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Research Article

THE INFLUENCE OF HISTORICAL CONTEXT ON THE THEMES OF WAR IN WORLD WAR I POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Poems written during World Military I provide light on the conflict's psychological, emotional, and social effects by reflecting the close relationship between historical background and military themes. World War I, with its unprecedented use of mechanized combat and massive casualties, provided poets with a historical context that significantly impacted their portrayal of the conflict. As a result of the horrors of trench warfare, the loss of youth, and the doubting of nationalistic principles, writers such as Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, and Wilfred Owen became increasingly skeptical and disillusioned with their earlier levels of patriotism. Topics covered include the emotional toll on soldiers, the brutality of battle, and the exaltation of sacrifice, all impacted by the historical context of the Great War. Poems serve as both memorials and critiques of the war experience, and this research emphasizes the significance of poetry in this process through textual analysis of essential poems. Thus, it sheds light on poetry's more significant cultural and historical role during World War I in influencing public recollection and comprehension of the conflict.

KEYWORDS

Themes of War, Historical Context, World War I.

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INTRODUCTION

World War I poetry captures the experiences and feelings of the time. However, much of it is not written from a completely interconnected view, nor does it address the same overarching themes. The context of the many generally incomplete drafts of such poetry is centered upon the lives and perspectives of individual soldiers, making it more personal and less directly focused on the end of the war or the course of duty, as seen in the chapter and verse of newspapers and other literature at the time. Perhaps most influentially, the battle taking place from 1914 to 1918 forces soldiers to endure lengthy periods of warfare, heightening the intense emotion that is developed and shows through the individualism cast by loss and frustration on the people who are attempting to exist.

Many men write of the transition from their previous state as boys or other young people with mothers, coming from distinctly different backgrounds in villages or towns and from farms in regions across the United Kingdom, into authors and military personnel in the war. Some discuss the connection between the people who do not fight and those who are fighting, intertwining the conscience of the people and their own with the reason for fighting. None of these authors has the same conviction; however, they state that the lack of understanding and commiseration from people in the United Kingdom only increases the solidarity of the men with each other and permits them emotional space to exist in. The sorrow that streams from the writing of First World War poets still resonates with readers nearly a century on, in defiance of the change of tone in favor of clean language that many poets have seen imposed.

Background of World War I Poetry

World War I poetry has long been an integral part of the British A-level English Literature syllabus because of the brutal war context in which it was written. Although written at different times in the war, this poetry presents a theme that remains throughout, detailing how war bears an irreversible impact upon its soldiers. War-related poetry before the start of World War I was always romantic, expressing an interest in the adventure of battle rather than the consequences a soldier would face before, during, and after battle. This idea is seen in works by men such as Alfred Tennyson and W. B. Yeats, who wrote about a soldier and his romantic conflict with a fair maiden. Following the outbreak of World War I, poetry morphed into being focused on explaining the harsh truths of war, reflecting the experiences of those who had been in battle; two of the most popular figures encapsulating the idea of this new war poetry were the voices of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.

Poetry of this new era was written about the true experiences of battle, and every last detail about the

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physical toll the battle took on a soldier became illustrated in a haunting, visceral way. Whereas older war poetry attempted to depict the war as a noble enterprise, the new war narratives showed the men on the front lines as mere cattle. The new poetry depicted physical and emotional injuries considered taboo in the past as standard subject fare. This war poetry faction argued that men who had been to the front were the only ones qualified to speak on war and that the new poetry exposed the brutality of war in a way that it had never been exposed before. The poetry by these two uniquely evocative figures is centered on the idea of facing death, and their reflections in writing reveal the traumatic toll war took on the souls of its soldiers.

Importance of Historical Context in Literary Analysis

Many consider historical context to be an essential part of literary analysis because it can provide rich insights into themes, expression, form, and narrative that shape individual works of literature. This paper connects poetry produced during and after the First World War to the ideas and social climate surrounding the war. Numerous historians and poets have considered the effect that posters, slogans, and political leaders have on public thinking. It is also easy to suggest that, at times, changing public mood and opinion demand the creation and publishing of specific poetry. Such assertions can increase or decrease the richness of a given work.

