

“Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected”

Irony in Siegfried Sassoon’s War Poems

by

Eduardo de Oliveira Bueno Queiroz Fontes

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Thesis Advisor

Prof. Thomas LaBorie Burns, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Accounts of the First World War were written by British soldiers who not only experienced and witnessed traumatic events in battle but also depicted them in poetry and prose. This M.A. thesis aims at analyzing the writings of Siegfried Sassoon, his poetry and his prose demonstrating connections among the biographies of the poet and historical accounts of the war, mainly to investigate the ironies in his poetry. Theories of irony are cited, especially Wayne Booth's stable irony to link the aspects of irony to his war poetry.

Keywords: irony, poetry, Sassoon, WW1.

Resumo

Registros da 1ª Guerra Mundial foram escritos por soldados britânicos, que não só experimentaram e testemunharam eventos traumáticos na batalha, mas também os manifestaram em poesia e prosa. A presente dissertação tem como objetivo analisar os registros de Siegfried Sassoon, sua poesia e sua prosa e, mostrar algumas conexões entre estes registros e suas biografias e relatos históricos da guerra e, principalmente, investigar as ironias em sua poesia. Teorias sobre ironia são citadas, especialmente a teoria de ironia de Wayne Booth a fim de conectar os aspectos da ironia com sua poesia de guerra.

Palavras-chave: ironia, poesia, Sassoon, WW1.

CHAPTER 1

1.1. A textual and contextual approach to the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon

The literature about the Great War is a theme which has been written extensively about, read, and debated from a vast range of perspectives. Especially important in the large corpus in the literature of the war is poetry. This might seem a paradox, as Kendal affirms:

The term war poetry has become so familiar that its internal tensions often go unnoticed. Yet it seems hard to imagine two human activities more unlike each other than experiencing a war and writing a poem. One suggests destruction, the other creation; one chaos, the other order; one pain, the other pleasure. (Kendal 01)

To add one more binary opposition, the most significant one poet-soldiers faced was life and death. One of the problems facing the student of this body of work is that as its detractors have pointed it out, “war poetry may be true neither to war nor to poetry” (Kendal 02). To defend the importance of the poetic corpus of the war I shall ponder the life and work of one of the finest British poets of the war, Siegfried Sassoon. In this study, Sassoon’s life and work will be approached through the trope of irony. As Paul Fussell, in his seminal study *The Great War and Modern Memory*, remarks, “Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends” (7). Fussell adds: “But the Great War was more ironic than any before or since. It was a

hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist¹ myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century. It reversed the idea of progress” (8).

This thesis will be divided as follows:

A textual and contextual approach (1.1.), a brief discussion on the history of the First World War (1.2.), followed by an explanation of war poetry and its soldier-poets, (1.3.). After having identified the main points in both, in the sub-chapter (1.4.) (Irony) the supporting methodology is discussed, focusing on the theories of irony, above all Booth’s theory on stable irony and Linda Hutcheon *Irony's Edge: Theory and Politics of Irony*. Therefore, connecting those theories to the language of Sassoon’s poems and aspects of the war depicted in his trilogy *The Memoirs of George Sherston* (1937).

In chapter 2 (The life of Sassoon) I discuss Sassoon’s life and highlight some important events, especially the ironic contradictions. Sassoon had a long and eventful life after surviving the trenches. It included a string of homosexual affairs, a failed marriage, a religious conversion, and several tumultuous arguments with literary friends. He continued to write poetry until his death, from cancer, in 1967.

The sub-chapters are divided as follows: 2.1 (Pre-War) where a brief overview of his life prior to the war is outlined; 2.2 (War Life) where I examine more thoroughly the wartime life of Sassoon and illustrate his historical participation in the war. It is also my intention to give a brief account of the way the Great War of 1914-18 was narrated and the changes it brought about in warfare because of its unprecedented brutality and anonymity. To close the chapter, 2.3. (Post-War) a brief account of his life after the war is given. I will rely here mostly on Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*,

¹ Meliorism is a thinking holding that progress is a real concept leading to an improvement of the world. It holds that humans can, through their interference with processes that would otherwise be natural, produce an outcome which is an improvement over the aforementioned natural one.
<http://www.vqronline.org/articles/2000/winter/graebner-limits/>

and on Helen Mcphail and Philip Guest's *On the Trail of the Poets of the Great War. Graves and Sassoon.*

In Chapter 3 (Irony perceived in Sassoon's war poetry), the ironic meanings that can be found and studied in his poetry are reconstructed by adopting Booth's four steps (10-14)

1. Reject the literal meaning – recognize a dissonance between what is presented in the poem and what one knows;
2. Try out alternative interpretations – e.g. the man must be mad;
3. Make a decision about the author's knowledge or beliefs;
4. Choose a new meaning based on beliefs about the author.

Based on these four steps, I will connect his war poetry to his trilogy and/or to war accounts to find out where the irony is and explain why it is ironic.

The concluding Chapter 4, is composed of final ponderings on the importance and implications of irony in Sassoon's War Writings, summing up the ideas discussed in the previous chapters. It reviews the notion that war, as depicted in the poems studied, has become a great source for irony and ironical accounts of what was the greatest bloodshed to that time.

1.2. The Great War

In order to understand what war represents, a good definition is given by Robert O'Connell.

Specialists such as anthropologists, sociologists, archeologists, and the like, have had a hard time defining what war is. If, on the one hand, a strict definition, in a single sentence or paragraph, may fail to

contemplate and encompass the various and multifaceted aspects armed conflicts have shown throughout history; on the other hand, a broad definition will end up accepting any local feud or rivalry as war.

Organized violence is not war. Definitions of war risk being commonplace, lacking specificity or scientific rigor.

Perhaps the best way to understand what war is lies in isolating its features, what Robert O'Connell calls a "defining structure". Wars display :

- a) premeditation and planning – war is not a momentary emotional response and requires elements of logistic such as supplies and mobility;
- b) collective nature – war deals with societal issues, to be solved through force;
- c) direction – war is led or conducted by some form of leadership or government;
- d) willingness – combatants are willing to get engaged in time-consuming actions that imply risks and are willing to kill each other;
- e) result – war, at least theoretically, must bring about either positive or negative effects, of a certain duration, not only immediate gain.

It goes without saying that not all wars in history have displayed all features above. Some wars have been triggered by the whims of dictators who aimed at nothing but their own personal benefit; some men have fought unwillingly, as slaves or conscripts. However, as a limiting framework, O'Connell's set of characteristics does help us better envisage what is to be understood when one comments on "war".

(O'Connell 05 06)

On 28 June 1914, Gavrilo Princip, a Serbian nationalist assassinated the Archduke of Austria-Hungary Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne and his Consort, in Sarajevo. No one at that time predicted that this rather minor event

would be the trigger for the First World War to break out and permanently change the relations between Western countries.

In order to understand a little more about the First World War and why this is so important to this dissertation, a simple summary of why the war happened and what it was like is necessary.

The Great War is how the conflict was commonly referred to by British audiences and scholars. After the 1939-45 conflict, it has been called First World War. World War I is the name given by Americans. The French call it La Grande Guerre. It was centered in Europe, began on 28 July 1914, and lasted until 11 November 1918. It involved all the world's great powers, which were assembled into two opposing alliances: the Allies (centered around the Triple Entente, an alliance of Britain, France and Russia) and the Central Powers (originally centered around the Triple Alliance, formed by German, Austria-Hungary and Italy).

More than 70 million military personnel, including 60 million Europeans, were mobilized in the largest war in history to that time. More than 9 million combatants were killed, largely because of great technological advances in firepower without corresponding advances in mobility and in training, as lots of the soldiers were volunteers who had never fired a weapon in their lives. It was the second deadliest conflict in world history.²

The Great War was considered to reverse the idea of progress. The day after the British entered the war Henry James wrote:

The plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness...is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering,

² <http://www.firstworldwar.com/origins/index.htm>

that to have to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and meaning is too tragic for any words. (qtd. in Roberts 142)

Too many people died or were wounded, too much power was used, and not much was achieved at the end. “The war, which began to the British as a ‘picnic’, had degenerated into a ‘loathsome tragedy’” (Campbel 11). The British expected to have ended the war by Christmas 1914, something far from the reality of four long years of war.

The First World War today lives on in the British History books as a trench war. It was a war fought by soldiers who dug deep trenches in which they seemed to lie and wait forever and, occasionally, would engage in combat, in the end not moving forward as much as a meter. Even though it was a trench war, many books describe the British trenches as something chaotic, whereas the German trenches were considered to be nice places, deep and safe as if they were hotels, unlike the British ones³. Fussell describes the British trenches as they “were wet, cold, smelly and thoroughly squalid... reflecting a complacency about the British genius for improvisation”(43), whereas the German trenches found on the Somme were “dugouts thirty feet deep, with as many as sixteen bunk-beds as well as door bells, water tanks with taps, cupboards, mirrors, electric light, etc...” (Coppard’s *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 87 – quoted in Fussell, 44) It was an immovable war, and the trenches that the soldiers dug took on the impression of impassable borders.

Nevertheless, as immovable as the war might seem, it did not turn out to be a futile conflict geared only around politics. Instead, the Great War was crucial in the development of the West causing entire societies to undergo substantial changes, both socially and culturally. For Great Britain, the Great War represented a turning point in

³ Perhaps the first irony in the war, the trenches in the battlefield.

social life and culture. Not only did it change politics and the outlook on the rest of the world, it also caused a considerable shift in the framework of British society. (Fussell 49)

For the men who were fighting, the roles that they played were set in a very long tradition of conflict and combat. Basically, those men, where possible, were expected to enlist and go to war, without any serious training and after only a few weeks introduction to gunfire and tactics they were to fight for their motherland. They might survive and come home, some badly wounded, or they might die a hero. No wonder why so many died or were presumed dead.

Nonetheless, for the men who went to war, a new world of experiences opened up to them. From their lives back in Great Britain, romantic images of war and heroism had been put in the front of their minds, as it was part of the culture at the time. However, after having been at war for some time the once noble soldiers quickly found out that war was nothing like the romantic pictures that they had. On the contrary, war had turned their dreams into horrifying nightmares, and their world had also been turned upside down.

The men were caught in terrible and horrendous battles from which they could not easily escape alive, other than by having no choice at all, to go through the path leading to death. Fussell says that “although the soldier tried to be sent home (normally on a sick leave or similar), the only way he actually did was in a box” (6), which actually meant he would have no choice but to die in the battle and return home in a coffin.

1.3. War Poetry

Going back to the men, what about the men that went to war? How did the War influence them, and in turn, how did they influence the War? These questions are what this thesis will focus on. Not on any men, or on a specific group of men but mainly one, Siegfried Sassoon.

There is one sub-genre of literature that finds a way into the mind of the men at the time of the Great War and that is the sub-genre of the war poem. Specifically the poems by the British soldier-poets Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves, among others who, like Sassoon were inspired by Thomas Hardy, “a master of situational irony”. As Fussell states, Sassoon admired greatly Hardy’s *Satire of Circumstances*, a collection of poems published in 1914, right before the war, which were Sassoon’s inspiration for some prewar and war poems, especially those poems that had a satirical tone (Fussell 3-9). These writers also produced poems and prose that addressed more seriously the confusion of values that the Great War revealed; but none responded with such passion or with such hatred of the ignorance and stupidity that permitted such pain as Sassoon. Paul Fussell states, in *Selections from The Sherston Memoirs*⁴: “...now Sassoon unleashed a talent for irony and satire and contumely that had been sleeping all during his pastoral youth”(xi-xii).⁵

Besides the irony and Sassoon’s life and writings, there should be an explanation for selecting his World War 1 or, as it is normally called, the Great War poems and prose. Jon Stallworthy’s introduction to *The Oxford Book of War Poetry* gives a good motive for paying attention to war poetry:

“Poetry”, Wordsworth reminds us, “is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”, and there can be no area of human experience that has generated a wider range of powerful feelings than war: hope and fear;

⁴ *The Sherston Memoirs* trilogy will be discussed later in the thesis.

⁵ *Selections from The Sherston Memoirs*(1983), (xi-xii)

exhilaration and humiliation; hatred – not only for the enemy, but also for generals, politicians, and war-profiteers; love – for fellow soldiers, for women and children left behind, for country (often) and cause (occasionally). (xix)

Although this statement does not define 'War Poetry', it gives us a good idea of how feelings were twisted and how people, both soldiers and those back home, could have seen the war with different eyes and had different opinions about it.

War Poetry, as a sub-genre, could be described as: a) Poems that concentrate on the subject of war; or b) Poems that are written during a war that seem to have a noticeable influence on the poet. Of these two, both are present in Sassoon's poems and both will be addressed. In fact, "The First World War provides one of the seminal moments of the twentieth-century in which literate soldiers, plunged into inhuman conditions, reacted to their surroundings in poems reflecting Wordsworth's 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'" (Stallworthy 13).⁶

The sub-genre of the war poem had never before seen so much popularity and so many publications as during the Great War. This was not because it was specifically new, as there had already been many war poems written before the Great War, but these poems had a certain "specialty" to them. What made these new war poems so worthy of note and gain popularity was that the poets involved were not just educated men looking at the War from the sidelines, as the authors of the earlier war poems, but were actually soldiers and officers serving in the army. These war poets saw and experienced the war in all its shocking and intense detail and this personal experience in turn heavily influenced their poems. War poetry was no longer impersonal and heroic; instead, it was now fully transformed into poetry of personal emotion and experience (Taylor 36).

⁶ *The Oxford Book of War Poetry* 13.

This change is especially visible in the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon, a British poet who served as an officer although he did not begin as one as he had come from a well off family and did not want to impose himself and wrote a large amount of war poems, which gave an extensive insight into his life and the theater of war that he experienced firsthand at the front.

Much of Sassoon's poetry written during the War was succinct and satirical in nature. Several poems, particularly those in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (1918) were aimed at those on the Home Front. Sassoon used his poems to hit out at those back "Home", whom he considered to be making a profit out of the War, or those whom he felt were helping to prolong the War. Only a few of his poems were actually about the generals and other senior officers - the two best-known of these being "Base Details" and "The General".

Sassoon was the first of the younger Georgian⁷ poets to react violently against sentimentally patriotic notions of the glories of war; these poems have an extraordinary vigor - a stridency of tone, in fact - expressing with unconcealed irony and in colloquial terms a passionate hatred of the horrors of war. Some of Sassoon's contemporaries produced poems that addressed more seriously the confusion of values that World War I revealed.

Wilfred Owen was one of these poets. Even though he died young during the war and most of his poems concern homoeroticism, he wrote some of the best war poems,

⁷ Georgian Poetry – The term coined by Edward Marsh in 1911 to signal the poetic reaction against Victorianism and to proclaim Marsh's belief that 'English poetry is now once again putting on new strength and beauty', as he said in his Preface to the first volume, *Georgian Poetry* 1911-1912. Published by Harold Monro and edited by Marsh, there were to be five volumes. The group of poets represented in the anthologies included Rupert Brooke, Walter de la Mare, D H Lawrence, Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden and Siegfried Sassoon, among many others. The Georgian poets are now commonly considered to have written lightweight, sentimental lyrics that were driven to oblivion by Modernism - an opinion that is partly due to the chronological accident that saw *The Waste Land* (1922) published shortly after the fifth and final volume of Georgian Poetry. However, within the literary context of their time, the Georgians were considered daring and even revolutionary. In 1960, James Reeves, in his *Georgian Poetry*, argued for the exclusion of Lawrence and the inclusion of Wilfred Owen and Edward Thomas, thereby defining Georgianism in terms of style rather than as a label for any poet who appeared in the anthologies. (<http://www.sassoonery.demon.co.uk>)

such as “Arms and the Boy”, which was written to his mother from Ripon on Easter Sunday, 31 March 1918.

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade
 How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;
 Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;
 And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-heads
 Which long to muzzle in the hearts of lads.
 Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth,
 Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.
 There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
 And God will grow no talons at his heels,
 Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.

Owen’s point of view in the poem touches the subject of innocence and experience through the intense use of figurative language like personification. Owen stresses through this poem that the innocent and pure men who go to war are corrupted by killing. The innocence is taken away from these young boys and in some cases their lives have been snatched away in a monstrous way. This very much represents Owen’s own experience as a soldier. The title alludes to “Arms and the Men”, Sassoon’s poem, but it is also an allusion to Virgil’s “Aeneid”, where he begins with a verse “I sing of arms and of a man ...”.

