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TRANSFORMATION OF SIEGFRIED  
SASSOON'S WAR POETRY:  
DISCOURSE SHAPES PERSPECTIVE

SIEGFRIED SASSOON'UN SAVAŞ ŞİİRİNİN  
DÖNÜŞÜMÜ: SÖYLEM VE BAKIŞ AÇISI



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Assist. Prof. Dr. Emrah ATASOY

**Abstract:** Siegfried Sassoon demonstrates a stark difference in his approach to war in his poetry. In this regard, his poetry can be divided into two: his poetry before the war and his poetry after the war. Sassoon experienced a radical transformation from a patriotic stance into an anti-war discourse in his attitude toward the war under the strong influence of his personal experiences of the war. In this context, this study will seek to analyze Sassoon's pre-war poetry and his poetry reflecting trench warfare, in particular his poems, "Absolution," "The Effect," "Suicide in the Trenches," and "The Dug-Out" in the light of Michel Foucault's concept of discourse. This analysis will ultimately reveal how a nationalistic discourse may easily turn into an anti-nationalistic discourse contingent on first-hand experience as in the case of Siegfried Sassoon.

**Keywords:** Siegfried Sassoon, World War I, discourse, poetry, transformation

**Öz:** Siegfried Sassoon'un şiirlerinde savaşa karşı tutum bakımından büyük farklılıklar bulunmaktadır. Bu bağlamda Sassoon'un şiiri, savaş öncesi ve savaş sonrası olmak üzere iki kategori altında ele alınabilir. Sassoon, savaşa ilişkin kişisel deneyimlerinin güçlü etkisi ile savaşa yönelik tutumunda vatansever bir duruştan savaş karşıtı bir söyleme radikal bir dönüşüm yaşamıştır. Bu bağlamda bu yazı, Sassoon'un savaş öncesine ait ve siper savaşının koşullarını yansıtan yapıtlarını, bu çalışma için seçilen "Absolution," "The Effect," "Suicide in the Trenches" ve "The Dug-Out" şiirleri üzerinden ele alacaktır. Bu analizde Michel Foucault'nun söylem kavramından yararlanılacaktır. Çalışmanın nihai amacı ise milliyetçi bir söylemin, Siegfried Sassoon örneğinde olduğu gibi birincil elden deneyimler sonucunda nasıl hızlı bir şekilde milliyetçilik karşıtı bir söyleme dönüşebileceğini ortaya çıkarmaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Siegfried Sassoon, Birinci Dünya Savaşı, söylem, şiir, dönüşüm

## Introduction

Discourse, which plays a crucial role in the distribution of knowledge and circulation of power, paves the way for the formation and validation of knowledge. It can legitimate certain catastrophic actions such as war through language and nationalism by creating certain perceptions and feelings. This can make people perceive what goes around them with a different lens or make people dislike another ideological discourse with the shift of discourse. Siegfried Sassoon, one of the poets of the First World War, wrote poems reflecting both the nationalistic discourse and anti-nationalistic discourse of the time in the aftermath of his first-hand war experi-

ence. His poetry in this regard highlights the importance of discourse in the formation of knowledge and truth. This study will therefore discuss Sassoon's pre-war poetry and his poetry of the trenches by applying Michel Foucault's concept of discourse to his poems, "Absolution," "The Effect," "Suicide in the Trenches," and "The Dug-Out." This analysis in the light of the primary sources and relevant secondary sources will ultimately reveal how nationalistic discourse may turn into an anti-nationalistic\* discourse.

