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Portrayal of the World War I in British Literature in the 20th Century

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracoval samostatně a výhradně s použitím citovaných pramenů, literatury a dalších odborných zdrojů.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením práce pro studijní účely.

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Abstrakt

Záměrem této bakalářské práce je prozkoumat způsob, jakým autoři z Britských ostrovů popisují první světovou válku. Primárním cílem je zjistit, jak se její zobrazení proměnilo za více než devadesát let od jejího skončení. Za tímto účelem bude práce zkoumat dva romány napsané přímými účastníky, kteří se v britské uniformě zúčastnili bojů v zákopech západní fronty, a dva romány od autorů píšících na přelomu dvacátého a jedenadvacátého století. S využitím literárněkritických, historických i kulturologických sekundárních pramenů a za pomoci analýzy primárních textů tato práce objasňuje, jak a proč se posunul způsob zobrazování a vnímání prvního globálního konfliktu z let 1914 až 1918. Hlavní důraz je kladen především na rozdíly ve zpracování tradičních motivů válečné literatury, hrdinství, oběti a smyslu války. Tato společenskovední a v jistém smyslu interdisciplinární analýza je předmětem kapitol dvě a tři. Tématem čtvrté kapitoly je pak dílem motivace autorů ke zpracování tohoto válečného konfliktu a s ní spojený způsob, jakým válka v konkrétních literárních dílech vystupuje. Předmět závěru je zhodnocení výše uvedených rozdílů nejenom mezi jednotlivými obdobími, ale i mezi jednotlivými autory. Z práce vyplývá, že vedle rozdílů, které jsou způsobeny upevňováním určitých představ o první světové válce v posledních padesáti letech a také postmoderním diskursem, jenž oba současné autory ovlivňuje, najdeme i rozdíly mezi jednotlivými díly ze stejné doby. Je tedy zjevné, že míra propagace politických a jiných idejí není nutně závislá na období vzniku. To ovlivňuje nikoliv rozsah, jakým do románů ideje vstupují, ale její povahu.

Abstract

The main goal of this thesis is to analyse the way in which British authors describe the First World War. The primary aim is to define how its description has changed in more than ninety years since it ended. For this purpose, the thesis will analyse two novels written by direct participants who took part in the trench fighting on the Western Front in the ranks of the British Army, and two novels by the authors writing on the brink of the twentieth and the twenty first centuries. Using secondary sources from the fields of literary criticism, historical and cultural studies, along with the analysis of the primary texts, this work reveals how and why the manner of depiction and perception of the first global conflict has changed. The main focus lies on the differences between the treatment of the traditional war-literature motives; heroism, sacrifice and the meaning of the war. This interdisciplinary analysis forms chapters two and three. The topic of the fourth chapter is partly the motivation of the authors to write about the conflict and, with relation to that, the way in which the war functions in them as in works of literature. The conclusion then assesses all the above mentioned differences not only between the two periods but also between the respective authors. The thesis proves that, apart from the differences caused by certain myths and preconceptions about the First World Wars becoming stronger in the last fifty years and the post-modern discourse, there are also differences between the novels from the same period. It is therefore obvious that the space which the authors used to express particular ideology is not determined by the period in which they wrote. The period influences not to what extent the ideology is present in the novels, but what ideology it actually is.

Table of Contents

<u>1. Introduction</u>	7
<u>2. Falstaff or Hotspur, heroism and naivety, naivety and innocence</u>	14
<u>3. War Aims, worth killing for, worth dying for</u>	24
<u>4. Literary War, the war as a topic</u>	34
<u>5. Conclusion</u>	45
<u>6. Works Cited</u>	50

1. Introduction

War has always been a subject of literary representation whether it was prose or poetry. Its literary image has evolved and changed over time; from heroic epics through works that acknowledged the horrors but accented the value of self sacrifice to the despicable and mocking portrayal of war as that of modernist and post modern literature. It is a fact that the war which for many symbolises this shift is the First World War. This conflict epitomizes for many the futile, bloody and unnecessary war. This should not come as a surprise when we consider the immensity of the conflict, the amount of lost lives and the number of people personally affected by it. Dan Todman claims in his book: ‘The war saw a scale of loss that was unprecedented for Britain, and which has never been repeated. The terrible cost of the war underpins many of our other received beliefs about it: the incompetence of the generals [...]; the purposelessness of any war with such a butcher’s bill; and the miraculous veneration of any veteran who managed to survive the carnage.’¹

As it was mentioned above, the perception of war and its literary depiction is no set and unchanging scheme. War in literature has aspects of both glory and sickness that we can trace as back as to Shakespeare. Bernard Bergonzi describes the ambivalent approaches on the two opposite characters from one of Shakespeare’s plays: ‘In *Henry IV*, Part I, he invents two characters who stand for opposing attitudes to war [...]. Hotspur exemplifies the moral virtues of heroism and the single-minded pursuit of honour [...]. Falstaff embodies the biological virtue of cowardice: he combines the blind impulse to survive of a low writhing organism with the human

¹ Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2005) 44.

burden of consciousness and a far more vivid imagination than Hotspur's.² It is, therefore, possible to say that the question of war was much less straightforward even before the mechanized slaughter in the trenches of the First World War. However, it was not until the twentieth century with two world wars when Falstaff's attitude became predominant. The purpose of this thesis is not to trace the small and subtle changes that occurred during the centuries between *Henry IV* and the Great War, for it is obvious that the qualitative changes in the perception of war had happened even before the modern trench warfare took place. The argument is that it was the war and its sufferings that convinced the audience to move from Hotspur to Falstaff in large numbers; it did not bring about a completely new point of view, it rather gave the old one a new credibility.

The war itself has simply changed the perception of war as such. The predominant understanding of the conflict is today that of death, blood and mud and this is for the great part due to the influence of the literature about the war. Niall Ferguson, who sees the war as utterly unnecessary and hardly defends it of the sheer enthusiasm, maintains in the introduction to his aptly named book, *The Pity of War 1914-1918*, that: 'The persistence of the idea that the war was 'a bad thing' owes much to the genre known as 'war poetry' (usually meaning 'anti-war'), which became firmly established in the British school curriculums in the 1970s.'³ Literature of the war written by its direct participants, whether it is prose or poetry, is one of the main sources of our today's understanding of the war. Moreover, it is arguably one of the most influential sources.

Immediately after the war the number of direct participants who tried to share their experience from the trenches was so large that it necessarily had to produce

² Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996) 9.

³ Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: 1914 – 1918* (London: Penguin Books, 1999) xxvi.

different outcomes both in attitudes and literary quality. Paul Fussell even called the war ‘a literary war’ and used that as a name of one chapter of his book.⁴ Dan Todman illustrates this issue of different approaches saying: ‘The involvement [...] produced a wide range of responses that differed hugely in a content, approach and form. The shock of war inspired or forced some writers to choose new means of expression, abandoning previous structures and beliefs. Others reacted by falling back on what they knew well, producing texts [...] which emphasised familiar versions of war as an occasion of heroism, love of country and self-sacrifice.’⁵ This great divergence in the means writers used to describe the war is often forgotten and the image of the war today is far more unanimous. The works that became a part of the literary canon were predominantly critical towards the conflict, whereas those favouring patriotism are nowadays largely unknown.

The today’s myth of the Great War was created by only a few authors who wrote mostly according to the principles of the modernist movement. That influenced the motives and topics they tried to depict and the way they depicted them. The First World War and modernism are therefore inevitably connected and it could be said that the modernist expression affected the way we tend to perceive the war as much as the war affected modernist writing and thinking. Without analysing this relationship, any attempt to describe the literary depiction of the conflict would be incomplete. Modernists changed the British literature profoundly even before the Great War, but it was only after it that modernism became a dominant literary movement. By far the most important innovation of this movement and the one that was aptly and firmly affirmed in the fighting was their notion of the hero: a modernist hero whose actions

⁴ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977) x.

⁵ Todman 154.

and characteristics are so unimportant that he is no hero in the traditional meaning at all. It is hard to imagine a better setting to prove it or the situation where it would be more apparent than the war of attrition that took place in Flanders.