The tone, form, and language of this poetry often function as an encoded space in which the poet battles with themselves and not always an accurate reflection of the poet's experiences. Thus, the subjects of heroism, anti-heroism, and the campaign abroad are neither the true subject of this paper, nor are they intrinsic to the human experience generally, which includes a myriad of other emotional priorities. Rather, they must become peripherally important to the content of this paper so that a departure point from which to begin the examination of the process by which the historical moment created a narrative. The interconnectedness of literature and history is vast and unending and takes many forms. It is my hope that the following pages can illuminate potential directions along which history had an active influence on literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF WORLD WAR I

World War I began in 1914, two years after the first big event that triggered the war's outbreak. This war was considered the "Great War" because a great number of countries were embroiled in a state of conflict. The biggest in Europe were Britain, Germany, Russia, France, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. Then, the nations' alliances eventually supported the conflict. The countries enlarged their mutual support system across the continents. This network of alliances was mainly set up to keep peace, but instead it dragged the countries into trespassing one by one when the

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archduke of Austria-Hungary, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated in Sarajevo. The idea of nationalism, imperialism, and militarism contributed to the development of a complex cross-national community in Europe. The additional conflict countries of the Entente joined Britain and France.

The war front line had two roads: the western front line and the eastern front, which were very intense. The eastern front extended from the coast of the Baltic Sea and broke out in eastern Germany, which was under Russian control. The western front was dominated by trenches from the Alps to the North Sea and from far France. World War I was the largest and most significant conflict of the time. Global technology and infrastructure were developed for the war. The suitable technology and weaponry were advancing. World War I turned into a coordinator of advanced weaponry: guns, incendiary devices, mortars, toxic gas, tanks, warplanes, and submarines. The psychological aspect of the war was the rivalry between countries over mastery.

Causes and Events of World War I

By the early 20th century, rivalries and alliances between powers in Europe had emerged between forces that had been part of a balance to support peace since the reign of Queen Victoria in England. The nations involved had partly prepared for the events that would eventually bring on war, and many press clippings and magazine articles of the era reflected tension throughout Europe. With the formation of two different alliances in 1914, just weeks following the killing of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand at the hands of a Serbian nationalist, World War I ensued. After declaring war, the troops did not see the sort of limited, short-and-sweet battle presumed by leaders on both sides. Instead, for the next four years, millions were forced to endure battles such as the fighting in Belgium or along the French-German border.

To wage any conflict, a strategy is needed, and several commanders enlisted in various plans. General Alfred Joffre of France, keen to reach a breakthrough, opted for punitive strikes on German forces in a bid to break lines and force a breach. At the outset, these tactics led to few men being killed; this was due mostly to the previous battles fought on German soil. The "race to the sea" to the west ended in 1914; trenches multiplied as space dwindled just outside the Belgian port of Ostend. In early 1915, Joffre opted to go on the defensive while he coordinated the largest advance in French military history that the world had seen in the Champagne. At the same time, to the west, English and Belgian forces, as well as the French, held their own against the German military, surrounded by unoccupied French territory on three sides. There were periods when trench offensives shifted no more than 50 yards within days or weeks. Hundreds of thousands of men fighting on both sides died over small but

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significant patches of ground. Raised on this chronology, the works of the soldier poets and other writers remain reflective of it, incited by the urgent need to fix the situation and disbelief and despair at the task to come.