The title is intriguing and at some point ironic, as it is unusual for the weapon to be written before the human, suggesting that the weapons are manipulating the boy. Also it is unusual for a young boy to call a “gun” “Arms” which suggests that these young boys have been forced to grow up too quickly.

Sassoon’s writings differentiated him from the other poets because he wrote in a conversational style. One might say that he took something from the modernists in his use of language, as we can see in “How to Die”(1918):

Dark clouds are smouldering into red
 While down the craters morning burns.
 The dying soldier shifts his head
 To watch the glory that returns;
 He lifts his fingers toward the skies
 Where holy brightness breaks in flame;
 Radiance reflected in his eyes,
 And on his lips a whispered name.

You’d think, to hear some people talk,
 That lads go West with sobs and curses,
 And sullen faces white as chalk,
 Hankering for wreaths and tombs and hearses.
 But they’ve been taught the way to do it
 Like Christian soldiers; not with haste
 And shuddering groans; but passing through it
 With due regard for decent taste.

The poet reflects on the death of one soldier, who in his final moments fixes his eyes on the rising sun, the last he will ever see. The beauty of this event moves him to whisper a name. Perhaps a prayer to his God, or possibly a farewell to a loved one, hopefully also watching a sunrise. However, as said before, Sassoon was sending a message of the possible outcome for those who go into battle.

Sassoon continued writing poetry after the war, but these poems will not be part of our study, which focuses on Sassoon's war poems of the 1920, even though irony can also be found in the poems he wrote after the war, as represented in *Satirical Poems* (1926 and 1933) and in *The Road to Ruin* (1933). Despite having been written to satirize the corruptions and the pretensions of a disintegrating and confused materialistic society, they were more controlled, artificial, less intense – much less effective than the more intricate war poems.

1.4. Irony

By analyzing Sassoon's war poetry together with his prose trilogy, *The Memoirs of George Sherston* (1937) and historical accounts of the war, the aim of this thesis is to show connections among them, but mainly to investigate the ironies produced by him in his poetry. It is my intention to examine theories of irony, especially Booth's stable irony, connect those theories to the language of Sassoon's poems and aspects of the war depicted in his trilogy *The Memoirs* and display the irony intended by the writer.

Any discussion of irony must begin with a definition, for there are few, if any, literary terms that have meant so much to so many. Muecke writes that:

[Irony's] forms and functions are so diverse as to seem scarcely amenable to a single definition: Anglo-Saxon understatement,

Eighteenth-century raillery, Romantic Irony, and schoolboy sarcasm are all forms of irony; Sophocles and Chaucer, Shakespeare and Kafka, Swift and Thomas Mann are all ironists; for Socrates irony was a standpoint, the governing principle of his intellectual activity; to Quintilian irony was a figure of rhetoric; to Karl Solger irony was the very principle of art; and to Cleanth Brooks irony is, “the most general term we have for the kind of qualification which the various elements in a context receive from the context”(3).

Irony may therefore refer to any number of things, but, essentially, irony refers to a difference between the way something appears and what is actually true. According to Booth (1974) and Muecke (1980) the simplest forms of irony rely on the audience or hearer or reader recognizing that what the speaker or writer says or writes cannot be exactly what he means. A word does not have a meaning independent of its social exchange. A reader should know whether a word is being used ironically if the word seems to be out of place or is unconventional for that purpose. Irony allows us to say something but to mean something else, whether we are being sarcastic, hyperbolic, or understating. A woman might say to her husband, ironically, "I never know what you're going to say," when in fact she always knows what he will say. Irony is generally more restrained than sarcasm, even though the effect might be the same. The woman of our example above might simply say, "How interesting," when her husband says something that really isn't interesting and she is totally aware that she is being ironic, that she intended to sound ironic with that remark, or she would have said something else. A listener who finds the husband dull would probably understand the irony. The key to irony is often the tone, which is always harder to detect in poetry than in speech, where gradations of voice may indicate its presence.

Booth recognizes the wide variety of ironies, but the one that he calls attention to is stable irony, for understanding stable ironies is a fundamental literary skill. In his *Rhetoric of Irony* (1974) Booth describes a theory about the recognition, creation and effects of stable ironies that tend to prove how shared and clearly recognizable our social and political norms and assumptions are, or at least, that is the intention with stable ironies. He insists on stable irony as the proper example for an understanding of irony precisely because he recognizes rhetoric as a device and practice within human understanding; rhetoric can only work because there is some presupposed context. He states that irony assumes, rather than disrupts, a common ground, that we would presuppose that the author's meaning is what we would agree with. For Booth, "...if the poem were not ironic then it would be a mere rant." (148)

He defines stable irony using four marks: 1- it is intended⁸ by the author; 2- it is covert, intended to be reconstructed; 3- it is stable or fixed, because once a reconstruction has been made, there is no room for others; 4- it is finite, the reconstructed meanings are local, limited (5-6). By having these four marks analyzed, Booth affirms that "Stable irony does not mock our efforts by making general claims about the ironic vision, on the contrary, it delimits a world of discourse in which we can say with great security certain things that are violated by the overt words of the discourse"(6). As stable irony depends on a process of obviously contradicting the conventions of a context, it has by its striking point the idea of its opposite meaning for the reader. When a stable irony is used, it is common place that we all should be aware when someone is being ironic or not. Booth also says that it is always good for two minds to meet in symbolic exchange; it is always good for an irony to be grasped when

⁸ Intended here means that the irony "was deliberately created by human beings to be heard or read and understood with some precision by other human beings... within an specific context"(Booth, 5). The context here being the war.

intended, always good for readers and authors to achieve understanding (Booth 204-205).

Muecke calls stable irony “simple irony”:

The more familiar kind of irony is Simple Irony, in which an apparently or ostensibly true statement, serious question, valid assumption or legitimate expectation is corrected, invalidated, or frustrated by the ironist’s real meaning, by the true state of affairs, or by what actually happens (23).

By extension, it is not because of the fact that we assume that a writer is great, or has written something outstanding that we take for granted that whatever he writes must be ironic. According to Booth (193), irony does not only rely on shared social values; it also relies on literary value, and that is what is to be studied here. Booth also insisted on literary irony when he said: “... irony tended to show how reliable most literary meaning is. It is because what the author says is so obviously false that “we” know something else must have been meant” (195).

Stable irony also celebrates human truths, and in the case of war poetry, especially Sassoon’s which were written during the war and depict all the atrocities of the war, these human truths are really well explored. In Sassoon’s case, irony is used as a method to lead to truth, as it carries lots of political and social, or rather anti-political and anti-social statements.

Another aspect of irony that must be taken into account is the fact that the ironies within a literary text are normally signaled either by plot or by disjunctions of character and context, but, in either case, used as a strategy adopted and intended by the writer.

Muecke also corroborates with the idea of irony by affirming: “I have taken ironical to mean transmitting a literal message in such a way or in such a context as to challenge a response in the form of a correct interpretation of one’s intent, the transliteral meaning” (48). He also adds that irony is rhetorical as it is used as a figure or technique to say or convey some other meaning, and if irony were to be absolutely one truth, we would lose the rich value of shared understanding.

Adding a different and more postmodern idea on how and why irony comes about, in Linda Hutcheon’s⁹ more recent study, *Irony’s Edge: Theory and Politics of Irony* (1995), she explains or tries to show “...how and why irony is used and understood as discursive practice or strategy, and... the consequences of both its comprehension and its misfiring” (3).

Hutcheon observes that irony tends towards multiplication of viewpoints and incoherence and that irony is simply a dispute over the status of politics – whether politics begin with agreement and recognition or difference and incommensurability.

Hutcheon details one unusual example of a Canadian museum exhibit that, instead of presenting its archives of other (dominated) cultures from the point of view of knowledge and authority, decided to adopt an ironic viewpoint (qtd. in Colebrook 155). For example, one image of a white woman educating the indigenous population in the art of hygiene was presented and labeled with quotation marks as such, “Taken in Nigeria about 1910, this photograph shows missionary Mrs. Thomas Titcombe giving African women a lesson in how to wash clothes.” The curator (ostensibly ironically) had quoted the original imperialist rhetoric in the captions to the objects, even by gaining the disapproval of the Museum for such historically factual, obviously discriminatory, exposing different perspectives, had groups and individuals of viewers who were supposedly able to recognize the patronizing tone both of the image and its

⁹ Canadian theorist of postmodernism

description with the feeling that the intended irony was not sufficiently marked, especially because the African labor was the mainstay of mission economies' (Hutcheon 192). The colonialist images of the past were presented *as colonialist* and *as images*: as speaking and looking in a certain style of paternalism, authority, objectification and imperialist grandeur. (Colebrook 156)

The curators were aware of the very politics of speaking about others. If one cannot present other cultures themselves, and if one cannot be placed in a position of reliable truth in relation to other contexts, then one should play up and emphasize that any exhibition of other cultures is just that: an exhibition. The image of the other is always *decided*, collected and determined from a governing and colonial responsibility point of view. However, this decision to present the colonizing gaze ironically, by repeating all its demeaning and objectifying images, failed to achieve its aim; many of the indigenous viewers of the exhibition saw the images as one more presentation of the white Western view of its others (Hutcheon 193).

Hutcheon's analysis of the incident details the ways in which the irony of the exhibition was misread. Not only did many viewers not notice the quotation marks around descriptions of exhibits, the indigenous viewers themselves felt that even a marked irony repeated the occlusion of their stories, culture, voices and specificity. Hutcheon's reading of the controversy not only demonstrates the unpredictability of an audience, but also questions the ironist's obligation to make his context clear, and the recipient's obligation to notice that context. Hutcheon's reflections are interesting and salutary precisely because she acknowledges the problem and risk of irony, but she can come to no conclusion:

It is far too easy to forget the dangers in the face of the valorization of irony's subversive potential by much feminist, gay and lesbian, post-

colonial and poststructuralist theory and practice... the particular intersection — in the communicative space set up by meaning and affect — what makes irony happen is a highly unstable, sometimes even a dangerous. (201)

Whether it will become too dangerous, too risky is for the future to decide. Will there ever be another — safe — ‘age of irony’? Did one ever really exist? (Hutcheon 204)

Hutcheon recognises that such gestures of irony, far from avoiding the old myths of the West as the privileged viewpoint of reason, once again allow the West to speak in the absence of others. Even if the irony had been better managed, rendered more explicit or made less ambivalent, would irony, Hutcheon asks, “have been an appropriate gesture?” (Hutcheon 205) Not only are there some issues that might deserve more respect than others, such as the genocidal crimes of colonialism, there are also risks inherent in such post-colonial acts of irony and self distancing. For Hutcheon, irony is not and should not just be a disbelief or distance from what one says. Irony has a political and ethical force. One speaks the language of colonialism and reason ironically in order to display its violence, force and delimited viewpoint. However, this critical repetition does not only risk being unnoticed or misunderstood, it still allows the voice of colonialism to speak, even in quotation marks.

What is striking about Hutcheon’s analysis is the fact that she could reach no conclusion on this issue. On the one hand, she maintains the value of irony in creating a distance from Western discourses and narratives of reason. It is precisely because, from a position of postmodern post colonialism, one cannot find or desire a better position of truth and authority, that one adopts irony to present any authority or history as one fiction among others. On the other hand, not only can such gestures of distancing and

irony fail to be read, they also allow the West to keep speaking itself, even if one is speaking with a full sense of the violence and limits of one's context.

Hutcheon makes her own irony "happen", and shows what distinguishes her extended commentary on the subject, *Irony's Edge*, from previous attempts to isolate this "slippery" form of discourse. She goes against the traditional characterization of irony as an elite practice. Hutcheon's theory of irony privileges the interpreter's perspective rather than the ironist's intentions. With analyses of her own encounters with irony's edge at the cinema, at the opera hall, and in museums,¹⁰ Hutcheon attempts to lay bare the operations of irony inductively, and to offer a theory of irony that empowers the individual.

According to Hutcheon, irony does not "exist". Instead, it is a kind of movement, almost ephemeral-event that can "happen" between speaker and assessor, or between curator and museum visitor; and "the final responsibility for deciding whether irony actually happens in an utterance or not (and what that ironic meaning is) rests, in the end, solely with the interpreter" (45), rather than with the initiating ironist.

The interpreter might determine that he should "make irony happen" by noting the "circumstantial, textual, and intertextual environment of the passage in question" (143); but, as Hutcheon recognizes, there is no "fail-safe" marker that distinguishes context from text, frame from material.

For Hutcheon, the context plays a decisive role in the part of understanding irony. In general, Hutcheon does not place any particular necessity or obligation on the collection of new knowledge. Irony might or might not happen; in her provocative argument, there is no onus upon the interpreter to acquire certain knowledge in order to "get" an irony (which simply won't happen if he does not have the context to recognize

¹⁰ Described above by Colebrook, Claire. *Irony, New critical idiom*

it). For her, we should learn from each other; but, in this egalitarian account, we should not be coerced to do so.

Hutcheon claims that irony can be used by any group for any reason. Her theory, however, is useful in dissociating irony from unilateral political ramifications. Yet the emphasis on individuals and their particular matrices of discursive communities makes any irony seem more accidental than political. Hutcheon repeatedly uses “happens” to describe irony’s operation: “that’s the verb I think best describes the process” (Hutcheon 48).

Although Hutcheon is a post-modernist, her views on irony do not hinder the way irony should be seen in Sassoon’s poems here. As for her, irony rests in the interpreter, this idea will be used to point out specific ironies that “happen” not only in relation to the poem but also to the specific context in which that poem was written and the context of the war.

Nevertheless, as the main aim of this study is to analyze Sassoon’s irony, we refer back to Sassoon’s life, who was also known as “Mad jack”, and became known in literature as a writer of satirical anti-war verse during World War I. An irony that can be explained by its reconstruction, as Sassoon really intended to write against the war in an ironic way, so not everyone would be able to see the irony “between the lines”, but only those to whom the irony was put forward to. A limited irony, because it is about the war and about the ones who took part in it.

In order to truly grasp Sassoon’s use of irony devices and to be able to recognize such ironies, other ideas of irony have to be introduced. Therefore, some aspects that will be analyzed superficially are how irony negotiates notions of empowerment, victimization, sense of self, traumas its effects on memories and behavior. How it is depicted in his writings thus creating room for ironic use.

As said before, irony is an ample literary term. As the New Critic Cleanth Brooks wrote in *Irony as a Principle of Structure 1951 (761)*, the concept of irony may be overused by all, especially formalists, but its studies are yet far from being conclusive. Irony is a figure of speech, a rhetorical device that conveys different meanings in different contexts, and it is also defined differently by writers and critics. Irony has especially drawn the attention of readers who identify themselves with what was written by the author and plays the game of identifying whether that text contains irony and of what kind, as explained by Wayne C. Booth “There is the ‘secret communication’ – based on the pleasures of deciphering and collaborating – between author and reader” (300-3).¹¹

Sassoon was a soldier who fought on the battlefield and had a controversial life. He was able to see and analyze the war differently. His war poems produced singular reactions. Some of these poems have an extraordinary vigor - a stridency of tone, in fact expressing with apparent irony and in colloquial terms a passionate hatred of the horrors of war. Not only this, Sassoon was able to show war from different angles. Be it a common soldier, a line officer or staff officer. For instance, he shows the insensitivity of staff officers in “Base Details”:

If I were fierce and bald and short of breath,
I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base.
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.
You'd see me with puffy, petulant face,
Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel,
Reading the Roll of Honor. “Poor young Chap,”
I'd say - - “I used to know his father well;
Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap.”

¹¹ Wayne C. Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony*, 1974.

And when the war is done and youth stone dead,
I'd toddle safely home and die - - in bed.