Siegfried Loraine Sassoon was born in Kent in 1886 as the son of Alfred Ezra Sassoon and Theresa Georgiana Thornycroft Sassoon. Siegfried Sassoon attended the New Beacon School from 1900 to 1902 and then enrolled at Marlborough College. There, he became interested in poetry and began to write. He entered Clare College, Cambridge, in 1906; however, he left Cambridge without taking a degree. After leaving Cambridge, he went back to Weirleigh, where he was encouraged by the anthologist Edward Marsh to move to London where he had the chance to meet Rupert Brooke. Sassoon enlisted in the Sussex Yeomanry Regiment on August 2, 1914 and was commissioned as a lieutenant in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers in 1915. He was sent to France in 1915. At this time, he lost his young brother Hamo at Gallipoli. He was awarded the Military Cross and was nicknamed Mad Jack by his soldiers because he rescued the wounded comrades from "no-man's land" in April 1916. During the Battle of the Somme, he took ill and had to be taken back to England. When he went back to the front in 1917, he was shot during the battle of Arras and was evacuated to the London hospital (Campbell<sup>†</sup>, 1999: 11-22).

Thanks to Robert Graves, he was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, as he was suffering from shell-shock: "Graves began a series of manipulative communications and requests for favors designed to arrange a medical board hearing that would save Sassoon from a court-martial for desertion after his public declaration against the war" (Presley, 2010: 273). Sassoon did not want to stay in England while his comrades were suffering; therefore, he went back to the front. In *Sherston's Progress*, he comments on it as follows: "Better to be in the trenches with those whose experience I had shared and understood than with this medley of civilians who, when one generalized about them intolerantly, seemed either being broken by the War or enriched and made important by it" (Sassoon, 1983a: 43). Sassoon spent three months in Palestine and then went to France. On 13 July, he was accidentally shot by one of his men. He married Hester Gatty in 1933, and they had a son, George. However, the marriage ended in 1936. Siegfried Sassoon died on September 1, 1967.

### **Sassoon's Poetry: Poetry before the War and Poetry after the War**

As can be seen, it is possible to observe the repercussions of Sassoon's personal life in his poetry and to divide his poetry into two parts: poetry before the War and poetry after the War. In his poetry before the War, Sassoon was influenced by Georgian Poetry, in which "the poet should strive for sincerity, vitality, and truth by reproducing honestly and faithfully what he saw and felt" (Moore, 1969: 200). In this period, he wrote such poems as "The Daffodil Murderer," "The Old Huntsman," "Morning Express," and "Dryads" in the tradition of Georgian realism (Moore, 1969: 203-204).

Sassoon was not anti-war at the beginning, as he thought that the uniforms were grandiose. He initially considered war as a chance to have some "fun" and adventure (emphasis added). Moreover, he believed that war poems should not be written in a very realistic way. His

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\* In this study, "anti-nationalistic" is used to denote "anti-war" since anti-war feelings were not accepted during the First World War and were regarded as treason in Sassoon's society.

<sup>†</sup> This source is a significant source for those who wish to learn more about Sassoon's life.

poems did not satirize war until he had the first-hand experience (Thorpe, 2000: 15). There is a drastic change in Sassoon's poetry during and after the War. As he, later on, lost his patriotism, his perception of war also changed accordingly. When he saw and experienced the brutality and the reality of the War in the trenches, he took on a different outlook and began to satirize war. His main objective was to destroy "the romantic idealizations of the War" and to show "the cruel falseness of the romantic glorification of the soldier's attitude" (Moore, 1969: 207).

Sassoon wrote "A Soldier's Declaration" on June 15, 1917 as a protest. He criticized those non-combatants on the home front. In this declaration, Sassoon explains his view as follows:

I am making this statement as an act of willful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defense and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow-soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation. I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust (qtd. in Ferguson, 1972: 217).

Sassoon did not get punished thanks to Robert Graves, as Graves saved him from court-martial and imprisonment. He was sent to Craiglockhart in Edinburgh because he suffered from shell-shock. He openly objected to the War, and harshly criticized those who did not take part in the War in his declaration.