Social and Political Climate

World War I has often been compared to an earthquake by historians. Just as an earthquake fundamentally changes the geological landscape, so too did the First World War alter the political, social, and military landscape of the 20th century. It is the poets of that era who best depict that historical context. The war had served to prolong and intensify the mission of the soldier. No longer simply the protector of the state, the modern soldier had become the embodiment of the state's ideal citizen and the guardian of the Enlightenment spirit, battling the darkness of a past that was anti-national and, therefore, retrograde. This is reflected in the war poetry of the time, including the poetry of Brooke, who in his poems epitomizes the 'officer class.' Throughout the war, nationality and its attendant patriotism were not simply uniting forces but were also powerful dividers between those who belonged to a certain nation and those who did not. The propaganda machinery of the governments during the war acted as a catalyst to this very process. Nationalistic attitudes, combined with the fear of subversion, helped engrain war paranoia in the public consciousness. Fear and an 'us versus them' mentality were common symptoms. Street names, the exhibition of enemy trophies, the incarceration of various 'enemy' peoples - which extended beyond those initially suspected as enemy aliens to include many under that heading, such as diplomats, priests, lawyers, and industrial competition - and a patriotic frenzy all typify the period. Yet there was something surreal about events. These were not experiences that one could easily appropriate or conceive of as part of a recognizable template of war-making. In many cases, this was industrial war beyond the realm of experience. War poetry also reflects this all-pervasive and omnipresent fear factor of the time. At the political end of the scale was a gulf between leaders and their apparently adoring subjects. The reality of their situations could not have been more removed from each other.

Impact on Literature and Poetry

World War I had a profound impact on human consciousness, and this trauma permeated literature. The senseless brutality of warfare, drawn out across four gruesome years, had far-reaching implications. It not only redefined human tragedy on an institutional level but also redefined the limits of language and knowledge. Warfare ravaged the environment, turned progress into a shibboleth, shattered notions of empire and human exceptionalism, and gripped a generation within the thrall of a despair so vast it must take a blank verse form to englobe it in verbal form.

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Artistic works turned away from the sprawling narratives of heroics and glory, and the epic or personal elegy reforged in the context of combat ceased to be a thing of bombast and hero worship and became instead a means to confront the raw, beautiful, and terrifying reality of the dark envelope of death. Some of these changes were in form, as poets decried the conceits of cobwebbed poetic fluency for the earthy, vigorous, and vituperative crudity of the soldier's song. Some of these changes could be metrical, as some could make their neutered kind of doggerel into a virtuous literary adoption of antiquarian accent. Yet the conflict has proven to be so persuasive; artists wrote these changes into their very bones, and thereby the work of countless men during this period, while presenting an ocean of experience of hell, presents alongside this a biting and vivid critique of the very culture and tactics that permitted these atrocities to unfold. And in particular, a sedulous and ferocious ethical restitution is sought in the poetry of this time. Although it is odd for the 'modern' form to proceed when publication is hardly the goal, this kind of form has been necessary to emphasize - through its formal rupture - the cosmic gulf between the terrible agon of firsthand experience and the apparent lackluster mutterings of politicians who, with bland and witless earnestness, oversee the slaughter of children.

THEMES OF WAR IN WORLD WAR I POETRY

World War I poetry, which arose from the frontline soldiers, not only provides us with different opinions and mindsets towards war, but also shares moments of glory and despair. Different subjects of war are covered in the poetry shaped by unique and individual experiences, and they have been condensed into four major themes: loss and grief, starting from survivors' guilt to the catastrophic gap in the human psyche when trying to find a rationale behind its losses; horror and despair; the pity, disillusionment, and psychological alienation; and finally, patriotism and nationalism. In discussing the poetry, I will go through these themes before outlining examples of the best poems from the literature. Loss and grief provide four of the five most important themes, but in some sense, all the poems can be related to these themes. The poems about loss and grief tend to focus on internal agony, capturing the tragedy that takes the joy out of life. Not only are the soldiers who fought in the war portrayed as victims of this agony, but their relatives and friends as well. The internal suffering from the working conditions on the frontline provides an underlying tone to the themes. Patriotism and nationalism provide the other part of why people write poetry, as seen in the second most frequent themes: the themes reflect different sorts of denial of the nations and the system underpinning the rationale of the war that is waged.

Loss and Grief

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Many World War I poems explore the theme of loss and grief, indicating that the war affected poets more deeply on an emotional level than on a political or ideological one. The most frequently analyzed war poetry relates to some aspect of mourning, whether that is mourning for particular individuals, comrades as a group, or for the world that has been lost. Due to the endurance and profundity of the social and emotional effects of the war, a lack of direct personal experience of the front did not necessarily potentiate a lack of understanding of its emotional landscape within society: mothers, wives, children, sisters, and even families of some comrades could depict the war as a catastrophe.

