

2020: What did you learn about the literature of World War I?

“Dulce et Decorum Est. Pro patria mori” with these famous lines, and indeed his poetry as a whole, Wilfred Owen joined the ranks of writers making profound contributions to the art and literature of WWI. The War inspired some of the most poignant literature of the 20th century, primarily in the form of poetry. It helped shaped our comprehensions of the realities of the “Great War” and altered the narrative within which we tell the story of war. This essay will examine how this literature was used as an expression of national identity, romanticism, the work of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and literature in Germany and France.

Literature was used during WWI to create a sense of national identity and patriotism, particularly in the early days of the war. The outbreak of war was met by a wave of enthusiasm with an expectation that it would be over by Christmas, and this was mirrored by war songs written to the music of popular dance-hall tunes. War songs such as “Send out the Army and the Navy” aided in creating a shared experience of the war, glorifying the idea of fighting for one’s country- a concept that would be heavily criticised by later writers. Governments produced propaganda posters to convince the public it was a just war, and encourage young men to sign up, building on the sense of patriotism. These efforts were designed to create a sense of national identity and a false idea of the reality of war.

This false narrative was mirrored by the romanticism present in the literature of the early days of the war. This is most heavily visible in the work of Rupert Brooke. This built upon the notion of the glory of dying for one’s country, and presented a romantic view of war. Brooke died of blood poisoning in 1915, and his death early in the war made him a symbol of patriotism. His most famous poem 1914 is still read at military funerals, and reflects the early enthusiasm and romanticism of the war “If I should die, think only this of me/That there’s some corner of a foreign field/That is forever England”. Brooke’s poems were published in 1915, and there would be a marked shift in perspective with the subsequent work of poets such as Wilfred Owen.

Initially, Owen himself shared in this romantic view of glory and patriotism, enlisting to “save the language of Shakespeare and Keats”. His earliest poems reflect this innocent view of warfare. However, following his experience of conflict, this view began to change particularly from 1916 onwards. In his poem “The Chances”, Owen addresses the horror of trench warfare in a way which had not been seen before, in stark contrast to the prior romantic poetry. He wrote of the daily experience and casual attitude to death in the vernacular “There ain’t no more nor five things as can happen”. Owen wrote in the vernacular language of the soldiers to describe the genuine reality of the trenches, bearing witness in a way that was a far cry from the works of Brooke and others. Although not poetry, his letters to his mother also aid his account of the horrors of total warfare. Writing roughly 522 letters, Owen describes the reality which he conveys through his poetry. This was a narrative not commonly seen, and a side of war not portrayed by propaganda, earning him the title “The Soldiers’ Poet”.

In January 1917, Owen was with his soldiers in a dugout under shellfire for over 50 hours when a sentry was hit and fatally wounded. In “The Sentry”, he described the trauma of this incident, once again in a vivid, harsh way that was not common in the war poetry of the era. He described the sentry going blind “Thumping/And splashing in the flood”. This image, and those throughout Owen’s work, painted a scene of trauma and death and this reality is perhaps one of his greatest contributions to the literature of World War One.

Another poet writing at this time and expressing the harsh reality of war was Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon served as an English infantry officer on the Western Front, and was awarded a Military Cross for his bravery. Sassoon’s poetry is full of cynicism, satirising the distance of military leadership from the realities of war. In poems such as “The General” and “Base Details” he deals with dark realities in a jovial manner, conveying the bitterness of many of the soldiers towards those giving the orders. In 1917, he was badly injured and decided to leave the Army to speak out against the war. He wrote to newspapers, calling the war one of “aggression and conquest”. In 1918, he published a series of bitter anti-war poems and later memoirs which enable us to better understand the reality of life on the front.

In April 1917, Sassoon and Owen met at Craiglockhart Hospital where they would influence one another’s work and make further contributions to the literature of WWI. Owen was transferred to the officers’ hospital as he was suffering from shellshock. Sassoon encouraged Owen to write about his experience, and helped him with many of the poems he wrote there. Sassoon is still visible on many of the manuscripts from the Hospital, such as suggested “Anthem for Doomed Youth” as a poem title in

place of “Anthem for Dead Youth”. It was at Craiglockhart that Owen penned his most famous poem “Dulce et Decorum Est”. This poem is often regarded as one of the most powerful poems of the war. Within its title and closing lines, Owen blatantly criticised the framing of the war as glorious and morally just. This poem profoundly challenges the notions of war, and presented an unwavering view of what soldiers truly faced. Through this, we see Owen as “The Soldiers’ Poet” once more, and see the voice which his poetry gave to those which had been silenced by the war.

In spite of his experience, as Owen recovered he decided to return to the trenches. Sassoon threatened to stab him in the leg to stop him, but Owen felt a duty to his men and also as a poet to “bear witness” to what was happening, and capture it in poetry. In 1918, he returned to the trenches. On the 4th November 1918, Owen was killed while leading an assault on the Sambre Canal in Belgium. The war ended a week later. As the bells rang out to celebrate the Armistice on the 11th November 1918, his parents received a telegram informing them of his death. He was posthumously awarded the Military Cross for bravery. His poems were published in 1920 and he is now recognised as one of the greatest and most influential war poets of WWI.

The literature of WWI is also visible through the works of Erich Remarque and Henri Barbusse. Erich Remarque, a German novelist, dealt with the sense of hopelessness experienced by German troops at the Front, in particular through his novel “All Quiet on the Western Front”. He explored the loss of innocence of young men sent to war, writing “We were eighteen and had begun to love life and the world: and we had to shoot it to pieces”. Similarly, French novelist Henri Barbusse gave a shocking and vivid account of the misery of French soldiers in “Le Feu”. The book was published in 1917, managing to escape censorship, and attacked wartime propaganda and the lack of concern for ordinary soldiers. Through both novels, we see the reality of warfare and the disillusionment of many soldiers throughout the war.

In conclusion, the literature of WWI played a central role in the experience of the war. It was often used to build a sense of patriotism and a shared experience of the war, including romantic poems such as those by Rupert Brooke. As the war went on, this narrative began to fade in the works of ordinary soldiers such as Owen and Sassoon. Both poets communicated the brutal reality of war, with Sassoon becoming an outspoken critic of the war and Owen earning the title “The Soldier’s Poet”. Bearing witness to the suffering, Owen aided in bringing reality to the literature of WWI, replacing those earlier romantic notions. Writers such as Barbusse and Remarque shared in this, communicating the lack of

hope and innocence of those fighting in the war through their novels. Through examining this literature, we can gain insights into the experience of the war, and hear their voices through time.