In the regiments counting thousands and armies counting millions, one soldier and his actions could not possibly have lesser impact. No heroic act of any soldier could bring the war to an end and what is more important the realities of the attrition warfare made even officers and generals less significant than ever before. According to Niall Ferguson, 'the largely amateur British army [...] was characterized by excessive rigidity in its command [...]. By contrast, the Germans throughout the war encouraged their men to take initiative on the battlefield [...].'⁶ This example could be applied at all levels of command; the German command was simply better than the British. Yet, despite this and despite a greater loss of lives on the Allied side, the Allies won. It is not to say that the writers did not reflect soldiers' heroism or even that the soldiers were not brave. Their bravery, however, faded into insignificance compared to the immensity of the conflict. The economic output, weapons production and net body count were far more important than tactics, dash and courage. In this environment, it is far easier to side with Falstaff than with Hotspur. The war became a factory where men became raw materials and death, not a victory, was a final product. The war itself was a product, a product of a modern society.

Writers were obviously influenced by the discourse at the time when they were writing. Still, there is no unanimous voice of the soldier-writers and the accounts of their experiences vary greatly, as it has been explained above. Even though there is no typical depiction of the conflict as far as the literary styles are concerned, it can

⁶ Ferguson 310.

roughly be divided into a traditional and a modern approach. That is with acknowledging that each book is placed individually on the scale between the two extremities. Many of those literary works did not prove to be good enough to survive to the present, even though they enjoyed great popularity immediately after the war's end. Many of those forgotten works would fall into the category of the traditional approach. Without denying that such literary works existed, this paper shall focus on two authors more modern in their approach. Since, as it has been said, the aspect of both traditional and modern can be found in most of the novels about the war written by soldiers, the novels should provide a sufficient sample to observe both tendencies.

However, the war was not a subject of literary depiction just immediately after the Armistice in 1918. On the contrary, the last twenty five years have seen a large influx of war novels written by people who not only could not remember the conflict, but they also never experienced any war first-hand. Their voice is far more unanimous and their attitudes necessarily show the influence of the discourse of the late twentieth century; heritage of another devastating global conflict, nuclear scare, war of decolonization and so forth. The influence of events and experiences which came later in the twentieth century is so large that it is possible to say that the authors today write more about war in general than about the Great War in particular. They choose the First World War because it has become an easily understandable symbol of futility and horror. As Niall Ferguson claims: 'The image of a bad, futile war is endlessly replicated.'⁷ Since this is a prevailing point of view nowadays, the stories from the war can serve to illustrate the futility of any war.

⁷ Ferguson xxxii – xxxiii.

The four books selected for the analysis in this thesis are: *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, *Death of a Hero*, *Regeneration*, and *A Long Long Way*. The first two were written by direct participants of the conflict; Siegfried Sassoon and Richard Aldington respectively. Bernard Bergonzi recognised two main prosaic genres of the immediate post-war period: avowed autobiography and fiction.⁸ Sassoon's trilogy, Bergonzi claims, 'fall[s] rather unhappily between the separate form of strict autobiography and the autobiographical novel.'⁹ Still, it is obviously an autobiographical novel. Aldington's novel, then, is categorized as fiction. The two books are examples of those two categories. The other two books were written around the turn of the twentieth and twenty first century. They are a part of a strong renaissance of the First World War literature in Britain. The most important criterion was their literary significance, since the traditional concept of heroism seems to have disappeared, or thoroughly changed in all books about the war published in the last twenty-five years.

There are three main areas of interest to be explored in this paper. Firstly, it is the heroic ideal. The question is, in what way the heroism of the soldiers and officers is depicted, what is their motivation and how the authors' descriptions adhere to the traditional image of a hero, and to what extent they prefer the biological self-preservation. Secondly, it is the war aims, or their significance for the characters and their assessment of the war. If the authors say that the war is futile, unnecessary or even a crime, they have to support their stands. The difference is on what grounds they and their characters condemn the war. Thirdly, there is the question of what had led the authors to depict the war in their novels. Sassoon and Aldington were both primarily poets, so the obvious interest is what there is in the novels they could not

⁸ Bergonzi 163.

⁹ Bergonzi 150.

have expressed in their poems. With modern authors, the question is much simpler: what led them to revisit the Great War? Generally, there is a different aesthetics in the novels of soldier-writers; they still have to argue about the sense of the war, even if they do consider it to be pointless. On the other hand, it is hard for them to discern heroism completely and not to depict it in the more traditional sense. Their motivation for writing is also different and as opposed to the modern writers, they are more focused on the particular conflict, trying to find some justification for the losses and suffering they had to endure. On the other hand, Barker and Barry are more readily prepared to refuse the war as justifiable by any means.

2. Falstaff or Hotspur, heroism and naivety, naivety and innocence

The question of heroism and its depiction in the novels is one of the most important and most interesting issues. To this day, the image of the British soldiers of the Great War has remained that of German General Ludendorff; they are ‘Lions led by Donkeys’¹⁰. Since this phrase does not diminish or deny the soldiers’ heroism in the traditional sense, while it partly acknowledges the futility of their sacrifice, it would seem a perfect middle ground. Neither Sassoon nor Aldington restrained from the criticism of the higher command and they both question the war aims themselves. By the same token, neither Barker nor Barry denied the soldiers in the line duty, fighting in the trenches, their bravery. There are, however, small variations and generally Barker and Barry tend to accommodate the biological self preservation more than the soldier-writers. They do not avoid describing heroic acts, but they are not as much impressed. It is as if the senselessness of the young men’s sacrifice casted a shadow on those who are sacrificing themselves. The sacrifice and heroism in Sassoon and Aldington is, when described as a wilful act and not a random slaughter, a conscious decision defying but not forgetting the danger. Barker and Barry accent the naivety or sometimes the outright stupidity that lies behind those courageous acts.

It is impossible to accuse Sassoon or Aldington of supporting the war. Nevertheless, the question of their adhering to the traditional heroic imagery is a completely different issue. Describing a scene where George, the main character of *Death of a Hero*, sees the experienced veterans, Bernard Bergonzi claims: ‘Aldington recognizes, in almost traditionally romantic terms, the heroic stature of the soldiers.’¹¹ Winterbourne feels the admiration for the traditional masculine hero figures on more

¹⁰ Princess Evelyn Blücher, *An English Wife in Berlin* (London: Constable, 1921) 211.

¹¹ Bergonzi 175.

occasions. It is even more striking when we realize that he despised the very same ideals of manliness before the war and during his education. The Edwardian and Victorian ideal of man is described with an open contempt through the attempts to force it upon him at school and by his mother. The final goal of public-school education is described through the words of the school headmaster: “The type of boy we aim at turning out,” the Head used to say to impressed parents, “is a thoroughly manly fellow.”¹² George’s attitude towards this is wholly negative: “[...] he somehow didn’t want to learn to kill and be a thoroughly manly fellow. Also, he resented being ordered about. Why should one be ordered about by thoroughly manly fellows whom one hates and despises?”¹³ His view on manliness and refusal to succumb to the social convention and expectations of a manly behaviour determines also his outlook on heroism. The hypocritical and perverse joy the Victorian ascribed to an unselfish sacrifice is again embodied by the Head who addresses the boys: “Within ten years one half of you boys will be DEAD!” [...] But did he know, that blind prophet? Was he inspired, that stately hypocrite? [...] How he must have enjoyed composing that inscription to those “who went forth unfalteringly and proudly laid their lives for King and Country”!’¹⁴

It is clear that the ideal of heroism, manliness and sacrifice is mocked in the first part of the book which describes George’s education. In the second and the third parts his attitude changes and he not only comes to admire the masculine world, but becomes a part of it. There are two different points of view on his change in the book. The first is expressed by Fanny and Elizabeth, his lovers, who agree that: ‘George had degenerated terribly since joining the army, and there was no knowing to what

¹² Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930) 82.

¹³ Aldington 83.

¹⁴ Aldington 78-79.

preposterous depths of Tommydom he might fall.’¹⁵ Winterbourne himself feels his mental faculties to deteriorate; he acknowledges that and loathes that. However, he feels to be the part of that manly endeavour and his view on manhood completely changes. When he thinks of his fellow soldiers, he recognises both the absurdity and horror they have to go through and their gallantry:

They had every excuse for turning into brutes, and they hadn’t done it. True, they were degenerating in certain ways, they were getting coarse and rough and a bit animal, but with amazing simplicity and unpretentiousness they had retained and developed a certain essential humanity and manhood. With them, then, to the end, because of their manhood and humanity. With them, too, because that manhood and humanity existed in spite of the War and not because of it.¹⁶

It is rather significant that humanity is put in the connection with manhood. Since such a large part of being a man is being brave, bravery and humanity works here together. Their heroism is not caused by their ignorance, because ‘the real soldiers, [...], had no more delusions about the war than he had.’¹⁷ In other words, their persistence and bravery, their manhood, is not to be confused with naivety. Their humanity is not caused by the Victorian ideals forced upon them and by the war enthusiasm and warmongering.

