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The Church of Craiglockhart: Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon's Critique and Use of Religion in their World War I Poetry

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The Church of Craiglockhart:
Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon's Critique and Use of Religion in their
World War I Poetry

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Abstract

Throughout history, faith and religious principles have been used as motivation for war. Accordingly, political leaders, religious leaders, and writers all used religion-themed propaganda to encourage enlistment in World War I. Two soldier poets, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, after meeting in the asylum of Craiglockhart, together recognized the injustice represented in using faith to promote warfare. Subsequently, they wrote poetry which criticized the religious and political hierarchy, countered the theology used in propaganda, and attempted to reveal the atrocities in battle. Although Sassoon's poetry remained satirical of the use of religion, Owen recognized its power and used religion and a connection to God as a medium for building empathy for and understanding of those called to serve.

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The Church of Craiglockhart:
Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon's Critique and Use of Religion
In Their World War I Poetry

On the fifteenth of August, 1917, Wilfred Owen timidly knocked on the door of his idol, Siegfried Sassoon. Upon entering the room, he found his hero, whom he had struggled up the nerve to meet for weeks, polishing his golf clubs. At a glance, the two would have seemed complete opposites. Sassoon was tall (nearly six inches taller than Owen) and confident, whereas Owen struggled to stammer out an introduction. Sassoon was already a well-known and published poet, while Owen was described later by Sassoon as “perceptively provincial” and merely an “interesting little chap” (Egremont 165). At that first meeting, they discussed Sassoon’s poetry for half an hour, and upon leaving, Owen meekly confessed that he too was a poet. This first, brief encounter paved the way for a fascinating relationship between two of the most significant poets of World War I. Although the two looked and acted differently, their similarities and circumstances brought them together: both were writers, both served in World War I, and both were, at the time, living in the mental hospital known as Craiglockhart.

Sassoon’s admittance in Craiglockhart was less for actual mental struggles, and more as a result of his growing outspokenness against the war. Months earlier, he had written a letter to his commanding officer proclaiming that he was no longer willing to serve “as a protest against the policy of the Government in prolonging the War by failing to state their conditions of peace” (Egremont 151). As a result, he was hospitalized as a means of keeping him quiet, contained, and free of a court martial (154-158). There he met Owen, who had arrived a month earlier, struggling with his part in the battles of World War I. Together, the poets talked about their

writing, and Sassoon served as a mentor and source of encouragement for Owen. They edited one another's work, talked at length about poetry, and also discussed the events of the war, fueling one another's opinions on how it was being presented. One significant opinion they shared, and also discussed, was the influence of religion. Sassoon, in his collection *The War Poems*, explains: "Like Wilfred Owen, I was anti-clerical, and the Churches seemed to offer no solution to the demented doings on the Western Front" (47). Their positions, which come shining through in their poetry, articulate a worldview that began its formation in both of their upbringings.

Siegfried Sassoon, although half-Jewish, was brought up in the Christian faith. An indicator of this upbringing is evident in his middle name, Loraine, which his mother chose because of her respect for the High Church clergyman, Canon Loraine (Egremont 9). Additionally, in the biography *Siegfried Sassoon*, Max Egremont describes how much of Sassoon's education was in a religious institution where Sassoon learned to play organ in the chapel (26). Sassoon's religious upbringing can also be understood by reading the descriptions he offers of George Sherston, the protagonist of his memoirs. In those texts, Sherston was raised Anglican; however, he pushed the church aside as a result of his war experiences. Sherston explains how, after his dear friend died, he "could find no consolation in the thought that Christ was risen" (Wilkinson 111-112). Although Sassoon, like his protagonist, for the most part rejected the church, the religion of his youth would have a lasting impact on his worldview and play a major part in the themes and criticisms evident in his poetry.

Owen, like Sassoon, grew up in a devout Christian home. His mother, Susan Owen, was Christian, and growing up Owen worked as a lay assistant in the parish of Dunsden near Reading (Egremont 166). In the biography titled *Wilfred Owen*, Jon Stallworthy gives a glimpse of just

how important religion was to the poet as a youngster. Stallworthy cites a passage from Harold Owen's *Journey from Obscurity* and describes times in Owen's youth when he would, with his mother's encouragement and help, imagine himself a bishop. Owen's mother created for him altar cloths and a bishop's mitre, and Owen would arrange their sitting-room to represent a church. Finally, on Sunday evenings, the young Owen would call his family in as his congregation and deliver a sermon he had prepared for them (39). Owen's childish play developed into true devotion as he aged. Before joining the war, Owen even considered the possibility of becoming an Anglican priest (Wilkinson 113). However, Owen, like Sassoon, later rejected the church altogether, in part because Owen's vicar called literature "artificial life," turning Owen away from the faith of his upbringing (Kerr, *Disciplines* 282). Owen also struggled to reconcile the things he saw in battle with the ideas presented by the church and later articulated these differences in his poetry.

Both poets, spurred by their upbringings and their first-hand knowledge of World War I, became voices against the political and religious structures that used religion as a tool for recruitment. The Government, media, and churches of England connected faith and religion, alongside the myths of knighthood and ideals of chivalry, to service in war in order to persuade the British people of the validity of the war and the brutality of their enemies while boosting the power and influence of the Church. Although many poets and writers of the time played a major role in furthering this message, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen did the opposite. Sassoon and Owen, through their poetry, criticized the use of faith and religious imagery in promoting the war effort, and questioned the theology presented by the church regarding war, while still recognizing the power that using religious imagery can have in furthering one's message.

Although Sassoon's poetry remained largely critical and satirical, Owen learned from and adopted the power of religious ideals to further his own messages of honesty and empathy.

CHAPTER ONE: ENGLAND AND ENGLAND'S GOD WILL WIN THE WAR

England entered World War I with unbridled confidence. A day after England's declaration of war, *The Morning Post* boasted, "Within a month from today, victory will have declared itself" (Roberts 45). Not only were leaders and media outlets convinced of and willing to express their confidence in Britain's ability to succeed, but they simultaneously employed language as a way to reaffirm England's position and values. Poetry became a major medium for this message to be presented, and many writers supported the cause.

Some of these artists, including Thomas Hardy, joined the "Fight for Right Movement" which supported the cause of the British government in World War I and used their literary prowess to promote it. A collection of essays and addresses entitled *For the Right*, published by many involved in the movement in 1918, explains the group's intentions. Its preface articulates how members strongly believed England was "fighting for something of priceless value to all mankind" (Youngusband, iv-v). Another essay from the collection, "What Is 'Right'?", explains how the movement's purpose, as defined by Sir Frederick Pollock, is "to encourage our fellow-countrymen, non-combatant as well as combatant, to use their utmost endeavour, in the several ways open to them towards the end of attaining decisive victory as the only sure means of honourable and lasting peace" (203). Members of the movement stood behind the following manifesto:

The spirit of the movement is essentially the spirit of Faith: Faith in the good of man; Faith therefore in ourselves, Faith in the righteousness of our Cause, Faith in the ultimate triumph of Right; but without this Faith the understanding that Right will only win

through the purification, the efforts and the significance of men and women who mean to *make* it prevail. (Haste 25)

The movement aided the enlistment process with speeches, essays, and patriotic poetry which connected service in the War to service to God. Those involved in the “Fight for Right Movement” published their work in support of Britain’s cause, adding to a significant propaganda effort by the Government and media.

The Fight for Right Movement wasn’t alone in its recognition of the power of poetry; the British government also saw the potential of poetry as a propaganda tool and in September of 1914 organized the Wellington House Propaganda Department, mobilizing poets such as Rudyard Kipling to work on behalf of the government’s goals (Bogacz 658). Other well known poets and authors such as John Masefield, Robert Nichols, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Arnold Bennett were also put on the payroll to support the cause of the English war effort (Roberts 58).

The poets and authors enlisted by the government were well known by British citizens; however, well-known poets were not the only ones writing in support of the war effort. *The Times* received an estimated 100 amateur patriotic poems per day in August of 1914 (Bogacz 647). These amateurs tried to make sense of an industrialized war in moral or religious terms, crafting their thoughts in poetic language (650). As Ted Bogacz describes in his book *A Tyranny of Words*, high diction carried a greater weight among the British people because of England’s upbringing in a canon of literature including *Oxford’s Book of English Verse* and the *King James Bible* (652). Bogacz goes on to explain: “If high diction was a ready-made means by which journalists and public speakers could give spiritual significance to their most mundane utterances, its employment in poetry transformed even the amateur occasional verse into a sacred vessel of

art” (646-647). Poets and politicians both understood the impact carefully crafted words have on the minds and hearts of the people. These words became a motivating force for a nation at war, aiding in enlistment and public perception.

Just as the style of the poetry added to the early war idealism, the content had an equal impact. People writing about the war often alluded to the history of Britain to generate nostalgia for a noble past. An excerpt from “A Call to Action,” a poem by Charles Sorley, a student at the onset of the war, demonstrates this backward glance:

A thousand years have passed away,
Cast back your glances on the scene,
Compare this England of today
With England as she once has been. (Roberts 26-27)

Sorley encourages his readers to reminisce on the England of the past, an England with a rich and proud legacy. He also calls his readers to action, preying on their nostalgia for England’s history.

In the final stanzas, he makes his call to action more clear:

For we have utterly forgot
One great unanswerable fact:
We are not tools, but craftsmen—not
Machines to think, but men to Act!

A few have learned the lesson: they
Can never know the good they do;
They help their brethren on their way,

They fight and conquer: -- all too few. (Roberts 27)

Again, Sorley ties his present to England's history, using remembrances of England's past to encourage his readers in 1912. This history calls to memory past glories and a rich mythology, including epic stories of knights and chivalry. In a war-time submission to *The Quiver*, A. C. Benson, a cleric, more directly connects to this mythology: "The young Christian soldier, high-hearted and courageous...may still be a worthy example of knightliness and stainless valour, who is willing, if need be, to make the last sacrifice of love, and to lay down his life for his friends" (Bontrager 792-793). Benson's piece demonstrates the connection between service in the Great War and the chivalric roots of Britain, and it reminds his readers that those roots are "courageous," "great and noble," and sacrificial. Yet Benson's submission doesn't focus solely on the English history of knighthood and call for chivalry; it also brings to light a second motivating force for the British people: religion.

The religious language of sacrifice and redemption became a significant tool for writers to connect to the British audience (Stromberg 56). An example from an article in *The Times* published in September of 1916 illustrates this point: "It is a wonder that never palls, but it is always new: the spirit which these men of ours possess...one wonders where the grumblers, the cowards, the mean people whom one thought are met in ordinary life have gone. They are not here. Or, if they are, they are *uplifted* and *transfigured*" (Bogacz 649). The language here calls to mind the transfiguration of Christ where the savior was exalted on a mountain with Moses and the prophets. Associating ordinary citizens with images of Jesus Christ connects their work to His work of salvation, and this rhetorical device compelled listeners to action for spiritual rather than practical, political, or personal reasons. An even more direct example of this comes from the

periodical *The Optimist*, which proclaimed British unity as “the work of self sacrifice, of altruism, of that mystic presence we know to be the Holy Ghost” (Hast 107). And, although the media often utilized religious language, it was even more evident in the poetry. “Thou Careless Awake,” “Redemption,” and “The Kaiser and God” are all examples of poem titles submitted to and printed in *The Times* in the War years (Bogacz 652). Poetry which utilized this language served two purposes: it acted as a ready-made form of propaganda for those interested in promoting the war, and it gave poets, both known and amateur, a subject that was well-received and very publishable. Poetry of this kind, alongside the messages presented by politicians, the church, and the media, were what Sassoon and Owen became especially critical of.

