

SONNETS OF WORLD WAR I: CONTENT VERSUS FORM

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Abstract

World War I is one of the deadliest wars that humankind has experienced, and the devastating effect of this war gave birth to a new genre called "trench poetry", where, ironically, there were countless gifted poets who found a ground on which to reflect their observations through poetry. Naturally, their poetry included patriotism, nationalism, religion, and the terror of war. The terror and misery inflicted on soldiers, cities, and towns by the war found ample space in the imagery of the poems written during those years. Yet the number of sonnets written during those years is very limited. The written ones mostly dealt with the agonies of soldiers and those who are left at home. Within the scope of this discussion, this article examines several sonnets written by both famous and lesser poets, including female poet May Herschel-Clarke and her attitude towards war and its consequences. Also examined are sonnets by various poets in terms of content and form employed to increase the effect of irony. A love poem, for example, serves to delineate bitter feelings felt in the face of a devastating war. On the whole, these war poets draw a very different picture of war, patriotism, and sacrifice. Some were even taken to task by other war poets for what they had written. Rupert Brooke, for instance, had seen very little of the devastation and received bitter criticisms from poets like Sorley, Owen, Sassoon, and Herschel-Clarke.

Key words: *World War I (WWI), Sonnet Form, Trench Poetry, War Poets*

BİRİNCİ DÜNYA SAVAŞI SONELERİ: FORM İÇERİK KARŞITLIĞI

Özet

Birinci dünya savaşı insanoğlunun gördüğü en yıkıcı savaşlardan biri olmuştur ve bu savaş İngiliz Edebiyatı'nda "siper şiirleri" olarak bilinecek olan bir bölünmeyi de beraberinde getirmiştir. Bu savaş ayrıca yüzlerce yetenekli şaire kendi savaş deneyimlerini şiirle ifade etme şansı vermiştir. Savaşın vahşetiyle birlikte, elbette şiirlerin bazıları milli ve dinsel duygularını da yansıtmıştır. Savaşın getirdiği yıkım, felaket ve sefalet o yıllarda yazılan şiirlerde çok geniş yankılar bulmuştur. Ne var ki, o yıllarda yazılan soneler oldukça kısıtlı sayıda kalmıştır. Bulunanlar da, çoğunlukla ya askerin veya evdekilerin derin acılarını ifade etmektedirler. Bu makale bazı ünlü ve daha az bilinen biri de kadın olan şairlerin savaşa ve getirdikleri hakkında yazılmış soneleri incelemektedir. Bu makale kapsamında, Brook vatanseverlik ve fedakârlık bağlamında diğer şairlerden farklı bir portre çizmektedir. Bunun sebebi savaşın dehşetini çok az görmüş olması olarak alınabilir. Ancak bu durum, Sorley, Owen, Sassoon, ve Herschel-Clarke tarafından yönlendirilen eleştirilerden onu kurtarmamıştır. Bu makale değişik şairlerin ürünü olan soneleri içerik olarak incelerken formla olan zıtlığın yarattığı ironiyi incelemektedir. Bir aşk şiiri türü olan sone umarsız sevgili karşısında aşğın çektiği acının resmini yaparken, makale için seçilenler yıkıcı savaşın hissi yok edişi karşısında hissedilenleri çizmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Savaş Şiiri, Sone formu, Siper Şiirleri, Savaş Şairleri*

A sonnet is preliminarily a poem, a lyric genre consisting of 14 lines, properly expressive of a single thought, idea or sentiment; originally, a poetic expression of unrequited love for a disdainful lady. Its rules were set by the Italian poet Petrarch (1304-1374) and the form was introduced into England by Wyatt and Surrey in the mid-sixteenth century. In time, the sonnet became a way of expression in the hands of gifted poets and the rhyme scheme presented

slight variations. There are basically three sonnet schemes: Petrarchan, Shakespearian, and Spenserian. Despite the fact that there have been some additions to the number of lines, this article is strictly limited to those with fourteen lines. A Petrarchan sonnet has an octave (8 lines) and a sestet (6 lines) with the rhyme scheme of *abba abba cde cde*, while the Shakespearean sonnet has three quatrains and a couplet with the rhyme scheme of *abab*

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cdcd efef gg, and the Spenserian is *abab bcbc cdcd ee*. A sonnet is usually considered a short poem with the theme of love. However, not all love sonnets are Petrarchan, nor are all sonnets devoted to love (see Abrams, 1986: 426-7).