¹⁵ Aldington 260.

¹⁶ Aldington 294.

¹⁷ Aldington 292.

The perfect example of naivety combined with obtuseness of heroic deeds in the contemporary writings is the scene from *A Long, Long Way* where Captain Pasley refuses to leave his position and run away from a gas attack. Pasley, described as a gallant officer, perfectly symbolises the inadequacy of the old methods and values in dealing with the modern threat of gas. He remains surprisingly calm, but his calmness and courage only leads to his demise. He is the first to realize the danger: “It’s the smoke,” said Captain Pasley, “there’s something wrong with the smoke, gents.”¹⁸ However, in the conversation with Christy Moran he clearly adheres to the military code of the past, too rigid and obtuse to adapt: “I need to ring the headquarters and ask them what to do. What is this hellish thing?” “No time for that, sir,” said the sergeant-major. “Can I let the men fall back, sir?” “I have no earthly orders for such a thing,” said Captain Pasley. “We are to hold this position. That’s all there is to it.”¹⁹ His men fall back in the end and he stays, which inevitably leads to his death. His stubborn refusal to acknowledge the futility of defending his trench and retreat without proper orders is rendered silly by the modern weapon of gas. If there were thousands of Germans swarming on his position and he would stay there fighting knowing that he would die, it would be heroic in the traditional meaning. He would sacrifice himself to slower their advance or at least to make them pay the price for it. The nature of the gas and its use in combat accents the futility of his sacrifice and naivety and folly of his decision. His act is undeniably courageous, but it is the epitome of pointlessness, nonetheless. Pasley is a naive caricature of Evans; Willie Dunne is a naive caricature of George Winterbourne.

¹⁸ Sebastian Barry, *A Long Long Way* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006) 45.

¹⁹ Barry 46.

Christy Moran, who disobeys Pasley's instruction and orders the men to leave the position, represents the sober-mindedness in this scene. At first, he is also unable to imagine the destructiveness of the gas. His first reaction is to open fire at the cloud fearing that it could be used to hide advancing infantrymen. When he realizes the sinister character of the new weapon after having seen it killing more advanced units, he immediately recognizes the futility of any defence and effectively saves all the other men from being gassed. Soldiers and NCO's represented by Moran chose their survival, while Pasley and other officers stubbornly refuse to leave the ground to the enemy. The officers' ignorance of the situation is described as follows: 'There were officers now along the road trying in a bewildered and puzzled fashion to get the men to turn around. They did not know what was happening and all they saw was men that seemed to be deserting wholesale.'²⁰ The futility of repelling the gas attack in this scene and the decision to flee driven by the natural impulse of survival could be applied to the war itself. Here, the gas represents the impersonal, relentless and overwhelming force consuming men in their hundreds and thousands. It is a force that once released is absolutely out of man's control. That point of view was not uncommon; Niall Ferguson argues the following: 'Indeed, the view most frequently expressed by British politicians was that the war had been the result of such vast historical forces that no human agency could have prevented it.'²¹ That was the idea of those who had the power to stop it. Those who had to fight it developed a myth based on a similar view of the war as a self-perpetuating force. As Ferguson claims: 'Many soldiers came to half-believe that the war would never end.'²² This immensity of the force of war and impossibility to stop it leads Barry to one conclusion. If you believe

²⁰ Barry 48.

²¹ Ferguson xxxvi.

²² Ferguson 365.

that the war cannot be won, what is the point of being brave? Heroism in this situation seems as a mere folly; heroism in this war is a folly.

Siegfried Sassoon did not avoid the horrors, naivety and to some extent foolhardiness of his service in France. However, his concise and almost reporter-like style of describing the combat is rather different. The most important fact is that he actually describes his satisfaction from some of his actions while being completely blunt about the absurdity and horror of the situation. Bernard Bergonzi describes this ambiguity as follows: 'Instead of the bitterness of the poems, the prose accounts are gently reflective and curiously undramatic.'²³ When he describes his partaking in the notorious Battle of Somme, Sassoon goes: 'I was cutting the wire by daylight because commonsense warned me that the lives of several hundred soldiers might depend on it being done properly. I was excited and pleased with myself [...]. And I had entirely forgotten that to-morrow Six Army Corps would attack, and [...] a tragic slaughter was inevitable.'²⁴ Operating in No Man's Land during the day is no doubt a courageous act to say the least and the fact that he and his two comrades did that not because they were ordered, but on their own volition invigorates the sense of heroism. Still, his rationale for doing so and his awareness of the carnage independent of his action put the whole episode in a different perspective. He does not justify the danger he is undertaking by some higher purpose: King, Country and victory. It is his concern for the lives of his fellow soldiers which makes him risk his own. Even when his motivation is much more violent and he is in a bloodthirsty frenzy, his motives seem much more personal. A good example is the scene in which one of his soldiers is killed: 'But after blank awareness that he was killed, all feelings tightened and

²³ Bergonzi 152.

²⁴ Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (London: Charles Whittingham and Griggs, 2010) 71.

contracted to a single intention – to “settle that sniper” on the other side of the valley.’²⁵ It is revenge that drives him to single-handedly attack the German trench, an act of the highest degree of courage and carelessness.

Sassoon is, nevertheless, much more critical towards the concept of the unshakeable, manly resolve even when speaking through Sherston who is according to Bergonzi ‘somewhat less sophisticated figure than his creator.’²⁶ Sherston’s courage often springs from the recklessness and sense of adventure, but he is aware of the nature of his bravery. Furthermore, he is aware of the hypocritical aspect of celebrating it. From the moment when he realizes and acknowledges the humanity of the enemy, he starts to see the flaws and limitations of courage. Recollecting his fighting on the Somme he says: ‘My courage was of the cock-fighting kind. Cock-fighting is illegal in England, but in July 1916 the man who could boast that he’d killed a German in the Battle of Somme would have been patted on the back by a bishop in a hospital ward.’²⁷ In this sentence, the war is described as some kind of macabre show where soldiers fight for the amusement and applause of the audience. By comparing himself and by extension all soldiers to fighting animals and by identifying the audience as a religious figure, Sassoon manages to describe both the nature of courage and the depth of the treachery of those abusing it. Courage is neither a virtue as described by Aldington, nor a folly as described by Barry; it is a mere animalistic instinct. The religion of Jesus Christ, who preached to love one’s fellow men as one loves oneself, paradoxically encourages and praises the acts of unutterable violence against human beings. Soldiers are reduced to animals and their pure fear and agony resulting in courage is abused in the name of the betrayed ideal.

²⁵ Sassoon 90-91.

²⁶ Bergonzi 150.

²⁷ Sassoon 94.

As for the classical image of the hero, however, Sassoon never mocks it completely and directly. He acknowledges the variety of responses to the combat and recognizes the animalistic nature of men's courage while still being able to admire that stoic bravery of the front-line soldiers. Their bravery is, in his eyes, undiminished by the futility of their deaths. On the contrary, Sherston states: 'Such men had inspired me to be at my best when things were very bad, and they outweighed all the failures. Against the background of the War and its brutal stupidity those men had stood glorified by the thing which sought to destroy them...'²⁸ This is very similar to what we can see in *Death of A Hero* where Aldington praises the bravery of front-line soldiers. The traditional heroism is not dead; it is being massacred in an immense conflict for a doubtful cause, but it is the stronger for it. This is in a stark contrast with the outspoken mockery in *Regeneration*. In a conversation with Rivers, Billy Prior says: 'Do you know, for the first time I realized that somewhere at the back of their ... *tiny tiny* minds they really do believe the whole thing's going to end in one big glorious *cavalry charge*.'²⁹ Prior carries on quoting Tennyson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and describes it with the word rubbish³⁰. This is just one of the differences in the heroic aesthetics of Pat Barker, but it can be said that it represents her point of view.

Barker took a different approach than Barry, but she also puts the words hero and courage in different perspective. First of all, her novel *Regeneration* takes place in the war mental hospital in Craiglockhart where the officers suffering from shell-shock were being treated. Paul Fussell, in an argument on how the war changed the literary depiction of a war, lists the phrase that had been used before the Great War and it

²⁸ Sassoon 259.

