

World war i: the overthrow of the romantic assignment

[History](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ If literature should not only indicate how mankind thinks, but also how mankind feels, then the poems of the First World War succeed on both counts. ” (Lee) Romanticism of war has existed since man first marched off to his earliest battles. Men historically were taught that their role was to fight for country and the honor of loved ones back home. Women were historically trained to be supportive helpmates, patiently waiting for their loved ones to reappear as heroic victors of war. Neither group was ever to admit the truth - that war is hell, regardless of who wins.

World War I changed this perspective forever. World War I was no exception to this initial romanticism. The men heading off to war were written in glorious terms as patriotic heroes, the women were depicted as faithful handmaidens, fulfilling the needs of their men. The men who served were on the battlefield, living through the day-to-day horrors of the trenches. The women were kept behind the lines, assisting in the processes of war - from helping with the building of munitions, to serving as nurses to the wounded, to staying behind to mourn the loss of loved ones.

All of this was reflected initially in the writings of both men and women. The shift in perspective was slow to arrive but arrive it eventually did as a result of a growing new political movement sweeping through Britain. Thanks to the emergence of the suffrage movement. Women were slowly getting acclimatized to a new role, one that pronounced their independence, and announced that they could say and feel and do as they chose and as they believed. If they knew the truth, they could for the first time reflect upon it and let the world see it from their perspective.

As the growth of independent thought of the female perspective grew so too did that of the male develop as well. As each gender learned to express its true feelings within the context of the times the grim realities of the war experience could be revealed to the world. As each gender reflected on the war, men with the harsh truth of the experience and women with the ability to write as a faction that finally mattered (even with the limitations that gender placed upon them), each faction could effectively portray the Great War as it really was.

The Nominal reactions of both genders to war were virtually identical - war was viewed in the most romantic of senses, with no real connection to the pain and suffering that AR invokes. War was romantic, altruistic, and it was heroic. As time passed, war could no longer be viewed with this pastoral naivety. It was ugly, it was brutal, and it was senseless. Reality set in for the boys in khaki and for the women who soon came to realize that many of their men might never return home.

Young men suddenly learned that war was not what they had anticipated, and their writings started to so too did those of the women back home - and this time their political independence and free thinking played a role as never before in expressing their heartfelt beliefs ND views of war. The women of Great Britain, already amidst the women's suffrage movement, were further reinforced in their independence, to living in a world in which they could say and feel and do. If they knew the truth, it was now time to reflect upon it and to let the world see it from their perspective.

As each gender reflected on the war, the men with the grim reality of experience and the women with the ability to write as a faction that mattered even with the limitations that gender placed upon them, each faction could more effectively portray the Great War as it really was. The switch in perspective was slow to emerge but once it gained momentum it was hard to contain. Initially war was depicted in the usual romantic way. However, things were starting to change as shown in the poem "The Dragon and the Undying" by Siegfried Swanson.

Initially it appears that this poem is just another somewhat romantic vision of war but looking more closely we see something else. The enemy and perhaps war itself is portrayed as a fearsome dragon - it "Reaches with grappling coils from town to town;/He lusts to break the loveliness of spreading hurls their martyred music toppling down. In lines three to five we view this enraged beast as powerful and widespread, destroying not only the defenses of the towns it conquers but seeking to destroy the hearts of the people through their religion, as referenced by the spires of the churches and the music of their martyrs.

Through these lines we get the feeling that war destroys not only bodies but hope and faith and culture as well. War is not so romantic anymore! This theme of destruction continues throughout the next lines. At line seven, we become aware of the slain, "homeless as the breeze", references perhaps to those who died on the battlefield, unburied and unblended as they passed from this world. "Their faces are the fair, enshrouded night," implies that these men are young and fair, enshrouded possibly being another mention to

the lack of last rites, they are enshrines and thus not prepared to enter heaven.

Yet, they tenderly stoop towards earth, to “ hail the burning heavens they left unsung. ” This last line, while still dealing with those who have been slain by the dragon that is the enemy, is a reminder again of the youth of the slain, with so much left unsung, earthbound yet reaching towards heaven. Still somewhat mantic, this poem at least attempts to give a more gritty depiction of the horrors of war, its destructive qualities, its effects on all aspects of life and perhaps notably afterlife as well. Poetry written by women feeling the early stages of the war seemed to be rather sentimental to say the least.