As has been understood from the definition, the sonnet is a poetic form to express enthusiastic feelings for the beloved. In the case of Rupert Brooke's 1914 sonnet sequence, his beloved is his country. As the sonnet form is suitable to express exuberant feelings for one's ideal yet elusive beloved, Brooke seems to be the one and only one to express his devotion to his country via the sonnet. It is still a matter of discussion whether Brooke's style would have turned as bitter and disillusioned as that of his contemporaries had he seen and experienced more of WWI. Of course, at the time, no one suspected that this war would be the "First World War". Some poets employed the sonnet form as a catalyst to foreground the negative side of the First World War, while others created a poetry in favour of it. This article will examine sonnets written in favour and opposition to the Great War.

All began with a gunshot aimed at the Archduke of Austria Hungary on 28th July 1914 and that turned out to be the point of no return for the western world. For each country had been making its own plan for a possible war to fight over national reasons for national interests. The winds of war had already begun to blow all over Europe and the populaces were somehow ready for the war. "[A]ll over Europe, the population was being accustomed to the wearing of a uniform. This was not just in Prussia, ... Even in Britain, ... when national pride had been affronted, khaki-clad groups of civilians, gentler but no less militaristic ... rose to meet the challenge of the times, supported by the people's will" (Purkis, 1999: 41). The officials were far beyond being ready, as Stoessinger quotes from Barbara Tuchmann: "Everything was to move at fixed times according to the numbers of train axles that would pass over a given bridge within a given time" (1990:18). Such a precision was to prove itself as the most terrible war hitherto known.

Eventually, the long expected war broke out. On the early days of the war, people were optimistic that a decisive war on Germany would end in a short time. Brooke also was taken by the same optimism so much so that he wrote to Violet Asquith on 1 March 1915: "I've never been quite so happy in my life, I think. Not quite so pervasively happy; like a stream flowing entirely to one end. I suddenly realize that the ambition of my life has been — since I was two — to go on a military expedition against Constantinople" (qtd in Stallworthy, 2005: 14). At the time of writing this letter, Brooke was a twenty-eight-year-old soldier headed (though he did not know it) for Gallipoli. The idea of a military expedition against Constantinople is a curious issue to have in mind. Yet the seizure of Constantinople had turned to be a *must* for Britain, since Britain had the fear that she would be cut off from "her empire which by then stretched from India to Africa and the Pacific" (Hamilton, 2003: 21). At the beginning of the new century, the seizure of Ottoman Land by the Russians was the least desirable thing by Britain. Then crowds gathered in Trafalgar square and sang the song "The Dogs of War" (1877) by G. W. Hunt:

We don't want to fight,
But by Jingo if we do,
We've got ships,
We've got the men,
We've got the money too,
We've fought the Bear before,
And if we're Britons true,
The Russians shall not have
Constantinople!

This song might have been the source of inspiration for young Brooke to have a military expedition to Constantinople.

This was the climate of thought into which Brooke was born and raised. Brooke is sometimes severely criticised for not taking a stand against the abomination of war. Yet at those times, even the bitter critics of war, e.g., poets Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, were writing optimistically about the war. Owen, in 1914, penned "The Women and the Slain", where he exalts the ones who lay their lives down for his fellow soldiers:

O meet it is and passing sweet
To live in peace with others,
But sweeter still and far more meet,
To die in war for brothers.

Even Sassoon, acerbic critic of the war, recalls his gentle introduction to soldiering in his autobiographical work *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*: "I had slipped into the Downfield troop by enlisting two days before the declaration of war. For me, so far, the War had been a mounted infantry picnic in perfect weather" (1972: 219). However, the ever-lengthening war was to change this optimism into a bitter reality, which, eventually, meant a backlash against Brooke's 1914 sonnets.

Like many of his contemporaries, Brooke conceives of the outbreak of war as an opportunity to break away from the daily routines of civilian life. One should keep in mind that his sonnets are the expression of Brooke's feelings. He is at the peak of his youth, vigour, and national ardour. The outbreak has given the English youth a chance "into cleanness leaping" (4), saving them from living with "sick hearts that honour could not move" (6), and from being "half-men" and from "all the little emptiness of love" (8). The love in question ought to be the one that contains "sensual pleasures" which is "little" and "empty" at least in Brooke's eye. However, Bernard Bergonzi suggests that *this* is "Brooke's long and painful affair with 'Ka'" (1996: 38). The octave of Sonnet I: "Peace" reflects the decadence of the *peace time* and his gratitude to God.