²⁹ Pat Barker, *Regeneration* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993) 66.

³⁰ Barker 66.

clearly reads that: ‘Not to complain [is] manly.’³¹ The old image of a hero, of a man, would be that of an uncompromising, noble officer with unshakeable resolve. Those who failed to keep this resolve and courage under fire do not fit the image of a hero. It is true that this kind of failure seem to be more acceptable with officers rather than in the ordinary ranks. As Elaine Showalter explains: ‘In sum, the hysterical soldier was seen as simple, emotional, unthinking, passive, suggestible, dependent, and weak - [...] - while complex and overworked neurasthenic officer was much closer to an acceptable, even heroic male ideal.’³² The fact that it was much more acceptable does not, however mean that it was to be accepted as an example. The ideal still was the men who did not complain and faced the unspeakable with almost superhuman courage. Aldington and Sassoon praise their stoicism despite the fact that they loathe the reasons for which they are being sent into the battle. The fact that they are all too painfully aware of the senselessness made their bravery even more striking. That Barker chose the setting of a place where defective heroes, shell-shocked officers, congregate would be unthinkable for the traditional heroism. In the traditional point of view, those men could be to some extent pardoned for their failure, but they could not become central characters.

Another important aspect is how Barker even uses the word courage. Firstly, she uses the word to describe Sassoon’s ‘act of a wilful defiance’ and partly propagating other pacifist views. The fictional Robert Graves says: “You know, I used to admire them [Russell and Morrell]. I used to think, well, I don’t agree with you, but, on the other hand, I can see it takes *courage* ...”³³ He admits, that he does not feel that way anymore, but even the fact that he did is significant. Courage can mean not to be brave

³¹ Fussell 22.

³² Elaine Showalter, *Female Malady* (London: Penguin Books, 1987) 175.

³³ Barker 23.

fighting the war; it is rather speaking against it. The same happens towards the end of the book in a discussion between Sassoon and Graves. When Graves accuses Sassoon of being obsessed, he replies: “The point is 102,000 [casualties] last month *alone*. You’re right, I am obsessed. I never forget it for a second, *and neither should you*. Robert, if you had any real courage you wouldn’t acquiesce the way you do.”³⁴ The roles are completely reversed. Sassoon who refuses to fight any longer accuses Graves who sticks to his military duty of cowardice. That means a hero is no longer someone who fulfils his duty to his king and country, who gallantly sacrifices his own life for a greater cause; a hero is someone willing to speak for himself and for his fellow soldiers, someone able to raise his voice against the slaughter and for the humanity.

Despite this subversion of the meaning of heroism, there is a motive that connects both the early accounts and the contemporary descriptions of the war. No matter how they chose to describe the courage the authors of all four novels see the young men’s sacrifice to have been in vain. Sherston sees ‘how blindly War destroys its victims.’³⁵ Winterbourne, meditating on the reasons and meaning of the war, comes to a fairly clear conclusion: ‘It doesn’t matter whether murder is individual or collective, whether committed on behalf of one man or a gang or a state. It’s murder.’³⁶ Barry and Barker denounce the very ideal of heroism on the grounds of their feeling that the war is unjust. It seems that the motive of ‘the evil war’³⁷, as Ferguson calls the idea, is all encompassing.

³⁴ Barker 198.

³⁵ Sassoon 96.

³⁶ Aldington 280.

³⁷ Ferguson xxvi.

3. War Aims, Worth Killing For, Worth Dying For

Few people today would be able to specify for which reasons the United Kingdom entered the war. On the Victory Medal the inscription says ‘The Great War for Civilization 1914-1918’³⁸, which is not a very specific war aim. It is little wonder, therefore, that the meaning of the war differed greatly and it could be even said that it had a multitude of meanings which depended on ethnicity, social status, age, gender and last but not least, political beliefs. Historian Janet Watson goes as far as saying that ‘many active participants were in fact “fighting different wars”.’³⁹ It is not necessary to describe all of those various personal meanings, even though it is significant to see to what extent the authors describe the reasons for the war and the motivation of the soldiers as a thing of some commonly stated war aim or a personal issue. The most important aspect in this chapter, however, is to what extent the war aims and their legitimacy influence the assessment of the war in the four novels in question. Dan Todman claims the following: ‘When we call the First World War “futile”, we are making a judgement, [...], of costs and results.’⁴⁰ As it has been mentioned in the previous chapter, all of the four writers detested the war; the results of their analyses are the same. Yet, it is important to evaluate the reasons that led them to this conclusion, for the modern authors tend to automatically assume that the results are nought, or they are not a part of their equation at all.

For the two authors who fought the war and their characters, the reasons for the war are very prominent. Even though both of them do not approve of the stated aims, they still use them to discredit the conflict and its purpose. In their point of view, the

³⁸ Ferguson xxi.

³⁹ Jane Watson, *Fighting Different Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 3.

⁴⁰ Todman 121.

reasons that led to the war or the accomplishments of victory are the main cause of the war being futile. Aldington takes the more radical and in a way more simplistic standpoint; the war was a crime right from the start. Bergonzi described *Death of a Hero* as follows: ‘It is a wilfully formless book, which Aldington unashamedly used as a vehicle for his own lengthy first-person reflections of life and ideas. Indeed, a sizeable portion of the novel is taken up by these interpolated essays.’⁴¹ The last pages of the second part of the book exactly fit Bergonzi’s description; it is practically the author’s deliberation on the meaning of the war. The narrator abhors the war in general, but it seems that it is the hypocrisy of what he calls ‘the Victorian Cant’⁴². The war seems to him to be an inevitable end of the Victorian period and a result of its set of values. He says: ‘On our coming of age the Victorians generously handed us a charming little cheque for fifty quineas – fifty-one months of hell, and the results. [...] But it wasn’t their fault? [...] It was Prussia, and Prussian militarism. [...] Who backed Prussia against Austria, and Bismarck against Napoleon III? England. And whose Cant governed England in the nineteenth century? But never mind this domestic squabble of mine – put it that I mean the “Victorians” of all nations.’⁴³ To the narrator, the war is produced by a society and social organization he openly deplores and he is therefore in no position to support the war.

The same applies to Winterbourne’s attitude, which the narrator describes in the same part of the book. He says: ‘You must remember that he did not believe in the alleged causes for which the War was fought. He looked upon the War as a ghastly calamity, or a more ghastly crime.’⁴⁴ The sense of the war being a kind of a natural

⁴¹ Bergonzi 173.

⁴² Aldington 253.

⁴³ Aldington 253.

⁴⁴ Aldington 255.

calamity was, as it was mentioned in the previous chapter, quite common. Winterbourne himself appears to be unable to decide whether it is true or a deception of those who are in fact responsible for it. Accepting that, it is impossible to view the conflict in any favourable terms. It is either a calamity imposed upon the humankind by the forces that are beyond its control or a conscious act of a small group of persons fully aware of the bloodshed they cause. If the former is true, the fighting is utterly futile; if the latter is true, the war is an act of villainy. Historian Niall Ferguson argues the following: ‘It [the war] was something worse than a tragedy, which is something [...] ultimately unavoidable. It was nothing less than the greatest error of modern history.’⁴⁵ Aldington allows this point of view for a moment, but then he disregards it on the basis of the hypocritical decision to fight the war to the complete victory. The narrator expresses his accusation through rhetorical questions, one of which goes: ‘Did they appeal to us honestly, and say: “We have made a colossal and tragic error, we have involved you and all of us in a huge war; it’s too late to stop it; you must come and help us, and we promise to take the first opportunity of making peace and making it thoroughly”?’ They did not.’⁴⁶ In Aldington’s point of view, even if the war was an error in the beginning, it has become a crime by virtue of a lack of effort to stop it. The fact that Winterbourne opposed the war from the beginning is only logical.

Sherston, on the other hand, volunteered for the army at the very beginning of the conflict⁴⁷ and gradually comes to a conclusion that the war is unjust, as it is stated in his *Soldier’s Manifest*. He does not think about the war aims much in the major part of the book before his second convalescence. Bergonzi assumes the following: ‘Sherston

⁴⁵ Ferguson 462.

⁴⁶ Aldington 254.