One of the most popular poets among soldiers and civilians during the war was John Oxenham. Many of his poems are about the comfort and blessings of God. According to Oxenham, “soldiers were fighting for Good vs. Evil, fighting for Right, Christianity, God’s Kingdom; they were martyrs and saints; they died as Christ did; they died that we might live; they were innocents who, it seemed, never did any wrong, never killed” (Roberts 16). His poetry made the British cause in World War I appear completely justified and altruistic. Stanzas from his poem “The Vision Splendid,” written in 1917, serve as a perfect example:

Christ’s own rich blood, for healing of the nations,
Poured through his heart the message of reprieve;
God’s holy martyrs built on His foundations,
Built with their lives and died that life may live.
Now, in their train, your blood shall bring like healing;
You, like the Saints, have freely given your all,

And your high deaths, God's purposes revealing,
Sound through the earth His mighty Clarion Call.

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

In this poem, Oxenham connects dying to martyrdom and compares the soldiers to the saints. Moreover, he connects the war to "God's purposes" and the soldiers' involvement as responding to "His mighty Clarion Call." The implication being that England is fighting on behalf their Lord. Even more direct is the final stanza where Oxenham describes the soldiers' service: "For by your dyings, Life is born again." The New Testament calls God's followers to be Christ-like (I Peter 2:21), and in this poem, Oxenham makes that connection distinct. By dying for the cause, they are truly bringing new life to the world. Poetry like Oxenham's, which was extremely prevalent at the time, perfectly suited the British cause as it generated enthusiasm and a sense of calling for those needed to serve.

Oxenham's poem uses religious language, creating parallels between military service and service to God, and those parallels were common even beyond poetry. Albert Marrin, in his book *The Last Crusade*, quotes Reverend Basil Bouchier, who served as the rector of St. Anne's in Soho during the war, and serves as another example: "We are fighting, not so much for the honour of our country, as for the honour of our God. Not only is this a Holy War, it is the holiest war that has ever been waged. The cause is the most sacred that man has been asked to defend. It

is the honour of the Most High God which is imperiled” (140). Bouchier’s claim was not rare as the people of England were often told, as evidenced in an article in *The Times* on February 23, 1915, that they were involved in “a ‘spiritual’ war” (Bogacz 659). Robert Bridges, the poet laureate at the time, further demonstrated this point in a letter to *The Times*, boldly stating, “I hope that our people will see that it is primarily a holy war” (Bogacz 650). As such, the men of Britain were considered to be justified in fighting. The implication was that God stood with the English in their cause since they were acting as righteous defenders of Belgium and truth (Bontrager 785). The belief that the English were divinely supported had powerful implications. First, it established a tremendous responsibility (Marrin 134). Men would feel pressured to enlist, as their service was not only patriotic, but spiritual. And secondly, it acted as a tremendous source of encouragement. Since the cause was presented as so clearly altruistic, the implication was that God would not allow the British to be unsuccessful.

God’s support for Britain was made clear and virtually undeniable in much of the dialogue at the time. In *Prophecy, the War, and the Near East*, written by Reverend G. H. Lancaster, the Vicar of St. Stephen’s, North Bow, this mentality is clearly present:

God of England! God Almighty!
God of England’s children free;
God of England’s wondrous story;
England’s God, we cry to thee.” (Marrin 133)

Lancaster’s poem not only connects God to the nation of England, but it generates emotional connection by also connecting God to “England’s children” and “England’s wondrous story.” In doing so, Lancaster extends God’s relationship to England to include the past, present and future.

God is not only on England's side in this war, but has always been, and will always be, "England's God." Again, this connection served as both encouragement in and pressure towards enlisting. As a voice from the pulpit, Reverend Lancaster's message would have been extremely influential. However, the idea of God's connection to England extended beyond the clergy. Poems published in *The Times*, such as this final stanza from Robert Bridges' "Wake Up England" also claim God's direct support of the English war effort:

Much suffering shall cleanse thee:

But thou through the flood

Shalt win to Salvation,

To Beauty through blood.

Up careless, awake!

Ye peacemakers, Fight!

ENGLAND STANDS FOR HONOUR.

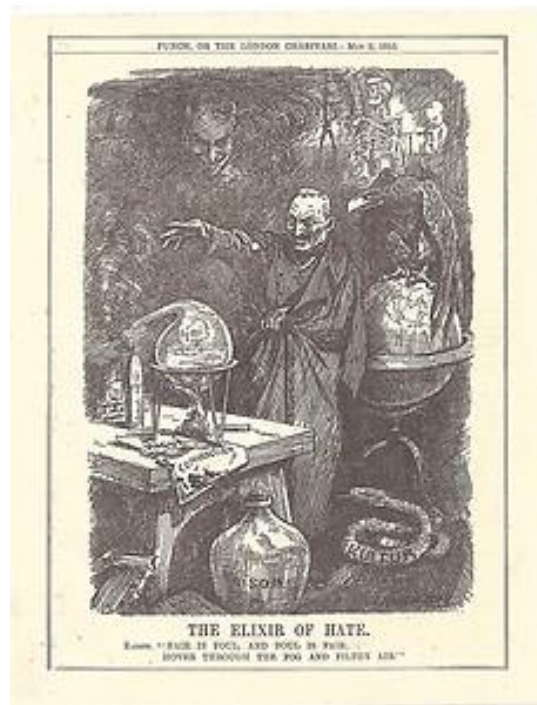
GOD DEFEND THE RIGHT! (Roberts 38)

This idea, of God standing and defending the British cause dominated the literature during the war, and the implication of a divine alliance instilled confidence in the cause, reassuring those unable to serve, and fostering guilt in those yet to volunteer.

Further inspiration to volunteer also came from fear of the enemy, which could also be fostered through words. Ted Bogacz, in his book *A Tyranny of Words*, argues how language had the power to "reassure the English public of the triumph of traditional values and ideas over disturbing new ones" (660). The disturbing new ideas, in this instance, were those held by the

Germans. Early in the war, the church hierarchy attacked the unchristian nature of Germany, calling it “the perceived antithesis of ennobled Christianity” (Bontrager 775). In particular, many making these claims were concerned with the major German thinkers of the time: Nietzsche, Treitschke, and Bernhardi. British ministers were very quick to label these three Germany’s “unholy trinity” and use them as a representation of the nation as a whole (Stromberg 55). In this way, by depicting the German national character as corrupt, England was able to justify how one largely Protestant nation could wage war against another (Bontrager 778). By fostering this fear, politicians could spur the English people to support the cause.

An example of how far indictments against Germany extended is represented in an editorial cartoon featured in *Punch* during the war:



1915 Cartoon from *Punch*

The cartoon depicted the Kaiser being overseen by Satan, creating “The Elixer of Hate,” while an infant, impaled behind him, is pinned to the wall (Marrin 96). The caption of the cartoon reads,

“Fair is foul and foul is fair; hover through the fog and filthy air,” alluding to the witch’s evil intervention in the life of Shakespeare’s Macbeth, thereby also connecting evil to Kaiser Wilhelm as well. Although satirical in the cartoon, the connection was more directly made elsewhere, as often the Kaiser was compared to Satan or Attila the Hun. *The Times* described the Germans as Huns: “The modern Attila respects neither the laws of God nor the laws of man” (Haste 106). Similarly, Robert Bridges’ passion for England extended beyond his above-mentioned poem; taking the idea further, in a letter to *The Times*, Bridges calls his readers to action, asking them to fight for the “holy cause of humanity and the law of love,” and proclaiming that those fighting on the side of the Germans were fighting for “the devil and all his works” and that they have “bowed the knee to Satan” (Roberts 51). This mentality went beyond cartoonists and poets as well. Any attempt at analysis or justification using satire or metaphor cannot be granted to Orator Horatio Bottomley who pronounced, “The Kaiser and his hellish hordes are possessed by the Soul of Satan” (Haste 106). Similar to the presentation of God as being on the side of the British, the demonization of Germany encouraged enlistment and unified England against a common enemy.

If Germany could be connected to Satan, then the British cause could be an act of salvation. The above-mentioned Horatio Bottomley drew this parallel by building up the actions of his nation:

If the British Empire resolves to fight this battle clearly, to look upon it as something more than as an ordinary war, we shall one day realize that it has not been in vain, and we, the British Empire, as the chosen leaders of the world, shall travel along the road of human destiny and progress at the end of which we shall see the patient figure of the Prince of Peace, pointing to the Star of Bethlehem that leads us on to God. (Haste 62)

The message implied here is that by fighting, the English are, like the Star of Bethlehem, paving a way to Christ—therefore acting as agents of salvation for the world. This message was perhaps most famously demonstrated in the poetry of Rupert Brooke. His sonnets, and their pro-war idealism, became well-known to the British people. Among them is “Peace,” which demonstrates this image of salvation through the British cause. In the first stanza, Brooke explains how the British are called by God and chosen to stand up against an “old and cold and weary” world (Roberts 70). Again, the British are described as redemptive agents in the world. This image fits perfectly with, not only the connections between God and England, or Germany and the devil, but the entire ethos of the British culture and mythology. Whether they are knights in shining armor, or fighting for the world’s salvation, English men are called to serve and to save.

And that call to serve was made unbelievably clear. In fact, those who didn’t answer the call were chastised, and the church was among those doing the chastising, as evidenced in this quotation from the Archbishop of York: “The country calls for the service of its sons. I envy the man who is able to meet the call; I pity the man who at such a time makes the great refusal” (Wilkinson 33). Religious leaders around England used their pulpits to enlist men in their congregations to fight. And the church was not alone; again many poets of the era also criticized those unwilling to join the war effort. Harold Begbie, in his poem, “A Christian to a Quaker,” is very damning of conscientious objectors – and the Quakers in particular. The poem ends with the following three stanzas:

We are marching to freedom and to love;

We’re fighting every shape of tyrant sin;

We are out to make it worth

God's while to love the earth,
And damn it, you won't join in!

To drive you mad, as I have done,
Has almost made me sick.

To torture Quakers like a Hun
Has hurt me to the quick.

But since your logic wars with mine
You're something I must guard,
So in you go, you dirty swine,
To two years hard.

We are marching to destroy the hosts of hate:
We've taken, every man, a Christian vow;
We are out to make war cease,
That men may live at peace,
And, damme, you're at it now! (Roberts 200)

Begbie's poem perfectly outlines all the reasons men were given to fight. Again, the British are portrayed as agents of salvation, and again, the enemy is vilified with the expression "hosts of hate." But most importantly, those unwilling to fight are made to feel guilty for their objections. Begbie reminds his readers of their "Christian vow" and denigrates those that disagree ("dirty swine"). Ironically, however, Begbie's reminder could be seen as contradictory to Jesus'

summary of the law in Mark 21, which concludes with “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Begbie’s poem fails to preach love to the Quakers he addresses or the neighboring German people. As a result, Begbie’s poem, which criticizes those unwilling to join, although under the guise of Christian intent, fails to fully encapsulate God’s call for His people. In this way, Begbie’s poem also represents much of the literature at the time, and serves as a very good example of the kind of rhetoric that Owen and Sassoon responded to in their poetry.

Even the clergy were viewed more highly if directly involved in the war effort, although they were also given exemption because of their position. Anglican priests were disdained as they were kept from the front lines; however, Catholic priests often earned respect for going to the front lines whenever able (Roberts 156). At the same time, although no bishops prohibited clergy from serving, many encouraged against service because it was deemed that they were could better aid the country by performing their accustomed duties. In fact, clergy from all denominations were excused from service under The Derby Scheme, and in 1916 they were exempted from The Military Service Act (Marrin 190).