Now, God be thanked Who has
watched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened
us from sleeping,
With hand made sure, clear eye, and
sharpened power,
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness
leaping,
Glad from a world grown old and
cold and weary,
Leave the sick hearts that honour
could not move,
And half-men, and their dirty songs
and dreary,
And all the little emptiness of love!

The sestet, on the other hand, focuses on the virtues of falling on the battlefield. The deliverance of an honourable man is in his sacrificial commitment for his country.

Oh! we, who have known shame, we
have found release there,
Where there's no ill, no grief, but
sleep has mending,
Naught broken save this body, lost
but breath;
Nothing to shake the laughing
heart's long peace there
But only agony, and that has ending;
And the worst friend and enemy is
but Death.

Of these sonnets the most famous one is Sonnet V: "The Soldier", where "Brooke uses the Georgian concentration on rural England as a focus for a meditation on his own possible death. He identifies his own body and the soil of England in an almost mystical fashion" (Bergonzi, 1996: 38).

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign
field
That is for ever England. There shall
be
In that rich earth a richer dust
concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped,
made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her
ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing
English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns
of home.

One should not forget the fact that military cemeteries are considered the soil of a country whose soldiers are dying. His body, in this sense, is England herself, and through Brooke's exaltation of his country, England has the richest soil; wherever an English soldier falls dead, he adds "the richer dust", not as a loss but a gain for that particular piece of land. This, of course, sounds rather chauvinistic. The octave of Sonnet V: "The Soldier" reiterates high values of "Englishness". The sestet of the

sonnet focuses on the incorporeal qualities of an English soldier. They bear no "evil" in their hearts; they are "gentle", ever "peaceful", and full of "laughter" all the time.

And think, this heart, all evil shed
away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts
by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams
happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and
gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English
heaven.

"The Dead" maintains the same spirit of rich jollity of Englishness. The dead is "rich" and bugles are blown to give him a proper funeral ceremony in English way. His death is not a sacrifice in vain. He has seized the chance of dying in war like the great ancestors of his, which made them "rarer gifts than gold" (3). Such patriotism is sustained by quasi-religious discourse, as in "[t]hese laid the world away" (4), suggesting that earthly values mean nothing to those who die for their country. Such sacrifice is reminiscent of Christian martyrdom implicated by "[n]o one has greater love than this – that one lays down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Those gallant soldiers "lay" their "years to be" (5) for "work and joy" (6), yet they give their sons "their immortality":

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich
Dead!
There's none of these so lonely and
poor of old,
But, dying, has made us rarer gifts
than gold.
These laid the world away; poured
out the red
Sweet wine of youth; gave up the
years to be
Of work and joy, and that unhop'd
serene,
That men call age; and those who
would have been,
Their sons, they gave, their
immortality.

The sestet of the sonnet continues to find holiness in such sacrificial death as it is in "Islamic martyrdom". A life without war is "dearth" (8) of "holiness" (9), the lack of it. It is their ancestors who bring those on earth holiness and honour, as Christ's expected return to earth as king. Those who have died in war will be the "subjects" (12) of "the King" and be paid "with a royal wage". Only by this means will they be able to gain their nobility and worthiness of their heritage:

Blow, bugles, blow! They brought
us, for our dearth,
Holiness, lacked so long, and Love,
and Pain.
Honour has come back, as a king, to
earth,
And paid his subjects with a royal
wage;
And Nobleness walks in our ways
again;
And we have come into our heritage.

Brooke's portrayal of Christian martyrdom is quite reminiscent of jingoist poet and author John Oxenham's poem "The Vision Splendid" (1917) where Oxenham preaches:

O, not in vain has been your great
endeavour;
For, by your dyings, Life is born
again,
And greater love hath no man
tokened ever,
Than with his life to purchase Life's
high gain.