⁴⁷ That is actually described in the first part of the trilogy, *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man*

has been given a remarkably simple consciousness.⁴⁸ Which is something that even Sherston himself reveals toward the end of the book when he admits: ‘It seemed as if, until to-day, I had been viewing the War through the loop-hole in a trench parapet.’⁴⁹ His limited point of view results in a limited subject of his judgement. It is still possible to see the evolution of his opinion, though. Watson argues: ‘Sassoon’s personal writings also illustrate changing attitudes toward the enemy.’⁵⁰ Recalling his early fighting days, Sherston describes ‘the queer feeling I used to have when I stared across No Man’s Land, ignorant of the humanity which was on the other side.’⁵¹ When describing a dead German soldier later in the same chapter, he says: ‘It disheartened me to see him, though his body had now lost all touch with life and was part of the wastage of the war.’⁵² A similar change could be observed in his attitude toward the conduct of the war. At the beginning of the book, he is, despite the horrors of the fighting and the blunders of his superiors, apologetic about the idiocy and senselessness of the orders.

It is particularly his description of one incident of the Battle of Somme, when his company and Royal Irish were sent to dig a trench in a supposedly unoccupied Mametz Wood resulting in dozens of casualties. Sherston says: ‘It was obvious now that a few strong patrols could have clarified the situation more economically than 1,000 men with picks and shovels. [...] But this sort of warfare was a new experience for all of us, and the difficulties of extempore organization must have been considerable.’⁵³ He clearly realises the mistake that Brass made by simply assuming

⁴⁸ Bergonzi 153.

⁴⁹ Sassoon 278.

⁵⁰ Watson 233.

⁵¹ Sassoon 82.

⁵² Sassoon 94.

⁵³ Sassoon 83.

without proper intelligence information, yet he does not condemn them. Throughout the book he becomes much more critical toward this kind of costly mistakes and he stops even considering them mistakes. At the end of the book, describing a conversation with Markington, he says: ‘I told him that our Second Battalion had been almost wiped out ten days ago, because the Divisional General had ordered an impossible attack on a local objective.’⁵⁴ The impression is that the General knew that the attack was doomed, and even if it had succeeded, the objective was not worth losses. It is no longer a mistake of judgement; it is callousness.

The condemnation of a senseless slaughter is only partly the reason for Sherston’s contempt for the war. He tries to find some justification for the whole affair and assign the deaths of his friends some meaning. Bearing witness to the suffering and death alone would not suffice. The feeling that those men were sacrificed for a selfish and acquisitive, as he calls it⁵⁵, cause is what makes him write and publish the declaration. When he speaks to Markington, he expresses that very clearly saying: “What I feel now is that if it’s got to go on there ought to be a jolly sound reason for it, and I can’t help thinking that the troops are being done in the eye by the people in control.”⁵⁶ It is this abuse of which he is reassured by Markington what forces him to write the declaration. The war is for Sherston undoubtedly horrible and inhumane in its nature, but it is the fact that it is unnecessary what makes it unbearable and intolerable. Watson argues that Sassoon wanted ‘to make a point [...] about how Britain had changed during the war (and not for the better in Sassoon’s eyes).’⁵⁷ His gradual change of attitudes and views on the war therefore has a dual function; Sherston is

⁵⁴ Sassoon 276.

⁵⁵ Sassoon 279.

⁵⁶ Sassoon 277.

⁵⁷ Watson 233.

being able to see more clearly the faults of his country, which in turn embody more and more vices. As opposed to Winterbourne, Sherston does not condemn the English Victorian society to begin with. Neither does he refuse to fight solely on the ground of the heavy losses.

Barker describing Sassoon's treatment in Craiglockhart takes the some features of his anti-war agenda, which he expressed through Sherston. However, the attitude expressed by Sassoon, Owen, Graves and Rivers is of a different quality. In her acceptance speech for Booker Prize, Barker said: "In my work, of course, I constantly pose that question [whether the war was just]."⁵⁸ It is true that the major part of the book consists of the dialogues about this topic whether it is between Rivers and Sassoon, Rivers and Prior or Sassoon and Graves. In such conversation, Rivers is the one upholding the official justification of the war and the traditional sense of duty. During a staff dinner, he exchanges an argument with Brock in which he is absolutely clear about his motive. Brock starts the discussion saying: "I mean simply by being here he's discredited. [...] I'd've thought there was a case for letting him be." "No, there's no case," Rivers said. "He's a mentally and physically healthy man. It's his duty to go back, and it's my duty to see he does."⁵⁹ It is not only a sense of duty, Rivers believes strongly that the war was caused by the Germans and that one way or the other it has to be dealt with. In his thoughts, he paints a picture of what the result of a premature termination of the conflict will be when he tries to convince himself that his support for the war is not driven by selfish motives. ' And yet if Rivers had allowed such motives to dominate, he'd have wanted the war to end tonight. Let the

⁵⁸ Todman 175.

⁵⁹ Barker 73.

next generation cope with the unresolved problem of German militarism, [...]’⁶⁰ He is convinced that the war is necessary and he is content with the role he has to play in it. Nevertheless, in the end it is Rivers who expresses the anti-war point of the whole book most poignantly.

His position towards the end of the book as well as the reasons for changing his opinions on the conflict is characteristic of the novel’s impression. After seeing closely the suffering of David Burns, another young patient, Rivers thinks to himself: ‘Nothing justifies this. Nothing nothing nothing.’⁶¹ Firstly, this thought coming from Rivers completely discredits his former views and opinions, thus making all his previous arguments and apologies of war irrelevant. Secondly, it is a completely different idea than that of both Sherston and Winterbourne who, as we have seen, believe that the particular objectives for which the war is fought are not worth the sacrifices. Rivers completely abandons his former standpoint and on the basis of the unbearable cost discredits any potential result that the war might bring. The reason why he does so is the horror he has seen. Literary critic Karen Patrick Knutsen claims the following: ‘He himself [Rivers] gradually realizes that he is exhibiting some of the symptoms of shell shock; as a secondary witness, he has been shell-shocked by the stories of his own patients.’⁶² Rivers re-lives the horrors of the officers through their narration, thus the reader is required to re-live those horrors with him.

Rivers works as a device to show how the constant exposure to the horrors of the war through the narration of his patients works to change his opinion towards it. Even though he has not changed his position regarding the war aims, or at least he does not

⁶⁰ Barker 44-45.

⁶¹ Barker 180.

⁶² Karen Patrick Knutsen, *Reciprocal Haunting* (Karlstad: Karlstad University Studies, 2008) 69.

say directly that he has, he condemns the war on the basis of the sheer extremity of the horrors he has witnessed. His reasons are exactly the same as Sassoon's reasons for writing the declaration, which he explains to Rivers. Being asked if he is a pacifist Sassoon replies: "I don't think so. I can't possibly say 'No war is ever justified', because I haven't thought about it enough. Perhaps some wars are. Perhaps this one was when it started. I just don't think our war aims – whatever they may be – and we don't know – justify this level of slaughter."⁶³ The number of dead and the scale of waste that the war brought can be in his eyes justified by no possible aims, no possible result, and no possible price for victory. It is the same position that Rivers adopts towards the end of the book, but it is expressed right at the beginning. At that moment Rivers, and the reader, has yet to go through the same horror through which Sassoon has already gone. The level of suffering and slaughter is to Barker more important than the legitimacy of the war aims.

To describe the war aims and their significance in the story is the most difficult with Barry's novel, because the book is not only about the war and the soldiers fighting it. More specifically it is about the Irish soldiers fighting the war. The infusion of other and often contrasting aims, which are not directly linked to the war, makes the analysis challenging. One possible approach is to limit the broad range by examining only the motives of the central character, Willie Dunne. The other is to accept the complex range of particular motives which led particular men to join the colours. This approach would mean to work with the concept of different wars of Janet Watson. All the characters in Barry's novel have different reasons for joining and they are all described in the book. Willie Dunne represents the naive and blind faith in the official justification of the war; he believes that he is fighting for Belgian independence. His

⁶³ Barker 13.

friend, Joe Kielty, joined up because a young girl gave him white feathers, a symbol of cowardice routinely used in a recruiting campaign for the British Army. Jesse Kirwan joined the colours because he believed he was fighting for Ireland and Home Rule and the same faith was shared by Father Buckley. However, it is Christy Moran who has the most absurd reason for joining the army. When explaining his reason, which is significantly the first time he ever speaks about himself and his life, he even names a list of different reasons that led different men to join the war. Being asked why he himself joined the Army, he says: “Well, why would you think? King and Country? Bad debts? To escape a murder charge? Did it for a wager? Lost my fucking way and found myself in barracks? No, none of those things. None of the fucking reasons that brought you bastards in,” [...] “Why then, Sarge?” said Joe Kielty. “Because the missus burned her hand off.”⁶⁴ Then he explains how his wife, a seamstress, burned her hand and so he had to join the Army to make a living.

