

# What attitudes to world war one does siegfried sassoon display in his poetry essa...

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



During the period from 1914-1918 one of the most tragic events to happen to mankind occurred in the form of World War One, in fact people have described it as, 'The war to end all wars'. Thousands upon thousands of young men and boys rushed to the front line to fight for their country feeling it was their honorary duty and would have been shunned if they did not, in what was called, 'The great and glorious war', which is so very ironic.

Never has the contrast between fantasy and reality been so valid and revealing. To help emphasise the soldier's outlook many of them wrote about their experiences in the form of letters or poetry, of these, perhaps the best example to use would be Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon makes the readers aware of the horrors and the terrible things that happened to soldiers in World War One, using a matter of fact style of writing.

He tells of how people at home thought it was brave and noble for a man to fight for his country, with little understanding of the tragedies and the horrors of war, of how the superior officers totally mishandled the war, letting it continue unnecessarily long, the hell like conditions, and of how many died the most horrific deaths imaginable. He tells us how men began to accept death, using euphemisms to shut out terror and emotions in their mind in such dreadful conditions. Sassoon won the military cross for bravery and was well respected by those people around him.

Without a doubt Sassoon has the right to comment on the war for he fought in the front line for many years and experienced the hell for himself. While he respected the men who fought alongside him, he felt that the war was dragging on too long because it was being completely mishandled, in fact he

despised the war and the attitudes of many towards it. Sassoon was, apparently, the first person to write sustainable poetry, and was critical of the progress of the war and he described its horrors unsparingly and compared life in the war metaphorically to 'hell'.

Writing poetry was Sassoon's way of releasing the anger he felt towards the war, and his poems display many of the emotions and attitudes he was aware of. His poetry is a primary historical source of life during the war as his attitudes to different aspects of the war are clear in his brutally honest poetry. His poetry is written, not only with excellent literary style, but also to warn future generations of the horrors of war, a warning people have ignored repeatedly. He did not glorify the war but was quick to condemn it and reflect on the total waste and loss of life.

He despised the war! He concentrates his poetry on four main areas: considering life in the trenches; the horrors of the war; attitudes to and of the superior officers; and citizens at home. He is critical of all of these things and shows vividly the horrors of war, especially for those who have never experienced such a war. Sassoon shows how the soldiers at the front line were subject to degrading and inhumane conditions in the trenches, which were filled with 'bottomless mud' and infested with rats and fleas.

Mud and the water made it very difficult to get around, another factor, which would break down the soldiers mentally. The soldiers in the trenches were also exposed to serious mental stress caused by horrific scenes of death and suffering, made worse by the lack of sleep and freezing conditions, both

night and day. This kind of nightmarish weather would have made men miserable, being forced to wear wet and cold uniforms all the time would have made the situation even worse. This may have been one of the factors leading to the radical action taken by the young soldier boy in 'Suicide in the Trenches'.

In that poem the trenches are called 'Winter Trenches', a metaphor for the conditions all year round; it was like winter every day of the year. These must have been almost inhospitable living conditions, and explains why Sassoon compared the trenches, metaphorically to hell, 'The hell where youth and laughter go'. The soldier's slept in dug-outs at the side of the trench, often referred to as 'flea-bags'. Sassoon suggested that no one deserved to endure these horrendous conditions, from which there was no escape. In the poem, 'A Working Party', Sassoon describes the dugouts as 'draughty' and 'frowsty with the fumes of coke'.

He uses the alliteration of the heavy 'd' in 'draughty dugout' and the suffocating 'f' sound to create an uncomfortable description of the trenches. Suffocating 'f' sound in 'frowsty' and 'fumes' emphasise the smothering environment in the trenches. 'Frowsty' means 'stuffy', a word, which sums up the compact living and sleeping arrangements in the trenches. In this poem Sassoon eradicates any misconceptions that while in the trenches the men are totally safe, for as the man in the poem piles sandbags at the side of the trench, he is shot by the enemy's gun.

In the trenches, the Germans were not the only enemy as the soldiers fought a battle against the dirt and disease in the 'bottomless mud' of the trenches, the mud fought the soldiers each and every step they took. The thick mud also rotted the soldier's boots, causing footrot through walking constantly 'ankle deep' in 'sludge', and not to forget the horrible creatures that lived in the trenches, and got at them particularly in their sleep, 'flea-bags'.