Just as war poets recount the profound emptiness that permeates their own experience of the war, the war is also depicted as a time when other families are bereft. The mothers, wives, and sweethearts that appear so frequently in the poetry are portrayed as oppressed by the unrelenting dread that at any moment they might receive the telegram, with so many of the best in their lives already lost. Loss and grief are so deeply ingrained in this literature, and the imagery used is so powerful that readers can be easily overwhelmed and mainly need to withdraw from the field of battle. Examples of direct personal bereavement include "Sonnet" and "Mental Cases." These poems are made more powerful by the fact that, to varying degrees, the poet-prophets successfully communicate not only the moment of loss but also the larger emotional context of the loss.

Patriotism and Nationalism

Themes of patriotism and nationalism loom large in the poetry of World War I. On the one hand, several poets explicitly align themselves with the state and its war aims. Some express an intense national pride, celebrating participation in the war as a crucial element of their national identity. This sentiment manifested in a variety of forms: in the imperialistic rhetoric of elder statesmen, who measured strength in jingoistic terms; in artworks, literature, music, and drama that used shifting methods of glorification of imperialism; and in pamphlets, handbills, books, newspapers, and propaganda declaring, in ways competitive with other participating nations, a strong and united purpose of patriotism.

At the same time, other poets, responding to the same social forces, critique the overtones of excessive patriotism. They point to outright government propaganda pressuring men of all nations in order to push them into military service. Many poems written in the immediate months after the outbreak worry that those who refuse will be understood as unpatriotic shirkers. "Patriotism ever conceives the neighbor wayward and a knave," wrote a poet, continuing: "If to fight, the path of he will most humbly leave." The proliferations of newspaper and printed calls to arms,

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however, present a more complicated pattern. Some, having joined up, can demonstrate an exuberant patriotism as soldiers and further encourage others to enlist.

Horror and Despair

'Horror' is a sub-theme commonly explored in World War I poetry. To depict war as 'repulsive matter', many poets employ grotesque or repugnant imagery. The main outcome is a poetry subverted by a 'systematic anti-poeticality'. The first subject of these repulsive images is the human body, disfigured by war. Most common among the images of repugnance are decay and corruption, frequently described as oil or green in color. Another recurring motif is that of the senses; smell is often a particularly unwelcome informant on the damage done to or by the disfigured body. Thus, poets usually write about the psychological horror engendered by seeing one's own flesh rot, but later the sense of smell becomes crucial in determining a wider despair. The despair of trench warfare lies in the waste it generates. This despair is often seen as conceptual as well, extending to the waste of human life and the shattering of a very old civilization. The main function, though, of this existential wasteland is to undermine romantic thought and language, demonstrating that the world is barren of life-giving value.

The body often displaces the human being in the space of the poems, the face, hands, eyes, and head turned away and invisible. This kind of silencing of the speaker—war poet and/or soldier in the trenches—is in line with a denial of the transcendent mission of poetry. Notably, in some poems, a poet-soldier heroically raises 'a hymn of hate' for what he sees, but this is a rare strategy. As such, the only available 'voice' in these poems is a Socratic futility, a self-critical acknowledgment of incapacity or refusal. Given the frequent reliance on a definitive 'no comment', the task of interpretation and judgments about the value of these poems is forcefully passed over to the agonistic reader. Finally, war poems, especially those of the last part of the Great War, are full of violent images to gain the reader's attention and to reach a deep emotional response.

ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POEMS

Virtually all the literature of the First World War presents male experiences of the conflict, but in the works of women writers, this imbalance is not the result of the historiographical and social factors that influenced their male counterparts. The absence of women from most accounts of the period is replicated in the texts that were produced. Of interest here is the difference between the combatant and colonial theatres - in the worn-out trenches of Europe, a sense of lament fermented among all languages of the combatant powers, producing an instant canon of poetry and prose. This was less the case in European overseas territories, the colonies of empire, until

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postcolonial readings of World War One revisit the literatures and histories of Palestine, Africa, and Syria, for instance, to find silences and enforced, or assumed, disinterest of European writers in colonial regions.