This can be clearly demonstrated by Marina Allen’s lament “ The Wind on the Downs” in which she writes as a woman left behind to mourn. This poem avoids any depiction of violence or horror but rather deals strictly with loss and denial: “ Because they tell me, dear, that you are decreases I can no anger see your face,/You have not died, it is not true, instantaneous seek adventure in is the tragic romance of the lost hero that is the source of inspiration, and it is from the perspective of the woman left behind, whose life is one of waiting for the soldier who will never return home.

Allen treats us to a romantic stroll in which she is able to demonstrate her feelings for her love, yet once again, denies the reader the modernity that identifies this war as a stepping point for British literature. As the war went on, the perspective of the poets writing about it slowly shifted. In erect contrast to his earlier work, Siegfried Season’s “ They” is written in the style

<https://assignbuster.com/world-war-i-the-overthrow-of-the-romantic-assignment/>

of an epigram, which according to Miriam-Webster Dictionary is a “ concise poem dealing pointedly and often satirically with a single thought or event and often ending with an ingenious turn of thought. Here we experience the soldier’s anger towards those who remained at home, attempting pity and understanding for something that the soldier deems they know nothing about. In this instance, the reader is introduced to a bishop who warns that “ When the boys come back/They will not be the same; for they’ll have fought/Len a Just cause. This poem truly deals with the War as a tangible thing, for “ ‘ We’re none of us the same! ‘ the boys reply. You’ll not find/A chap who’s served that hasn’t found some change. ” This is further expanded on as the boys announce the various injuries that they experienced at war, Jim faces death, George has lost his legs, Bill is blind and Bert has syphilis. Clearly this is not a romantic depiction of war, and while it is shocking enough that a list of injuries received in battle is given, to announce to a bishop that one has a sexually transmitted disease is certainly not a traditional literary device. The horror of war is here in the new poetry of the times. No longer is war something that cannot be grasped and physically felt.

Through the use of a short two-stanza poem, Swanson is definitely renouncing his earlier dreams of dragons and slain breezes. Especially when one reads the last line, that of an ignorant bishop, left at home to continue to minister to those left behind and make heroes of those who have left for battle: “ And the bishop said: ‘ The ways of God are strange! ‘ ” This unexpected twist of thought is a reminder of the naivety of those left at home, who did not see the trenches and experienced the pains of those who

have ought there and perhaps there is even a questioning of one's religious beliefs as well.

It is a far cry from the initial depiction of war. Swanson continues in this trend with his poem "Glory of Women," in which he moves on to vilify the ignorance of the women left at home, "You love us when we're heroes, home on leave... You believe/That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace." Here again we see evidence of Swanson's anger towards those who remained in Britain, imagining the war yet not experiencing it. In this particular poem, he is describing the women he apparently returns home to, the women who are thrilled by the details of the war, yet cannot possibly imagine the horrors: "You can't believe that British troops 'retire'... And they ruminating the terrible corpses - blind with blood." He is once again using strong language to shift perception and define the terror of what he experienced, trying to remove the sense of romance and heroism, so that it can be Jessie Pope's poem "The Call" seems to describe precisely the kind of woman that Siegfried Swanson is so adamantly disgusted by. Written in the first year of the war, this poem asks of its gentlemen readers, "Who's for the khaki suit?" and continues on in a very patriotic fashion, asking "my ladder" if he is ready to join the army and stand for the Empire.

It implies that the man who signs up for the army is eager to "show his grit" and "swell the victor's ranks," while the man who does not shall be a coward, a man "who'll stand and bite his thumbs." This is the type of outlook that seems to so enrage Swanson in his later works, and yet it was popular, published and definitely patriotic. Pope's poem is that of the woman

who stands behind the men as the cheerleader, encouraging and hopeful. She also voices an opinion, and openly ritziest any man who is not “ for the trench. It is a strong female voice that is heard in this poem, and while it voices a popular opinion, it is clearly provocative and modern in its goading. This strength of the growing female voice is clearly demonstrated in the poem “ Munitions Wages” by Madeline Ida Bedford, where the reader is introduced to the voice of the working class woman. However, this poem is written by an educated woman in scorn of the “ Mennonites” who were typically paid no more than 2 pounds per week (as opposed to the five mentioned in the poem).

Bedford attempts to scribe the licentious behavior of the factory girls, and clearly demonstrates the class lines that still flowed back in England. While all women were recruited to work, the upper classes were often given roles of responsibility. (Bell, 93) Yet, as it describes a life possible for an independent woman who might benefit from the freedom the war provides, the author’s outlook forces the reader to revisit the poem as a satire, rather than a literal piece of poetry.