Many clergy members, rather than serving physically themselves, used their pulpits to call for enlistment from their congregations (Wilkinson 33). This use of the church, in connection with national duty, served not only to benefit the war effort, but it benefitted the church as well. According to Shannon Ty Bontrager, in her article entitled “The Imagined Crusade: The Church of England and the Mythology of Nationalism and Christianity during the Great War,” the church recognized the power of the media and government’s propaganda to promote nationalism, and it “exploited this process to gain power in English society” (798). As support, Bontrager quotes Anglican Denis Crane: “The message is to the nation, and to the individual first and foremost as

citizen; if he is to serve his nation as a citizen he will need conversion and consecration himself, and the appeal to individuals will be not less strong, but rather stronger, because it is through his national and social responsibility that the appeal will come” (787). By siding with the government on the issue of war, the church stood to gain influence. The church then used this influence to further its own agendas. One of the results of this religious promotion was an anti-modernism or anti-mechanism (which coincided with the vilification of Germany). In addition, the war was used by the church as an excuse to enforce other religious ideals such as prohibition of alcohol, the end of gambling, football match rowdiness, and other indiscretions (Bogacz 659-660). And, as previously demonstrated, this mentality, first posed by the church, is picked up by the poets writing in response. Harold Begbie, in the final stanza of his poem “Fall In” perfectly illustrates this:

Why do they call, sonny, why do they call?
For the men who are brave and strong?
Is it naught to you if your country fall?
And right is smashed by Wrong?
Is it football still and the picture show,
The pub and the betting odds,
When your brothers stand to the tyrant’s blow
And England’s call is God’s? (Roberts 52)

Begbie’s verse juxtaposes right and wrong in much the same way as the church at the time, contrasting the righteousness of those serving with the sins (football, film, drinking and gambling) of those staying home. The battles of World War I served as a diversion, assisting the church in

winning other battles on the home front. And again, language was the medium for establishing those diversions.

Politicians, poets, the media and the church all used rhetorical language to spur the people of England to action. By connecting to the mythology and history of England, writers and speakers generated a feeling of nostalgia, thereby encouraging support to both preserve and continue that history and mythology. By connecting to religious language and ideals, writers and speakers elevated their cause beyond mere jingoism to a spiritual calling. And by vilifying the Germans and connecting them to evil, writers and speakers spawned fear and further inspired the British people to join England's cause. Although the rhetoric served practical purposes, enlisting soldiers, generating enthusiasm on the home front, filling churches, and selling poetry, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon recognized its faults. Although neither poet continued in the Christian faith of their upbringings, both understood the power that spiritual connection could have. Both used their poetry to counterbalance that power, calling for transparency and criticizing the use of religion in propaganda.

CHAPTER TWO: SASSOON AND OWEN RESPOND, CRITICIZING THOSE DELIVERING THE PROPAGANDA

Although Wilfred Owen moved on from his Christian roots, his faith never completely disappeared from his poetry. Douglas Kerr, in “The Disciplines of the Wars: Army Training and the Language of Wilfred Owen,” demonstrates how religion serves as a major motif in Owen’s work, alongside family, army language, and poetry (Kerr, *Disciplines* 286). And besides simply creating the presence of religion in Owen’s poetry as a motif, the impact of his upbringing carried further significance: it would have trained him to think of himself as a redeemer. Kerr connects this idea to Owen’s war poetry: “He took with him the myth of a healing redemption through speech. The war poems are really an attempt to reclaim people from self-destruction and insanity by speaking the truth” (Kerr, *Wilfred* 96-97). The truth Owen was particularly focused on the need for a realistic understanding of what was involved for soldiers—an understanding that Owen knew firsthand. Daniel Hipp’s essay “‘By Degrees Regain[ing] Cool Peaceful Air in Wonder’: Wilfred Owen's War Poetry as Psychological Therapy,” furthers this idea. Hipp explains how Owen needed to come to terms with his past – both his war experiences and his religious past—in order to move forward. “If he could will the recurrence of the nightmares, he could bring the content of his unconscious to the surface where it would be the subject of scrutiny, and as Owen had discovered by this point, artistic control” (33). By coming to terms with war and how it might be juxtaposed with his religious upbringing, Owen could ask the questions necessary to write the poetry that made him noteworthy—the poetry that challenged those who idealistically promoted the war.

This conclusion could be argued for both Sassoon and Owen. Kerr quotes Ian Bradley, the British academic, author, theologian, and minister, who points out that Evangelical Christianity is “a highly introspective religion” and how fear of judgment left its followers in “agonizing sessions of self-examination and soul-searching” (72). As a result, although Sassoon and Owen oftentimes seem critical, “Those who were unable to retain the religious faith of their Evangelical parents commonly did not relinquish the ethical and moral beliefs that had gone with that faith, and the profound sense of duty it had imposed” (Kerr, *Wilfred* 70). This duty was channeled, for both poets, toward both the need to serve alongside their fellow countrymen, but also the demand for realism and honesty when speaking about the war and its atrocities.

This demand was impassioned and personal for both men. As writers, Owen and Sassoon understood how language could be a powerful medium. Government, artists, clergy and the media manipulated language’s power for much of the early stages of the war, and the recognition of this manipulation fueled much of Owen and Sassoon’s poetry. And much of their focus landed squarely on the theme of religion. Alan Wilkinson, in *The Church of England and the First World War*, presents an idea of why Owen and Sassoon had reason to speak out:

The language of apocalyptic was particularly dangerous for Christians to use during the war because of its sadistic undertones, because of the bestial imagery used to describe the opposing powers, because it encouraged a view of the war as a stranger conflict between good and evil, Christ and Anti-Christ, God and the powers of darkness, and because it offered an eschatological escape from wrestling with the moral ambiguities of contemporary human history. (12)

Sassoon and Owen recognized the potential religious language had, and both utilized their poetry as a tool to expose the dangers it presented. They understood that the War could not be merely seen as a conflict between good and evil, and that those presenting that idea had a vested interest in furthering it. Both poets' work serves to expose the conflicts between religion and the action of war. An article in *The Nation* on November 10th, 1917 states, "The generation of Englishmen which had just reached manhood when this war began will one day have to face the heavy charge that it suffered the eye of the soul to be dimmed. It was brave, but it dared not tell the truth; it could not see the truth. . . . The truth was buried under words" (Bogacz 643). Owen and Sassoon had come to this realization some time before this publication, and were doing all they could to dig up the truth.

Sassoon's method of exposing the truth came via satire and a formulaic style. In February of 1916, Sassoon penned what he described as "The first of my 'outspoken' war poems" (Sassoon, *War Poems* 22). "In the Pink" begins by describing a soldier, Willie Davies, writing a letter to his "brown-eyed Gwen" who is back at home. Davies reminisces about love and better times and "simple, silly things she liked to hear" for the first two stanzas of the poem, but it is in the final stanza where Sassoon stumbles upon what would become his calling card: "To-night he's in the pink; but soon he'll die. / And still the war goes on—he don't know why" (22). This quick and powerful tonal shift is described by Sassoon in *Siegfried's Journey*: "I merely chanced on the device of composing two or three harsh, peremptory, and colloquial stanzas with a knock-out blow in the last line" (43). This "knock-out blow" went on to carry the weight of Sassoon's satire in many of his poems. Much of "In the Pink" may have mirrored the war poetry being published in large scale at this time—exploring the story of a soldier and his duty to fight for the

girl back home. Sassoon's ironic closing, however, offers his true perspective: Willie Davies has no idea why he is fighting. As demonstrated in this poem, Sassoon used his work to question the transparency of war rhetoric. The closing couplet of "In the Pink" gave Sassoon a style that would allow him to combat the language burying the truth behind the war.

Owen, even before encountering Sassoon in person, admired Sassoon's style. Prior to meeting Sassoon, Owen was already working at the craft of poetry while rehabilitating in Craiglockhart. He had read some of Sassoon's poetry and expressed his admiration of his future friend's poetic skill in a letter to his mother, explaining how after reading Sassoon's work he was "feeling at a very high pitch of emotion." Owen went on to say, "Shakespeare reads vapid after these. Not of course because Sassoon is a greater artist, but because of the subjects, I mean. I think if I had the choice of making friends with Tennyson or with Sassoon I should go to Sassoon" (Stallworthy, *Wilfred* 204). Although Sassoon's opinions and poetry contributed to his relegation to Craiglockhart, Owen saw him differently (311). Owen considered Sassoon's protest poems "an act of courage, and said Sassoon's poems were 'perfectly truthful descriptions of war'" (Kerr, *Wilfred* 328). As a result, Sassoon's admittance to Craiglockhart served to impact Owen in significant ways. Although today, Owen is arguably more well-known than his mentor, the impact of Sassoon cannot be underestimated. Sassoon encouraged Owen and introduced him to a greater literary community. Additionally, he helped Owen grow as a poet, often reading his work and giving editorial suggestions to the point where Owen once referred to his relationship with Sassoon as a "discipleship" to his mother (Egremont 169). Daniel Hipp explains how "Owen's daily discussions with Sassoon between August and October taught Owen the value of irony and the use of vernacular, rather than ornate language in his poetry" (28). Much of this impact is

easily recognizable in Owen's later poems; however, whereas Sassoon's poetic commentaries were often forceful and satiric, Owen's evolved, and were often more subtle and filled with hints of doubt (Kerr, *Wilfred* 327). Regardless, both poets enlisted their particular styles to ask powerful questions about God and the Great War.

Those questions are first posed at those in control. Both Owen and Sassoon demonstrate complete disdain for the religious leaders of the time, offering them little to no respect in their poetry. When reflecting on one of his poems, "Christ and the Soldier," Sassoon made his opinion clear: "I suppose that behind it was the persistent anti-parson mentality—and it was difficult to swallow their patriotic pietism, which seemed unreal to many of us front-liners" (Cavill et al 366). What made the clergy's pietism seem particularly unreal might have been their poor representation on the front lines in combination with their lack of resistance to the war itself. According to Historian Albert Marrin, "If Anglican laymen were poorly represented in the pacifist ranks, their spiritual leaders were absent altogether" (Bontrager 781). Wilfred Owen, in a letter to his mother, expresses explicit frustration with this situation. In response to the idea of "Christ's apparent command to suffer without retaliation," Owen writes, "I think pulpit professionals are ignoring it very skillfully and successfully...And am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience?" (Cavill et al 365). Owen articulates a discrepancy between the message of the religious authority and the reality of what he came to know on the front lines, where those making the religious claims and connecting faith and religion were underrepresented. This disconnect led to disdain that both he and Sassoon shared.

Both poets' disdain comes through in their poetry. Owen, for instance, is quite direct in his poem "At a Calvary Near the Ancre." The poem begins by referencing a common site for soldiers

in the war: a roadside calvary. These crosses which were scattered across the European countryside were foreign to the British soldiers, as they were not accustomed to seeing them along the Protestant rural roads in England. Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, explains how these physical symbols aided in reminding the soldiers of their own suffering and sacrifice (118). Owen's poem not only allows for that connection, but a further one as well: in the second stanza, he blatantly accuses the intentions of the clergy:

Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,
And in their faces there is pride
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast
By whom the gentle Christ's denied." (Owen, *The Poems* 111)

Not only does the poem label the priest as prideful, but by referencing Golgotha, thereby alluding to the New Testament story of the crucifixion, Owen labels the English clergy as pharisaical as well. In a letter to his mother, Owen furthers this sentiment. He speaks of soldiers that are "ignorant of the civilization that sends us there, and the religious men that say it is good to be in that Hell" (Stallworthy, *Wilfred* 203). Owen's description of the soldiers here as ignorant is not where his criticism lies. Owen never criticized the soldiers, generally depicting them as the victims of war. Rather, Owen's frustrations and accusations remain focused on those who misrepresent religion and the War itself.

These accusations are evident in one of Owen's most memorable poems, "Mental Cases." In this poem, he vividly illustrates the mental anguish suffered by those that fight. Owen brutally depicts their struggles with lines such as "Ever from their hair and through their hands' palms / Misery swelters," (lines 7-8) or "their eyeballs shrink tormented / Back into their brains" (19-20).