However, Brooke's 1914 Sonnets "grew as much out of frustration as out of patriotism" (Purkis, 1999: 65). Brooke seems to be well aware of the fact that this war will charge a price and there will be redeemers. His patriotic discourse reflects his emotional side. Purkis briefly comments on this emotional diversion as follows:

He is consciously embarking on an
exercise in high-flown sentiment to
which he is not used and from the
second to the eighth line he seems

to stumble and hesitate slightly; one could argue that he is trying to convince himself as much as others *what is to be done* [my emphasis]. Then in the sestet the poem is set to run towards full closure with settled stride. We seem to hear the voice of conviction and are ourselves persuaded that everything he says is true. It is like being exhorted at a Revivalist meeting. We take the leap of faith, and are healed; as Brooke said in the sonnet "Peace" we are "as swimmers into cleanness leaping" (1999: 66).

Receiving great vogue at first and bitter reaction against them later, Brooke's 1914 sonnet sequence seems to have put the sonnet form out of English poetry and action for decades. There are hardly any sonnets written in praise of country or war thereafter. Brooke may partly be extenuated in that he had seen little violence. Those who were involved in trench warfare, however, were to soon reject such chauvinistic discourse. The most immediate and bitter criticism of this sequence comes from Charles Hamilton Sorley, who, in a letter of 28 April 1915 to his mother, writes:

That last sonnet-sequence of his, of which you sent me the review in the *Times Lit. Sup.*, and which has been so praised, I find (with the exception of that beginning, 'Their hearts were woven of human joys and cares ...' which is not about himself) overpraised. He is far too obsessed with his own sacrifice, regarding the going to war of himself (and others) as a highly intense, remarkable and sacrificial exploit, whereas it is merely the conduct demanded of him (and others) by the turn of circumstances, where the non-compliance with this demand would have made life intolerable. It was not that 'they' gave up anything of that list he gives in one sonnet: but that essence of these things had been endangered by circumstances over which he had no control and he must fight to recapture them. He has

clothed his attitude in fine words: but he has taken the sentimental attitude (Stallworthy, 2005: 35).

As is clear from his letter, Sorley himself is far from sentimental. In addition, Sorley "wrote a poetic reply to Brooke, using the same form, though it actually uses a variation of the rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan sonnet" (Purkis, 1999: 67). Being a soldier of trench warfare and a son of a scholar, both his sonnet and his estimations are precise and trustworthy. As opposed to Brooke's 'If I should die...', which employs a singular pronoun, there are 'millions of the mouthless dead' in Sorley's sonnet. Brooke urges his reader to "think only *this of him*" whereas Sorley insists, 'Say not soft things as other men have said' (3). There is no first person pronoun "I" in Sorley's poem. His is an impersonalising of the ordinary soldier who redeems but expects neither "words of praise" nor "tears", for "[t]heir blind eyes see not your tears flow" (7). Moreover, Sorley's sonnet contains eight negations while Brooke's has none. "Those negatives are followed by others, as with unsparing irony he punctures the platitudes of consolation" (Stallworthy, 2005: 37):

Give them not praise. For, deaf, how
should they know
It is not curses heaped on each
gashed head?
Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not
your tears flow.
Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.

His scholarly background manifests itself in the sestet of his sonnet. Though, in a letter of November 1915 sent to the Master of Marlborough, "he had quoted a line from *the Iliad*, spoken by Achilles — 'Died Patroclus too who was a far better man thou'¹, adding 'no saner and splendor comment on death has been made.' As his last sonnet enters its sestet, he echoes that Homeric line with another instruction to the reader" (Stallworthy, 2005: 37):

Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.
Say only this, 'They are dead.' Then
add thereto,
'Yet many a better one has died

¹ *The Iliad*, XXI. 106-7

before.'

Then, scanning all the o'ercrowded
mass, should you

Perceive one face that you loved
heretofore,

It is a spook. None wears the face
you knew.

Great death has made all his for
evermore.

As a last token, Stallworthy comments on Sorley's juxtaposition of the dead with those of old, and his technicality and achievement as a poet thus:

Sorley's dead are blind, deaf, gashed. They are not heroic Homeric shades, garlanded with glory, but an indistinguishable 'o'ercrowded mass'. He did not live long enough to acquire the technical skills of an Owen or a Sassoon, but he understood the truth about the war before they did, and found words for it before them. He stands as an attractive transitional figure between the first wave of poets and those of the second wave soon to follow them (2005: 37).