However, it works as a reference to other pieces written during this time, as women took pleasure in working outside of he home, living freely with their own money and rights, and can even begin to point us towards the women’s suffrage movement. (Bell, 94-95). While reflective of the upper class female perspective of the time, it is clearly not romantic in its treatment of those who are working behind the lines for the war movement. A tremendous shift in perspective is emerging.

It is the voice of the independent woman that is beginning to carry through the war, not just the women left to mourn and ponder the heroism of their men, but those that made a success of it, through their patriotic spirit or independence. Suddenly the voices of women were heard, published in the daily papers and lifted up for being of use to the war effort. The above two female poets, rather traditional in their beliefs, reflect the growing movement of the voice of women, a voice that is neither romantic nor sentimental, but one that is reflective of their own personal viewpoints.

It is impossible not to ignore the voices of the women who served on the fields of the war itself. Their voices begged to be heard. Eva Double was a British nurse who wrote the poem "Pluck" about one of her patients, a young man whose legs were smashed infested, mud-crusting uniforms, bloody bandages, gaping shrapnel wounds, hideously infected fractures, mustard gas burns, frantic coughing and choking from phosgene inhalation, groans and shrieks of pain, trauma from exposure, fatigue, and emotional collapse." (Gavin, 43) However, despite these conditions, her pity for him resounds throughout the poem.

He is "A child - so wasted and so white,/He told a lie to get his way." This is the voice of the woman who has followed the soldiers to war, and who has seen the horror of it firsthand. She sees clearly the child who "So broke tit pain, he shrinks in dread/. /And winds the clothes about his head/That none may see his heart-sick fear. /His shaking, strangled sobs you hear." Double's voice is clear, seeing the boy behind the soldier, scared and shaking, a child who lied about his age to be a man and help to fight the war.

She knows that in the end, " He'll face us all, a soldier yet" and her poem remarks on the contrast between the wounded boy and the pride of a soldier who while wounded is not broken. Here we have a female poet experiencing first hand the horrors of war, who knows that soldiers are just youths, who knows that war kills and maims. She is willing to share that opinion with the rest of the world through the strong and independent voice of her poetry. Slowly emerging through the voices of male poets in this period is the concept that war is brutal, ugly, horrific.

Written as a preface to a never published book, Wilfred Owen said: " My subject is war, and the pity of war. The poetry is in the pity. " (Williams, 3) He shows this perspective as he decries the hypocrisy of the romance of war in his poem, " Disabled," as he describes a legless soldier, sent home from the war. Another boy who had " asked to join. He didn't have to beg;/Smiling they wrote his lie: aged nineteen years. " Yet this boy is not in the hospital and does not have the kind nurse to care for him, instead he sits in a " wheeled chair, waiting for dark. This soldier's story is one of a return home and of what awaits, and while it cries out for pity as a tragedy, it is also a limiting tale. It tells of the limits of the wounded soldier, not of his pride, but of his fall from wholeness, taking " whatever pity they may dole. " The young man who joined the war to look " a god in kilts. And abbeys too, to please his Meg" is now the tragic figure. It closes with this same sense of helplessness: " How cold and late it is! Why don't they come/And put him into bed? Why don't they come? " Clearly, the romance of war is gone, replaced by the horrible aftereffects.

According to Oscar Williams, war poetry is an unpopular and unread art form, as “ most people do not have the courage to face honestly the facts of others’ intense suffering. It is easier to have the attention diverted, the guilt of responsibility converted into a conviction that the suffering is justified since it is in a noble cause. (Williams, 5) It is this initial reaction that the poetry of World War I displays, using romantic and sentimental terms so as to inspire the people of Great Britain, rather than scare them with the vivid truth of life in the trenches.

Where initially patriotism and the call to duty are treated with exuberance and romanticism by authors of both sexes, both men and women develop their own perspectives – men reacting to the horrors of the front, and women responding to the tragedies of losing treat the wounded and dying. World War I came as the women’s suffrage movement was at its most violent and those women who had once sung out for the vote used these same voices to call for their country and to support their government, which in turn resulted in a strong female voice throughout the war.

These women can also see clearly that their voices are important amidst this battle and that they too can be of service to their country, either by recording vignettes of the war as they see it or by pushing the men to bear arms for their country. Each sex matters, each sex has a different perspective, and both of these perspectives are worth examining – what truly is wonderful is that we can finally hear both factions. And as the voices emerged, there appeared to be a common chord in the song of war – it was no longer the sentimental, it was no longer heroic.