As stated, those who have served are victims and suffer emotionally and physically. In the midst of these powerful images of suffering are references to religious ideas, such as “purgatorial shadows” (2) and “Surely we have perished / Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?” (8-9). These references to purgatory and Hell fly in the face of the messages of service and salvation many of the early war poems presented. The imagery alone makes the poem a powerful condemnation of the war in general, and the use of religion more specifically, but it is in the last four lines – similar to the style of his mentor Sassoon—where “Mental Cases” really makes its mark:

—Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;
Snatching after us who smote them brother,
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness. (Owen, *The Poems* 146)

In these concluding lines, Owen chooses active and powerful verbs to issue his indictment. The verb “to smite” has religious connotations, as it relates to God’s punishment of sinners in the Old Testament. Additionally, the addition of “brother” ironically nods to the Biblical image of “brothers in Christ.” Rather than connecting brotherhood to Christian fellowship, “brother” feels more flippant and cynical. These two carefully chosen words connect the madness of the men in the poem to the religious ideals that were formative in the enlistment of the soldiers now suffering. The verb “dealt” also carries significance. Its inclusion within the last quoted line makes those that stirred the war akin to those that caused the soldiers’ madness. Owen connects the verb to both objects in the sentence as a way of clearly tying the initiation of war to the consequences. Interestingly, Owen chooses “us” to refer to the antagonists; by putting himself

among those dealing and smiting, he forces the reader to question the source. This choice serves as a way of including the poets that wrote propaganda and used religion as their medium alongside the leaders who made the war declaration. Although his own poetry offers a very different perspective, Owen takes the first person point of view (“Snatching after us” and “Pawing us”) as a representative of his craft. This rhetorical choice opens his criticism to include not just the politicians or church leaders, but those that were mediums of their messages as well.

While Owen clearly criticizes those who promoted the war, including the religious leaders, Sassoon’s poetry is where the largest condemnations lie. In “They,” the Bishop, one of the “religious men” Owen would’ve been referencing in his letters, is clearly the antagonist, offering little in terms of consolation for the soldiers who are cynically responding to his message. In his book, *Siegfried’s Journey*, Sassoon exposes the inspiration for the poem. He talks about a conversation he had with the Bishop of London who had mentioned that those serving at the front would come back “with their souls purged and purified by what they had experienced.” Sassoon then explained his depiction of the clergyman saying how “on the whole one was justified in resenting it as inappropriate though well-intentioned bunkum” (45). The poem’s first stanza mirrors the types of messages presented to those enlisting at the onset of the war, explaining some of the “bunkum” to which Sassoon might have been referring:

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 honorable race,

They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.”

The Bishop in the poem, by referring to a “just cause” and stating that the men “lead the last attack on Anti-Christ” clearly satirizes the religious propaganda prevalent in the early stages of the war. The high diction (“comrades) softens the death of those serving and is also a clear connection to the language which promoted the war.

Sassoon’s scorn does not end there, however. The second stanza has the men, who Sassoon powerfully and ironically refers to as “boys,” speak back to the religious leader, and their response is sarcastic; they list the ailments and atrocities they are dealing with:

“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.”

Although somewhat playful in tone, the poem also contains Sassoon’s signature satiric final line:

“And the Bishop said: ‘The ways of God are strange!’” (Sassoon, *The War Poems* 57). The

Bishop’s inability to explain or respond to the atrocities outlined by the soldiers in the poem clearly exposes Sassoon’s perspective. Sassoon’s poem demonstrates how disconnected the clergy was with the actual experiences of the soldiers that were fighting, and how they would employ theology to gloss over the real atrocities of war.

Sassoon’s criticism goes beyond the accusation of “well-intentioned bunkum” in his poem “How to Die.” The first stanza creates an image of a dying soldier, and the imagery of sunset and

morning imply a significant passing of time. His death is slow, but interestingly the poem makes it appear majestic. Sassoon describes the action:

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. (Sassoon, *The War Poems* 92)

Rather than waiting for a final, closing punch, the entire poem has a subtly ironic tone, questioning the kinds of messages presented to soldiers as they go off to war. The first four lines of the second stanza serve as an allusion to those—like himself and Owen—that call for realistic depictions of war. When Sassoon writes, “You’d think, to hear some people talk, / That lads go west with sobs and curses / And sullen faces white as chalk,” it almost seems to allude to Owen’s “Dulce Et Decorum Est” which was being written around the same time. In that poem, Owen describes a gas attack victim as having “white eyes writing in his face” (Owen, *The Poems* 117). Sassoon’s next line, “Hankering for wreaths and tombs and hearses” invokes memories of Owen’s landmark poem “Anthem for Doomed Youth” which uses the metaphor of a funeral to address soldier deaths. Since the same kind of realism is often evident in Sassoon’s own poetry, he is clearly not condemning Owen; rather, the true cynicism comes through in the final lines:

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. (Sassoon, *The War Poems* 92)

The poem, with its ironic finish, serves as a condemnation of those presenting messages of idealistic sacrifice and death. By sarcastically proposing death can be done in a mannerly way, with “due regard for decent taste,” Sassoon challenges the myths presented by the church as well as the idealistic war poets enlisted by the government. Sassoon’s choice of the phrase “passing through it” connects to the idea of martyrdom—as these soldiers are “passing through” to the afterlife because of their sacrifice. Sassoon’s paradoxically brutal “shuddering groan” and euphemized “passing through it” point to the inconsistency between the message and the reality. Adding further criticism, the description of “Christian soldiers” alludes to the famous hymn, “Onward Christian Soldiers,” which connects the metaphor for war in a fight against evil. This allusion serves as a further condemnation of the use of religious imagery to promote the cause. Similarly, the phrase “they’ve been taught” makes the source of the message, the church, the focal point of the criticism. Again, Sassoon is challenging the messages which connect service in the Great War to a calling by God.

Sassoon equally critiques those calling soldiers to fight in a poem published in his diary on August 24th, 1917, shortly after arriving at Craiglockhart. In “A Wooden Cross (To S.G.H.)”, Sassoon again cynically challenges the messages delivered from the religious leaders at the time.

The second to last stanza makes this point clear:

The world’s too full of heroes, mostly dead,
Mocked by rich wreaths and tributes nobly said,
And it’s no gain to you, nor mends our loss,
To know you’ve earned a glorious wooden cross;

Nor, while the parson preaches from his perch,

To read your name gold-lettered in the church. (Sassoon, *The War Poems* 186)

Sassoon begins this stanza with an allusion to Wordsworth's "The World is Too Much With Us," where Wordsworth states, "The world is too much with us, late and soon." In the poem, Wordsworth suggests a disconnect humans have with nature, and later in the poem suggests, "It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be / A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn." By referencing the Wordsworth poem, Sassoon connects to and challenges religion and begins to point to a gap between what is, and what should be. That gap is further evidenced when Sassoon cleverly juxtaposes the rewards that the church receives and those merited to the soldiers. Whereas the soldier earns "a glorious wooden cross," which Sassoon explains is of "no gain," it is the parson in church who seems to benefit most. The mocking tributes and "gold-lettered" names seem most beneficial or positively connected to the preacher, who is significantly perched above his congregation, looking down on them and using the victims as sermon fodder. Additionally, Sassoon shows the separation between the soldiers, fighting on the battlefields, and the preacher, home safe in England. The image in this stanza is loaded with sarcasm and clearly illustrates Sassoon's disdain for the way things are presented through the medium of the church. Similar to the message in "They," the clergy seem too disconnected to understand the plight of the soldier, and as a result, are only adding to it.

The clergy Sassoon criticizes are in part condemned for their message, but also because they refuse to take up arms themselves. In the poem "Joy-Bells," Sassoon exposes the clergy's hypocritical calls to action. The poem offers bells to symbolize the sounds issued from churches, and initially seems to have the bells speak of past days and peacefulness. The opening stanza

describes the bells as “sweet” and their chimes as “joyful.” As in other poems, he connects the message of the church with recruitment by explaining how the bells “changed us into soldiers.” And again, typical of Sassoon, the true punch of the poem comes in the final stanza when he turns things around and finishes with biting satire:

Bells are like fierce-browed prelates who proclaim
That “if Our Lord returned He’d fight for us.”
So let our bells and bishops do the same,
Shoulder to shoulder with the motor-bus. (Sassoon, *The War Poems* 125)

Again without subtlety, Sassoon turns the call on the church hierarchy, encouraging them to heed their own call. Disconnected from the actual consequences of war, Sassoon implies that the church leaders have no right to encourage others to be a part of the battle.

This same message is presented in Owen’s poem “At a Calvary Near the Ancre.” In *Dismantling Glory*, Lorrie Goldensohn suggests that “Owen followed Siegfried Sassoon’s lead in looking at the higher leadership with hostility and suspicion,” and this allegorical poem demonstrates this influence perfectly (18). In the first stanza of the poem, Owen very clearly alludes to the crucifixion of Jesus; yet interestingly, as previously explored, he seems to connect Christ to those that are serving in the war. In an ironic and creative spin, he does this by turning the focus of the story around:

One ever hangs where shelled roads part,
In this war He too lost a limb,
But His disciples hide apart;
And now the Soldiers bear with Him. (Owen, *The Poems* 111)

Owen draws parallels between the Soldiers and Christ – both by explaining that they “bear” their pains with him and by capitalizing both “Soldiers” and “Him.” In doing so, he not only elevates the men serving in the war to a level alongside Christ, honoring them and their sacrifices, but makes a case for their innocence. Intentionally, “disciples” are not given the same respect. Ironically, in the actual story of the crucifixion, the soldiers are the antagonists responsible for the savior’s death. In this stanza of the poem, however, they seem to be empathized with more than the disciples, the followers of Christ, who have disappeared. In drawing these connections, Owen simultaneously builds up the soldiers that follow orders while pointing out the cowardice of those that proclaim to follow Christ. As a result, Owen makes a statement about the War, explaining how those serving their authorities are forced to suffer, while those who proclaim God’s message are nowhere to be seen. Owen’s religious upbringing would have resulted in his knowledge of the actual gospel account, making these connections even more telling. Although unstated in the poem, the soldiers’ involvement could be further exonerated with knowledge of the actual story where Christ asks God for their forgiveness, stating that they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23:34). The soldiers, like those serving in World War I, are victims of a political and religious hierarchy with a prideful agenda. Owen cleverly turns the story around on his readers, victimizing the soldiers involved in the slaughter alongside Christ.

The second and third stanzas of the poem are far less subtle and even more condemning of the religious leaders. Owen describes the scene:

Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,
And in their faces there is pride
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast

By whom the gentle Christ's denied

The scribes on all the people shove

And bawl allegiance to the state,

But they who love the greater love

Lay down their life; they do not hate.

As previously mentioned, the image of the pride-filled priest in the second stanza is clearly another criticism of the religious hierarchy at the time of the Great War. Their pride comes from being “flesh-marked by the Beast,” which points to minor wounds they may have accrued in the war, but are nothing compared to the injuries and fatalities amongst the soldiers. Jon Stallworthy, editor of *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, also offers a further analysis of this image in his footnotes for the poem. He points out how “flesh-marked” could also signify something more: “the Devil used to be believed to leave his finger-marks on the flesh of his followers” (111). Arguably then, the religious hierarchy are being placed in connection more closely with the devil than with God. With or without Stallworthy's analysis, Owen's disgust for the religious leaders is clear.

Furthermore, the final stanza also offers a strong condemnation. Similar to the closing lines in “Mental Cases,” Owen ties the religious leadership to those who serve as their medium. “The scribes” that “bawl allegiance to the state” again seems to point a finger at the poets and other writers that served to promote the war, offering religious-themed propaganda. Owen again shows his disdain for both the message and the medium.

The criticism of the church leaders by both Sassoon and Owen signifies a reaction to the use of religious ideals for enlistment. Both poets recognize the dishonesty of the recruitment

messages and work to set things straight in their writing. Sassoon makes this fact abundantly clear in his book *Siegfried's Journey* when discussing a return to the front: "One gets sent out again like a cabbage going to Covent Garden market...cabbages were better off, because they didn't claim to have unconquerable souls, and weren't told that they were making a supreme sacrifice for the sake of unborn vegetables" (69-70). Throughout his writing, as well as in Owen's, the criticism surrounds religious and political leaders that do not seem to be thinking of those that are serving. Owen and Sassoon are especially critical of the use of religion and spirituality in their propaganda. This message, although visible throughout their work, is perhaps best presented in a pair of allegorical poems, one by each author.