Under the influence of these experiences, Sassoon changed his ideas, as time went by and became more experienced. In *Sherston's Progress*, Sassoon stated that he realized the fact that the War "re-made" him and did away with a lot of his ideas (1983a: 101). His pre-war ideas were destroyed. Death was almost unavoidable at war and one could be killed at any moment. Aware of this fact, Sassoon wrote about how some soldiers felt as follows: "[A]bout 150 strong and healthy men, all wondering how soon they'll get killed and hoping it will be someone else" (Sassoon, 1983a: 112). He started questioning the War more and more. Sassoon, who initially saw war as an adventure, changed his approach, on which he comments as follows: "[T]he War is outside of life and I'm in the War . . . in the darkness where I am alone my soul rebels against what we are doing" (Sassoon, 1983a: 113-122).

In this regard, Sassoon gradually realized the injustice of the War. On the one hand, there were many soldiers and people who died whereas, on the other hand, there were those who lived in comfort and safety while the War went on, which was a stark contrast to Sassoon. Sassoon showed the horror of war, the spiritual weakening, and deterioration. His patriotism was gone. Accordingly, he explains his feelings in *Sherston's Progress* as follows:

How could I begin my life all over again when I had no conviction about anything except that the War was a dirty trick which had been played on me and my generation? That, at any rate, was something to be angry and bitter about now that everything had fallen to pieces and one's mind was in a muddle and one's nerves were all on edge (1983a: 149).

As can be seen, Sassoon experienced a radical transformation at the end of the War, which led him to call the War a trick. His poetry of the trenches and his post-war poetry in this respect were shaped under the influence of his anti-war ideas. Thus, Sassoon reflects both nationalistic

and anti-nationalistic discourses in his poetry. It is possible to apply Foucault's concept of discourse to the analysis of the selected poems such as "The Effect," "Absolution," "Suicide in the Trenches," and "The Dug-Out" within the scope of this study.

#### **Analysis of Sassoon's Poetry: "The Effect," "Absolution," "Suicide in the Trenches," and "The Dug-Out"**

Michel Foucault emphasizes the importance of discourse, as it is what defines people and what is defined by people. Discourse is what allows people to talk from a perspective and what produces knowledge and what is influenced by knowledge. It also shapes the social and other practices as well as influencing the shape of nationalism, patriotism, jingoism, and chauvinism. Discourse has a close connection with power, knowledge, and the formation of truth. It is power that shapes the construction of knowledge and truth. Foucault explains the relationship between truth and power as follows:

Truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power. Contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits . . . nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: It is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its own regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true (1980: 131).

As can be seen, each society differs in its discourse and politics of truth. This politics or regime of truth decides what is to be included or excluded under the influence of power relations.

Discourse is thus shaped in line with power relations with certain multiple factors affecting the construction of truth and discourse. Furthermore, power relations are maintained through certain institutions such as schools, hospitals, and families. Foucault comments on the influential role of power as follows: "[P]ower had to be able to gain access to the bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes and modes of everyday behaviour (1980: 125). Thus, the nationalistic discourse is formed through certain institutions. Its power forms its regime of truth through which it persuades people to have an extreme love for one's country. These patriotic feelings can be communicated through poetry as well. Sassoon reflects such a nationalistic discourse in his pre-war poetry which suggests Sassoon's "upper-class affinities and youthful conformism," whereas his later discourse changes from nationalistic into anti-nationalistic once he experiences the War (Matalon, 2002: 27-28).

"Absolution" by Sassoon is a pre-war poem that shows Sassoon's early patriotism, which is affected by the nationalistic discourse of the time. Since discourse gives or imposes people a perspective, and a world is created through this lens, it causes people to behave in a certain way when they are confronted with a problem. It also teaches people how to react to the situation, and how to interpret what takes place around them. Accordingly, it is possible to observe the influence of the patriotic discourse in "Absolution," which claims the righteousness of England's cause and the glorifying features of the War. The poem reflects the patriotic discourse that imprints extreme love of the country into the citizens. The title also attests to the influence of such a discourse. The word, 'Absolution' comes from the Latin *absolutio* which means *acquittal* or *absolvere* (absolve). *Ab* means *away* and *solvere* is to *loosen*. Absolution is also used to signify "the act of forgiving someone for having done something wrong or sinful . . . a remission of sins pronounced by a priest" (*Merriam-Webster*).