In order to illustrate what will be the driving force of this study, irony is clearly present throughout the poem to the one that can see it. As Wayne C. Booth says “Every reader must be, among other things, sensitive in detecting and reconstructing ironic meaning.” (Booth, 1) The reconstruction, for this specific poem, can be done just by following simple leads such as: a) Does the author admire officers? The ironic contrast between the staff officers (majors, etc.) and the line officers (lieutenants and captains) who shared the hardships and dangers of the trenches; b) Does the author believe that enlisted men feel honored to fight in wars? The sadness of being a “glum hero”; c) Does the author believe that officers have a genuine concern for their men? The blitheness of the staff reading about the deaths of the younger men and the social connections implied by “I knew his father well”; d) Does the author believe that war is equally dangerous for officers and enlisted men? The relative safety of these old guys that “die in bed”, while the nation’s youth is sacrificed; even the mocking tone of their physical un-fitness: “puffy face”, their gluttony: “guzzling and gulping” food and drink in total comfort. By answering these questions, one is able to reconstruct the ironic meanings. The view of the ruling classes (majors, politicians, etc) is ironic in terms of those who suffered most at war, reinforced by the satirical tone of the poem.

In “Does it matter?” Sassoon depicts three different situations and how people generally react, mainly the high commanders, in a cowardly manner:

Does it matter?—losing your legs?...
For people will always be kind,
And you need not show that you mind

When the others come in after hunting
 To gobble their muffins and eggs
 Does it matter?—losing your sight?...
 There's such splendid work for the blind;
 And people will always be kind,
 As you sit on the terrace remembering
 And turning your face to the light.

Do they matter?—those dreams from the pit?...
 You can drink and forget and be glad,
 And people won't say that you're mad;
 For they'll know you've fought for your country
 And no one will worry a bit.

In the poem, stable irony lies in the contrast between the anaphora¹² of initial repetitive questions “Does it Matter?” on the details that follow each stanza.

By giving ideas of stable irony at this point, the poem makes us think about what really happened during wartime. It puts us in the writer's shoes, and the sarcasm¹³ shows how people who have fought and suffered such awful injuries, although praised for their action, will eventually be simply forgotten, pitied, or have to live half a life

¹² ANAPHORA (Greek, "carried again," also called epanaphora): The intentional repetition of beginning clauses in order to create an artistic effect. For instance, Churchill declared, "We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on the end. We shall fight in France. We shall fight on the seas and oceans. We shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island, whatever the cost shall be." The repetition of "We shall. . ." creates a rhetorical effect of solidarity and determination. A well-known example is the Beatitudes in the Bible, where nine statements in a row begin with "Blessed are." ("Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.") (http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_A.html)

¹³ a mode of satirical wit depending for its effect on bitter, caustic, and often ironic language that is usually directed against an individual (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sarcasm>)

because of this war. Also, who are “people”? The repetition of 'people' creates a partition between 'you'/the disabled and the fit. These reconstructions are possible by using Booth's theory of stable irony.

I would like to underline that the recourse to the main theme analyzed herein, irony is sometimes seen as satire.¹⁴ Irony is a satirical device, as Sassoon was seen not only as an ironist but also as a satirist, this differentiation has not been done regardless of what was found in the samples chosen for analysis. Conversely, links between irony and Sassoon's life have been thorough researched.

Chapter 2: The Life of Sassoon

2.1. Pre-War

My plan in this chapter is to give a careful analysis of Sassoon's life and highlight some important events in it, especially its ironic contradictions. Sassoon wrote in the *Memoirs* about his alter-ego George Sherston: “says George, I had more or less made up my mind to die” (373). There are other passages in which he says something similar, especially after he had lost a close friend or a member of his family.

Siegfried Loraine Sassoon was born at the family home of Weirleigh at Matfield in Brenchley, Kent, England on Sept. 8, 1886, to a Jewish father and an Anglo-Catholic mother. His father, Alfred, from one of the wealthy Indian Baghdadi Jewish Sassoon merchant families, was disinherited for marrying outside the faith and after separating from Sassoon's mother when the child was 5, ended up dying of TB when Sassoon was 9.

¹⁴ SATIRE: the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues: (<http://oxforddictionaries.com/satire>)

Curiously, in the *Memoirs*, Sassoon decided to get rid of his own parents, probably because he did not want to go over this disillusion, as his parents divorced, his father died and the person that really took care of him in a maternal way, his nanny, also left him to retire. He wrote: “My father and my mother died before I was capable of remembering them” (I). Right after his father’s death, He felt abandoned. He wrote, “How curious it is to be left out in the chilly garden until dusk without any one coming to call me” (*The Old Century* 53). The combination of the cold weather and the depression he was feeling because of his father’s death caused him to be diagnosed with pneumonia and high fever as Sassoon was a boy of weak health and would often get sick very easily. This fact is ironically interesting because during the WW1, most of his leaves were “sick leaves” and not only because he had been wounded. His mother, Theresa, belonged to the Thornycroft family, sculptors responsible for many of the best-known statues in London—her brother was Sir Hamo Thornycroft. There was no German ancestry in Sassoon's family; he owed his Germanic first name to his mother's predilection for the operas of Wagner. His middle name was taken from the surname of a clergyman with whom she was friendly (Wilson, *The Making of a War Poet* Chapters 4-7).¹⁵

He spent his childhood at the family home in Weirleigh, in the protected and somewhat rarefied atmosphere of a family near the center of the late Victorian and Edwardian literary and artistic world. He was formally educated at Marlborough School where he, differently from his brothers Michael and Hamo, who took up carpentry classes, read literature, as he writes:

From my earliest years I was interested in words, but their effect on my mind was mainly visual. In a muddled way I knew that they had

¹⁵ This chapter owes much to Wilson’s and Roberts’ Biographies on Sassoon and to Fussell’s two books in the works cited.

derivations, but my spontaneous assumption was that a mouse was called a mouse because it was mouse-like (*The Old Century* 152).

Also in Marlborough, he had an English teacher who stimulated his students by offering them half-a-crown prize for writing poetry and Sassoon took advantage of that. One of his winning entries was (Wilson, *The Making of a War Poet* 254) (no date):

My life at school is fraught with care
 Replete with many sorrow
 When evening shadows fall I dare
 Not think about tomorrow
 The extra lesson doth correct
 My wandering attention
 And other things which I expect
 But the extra lessons cannot kill,
 And blows don't fall so hard
 That they will end the life of this
 Ambitions little hard.

Despite this attempt at poetry, Sassoon left Marlborough with this comment given by his teacher (as what happened later proved to be ironic, perhaps the first one regarding his poetry) on his school report. "Lacks power of concentration, shows no particular intelligence or aptitude for any branch of his work, seems unlikely to adapt to any special career" (*The Old Century* 243).

Afterwards, Sassoon started writing more complex poetry in terms of meter, rhyme and stanza form, but at the time he was obsessed with death, as he had

experienced some losses in his life. However, he attributes some of this romantic fondness for death to Shelley (1813), especially for *Queen Mab* opening lines:

How wonderful is Death,
 Death, and his brother Sleep!
 One, pale as yonder waning moon
 With lips of lurid blue;
 The other, rosy as the morn
 When throned on ocean's wave
 It blushes o'er the world;
 Yet both so passing wonderful!

After secondary school, he went to Clare College, Cambridge, where he studied both law and history from 1905 to 1907. However, he dropped out of university and returned home where he spent the next seven years hunting, playing cricket and collecting books and paintings, as narrated in the first volume of his *Sherston trilogy*, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), but in 1906 he began publishing poems privately.

In 1908, Sassoon writes one of the poems which called for some attention. As Campbell says, it was the first poem in which Sassoon declares not knowing whether it was to be satirical or serious, "Orpheus in Diloeryum". (Campbell 19) The poem served two purposes for Sassoon: not only did it give him the opportunity to analyze other poets, but it also was the start of the style he would use later in his war poetry.

Although Sassoon wrote poetry before the War, he was at that time considered no more than a Georgian poet. His best poem before the War was "The Daffodil

Murderer” - a parody¹⁶ of John Masefield's “The Everlasting Mercy”. Sassoon wrote “The Daffodil Murderer” one day in December 1913. He had been feeling particularly uninspired and weary with his poetry, and was looking at the books on the shelves in his room out in the studio when he picked up Masefield's “The Everlasting Mercy”. Sassoon sat down to attempt a parody and did it so well that it was a success. He sent a copy of “The Daffodil Murderer” (which was written under Sassoon’s pseudonym Saul Kain) to Edmund Gosse¹⁷, who was so impressed with the poem, he said; “it is a very clever, brilliant thing and displays powers which I had not expected from you”(Wilson 160); Gosse sent a copy to Edward Marsh¹⁸. As Marsh was editor of the Georgian Poetry anthology at the time, Gosse asked Sassoon to send copies of his other poems to Edward Marsh. Marsh wrote to Sassoon and “The Daffodil Murderer” proved to be the start of a long friendship between the two men.

Idyllic Weirleigh had been the center of his life for the past six years, but in early 1914, in February he wrote to Marsh: “I have quite made up my mind to live in London a good deal in the future. I shall never do any decent work buried alive among fox-hunters” (Roberts 55). Then in March, he had already moved to London, as he was really feeling hopelessly about his poetry back home and was seeking an antidote. He then became even closer to Marsh.

¹⁶ PARODY (Greek: "beside, subsidiary, or mock song"): A parody imitates the serious manner and characteristic features of a particular literary work in order to make fun of those same features. The humorist achieves parody by exaggerating certain traits common to the work, much as a caricaturist creates a humorous depiction of a person by magnifying and calling attention to the person's most noticeable features. The term *parody* is often used synonymously with the more general term *spoof*, which makes fun of the general traits of a *genre* rather than one particular work or author. Often the subject-matter of a parody is comically inappropriate, such as using the elaborate, formal diction of an epic to describe something trivial like washing socks or cleaning a dusty attic. http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_P.html

¹⁷ Gosse (1849-1928) wrote critical essays for the Times. He was an early influence on pre-war Sassoon in matters of literary taste.

¹⁸ Marsh(1872-1953) was the editor of influential volumes of Georgian Poetry between 1912-1922. He was a friend of many poets, including Rupert Brooke and Sassoon, he was one of Sassoon’s first sponsors as far as publishing was concerned.

Then in the same year, 1914, Sassoon enlisted and his life as a soldier-poet begins.

2.2 War Life

In this sub-chapter, I intend to examine more thoroughly the wartime life of Sassoon and to sort out his historical participation in the war. It is also intended to have a brief account of the way the Great War of 1914-18 was narrated and the changes it brought about in warfare because of its unprecedented brutality and anonymity. I will rely here mostly on Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* and on Helen Mcphail and Philip Guest's *On the Trail of the Poets of the Great War, Graves and Sassoon*.

Sassoon, motivated by pure patriotism, enlisted in the army on 4 August 1914, the day before the British declaration of war¹⁹, and that is where the first irony takes place. Until then he had lived a life filled with the pleasures of rural sports. He was healthy, native, unthinkingly patriotic and, as the English say, "horsey." By August 5, he was in the uniform of a cavalry trooper in C Squadron, 1st Battalion, Sussex Yeomanry, the Royal Sussex Regiment, as depicted in the second book, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer (1930)*²⁰, where his transition from upper class loafer to subordinate officer is depicted, which might be called the first ironic event in relation to the war. It was unusual for such boys to go into the ranks rather than seeking a commission, but Sassoon decided that he would be happier among fellow troopers than officers. Specially because his favorite horse, Cockbird, was with him. Unfortunately, after a

¹⁹ There are some discrepancies according to this exact date; different books and biographies would give a different one, but what is true is that he enlisted on the very verge of the war. That is the date in the biography written by John Stuart Roberts, page 58.

²⁰ Second book of his three-volume fictional autobiography, *The Memoirs of George Sherston (1937)*.

riding accident while doing some field-work (he had put his horse at a fence blind with summer vegetation and a hidden strand of barbed wire²¹ brought the horse down on top of him, leaving Sassoon with a badly broken right arm)²², Sassoon had to sell Cockbird to one of the officers in C Company. And this was one of numerous accidents or misfortunes that befell his way and the first of many sick leaves.

Sassoon then was commissioned in the Royal Welch Fusiliers (May 1915). Between November 1915 and April 1917 he served as a second lieutenant in both the First and Second Battalions R.W.F.

On November 1, 1915 Sassoon suffered his first personal loss of the War. His younger brother Hamo who was at Suvla Bay. Going out into No Man's Land to supervise the construction of barbed wire entanglements, Hamo was very badly wounded in the leg on the battlefield at Gallipoli. Gallipoli may be considered one of the ironic battles of the WW1. It was planned to “end the war”, but it resulted in nothing but lots of corpses for the British. The battle turned out to be one of the Allies’ great disasters of the war. The strategy was thought up by Winston Churchill, who would eventually be the British leader who helped to stop Hitler in the WW2. The idea was to create a new front that the Central Powers could not cope with. The overall campaign was a disaster of the first order. Over 200,000 Allied casualties occurred with many deaths coming from disease; the number of Turkish deaths is thought to have been just as many²³.

Although his brother made light of his injury, the medical officer diagnosed a serious wound which would necessitate amputation. He was taken aboard the hospital

²¹ Barbed wire would normally be used as fences to stop animals, but it was largely used in the war to protect the trenches.

²² Ironically enough, as described in the *Memoirs* when young pre-war Sassoon is recalling a moment when the Master of the Ringwell Hunt declared that barbed wire is “the most dangerous enemy of the hunting-man”(120). Sassoon was riding his horse, barbed wire almost got him killed, but in Gallipoli it was the barbed wire that got his brother killed, not passing through it as Sassoon but constructing barbed wire obstacles.

²³ <http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/gallipoli.htm>

ship SS Kildonan Castle where he died from the effects of his wound. He was later buried at sea and his name is on one of panels of the Helles Memorial²⁴. Sassoon subsequently commemorated this with a poem entitled “To My Brother” (published in the *Saturday Review*, February 26, 1916 and later published in *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems*, 1918.)

Give me your hand, my brother, search my face;
 Look in these eyes lest I should think of shame;
 For we have made an end of all things base.
 We are returning by the road we came.
 Your lot is with the ghosts of soldiers dead,
 And I am in the field where men must fight.
 But in the gloom I see your laurel'd head
 And through your victory I shall win the light.

“To my brother”, a kind of poem Sassoon would not write later in life, remembers the way in which positive attitudes to fighting to free Europe during the WW1 were. It is distinctively unironic as it depicts merely the conventional feelings and responses of the soldiers towards the war at that time, if compared to Sassoon’s poems

²⁴ The Helles Memorial serves the dual function of Commonwealth battle memorial for the whole Gallipoli campaign and place of commemoration for many of those Commonwealth servicemen who died there and have no known grave. The United Kingdom and Indian forces named on the memorial died in operations throughout the peninsula, the Australians at Helles. There are also panels for those who died or were buried at sea in Gallipoli waters. The memorial bears more than 21,000 names. The main inscription on the memorial reads: “*The Helles Memorial is both the memorial to the Gallipoli Campaign and to the 20,763 men who fell in that campaign and whose graves are unknown or who were lost or buried at sea in Gallipoli waters. Inscribed on it are the names of all the ships that took part in the campaign and the titles of the army formations and units which served on the Peninsula together with the names of 18,985 sailors, soldiers and marines from the United Kingdom, 248 soldiers from Australia, and 1,530 soldiers of the Indian Army.*” Designed by Sir John Burnet, the Helles Memorial was completed in 1924 and is built of rough stone from Ilgardere. The largest number of names are from the Lancashire Fusiliers (1,357 commemorations) on Panels 58-72, and the Manchester Regiment (1,215 commemorations) on Panels 158-170. The Memorial stands on the tip of the Peninsula and is in the form of an obelisk over 30 meters high that can be seen by ships passing through the Dardanelles.

written after 1917 as himself and many soldiers and influential people would become disillusioned by the sacrifice of the English young men to a hopeless and incompetent campaign. At the beginning of the war, little did Sassoon realize that he would later become one of them, an anti-war pacifist.

The death of any boy is a terrible thing for a brother. The idea of war poetry could suggest that Sassoon's poem is not just about his brother, but about anyone who has died. It should contain expressions of heartfelt grief, sorrow, emptiness, bitterness and even anger, but that is not what is seen in this poem. On the contrary, Sassoon begins positively, with a bracing command to his brother as if he were still alive. "Give me your hand my brother, search my face" he insists, worried that his brother may see fear there, and thus feel shame at the sight of despair. It is almost as if he wants his brother to know that his death will not stop him from "fighting the good fight for the free".