Owen's "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" was written first, in July of 1918. The poem, similar to "At a Calvary Near the Ancre," is a retelling of a Biblical story; however, this one stems from the Old Testament. Genesis 22 tells the story of Abraham's willingness to follow God's call and slaughter his son, Isaac. Although Owen's poem mirrors the Genesis passage very closely, often taking wording directly from the Bible, Owen's poem, from the very beginning, forces his readers to recognize that he is doing more than a simple retelling. The opening two lines, "So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went, / And took the fire with him, and a knife," immediately draw connections to the Old Testament story; however, since the context of the poem is World War I, the subject of Abram, the father of the nation of Israel, clearly references the religious and political leaders of Owen's time. His son, Isaac, who is the victim of the story, is therefore an obvious reference to the soldiers being sacrificed for the cause. These connections are made less inferential in lines seven and eight when Owen writes, "Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps, / And builded parapets and trenches there." The

choice of the word “youth,” which serves as both a singular and plural noun, works well for both Isaac and those serving England, and the references to “belts and straps” is explained by editor Jon Stallworthy as being part of a soldier’s equipment (151). Furthermore, the image of building “trenches” makes the connection to the Great War and its trench warfare complete.

The original story is a testament to the faith of the father of Israel, as well an example of God’s love and mercy. As told in Genesis 22, without questioning God at all, Abraham takes his only son to the top of a mountain, preparing to sacrifice him to God as he had been requested. After strapping him to an altar and raising his blade, God calls out and commands Abraham to stop—saving Isaac and preserving his covenant. The narrative in Owen’s poem begins similarly, painting a picture of a young, innocent Isaac on the altar. Like the Genesis story, God calls out to save Isaac, providing a ram to be used in an offering instead. This is where Owen’s story and the Biblical one differ. Much like his mentor, Sassoon, Owen finishes with a powerful and cynical closing: “But the old man would not so, but slew his son, / And half the seed of Europe, one by one” (Owen, *The Poems* 151). Rather than adhering to God’s command, the father kills his son, thereby ending the story of God’s people. Whereas the original story is about Abraham’s faithfulness, Owen’s poem depicts man’s sinfulness overriding God’s gracious gift of mercy. As a result, these closing lines serve as a brutal condemnation of those who called young men to service in the Great War. Owen brilliantly uses a Biblical story to make his argument, mirroring the use of scripture by those looking for men to enlist.

Although Owen masterfully uses the Genesis story by mimicking it almost completely in the poem, he also includes one major inconsistency: Owen’s poem speaks of Abram, but the story of Isaac’s near sacrifice in Genesis occurs after Abram’s name has been changed to Abraham.

Owen's choice to use "Abram" in his poem offers an additional criticism of the political and religious leaders of his time. Five chapters prior to the passage being mirrored, in Genesis 17, Abram was called by God to be the father of nations. At this time, God changes his name to Abraham (meaning "father of many") as a sign, and God makes a covenant with him to make Abraham fruitful and to be his God forever. Owen's intentional use of the former name offers perhaps his most scathing criticism of the leadership of England; by opting for "Abram," he implies they have not been called by God and are not God's representatives, nor is God on their side.

Not only are the leaders not called by God, but their insistence on sacrificing "the youth" is unjustifiable. In the original text, God provides a ram as a replacement sacrifice for Isaac. In the poem, Owen offers a more specific designation: "Behold! Caught in a thicket by its horns, / A Ram. Offer the Ram of Pride instead" (151). The very clear implication by Owen is that the leaders are unwilling to sacrifice their pride in lieu of the lives of innocent victims. Again, through this allegorical story, like his other poems, Owen suggests that the leadership proclaiming God's will in declaring war are not correct in their actions.

An even more intriguing connection in the poem is the significance of Isaac's connection to the soldiers of World War I. Unlike the leaders being criticized, Owen himself served at the front, and as a result, saw the atrocities of war. He speaks on behalf of the victims: those who served, those still serving, and those being given the message back home. The victims of the untruth are the main focus of both Sassoon and Owen. The famous introduction to Owen's anthology of poems illustrates this point when it says, "This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them... The subject is war, and the pity of war. The poetry is in the

pity” (Owen, *The Poems*). Aptly, Owen’s title gives equal billing to both Abram and Isaac. In “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young,” the young are not glamorized, but they are also not to be forgotten. As in the Old Testament story, the poem’s Isaac goes willingly, almost frustratingly, into sacrifice, trusting his father. By inference, Owen forces his readers to empathize with the victims that are loyal without question, while being critical of the antagonistic leadership that sacrifice others.

In an equally damning allegorical poem, Siegfried Sassoon makes a similar statement. To fully recognize the significance behind “Devotion to Duty,” one must again begin with the original Biblical story. II Samuel 11 tells the story of David and Bathsheba. In the story, David, the King of Israel, sleeps with a married woman, Bathsheba, making her pregnant. To avoid conflict, David commands that her husband, Uriah, be sent to the front lines, “in the forefront of the hottest battle...that he may be smitten, and die” (II Samuel 11:15 KJV). Once he is killed, David takes Bathsheba as his wife, displeasing the Lord. In II Samuel, the story serves to demonstrate the brokenness of the second King of Israel. David writes many of the Psalms in response to this action, and continuously confesses his sinfulness, begging for forgiveness from God. Similar to Owen’s objective in “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young,” where Owen invokes Abraham, Sassoon uses a major Old Testament figure, King David, to condemn the religious and political leaders during World War I.

Like Abraham in Owen’s poem, David is a central character in the story of Israel. Both men are included in Matthew 1 as part of the genealogy of Christ Jesus, and both men are called specifically by God to serve their people. As a result, the poems by Sassoon and Owen both powerfully link the Old Testament political and religious leaders to their modern-day

contemporaries. These leaders have immense responsibility and their places in history will be forged by their actions. By using the very recognizable figures, without offering much in terms of context (Sassoon even leaves King David nameless in his poem), Sassoon and Owen are demonstrating the power and lasting presence the decisions made by these leaders had, thereby making the same case for the leaders of their time.

Unlike Owen's allegorical poem, Sassoon doesn't need to change the plotline to make his message clear. Readers of the poem familiar with the Old Testament story, and knowledgeable of Sassoon's perspectives on the War, immediately see the criticism. David's act in II Samuel was deliberate and selfish, thereby implying that the leaders of England's actions are equally intentional and self-gratifying. Sassoon ironically describes the King as sorrowful ("His face was grave") and yet his sorrow is undermined by his first action upon hearing the news:

He gripped his beard; then closed his eyes and said,

"Bathsheba must be warned that he is dead.

Send for her. I will be the first to tell

This wife how her heroic husband fell." (Sassoon, *The War Poems* 142).

By withholding the name of the King, the reader is unable to make connections until the final three lines. With no mention of Uriah or David, readers are initially led through a story of a King that seems genuinely interested in and sympathetic to his soldiers. In the final stanza, however, when the name of "Bathsheba" is given, the entire tone of the poem shifts to Sassoon's more typical cynicism. Sassoon makes the allusion complete, and the reader, with knowledge of the original story, forcibly sees the selfishness of the leader's actions.

Interestingly, like Owen's "At a Calvary Near the Ancre," Sassoon seems to reserve some criticism of those that serve as the medium for propaganda as well. The final line of the poem, where the King states how he will tell "This wife how her heroic husband fell," picks up on the language of war. The description of Uriah as "heroic," is ironic coming from King David, but is also reminiscent of the language used to call soldiers into service by those enlisted to write on behalf of the government. The use of "fell" to euphemize Uriah's death is also representative of the high diction continuously employed in the poetry calling soldiers to serve. Similar to Owen's intentions with his allegorical poem, Sassoon looks for honesty and forthrightness from those who are leading and those calling others to follow.

Again, like Owen, a further understanding of the poem can also be gleaned with knowledge of the victim in the story. The title of Sassoon's poem, "Devotion to Duty," forces the reader to consider Uriah's connection to the message by focusing the poem on the man who served, building his sacrifice up as one of unquestioned loyalty. The Old Testament story furthers this perspective, since, prior to being sent back to battle, David urges Uriah to go home and be with his wife. Uriah's loyalty to his King and the cause then becomes his undoing as he replies, "The ark, and Israel, and Judah, abide in tents; and my lord Joab, and the servants of my lord, are encamped in the open fields; shall I then go into mine house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As thou livest, and as thy soul liveth, I will not do this thing!" (II Samuel 11: 11 KJV). Like Isaac in the Genesis story, Uriah's unquestioning, and even frustrating, loyalty is demonstrated. Although the condemnation in both poems is undeniably on the leaders Abraham and David, it is amplified by the devotion of their victims. Subsequently, the innocence and

devotion of those who continued to serve on the front lines of World War I further indicts those selfishly call them to action.

Continuously in the poetry of both Sassoon and Owen, the soldiers are depicted as victims of those who send them to war. The strong imagery in Owen's "Mental Cases" displays the horrific impact of war on the minds of those who serve. The use of juxtaposition in Owen's "Disabled" and the sarcastic soldier quips in Sassoon's "They" give readers a glimpse of the brutal physical injuries caused by the War. Throughout their work, Owen and Sassoon show a great deal of understanding for the struggles soldiers are burdened with as a result of their service. These struggles, including both death and emotional suffering, are most brutally captured in Owen's "Dulce et Decorum est." Alan Wilkinson, in *The Church of England and the First World War* explains how "The comradeship of the trenches was described in language from the Gospels" (12). But rather than the language of discipleship and brotherhood, in "Dulce et Decorum Est," Owen dismisses any glorious image of camaraderie: "In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning" (Owen, *The Poems* 117). In the closing stanza, Owen describes the action of tossing his fellow soldier into a wagon as he gasps for his last breaths. In their poetry, Sassoon and Owen strip away the messages of honor and glory and instead show the mental, physical, and emotional burdens war has on those that serve.

Another important facet of a soldier's existence, his spiritual life, is impacted by service, and that impact is described in Sassoon's "Vicarious Christ." Typical of Sassoon, the poem begins with an almost playful, upbeat tone. This tone is set with the naming the focal character: The Bishop of Byegumb. According to the Oxford English dictionary, "by gum" is an expression used in lieu of "by God" ("gum"). By using a flippant expression for God's name for a man called

to revere Him, Sassoon immediately lets his audience know the focus of his satire. The first stanza then tells of the bishop who makes an “astounding” impression on the men in his audience. They recognize that “he was such a Christian man.” With this early depiction, Sassoon is already beginning to form his argument. By contrasting the name of the Bishop with his description, Sassoon already demonstrates an inconsistency between the man and his message. In doing so, Sassoon commands his readers to question the clergy as a whole.

Although readers familiar with Sassoon are anticipating the tone to shift, the second stanza of the poem continues to create a positive mood as the bishop compares the soldiers to the martyrs and changes their perceptions: “O, it made us love the war—to hear him speak!” Like in other poems, Sassoon directs his commentary toward those who connect the war and spirituality, those who promote spiritual benefits in order to boost morale and encourage enlistment. And it is at this point in the poem that Sassoon makes his signature shift: “But when I was his victim, how I wished I could have kicked him, / For he made me love Religion less and less” (Sassoon, *The War Poems* 141). Stylistically, Sassoon draws attention to these last lines with a bouncy meter and a playful internal rhyme (“victim” and “kicked him”), and ironically contrasts them with a far more serious message. Furthermore, the message itself points to a truer irony; the bishop, whose calling is to develop the spiritual lives of his followers, is actual a detriment to their faith lives.

This irony was literally demonstrated in the actual lives of soldiers, as poet Robert Graves figured that only one in one hundred soldiers were actually religious in World War I (Roberts 156). The ninety-nine percent described by Graves included Siegfried Sassoon. According to Max Egremont’s biography *Siegfried Sassoon: A Life*, Sassoon made connections between death, sacrifice, and religion in his poetry only; he never prayed during the war (77). This reality is

shown in what feels like one of his most personal, heartfelt poems, “In the Church of St. Ouen.” The poem offers a reflection, as Sassoon is describing a visit to the church in Northern France, and it begins with the following lines:

Time makes me a soldier. But I know
That had I lived six hundred years ago
I might have tried to build within my heart
A church like this, where I could dwell apart
With chanting peace. My spirit longs for prayer;
And, lost to God, I seek him everywhere.

