

## Comparison between Wilfred Owen's and Siegfried Sassoon's Poetry

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### Abstract

Two great British poets, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon are considered the best War Poets of all the time. Both served as army officers during World War I, experiencing first-hand the horrors of trench warfare at the front and gas attacks. The direct involvement in war action disillusioned them concerning the war and its causes and objectives. In their poems, the two poets deal with a wide spectrum of issues related to the war and its proceedings. They present the sufferings of men during action; they condemn the politicians and generals of war who live on wars and build their personal glories at the expense of the soldiers' lives; they criticize the civilians in general including the clergymen, and the young girls in particular, for their indifference to the soldiers' sufferings and their naïve belief in the war propaganda, the War mongers and they show sympathy with the Germans whom they see as innocent victims as much as the English. Owen was a great admirer of Sassoon's poetry and the two became very good friends in the at Craiglockhart where Owen was getting treated from his shellshock. However according to some critics, both the men were homosexual and in a relationship. In spite of the similarities in subject matters these two poets are quite different in their approaches, techniques, the language used, and in the mood they express and even in their style. Sassoon seems to be more direct, explicit, and straightforward, while Owen is more subtle and indirect and complicated.

Wilfred Owen expresses his views and feelings of anger, bitterness and sadness towards the war, in his poetry. Owen's use of details of war in his poetry shows scenes that are horrific and memorable. His poems were often over dramatized with the horror of battle yet it was highly thought provoking. His use of speech and present tense gives his poems direction as well as a sense of urgency. Moreover, it is these techniques that help to underline the message of his poems. Sassoon's poems are told with a negative attitude towards war, which he is certainly renowned to have had. Sassoon refuses to falsify the truth by exaggerating the patriotism of soldiers or their enthusiasm for fighting and laying their lives for their country, he rather bares the mere truth by revealing the worry, fear of death, and physical exhaustion of those soldiers. Sassoon tends to write about views associated with religion and government issues.

Both Sassoon and Owen turned their war experiences into poems with the poems of a few other young soldier poets, a true record of the sufferings and miseries of the young soldiers who were obliged to fight in a savage war which seemed never to end. Their poems, in spite of all differences in style, technique, language, and approach, style and way, exposes the inhuman effects of war on the soldiers; the dehumanization of soldiers by their superiors and Warmongers, who showed clear detachment to the fate and suffering of those soldiers; the futility and hopelessness of their trench life, and the loss of their youth and life in the war.

## INTRODUCTION

In this work, an effort has been made to trace the response and attitude of two prominent War poets of 1920s - Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon towards World War I through a critical analysis of their famous shorter poems. The comparative study of the treatment of war at the hands of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon shows that being against the war, they were similar in their response to war. However their writing style, mood and language was different.

The First World War was one of the most atrocious events in human history in which millions of people were killed and injured. Young men were widely recruited through a very strong persuasive propaganda, which justified the urgency of participation in War and the understanding of war providing a golden opportunity for young men to defend their country. Amongst those taken in by the false propaganda were Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen as well.

Both Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen were soldier-poets of the First World War. They took part in action and tasted the sufferings and agonies of trench life. This direct involvement in war action disillusioned them concerning the war and its causes and objectives. Hence, they employed their poetic talents to expose the futility of war and the selfishness of those politicians who led the contemporary generation to it and insisted on its continuity, despite the loss of millions of lives of young men and all the ruin it caused to the natural world or to the psychological well being of those who survived it. In their poems, the two poets deal with a wide spectrum of issues related to the war and its proceedings. They present the sufferings of men during action; they condemn the politicians and generals of war who live on wars and build their personal glories at the expense of the soldiers' lives; they criticize the civilians in general including the clergymen, and the young girls in particular, for their indifference to the soldiers' sufferings and their naïve belief in the war propaganda; and they show sympathy with the Germans whom they see as innocent victims as much as the English.

In spite of the similarities in subject matters which the two poets have dealt with, they are quite different in their approaches, techniques, the language used, and in the mood they express. Sassoon seems to be more direct, explicit, and straightforward, while Owen is more subtle, implicit, and complicated.

Wilfred Owen expresses his views and feelings of anger, bitterness and sadness towards the war, in his poetry. In each of the poems, in some way or another, Wilfred Owen attacks someone, whether it be the people at home, taken in by the propaganda machine, or the government who have the power to stop the war. Owen wrote his poetry with an intention to put an end to the war. He just wanted the peace to return and people to understand the harsh reality of the war. Poetry became a way for him to express his own real thoughts about the war, his way to express the feeling of that horrible horror that was threatening their survival from all sides. His poetry serves as advice to expose the lies behind the government's propaganda which they used to feed young men for their own benefit so that they can take part in war by becoming a soldier. As he personally experienced the truth and the harsh realities of war, all this became his strength in writing poetry.

Wilfred Owen was known for his unique style of poetry, for his ability to convey his complex messages about war so that a person without any prior knowledge of war could understand. Owen's use of details of war in his poetry shows scenes that are horrific and

memorable. His poems were often over dramatized with the horror of battle yet it was highly thought provoking. His use of speech and present tense gives his poems direction as well as a sense of urgency. Moreover, it is these techniques that help to underline the message of his poems. Owen's style of writing is best known for his use of half rhyme which gives his poetry a dissonant and provoking quality that shadows the recurrent themes of his poetry. Furthermore, his ability to give a poem a quiet tone comes from his use of assonance and different sounds prevalent to war. Wilfred Owen was virtually unknown at the time of his death, yet our collective vision of the hell of the Western Front has largely been shaped by his writing.