At the beginning of the war, many of the war poets had an almost exultant attitude to the "Great War" as they thought it would be a simple one. Many of them were happy to fight for its preservation. "We have made an end of all things base, we are returning by the road we came," says Sassoon in the first verse.

It seems that Sassoon sympathizes with his brother about the fact that he is now out of the action. "Your lot is with the ghosts of soldiers dead, and I am in the field where men must fight". He is still a noble patriot laying down his life for his country without any complaints.

In one of his early poems after the outbreak of the war, "Absolution", he writes:

The anguish of the earth absolves our eyes
Till beauty shines in all that we can see.
War is our scourge; yet war has made us wise,

And, fighting for our freedom, we are free.
Horror of wounds and anger at the foe,
And loss of things desired; all these must pass.
We are the happy legion, for we know
Time's but a golden wind that shakes the grass.
There was an hour when we were loth to part
From life we longed to share no less than others.
Now, having claimed this heritage of heart,
What need we more, my comrades and my brothers?

This was how 19th century readers and writers, especially those from a privileged background like Sassoon, viewed the life of “the fighting man”. “Warriors” were “heroes”, war was a “heroic struggle” of “good against evil”; “the foe” must be “defeated” by “noble actions” on the battlefield under a flag in shreds by gunshot but still “nobly” flying.

Young men seemed to feel like this when they “joined up” in 1914 and 1915. No one feels it when they “go out again”. They only feel, then, a strange craving for “good old times at Givenchy” etc. but there will always be “good old times”, even for people promoted from Inferno to Paradise! (Hart-Davis 15) As this was how 19th century readers and writers, especially those from a privileged background, viewed the life of the soldiers, through their upper-class lens, we may conclude from the poem that “warriors” were considered heroes, as “the suffering of war will absolve the soldier” Adrian Caesar commented (qtd. in Campbell 88); war was a heroic struggle of good against evil; “the foe” must be defeated by noble deeds on the battlefield under his flag.

Irony may be perceived by comparing the poem with the passage in the memoirs, where Sherston says: “My king and country expect it of me”(223). As in fact, the soldiers were actually anxious to escape the hell of Front line, as they were “loth to part”. They did not want to live through their own death. As Sassoon realized how inadequate the poem was to express the feelings of the soldiers that would face a war of destructive and dehumanizing nature for the first time:

While learning to be a second lieutenant, I was unable to write anything at all, with the exception of a short poem called “Absolution”, manifestly influenced by Rupert Brooke’s famous sonnet sequence. 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 favor with middle-aged reviewers, but the more I saw of war the less noble-minded I felt about it.
(*Siegfried’s Journey* 17)

Sassoon wrote “Absolution” before the Battle of the Somme which would affect Sassoon’s views towards war. It was after the Battle of the Somme and together with other events in his life and at the battlefield that Sassoon’s poetry began to change dramatically from pro-war to strongly anti-war.

The Battle of the Somme was so important that John Masefield was invited by the British Army to write an account of it.

Before the blackness of their burst had thinned or fallen the hand of time rested on the half-hour mark, and all along that old front line of the English there came a whistling and a crying. The men of the first wave climbed up the parapets, in tumult, darkness, and the presence of death, and having done with all pleasant things, advanced across No Man's

Land to begin the Battle of the Somme. *The Old Front Line*, John Masefield (99).²⁵

In fact, including the main Allied attack on the Western Front during 1916, the Battle of the Somme is famous chiefly on account of the loss of 58,000 British troops (one third of them killed) on the first day of the battle, 1 July 1916, which to this day remains a one-day record. The attack was launched upon a 30 kilometer front, from north of the Somme river between Arras and Albert, and ran from 1 July until 18 November, at which point it was called off. The offensive was a sequence of badly planned attacks which resulted in having the British and French gaining 12 kilometers of ground, which was virtually nothing compared to what had been expected. The battle resulted in 420,000 estimated British casualties, plus a further 200,000 French casualties. German casualties were estimated to run at around 500,000.

Only to exemplify some of these sequences of failure attacks, before the battle, an attack was preceded by an eight-day preliminary bombardment of the German lines, beginning on Saturday 24 June. The expectation was that the ferocity of the bombardment would entirely destroy all forward German defenses, enabling the attacking British troops to practically walk across No Man's Land and take possession of the German front lines from the battered and dazed German troops. However, the advance artillery bombardment failed to destroy either the German front line barbed wire or the heavily-built concrete bunkers the Germans had carefully and robustly constructed. Much of the munitions used by the British proved to be “duds” - badly made and ineffective. During the bombardment the German troops sought shelter in such bunkers (different from the badly constructed trenches used by the British),

²⁵ Masefield, John (1917). *The Old Front Line*. New York City: The Macmillan Company.

emerging only with the ceasing of the British artillery bombardment, when the German machine guns were manned to great effect.²⁶

Then on March 18, 1916 second lieutenant David C. 'Tommy' Thomas (the "Dick Tiltwood" of *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man*) was killed while out with a wiring party. He had been hit in the throat by a rifle bullet, and despite the Battalion doctor being a throat specialist, had died of the wound. These losses were upsetting and Sassoon became determined to "get his revenge" on the German enemy. He set himself to patrol in no-man's-land even when there were no raids planned. Not only did he bring in wounded men under fire but also he personally bombed (i.e. hurled hand-grenades into) enemy trenches. Such reckless enthusiasm and behavior earned him the nickname "Mad Jack" , but he was saved from further folly by a four-week spell at the Army School in Flixecourt. Returning to the front a month later, some of Sassoon's desire for revenge had abated, and when his platoon was involved in a raid on Kiel Trench shortly afterwards, his actions in getting his dead and wounded men back to the British trenches earned him a Military Cross, which he received the day before the start of the Battle of the Somme, in July 1916. As this act was not expected nor was Sassoon's way of facing the war, thus it could be understood as an ironic passage on his life as described by Wilson,²⁷ who wrote: " Sassoon, whose incompetence in practical matters contrasted oddly with his skills at sports...-... accustomed to both leisure and servants..." and yet, he was decorated for bravery.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Sassoon had already written some poems but he had accomplished little before the publication of his war poems - in *The Old Huntsman* (1917) and *Counter-attack* (1918). Sassoon admired Thomas Hardy's *Satire of Circumstances*, a collection of poems published in 1914, right before the war, which

²⁶ Summarized from <http://www.firstworldwar.com/battles/somme.htm>

²⁷ Siegfried Sassoon, *The making of a war poet*, page 182.

were Sassoon's inspiration for some prewar and war poems (Fussell 3-9). One of the best of these poems was "The man he killed";

Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!
But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.
I shot him dead because —
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although
He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,
Off-hand like — just as I —
Was out of work — had sold his traps —
No other reason why.
Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown.

Hardy's poem was written in 1902, twelve years before the war. The poem, in the form of a dramatic monologue, is a wonderful example of Hardy's belief in

meliorism²⁸ and his anti-war sentiments. The poem is in first person, using a young soldier as the speaker. To summarize, the speaker is attempting to explain, apparently to himself, why his adversary died.

Hardy was very concerned with man's inhumanity to man, and he felt that war was the ultimate form of this, being planned, and organized inhumanity. The poem specifically addresses the Boer War, which Hardy was vehemently against, but the poem might well be referring to a chance encounter in No Man's Land. The young soldier off-handedly enlists in the infantry simply because he needs the wages. He does not fight because he believes in "the cause." After killing his adversary, he ponders if perhaps the other young man entered the army for similar reasons: "He thought he'd 'list, perhaps, Off-hand, like, just as I -Was out of work - had sold his traps -No other reason why."

How ironic war is that you might meet someone very much like yourself and kill them on the battlefield but, if you had encountered them in peaceful circumstances, you might have bought him a drink or loaned him some money. The poem makes it obvious that the speaker understands the senselessness and futility of the war, yet he rationalizes his killing of the man. It forces the reader to examine the brutality and inhumanity of war, and to consider how ironically humans are often victims of absolute circumstance and fate.

Some of Sassoon's contemporaries, such as Robert Graves and Wilfred Owen, also produced poems and prose that addressed more seriously the confusion of values that World War I revealed. Paul Fussell states, in *Selections from The Sherston*

²⁸ Meliorists believe that society is constantly improving, but only through man's efforts.

Memoirs: "...now Sassoon unleashed a talent for irony and satire and contumely that had been sleeping all during his pastoral youth".²⁹

In Sassoon's writings, irony can be explained by its reconstruction, as Sassoon really intended, as the idea of intention will be used later in the thesis, to write against the war in an ironic way, so not everyone could be able to see the irony between the lines. The ironies were somehow limited because it is about the war and about the ones who took part in it.

During the first day of the Battle of the Somme, Sassoon was "in reserve" in a support trench opposite Fricourt. He was not involved in the battle until July 4, when he went up to the front line from Bottom Wood, to a captured half-finished German trench called Quadrangle Trench. The 1st Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers had a bombing-post established on the battalion's right, where a trench leading eastwards towards Mametz Wood came to an end and, after a gap, became another trench, which in turn led into Mametz Wood itself. Sassoon went across from the bombing-post to where the one trench ended near Mametz Wood. He hoped to put a stop to the German sniper in action nearby. When he got to the trench, he threw four Mills Bombs (grenades) into it, and was surprised to see 50 or 60 Germans running "hell for leather" into Mametz Wood. For this action, Sassoon was recommended for another decoration, but the repeated failure of the Allies to capture Mametz Wood (it was not taken until July 12 by the 38th (Welsh) Division, which had 4000 casualties) led Brigade Headquarters to consider it inappropriate to make the award. Sassoon was sent home from France in late July after an attack of trench fever (or enteritis). From Oxford's Somerville College, he was sent home to Weirleigh for convalescence. He also spent some time in London with Robert

²⁹ *Selections from The Sherston Memoirs*(1983), (xi-xii)

Ross³⁰. Ross introduced him to Arnold Bennet and H G Wells, among others. Ross also encouraged Sassoon's writing of the satirical war poems. Sassoon reported to the Regimental Depot in Liverpool in December 1916, and returned to France in February 1917.

Sassoon was only back in France for two days before coming down with German measles, which forced him to spend nearly ten days at the 25th Stationary Hospital in Rouen. On March 11, Sassoon rejoined the 2nd Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers on the Somme front. He was "in reserve" during the Battle of Arras before spending two days in the Hindenburgh Tunnel. Sassoon participated in the Second Battle of the Scarpe where he was wounded in the shoulder. This particular incident started a series of events which culminated in Sassoon's "Declaration". While he was on convalescent leave after being wounded, he talked to several prominent pacifists (including John Middleton Murry and Bertrand Russell).

One of the most notably ironic moments in Sassoon's life was his bombshell public statement "A Soldier's Declaration,"³¹ in which he published a protest against the continuation of the war. It was read out in the House of Commons and reported in *The Times*. Instead of being court-martialed as he or anyone else would have been by writing such a criticism of the British Government, Sassoon was sent to an army mental hospital, Craiglockhart, where he supposedly recovered from shell-shock,³² as Fussell points out in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (90-105).

In *Siegfried's Journey* (1945), he relates the circumstances in which he made the protest of 15 June 1917:

³⁰ Ross (1869 - 1918) was the literary executor of Oscar Wilde, and a literary journalist. He was a patron of the arts & many artists and writers visited him during his life in London. Sassoon was a frequent visitor to his London home.

³¹ *Selections from The Sherston Memoirs*, (xiv)

³² Now generally known as P.T.S.D. (Posttraumatic Stress Disorder)

While at the front I was able to identify myself with the battalion. But, once I was back in England I had to do something to relieve my state of mental tension. In my notebook there is an entry dated May 21st: 'I still think that I'd better go back as soon as possible unless I can make some protest against the War'. Had there been the chance of my getting passed for general service at the end of my June leave, I might conceivably have tried for it in the spirit of self-destructive bravado. But there seemed no likelihood of my being sent out again for several months, so I plunged headlong into my protest" (qtd. in Roberts 118).

Here is the statement against the continuation of the War - July 1917, also known as A Soldier's Declaration;

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.

I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed.

On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practiced on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize” (printed in *The London Times*, on July 31, 1917).

Sassoon depicts here the political errors and insincerities of war, drawing on some of his experiences of war in a somewhat non-fictional poem, which emphasizes the contradictory nature of the war. The more formal style is another ironic characteristic as it used words and phrases that were not common for soldiers as normally they had little or no formal education. Although it is a soldier's declaration, it was not written to the soldiers but to the people of influence with the intention of being heard and not looked down on. After having written his Declaration of "willful defiance" during that time, he returned to the Depot in Liverpool having already sent his statement to his Colonel, miserably determined to take whatever punishment was necessary. Fortunately for Sassoon, his friend and fellow Welch Fusilier, Robert Graves³³, intervened, pulled strings with the authorities and managed to persuade them to have Sassoon medically boarded , with the result that in July 1917 he was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital. It was at Craiglockhart that Sassoon met the poet Wilfred

³³ Robert Graves (1895-1985) got to know Sassoon while serving out in France. The two men became firm friends and spent hours discussing poetry.

Owen³⁴. Ironically Owen, as Sassoon, was also diagnosed with shell-shock. Sassoon's encouragement of Owen's writing has been well-documented. Sassoon himself wrote a good deal of poetry at Craiglockhart and the material he wrote at that time later appeared in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*. After four months at Craiglockhart, Sassoon was again passed fit for General Service abroad. He had spent many hours talking to his psychiatrist, Dr. W. H. R. Rivers³⁵.

One curiosity about his poems is the way they were written and the reason for the kind of content in each. For example, Sassoon normally writes in rhymed stanzas which do not follow any pattern as to their individual length, suggesting the disorder and absurdity of the war³⁶. Also his war poetry moves to an increasingly discordant music, intended to convey the ugly truths of the trenches to an audience up till then, lulled by patriotic propaganda. Details such as rotting corpses, mangled limbs, filth, cowardice, and suicide are all trademarks of his work at this time.

Sassoon, who never regretted making his protest, eventually, realized that it had achieved nothing, except to keep him away from his men; his decision to apply for General Service seems to have been based on his perceived responsibilities at the front.

In November 1917 he was passed fit for General Service and returned to the Regimental Depot, from whence in January 1918, he was posted to Limerick. In February 1918, Sassoon was posted to Palestine with the 25th Battalion of the Royal Welch Fusiliers. After three months in Palestine the Battalion was sent back to France and Sassoon eventually found himself in the Front Line near Mercatel. From there he moved to St. Hilaire and the Front Line at St. Floris where his old foolhardiness took

³⁴ Wilfred Owen (1893 - 1918) was commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant in the 5th Battalion, Manchester Regiment. His experiences in France left him in a state of "shell-shock", and he was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital, Edinburgh where he met Sassoon.

³⁵ Dr. W. H. R. Rivers (1864 - 1922) was transferred to Craiglockhart War Hospital, Edinburgh in 1916 and the following year Sassoon became his patient. Rivers's life was distinguished by work in a variety of fields besides medicine.

³⁶ <http://siegfried-sassoon.firstworldwarrelics.co.uk/html/sassoon.html>

over. Despite the responsibility of being a Company Commander, Sassoon decided to attack the German trenches opposite them. On July 13, 1918, he took a party on patrol towards the enemy lines and, returning to his own line with his helmet in his hand, was shot in the head. What is ironic about this is that the bullet that hit him came from a British gun. Sassoon was invalidated out and sent back to England. As Roberts (128) said about this incident: "This bizarre end to his military career can safely be judged as totally appropriate." But this was too much for Sassoon, whose only hatred was being separated from his company. He thought that was the only way to have some purpose to his life. Although Sassoon's later poetry is skillful and sometimes very powerful, it's for the smart of his war poems that he is best remembered. Like other Great War writers such as Owen, Sorley, Blunden, Rosenberg and Graves, Sassoon was very fortunate to have survived the experience and wrote 150 poems or so about the war. Sassoon is adept at catching the rhythms and slang of the ordinary soldiers he served with. Campbell (84) affirms that "Sassoon did more than document conditions in the trenches", Sassoon always took into consideration "...the war's mental accumulations as well as the physical manifestations and the impact on other men's minds as well as his own."