As Sorley was composing "When you see millions of the mouthless dead", he was merely a twenty-year-old young soldier, yet, not alone in his reaction. May Herschel-Clarke, after reading Brooke's Sonnet V: "Soldier", wrote a poem in the same fashion. Herschel-Clarke's "The Mother" imagines a woman in her private world where there is no "parting", "loss", and "bloodshed" (3). Yet this is the world of imagination. The worst thing had already happened and there is nothing else to do but to drain "the bitter cup" (6), still worse "[t]ill there's nought to drink" (7), metaphorically signifying the utmost pain felt by a mother over the death of a son. Such sufferance raises "the standard up", which is rather ironic, in its way, to criticise the honour felt about a dead son. In reality, the mother, consoling herself with the things he "loved", has turned to the living dead (11). However "honourable" is the deed of the son, or "high" the price that has "proudly" been paid, there is a "proud" (13) mother left behind whose heart is "aglow"

(11). The son "will not know" (14) the pain he left behind, so there is not any good about it. The whole sonnet runs as follows:

If you should die, think only this of
me

In that still quietness where is space
for thought,

Where parting, loss and bloodshed
shall not be,

And men may rest themselves and
dream of nought:

That in some place a mystic mile
away

One whom you loved has drained
the bitter cup

Till there is nought to drink; has
faced the day

Once more, and now, has raised the
standard up.

And think, my son, with eyes grown
clear and dry

She lives as though for ever in your
sight,

Loving the things *you* loved, with
heart aglow

For country, honour, truth, traditions
high,

--Proud that you paid their price.
(And if some night

Her heart should break--well, lad,
you will not know.

Every aspect of patriotism and sacrifice of which Brooke's "soldier" feels proud is a source of agony for the mother of Herschel-Clarke's projected lamentation. Such sacrifice claimed great numbers of young men, as Parfitt puts it: "Combatants have to be measured in millions rather than in thousands or even hundreds of thousands" (1990: 5).

Above all, the scale and duration of the war were such as to mark almost everyone and every aspect of British life at home. Edward Tomas, famously, wrote in "As the Team's Head Brass" of a fallen elm which, the poem's ploughman says, will only be moved 'when the war's over' [16]. It is a detail which can act as a

symbol of how far the war reached out (Parfitt, 1990: 7).

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson's poem "the Conscript" vividly portrays the soldiers' path that leads up to their "hasty award" (4), and how they pass the medical check. The number of men is so huge and working hours are so long that such serious a job is carried out "indifferently and flippantly". As described in the first half of the octave:

Indifferent, flippant, earnest, but all bored,
The doctors sit in the glare of electric light
Watching the endless stream of naked white
Bodies of men for whom their hasty award

Statistics show only the material gains or losses, such as the number of deaths and prisoners, the amount of equipment and ammunition, etc. Yet they

can do nothing (because there is nothing to be done) to remove the awfulness of the facts, an awfulness which statistics can only gesture towards. The rest – the degradation of bodies and devastation of psyches – cannot be counted. And, remembering our subject – English poetry of the war – it should be added that combatants, at least, were always aware of the casualties at the immediate level, and had to find ways of living with such awareness (Parfitt, 1990: 6).

At this point Gibson's sonnet gains significance, for Gibson served his brief soldiering as a private on the Western Front. Therefore, Gibson's point of view is that of an ordinary soldier's. Combatants were to be prompt and ready for the devastation of the war. Gibson's second half of the octave ends in describing what, as George Parfitt suggests, "statistics can only gesture towards":

Means life or death maybe, or the living death
Of mangled limbs, blind eyes, or a

darkened brain;
And the chairman, as his monocle falls again,
Pronounces each doom with easy indifferent breath.

Pressing circumstances in which the country struggles must have forced "the chairman" (7) to pronounce "each doom with easy indifferent breath" (8). It is obvious from the condition under which he performs his duty that he is tired and has grown callous to young men's death, plight and agony or perhaps mental disorder. As the medical check continues in the room, the persona of the poem envisions a conscript as Christ. Each one of them is a Christ with their white bodies, for they shed their blood for the welfare of their nation, and "nails" and "thorn-crown" are eked out by the vision of the persona. Even this crucifixion vision of a wretched conscript does not move the board of doctors, giving the implication that "someone must redeem" as once Christ did. The sestet goes as follows:

Then suddenly I shudder as I see
A young man stand before them wearily,
Cadaverous as one already dead;
But still they stare untroubled as he stands
With arms outstretched and drooping thorn-crowned head,
The nail-marks glowing in his feet and hands.