Sassoon's poems are told with a negative attitude towards war, which he is certainly renowned to have had. However, many men who fought, suffered and survived the war like Sassoon still maintained their patriotism and reveled in the glory of surviving the war. Many poems are written about the war in a positive attitude, and have the same fame as Sassoon's negative poems have. He writes poems based on his first hand experiences of war. All of his poems follow the theme of war and relate to the negative effects of war experiences. The theme of his poems allows the reader to appreciate and show gratitude to the soldiers who fought for their country. His poems are written in a graphic manner and describe what it was like during the war and the effects it had on a person's mental health. The style of writing clearly shows the reader that a lot of psychological damage was experienced by many soldiers.

Sassoon's writing appears in great contrast to the term the "Great war". Sassoon tends to write about views associated with religion and government issues. One of the important subjects Sassoon usually presents is the basic truth about the daily life of the soldiers in the trenches with all its ugly details, showing their feelings and thoughts, especially at times of bombardments or firings. Unlike those civilian poets who glorify the heroism of soldiers at such times, Sassoon refuses to falsify the truth by exaggerating the patriotism of soldiers or their enthusiasm for fighting and laying their lives for their country, he rather bares the mere truth by revealing the worry, fear of death, and physical exhaustion of those soldiers.

During this war, Owen was diagnosed as suffering from shell shock and sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh for treatment. It was while recuperating at Craiglockhart that he met Siegfried Sassoon, (who was also considered mentally affected) an encounter that was to transform Owen's life. He was the one who showed Owen how to channel his nightmarish battlefield flashbacks into his poetry. Owen was in awe of Sassoon, and their relationship at Craiglockhart would prove to be essential to his poetry. Before meeting Sassoon, Owen was much influenced by Keats and Shelley, copying their Romantic style. He was also largely unpublished and unknown. Sassoon, mentoring Owen during the time they had together, encouraged him to write more realistically and directly, using a less elaborate, more colloquial style. Sassoon served as a mentor to the younger Owen, encouraging him and suggesting revisions to some of his poems. Owen was a great admirer of Sassoon's poetry and the two became friends. Both men felt a tremendous sense of responsibility to the soldiers they had left at the front, a feeling expressed by many soldiers today when they leave a combat unit. Although both Sassoon and Owen could have avoided being sent back to action, each insisted on returning to the front. "Anthem for Doomed Youth" is a product of Owen's bond with Sassoon, who aided Owen in revising it, suggesting words, correcting conjunctions, even suggesting the

title, recommending a change from "Anthem for Bad Youth." The relationship between Sassoon and Owen was a complex one, the strength of the bond that linked Owen and Sassoon was not simply that of officer and officer, or even poet and poet, but a bond of a very pure and fierce kind of love. Both men were homosexual, and Graves was convinced that they were in love with each other; when one considers the isolating effects of war, it is hardly surprising that such kindred spirits were drawn to each other. Most tellingly of all, in a letter written after leaving Craiglockhart, Owen told Sassoon that:

"You have fixed my Life – however short. You did not light me: I was always a mad comet; but you have fixed me. I spun round you like a satellite for a month, but I shall swing out soon, a dark star in the orbit where you will blaze".

After so many years, the irony of this comment is clear. It is Sassoon who is the dark star in the orbit where Owen blazes, regarded by historians, literary critics and the general public alike as the greatest poet of the Great War and one of the greatest of the twentieth century. Yet Sassoon's contribution must not be forgotten; it was the result of his encouragement and guidance that Owen began to write about the war in the first place.

The content of Owen's verse was undoubtedly affected by his friendship with Sassoon, who placed great emphasis on "writing from experience" to create the utmost level of realism. To Sassoon, and subsequently to Owen, poetry was not simply literature or art; it was a means of expressing oneself, of making a point, be it about the beauty of a summer afternoon or the incompetence of the British generals.

Owen later began to combine the gritty realism (learning from Sassoon) of his hero's work with his own Romanticism to expose the "pity of war", and he managed to evoke the terrible sadness of industrial-scale slaughter in the way that Sassoon's angry, hate-filled verse could not do.

Both Sassoon and Owen turned their war experiences into poems that remain, with the poems of a few other young soldier poets, a true chronicle of the sufferings and miseries of the young soldiers who were obliged to fight in a savage war which seemed never to end. Their poems, in spite of all differences in style, technique, language, and approach, expose the inhuman effects of war on the soldiers; the dehumanization of soldiers by their superiors, who showed clear nonchalance to the fate and suffering of those soldiers; the futility and hopelessness of their trench life, and the loss of their youth and life in the war; hence these poems are replete with humanistic feelings toward young soldiers in the trenches. These poems have become a true historical document of the daily life of soldiers at the front lines during the First World War, satirizing and condemning the carelessness of the politicians at home who prolonged the war to achieve personal glories for themselves without any regard to the miserable conditions of soldiers and the high casualties among them.

Finally, if Sassoon's mood is anger and the tone is loud, in Owen, the mood is quieter, sympathetic and more reflective. In most poems, Sassoon is full of anger at those men and women at home, those who encourage the war without tasting its horrid, bitter truths. Thus, his poems become an outcry of protest against those people. On the opposite side, Owen's voice is pitched low to suit the tone of compassion that permeates through his poems. In many of his poems, he is speculative about life and death, trying to show through philosophical questions the pointlessness of war and the meaninglessness of life and death.

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