It can be argued that absolution here stands for forgiveness, glory, and absolution from sins. Sin may be the fear that the soldiers have of death. It is a kind of encouragement for the

soldiers since it is expressed that if the soldiers do not fear death, they will have glory. When they die for their country, death will free them, as they sacrifice themselves for something sacred. They are made to believe that they will be forgiven. This excitement results in certain nationalistic feelings. Individuals might think that they are aware of what they are doing as patriotic citizens; however, they probably forget that when they "know and control themselves, they are also known and controlled" (Love, 1989: 281). The nationalistic discourse can, therefore, control individuals through language and actions. Thus, what the soldiers experience might give temporary pleasure and create a kind of knowledge for them; however, it loses its value once the soldiers experience the battle field. Hence, the formerly constructed discourse places citizens into a certain mindset. People perceive the world through this manipulated lens, which prevents them from seeing the reality. Thus, this poem highlights Sassoon's pre-war patriotic discourse, his perception of the War, and his idealization of the War.

As can be seen, the patriotic discourse is strongly felt in the poem. Sassoon suggests that war makes people mature and wise since they fight for and win their freedom. Loss is enormous, but those losses will pass and the Sun will shine for the happy legion, which is England. There are times when the soldiers are unwilling to die for their country, as they do not want to leave their loved ones. However, as they carry the heritage of England and fight for their country, they should be proud and die if necessary. Concerning this point, Hall's following comments can be useful in comprehending the situation: "Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of others" (2001: 76). Thus, the knowledge of one's country and of nationalism can require sacrifice and restraint as in the case of the nationalistic discourse.

However, Sassoon became less satisfied with this poem when he saw and experienced the trenches himself, which led him to have an anti-nationalistic discourse upon experiencing the War. This turn even resulted in his decision not to anthologize it due to the fact that it was "completely false in its emotion" (Moore, 1969: 206). Sassoon comments on this as follows:

The significance of my too nobly worded lines was that they expressed the typical self-glorifying feelings of a young man about to go to the Front for the first time. The poem subsequently found favour with middle-aged reviewers, but the more I saw of the war, the less noble-minded I felt about it (Sassoon, 1945: 17).

After Sassoon was taken to the real battlefield and he experienced the cruelty of the War, he was no longer proud of this poem, and assumed another discourse, which is anti-nationalistic and anti-war.

"The Effect," a poem much different than "Absolution," is a poem that illustrates Sassoon's anti-nationalistic feelings about the War after he experienced the brutality and the reality of the War. The battlefield is like hell and is referred to as yellow daylight. There are corpses sprawled everywhere. The narrator is shocked to learn that those places which were once a road are now ruined. Corpses are capering in the rain. The word, *caper* means "a frolicsome leap" (*Merriam-Webster*). Sassoon uses this word for the corpses which capered in the rain. It is impossible for the corpses to caper under normal circumstances; however, Sassoon brings this image to perception through his poetic creativity. There are dancing words, jumping corpses, and so many dead that one cannot count anymore. All these images and representations can exemplify how Sassoon's nationalistic discourse has turned into the anti-nationalistic discourse.

"Suicide in the Trenches" is another poem that shows Sassoon's anti-war feelings. This anti-patriotic poem also touches on the futility of the War. A naive boy chooses to go to war, as he believes that it is a good option because he does not see any aspirations for the future. He does not have an aim in life; therefore, he "grinned at life in empty joy" (Sassoon, "Suicide in

the Trenches," 1983b: Line 2). The boy is lonely without any hope or light, in despair and emptiness. The rhymes dark and lark may be used to create a dark atmosphere for the reader. These images contribute to the tone of the poem and highlight the radical shift of discourse in Sassoon's perspective.