Sassoon admits to a longing for and search of God, but claims to be “lost to God.” The shift in tense from the conditional “might have tried” to the present “spirit longs” and “seek him” differentiates from what could have been to what is currently. In the past, he might have looked for the church, but now he is left wanting. The church no longer offers him the peace it might have; rather, as illustrated in the final lines, he is being pulled away from it:

But where I stand, desiring yet to stay,
Hearing rich music at the close of day,
The Spring Offensive (Easter is its date)
Calls me. And that’s the music I await. (Sassoon, *The War Poems* 72)

Sassoon points out the irony in the fact that Easter—the day of salvation in the Christian faith, marked by the death of Christ—is the day of the Spring Offensive, where soldiers will fight to their deaths. The images of martyrdom and Christ-like sacrifice proposed by the poets and religious leaders do not hold true; instead, the fighting is pulling them further from their savior.

While the martyrdom of Christ on Easter was followed by a resurrection three days later, the Easter sacrifice of these soldiers will not end with new lives. By making this connection, Sassoon truly speaks out against the use of religion in pro-war propaganda—especially that which links it to sacrificial service--and in doing so, criticizes those delivering the messages.

In these poems, Owen and Sassoon draw attention to the sources of the messages. They question the impact the clergy are having on the spiritual lives of those that are serving. Both Sassoon and Owen recognize that the church seems more preoccupied with the physical lives of their audience, and how those lives can be of service to the English cause. The religious leaders abused their positions to draw connections between service to God and service to England, and Sassoon and Owen used their poetry to question this rhetoric and its impact on its audiences. In their poems, they concluded that, not only is the church unfair in its correlation between service and salvation, but by making the correlation, they are turning people away from its higher calling of salvation and redemption.

CHAPTER THREE: SASSOON AND OWEN CRITICIZE MORE THAN THE SPIRITUAL LEADERS; THEY QUESTION THE THEOLOGY ITSELF

One specific and tangible way soldiers could be seen as having turned away from their religious upbringings may have been in their use of language. Sassoon and Owen fully recognized the power language had, and would have also been very familiar with the Bible's mandates on language – in particular on the use of God's name. The Old Testament outlines the Ten Commandments, where God gave His people strict rules to live by. The third commandment very clearly outlines God's expectations for language: "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain" (Exodus 20:7 KJV). As explored previously, Sassoon intentionally plays with this command with the name of his bishop in "Vicarious Christ," calling him the Bishop of Byegumb. Owen, who also would have been extremely familiar with these commandments, brought up this issue in a letter to his mother, saying, "There is a point where prayer is indistinguishable from blasphemy. There is also a point where blasphemy is indistinguishable from prayer" (Stallworthy, *Wilfred* 258). Early in his poetry, the line between prayer and blasphemy is seemingly defined. In "Nocturne," Owen solemnly seems to bring concerns wholeheartedly to God in his poetry: "God rest all souls in toil and turbulence, / All men a-weary seeking bread; / God rest them all tonight!" (Owen, *The Poems* 52). The tone behind Owen's use of God's name here seems reverent and is used prayerfully, whereas its inclusion is less genuine in "The Last Laugh." In this poem Owen reveals the thin line between prayer and blasphemy: "'Oh Jesus Christ! I'm hit,' he said and died. / Whether he vainly cursed, or prayed indeed, / The bullets chirped, 'In vain! vain! vain!'" (145). Here Owen, rather

than leaving his commentary focused on the religious leaders, challenges the theology itself. This flippant use of the Lord's name in vain is an affront to the commandment altogether, forcing his readers to begin to question more than just the authorities' intentions, but the theology they present as well.

One of the theological issues Owen and Sassoon especially take offense to is the idea that God is on the side of the English. Shannon Ty Bontrager, in "The Imagined Crusade: The Church of England and the Mythology of Nationalism and Christianity during the Great War," explains how Anglicans argued that God was on the side of the British, but how the idea was tougher and tougher to argue as the war went on (775). Part of the difficulty was, as Scottish theologian John Oman states, that England was at war with a nation "linked by ties of intercourse, friendship, knowledge, ties of race, religion, and temper" (Hoover 19). Owen, in a letter to his mother, challenges the idea of a one-sided God. Speaking about Christ's voice, he writes, "Is it spoken in English only, and French? I do not believe so. Thus you see how pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism" (Roberts 147). And these ideas come through in the poetry as well. In his allegorical poem, "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young," Owen intentionally opts to use the name "Abram" rather than the more Biblically accurate "Abraham." As stated earlier, this choice connects to the lack of calling from or connection to God Owen sees from the leaders of England; however, a deeper connection can also be inferred. In the Old Testament story, Abraham is given his name to signify him as the "father of many." Whereas this is true of the Old Testament patriarch, the Abram in the poem acts not as the "father of many," but with a much more singular and selfish focus.

In the later poem, “Disabled,” Owen turns his focus from whether or not God was actually on the side of the English, fighting an evil enemy, to whether or not the British cared. Much of the demonization of England’s enemies in written propaganda was to spur people to enlist and fight against an evil enemy; however in this poem, Owen demonstrates the lack of conviction soldiers had in this regard. Reflecting on the enlistment of a disabled soldier, he writes, “Germans he scarcely thought of; all their guilt, / And Austria’s, did not move him” (Owen, *The Poems* 153). In both poems, Owen questions the idea of a God that takes sides and shows the falseness in this ideology, both theologically and as a practical tool for enlistment. In doing so, Owen challenges the religious and political structures furthering this ideology.

Sassoon too writes about this theological conundrum. In one of his memoirs, his protagonist Sherston cynically points out the hypocrisy he sees in the religious leaders: “The Brigade chaplain did not exhort us to love our enemies. He was content to lead off with the hymn “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds!” (Wilkinson 112). Although the New Testament often calls for grace, the political and religious leaders worked hard to paint a picture of an evil enemy. In response, Sassoon very explicitly challenges his readers to think differently about the opposition they are fighting in the poem “Reconciliation”:

When you are standing at your hero’s grave,
Or near some homeless village where he died,
Remember, through your heart’s rekindling pride,
The German soldiers who were loyal and brave.

Men fought like brutes; and hideous things were done,

And you have nourished hatred harsh and blind.

But in that Golgotha perhaps you'll find

The mothers of the men who killed your son. (Sassoon, *The War Poems* 136)

The poem's first stanza blatantly challenges its readers to think about the Germans who fought for their cause with similar loyalty and bravery to the English soldiers. In the second stanza, Sassoon then changes the focus. Rather than fixating on the positive virtues English mourners may have reserved for their fallen soldiers, and trying to connect those virtues to the Germans as well, he shifts to the negative virtues attributed solely to the enemy. By opting for the ambiguous noun "men" and generally speaking of "brutes" and "hideous things," Sassoon comments on the atrocities committed by both sides in battle. The bold accusation of having "nourished hatred harsh and blind" is offered in the second person point of view to make clear the sinfulness of both sides, including those not directly involved in the battle. Powerfully, Sassoon then returns to religious imagery for the final two stanzas. "Golgotha" is quickly recognized as the place of slaughter where Jesus was crucified, and it works strongly to connect to the propaganda of salvation and martyrdom commonly presented on behalf of the English cause. However, "Golgotha" also brings to mind connections to Christ's forgiveness and grace, and this connection is the one Sassoon pushes on his readers as he asks them to consider the mothers of the German soldiers who are also mourning their losses. His poem seems to beg the question, "Did Christ not die for these as well?"

In *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, Sassoon, through his protagonist Sherston, describes a scene where he's in conversation with Lady Asterisk. In the story she says, "But death is nothing.... Life, after all, is only the beginning. And those who are killed in the war—they help us

from up there. They are helping us to win.” Sherston’s response gives a further glance into the position of Siegfried Sassoon. As the narrator, he responds, “I went up to the Clematis Room feeling caddishly estranged and cynical; wondering whether the Germans ‘up there’ were doing anything definite to impede the offensive operations of the Allied Powers” (264-265). Although playful and sarcastic, Sassoon again challenges the idea of a God that takes sides. In doing so, he stirs up questions of salvation and heaven that are also explored in his poem “Enemies.”

“Enemies” cleverly makes Sassoon’s point, beginning with the title. The connotation of the word “enemies” is generally negative; however, it also brings to mind Christ’s command in Matthew 5:44: “But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (KJV). This biblical command carries through in the message in the poem. Sassoon begins the poem by remaining ambiguous, creating an image of men in the afterlife without clearly establishing who or where they are. The opening lines set the tone: “He stood alone in some queer sunless place / Where Armageddon ends.” Initially, Sassoon appears to be describing a fallen soldier, however later lines muddy the interpretation: “...and suddenly there thronged / Round him the hulking Germans that I shot / When for his death my brooding rage was hot.” Suddenly, the pronoun “he” is less clear, since Sassoon introduces the pronoun “I” as an English soldier who has fought against the Germans. Sassoon then challenges the war propaganda that demonizes the Germans and promotes the English war effort as an act of salvation by making the antecedent for “he” more clear further into the poem. In the eighth line, Sassoon writes, “They told him how I’d killed them for his sake.” This line sarcastically points back to the ideal of serving a greater good in battle. “His sake” immediately becomes an allusion to Christ.

As the poem continues, Christ, now clearly represented by the pronoun “he,” carries a much larger message. The closing lines, which Sassoon typically reserves for cynicism and his signature punch, state, “At last he turned and smiled. One took his hand / Because his face could make them understand” (Sassoon, *The War Poems* 66). Atypically, without a hint of irony or cynicism, Sassoon defies the idea of a God that takes sides. By accepting the German soldiers and silently taking a hand, Sassoon not only depicts a Christ that shows love and acceptance of the Germans, but Sassoon also seems again to dispute the voices that often speak on behalf of God’s name. The Christ pictured in the poem does not share the voice of those who continually speak on his behalf—in fact, He does not say a word. He acts. In doing so, the poem challenges the entire idea represented in its title, and it evokes the image of a silent Christ to speak out against the messages presented by His earthly representatives, those of an English-centric God.

In *Siegfried Sassoon’s Diaries 1915-1918*, Sassoon expands this idea and his frustrations on war with a question: “The agony of France! The agony of Austria-Hungary and Germany! Are not those equal before God?” (177). These ponderings again beg the question of whether or not God has taken a side in the conflict, but it also brings up another theological question that both Sassoon and Owen struggle with throughout their poetry—the question of whether or not God is insensitive to human suffering (Cavill et al 366). In the poem “A Mystic as Soldier,” Sassoon seems to take a firm stance on the question of God’s involvement in human suffering. The second stanza offers a clear description of God’s providence regarding struggles:

Now God is in the strife,
And I must seek Him there,
Where death outnumbered life,

And fury smites the air. (Sassoon, *The War Poems* 60)

Although this stanza depicts a God very invested and involved in suffering, it is also a poem written earlier in the war and before Sassoon met Owen at Craiglockhart. Sassoon gives a different glimpse of this issue in a poem originally published in *Hydra* while Sassoon was in Craiglockhart; this poem is titled “Break of Day.” Amidst a collection of images describing a soldier’s morning, Sassoon starts the second stanza with the lines, “Was it the ghost of autumn in that smell / Of underground, or God’s blank heart grown kind” (Sassoon, *The War Poems* 102). The passing statement about “God’s blank heart” is significant in understanding the poet’s perspective on religion. Although brief, this line makes a statement about the connection God has (or fails to have) with His people. The God with the blank heart in “Break of Day” is not like the God “in the strife” depicted in “A Mystic as Soldier.” Sassoon’s experiences with the War, and those who are orchestrating and religiously promoting it, seem to have changed his perceptions on God Himself.