Even the lean bodies of youth and innocence of the conscripts may reflect the body of Christ himself. Such an implication of the innocence of soldiers is sensed in Wilfred Owen's famous poem "Duce et Decourm Est" wherein incurable sores are exposed on the "innocent tongues" (24) of gassed soldiers. Their tongues are innocent because they did pronounce an evil word, as Christ never did. These imagined Christlike soldiers continue dying on battlefields. In "Anthem for Doomed Youth", Owen depicts such boys dying in multitudes like "cattle" (1) in slaughterhouses. They die in such numbers that there is no time to give them a proper Christian funeral. There are no bells ringing for their silent passage.

They receive only the brutal parody of a service from "the monstrous anger of the guns" (2) and "the stuttering rifle's rapid rattle" (3). The church choir are "The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells; / And bugles calling for them from sad shires" (7-8). "The bugles may sound the Last Post for them, but they had previously called them to the colours in those same sad shires. So, bitterly but obliquely, Owen assigns to Church and State responsibility for their deaths" (Stallworthy, 2005: 101).

The last word of the octave brings the reader back to England and the sestet opens with a parallel question, yet a much gentler question than the first, that prepares us for a gentler answer instead of "parodic rituals offered by rifle, shell and bugle"; for "those who love soldiers will mark their death with observances more heart-felt, more permanent, than those prescribed by convention" (Stallworthy, 2005: 101):

The pallor of girls' brows shall be
their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of
patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-
down of blinds.

The girls who loved them will bear the memories for the rest of their lives and each time they draw down the blinds, they will remember them as they have mourned for a fortnight, drawing the blinds and confining them home. "The End" touches the same theme from a very different perspective is another sonnet by Owen. As "the Anthem for Doomed Youth" mourns over the soldiers and grieves after their death, "the End" is an attempt to prove that there is no spiritual connection between man and the cosmic universe. This sonnet could be examined as Owen's severance from faith in an afterlife.

The sonnet begins with a bolt of lightning in the east, as a cosmic event heralding the beginning of life or a new day on the battlefields, for attacks do actually take place at dawn. Such a daybreak is not silent as the ones one usually experiences in his ordinary life. These are the daybreaks over battlefields accompanied by deafening explosions spouting clouds of earth toward the heavens.

Ruler of the day is not the Christian god but "the Chariot Throne" (2) which may be alluding to Apollo, god of heavens and the day. On the other side is "bronze west" (4) and in-between is war and its dregs, dead bodies of soldiers:

After the blast of lightning from the
east,
The flourish of loud clouds, the
Chariot Throne;
After the drums of time have rolled
and ceased,
And by the bronze west long retreat
is blown,

The next four lines inquire of the possibility of returning the dead to life again. The persona directs to the Earth the question of whether there is a possibility of returning to them their life, or whether it is possible for the Christian God to reverse and remove all this carnage from men, wondering whether He will be able to alleviate the pain endured? If God filled their veins with blood and returned them to life again, would these dead soldiers have a normal life and live forever?

Shall Life renew these bodies? Of a
truth
All death will he annul, all tears
assuage?--
Or fill these void veins full again
with youth,
And wash, with an immortal water,
Age?

That there will be no immortality is yet the answer. "'It is death,' [12] the Earth says in answer to human questioning" (Hibberd, 2002: 196). In the sestet, the Earth says that the wounds it has now are neither heroic nor glorious, except for being the reminders of that senseless and ruthless massacre. Even though the seas of tears would go dry, the fact about the war will stay the same:

'My fiery heart shrinks, aching. It is
death.
Mine ancient scars shall not be
glorified,
Nor my titanic tears, the seas, be
dried.'

Such despondency stems not from the abomination of war but his educational background. Dominic Hibberd presents an explanation that "Wilfred was not driven to that conclusion by the Somme, as is sometimes assumed. He had written that 'Science has looked, and sees no life but this four years earlier, sitting in the dining room at Dunsden Vicarage'" (2002: 196). As Owen was composing "the End", Siegfried Sassoon's "entry for 5 February [1918] reveals an artist ever anxious to remember and record the brutal facts of war" (Campbell, 1999: 179).

With endless mud, swamps, bursting shells, and cries of the wounded, battlefield conditions are appalling and the inexperienced persona of the sonnet wonders, "Could anything be worse than this?" (6) "The answer is "Yes". Full of remorse, he recollects a nightmarish scenario with German soldiers being bayoneted to death Here in a situation that is all too real, even the soldier can empathize with the plight of enemy soldiers" (Campbell, 1999: 179):

Green-faced, they dodged and
darted: there was one
Livid with terror, clutching at his
knees...
Our chaps were sticking 'em like
pigs... "O hell!"