The fleas would have made the conditions worse when the men needed the precious little sleep they were given, by keeping the fatigued men awake to totally uncomfortable conditions. Rats, lice and worms amongst other things were also living along side the men. These dire conditions are shown in 'Suicide in the Trenches' in these lines, 'In winter trenches, cowed and glum, With crumps and lice and lack of rum, He put a bullet through his brain, No one spoke of him again'. We are told of a simple soldier boy who killed himself because of the sheer misery of war and life in the trenches.

The first verse reveals a boy who enjoyed life and was happy, 'grinned at life with empty joy' but when he enters 'the hell where youth and laughter go', and is faced with the grim realities of war, his spirit is broken and eventually he is compelled to commit suicide. The poet uses a nursery rhyme rhythm to reflect the innocence of the young boy, but in the second stanza his tone hardens using short, harsh, one syllable, words like 'lice' and 'lack', to mirror the harsh reality of the First World War.

Throughout his poetry, Sassoon parallels living in the trenches to a living hell, 'died in hell' and 'hell's last horror'. These are strong words and really convey a serious message to the people who did not experience the trenches for themselves. Conditions in the trenches are emphasised again in 'Suicide in the Trenches' with the 'lack of rum'. Sassoon mentioned the lack of alcohol, which was needed to keep the men warm in the freezing trenches. The title, 'Suicide in the Trenches', interestingly may have symbolised young men being sent to their deaths either by suicide or by the enemy.

Sassoon reflects the horror of war and the scale of death in all his poems, however in 'Attack' he shows the effects on the mentality of the soldiers who faced this horror and how their faces are 'masked with fear' as they go over the top to face 'the bristling fire' of the enemy. As the men climb to meet the enemy's guns 'time ticks blank and busy' which could have a double meaning: for the men time moves slowly and also their lives are ticking away. In 'Base Details' Sassoon describes his views of those officers senior to him using a disparaging, cynical tone to show his lack of respect for these commanding officers.

He generalises them as 'fierce, bald and short of breath', and describes them as 'scarlet' possibly due to their uniforms, their drinking, or the metaphorical blood they have on their hands. He shows how the officers trivialise the war, showing a lack of respect for their subordinates in the words, 'we've lost heavily in this scrap', comparing the horrific battles of World War One using a simile, likening it to a simple school-boy fight in the school yard using the word 'scrap'.

Throughout all Sassoon's description of the senior officers he disparages them, likening them often to pigs, calling them 'incompetent swine' who 'guzzle and gulp' and 'toddle'. In 'The General' Sassoon describes an officer who ironically greeted all his soldiers' with 'Good morning' before sending them to the front line to be killed 'by his plan of attack'. Sassoon cleverly wrote this poem with a regimented rhyming scheme, like the marching of soldiers towards their death at the front.

Sassoon has similar negative views towards citizens at 'home' and through his poetry he shows how the soldiers resented the propaganda and attitudes of those at home. In the poem 'Glory of Women' Sassoon shows the naive attitudes of these individuals, of how they are oblivious to the true horrors of war and how they think 'that chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.' Sassoon shows it is not only the British women who are misguided by propaganda but also the Germans. Using the irony of the 'German mother dreaming by the fire' while her 'son is trodden deeper in the mud', Sassoon shows the naivety of those on both sides.

The greatest prestige for women is apparent if their husbands, or sons are killed or wounded at some great battle, but when British troops 'retire' then they are cheated of their glory by those at home. In the poem he expresses his anger and bitterness towards these citizens, criticising them for their naivety and lack of awareness as to what war was really like, he despised them. In 'Suicide in the Trenches' he shows that the 'smug-faced crowds with kindling eye' have selfish motive of prestige, cheering when soldiers march by, without knowledge of 'the hell were youth and laughter go'.

In 'Memorial Tablet' the shame of not going to war and being 'nagged and bullied' finally forced the soldier to go and fight. Sassoon uses a bitter tone, reflecting his attitudes to those at home. He shows how once the soldier is dead and gone all that remains of his 'glory' is his 'gilded name' which receives an occasional 'thoughtful stare' from the Squire, who represents the civilians of war-time and beyond who will not remember the names of the dead, nor their sacrifice. Sassoon's poems, in conclusion, all reflect different aspects of the war, creating vivid pictures and descriptions of the graphic intensity of it.

His anger is directed towards senior officers and those at home, both of whom had no idea of the horrors from which the soldiers suffered. Sassoon, along with most of the World War One soldiers, believed that they were a brotherhood who fought (and in many cases died) together for their country. The harsh reality is that they were just sad statistics on the war's death toll who died, as another war poet Wilfred Owen wrote, 'as cattle'. The sad fact is that the human race does not learn from its mistakes. We have seen that war causes nothing but suffering, yet it still continues to this very day.