In “Greater Love” Owen also addresses this issue by first forcing his readers to see and accept the horrors of war with the opening lines: “Red lips are not so red / As the stained stones kissed by the English dead” (Owen, *The Poems* 143). As the poem builds its somber and empathetic tone, using the second person point of view to draw his readers in, Owen drops a statement which stands out from the rest:

Your slender attitude

Trembles not exquisite like limbs knife-skewed,

Rolling and rolling there

Where God seems not to care; (143)

The implications behind the last quoted line are further established in a letter Owen writes to his mother in 1918 where he alludes to John 3:16: “God so hated the world that He gave several millions of English-begotten sons, that whosoever believeth in them should not perish, but have a comfortable life” (Wilkinson 115). The idea of God’s negligence issued by both poets here is bolder than prior statements about the honesty and integrity of religious or political leaders or the interpretation of scriptural truths; here Owen, and in “Break of Day,” Sassoon, questions the actual goodness and interests of God.

Another poem which furthers this argument, written by Owen but clearly demonstrating the influence of Sassoon, is “Inspection.” The most significant sign of Sassoon’s influence in this poem comes with Owen’s use of colloquial language. The first stanza of the poem shows this perfectly:

‘You! What d’you mean by this?’ I rapped.

‘You dare come on parade like this?’

‘Please, sir, it’s—‘ ‘Old yer mouth,’ the sergeant snapped.

‘I takes is name, sir?’ – ‘Please, and then dismiss.’

Stylistically, this poem is a sharp turn from the poetry that had been written by Owen before the war, and before meeting Sassoon. Douglas Kerr explains how prior to the war, Owen wanted a poetry that was “romantic self-expression” (Kerr, *Disciplines* 287). This poem moves away from the romantic verse Owen was accustomed to writing; rather, the realistic and unfiltered speech utilized in the poem serves to correspond with the powerful message that comes in its conclusion. As such, Sassoon’s influence is seen not only stylistically, but thematically as well.

Initially the poem seems to be another commentary on the disconnectedness of those in charge, and that idea is represented in the second stanza; however, the third stanza makes a much larger statement:

Some days 'confined to camp' he got,
For being 'dirty on parade'.
He told me, afterwards, the damned spot
Was blood, his own. 'Well, blood is dirt,' I said.

'Blood's dirt,' he laughed, looking away,
Far off to where his wounds had bled
And almost merged for ever into clay.
'The world is washing out its stains,' he said.
'It doesn't like our cheeks so red:
Young blood's its great objection.
But when we're duly white-washed, being dead,

The race will bear Field Marshal God's inspection.' (Owen, *The Poems* 72)

Here the commentary goes beyond leadership and the inspector's inability to understand the soldier's initial point. The reference to "the damned spot" is a clear allusion to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* where blood is synonymous with guilt. In this poem too, blood signifies guilt, and the war is depicted as a way of washing all the guilt away—at the expense of all the young men who fight. Owen uses the scene to again question God's involvement, but this poem offers a different perspective. Rather than an uncaring God or a God with a "blank heart," this poem depicts a very

involved God. Here, God seems intent on doing the damage as a way of cleaning the world of its sins, and as a result, Owen seems critical of the theology of a righteous God. “Field Marshal God” is not a positive depiction.

Owen’s criticism of theological ideas is further evidenced in his use of, and subsequent critique of religious ceremonies. Funerals are solemn and sacramental acts in the Christian religion. Death is seen as a glorious passage from the broken world of earth to the redeemed world of heaven. In “Anthem for Doomed Youth” however, Owen questions the solemnity and beauty of death and passing and used symbols of Christianity to generate anger or “highlight the mismatch between organised religion and the reality on the ground” (Cavill et al 365). Throughout the poem, Owen juxtaposes the ceremony of the mass for the dead and scenes from battle. He begins by hitting his readers with an opening question and simile: “What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?” Immediately, Owen objects to and discards the solemn and personal ceremony of a funeral. Rather than highlighting the somber and respectful tone one might associate with the service, Owen instead picks up on the melancholy of death and contrasts it with dark and angry images of war. Additionally he negates the service of the men serving, referring to them as livestock. Then, instead of meaningful prayers for those lost, the soldiers are greeted by the “hasty orisons” of rifle shots; instead of a mournful church choir, they are sent away with “demented choirs of wailing shells” (Owen, *The Poems* 76). Owen employs these church-related images to criticize religion. Much like the theology presented by the religious leaders, the accompanying bells, orisons, and choirs intended to bring joy or peace are twisted by the realities of war. In doing so, Owen is “testing the biblical and Christian images and doctrines to see

whether they will bear the weight of the increasing revulsion he felt against the slaughter” (Wilkinson 113).

Even the ideas of evangelism and salvation are challenged by Owen. In “Disabled,” Owen contrasts a young man’s life before the war and his existence as a disabled veteran after. Upon his return, he notes that he isn’t welcomed with cheers. Instead, “Only a solemn man who brought him fruits / *Thanked* him; and then enquired about his soul” (Owen, *The Poems* 153). The gesture comes across as trite and insulting in the context of the poem, offering little actual support or thankfulness for the soldier’s dedication and loss. Similarly, in the poem “Happiness,” Owen states that “heaven looks smaller than the old doll’s home” (65). Again, the promise of grace and salvation are undermined by the effects of war.

Likewise, Sassoon seems critical of the promise of heaven in the poem “Supreme Sacrifice.” The title of the poem sets the tone by bringing to mind allusions to Christ and the martyrdom he suffered in His crucifixion. This connection to salvation is made ironic with the actual scene depicted in the poem:

I told her our Battalion’d got a knock.
“Six officers were killed; a hopeless show!”
Her tired eyes half-confessed she’d felt the shock
Of ugly war brought home. And then a slow
Spiritual brightness stole across her face....
“But *they* are safe and happy now,” she said.
I thought “The world’s a silly sort of place
When people think it’s pleasant to be dead.”

I thought, “How cheery the brave troops would be

If Sergeant-Majors taught Theosophy!” (Sassoon, *War Poems* 81)

The almost hypnotic response of the woman receiving the news satirizes the unflinching acceptance of salvation and the promise of heaven held by believers. Again, Sassoon questions the use of religious ideals as propaganda, but here, rather than undermining the messenger, he seems critical of the message. Heaven and salvation appear less than a reality, but rather a tool for indoctrination and suppression. Sassoon then takes the criticism further by connecting the woman’s belief in a “safe and happy” afterlife with the Theosophy popularized by Madam Blavatsky near the end of the 1800’s. Blavatsky, along with fellow theosophist Henry Steel Olcott, tried to synthesize religious and scientific ideas to create a new worldview, which Olcott proudly linked to the Occult. Their mission was described in military terms: “a war against false science and false religion.” Theosophists thought modern science was “arrogant, materialistic, and atheistic,” but also wanted to provide modern religion with the ability to bear the “test of reason” (Prosthero 206). Sassoon’s passing and cynical reference to this movement adds to the criticism of religious ideals. The woman’s unfaltering reliance on her beliefs, and the connection to the occult-connected Theosophy, calls the entire system of belief into question.

Further criticism can be seen when Christianity fails to give answers for Sassoon regarding the issue whether or not God takes sides. In “Christ and the Soldier,” a man comes face-to-face with his savior while in battle. In the poem, Christ offers the soldier healing and forgiveness, but is caught off-guard by the soldier’s response to these actions:

The soldier answered, “Heal me if you will,

Maybe there’s comfort when a soul believes

In mercy, and we need it in these hells.
But be you for both sides? I'm paid to kill
And if I shoot a man his mother grieves.
Does that come into what your teaching tells?"

This stanza, like the poems "Enemies" and "Reconciliation," targets the idea presented by the religious and political leaders that God stands behind the English. As previously argued, this message was predominant in the literature encouraging young men to enlist and is an issue Sassoon and Owen challenge in their poetry. However this poem shifts the attention away from the issue and expands its attack. The final stanza of the poem, instead of making a statement about the enemy, turns against God Himself. When Christ does not respond to the questions posed, the soldier finishes with the following lines:

"Lord Jesus, ain't you got no more to say?"
Bowed hung that head below the crown of thorns.
The soldier shifted, and picked up his pack,
And slung his gun, and stumbled on his way.
"O God," he groaned, "why ever was I born?"...
The battle boomed, and no reply came back.

This stanza is a much bolder statement than the ones made in "Enemies" and "Reconciliation." Max Egremont, in the biography titled *Siegfried Sassoon*, explains that "Christ and the Soldier" is a sign of Sassoon's "scorn for religious inadequacy in war" (110). The image of God in this poem is paralyzed and unable to deal with confrontation. Through the first several stanzas, Christ tries to calm the soldier and offer his guidance, but when faced with the difficult questions, He

has nothing to offer. As a result, Sassoon challenges the very nature of an omnipotent God and implies that the war has moved beyond His control.

Egremont also highlights the poem “The Prince of Wounds,” originally titled “The Prince of Peace.” In this poem, Christ is on the cross, watching over “the spirit of Destruction” (77). It begins by seemingly offering assurances that Christ is with the soldiers and that they have done as they have been called. The line, “We have renounced our lovely things,” seems to point toward the kind of unselfish discipleship Christ commands in the gospels. Although the poem initially seems to point toward connection to God, it finishes with a very different image:

Have we the strength to strive alone
Who can no longer worship Christ?
Is He a God of wood and stone,
While those who served him writhe and moan,
On warfare’s altar sacrificed?

Again, Sassoon seems to dismiss belief altogether. More than criticizing the messages offered about God and salvation as false and misleading, Sassoon seems to be criticizing Christianity at its core. By describing a “God of wood and stone”, he is alluding back to the false gods of the Old Testament, therefore challenging His presence and power.

Owen struggled with these same ideas. D. S. R. Welland, in the essay “Half-Rhyme in Wilfred Owen: Its Derivation and Use” explains how Owen felt religion to be “at variance with poetry.” At the same time, Owen couldn’t dismiss it so readily. Welland explains how Owen couldn’t overcome the “constricting dichotomy which necessitated the subordination of one complete side of his personality” (43). Owen also recognized that his readers wouldn’t readily

reject their beliefs as well. When writing “Spring Offensive,” Owen told Sassoon that he didn’t want “to write anything to which a soldier would say No Compris!” Douglas Kerr, in *Wilfred Owen’s Voices: Language and Community*, explains Owen’s thoughts: “Both preacher and poet must recognize themselves to be privileged beings; but for their words to be most widely effective, they had to find a common tongue” (112). And that common tongue is what Owen inevitably discovered. While both poets pointed to issues they saw in theology and religion, Owen refused to discount it altogether as Sassoon did. Owen saw a greater purpose.

CHAPTER FOUR: OWEN LEARNS TO USE RELIGION; SASSOON STILL SATIRIZES

Although Owen was intentional with the critiques he was making of the religious hierarchy, Owen's Christian upbringing did not allow him to completely forget the power of religion. In *Wilfred Owen*, Jon Stallworthy quotes the poet saying, "If I do not read hymns, and if Harold [Owen's brother] marks no Bible, or Colin [Owen's youngest brother] sees no life-guide in his prayer-book, it is no bad sign. I have heard the cadences of harps not audible to Sankey, but which were strung by God; and played by mysteries to Him, and I was permitted to hear them" (258). Owen clearly still understood the connection capable in the faith of his youth, and he wrote of seeing glimpses of God amidst the war. As his poetry evolved, alongside the criticisms and commentaries, he tried to capture those glimpses. In another letter, Owen explains, "Christ is literally in no man's land. There men often hear His voice: Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life – for a friend" (Najarian 34). Owen saw the power of faith in the midst of war, and began to recognize the impact faith could have on spurring his readers. These beliefs became more present in Owen's writing as his poetic style developed, giving him the ability to more craftily use religious ideas. Douglas Kerr explains in *Wilfred Owen's Voices: Language and Community*: "if Owen moved beyond Sassoon's orbit, it was not to leave behind such 'truthfully descriptive' representations of the war, but to present and understand them in a different context" (328). Owen evolved beyond Sassoon's "knock out" satire and focused his attention not just on criticizing religion, but using it for a greater purpose.