The terrible health conditions and the psychologies of the soldiers are presented, which is not pleasant. Sassoon uses the words "cowed" and "glum" to show that the soldiers are upset, hopeless, and unhappy (Sassoon, "Suicide in the Trenches," 1983b: Line 5). Moreover, there are bombardments, explosions, and fires, which makes it difficult to remain healthy and sane. This situation influences the soldiers physically and mentally in a negative manner. There is not even enough rum to let them forget the troublesome moments and the images of the War. All these conditions increase the likelihood of committing suicide as the boy does in the poem. After this point, patriotism loses its validity.

Sassoon in this regard criticizes those who try to profit from the War in the third stanza. He satirizes those who take pride in their children's participation in the War, as it gets them nowhere. He uses the expression "you smug-faced crowds" for those who are hypocritical and chauvinist, as war, for Sassoon, is not something to be proud of (Sassoon, "Suicide in the Trenches," 1983b: Line 9). He wants to tell those "who cheer when soldier lads march by" that they are actually mistaken since the soldiers are walking to hell and death (Sassoon, "Suicide in the Trenches," 1983b: Line 10). Through these lines, Sassoon implicated that those who send their children to the War do not probably have a realistic vision of the battlefield, and are unaware of the fact that they may hear of their children's death soon. Thus, this poem reflects how discourse produces power and knowledge, as those, most probably the decision-makers, who do not take part in the War physically, construct the nationalistic discourse, which Sassoon highlights through the poem.

"The Dug-Out" is the last poem to be analyzed within the context of his study that reflects Sassoon's anti-war feelings. Dug-outs were underground shelters during the War. Sassoon chooses this specific place to show the brutality of the War. The persona of the poem tries to speak to a soldier; however, the soldier is about to die. He asks questions to the soldier, but he does not get an answer from him. The powerful images of a soldier lying with his legs "ungainly huddled," with a "sullen, cold, exhausted face" make the reader aware of the soldier's pain, sadness, and fatigue (Sassoon, "The Dug-Out," 1983b: Lines 1-3). Huddled legs, here, demonstrate that the soldier is in pain and his legs are curled up into his body. The persona is not happy to see him in a miserable position, which increases his anti-war stance. The persona witnesses the last moments of the soldier. The soldier becomes "deep-shadow'd from the candle's guttering gold" (Sassoon, "The Dug-Out," 1983b: Line 4). This image of "the candle's guttering gold" may mean that death is imminent for the soldier (Sassoon, "The Dug-Out," 1983b: Line 4). His life is guttering like a candle melting away, and the soldier is close to closing his eyes for good, as he has only a flicker of life left. Hence, this poem illustrates the harsh reality of the War and the fact that most of those who died were really young. Through this poem in which the anti-patriotic discourse can be observed, Sassoon stresses that the young flowers of society had to die in vain.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that Siegfried Sassoon experienced a radical transformation from a nationalistic approach to an anti-nationalistic attitude in his poetry in the aftermath of first-hand war experiences. The analysis of the selected poems has revealed that it is possible to observe the importance of discourse in the formation of nationalistic or anti-nationalistic feelings, which can play a crucial role in people's motivation. Sassoon wrote patri-

otic poems before the War as can be seen in his poem "Absolution," in which he saw war as something honorable.

However, once Sassoon observed and experienced the reality of the War, his writing changed drastically. He criticized those at the home-front, their indifference, and those who tried to profit from the War, as they did not physically take part in the War but motivated others to fight. His poetry in this respect had a "didactic feeling" (Silkin, 1972: 167). He aimed to make people conscious of the War by showing its brutality and violence through his poems such as "The Effect," "Suicide in the Trenches," and "The Dug-Out." In short, through his poetry, Sassoon expressed his anti-jingoistic approach implicating that war is not something to be proud of, but something that brings suffering, death, and the loss of human values.

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