"O hell!" takes Sassoon's soldier back to the present, to the realization that this terrifying reality of "sticking 'em like pigs" is not an instant he could easily reveal to their fathers and mothers who believe in the official propaganda machine that tells of "dying heroes" and their "deathless deeds" (14):

He thought -- "there's things in war
one dare not tell
Poor father sitting safe at home,
who reads
Of dying heroes and their deathless
deeds."

Misleading war propaganda and a public without enough imagination to understand the troubles soldiers face on the battlefield have become the subject matter for Sassoon to excoriate. In "Glory of Women" the womenfolk of the country receive criticism from Sassoon,

who believes that they are not sincere in their attitudes towards war and men. As he had enough acquaintance with war, Sassoon never suffered from "false appreciations" of it, which, as Silkin puts it, is "the especial prerogative of women" (1987: 163). As long as a soldier is in uniform, hale and hearty, and *whole*, he receives admiration. "Many of these female misconceptions were, in Sassoon's jaundiced view, a result of a possessive and obsessive love that rendered "mothers and wives and sweethearts" temperamentally incapable of seeing the larger perspective, or of developing an over-arching concern for all young soldiers" (Campbell, 1999: 169). They care not for "war's disgrace" (4) or "dirt and danger" (6) with which soldiers co-exist. They seem to enjoy the chivalric side of the war so much that it does give no harm to their own interests and sons, husbands and beloveds. In "Their Frailty" Sassoon claims, "Mothers and wives and sweethearts, they don't care / So long as He is alright." And he is "wounded in a mentionable place" (2). Despite Patrick Campbell's facile, misdirected claim that such a line "was at root a product of a homosexuality", the line connotes a different truth. Virility is a significant aspect in straight relationships. Owen draws attention to this fact in his poem "Disabled", wherein there is a soldier who had been wounded in an "unmentionable place":

Tonight he noticed how women's
eyes
Passed from him to the strong men
that are whole. (ll. 42-3)

The octave of "Glory of Women" goes as follows:

You love us when we're heroes,
home on leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place.
You worship decorations; you
believe
That chivalry redeems the war's
disgrace.
You make us shells. You listen with
delight,
By tales of dirt and danger fondly
thrilled.

You crown our distant ardours while
we fight,
And mourn our laurelled memories
when we're killed.

Sassoon expresses his disdain for the female predilections for chivalry. This adoration is strictly dependent upon the victorious part of the warfare. "Decorations" issued upon a success, invoking "tales of dirt", fond chivalric stories; and if a soldier were to be killed in action, they mourned his "laurelled memories" at home, whether England or Germany. Sassoon obliquely prepares the reader for an optimistic resolution, yet readers only find themselves at the receiving end of a knock-out blow:

You can't believe that British troops
'retire'
When hell's last horror breaks them,
and they run,
Trampling the terrible corpses--
blind with blood.
O German mother dreaming by the
fire,
While you are knitting socks to send
your son
His face is trodden deeper in the
mud.

"[T]he sonnet's conclusion shows his compassion for all the male victims of war, regardless of the side on which they fight; it uncharitably stresses the pointlessness of the female war effort, whether it be making shells or "knitting socks" to send a son who will never receive them" (Campbell, 1999: 169).

Hence, Rupert Brooke's 1914 sonnet sequence stands alone in its domain. Sonnets written after Brooke's are generally bitter criticism of the war and its consequences. During the Great War, the sonnet is a rare poetic form. Patrick Cruttwell suspects that "these unfortunate poems, through their great vogue at first and the bitter reaction against them later, did more than anything else to put the traditional sonnet virtually out of action for a generation or more of vital poetry in English" ("Sonnets of WWI"). Cruttwell's hypothesis seems to work, though it may not be possible to determine the proportion of sonnets to other poetic forms, at least, Catherine Reilly's anthology of *Women's Poetry* contains 125 poems in total, of which only three are sonnets. Those three and one included in this study are either critical of war or of the agonies felt for those on the battlefields. If a generalization ought to be made, the sonnet as a poetic form to express heart-felt sentiments has been used to double the effect, creating an irony between form and content.

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