This development is evident in the poem “Strange Meeting” which begins mysteriously, creating an image of an escape from the battlefield:

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I propped them, one sprang up and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall, --
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell. (Owen, *The Poems* 125)

Owen’s ironic choice of “escape,” “bless,” and “smile” alongside his final destination of Hell serve as a statement on the brutality of battle. The fact that he sees Hell in more positive terms than the front lines is a severe indictment. Again Owen employs religion to deliver a commentary on the battles of World War I. For the remainder of the poem, however, Owen’s tone remains less cynical and more genuinely interested in the soldier who delivers much of the poem’s dialogue. By maintaining this focus, he uses the conversation in Hell to engage the moral issue of killing someone similar to himself (Cavill et al 370-371). The second person in the poem articulates their similarity, saying, “Whatever hope is yours, / Was my life also,” and he later explains how, like the narrator Owen, he tried to expose the truth about the war. Dennis Welland, in his book *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, explains how this poem is an example of how Owen tried to find a balance between religion and beauty, and how the experience of war gave him that insight (45). Rather than merely satirizing the war, its leadership, or the religious propaganda used to promote it, Owen moves beyond cynicism and engages the subject of war in a new direction. Although

religion is still evident in the poem, Owen isn't criticizing it. He evokes it for his own purposes; God and religion become a link between his readers and those serving in the war.

In actualizing this link, Owen progresses beyond his mentor Sassoon. Owen "learned from Sassoon how to be a war poet. But he brought, to the realistic treatment of war, subjects he had learned from Sassoon, and understanding of war and a discourse of war poetry that was more radical and more desolate than his friends" (Kerr, *Wilfred* 330-331). Although Sassoon influenced Owen, Owen evolved past Sassoon's trademark closing punch, to use religion in a more complex way. In his book on Owen, Douglas Kerr cites Paul Norgate explaining how Owen was a more "subtle provisional discourse" than the other soldier poets who "unquestionably reference back to religion, tradition, sacrifice and so on, or for that matter Sassoon's essentially simple counter-assertion and satirical inversion of such ideas" (327). For much of Sassoon's poetry, this is an apt description. Sassoon isolated the rhetoric of the religious and political hierarchies and exposed it with irony.

In a biography on Sassoon, Max Egremont describes an exception. In "A Simpleton," Sassoon depicts a strong God who "is a comfort in loneliness and 'triumphs' in wounds and war as well as laughter." The poem, however, goes unpublished, leaving Sassoon's more satirical poems to be the representatives of his thoughts on religion and its effects on war (Egremont 77). Poems such as "They," "Devotion to Duty," "Reconciliation," and "Vicarious Christ" serve as more indicative examples of Sassoon's work; Sassoon is quick to criticize without seeing the potential for religion as part of his message. Although he himself remained focused on satire, Sassoon himself seemed to recognize Owen's evolution. In *Siegfried's Journey*, Sassoon explains: "The clue to his poetic genius was sympathy, not only in his detached visioning of humanity but

in all his actions and responses towards individuals” (91). What Sassoon recognized was a level of grace and love that Owen had for his fellow soldiers.

At the same time, Sassoon never lost sympathy for the men he fought alongside. Attacking war and the religious propaganda that furthered it did not mean attacking soldiers for Sassoon; his poems also demonstrate love and respect for his peers. Douglas Kerr writes of Sassoon’s approach: “To give voice to the anguish, the sense of terrible unfairness, and even the fear, was not an act of weakness. It did not mean letting others down, but speaking up for them. A poet could war, if he could do nothing else” (Kerr, *Wilfred* 311). A perfect example of this empathy is his poem “To Any Dead Officer.” The poem, written shortly after Sassoon wrote the anti-war declaration that caused his relegation to Craiglockhart, is a conversation with soldiers killed in the war. His tone in the poem is respectful, defending those who had died and speaking on their behalf. Like Owen’s “Strange Meeting,” the poem begins with a focus on the afterlife, and a conversation with a soldier who is there; however, Sassoon opts for heaven over hell. Yet typical of Sassoon, rather than remaining focused on the plight of the soldiers, he also jabs at those in authority, critical of those who call soldiers to fight. His closing stanza serves as his closing punch:

Good-bye old lad! Remember me to God,
And tell Him that our Politicians swear
They won’t give in till Prussian Rule’s been trod
Under the Heel of England ... Are you there? ...
Yes ... and the War won’t end for at least two years;
But we’ve got stacks of men ... I’m blind with tears,

Staring into the dark. Cheero!

I wish they'd killed you in a decent show. (Sassoon, *The War Poems* 83)

Unlike “Strange Meeting,” Sassoon’s poem doesn’t remain focused on the men who have died. He turns his attention back on the powers controlling the fighting and away from those in the trenches. Not until after meeting Owen, was Sassoon able to reflect on his perspective, and how it shifted after Craiglockhart. In *Siegfried’s Journey*, he explains: “I was developing a more controlled and subjective attitude towards the war. To remind people of its realities was still my main purpose, but now I preferred to depict it impersonally, and to be as much “above the battle” as I could. Unconsciously, I was getting nearer to Wilfred Owen’s method of approach” (107). However, Sassoon’s perspective never matched Owen’s exactly. Sassoon remained the cynic, opting to continue his focus on the power structures behind the war, rather than those involved on the front lines.

The major distinction between their worldviews may have stemmed from how they saw the war as a whole. Sassoon saw the war as an interruption; all was well before and all would be well after. Sassoon saw the end and worked towards the means. Owen saw the war as a far weightier problem. “To measure the distance between this [Sassoon’s perspective on war] and Wilfred Owen is to see how far, in the end, Owen’s understanding of the meaning of the war, and his representation of it, differ from even those of the poet he most admired” (Kerr, *Wilfred* 329). As a result of seeing the war with more significance, Owen saw his fellow soldiers differently as well. Owen’s perspective on the war made his empathy for his fellow soldiers far more prominent in his poetry.

In *Dismantling Glory: Twentieth-century Soldier Poetry*, Lorrie Goldensohn explains Owen's focus: "Of all the soldier-poets, his concentration on his fellows is most arresting and provocative and also exists in the purest arc of definition" (50). His compassion for the soldiers may have stemmed from his Christian upbringing and his belief in community and fellowship, whereas his use of religious imagery to demonstrate that compassion was undeniably a result of that early Christian worldview. A poem where that compassion was most evident was in "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo." In the poem, Owen suggests seeing God in the soldiers he served with, but not in a jingoistic way like those who wrote about war to recruit (Cavill et al 370-371). Owen sees God in the soldiers amidst that brutality. He describes this phenomenon in the first stanza:

I, too, saw God through mud, --

The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled.

War brought more glory to their eyes than blood,

And gave their laughs more glee than shakes a child. (Owen, *The Poems* 101).

Owen links the soldiers serving at the front to God, powerfully creating sympathy for his fellow troops. In a letter to Osbert Sitwell in July of 1918, Owen offered a similar comparison, again connecting troops in battle to God:

For 14 hours yesterday I was at work—teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown; and not to imagine he thirst until after the last halt. I attended his supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected his feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb, and stands at attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha. (Roberts 128)

Owen sees God in the troops he served with and offers the image of God to show the connection he had to them. As a result, Owen's perspective on those he served with was elevated, and this perspective has an impact on his readers. Goldensohn further articulates this point, illustrating the way Owen connected his readers to the soldiers:

Owen's true originality is to have swept all the new ways of looking at war and soldiering – the comprehension of the soldiers as a dehumanized fighting particle of a mass machine, who endures the industrial ugliness of sound, sight, and smell and the impersonal, overwhelming weapons tearing into the human body – and to have reinstated the old appreciations, in a presentation of the new and frightful amalgam as tragic glory. Heroism now lives in the preemptive maternity of Owen's brooding care for the dead, the mutilated and the mutilated dead of war. As these soldiers enter their purgatory of suffering, it is their animal sacrifice that enhances our indifferent, underrealized and uncaring life: crossing the line separating our life from their transfiguring death is only the grace available to us, or to Owen. (76)

Owen brings his readers closer to those who are serving and makes them the heroes he felt they deserved to be. As demonstrated earlier, in the brutal, yet artful, depictions of the minds of his "Mental Cases," Owen forces his readers to feel for those soldiers who are unable to process their wartime experiences. In the struggle that comes with being "Disabled," Owen challenges his audience to empathize with physical loss. In many of his poems, Owen created a bond between those he writes to and those he served alongside, and throughout, he did so by utilizing religious imagery to connect rather than distance.

In the essay, “Digging In: An Interpretation of Wilfred Owen’s ‘Strange Meeting,’” Elliott B. Gose Jr. explains how Wilfred Owen began to learn that “the mood of protest to which Sassoon was giving voice was a limiting mood for poetry” (417). This realization sparked the evolution in Owen’s poetry. Although Owen’s empathetic approach differed from Sassoon’s, his motive was no less strong. Whereas Sassoon remained focused on the political and religious hierarchy, and used satire to critique them, Owen turned his attention on his readers and their connection to the true realities of war. While Sassoon caused his readers to scorn the political and religious leaders that manipulated men into serving, Owen stirred his audience to connect with those who had been manipulated. One of the ways Owen managed this is noted by Douglas Kerr who points out an interesting rhetorical shift in Owen’s point-of-view for several of his poems. In certain poems, Owen changed to a clear and relatable second person perspective. This is evident in “Dulce Et Decorum Est” when he issues the closing indictment (“My friend, you would not tell with such high zest”), in “Strange Meeting” when he makes his accusation (“I am the enemy you killed...”), and in “Apologia Pro Poemate Meo” when he closes with “You are not worth their merriment” (Kerr, *Wilfred* 113). Owen’s decision to write in second person immediately calls whoever is reading to attention, and, as a result, Owen generates a connection between his audience and the soldiers, pushing his readers to react, and in doing so, furthering his objective. In an unfinished preface to his poems, Owen even made his intentions clear. He saw his poetry as propaganda and under the heading of “Motive” described how his poems “show exactly the manner in which each poem was intended to further the central object of inspiring loathing for the bestialities of war” (Welland 54). He recognized the rhetorical power religion had for those who

were promoting the war effort and rather than merely expose it, he opted to utilize it for his own purposes.

Both Owen and Sassoon grew up in homes that familiarized them with the Bible and its teachings. Although both moved away from those teachings, they were undoubtedly familiar with them. They would have read the gospels and both would have been familiar with the passage from Matthew 5:38-45 which states,

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. (KJV)

The passage is often used as a way of calling God's followers to love and forgive anyone that causes harm, and both Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon would have been familiar with harm. Both poets served in the war and saw firsthand the damage done to those who were on the front. They also knew of the rhetoric that encouraged men like themselves to join. In Jon Stallworthy's biography, *Wilfred Owen*, he cites the poet's powerful response to Christ's call in Matthew 5: "While I wear my star and eat my rations, I continue to take care of my other cheek; and, thinking

of the eyes I have seen made sightless, and the bleeding lad's cheeks I have wiped, I say:
Vengeance is mine, I, Owen, will repay" (203). And with this mentality, both Owen and his friend Siegfried Sassoon wrote their war poems. Looking for honesty and truthfulness, they stripped away pro-war idealism offered up by religious leaders, political leaders, authors, poets, and the media. They exposed the misuse of religious ideology, and yet acknowledged the power of, and (Owen particularly) found new ways to use, God's calling to His people to powerfully speak about the events they saw and experienced on the front. Both Owen and Sassoon recognized, and spoke out against a message they felt was misleading and consequently questioned a belief system. They forced many to second-guess the messages offered up by those satirized in Sassoon's Bishop of Byegumb, and in doing so, helped their readers to come to the same realizations realization that close the poem:

But when I was his victim, how I wished I could have kicked him,
For he made me love Religion less and less.

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