Although each publication provides a slightly different set of poems about similar themes, the most reproduced poems have turned them into anthologies of World War One poetry. However, new research on poetry and emotions shows that poems present more complex stories since, in European cultures, emotion has been historically measurable, uniquely private, and inherently opposed to reason. Although emotion had been opposed to reason, poems presented alternative ways for understanding personal and social events, including the war. Each poem has distinct roots in a time and place, with unique qualities of tone and feeling, but beyond their immediate contexts, these are not irrelevant to the moment of war because affective intensities in the cultures up to and during the events of the First World War and the development of a mass or global condition were part of this.

Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est'

"Dulce et Decorum Est" was written during Wilfred Owen's convalescence at Craiglockhart military hospital in 1917. Originally based upon an incident where mustard gas was dropped on a transport column in April of 1916, Owen 'did not realize the significance of his material.' He returned to it in October of the same year and completely redrafted it with renewed vigor. The poem was eventually published after two further drafts in 1920 without Owen ever having seen the final version. In the poem, Owen deals with the question of heroism, a theme touched upon by Sassoon. In "Dulce et Decorum Est," Owen does not show heroism to be glamorous or filled with glory but as the actions of a man disillusioned and broken by the true face of war. By using vivid and gut-wrenching imagery, he makes it clear that the propaganda being thrust upon the unsuspecting public by war supporters was false and ethically wrong. Owen hits directly at the false old lie about nobility in hardship and the fine reward one gets for dying in battle. Contrasted to the other poets' treatment of war, which would lead us to believe that it is preferable, albeit only slightly, to die "with the glory and victory of battle," he calls it the most obscene and loathsome experience to face a human being. Owen's traumatized poem is far removed from the romantic image of a heroic English action. It rejects the romantic and criminal promotion of false slogans. The real becomes even further removed from Owen's pre-war and soldier background phase of his writing. He is becoming less a conventionally English poet than, for instance, the American, although Owen retained his anger and compassion, and in this phase has a more seriously harnessed fury. Their ethical wrath becomes deeper and more seriously analyzed.

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Siegfried Sassoon's 'The General'

Level 4.2

Siegfried Sassoon's 'The General' focuses particularly on the military leadership of the First World War and harshly criticizes a variety of its themes as represented in the poem by the Scottish officer. The opening juxtaposition of the famous, battle-winning general with "a glut of marmalade" paints a picture of a distant, pampered leadership; this is supported by the clean handkerchiefs in the officer's pocket. Clearly, he is not in range of the killing that occurs on the battlefield. In addition, his "white" gloves suggest a ceremonial aspect of his figure, picking up on the ironic honors listed in line two. Sassoon also makes use of ominous imagery from the off, as the general "splatters our way" – the abattoir simile paints the soldiers as animals, indicating how the officers view them. Indeed, Sassoon suggests that the general takes little interest in his troops beyond their numbers; their actual deaths are of little consequence. Sassoon personifies the officer's moods: "glum", "wizard", "jovial", juxtaposing these with the privacy of his "officious" military desk and suggests that he issues orders mechanically in order to maintain his own distance, detached from the reality of war.

The third paragraph concludes with a brief examination of 'The General', showing the poem's dual thrust. The criticism of blind patriotism is present, though in this case the foolish men are the generals, not the poor boys from the working class. Sassoon's poem draws attention to the radical ignorance, even when traditional ideas of courage and leadership may have propelled these men up the chain of command, and their unwavering belief in the support of God for their battle in spite of all evidence to the contrary, or rather that evidence is ignored. Sassoon's focus in Owen's poem is the actual fighting in the trenches, and so the ideas conveyed are different in each poem, and these differences can be read further as coping with the personal pain of their experiences. This personal coping is evident in the colloquial language used by Sassoon throughout, particularly in the repetition of the general's title; it could equally be argued this language is used to convey how "ordinary" and expendable the officer perceives his troops to be, as well as himself being far above them.

Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier'

Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" is one of the best-known war sonnets of the era. It presents an idealized and romanticized vision of the themes associated with the period. Written early in the war, this provides a good starting point for analysis in elucidating the general sentiment about the conflict at the time. 'The Soldier' is an encomium, an ode in praise of the willingness of the volunteering poet-soldier to die, without the spilling of his sacred blood being experienced as an earthy departure from a clean,

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ardent, and exalted life, in the service of his God, his king, and England. Brooke's use of abstract and idealized language is reminiscent of the glorification of war in the poetry of the pre-war poets.

'The Soldier', as a representative of the transitional phase, embodies both the aspirational hopes and the sobering reality in an optimistic sentiment. We might wonder about the value of latent suffering, if so many English soldiers had not died and suffered death, for what might seem, in the context of this culture, the mere technicality of one drop of gore against another. Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" is marked by his death, months after war began, and by the circumstance of its composition. War had already been declared, it was in full force, and Brooke was on his way as a soldier to the Western Front. There is no fatuity, no assurance of an untroubled departure.

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF POETS

In the time of war, these poets each approached conflict with an individual style and subject matter. For example, one poet wrote of the dehumanization of the men in the trenches, the nightmares that he lived after his exposure to mustard gas, and the pity of war in his poem. Similarly, another poet was bitter in his satirical poetry and wrote of the waste, the lies, and the immorality of the conflict. Conversely, the earlier war poetry of another poet was patriotic in each of the five sonnets. He began with a celebration of his hope, the soldiers of England, in a poem for the enemy country, along with another poem, which meditated on his keenness to go to war.

Despite these inherent differences, each poet had found common ground, writing in times of war, and as such, there are intricate and sometimes vague similarities in their subject matter. One sonnet was published in 1919; it was the first World War poem to be published to masses of readers, while at the time of one poet's death, only five of his war poems had been published in book form. Two poets were both soldiers and poets, but as one was honorably discharged after receiving a head injury, the other was treated for shell shock and invalided back to England through the influence of the first. It was in the hospital that one became a poet, physically able to think clearly and intellectually capable of writing.

Different Approaches to War

In literature, poets approached the war from various angles. Poets such as Rupert Brooke, who was also one of the first to die in action, wrote poems about the nobility and romance of battle. Few of his early poems, all published posthumously and taken out of context, have spread around the world, giving the world an incorrect first impression of war poetry. However, the poetic voice most synonymous with the Great War is not Brooke's romantic hero, but Wilfred Owen's, who was more concerned with representing the reality of

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the trenches than incorporating romanticized and beautiful elements. Owen's approach is representative of how many poets saw the war, as a brutal and pointless conflict. These differences are due to the personal experiences of the poets and their own way of seeing the world. More than representing the rest of society, these poets used their works primarily to try to represent what they went through. While many of the war poems that were written during the Great War revolve around the same key themes about trench life, there are so many of them that it is easy to locate poems with significant differences in perspective on the war. This is healthy for the area of war poetry because it suggests that there were many different views of the conflict, and no one poem or group of poems could ever hope to capture a single, 'true' representation of the war. Poetry, perhaps, can never represent 'truth' but merely the ever-changing 'truths' according to one's personal experience.

Similarities in Themes and Motifs

Something that makes the poetry such a useful primary source is that it allows for the recognition of similarities in experiences between soldiers. Poets chose quite different forms with different aims, but shared in the same experiences. It is the recognition of these common thematic threads woven through their works that reveal to us a general impression of many soldiers' wartime experiences. We get a sense that many of the poets felt the futility of war, treasured moments of peace, security, and the natural world, and dealt with the trauma of witnessing death, as well as the actual onset of depression in some cases. In viewing these poems together, we can even make out an impression of the life of human experience.

Though his works are full of both bitterness and sorrow at the terrible impact the horrors of the war have had on people, one poet's tone is not so despondent as commentary on the war poetry generally postulates. Indeed, some poems step out of this sense of dread, most famously certain notable works. What makes these works different is not the motivations behind the work so much as the moments that stand out most to the individual, the futility of it. It is in this poetry that we find many of the themes and symbols viewed as commonplace to consider in studies of World War I verse. The overriding theme we find in these poems, then, is the futility of war summed up neatly by a notable title. Attesting to the personal experience is that the vocabulary reveals a preoccupation with patterns of meaning rather than emotional portraits of individuals and their struggles. This poetry is filled with works that are cynical and world-weary, a mood of disillusionment. Over 130 poems and almost an equal number of prose pieces were published, nine volumes by summer 1919. The popularity was such that volumes of the "War Verse" in the 1914-18 period would usually contain more of these works and in more flexible arrangements than proposed in the first two volumes.