The reasons to fight vary from personal to national and from pragmatic to idealistic. As Niall Ferguson argues, even the educated were sometimes at a loss regarding the cause they were fighting for. He states: ‘In Cambridge Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch declared war on “the dry chaff of [German] historical research and criticism”. “The age of German footnotes”, declared one Oxford optimist, is on the wane.’ [...] It is scarcely credible, but true, that intelligent men in Britain thought they were fighting footnotes [...].’⁶⁵ Barry does well to explain and describe the ambiguity of the war aims with respect to individuals taking part in the conflict. It is impossible to justify the war with so many different and even contradicting motives. Just as Jesse Kirwan joined for Ireland’s independence, there were Ulster soldiers fighting for the

⁶⁴ Barry, 218.

⁶⁵ Ferguson 233.

exact opposite. Victory cannot solve these contradictions and its value is doubtful, as Willie realizes towards the end of the book. Germans are retreating and victory seems close, but Willie thinks to himself: 'But how would he live and breathe? How would he love and live? How would any of them? Those that went out for a dozen reasons, both foolish and wise and all between, from a world they loved or feared, but that equally vanished behind them. How could a fella go out and fight for his country when his country would dissolve behind him like sugar in the rain?'⁶⁶ The dissolving country is, of course, Ireland, but the meaning could be applied to the general situation. The world the soldiers left to defend is lost.

It seems that Aldington and Sassoon both spend more time and effort trying to disprove or discredit the official reasons used to justify the bloodshed. Barker tends to apply a postmodern point of view in which the suffering of war cannot be justified by anything. This postmodern relativism will be explored further in the following chapter. Barry also bases his refusal on the fact that there are many war aims many of which can be of a purely personal nature. The different attitudes that the authors express towards the war aims and their importance are very much connected with the way the war as a topic and a motive is used in the respective books.

⁶⁶ Barry 287.

4. Literary War, the war as a topic

So far, the thesis has been concerned mainly with some specific motives and aspects of depicting the war. The analysis of differences was focused more on the historical approach towards the works of literature. However, the war functions as a motive and a topic of its own in the four novels in question. It has its role and there are differences in what the war means. There are vast differences in both style and content of the book. The war fills proportionately different space in each of the four novels. Another important aspect is to what extent the book is about the war, from the war or just utilizes the war as a motif, symbol or scenery. Sassoon's fictionalized memoirs are written with a purpose of describing the author's war experiences in the most precise way possible. War is for him an event he tries to describe austere. Aldington, on the other hand, works more with what the war means and the war itself is not the primary thing that he tries to capture and describe. Furthermore, he uses war to describe something else and not merely describes it. Where Sassoon writes about the war, Aldington utilizes it. That, of course does not mean that each one adheres to this approach throughout the book and does not change it occasionally.

Sassoon's novel is an example of the most common type of prose written about the war by those who fought it. His book is highly autobiographical and the main focus is the personal responses of the author to the conflict. It is remarkable that Sassoon described the same events twice; once as a fiction in *Sherston's* trilogy and once as an admitted autobiography in *Siegfried's Journey*. Bernard Bergonzi expresses the difference between the two books as follows: "George Sherston" is not Siegfried Sassoon: it is evident that some of his personal and family circumstances are different. And yet the underlying assumption seems to be that the events of Sherston's wartime

life can be identified with Sassoon's own experience.'⁶⁷ Sassoon wrote the book in order to cope with and make some sense of his wartime experience, even though he 'did not feel ready to present his experience to the world without some attempt at fictional concealment.'⁶⁸ His primary goal was to explore his feelings, motivations and changes that had been aroused by the momentous event of the war. However, that does not mean that he would not comment upon the war itself and Britain's involvement in it. It is just described in a more subtle way, most importantly through his recollections of his time of convalescence in Britain. As it was mentioned in the previous chapter, Sherston is profoundly changed by his war experience and it is possible, to some extent, to link this change to the changes Sassoon believed Britain had undergone during the war. There are two dimensions of his book; there is a strictly personal point of view when he describes his frontline experiences, and there is an extensive social commentary when he spends time in Britain. Paul Fussell argues: 'The dynamics of *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* are penetration and withdrawal: repeated entrances into the center of trench experience, repeated returns to the world of "home."⁶⁹

Sassoon's trilogy could be read as both an act of remembering and the critical approach toward the war. The gruesome fighting scenes, which in fact form only a small part of his memoirs, and his more mundane experiences from his army-life, are the vehicles of remembrance. Long descriptive passages are only seldom interrupted by a commentary upon the war, and when they are it is only a brief or very personal commentary. Bergonzi expresses it in the preface to his book as follows: 'The works I discuss were written as an act of anamnesis, to make experience clear to their authors

⁶⁷ Bergonzi, 150.

⁶⁸ Bergonzi, 150.

⁶⁹ Fussell 96.

and to preserve the memory of what they had seen and undergone.⁷⁰ Sassoon did not write to convince, at least he did not do so in the parts where he remembers; he wrote in order not to forget. Sherston himself says: ‘Although the war has been described as the greatest event in history, it could be tedious and repetitional for an ordinary Infantry Officer like myself.’⁷¹ It is exactly those tedious moments and personal perspective what Sassoon tries to preserve. The fact that he enables the reader to read them as the experiences of someone else means that they do retain a private aspect for him. Only the author knows what has been left out and what he decided to keep for himself. Since the reader expects that Sherston’s story is in fact Sassoon’s, this feeling is particularly strong. It was not until the 1945 when Sassoon published *Siegfried’s Journey* that he was able to share his memory as his own, thus making it a public rather than a private matter. His outlooks on war described in the parts where he is back in England are less private and more outwardly oriented, poignantly culminating with his declaration.

Whereas Sassoon focused more on what he had lived through, Aldington’s book is full of his deliberations on certain social topics. As we saw in the previous chapter, the book includes Aldington’s outlooks on life and ideas.⁷² The war itself is described only in the third part of the book and it is actually only one of the subjects to Aldington’s criticism. *Death of a Hero* is not only a story about the war and about George Winterbourne: the story starts to unfold with George’s parents and their lives. In a way the novel can be read as a *bildungsroman* describing two generations. The book consists of three parts. The first describes the early life, the encounter and the marriage of George’s parents and ends with George leaving his parental home. The

⁷⁰ Bergonzi 7.

⁷¹ Sassoon 183.

⁷² Bergonzi 173.

second describes his life before his joining the army and the final third describes his experiences from the trenches. Aldington's narration can undoubtedly be viewed as a war novel due to the last part which takes roughly two hundred of the four hundred and fifty pages of the novel. Bergonzi claims the following: 'These chapters contain by far the best writing in *Death of a Hero*; [...].'⁷³ He dismisses the first two parts as too essayistic and ideological. However, the fact that Aldington uses the first half of the book to express his opinions on the English society is not to be considered a defect of the book. On the contrary, the life story of two generations of the Winterbournes clearly mirrors the life of the entire country.

The narrator occasionally admits that there are many Winterbournes in England. He says: 'It is the tragedy of England that the war has taught its Winterbournes nothing, and that it has been ruled by grotesques [...], while the young have simply chucked up the job in despair. *Gott strafe England*⁷⁴ is a prayer that has been fully answered – by the insanity of retaining the old Winterbourne grotesques and pretending they are alive.'⁷⁵ The war, therefore, is a tragic yet inevitable culmination of George's life and 50 years of development in England before the war. Bergonzi argues: 'For George Winterbourne, the war seems merely the culminating element in a whole series of burdens that he had to bear from childhood: [...].'⁷⁶ The burdens are laid upon him by his parents, teachers and peers. In a way, the hero had died even before the war broke out. To express that, there are caricatures of ideals represented by George's parents and a long line of characters with a blind and stubborn dedication to the concept of Englishness, especially teachers trying to make 'a thoroughly manly

⁷³ Bergonzi, 175.

