

# Siegfried Sassoon: The Iconoclast

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In *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, Siegfried Sassoon articulates:

You love us when we're heroes, home on leave  
Or wounded in a mentionable place.  
You worship decorations; you believe  
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace. (18)

Sassoon is a breaker of the myth of glorification of war in the truest sense. He unmasks the brutality and irony of war. War is the negation of life, peace and beauty. The concept of grand "heroism" is punctured in his poems. Sassoon's scathing, sarcastic treatment of the horror of World War I evokes pity and fear in every heart. 1914-18, the years of doom, horror, massacre. Hopelessness, futility are vividly portrayed in the collage of war poetry. Sassoon remains the father-figure of this tradition. The romantic view of war is treated with sheer disillusionment when he sums up the implication of war in "Remorse"

...O hell  
... there's things in war one dare not tell  
Poor father sitting safe at home, who reads  
Of dying heroes and their deathless deeds.(34)

Sassoon is a master painter of the hypocrisy underlying war. The warmongers send the young soldiers to the dome of death. They announce the war and the common people are there to bear the brunt. Even the religion is under the clutch of politicians during the World War I. Religious ideologies had constricted the human mind by glorifying war as a pious deed. In "They", the rebellious poet says:

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 comrade's blood has bought  
Now right to breed an honourable race. (20)

They have challenged death and dared him face to face. (Sassoon, web.)

The concept of "heroism" attained from war befooled the common people for a long time. The English mother loved to see her son as a hero. In "The Hero", the old bereaved mother after the death of her son in World War I:

... "We mothers are so proud  
Of our dead soldiers." (28)

The English wife cherished in the martyrdom of her husband's heroism. Sassoon shows that this heroism is an eyewash for the ordinary men. No stardom, martyrdom of heroism is synonymous with the price of life. Soldiers are also living human beings. They are also made of flesh and blood. They get shaken with fear in the efface of death. But everything fades under the dazzling glory of heroism. The soldiers die in the battlefield with immense pain in their heart but the advocates of war try to convince them by putting a soothing image of grand heroism before them. Sassoon's excellence lies in deflating

heroism. None wants to be a hero at the cost of his life. Everybody wants to live. Everybody wants peace. But the war beckons them with the fake concept of heroism. Sassoon excels himself when he says in "Two Hundreds Years After":

Poor silent things they were the English dead  
Who came to fight in France and got their fill. (19)

Sassoon is graphic in his presentation of the monstrosity of war in 'They':

'We are none of us the same!' The boys replied.  
For George lost both his eyes and Bill's stone blind;  
Poor Jim sought through the lungs and like to die;  
And Berte's gone syphilitic: You'll not find  
A chap who's served that hasn't find the change  
And the Bishop said, "The ways of God are strange" (20)

The Bishop tries to quell the common mind by presenting untimely death of soldiers as a predestined reality. "Wraiths" captures the still silent footsteps of war:

They are dead ... (O hear how death  
gropes on the shatter'd pane... (21)

the cheap hurry among the officers to deliver a soldier's a martyrdom at the front is articulated in "Devotion to Duty":

Send for her. I will be the first to tell  
This wife how her heroic husband. (15)

"The Death-Bed" is set in a military hospital where a young soldier is dying. The poem begins with a bitter account of how:

'drowsed and was aware of silence heaped  
Round him,' of  
Silence and safety he is borne between life and death,  
Kissed by the inward moonless ways of death . (34)

Someone offered him water but he groaned and sank to ground, somehow forgot the rapid pulsation and pain of his injuries as a result of some opiate pain killer. He recalled idyllic days of his boating on the river calm, green skylit, regaled by the notes of birds and bordered with the reflection of flowers and colours of summer. He recalled how he was all content to dip his oars, then sighed and slept. Night came to his ward with a gust of wind blowing the curtain with "a glimmering curve". But warblind as he was he fell to see the star from his deathbed though they were all twinkling their from behind the wraiths of wandering clouds". Strang spots of purple, scarlet, green only flickered and faded from his failing sight. He could hear the warm rain rustling in the dark, carrying to him the smell of drooping roses and passionless pattering music simultaneously. It was no harsh rain accompanying thunder but rain trickling peace gently and slowly to wash and cleanse life. The dying soldier then rose from bed to change the position of his body. But his pain "left like a prowling beast and gripped and tore/ his groping dreams with grinding claws and fangs." (34) Death approached him as an evil thing with a shudder, stopped and stared at him from a brief while. Sassoon hopes that the soldier may yet be saved if many lamps are lighted, people gathered round him to lend their eyes, warm blood and will to live, to speak to him and rouse him. A hater of war this young soldier can never die. The poet asks most bitterly and passionately:

How should he die  
When cruel old campaigners win safe through?

Alas! The hope is so short-  
lived! He died in the silence and safety of the summer  
Night: (34)

The irony in the uses of 'safety' needs no explanation. The picture of the deathbed is thus graphic with its telling images of the conflict between light and darkness, pain and peace, the stars twinkling and clouds wandering, the idyllic picture of boating on a sky-lit green river, pain and pleasure, the young and old to bring home to the reader the sense of the loss, of life, hatred of the brutality, the cruelty, the horror of death in the battlefield and complacency of home-staying war-mongers.

Sassoon raised anti-war poetry to a new height. He is the great myth breaker who chose not to tread on the trodden track of Rupert Brooke. Sassoon's brief lyric "Everyone Sang" celebrates the new-found freedom from fear, joy and relief of the soldiers at the end of the war. Sassoon's is getting more relevant in today's world. Sassoon's soothing songs can pacify the clashing countries and sing the deathless tune of life.

#### Works Cited:

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