

Representation of masculinity and the nation in british women's poetry of world w...

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



Introduction

“Of arms and the man, I sing” marks the opening of Virgil’s book, *The Aeneid*. The narrative paints the image of ensanguined warrior men engaged in combat for pride and preservation of their motherland. Thus, according to Raewyn Connell, “the classical literature from which European culture stems, announces from the start, the gender of war.” George Orwell’s essay – ‘My Country Right or Left’ talks about the men of his generation who as boys had been morally trained for war even before they received any technical training. These were men, who like him, became acutely aware of the experience of war that they had missed out on for having been too young. His essay serves to highlight how the First World War became a point of reference for men with respect to the shaping and construction of their identities. The war segregated men who hadn’t served their nation in battlefield from those who had seen and experienced warfare first hand. The isolation of those men as the ones who had participated in war resulted in reinforcing their gender differences as individuals whose sex had, in part, dictated that they must fight. The identities men acquired through war were implicitly gendered. War became a sphere of masculine attainment and suffering. (Meyer 1)

The very rationale behind going to war became a masculine discourse. Historian Jessica Meyer, in her book *Men of War*, gathers that the construction of these identities can be traced back to the letters written by the soldiers at the war front, letters of condolence to the families of the deceased and memoirs written several years after war. On examination of

these written accounts, there emerged two identities as ideals that must be emulated and strived for. One was the figure of the soldier hero who went on to assume one of the most long standing and dominant forms of idealized masculinity by possessing qualities such as courage, endurance, adaptability and duty. (Meyer, 6) The second, more important, identity of men that surfaced was regarding their domestic lives. It was situated more so in relation to women and placed emphasis on “ men’s roles as good sons, husbands and fathers, as both protector and provider.” The soldiers saw war as a masculinizing process. It was an experience which would result in the ‘ making of men’ and missing out on it as Orwell’s essay suggests, made one feel like a lesser man.

During the primitive years of war, Meyer argues that it was gendered propagandas that promoted recruitment for armed forces. The nature of these propagandas elicited “ associations between participation in warfare and physically and morally virtuous masculinity.” (Meyer 3) The notions of masculinity attached to war became consolidated through the consciousness of Nationalism. John Somerville, in *Patriotism and War*, expounds how a mention of the words, “ a great patriot” bring to mind images of an armed man on battlefronts jeopardizing his life to guarantee the security of his fellow countrymen. These mental associations invigorated the notion that to speak of patriotism was to think of war. If risking one’s life is an exceptional form of courage then risking it for the people of your nation becomes an unrivalled form of patriotism. Thus making war a supremely patriotic profession as well as institution. (Somerville, 568) In death, a soldier’s

sacrifices were reduced to his nationality as being either English or German or otherwise. The ideology of Nationalism allowed total strangers to become kinsmen. Recruitment posters plastered all across Britain at the outset of war made use of slogans like “ Your Country needs YOU”. Similar slogans appealed to the deep rooted national sentiments of people thus invoking in them, the need to enlist for war. The poster for war recruitment is a great instance that highlights how appeals made to the masculine identity will encourage men to overcome their fears and reluctance to go to war. Posters of women and children having slogans like “ Women of Britain say -GO!” served to fuel the nationalist propaganda.

Joshua Goldstein reveals how it is the gender roles and identities that men and women subscribe to that ended up validating and enabling war. Women were seen as vulnerable home makers and caregivers that urged their men to go to war. Goldstein believes women to also be responsible for perpetuating this militarized notion of manhood. They do so by reinforcing their gender roles that restricts them to sweethearts that must encourage and prompt their man, or mothers who must raise young boys that grow up to be brave men or as nurses who heal wounded men and function as substitute mothers. War facilitated this organization of gender identities.

(Prugl) Gender roles permitted the categorization of women as those who will hold the fort down at the home front while the men of the house are away. This results in creation of spaces where home becomes a place of return or a place one must die trying to protect. The symbol of domestic space can be likened to the feminization of nation as the motherland whose honour

needed to be defended by its sons. Tamar Mayer, in her book *Sexing the Nation* argues that “ despite its rhetoric of equality for all who partake in the “ national project,” nation remains, like other feminized entities— emphatically, historically and globally—the property of men.”

Scholars have acknowledged that war has been a prevalent feature in literature dating back to the earliest cultures such as of the Greeks and Romans. Homer’s *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* reflect a culture of war as does Virgil’s *The Aeneid* and the Hebrew Bible. Even the ancient Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh* includes an epic battle with an enemy force that must be defeated. These literary works and many others that span the centuries since the classical era remind us that war is a constant in society and a topic that will continue to ensure critical debate. It is as universal as themes of love, death, time or human frailty. The proliferation of recent scholarship on war serves only to remind us that war is still very much a contemporary issue and that war literature is a popular subject for publication. (Calloway)

Representation embodies the notion that texts and media assist in the construction of meanings in the world: the ways in which we look at the world. A cursory examination of the various renditions of war across different time periods provides an insight into the changing dynamic involving it’s representation in literature. *Iliad* features set-piece duels which tend to take place at the outset of the mass battles. Historians suggest that the institution of monomachy provided a warrior with opportunity to prove his qualities of leadership or legitimise his status or to win fame rather than wars and thereby provide service to the state. (McLoughlin) The heroes of

Iliad didn't suffer from long term injuries. Soldiers die - impossibly cleanly and instantaneously.

The literature of the medieval times saw war as a subject matter that was used to talk about notions of chivalry, religion, nationhood. Across medieval writing the enemy and the infidel become the measure of the hero. (Sanders, Le Saux and Thomas) Through the course of literature, for the most part, war was depicted as an attempt to protect and preserve a treasured way of life. While through these ages there had been brief mentions of a sense of loss that was accompanied by war, the agony of death-throes, the vivid images and cries of pain from soldiers too wounded to move, are absent from the poems until much later in the early 19th century.

“ The risk as outlined by Theodor Adorno is that representation of human suffering when depicted containing aesthetic beauty and provoking mimetic pleasure (in the form of pathos or catharsis), enable it to accrue a metaphysical meaning that reduces or redeems its horror, not only justifying but perhaps in some form encouraging the perpetuation of such crimes against humanity.” (Bellis and Slater) Soldiers and civilians who have been witnesses to Twentieth century extremes of war and violence testify to being able to contain and give meaning to their traumatic memories by expressing them through various forms of literature. Thus, Adorno's anguished wrestling with the ethics of representing war and violence set the terms for Twentieth century criticism's meditations. (Bellis and Slater)

Many young men grew up on tales of dashing military heroes and masculine bravery and honour characterised by well-organised cavalry charges and gleaming uniforms. However, the reality of the Front for the average soldier could not have been more different. Narratives of purposeful activity with a clear objective were soon replaced by confusion and apparent chaos.

(Richards) With the outbreak of the Great War, the general tone of war poetry mostly glorified and lauded virtues of duty, heroism, patriotism and honour. This conviction prompted young men to enrol themselves for war. Rupert Brooke captured the idealism of the opening months of the war, while Siegfried Sassoon and Ivor Gurney eventually went on to encapsulate the mounting anger and sense of waste as the war continued. Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen, and Edmund Blunden not only expressed the comradely compassion of the trenches but also addressed themselves to the larger moral perplexities raised by the war ("The Renaissance Period"). The basic themes underwent a marked change as those very few who survived the war, returned wiser, more cynical, having experienced the horrors of the war first hand. It led war poetry to eventually focus on the conflict, loss and suffering associated with the stark reality of war.