⁷⁴ 'God, smite England!' German propagandist slogan from the WWI

⁷⁵ Aldington 17.

⁷⁶ Bergonzi 176.

fellow' out of George. George's father is a woefully incompetent, zealously pious and apparently weak man, the exact opposite of the ideal. His mother is a cheating, hypocritical woman whose sense for dramatic moments borders with hysteria. The society consisting of such individuals is inherently incapable of adhering to any true ideal including the ideal of heroism.

There is a sense of silent and stubborn heroism of the soldiers as it has been mentioned in the first chapter, but 'a clean sportin' death, an Englishman's death'⁷⁷ is a vain illusion. The heroism died; it was drowned in the flood of what the narrator calls a 'Victorian Cant'⁷⁸. The war in the novel is not a historical event disrupting the life of England, a cataclysm threatening to dismantle the society. It is rather a catharsis at the end of a Greek tragedy, inevitability looming above the corrupt and sinful Victorians. It is even more tragic, since the catharsis is incomplete; the Winterbourne grotesques are still there. *Death of a Hero* is a *bildungsroman* in which the hero of the book is destroyed not by the war at the end of the novel, but by the never-ending series of blows he suffers throughout his life. George Winterbourne is as much a symbol for the whole lost generation as his parents are for the preceding one. Aldington himself admits that much in the preface, where he says that 'this book is really a threnody, a memorial, in its ineffective way to a generation which hoped much, strove honestly, and suffered deeply.'⁷⁹ The contrast between hopes and an honest effort on the one hand and the suffering on the other is a driving force of the whole story. George's plight starts with his birth not in the trenches and it ends in the war, but not because of the war. He practically commits suicide because of his personal problems.

⁷⁷ Aldington 7.

⁷⁸ Aldington 253.

⁷⁹ Aldington x.

Sebastian Barry uses a similar principle in his novel, but there are significant differences in both the ratio of war and pre-war experiences and in the main characters. Whereas Winterbourne enters the war with no illusions and he is utterly sceptical after the years the society tried to mould him into a man, Willie Dunne loses his illusions and innocence in the war. To a certain extent, it is a *bildungsroman* as well, but there is a much larger focus on Willie's initiation in the war as compared to Winterbourne whose initiation took place before the war and it was rather a series of moments. Barry also describes the birth and the pre-war life of Willie, but it is much shorter and less prominent. The overwhelming majority of the book consists of his experiences from the battlefield both in Flanders and in Dublin during the Easter Rising. When Dunne joins the army, he believes the official *causus belli*; he believes that he is defending Belgium. The narrator, describing the volunteers and the atmosphere of the early days, says: 'Public Schoolboys from Winchester and Marlborough, boys of the Catholic University School and Belvedere and Blackrock College in Dublin. High-toned critics of Home Rule from the rainy Ulster, and Catholic men of the South alarmed for Belgian nun and child.'⁸⁰

Willie notices the complexity of different reasons for which different people join the army, but he does not fully understand them. The narrator says: 'Of course, the Ulsterman joined up in the selfsame army for an opposite reason, and an opposite end. Perhaps that was curious, but there it was.'⁸¹ For Willie the war means two things at the beginning; defending Belgium and compensating for his not being able to join the police force because of his height. The second reason is, of course, personal. Willie expects that the war will grant him an entry to the company of other men whose

⁸⁰ Barry 14.

⁸¹ Barry 14.

respect he seeks to gain. The narrator describes his feeling during a transport to Flanders: 'He could think of only one word to describe everything, bloody manhood at last.'⁸² The rite of passage is the first battle.

Willie defecates himself with pure shock and terror during the gas attack in which Captain Pasley is killed. At the end of the book, hardened by many battles, he is able to control himself. His passing from boyhood to manhood, however, is distorted by his war experience. He undoubtedly becomes a man in the procession of the novel, but he also becomes a broken man. The narrator describes the ambiguous feeling Willie has when he returns to his unit: 'It was almost a jaunty, happy thing to go back to his regiment, what remained of it. All in his youth and prime, like the song said. To the extent that a man with a broken heart could be happy. To the extent that a man with the soul filleted out of him could be happy. Since the things he had wished for were no more, he wished for nothing. He breathed in and out. That was all. That was where the war had brought him, he thought.'⁸³ The war is a bloody, muddy and perverted rite of passage, but it is a rite of passage, nonetheless. Willie's death at the end of the book resembles that of George Winterbourne, but the nature is different. While Winterbourne effectively commits suicide, Dunne is shot because he cannot resist singing along with a German soldier singing in the opposite trench, thus revealing his position to the enemy. His end is utterly and completely pointless, more or less an open allusion to the death of Paul Bäumer in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The end stands there as the most expressive evidence that the image of war making man out of boys is perverted; the war makes a man from Willie only to break him and eventually kill him.

⁸² Barry 21.

⁸³ Barry 281.

While Barry's novel adheres to the more traditional storyline and except for the profanity (and even more graphic depiction of the violence) resembles the soldiers' accounts, Barker seems to be much more modern in her choice of topics. It seems that Barker writes in the new era of remembrance of the war. According to Todman, there has been an increased interest in the war in the last twenty or thirty years.⁸⁴ This new interest in the war also coincides with the rise of New History movement. Knutsen argues: 'From that perspective [perspective of New Historicists], Barker's trilogy itself functions as a historical text which embodies conflicting discourses in her own culture during the last decade of the twentieth century.'⁸⁵ The book therefore is a story from the war, but it is not necessarily a story about the war. It is inevitable that Barker has different motivations and attitudes than the direct participants. People living today undoubtedly have different agendas when revisiting the war than they had shortly after it. In order to make the story more accessible to the modern reader, Barker introduces new topics and questions. Firstly, there is a prominent issue of gender, which extends far beyond the limited scope of Richard Aldington. Secondly, there is a heavy focus on narration; all the front-line experiences are conveyed through the narration of the officers. In both of those major issues, Barker uses the method of contrast. There is the contrast between how men and women are expected to behave and how they really do. There is a contrast between the urge to speak and the restraints of what can be said.

The gender roles in the pre-war Victorian society were firmly set. However, the war seemed to shake the old certainties and changed the roles. Men, who were supposed to be active, resolved and unflinching, were crumbling under the distress of the trench war-fare, while women, who should have been passive and weak, worked in

⁸⁴ Todman 68.

⁸⁵ Knutsen 32.

munitions factories and actively helped to fight the war. Barker's choice of female characters illustrates this well. Knutsen argues the following: 'It is significant that Sarah Lumb and her workmates are munitions workers rather than nurses, VADs or Land Army Workers.'⁸⁶ VADs are associated with the more feminine world; they care, nurture and help. Sarah and her friends, on the other hand, are strong and active on their own. The absence of men gives them freedom to the extent that Lizzie, one of the munitions workers, says: "'Do you know what happened on August 4th 1914? [...] Peace broke out. The only little peace I've ever had.'" ⁸⁷ In a way, we can read a dual story; it is empowering experience for women and emasculating for men. Rivers thinks about how the war changes men: 'The war that had promised so much in the way of "manly" activity had actually delivered "female" passivity, and on a scale that their mothers and sisters had scarcely known. No wonder they broke down.'⁸⁸ Not for the last time, there is a great tension between the reality and expectations.

There is also the character of Rivers whose work is to be the caring figure for men. Rivers himself discards the idea of his being 'a male mother'⁸⁹. On the other hand, he clearly sees the resemblance between the role of the officers, the father of their men, and the mothers he used to see in hospitals before the war. The narrator says: 'Rivers had often been touched by the way in which young men, some of them not yet twenty, spoke about feeling like fathers to their men. Though when you looked at that they *did*. Worrying about socks, boots, blisters, food, hot drinks. And that perpetually harried expression of theirs. Rivers had only seen the look in one other place; [...] on the faces of women who were bringing up large families on very low

⁸⁶ Knutsen 149.

⁸⁷ Barker 110.

⁸⁸ Barker 96.

⁸⁹ Barker 106.

incomes, [...]. It was the look of people who are totally responsible for lives they have no power to save.’⁹⁰ The officers are without power to save their men and Rivers is, similarly, without power to save his patients. It is impossible to save all of them and that may be one of the causes of Rivers’s war neurosis. The contrast between what he expects of himself and what he really is capable of doing.