Edmund Blunden also asserted about Sassoon's most famous trench-poems of the first rank, such as *Counter-Attack*: "It was his triumph to be the first man who ever described war fully and exactly; and had description been all that he did, the feat would have been distinguished" suggested Blunden (qtd. in Campbell 84). Roberts describes an event of a recording which was made in the 1950s by Dennis Silk, to whom we are indebted for allowing us to use it. He was a young man at the time of his first meeting with Sassoon and became a close friend for the last thirteen years of the poet's life. It was made at Heytesbury House in Wiltshire in the old library where Sassoon practically

lived. Initially reluctant to be recorded, Sassoon eventually allowed "the infernal machine" (as he called it) to tape him reading from his original notebooks some of the most famous war poems of our time. It was in fact important for Sassoon as he "unloaded World War One" onto the younger man. It is clear that forty years after the events Sassoon was still haunted by his time on the Western Front and the fact of his survival. By contrast, in "Everyone Sang" Sassoon shows his happiness on his famous celebration of the signing of the Armistice on 11th November 1918, which finally brought the carnage to an end.

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
 And I was filled with such delight
 As prisoned birds must find in freedom,
 Winging wildly across the white
 Orchards and dark-green fields; on--on--and out of sight.
 Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;
 And beauty came like the setting sun:
 My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
 Drifted away . . . O, but Everyone
 Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done

"Everyone Sang" was first published on April 1919. The poem ends on the beautiful statement: "The singing will never be done", as fitting a metaphor as any for the way in which poetry keeps the human spirit alive and will never be silenced. Sassoon used another metaphor when comparing the speaker to a bird in line 3 "as prisoned birds must find in freedom". This shows exactly how he must have felt when everyone started singing. As freedom comes to a bird that could have lost all hopes of

living outside of his cage, the freedom of the soldiers came filled with not only happiness, but also relief and hope. This seems a kind of return to old pre-war Sassoon and that is exactly where another irony occurs: when the war ends he goes back to where he was before as if nothing had happened in his life, but in fact he would be haunted by his memories for the rest of his life.

1.3 Post-War

Not much later after the end of the war, Sassoon retired officially from the Army in March 1919, but the war continued being present in his life.

After the war ended, Sassoon had not already started writing other kinds of texts to represent the war times. He had stopped writing poems about the war, especially after the Armistice, as he wanted to feel detached from the horrors of the war, but the scars would never heal completely. After a decade or so had passed, he, however, began the development of his most famous fiction-autobiographical account of the war, with which he became obsessed.

Sassoon's poems of the 1920s - represented in *Satirical Poems* (1926 and 1933) and in *The Road to Ruin* (1933) although they satirize the corruptions and the pretensions of a decayed and confused money-oriented society, were more controlled, artificial, less intense, and much less affecting than his war poems.

That is one reason why it is said that his reputation, besides his war poetry writings, mostly depended on his prose works and not on any other genre he wrote. *The Memoirs of George Sherston* (1937), his three-volume fictionalized memoir, describes, on one level at least, the way of life and the decline in influence of the educated, cultivated, English country gentry during the first quarter of the 20th century. The titles

of each of the three books are significant as well; for instance, the trilogy is composed of *Memoirs of a Foxhunting Man* (1928) which depicts the country playboy, the anonymously-published³⁷ first volume of a fictionalized autobiography, which was almost immediately received as a classic, bringing its author new fame as a comic writer, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) which depicts the soldier, and *Sherston's Progress* (1936) which echoes *Pilgrims Progress*,³⁸ the Christian prose epic. The trilogy is important to this study because it is a fictional account of Sassoon's life. Sherston was based on Sassoon's outdoor self, omitting the literary side of his personality and it deals with the elements of his life from about 1895 and especially the war years from 1914 to 1918-19.

It is important to add here a comment. Many people call the *Sherston* trilogy “fictional”. It is true that Sassoon changed the names of characters and places, and also wrote his family out of history, instead substituting a maiden aunt to look after him in his youth. Most of the experiences he describes however, truly occurred and / or explained the fiction of these early memoirs can be attributed more to what he left out; for instance, Sherston shows no interest in poetry.³⁹

In order to give more importance to history in the trilogy, it may be important to say that the wartime experiences that Sassoon describes in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* and *Sherston's Progress* can be understood as being essentially a true record of events. In the third volume of his nonfictional autobiography, *Siegfried's Journey 1916-1920*, Sassoon states more than once that certain events had already been recounted by Sherston. For instance:

³⁷ Anonymously, because Sassoon was worried about presenting himself to the reading public as a prose writer, when he was better known as a poet.

³⁸ *Pilgrims Progress* was written by John Bunyan and published in February 1678.

³⁹ <http://siegfried-sassoon.firstworldwarrelics.co.uk/html/sassoon.html>

My experiences during the next three weeks, which ended in my being sent to a shell-shock hospital, have already been related in *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*. I am thankful not to be obliged to drag my mind through the details again. (55)

And:

That inveterate memoirs George Sherston has already narrated a sequence of infantry experiences - from the end of 1917 - which were terminated on July 13th, [1918] by a bullet wound in the head. His experiences were mine, so I am spared the effort of describing them. (69)

The next three volumes of Sassoon's autobiography to complement his Sherston trilogy were brilliant evocations of characters and patterns of life in the period in which he revisited his youth and early manhood with three volumes of genuine autobiography but they remain fundamentally the explorations of a man whose own experience, whose own alienation, is by no means representative. They were *The Old Century and Seven More Years* (1938), *The Weald of Youth* (1942) and *Siegfried's Journey* (1945), which complement his *Sherston* trilogy.

Another irony in Sassoon's life⁴⁰ is that in December 1933, to many people's surprise, who perhaps found it ironic that a gay man would marry a woman, Sassoon married Hester Gatty, who was nearly 20 years younger, and this led to the birth of an offspring, something which he had long desired. This child, their only child, George (1936-2006) became a noted scientist, linguist and author, and was adored by Siegfried,

⁴⁰ As there are various ironic moments in Sassoon's life, I will shorten the study of them to situations that could be classified as ironic only when individual intentions or social expectations are disrupted by an incongruous reality. In addition, I will try to follow them as they can match the same chronology of the poems and the trilogy.

who wrote several poems addressed to him. George had three children, two of whom were killed in a car crash in 1996 (tragedy takes place in Sassoon's family as had happened to his father and brothers before). However, the marriage ended after World War II, Sassoon apparently unable to find a compromise between the solitude he enjoyed and the companionship he craved. This marriage was unexpected because Sassoon had already showed his sexual preference. For instance, in his poem, "Everyone Sang", as stated by Rupert Hart-Davis who arranged chronologically Sassoon's *The War Poems* (144). Here, Sassoon depicts the freedom which everyone caught up in the war must have felt to some extent when it finally ended, specially to say that now he was also free from the restrains of military service to live his life the way he wanted.

It is important to show the ability of Sassoon to satirize the war and at the same time to deal with the emotional after-effects of the war itself. The stable irony that can be reconstructed here is that the poem reflects on the possibility of still appreciating beauty after the war ("Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted; /And beauty came like the setting sun.").

Some of his poems showed not only the respect, but also the affection of the men in his platoon and company towards him, and vice-versa. Novelist Pat Barker⁴¹ even suggests that the caring, nearly domestic relationship concern for the men's food, boots, socks, comfort and safety is more properly of a maternal nature, in her *Regeneration* trilogy where the fictional Siegfried Sassoon — the main character is closely based on the real Sassoon — Barker writes that in war the bond between men is a desired quality, and Sassoon shows affection towards his fellow men in her novel, which is an event that also takes place in his real life. However, it was clear to Sassoon that outside of war his homosexuality was considered unacceptable to much of society,

⁴¹ Pat Barker – *Regeneration* (45)

and in the poem that is why now he can live his life freely. Even though his homosexuality caused him a great deal of problems during and after the war, as he engaged in some shaken relationships with some fellow soldiers as well as writers and others.

Much of Sassoon's poetry written during the War was epigrammatic⁴² and satirical in nature. Several poems, particularly those in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* are aimed at those on the Home Front. Sassoon used his poems to hit out at those at home whom he considered to be making a profit out of the War, or those whom he felt were helping to prolong it. Only a few of his poems were actually about the generals and other senior officers the two best-known of these being "Base Details" and "The General".

In the immediate period after Sassoon's active service ended, he spent several months meeting various famous writers. Sassoon was introduced to T. E. Lawrence shortly after his convalescence at Lennel House ended. Edward Marsh introduced the two men to each other at dinner at the Savoy. The three men spent a considerable part of the evening talking about C. M. Doughty. The very next day saw Sassoon's first visit to Thomas Hardy at his home in Dorset, Max Gate. Sassoon became a frequent visitor to Hardy until the latter's death. Shortly after the Armistice, Sassoon visited John Galsworthy. Galsworthy asked Sassoon to contribute a poem to a new magazine *Reveille*, which unfortunately only ran to three issues. Galsworthy's sympathetic manner made Sassoon feel like an impulsively informative nephew. A few days later, Sassoon made a visit to Walter de la Mare and found him unmysterious (despite his imaginative

⁴² EPIGRAM (from Greek epigramma "an inscription"): (1) An inscription in verse or prose on a building, tomb, or coin. (2) a short verse or motto appearing at the beginning of a longer poem or the title page of a novel, at the heading of a new section or paragraph of an essay or other literary work to establish mood or raise thematic concerns. The opening epigram to Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" is one such example. (3) A short, humorous poem, often written in couplets, that makes a satiric point. Coleridge once described this third type of epigram using an epigram himself: "A dwarfish whole, / Its body brevity, / and wit its soul." (http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_E.html)

writings), humorous and hospitable. In fact Sassoon considered de la Mare as homely and natural as Thomas Hardy.

The war had brought Sassoon into contact with men from less advantaged backgrounds, and he developed Socialist sympathies. Having lived for a period at Oxford, where he spent more time visiting literary friends than studying, he dabbled briefly in the politics of the Labor movement, and in 1919 took up a post as literary editor of the socialist *Daily Herald*. During his period at the *Herald*, Sassoon was responsible for employing several eminent names as reviewers, including E. M. Forster and Charlotte Mew, and commissioned original material from "names" like Arnold Bennett and Osbert Sitwell. Also, it was during this time that he "discovered" Edmund Blunden⁴³. Blunden sent to the *Herald* a copy of a privately printed volume of poetry. Sassoon immediately recognized Blunden's talent. The two also shared a love of cricket. Sassoon artistic interests extended to music. While at Oxford he was introduced to the young William Walton, whose friend and patron he became. Walton later dedicated his *Portsmouth Point Overture* to Sassoon in recognition of his financial assistance and moral support.

Sassoon later embarked on a lecture tour of the USA, where he traveled the length and breadth of the country, speaking at clubs and schools, and making friends, as well as travelling in Europe and throughout Britain. He acquired a car, a gift from the publisher Frankie Schuster, and became renowned among his friends for his lack of driving skill, but this did not prevent him from making full use of the mobility it gave him. Meanwhile, he was beginning to practice his homosexuality more openly, embarking on an affair with the artist Gabriel Atkin, who had been introduced by mutual friends.

⁴³ Blunden (1896 - 1974) is best known for his *Undertones of War* - a memoir of his FWW experiences in France. Blunden is underestimated today as a war poet, mainly because the works of other poets such as Owen, Rosenberg & Sassoon have eclipsed his work.

Sassoon was a great admirer of the Welsh poet, Henry Vaughan. On a visit to Wales in 1923, he paid a pilgrimage to Vaughan's grave at Llansanffraid, Powys, and there wrote one of his best-known peacetime poems, "At the Grave of Henry Vaughan". The deaths of three of his closest friends, Edmund Gosse, Thomas Hardy and Frankie Schuster, within a short space of time, came as another serious setback to his personal happiness.

Later, Sassoon spent several years travelling abroad with a friend. During this time he became friends with Max Beerbohm and his wife, with whom he stayed on several occasions. Edmund Gosse had initially introduced Sassoon to Beerbohm first by reading Sassoon extracts from Beerbohm's prose parodies in *A Christmas Garland* at a dinner at Gosse's home in Hanover Terrace while Sassoon was living in London preceding the outbreak of the War, and then later in person. Gosse did his best to introduce Sassoon to various people who might further the aspiring poet's career. He gave Sassoon a letter of introduction to Sydney Carlyle Cockerell, whom Sassoon had met while in Cambridge in 1915 for officer training.

He did not serve during the Second World War, but lived quietly at Heytesbury House in Wiltshire. In the latter half of his life, Sassoon lived in semiretirement from the world of pressing public issues and changing literary values. His critical biography of George Meredith, published in 1948, valued Meredith largely for his "freedom of spirit" and for his instinctive love of nature. Towards the end of his long life, he was converted to Roman Catholicism. It may be seen like an irony that a Jewish Protestant Aristocrat became a Roman Catholic, but in English literary circles, in fact, this was not uncommon; e.g. Evelyn Waugh⁴⁴, Graham Greene⁴⁵ were also writers who were

⁴⁴ Arthur Evelyn St. John Waugh (28 October 1903 – 10 April 1966), known as Evelyn Waugh, was an English writer of novels, travel books and biographies. He was also a prolific journalist and reviewer. His best-known works include his early satires *Decline and Fall* (1928) and *A Handful of Dust* (1934), his novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) and his trilogy of Second World War novels collectively known as

converted to a different faith. Sassoon then, was admitted to church at Downside Abbey, close to his home. He also paid regular visits to the nuns at Stanbrook Abbey, and the abbey press printed commemorative editions of some of his poems. Then, in Wiltshire he died on Sept. 1, 1967 one week short of his eighty-first birthday. He is buried at St Andrew's Church, Mells in Somerset, close to Ronald Knox, a Roman Catholic priest and writer whom he admired.

To sum up, I would like to list the most important ironic moments regarding Sassoon's life. The first is the duality of the barbed wire which was used to build fences on farms where he spent his childhood but was also used during the war to protect the lines. The fence barbed wire almost got Sassoon killed in a horse accident and the military barbed wire was the cause of the death of his brother Hamo; the second is the idea of a soldier with little or no training at all after having lost his loved officer, he set himself to patrol in no-man's-land to bomb enemy trenches, and as for this bravery was awarded the nick name "Mad Jack" and also a Military Cross; the third has to do with the "Soldier's Declaration", a statement that would have had him court-martialed as anyone else, but as he was from a upper cast family and his good friend Graves moved some strings in his favor, he ended up being sent to Craighlocart with shell-shock; the fourth has to do with his sexual preferences, as well known as a gay man, who got married and eventually had a son, not as a surprise, this did not take long; Sassoon

Sword of Honour (1952–61). Waugh is widely recognized as one of the great prose stylists of the 20th century. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evelyn_Waugh

⁴⁵ Henry Graham Greene (2 October 1904 – 3 April 1991) was an English author, playwright and literary critic. His works explore the ambivalent moral and political issues of the modern world. Greene was notable for his ability to combine serious literary acclaim with widespread popularity.

Although Greene objected strongly to being described as a Roman Catholic novelist rather than as a novelist who happened to be Catholic, Catholic religious themes are at the root of much of his writing, especially the four major Catholic novels: *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter* and *The End of the Affair*. Several works such as *The Confidential Agent*, *The Third Man*, *The Quiet American*, *Our Man in Havana* and *The Human Factor* also show an avid interest in the workings of international politics and espionage. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graham_Greene

being born Jewish and having dwelt with that throughout his life never signing any of his writings as Siegfried Sassoon, but as only S. Sassoon, as Siegfried has a German ancestry; also in calculating the length of the war and the periods in which Sassoon was on a sick leave for both being really sick and wounded, it is estimated that he only participated 6 months in the front during the complete war.

Chapter 3: Irony reconstructed in Sassoon's war poetry

The basis of the war poems is the published collections *Counter-Attack* (1918) and *War Poems* (1919), but to these have been added those poems printed in periodicals and not reprinted in volumes of collected verse, as well as others left in manuscript, amounting to some thirteen previously unpublished items in all. Hart-Davis has also incorporated into the new edition some further related poems dating from the 1920s and 1930s. Among these is 'A Footnote on the War' written in 1926, which contains a verse reflecting on the purpose of the poet's diaries of 1915-18 and includes the observation, 'War's a mystery / Beyond my retrospection', made, in fact, just at the time when Sassoon was actually embarking upon his famous prose works devoted to the subject. (Loyd 263-264)

In order to cope with this project, I had to be selective, and only choose some of the poems Sassoon wrote, but it is a pity that such thematically-relevant poetry should have been discarded. The poems will be presented in a chronological sequence so as to follow the early pro-war poems and the shift into a passionate anti-war poet.