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CONCLUSION

The essays in this collection consistently point to the interpenetration of history and material culture on the one hand and the literature produced by those who participated in World War I on the other. To some extent, the essays consider the life and experience of a range of individual poets and indicate how this experience has a clear bearing on the way they write about World War I and on the themes they negotiate. Human bodies, time, and place meld in a binary stretching between the immediate, embodied experience of the individual on the war front and a wider history of release, settlement, and betrayal as part of a more generally felt history.

The first of these causes of mutation is loss, a theme that is captured in the story of Wilfred Owen, both the man and the poet. The second theme intersecting between the essays is that of patriotism. The last theme coming out of the essays is that of despair. The relatively small sample of poetry cumulatively indicates that it was difficult for soldiers to regard death as anything other than abomination – and this is also evident in the essays when considering the histories of the individuals involved. In conclusion, this essay has sought to illustrate how understanding the national and personal history of all the poets considered here is integral to their reading. It is useful too because it is a reminder of how personal responses to the war are conditioned by a wider, extra-literary response.

Summary of Findings

Following an in-depth examination of World War I poetry and the period in which it was written, it has become evident that history had significant bearing both on the extent to which, and the methods by which poets addressed the war. In close study of five key poets of the time, poems have been carefully chosen to underscore the key thematic and stylistic elements of World War I poetry. Items such as loss, grief, patriotism, and others recur throughout the poems, leading to the further exploration of each theme on a comparative basis. Yet it has also been noted in the examination of the poems in question that both authorial intent and subject matter varied significantly from poet to poet; whilst certain themes were undeniably pervasive, the way in which these themes were approached by each poet suggests that some were more able to reflect the prevailing mood than others. The overall thematic assertion remains, however, that the poems selected each represent a set of recurring themes representative of World War I poetry. The varying experiences and psychological motives of these poets have been identified as an additional catalyst for their continued and sustained poetic output. In conclusion, it has been argued that, only in light of history, can World War I poetry be fully and widely comprehended.

By revisiting their work, it has become clear that certain poets aimed to document the conflict in a way

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that others did not feel compelled to. The thematic concerns of these protest poets were substantially divergent in nature from those of their peers. The exploration of the historical context in which World War I poetry emerged forces a re-reading of these poems and stresses the symbiotic relationship between history and literature. This paper, therefore, concludes by calling for further study into the historical conditions which have influenced literature and, conversely, the ways in which literature can shed new light upon history.

Implications for Understanding War Literature

It is difficult for a reader to grasp the thematic themes running through war literature if he does not understand the historical context of the conflict that gave rise to it. In a broad overview of the framing of poetry, we find that not only did some of the most powerful works come out of the Great War, but prominent poets, too. In other words, poets gave and still give voice to an experience and perspective of war that the reader might never truly see without the services of poetic expression. While we might suppose that we know the horrors and pain of war, it is only through war literature and the revealed depths of human emotion and expression that we really grasp the full measure of how complex and deadly a war truly is. Works like these, which directly express the attitudes of one historical moment, give the student and scholar of military history an additional understanding of the war, the people engaged on either side, and the effects the war had on those individuals and abroad through the wider angle of culture. These works serve as a reminder of that rather obvious point: wars are experienced differently, in part, by individual people and within collective groups, and literature of war reflects those varied experiences that cannot be short-handed. Furthermore, it is important to see how people have come to reflections on war and warfare throughout history. Nor can we reduce all works to the idea that war is bad. Poetry about World War I points out their view of the war and the conditions. However, critical examinations also pointed out that such works utilize concepts as evidence of our perceptions of knowledge. Such knowledge is a process of emotion and reason working together.

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