The same tension applies to the act of speaking. Barker’s book is full of narration and yet many of the characters, including Prior, are unable to speak when they first come to Craiglockhart. They have to be taught and instructed to remember and to verbalize their experiences, and at the same time, there are things which they are not supposed to say. Prior describes it in the conversation with Rivers when he says: ‘They don’t want the truth. It’s like letters of condolence. “Dear Mrs Bloggs, Your son had the side of his head blown off by a shell and took five hours to die. [...] They don’t want that. They want to be told that George – or Johnny – or whatever his name was, died a quick death and was give a decent send off.’⁹¹ One of the reasons for the men’s silence, therefore, is not that they would be unable to convey what they had lived through. It is that they think that nobody wants to hear them. As we have seen in the chapter about heroism, a man does not complain. So, many of them choose to suppress their experiences. This applies to Rivers himself and it is exactly the reason why Sassoon is such a difficult patient for him. As it has been said, Rivers is the supporter of the war at the beginning of the book. The narrator explains how he could retain this position despite the long line of broken men who have gone through his ward. He says: ‘Rivers had survived partly by suppressing his awareness of this. But then along came Sassoon and made the justifiability of the war a matter of constant,

⁹⁰ Barker 109-110.

⁹¹ Barker 134.

open debate, and that suppression was no longer possible.⁹² Rivers tries not to allow this kind of feelings to overtake him, but the more he tries to forget, the stronger his war neurosis becomes.

Barker uses the power of contrast and opposites to depict her image of the war; unjustifiable, dividing and devastating. The level of slaughter cannot be justified by any possible spoils of war, as we have seen in one of the previous chapters. The war reverses the gender roles sharply and thus divides men and women, as we can see with Prior. And finally, the devastation it causes to the patients spreads onto Rivers. Rivers is a device which enables the reader to experience the war without actually seeing the war. Barker's novel tries to show that the problem is not that the front-line experience cannot be shared; Rivers shares it and not only that, he shows the same symptoms as his patients. The problem is that Rivers is the only one actually willing to listen and so when he becomes one of the men with war neurosis, it is impossible to find someone to talk to. Barker recognizes the inability to listen by describing the inability to speak.

⁹² Barker 115.

5. Conclusion

Considering the number of ordinary people involved in the conflict, it is not surprising that so many literary accounts of the war survived. Considering how important the event was for the modern history of Britain, it is only natural that it is being revisited by the British authors such a long time after the Armistice. The long time that separates the authors belonging to the war generation and those writing at the turn of the twenty first century provides an explanation for some of the differences in the novels. However, even the two novels written at roughly the same time differ in some aspects, which reveals more about the author's purpose than about the time he or she wrote his or her novel.

Aldington used the war to illustrate a point. He pursued his goal with such persistency and perseverance that Bergonzi claims: '*Death of a Hero* is written to advance a thesis; [...].'⁹³ This is only partly true, but as we have seen, Aldington writes his included essays on many other topics and not just the war. The author undoubtedly holds strong opinions on British society before the war and the life story of George Winterbourne is a background on which the author expresses his views. To some extent, the narrator is there to speak for Winterbourne and the views he expresses, thus are Winterbourne's own views. The authorial intervention in the form of short essays and narrator's strong and plainly expressed opinions are therefore not only justifiable but inevitable. To a large extent the war and its waste is a motivation for the narrator rather than the topic in itself. Commenting on George's suicide at the end of the book, the narrators says: 'I wish he hadn't stood up to that machine-gun just one week before the Torture ended. After he had fought the swine (*i.e.* the British ones) so gallantly for

⁹³ Bergonzi 173.

so many years.’⁹⁴ For Aldington the Great War is a last stage of a much longer conflict, the conflict that really kills Winterbourne in the end, the conflict of realities and ideas, the conflict of moralities.

The war for Sherston is an event from which he tries to escape only to discover that the immensity of the conflict allows no such thing. Sherston himself says: ‘But the War insisted on being remembered.’⁹⁵ That means, of course, that there is no escape for him, because he has seen it and witnessed the trench fighting first hand. Others seem blatantly unconcerned for the events happening overseas. As it has been mentioned in one of the previous chapters, Sassoon observes the deterioration of England during the war. This statement should be further specified. Bergonzi claims the following: ‘The Sherston trilogy provides on an extended scale the basic paradigm on which so many war-time poems were based: a poignant contrast between rural England and the horrors of trench warfare; here exemplified in Sherston’s pre-war life.’⁹⁶ His pre-war life is described in the first book of the trilogy. In the second book, which is analysed in this thesis, we can see the shift of focus in the texts describing England. It is, on the one hand, still that safe and cosy place where he could shelter himself from the war. On the other hand, the war has changed Sherston and there he cannot escape from that fact. The hypocritical phrase ‘Business as usual’⁹⁷ is what he cannot accept. As a literary vehicle the war symbolises a loss, but more important than the loss of life described in the fighting scenes is the loss of illusions and the loss of innocence described in the part from the home front.

⁹⁴ Aldington, 88.

⁹⁵ Sassoon, 259.

⁹⁶ Bergonzi 150.

⁹⁷ Phrase used by English authorities during and after the war.

Barker also wrote a trilogy about the First World War and Sassoon is one of the central characters in one of the three novels, *Regeneration*, which is also analysed in this thesis. Barker's story takes place entirely in Craiglockhart far away from the trenches. It is, however, literally haunted by the war which is relived and re-experienced through the horrific memories and mental wounds of treated officers. The war is undoubtedly a central in the book, even though it means different things to different characters. The way the war works in the novel is inseparable from the time and experiences which separate the Armistice and the creation of the novel. As Dan Todman argues: 'Throughout the rest of the twentieth century [1960's and later], a persistent undercurrent of emotional involvement has dragged Britons back to the war, to revisit, reconsider and refight its battles, whether they experienced them at first hand or not.'⁹⁸ It is obvious that this 'revisiting' brings different focus, discourse and experience.

It is inevitable that the war means different things for Barker, a woman living in the discourse of the latter half of the twentieth century. Knutsen argues the following: 'From that perspective, Barker's trilogy itself functions as a historical text which embodies conflicting discourses in her own culture during the last decade of the twentieth century.'⁹⁹ The book, therefore, is a story about the war, but it is at the same time and unavoidably a story about a modern perspective of the war and more importantly about war in general. The objections Barker raises against the war through the character of Rivers, which has been analysed in the previous chapters, seem to be applicable to any war rather than just particularly the Great War. The conflict is in her novel a symbol of relativity of values and futility of fighting for such relative values.

⁹⁸ Todman 221.

⁹⁹ Knutsen 32.

There is the contrast between the relativity of the motives and the totality of the results; death, mutilation, both physical and mental, and destruction. This totality, as we have seen, cannot be justified by relative and unstable values, whatever they may be.

Barry depicts the war as a catalyst of historical and social changes, even though they are completely different ones. He uses the war to illustrate the bitter conflict between two groups of Irish with all its absurdities. The author does that through the motive of different wars, which we have explored in the previous chapters. After being deployed into Dublin to quell the rebellion, Willie finds himself perplexed by what he saw. He cannot understand who the rebels were and what their cause was. The scene in which Jesse Kirwan tries to explain the difference between Willie, a volunteer, and Volunteers borders with the absurd. The war acts as a catalyst for deeper and more complex animosities, while, oddly enough, the two opposing sides fight in the ranks of the same army. There is also another aspect to Barry's use of the war as a motive. Similarly to Barker, he does not portray only the Great War as an utterly rotten and senseless business. War is shown as sort of a childish game in which the only obvious goal is to have the last man standing. The Great War is the more foolish the more people are involved in it. What changes is the extent not the nature.

All the authors use the war to some extent to promote their agenda. Aldington does that in the most obvious fashion, as Bergonzi argues, but on the other hand, the part of his book which describes the war is relatively small. Sassoon uses the war for contrast and that illustrates the changes he supposed the English society underwent during the war and the loss of moral values and innocence, which Aldington considers to have been lost many years before the war. Both Barker and Barry inevitably apply a

contemporary perspective of the war, and though the aspect they choose to accent differ, they both use the war as an epitome of futility of any war. Barker focuses more on gender and social issues, which she describes against the backdrop of the conflict, while Barry does the same with national unrest. However, there is a strong feeling in both books that the war, and not just this war, is at its nature perverted and unjustifiable. While soldier-writers seem to be dealing with their memory, experience and their war, the message of the modern writers is applicable to any war.

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