

Peace by rupert  
brooke, and the  
volunteer by herbert  
asquith



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The First World War provides one of the seminal moments of the twentieth-century in which literate soldiers, plunged into inhuman conditions, reacted to their surroundings in poems. There were a number of famous poets who wrote war poetry, and a number of different reactions to war. Some poets approved of war, or found it honourable, and others disapproved of war, or found it futile and pointless.

“Peace” by Rupert Brooke, and “The Volunteer” by Herbert Asquith, are two poems that seem to be very similar, yet, at the same time are eerily different. They both saw the war as a great escape, a chance to start anew. They did not realize that the war was death and carnage. They did not realize this as they were marching in formation towards the front. Realization only came to them on the battlefield, when they were faced with imminent death. Even then though, death was a thing to be proud of. “Who didn’t want to die a hero?” Few got the chance to die as heroes though, and those who did, were the lucky ones. They did not feel a sense of disillusionment and despair, as their dreams had not been shattered and scattered to the winds.

Both of these poems are about war, both of these poems are written in iambic pentameter, but only one of them is a sonnet. That is the one main distinctive difference between “Peace” and “The Volunteer”. There are also more subtle differences such as the irony evident in “The Volunteer”. The poem is not exactly what it seems, and in some instances, especially towards the end, it seems to be mocking itself and all of what it has just preached to the reader.

Rupert Brooke's entire reputation as a war poet rests on only 5 "war sonnets". Brooke's war experience consisted of one day of limited military action with the Hood Battalion during the evacuation of Antwerp.

Consequently, his "war sonnets" swell with sentiments of romantic death — the kind of sentiments held by many (but not all) young Englishmen at the outbreak of the war. Brooke's "war sonnets" are really more a declaration occasioned by the ups and downs of his tumultuous personal life than a call to war for his generation. Rupert Brooke had a rather idealized view of war. He had not taken part in a war himself, so could not really understand the horror of war

"Peace" is written in the form of a sonnet, in iambic pentameter with an octave and a sestet. All the lines have 10 syllables, but the octave and the sestet follow different rhyme schemes. The octave follows Shakespearean/Elizabethan (ababcbcd) rhyme scheme, while the sestet follows the Petrarchan/Italian (efgefg). Rupert's nationalistic and religious fervour is astounding. In his poem he writes, "Now, God be thanked who has matched us with His hour...With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power". Rupert Brooke believes that the war is a Holy cause and that the British have been strengthened by God's hand.

His poem is evidence of that. In his poem, he thanks God for waking them from their sleeping and sending them off to war. The images in the first four lines: of religious calling, inspired youth, waking with restored strength and refreshed senses, and the swimmer turning (away from filthiness) and diving into sparkling clean water are images of "Muscular Christianity". These

ideas of cleansing and of a new start, away from modernism, existed in <https://assignbuster.com/peace-by-rupert-brooke-and-the-volunteer-by-herbert-asquith/>

public schools during the Victorian era. They were thought of as a way to purify society, and the young manhood. Rupert Brooke obviously saw this as a way to cleanse himself as well. Rupert would be leaving the filth of real society, and would dive into cleanness, be it war or not.

He is “ Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary.” In that sentence, there is an extra “ and”. This was no grammatical error however, this was done purposely. It not only gives the sense of alliteration, but it also gives the line new meaning. The line is no longer just describing the world, it is making a list of all the negative aspects of that world. It tries to give us a more profound idea of the world that Rupert lived in. It succeeds very well in giving us a lurid description of the world back in the early 1900’s, even if it is a trifle ungrammatical.

For the full meaning of the line to be realised, the reader must take his time and read it slowly, stressing the “ and”. The reader can’t rush through that line, or the whole poem for that matter, and expect to understand it all. He must take it slowly. Rupert Brooke knew full well the meaning of what he was writing; he was trying to give himself a good reason for leaving Britain and going off to war. He believed life back then was a drag and he used it as an excuse to make his act of foolishness and immaturity seem understandable.

If we look at the poem further down, we see that “ we have found release there”. It seems to me that here we have found release from life as well as society, since “ naught is broken, save this body”. We have inevitably found death “ and he is the worst friend and enemy”. The worst friend and enemy

is death, but that is a release. A release from what, we ask? It is a release from the agony of a “ world grown old and cold and weary”. Death may be the enemy, but it is preferable to a filthy society within a filthy world. We have turned as “ swimmers into cleanness leaping”, and we have leapt straight into the jaws of death, but it is cleaning.

Rupert Brooke, however, was not the only one to try to give reason to his foolhardy acts. Herbert Asquith did the same thing in his poem, “ The Volunteer”. In Herbert’s case, we can never be quite sure if he meant what he said.

“ The Volunteer” is also written in iambic pentameter, but it is not a sonnet, as it does not have fourteen lines. This poem is quite ironic if you read it properly. It has dual meanings and if you read between the lines, the second meaning is starkly clear. Many people believe that this poem is about Herbert’s brother, Raymond. This however, is impossible, as his brother died in 1916 and this poem was written in 1915. I am led to believe that this poem is about ALL the officers in general. Asquith regards them as one individual driven by a powerful, self-destructive inner force. This poem can be actually described as a metaphor for all the officers.

Parts of the poem have to be read with a certain cadence, or else, they do not convey their proper meaning. The poem starts off by describing the life of many young Englishmen, who toil away at their ledgers in a “ city grey.” Then it goes on to describe the wishes and fantasies of all those men, as legions passing under the “ oriflamme”. His words convey a sense of longing to the reader, the longing of those young men who went to become great

heroes. Then, it goes to talk about how these young men are innocents, their lances not broken in life's great "tournament".

These young men have experienced nothing of the evil of men. Then, towards the end, Asquith starts on about how these men who have died bravely go to Valhalla and join the men of Agincourt. He says all this and more, but does it really mean what it says? Their hopes have been recognised and they have died heroes, but they have died. He mocks their ideals of "dulce et decorum est pro patria mori." He laughs in their faces, he does not believe they have gone to Valhalla, he knows that they have just died in the field and are lying there rotting. He mocks their inexperience. "Look at what your foolishness has brought you!" "Nothing, but death to you and your friends."

No glorious victory, no heroic death, no knight in shining armour, just being blown to bits by shrapnel and shell. "You were all fools to join up, this is what your folly has brought you." Brooke does not see these deaths as folly, he sees them as justification for going to war and fighting for King and country. He sees them as an achievement. All those soldiers who died achieved cleansing, Asquith sees all that death as a loss. It is this fundamentally different mind set that makes these poems truly different. These poems are polar opposites when it comes to how they view life.

What Herbert Asquith is trying to say does not jump right out at you. To grasp the full meaning of the poem, you have to read between the lines. Once you do, you will find this poem very ironic. Herbert is mocking those

silly people who became soldiers and thought that war was all glory and heroism and lost their lives with this belief at heart.

In different formats and literary styles, these two poems display the same glorifying attitude towards war. That is why some literary critics regard them as pro-war poetry. Their authors have not become “ true trench poets”, as they have not experienced the horrors of war. In the view of Brooke and Asquith, the war was some great cleansing fire that would lead to a better world. This made it worthwhile. Their poetry celebrated the “ happy warrior”.

As Paul Fussell has noted in “ The Great War and Modern Memory”, these two poets’ sentiment about the war is “...an emotion so innocent and bizarre, so confident of right and wrong, that it not likely to surface more than once a century.”