For a better understanding of the sequence adopted here, I am using the biographical table presented in the beginning of *War Poems* by Rupert Hart-Davis, (13-14) to assist the reader in situating the poems in time.

Biographical table

1886	September 8	Siegfried Sassoon born at Weirleigh, near Paddock Wood, in Kent.
1941	August 3	Enlisted as trooper in Sussex Yeomanry.
1915	May	Commissioned in Royal Welch Fusiliers.
	November 24	Joined First Battalion RWF in France.
1916	April 20	To Fourth Army School at Flixécourt for four-week course.
	June	Awarded Military Cross for gallantry in action.
	August 20	Invalided home with trench fever. In hospital at Somerville College, Oxford. Convalescent at Weirleigh.
	December 4	Reported to Regiment Depot at Litherland, near Liverpool.
1917	February 16	Arrived at Infantry Base Depot, Rouen.
	February 18 - 27	In 25 Stationary Hospital, Rouen, with German measles.
	March 11	Joined Second Battalion RWF on the Somme front.
	April 16	Wounded in shoulder.
	April 20	In hospital at Denmark Hill.
	May 8	<i>The Old Huntsman</i> published.
	May 12 - June 4	In convalescent home at Chapelwood Manor, Nutley, Sussex.
	July 20	Attended Medical Board at Liverpool. Sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital, near Edinburgh, where he was patient of W.H.R. Rivers and met Wilfred Owen.

	July 30	His statement against the continuation of the war read out in House of Commons and reported in <i>The Times</i> next day.
	November 26	Passed fit for General Service.
	December 11	Reported back to Litherland.
1918	January 7	Posted to Limerick.
	February 8	Posted to Palestine with Twenty-Fifth Battalion arrived in France.
	May 9	Battalion arrived in France.
	June 27	<i>Counter- Attack</i> published.
	July 13	Wounded in head To American Red Cross Hospital, 98 Lancaster Gate.
	August 20	To convalescent home at Lennel House, near Coldstream in Berwickshire. Thereafter on indefinite sick-leave.
1919	March 12	Officially retired from Army.
	October 30	<i>War Poems</i> published.

At this point, I will propose a reconstruction the ironic meanings of stable irony by adopting Booth's four steps to reconstruction: (10-14)

1. Reject the literal meaning – recognize a dissonance between what is presented in the poem and what I know;
2. Try out alternative interpretations – e.g. , it is a slip, the man must be crazy, or I missed something earlier;
3. Make a decision about the author's knowledge or beliefs;
4. Choose a new meaning based on your beliefs about the author;

An example provided by Muecke from *Candide* in Booth is: “When all was over and the rival kings were celebrating their victory with ‘Te Deums’ in their respective camps...”, explains the ideas above. The irony lies in the idea that: Is that possible that both sides can win a war? Can God give victory to both sides in the same war? Isn’t such a notion absurd? In other words, the surface meaning is nonsense, two sides cannot win the same war; alternatives: both win – impossible, God granted victory to both sides – unlikely, the author must be kidding; I decide he must be making fun of the situation; I construct a meaning in harmony with my decision: In fact, the author pretends to be making such and such statements that imply certain beliefs or reaffirm what I know and can infer about his beliefs and intentions.

Obviously, all these steps are to be taken simultaneously; otherwise, they would take too long. However, they can also be taken in isolation if it is the intention of the reader to challenge a specific point.

As Booth defines stable irony using four marks: 1- it is intended by the author; 2- it is covert, intended to be reconstructed; 3- it is stable or fixed, because once a reconstruction has been made, there is no room for others; 4- it is finite, the reconstructed meanings are local, limited.(5-6)

And, based on these four steps and Booth’s definition of stable irony, I will connect his war poetry to his war accounts to find out where the irony is and explain why there might be some ironic meaning in the poems. For the chronological approach, I will intentionally leave the titles of the poems that have been analyzed throughout the thesis.

The following are poems written before he decidedly turned against the war.

1- Absolution (April – September 1915)

2- To My Brother (18 December 1915)

3- To Victory (4 January 1916)

(To Edmund Gosse)

Return to greet me, colours that were my joy,
 Not in the woeful crimson of men slain,
 But shining as a garden; come with the streaming
 Banners of dawn and sundown after rain.

I want to fill my gaze with blue and silver,
 Radiance through living roses, spires of green,
 Rising in young-limbed copse and lovely wood,
 Where the hueless wind passes and cries unseen.

I am not sad; only I long for lustre,—
 Tired of the greys and browns and leafless ash.
 I would have hours that move like a glitter of dancers,
 Far from the angry guns that boom and flash.

Return, musical, gay with blossom and fleetness,
 Days when my sight shall be clear and my heart rejoice;
 Come from the sea with breadth of approaching brightness,
 When the blithe wind laughs on the hills with uplifted voice.

In “To Victory,” published in early 1915, the soldier poet wants to return to a consolatory world of harmony and brightness, peace and pastoral paradise back home;

“Return to greet me, colours that were my joy, Not in the woeful crimson of men slain,
But shining as a garden.”

The irony intended by Sassoon is to depict what he thought war would be like. So far, he had not yet been in the trenches and yet he writes about them. It is ironic that he does so to talk about an idealized soldier with in fact little documentary realism. As for “living roses”, the irony here is to see red roses when in fact what one can see at war is the red stains of blood on their bodies. The “blossom and fleetness” of the soldier returning home is also ironic, since only a few lucky ones would return home without any wound; how would they have returned home better, stronger and faster? His friend Robert Graves would tell Sassoon that he soon would change his style and not write so “idealistically” about the war. Sassoon creates a concordance between the battlefield and the traditional English garden; the two can ironically coexist. Sassoon tried to crystallize the harmony between civilians and soldiers, but he (un)intentionally showed the cruel side of war, the denatured world of trenches where soldiers were “tired” and anxious to escape the living hell.

4- In the Pink (10 February 1916)

So Davies wrote: ‘This leaves me in the pink’.

Then scrawled his name: ‘Your loving sweetheart, Willie’.

With crosses for a hug. He’d had a drink

Of rum and tea; and, though the barn was chilly,

For once his blood ran warm; he had pay to spend.

Winter was passing; soon the year would mend.

But he couldn’t sleep that night; stiff in the dark

He groaned and thought of Sundays at the farm,
 And how he'd go as cheerful as a lark
 In his best suit, to wander arm in arm
 With brown-eyed Gwen, and whisper in her ear
 The simple, silly things she liked to hear.

And then he thought: to-morrow night we trudge
 Up to the trenches, and my boots are rotten.
 Five miles of stodgy clay and freezing sludge,
 And everything but wretchedness forgotten.
 To-night he's in the pink; but soon he'll die.
 And still the war goes on—*he* don't know why.

As Sassoon explains;

The first of my “outspoken” war poems. I wrote it one cold morning at Morlancourt, sitting by the fire in the Quartermaster's billet, while our Machine-Gun Officer shivered in his blankets on the floor. He was suffering from alcoholic poisoning, and cold feet, and shortly afterwards departed for England, never to return. Needless to say, the verses do not refer to him, but to some typical Welshman who probably got killed on the Somme in July, after months and months of a dog's life and no leave. The *Westminster* refused the poem, as they thought it might prejudice recruiting! (*War Poems* 22)

In this and the following poems, Sassoon is changing his attitude about the war, displaying fewer noble sentiments and more sensibility about its costs.

Sassoon, by naming “Davies”, creates the first irony of the poem. “Davies”, could write and reflect about the war on his own and would not be reprimanded by doing so, as the regular working class soldier could not swear and curse about the war out loud. Again, Sassoon was able to empathize with the plight of the soldier without actually “fighting”, and his ironic tone makes the reader believe he had indeed been in trenches.

Another irony can be identified in the soldier’s attitude who has the first hopeful and the last hopeless word “he don’t know why”, as he does not know why the war would go on and why he had to go through that simply to die.

5- The Kiss (Flixécourt, 25 April 1916)

To these I turn, in these I trust—

Brother Lead and Sister Steel.

To his blind power I make appeal,

I guard her beauty clean from rust.

He spins and burns and loves the air,

And splits a skull to win my praise;

But up the nobly marching days

She glitters naked, cold and fair.

Sweet Sister, grant your soldier this:

That in good fury he may feel

The body where he sets his heel

Quail from your downward darting kiss.

As Sassoon comments; a famous Scotch Major (Campbell) came and lectured on the bayonet.

The bayonet and the bullet are brother and sister. If you don't kill him, he'll kill you. Stick him between the eyes, in the throat, in the chest, or round the things. If he's on the run, there's only one place; get your bayonet into his kidneys; it'll go in as easy as butter... Quickness, anger, strength, good fury, accuracy of aim. Don't waste good steel. Six inches are enough... when he coughs, go find another, he said.

(Diaries, 25 April, 59/60)

The first irony is in the title "The Kiss". The title suggests romance, but in military jargon, "the kiss" is the exact moment when the bayonet stabs the body of the enemy soldier. In addition, in local English there is a kind of joke made about someone who has turned events in a wrong or unlucky direction: we say "well, that's the kiss of death" - an ironic reference to the kiss of life which is artificial respiration or resuscitation.

This would not be the kind of vocabulary used ironically in 1916, especially after the words used in the lecture given by the Major, because he had not yet completely changed his view of the war, and created a metaphor that was meant to be shocking.

A more "erotic" irony would be that killing might give a soldier the sort of excitement that comes with a kiss. If we metaphorically compare a man's penis to a weapon, the irony is well explained.

6- Before the Battle (Bussy-le-Daours, 25 June 1916)

Music of whispering trees
Hushed by a broad-winged breeze
Where shaken water gleams;
And evening radiance falling
With reedy bird-notes calling.
O bear me safe through dark, you low-voiced streams.

I have no need to pray
That fear may pass away;
I scorn the growl and rumble of the fight
That summons me from cool
Silence of marsh and pool
And yellow lilies is landed in light
O river of stars and shadows, lead me through the night.

It is interesting to note that the Battle of Somme began on 1 July, a week after Sassoon had written this poem (*War Poems* 39).

In “Before the Battle”, it is the speaker who tells what is happening to him, and what he is feeling, but we cannot find out until the second stanza “I have no need to pray” he says, but the poet puts it like a prayer without naming the Deity.

Sassoon starts the poem describing the surrounding landscape. It is a beautiful place and, by the description of the author we may suppose that he is in the countryside, next to a river or a small lake, because of the trees and the water in the poem “Music of whispering trees; where shaken water gleams”. The place is peaceful at the beginning of the poem, with the whispering of the trees, the water shining and the birds singing with

ready bird-notes calling, however, irony may be understood here as a contrast of the place that he is describing as it is where he fights every day. The horrors of the battlefield, which used to be beautiful in the past have now become a trench with bombs and corpses.

In reaction to the opposition between light and dark, another playful irony described in the poem, Sassoon is telling us that the light in fact represents facing death in contrast to the dark, a moment that means to rest and prepare for the next battle day. Fussell says “the day in the trenches was similar to any other day in the war, dangerous ... and at night soldiers had been rested and fed”(125-26).

Sassoon also gives us another irony, but this one is more of a poet protesting between two worlds. In “I have no need to pray” we can see that Sassoon himself seems to deny religion, but as he wrote the two prayer-like “non-Catholic” refrains of both stanzas (*O bear me safe through dark, you low-voiced streams; O river of stars and shadows, lead me through the night.*) he was in fact praying to nature or some superior power to safeguard him from death.

7- Died of Wounds (July 1916)

His wet white face and miserable eyes
 Brought nurses to him more than groans and sighs:
 But hoarse and low and rapid rose and fell
 His troubled voice: he did the business well.
 The ward grew dark; but he was still complaining
 And calling out for ‘Dickie’. ‘Curse the Wood!
 ‘It’s time to go. O Christ, and what’s the good?
 ‘We’ll never take it, and it’s always raining.’

I wondered where he'd been; then heard him shout,
 'They snipe like hell! O Dickie, don't go out...
 I fell asleep ... Next morning he was dead;
 And some Slight Wound lay smiling on the bed.

Sassoon comments; "I got the idea in the hospital at Amiens, where a youngster raved and died in the bed opposite mine. I think he came from High Wood and its worst" (*War Poems*, 41).

Even though Sassoon was using irony to explain a death of a "pathetically youthful officer" (*Journey* 19) and then the next day "some Slight Wound lay smiling on the bed", as if nothing had happened. In *Memoirs*, he says: "Someone called Dick was on his mind, and he kept crying out for Dicky. – "Don't go out , Dicky; they snipe like hell!" And then, "curse the Wood"...Dick, you fool, don't go out!(366).

Another piece of irony here would be the death of Sassoon's great love, David C. 'Tommy' Thomas (the 'Dick Tiltwood' of *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man*) who was killed while out with a wiring party.

As the idea of a depersonalized victim of war is depicted here, another irony can be found in the listener's initial indifference, in the mistaken belief that "he did the business well", but that could not refrain him from a miserable and suffering death.

8- To His Dead Body (July 1916)

When roaring gloom surged inward and you cried,
 Groping for friendly hands, and clutched, and died,
 Like racing smoke, swift from your lolling head
 phantoms of thought and memory thinned and fled.

Yet, though my dreams that throng the darkened stair
 Can bring me no report of how you fare,
 Safe quit of wars, I speed you on your way
 Up lonely, glimmering fields to find new day,
 Slow-rising, saintless, confident and kind—
 Dear, red-faced father God who lit your mind.

The first irony, is one of circumstance: “ written in hospital at the end of July 1916. It refers to Robert Graves, who had been reported Died of Wounds in the Battle of the Somme. A fortnight later Eddie Marsh wired to me at Oxford that R.G. was doing well and in hospital at Highgate” (*War Poems* 44). This was a moment of truth for Sassoon as he had already lost close friends in the war and envisaged that as his own inevitable end. Graves was actually alive but badly wounded and would return to fight, but Sassoon wrote in his *Diaries*, “Now he and Tommy are together, and perhaps I’ll join them soon”(21 July, 1916, 98).

It is one of the more wistful of Sassoon's writings, even though it does not follow the cynical or satirical stand that many of his other works take but is nonetheless one of the most powerful pieces of war poetry (Marsh 1916). And yet Sassoon could not resist an ironic touch as when he says that God, even by not being Catholic, has taken his friend and is embarrassed for being a divinity and committing such an act, “red-faced father God”.

9- The One-Legged Man (August 1916)

Propped on a stick he viewed the August weald;

Squat orchard trees and oasts with painted cowls;
 A homely, tangled hedge, a corn-stalked field,
 And sound of barking dogs and farmyard fowls.
 And he'd come home again to find it more
 Desirable than ever it was before.
 How right it seemed that he should reach the span
 Of comfortable years allowed to man!
 Splendid to eat and sleep and choose a wife,
 Safe with his wound, a citizen of life.
 He hobbled blithely through the garden gate,
 And thought: 'Thank God they had to amputate!'

"The one Legged Man" began as a journal entry about a man returning from war, thankful to be alive, despite missing a limb. There is an obvious ironical reversal in the last line, although the poem was titled "One-Legged Man" and Sassoon had given the game away in the title, it is not clear for the reader until the last line. The poem is ironic in that despite losing his leg, the man still seems to be jovial and thankful.

The ironic device that Sassoon employs in and some other poems is described by him as "-two or three harsh, peremptory, and colloquial stanzas with a knock-out blow in the last line" (*Journey* 29), which as Campbell observes, "became a staple of his epigrammatic method" (Campbell 59).

10- The Hero (August 1916)

"Jack fell as he'd have wished," the Mother said,
 And folded up the letter that she'd read.

“The Colonel writes so nicely.” Something broke
In the tired voice that quavered to a choke.
She half looked up. “We mothers are so proud
Of our dead soldiers.” Then her face was bowed.
Quietly the Brother Officer went out.
He’d told the poor old dear some gallant lies
That she would nourish all her days, no doubt.
For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak joy,
Has shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
Because he’d been so brave, her glorious boy.
He thought how “Jack”, cold-footed, useless swine,
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
Went up at Wicked Corner; how he’d tried
To get sent home, and how, at last, he died,
Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
Except that lonely woman with white hair.

Sassoon comments:

Does not refer to anyone I have known. But it is pathetically true. And of course the “average Englishman” will hate it. This, and “The Tombstone-Maker”, “The One-Legged Man” and “Arms and the Man”, show a resemblance to Hardy’s *Satires of Circumstance*, which I read with amusement in 1914, but now find unworthy of his greatness. (*War Poems* 49)

The first irony throughout the poem is that the officer is saying to the bereaved mother the things you expect him to say, but he does not mean it. He is just saying things to make her feel that the war is not really stupid and pointless. Sassoon is angry about the pointlessness; his poem reveals anger at a system that perpetuates war, which can be seen in the first stanza. The mother is saying she is proud, because she has to be. The ironic contrast is in the rapid language of consolation compared to the real circumstances of the boy's death; she has to believe the words.

In the second and third stanzas, we find that the officer has been telling the old lady lies about how her son died. He is telling her lies to make her feel better. The ironic idea here is that the officer is pretending for the old lady's sake and the old lady wants to believe it. The characters are all in no-win ironical situations as none of them, with the possible exception of Jack, can be easily blamed for what they do. The Colonel and the Fellow Officer certainly can't tell the mother the truth about her cowardly son. The mother can't help but want to believe her son was brave and died nobly. What makes it ironic is that all of them may be blamed for perpetuating the war machine, including the mother who had lost a son.

This poem shows us irony in its title "The Hero". It cannot be used to describe those who have never experienced heroism at first hand. "Jack" isn't someone willing to risk his life for his country, so if we believe he is a hero, we might need a better definition for it. The bitterest irony of all is that it does not really matter if a brave soldier has a heroic or a cowardly death. The powers of those who create and orchestrate war for their own personal ends is unscrupulous.

11- The Road (August 1916)

The road is thronged with women; soldiers pass

And halt, but never see them; yet they're here—
 A patient crowd along the sodden grass,
 Silent, worn out with waiting, sick with fear.
 The road goes crawling up a long hillside,
 All ruts and stones and sludge, and the emptied dregs
 Of battle thrown in heaps. Here where they died
 Are stretched big-bellied horses with stiff legs,
 And dead men, bloody-fingered from the fight,
 Stare up at caverned darkness winking white.

You in the bomb-scorched kilt, poor sprawling Jock,
 You tottered here and fell, and stumbled on,
 Half dazed for want of sleep. No dream would mock
 Your reeling brain with comforts lost and gone.
 You did not feel her arms about your knees,
 Her blind caress, her lips upon your head.
 Too tired for thoughts of home and love and ease,
 The road would serve you well enough for bed.

Sassoon comments: "This is the road through Mametz village as I saw early in July 1916, when we struggled up through the mud to make a night attack on Quadrante Trench" (*War Poems* 51). And as he portrays:

These dead are terrible and undignified carcasses, stiff and
 contorted. There were thirty of our own laid in two ranks by
 Mametz-Carnoy road, some side by side on their backs with bloody

clotted fingers mingled as if they were handshaking in the
 companionship of death. And the stench indefinable. (*Diaries*, 4 July,
 1916)

Sassoon tries to give the idea that, as the poem was written before the Battle of Somme, the road they have taken is the road from purgatory to hell, as he focuses on the human dilemma, on a single suffering individual; “You in the bomb-scorched kilt, poor sprawling Jock”, which was the name given to the 9th (Scottish) Division, which was one of the Kitchener's Army divisions raised from volunteers by Lord Kitchener to serve on the Western Front during the war. Ironically, not only did they volunteer to fight in the war but also volunteered to die.

12- “They” (31 October 1916)

The Bishop tells us: 'When the boys come back
 They will not be the same; for they'll have fought
 In a just cause: they lead the last attack
 On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought
 New right to breed an honourable race,
 They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.'
 We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.
 For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;
 Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;
 And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find
 A chap who's served that hasn't found some change.
 And the Bishop said: “The ways of God are strange!”

Sassoon comments:

Written at 40 Half Moon Street about 1 a.m. after a long evening with Robbie Ross, More Adley and Roderick Meiklejohn. I was so sleepy I could hardly keep my eyes open, but the thing just wrote itself. And Eddie Marsh, when I showed it to him one wet morning (at 10 Downing Street!), said: "It's too horrible." As I was walking back I actually met "the Bishop" (of London) and he turned a mild shining gaze on me and my M.C. (*War Poems* 57).

This poem ironically contrasts the moral improvement of British soldiers promised by a Bishop with the physical damage and moral degradation that they actually experience. In the first stanza Sassoon talks about the heroic view of the Bishop upon the soldiers and in the second stanza what is shown the opposite. "They" are the idealized British soldiers of whom the bishop speaks. "They" are quite unlike the real soldiers who go to war, the "we".

"The Bishop tells us:", is another piece of irony as he is the figure of religious authority in the poem, a Bishop of the Church of England who speaks with confidence about a situation of which he has no knowledge. He represents a brand of religious hypocrisy that was deeply unpopular among many men at the front. It is ironic that the 5th commandment says, "Thou shall not kill".⁴⁶

"When the boys come back / They will not be the same;": The meaning of the poem turns on this observation that the war changes the men who fought in it. And that is another ironic part in the poem, as "'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply": The anguished agreement echoes— along with the use of the phrase "the boys" – the first line, only to subvert the Bishop's prediction as "For George lost both his legs...", and "Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;" "And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll

⁴⁶ http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/command.htm

not find”, Sassoon is spelling out the terrible, real consequences of war for “the boys”. Sassoon ironically names the soldier in order to contrast with the idealized and anonymous ones in the Bishop’s sermon.

“And Bert’s gone syphilitic.”: Bert has contracted syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease. Normally, soldiers on leave would commonly visit prostitutes in the local towns and villages. There is another ironic contrast, then, between this and the Bishop’s claim that “their comrades blood has bought / New right to breed an honourable race”.

Finally, “...that hasn’t found some change.”, the irony of this statement illustrates Sassoon’s satirical point, that serious changes leave indeed come to the men, but quite different from that which the Bishop predicts.

13- Arms and the Man (November 1916)

Young Croesus went to pay his call

On Colonel Sawbones, Caxton Hall:

And, though his wound was healed and mended,

He hoped he’d get his leave extended.

The waiting-room was dark and bare.

He eyed a neat-framed notice there

Above the fireplace hung to show

Disabled heroes where to go

For arms and legs; with scale of price,

And words of dignified advice

How officers could get them free.

Elbow or shoulder, hip or knee,
 Two arms, two legs, though all were lost,
 They'd be restored him free of cost.
 Then a Girl Guide looked to say,
 'Will Captain Croesus come this way?'

“Arms and the Man” is written in a mockingly humorous tone which hides a bitter cynicism and distaste for those who knowingly sent innocent youth to a bloody and pointless war.

Colonel Sawbones represents the first irony in the poem, the comical use of language in the officer's name, which relates to the dreadful exaggeration of a military doctor's role. This officer, however, is not risking his life among exploding shells and dead soldiers' bodies; he is at home as most of the other officers were during the war.

Sassoon writes it like a sing-song “light-verse”, rhyming it. The irony lies in the contrast between comic tone and the dreadful fact of dismemberment.

Sassoon then goes on to explain the young soldier's mission at the hall: “And, though his wound was healed and mended, He hoped he'd get his leave extended.” This comical picture of a soldier making excuses about returning to the front may have raised many laughs in the officers' mess at the beginning of the war. But at that point, that was exactly what Sassoon wished, “leave extended”. This mission is described in the *Memoirs*, his late re-acquaintance with the facts of military life:

Early in November I went to London for a final Medical Board. At the Caxton Hall in Westminster I spent a few minutes gazing funereally round an empty waiting-room. Above the fireplace (there was no fire)

hung a neatly framed notice for the benefit of all of whom it might concern. It stated the scale of the prices for artificial limbs, with instructions as to how officers could obtain them free of cost... While I was adjusting my mind to what a journalist might have called “the grim humour” of this footnote to army life, a Girl Guide stepped in saying that Colonel Crossbones (or whatever his cognomen was) would see me now. A few formalities “put paid to” my period of freedom and I pretended to be feeling pleased as I walked away. (379-80)

This also describes another bitter irony in the poem. Even though the soldiers were the one to lose their limbs in the battle, only officers, who were normally rich, could get prosthetic appliances, and for free. Sassoon tries to illustrate here the lack of humanity shown to the ordinary trooper.

In the title, Sassoon’s play of words “Arms” does not refer not to munitions and guns, as one could expect as it talks about war, but to the dead limbs of soldier amputees, and the irony presented in the poem is that even though there is a possibility of “free” limbs, it could hardly compensate for missing arms and legs. Your arms cannot really be “restored”.

14- “Blighters”

The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin

And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks

Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;

‘We’re sure the Kaiser loves our dear old Tanks!’

I’d like to see a Tank come down the stalls,

Lurching to rag-time tunes, or 'Home, sweet Home',
 And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
 To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.

“Blighters” is a memorable poem of protest directed at those who stay in “Blighty” and profit from the misfortunes of others. Sassoon shows a nightmare vision of the hell that is trench warfare.

In “Blighters”, Sassoon sets the scene with details about a musical show; the audience was laughing, the performers were shrilly singing, and the venue was packed. The second stanza introduces the first surprising switch. As well as Sassoon’s wish for a tank to invade the music hall, he creates a kind of ambiguity that is only resolved in the last two lines, “And there’d be no more jokes in Music-halls/To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume” (Sassoon).

Sassoon describes this view in the *Journey*, where he recalled:

“I wrote the afterwards well-known lines called “Blighters” in which I asserted that I’d like to see a tank come down the stalls at a music hall performance where – in my opinion – the jingoism of the jokes and songs appeared to ‘mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume’”(45)

As if telling the reader about the irony they are about to encounter, Sassoon made the title itself have multiple meanings. First of all, it is placed within quotation marks, which denotes either speech or when someone intends to be ironic. The speaker could have been an English soldier who, as many soldiers did at that time, was referring to his homeland as “blighty.” Due to the negative connotations of the root word “blight”, this is Sassoon’s first jab at the people on the home front. In England, a blighter could be a colloquial term for nearly any person in an unfortunate state.

Therefore, at the same time, the title is possibly quoting a person who is lamenting the loss of youthful soldier to the war. Lastly, blighters are those who wreck something, in this case Britain through their blind patriotism (“Blighters”). Viewing the title through the lens of all of these meanings leads one to ask why soldiers are dying to protect “blighty”, a land that cares so little for them.

The capitalization of “Show” indicates another irony. As the show is being watched by either civilians or metaphorical parliamentarians, as the case may be, it is not any show, but rather the most important “show” of all. Sassoon is already hinting to the reader that the war is not fully understood by the people at home. Even the dancers themselves seem to be making a mockery of the war; he describes their formation as “ranks”, which is both a military term for groups of soldiers, as well as a word for ordinary lines of people.

As I see it, Sassoon’s strongest use of irony is delivered before his touching final lines when he mentions a tank essentially dancing to “Home, Sweet Home.” Besides the obvious strangeness of a tank “lurching” in time with a song, it is paradoxical that this patriotic song would be playing for a soldier, since his country has betrayed him. Along with other works by Sassoon, a more insightful view of the First World and maybe even war in general, can be established through the reading of “Blighters”. Most importantly, it represents the pain of a soldier torn between either calling out a nation (first stanza) or fighting for them (second stanza). Also, it is interesting that it puts the war supporters in the place of the soldiers for a brief moment, something that is rarely done.

15 – Base Details (Rouen, 4 March 1917)

16- The General (Denmark Hill Hospital, April 1917)

Good-morning; good-morning!” the General said
When we met him last week on our way to the line.
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
“He's a cherry old card,” grunted Harry to Jack
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.
...
But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

This poem is one of Sassoon's bitterest anti-war poems. After the death of one of his close friends he started questioning the validity of the war. He praised the war heroes, but blamed those in charge. In WWI, many men died because of the incompetence of those in charge and Sassoon highlights that in this poem.

The General, as he has never been to the front line, has no real idea what is going on there and he is giving orders that are not in the soldier's best interest. The General and his staff are the ones that are getting these men killed. In “But he did for them both by his plan of attack”, Sassoon depicts the most bitter irony of the poem, which shocks the reader. Harry and Jack went back to the front line and were killed all because they followed the General's orders. These lines ironically celebrate the heroism of these men; even though they know that it is a futile mission and it a matter of fact finality, they will die for their country.

Arras shows the irony of war in the poem. As the soldiers “slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack”, they made significant advances but had been unable to achieve a breakthrough.

The Battle of Arras offers up yet another example of incompetence, a wrong-headed strategy in which the general's "plan of attack" accounts not for an unseen enemy but for the long suffering and tolerant British "Tommy"⁴⁷. (Campbell, 144)

The British attack on the Western Front was known as the Battle of Arras, which lasted from 9 April to 16 May 1917.

17- Lamentations (Summer 1917 [episode at Rouen, February 1917])

I found him in the guard-room at the Base.
 From the blind darkness I had heard his crying
 And blundered in. With puzzled, patient face
 A sergeant watched him; it was no good trying
 To stop it; for he howled and beat his chest.
 And, all because his brother had gone west,
 Raved at the bleeding war; his rampant grief
 Moaned, shouted, sobbed, and choked, while he was kneeling
 Half-naked on the floor. In my belief
 Such men have lost all patriotic feeling.

Sassoon comments:

For the soldier is no longer a noble figure; he is merely a writhing insect among this ghastly folly of destruction. His kingly reason is fooled and debauched by the dire pangs that his body must endure. (*Diaries*, 22 February, 133)

⁴⁷ The name Tommy or Tommy Atkins has long been used as a generic nickname for the British Soldier for hundreds of years. <http://worldwarone.wordpress.com/2011/03/17/the-origins-of-the-british-tommy/>

In “Lamentations”, the immediate irony, however, is that this irreparable rupture between soldier and officer does not span enemy lines. Rather, the acutest separation of underlying principle, comprehension, and understanding occurs between the English field soldier and his highest ranking officers. The effect of this combination between experienced, knowing soldier and unaware, untouched commanding officer is that it is the insignificant perception of the officer that is lamentable.

Another irony in the poem is the “guard-room” with the connotation, understood from the officer’s narration that the soldier is not in a good mood. The “guard-room”, then, takes on the quality of a “guarded room”, and the suggestion that the soldier is unfit in his condition to be left unsupervised points up the irony.

The behavior of the sergeant constitutes another piece of irony. As he is also a member of the army, he would thus, expectedly, show some compassion or comprehension at another member, but what is shown is the opposite: the sergeant did not show any grief, maybe because his tasks are done so far from the field where grief consumes men that he does not know that men are dehumanized by “the bleeding war”.

Sassoon finishes the poem with another ironic standpoint. As he refers to the pain of war and his own attitude towards it. Take, for example, the line, “In my belief, such men have lost all patriotic feeling”. It can be inferred that the soldiers are unable to think about the king and the country, only about their own grieving. Here it seems that he is sympathizing with the man who has lost his brother, in other words, himself, as his brother was killed in the war.

18- The Effect (Summer 1917 [*Hindenburg Line material*])

The effect of our bombardment was terrific. One man told me he had never seen so many dead before. —*War Correspondent*.

“He’d never seen so many dead before.”

They sprawled in yellow daylight while he swore

And gasped and lugged his everlasting load

Of bombs along what once had been a road.

“How peaceful are the dead.”

Who put that silly gag in some one’s head?

“He’d never seen so many dead before.”

The lilted words danced up and down his brain,

While corpses jumped and capered in the rain.

No, no; he wouldn’t count them any more...

The dead have done with pain:

They’ve choked; they can’t come back to life again.

When Dick was killed last week he looked like that,

Flapping along the fire-step like a fish,

After the blazing crump had knocked him flat...

“How many dead? As many as ever you wish.

Don’t count ’em; they’re too many.

Who’ll buy my nice fresh corpses, two a penny?”

Sassoon comments: “The poem suggests that we sneak home and pray that we’ll never know the hell where youth and laughter go” (*War Poems* 87).

“The Effect”, with the opening lines of the first and second stanza and a more elaborate one in the final stanza, provides an ironic counterpoint to the shocking facts of

death, and is built up by enthusiastic sales ground in which the *only* goods for sale by the street trader are corpses. The finale is ironic as it reveals the sardonic speaker playing the same unintelligent game as the correspondent. Resorting to street trader slang, he offers as many “*nice fresh corpses, two a penny...as ever you wish.*”

The poem is an ironic ballad response to the “war correspondent” presented as an epigraph to the poem, and represents all Sassoon’s fury towards civilians, especially the correspondent who was safe behind the lines, as shown below:

It targets those “Gentlemen of the Press” who still insisted on cosmeticizing or dramatizing by turns what they reported from the Front for the dubious benefit of their civilian readers. (Campbell, 161)

Sassoon is ironically addressing the dehumanizing effect of war by comparing his late friend Dick with a fish, “Flapping along the fire-step like a fish”. Thus it appears to call in question his real sympathy for his human subject.

19- Does it Matter? (Craiglockhart, 1917)

20- How to Die (Craiglockhart, 1917)

21- The Fathers (Craiglockhart, 1917)

Snug at the club two fathers sat,
Gross, goggle-eyed, and full of chat.
One of them said: ‘My eldest lad
Writes cheery letters from Bagdad.
But Arthur’s getting all the fun
At Arras with his nine-inch gun.’

'Yes,' wheezed the other, 'that's the luck!
 My boy's quite broken-hearted, stuck
 In England training all this year.
 Still, if there's truth in what we hear,
 The Huns intend to ask for more
 Before they bolt across the Rhine.'
 I watched them toddle through the door—
 These impotent old friends of mine.

In "The Fathers", Sassoon attacks an older generation of English who make patriotic noises from their comfortable homes and clubs, while they (and here an attack again on Generals) send their youth to war.

Sassoon ironically compares the two fathers to two children. The lines "Bagdad and lad, fun and gun" are characteristically rhymes done by children. Also, when he says that they "toddle" out and were "impotent" he is calling them children. But the reverse verdict given by Sassoon is that they are victims, unlike their sons who were victims of some murderous war machine, of booze and senility.

22- Sick Leave (Craiglockhart, 1917)

When I'm asleep, dreaming and lulled and warm,--
 They come, the homeless ones, the noiseless dead.
 While the dim charging breakers of the storm
 Bellow and drone and rumble overhead,
 Out of the gloom they gather about my bed.
 They whisper to my heart; their thoughts are mine.

"Why are you here with all your watches ended?
 From Ypres to Frise we sought you in the Line."
 In bitter safety I awake, unfriended;
 And while the dawn begins with slashing rain
 I think of the Battalion in the mud.
 "When are you going out to them again?
 Are they not still your brothers through our blood?"

Sent to Lady Ottoline Morrel on 17 October. Published as "Death's Brotherhood" in the *English Review*, January 1918 (*War Poems* 94).

Sassoon wrote "Sick Leave" in 1918 while in a hospital and away from the front lines. That is why the feeling of remorse throughout the poem is so striking. Sassoon had the problem of how to reconcile his pacifist convictions with the feeling that he was betraying his comrades by not returning to France. While he is "lulled and warm", his battalion is "in the mud" with "slashing rain", something that was not easily resolved for him. The tone of Sassoon expresses a damaged sense of honor as he reflects on his absence from the fighting. A basic premise of traditional ideas of honor is that a soldier should not ask others to do things that he would not do himself, and Sassoon experiences guilt that he has been spared while his men continue to fight and die. Irony can be seen in the sense that he would prefer to die in the blood brotherhood of the front than to stay safe in hospital.

The poem finishes with two unanswered questions that were currently haunting the poet, "When are you going out to them again? / Are they not still your brothers through our blood?" Here there is irony has to do with another poem. As for he is not just betraying his comrades he is the one who unadvisedly stays in the "Blighty".

23- Attack (Craiglockhart, 1917)

At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
 In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,
 Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud
 The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one,
 Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.
 The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed
 With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
 Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.
 Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
 They leave their trenches, going over the top,
 While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
 And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
 Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

From a note in my diary while observing the Hindenburg Line attack. (*War Poems* 95)

“Attack” captures the terror of men caught in a mechanized war. Sassoon’s own experience of war is brought vividly to life as he explores the horror with nonstop detail. It is a real trench-line poem written in October, 1917.

There is the despairing plea to God from the ordinary soldier who is there but he is not to be glorified in “O Jesus, make it stop!” Is Sassoon as he a non-Catholic man saying that God is being insensate? If he is, that is another piece of irony here. Another attack Sassoon does is that the nationality of the combatants is overlooked. Any sense of

who the soldiers are or where they come from is given in a descriptive line that reveals little of their origins or intentions: “Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear, They leave their trenches, going over the top”. It is only revealed that they reside in trenches and have faces. This omission is presumably because Sassoon’s intention in “Attack” is not to suggest anything about the enemy, but deplore the fact of war. His treatment of the soldiers then, is appropriate; what does nationality matter in a contest where there are no winners?

A piece of irony that can be stated here is that even after six months of this battle, it seems that, differently from other battles, this one has been “most indelibly imprinted on the poet’s frazzled consciousness.” (Campbell 165) As Sassoon recorded in his diary of 14 April, 1917;

The dead bodies...are beyond description especially after the rain...Our shelling of the line – and subsequent bombing, etc. – has left a number of mangled Germans; they will haunt me till I die” (*Diaries*, 14 April, 1917, 154)

There is another irony being shown here: Sassoon uses many negative adjectives and adverbs to describe what was actually happening then. Tanks “creep and topple”, the men are “clumsily bowed” and death-gear weighing them down, they “flounder” in the mud. This use of negative adjectives dominates not only the lines of men in the poem but oppress the reader as well, attaining the desired tone for his poem.

24- Fight to a Finish (Craiglockhart, 1917)

The boys came back. Bands played and flags were flying,
And Yellow-Pressmen thronged the sunlit street
To cheer the soldiers who’d refrained from dying,

And hear the music of returning feet.

“Of all the thrills and ardours War has brought,
This moment is the finest.” (So they thought.)

Snapping their bayonets on to charge the mob,
Grim Fusiliers broke ranks with glint of steel,
At last the boys had found a cushy job.

. . . .

I heard the Yellow-Pressmen grunt and squeal;
And with my trusty bombers turned and went
To clear those Junkers out of Parliament.

“Fight to a Finish” brings only lies. It is a satiric attack on “yellow pressmen”, who would only promote the war and defend the government.

The idea of bringing war to those in England who supported the fighting without any understanding of its reality is also approached in Sassoon’s “Blighters”. But this poem is more ironic and caused more impact on British people. Maybe because Sassoon vents all his anger on the “To clear those Junkers out of Parliament”. “Junkers” were landowning aristocrats, but they were not English but German. The ironic implication is that the Members of the British Parliament are no better than their German counterparts, and worse, they might have been conspiring together in order to prolong an unjust war.

Another ironic attack of Sassoon to the journalists is that they had a cushy (easy) job, safe at home to report on a war they knew nothing or very little about, differently from the soldiers who in a bitter irony only “refrain from dying”.

25- Survivors (Craiglockhart, October 1917)

No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain
 Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.
 Of course they're 'longing to go out again,'—
 These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk.
 They'll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed
 Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,—
 Their dreams that drip with murder; and they'll be proud
 Of glorious war that shatter'd all their pride...
 Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;
 Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.

“Survivors” is very powerful because it is auto-biographical. It was written while the poet was recovering from shell-shock at Craiglockhart Hospital. Sassoon describes his “life among the inmates of ‘Dottyville’”. (Campbell 165) To my mind it is clear that Sassoon is using a large dose of irony in this piece. He describes the horrific symptoms and military top-brass of the time. Symptoms that he knew only too well from his own personal experience.

The poem begins by giving the reader the misleading hope that the shell-shocked soldiers would surely recover (the view of the non-combatant) and breaks this hope when he describes how the “shock and strain” of war have caused these soldiers to stammer and to talk incoherently. The irony here is that in fact it would take them a long time to recover from this and not “soon”.

“Of course they're 'longing to go out again'” is clearly ironic, as it makes us imagine that the soldiers are enthusiastic about going out to the war front again and

fight. This is again negated by describing the soldier's faces as "old" and "scared" showing how war makes these courageous men afraid and old before their time.

Once again the reassuring statement that "they will soon forget their haunted nights" is contradicted by stating that their sleep is filled with nightmares of the ghosts of friends who died in battle and the scenes of killing and blood in the battlefield. How can they ever "soon" forget anything?

Sassoon is also ironic when he says that the soldiers will be proud of glorious war which not only shattered their pride in fighting for their country but shattered their individual selves. The last two lines carry the total effect of war, that is, it turns men who went to war, glad and serious about fighting for their country, returning reduced to the level of helpless children. They are completely broken psychologically and almost insane. They are also filled with hatred for the supporters of war namely, the politicians and the non-combatants. Thus, using irony, the poem emotionally exposes the fake of war and its effects on the combatants.

26- Glory of Women (Craiglockhart, 1917)

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.

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.

In "Glory of Women", Sassoon makes ample use of irony within the structure and the content in order to portray his view of the role of the young, working, British woman during this time period. Sassoon was still very critical of women's attitude in relation to war heroes. Sassoon depicts the soldiers' sweethearts in the workforce as capricious hypocrites with misguided ideation about the heroics of war. Not only do their sympathies lie only with the soldiers who are heroes, who do not "retire" when "hell's last horror breaks them." They see the war as romantic, full of danger and chivalry when, in reality, it is full of "trampling corpses", "horror", and "blood".

There is further irony within the last three lines. These lines leave the reader with the final image of a devoted, German soldier's mother knitting by the fire for a son who would never wear them. The irony lies with the juxtaposition from the image of the British women in a factory making the shells that are killing the German soldiers. This juxtaposition leads to the final and most potent irony of one woman's power to create another woman's grief.

In Sassoon's view, this is the glory of women. Even the title is clearly ironic because the descriptions of these women are far from evoking any sense of pride or honor.

27- Suicide in the Trenches (Published in the *Cambridge Magazine*, 23 February 1918.)

I knew a simple soldier boy
Who grinned at life in empty joy,
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,
And whistled early with the lark.
In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain.
No one spoke of him again.
You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.

In “Suicide in the Trenches”, the main subject is “the dehumanizing effect of a war that can transform happiness to degradation or even worse, suicidal despair.” (Campbell 181)

Sassoon starts by pointing out the extreme youth of the soldiers in the First World War with “soldier boy”. It was true that some of the youngsters that enlisted in the army had no aspirations for the future and thought it was a good option to go to war and come back, with a good future in the army. But no aspirations does not mean “put a bullet through his brain” and commit suicide. It is ironical in a sense that they would go to war to find something better for their lives but in fact ended up finding death.

The soldier's mood is well defined in "cowed and glum" and those words show us that this soldier, unable to find solace in the trenches, is unhappy and desperate. Sassoon also shows us the bad conditions soldiers suffered in the war in "crumps and lice" were very common among soldiers and here the poet is using this word to criticize the dreadful hygienic conditions.

Ironically, one of the common reliefs welcomed by the soldiers to make them forget the bad moments and the images of war was "the rum", but as the war went on it started to be scarce and only the officers could drink it, a situation that only aggravated the number of suicides then.

In the last stanza, Sassoon mocks with irony those "smug-faced crowds", who "cheer when soldiers march by". He hated those who considered to be making a profit out of the war and those who were happy and proud their children were going to serve their country: "A patriotic feeling."

28- The Dug-Out (St Venant, July 1918)

Why do you lie with your legs ungainly huddled,
 And one arm bent across your sullen, cold,
 Exhausted face? It hurts my heart to watch you,
 Deep-shadowed from the candle's guttering gold;
 And you wonder why I shake you by the shoulder;
 Drowsy, you mumble and sigh and turn your head...
You are too young to fall asleep for ever;
And when you sleep you remind me of the dead.

A short poem written in July 1918 and based on one of Sassoon's final experiences in the trenches. In *Siegfried's Journey*, Sassoon reflect on the poem's gestation: "While at Lancaster Gate I wrote eight vigil-haunted lines, 'The Dug-Out,' which are probably more memorable than anything I could have achieved in confederacy with a propaganda Ministry." (71)

"The Dug-Out" is written from the perspective of a soldier, most likely Sassoon, who is tortured by the thought of losing his young comrade. Sassoon describes his young comrade who is sleeping in such a way that he reminds Sassoon "of the dead." He had written two months before in his diary: "Handsome Jowett asleep on the floor, with his smooth, sensual face and large limbs (as usual, he looks as if dead)". The irony shown here is the unromantic attitude of the sleeping comrade. The emotions are so profound that in a sign of anger he shakes him by the shoulder. He shakes his friend awake because this image disturbs him. Sassoon reflects on how young his friend is and feels that it is not fair for someone of his age to "fall asleep for ever", which is an euphemism used by Sassoon in this poem which in fact means to die. Sassoon does not agree with sending such young boys off to fight in a war that they did not create. Sassoon also expresses his fear that his friend shall die like so many before him.

Even Pat Barker may have used this poem as an aspect of research for her trilogy novel, *Regeneration*. In this we can see how the war marked them, "he woke to a dugout smell of wet sandbags and stale farts." (101).

29- Everyone Sang (April 1919)

This is the end of his war poems.

Conclusion

Siegfried Sassoon is best remembered for his angry and compassionate poems of the First World War, which brought him public and critical acclaim. Avoiding the sentimentality and jingoism of many war poets, Sassoon wrote of the horror and brutality of trench warfare and disdainfully satirized generals, politicians, and churchmen for their incompetence and blind support of the war. Sassoon himself said about his anti war poetry that he deliberately wrote them to disturb complacency. He wanted to shock the complacent public in England with the realities of war, the inefficiency of the Country's higher command, and the great suffering endured by the men in the trenches.

It is interesting to mention the truth that lies beyond Sassoon's writings. War writings recount what soldiers do or not do in war and the impact of the conflict on these men's lives, but not necessarily accurately. In Sassoon specific example, his biographies, his Memoirs and his poems recount his own truth. But if we try to connect his truth to historical accounts of the war, we may find out that some are correct and some are mere delusion he had. In this way, truth in war writings is impossible, or even irrelevant. According to Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried*,

In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. (O'Brien 78)

There is a kind of analysis that was deliberately not done throughout this thesis, but should be mentioned now. A different analysis in terms of gender and homosexuality of some of the poems left out would give a diverse impression that the

poems that the war poets like Sassoon, Owen, Graves and others wrote during the Great War were merely skilful works of anti-war criticism. Any sign of homosexual influence seems to be untraceable, as one would normally expect with poetry published in a society in which homosexuality was punishable by law. This different analysis may be seen in a contemporary reading where Sassoon seems to attack those women sitting at home; who were indifferent to the men's suffering and yet supported the government.

Accordingly, the duality that Sassoon carried in him throughout his life, before, during, and after the Great War, is also clearly visible in his (anti) war poems. Whereas the time of publication his poems were, on the whole, read as straightforward antiwar poems, they now show themselves to be invested with his own personal struggles.

Reading literature ironically requires that we think beyond the traditional thinking, recognizing that truth is not simply there to be referred to by an innocent language. Truth requires thinking through the contradictory force of language. We can only read texts ironically, perceive the tensions and relations between what is said and not-said, what is and is not the case, if we commit ourselves to a sense and truth towards which speech and language attempt. Irony can, then, neither be achieved nor overcome. There is always a certain irony, always a predicament of disjunction between what one is and what one means, both for oneself and for others.

Nevertheless, this thesis will hopefully be seen as a contribution to an ongoing discussion, and not as a definitive answer to the problem of the irony in war poetry. At times, however, it seems difficult to pinpoint what is ironic and what is not, even in the most supposedly ironic idea. What I explained is that there may be different ways to understand irony and how it works.

Through his writings, it seems that Sassoon's purpose is to produce imaginatively attractive literature that transcends the specific points, details, or

circumstances of the First World War through lasting poetic, fiction and prose writings. His importance in the British cultural scenario lies in the fact that while very little has been said about the war nowadays, and through literature Sassoon's memory is alive.

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