



## REMINISCING WAR POETRY: INTERPRETATIONS OF HARDY, SASSOON, PICKTHALL AND MCCRAE

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### ABSTRACT

War poetry is a genre of literature written by the poets commonly known as “war poets”, who either participates in a war or has proper knowledge on war and expresses his/her views through the medium of poetry. In this paper I have taken into account few poems such as *In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'* by Thomas Hardy, *Dreamers* by Siegfried Sassoon, *Marching Men* by Marjorie Pickthall, *In Flanders Fields* by John McCrae, and tried analysing their observations of war. All these writers belong to different nations such as England, Ireland, Canada etc, and give their interpretations on war through their poems. Hardy in the poem presents the picture of the war situation not in the battlefield but instead in the native land, how war affects the lives of the ordinary individuals. Sassoon on the other hand on the basis of his experience as a soldier, writes about the thoughts and feelings of a soldier facing enemies at the battlefield. Pickthall in her poem writes about the Canadian sacrifices in the war, her way of looking into the sacrifice was a Christian way where she compares the thousands of soldiers with Christ. McCrae in his poem laments the death of his dear friend Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, who was killed in the “Second battle of Ypres”. Thus, I have tried to analyse these poems to see how different poems presented or gave different interpretations on looking at war. Also how the authors were affected on a personal level by the war.

**Keywords:** Anti-war, death, impermanence, native land, moroseness, soldier.

### Introduction to War Poetry:

War Poetry was basically written during and about the First World War. It is also known as ‘Trench Poetry’. It is a kind of modern poetry which is naturalistic and at the same time painful and realistic. Most of the war poets were influenced by the Georgian Poets or were Romantics at heart. Although they were modernist poets writing during the early 20th century, it is difficult to find modernist traits in their poetries. The reason behind this is that they were experiencing havoc in their lives and they wrote in response to the pathos or traumatic experiences occurring in the society. Most Georgian Poets presented war as a noble affair, war was glorified and the warrior was termed as “the happy warrior” who was celebrated for his nobility. War poetry punctured the idea of this jingoism, which meant supporting one’s own country irrespective of it being right or wrong. War poetry was actually anti-war poetry; it instead of glorifying the war represented the horror and pity of war. The dark side of war was presented by the war poets. Several war poets wrote on several perspectives on war, few presented the battle field situation, few expressed the feeling of loss, few lamented the death of their near and dear ones. They basically tried to portray the negative side of war and how war did



no good to humanity. War poetry presented shocking images and language; in fact war poetry contributed whole lot of new words to language, especially English language. Few important war poets were Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Marjorie Pickthall, Thomas Hardy, John McCrae, Wilfred Owen, Herbert Read etc. In this paper I will be talking about such war poetries, which evoke death, disillusionment, pathos and focuses on the vices of the First World War. Amongst several war poets I have chosen four poems of the four poets like Thomas Hardy, Siegfried Sassoon, Marjorie Pickthall, John McCrae, who are from different backgrounds. All these poets had different personal lives where they had a role to play, their individuality always left an impression on their piece of art. That is why every poem differs from the other inspite of the fact that they fall under the same category of war poetry. I have tried to recall the war poetries to understand the time of the First World War. An attempt has been made to capture the gloominess of the period. We will also try to understand the various interpretations of the various poets and how their works reflected their inner passions. Poet through the medium of poetry tried to vent up his emotions, reflecting a fair picture of his times.

#### Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

Hardy was an English poet and novelist. Hardy's poems and novels gave a pessimistic view of the world around him. Subjects of his poetry include nature, love and war. Most of his poems on war have tragic themes and present human beings as having little or no control over destiny Hardy mostly writes tragic poems on hopelessness, loneliness, and brutality of war. The title of the poem '*In times of "The Breaking of Nations"*' is an allusion to the Bible and the Old Testament, and, more specifically to Jeremiah 51:20: 'Thou art my battle axe and weapons of war: for with thee will I break in pieces, and with thee will I destroy the kingdoms.' In other words Hardy's poem is written in the time of such 'breaking of nations'- in time of a war i.e. the World War. Hardy's biblical allusion marks the presence of war in the human history and the breaking of nations as was seen across Europe during the First World War was nothing new. The first stanza focuses on 'a man harrowing clods', i.e. the man is breaking up the clods of earth. We get an idea that he might be a farmer working on the fields instead of holding arms at the battle field. Moving on to the next line we notice that the man is moving 'In a slow silent walk', which indicates his lack of vitality or we get an assumption that that he is not very young and energetic. This entire stanza basically gives us a picture of a farmland where an old man who is half asleep maybe because of weed consumption. The old man along with his old horse is working lazily and silently, it seems that all the young and energetic men have gone to the battlegrounds for the war. The people who are old and are unable to fight for the nation are left behind and so they are made to work on the fields. Food we know is a basic necessity so no matter what crisis the country is facing, food has to be cultivated so the weaker ones are to cultivate crops. The situation of the people at their native homeland, who are physically away from the war but are affected by the adverse effects of the war, is shown. The basic necessities of life like food, clothing and shelter cannot be avoided or ignored, so the normal course of life has to go on. The second stanza starts with the line 'Only thin smoke without flame', which contrasts with the terrible fire and destruction of the war. The farmer is burning the weeds and plants that he has pulled out from his fields. This process of farming unlike the wars is said to go on the same, 'though dynasties pass'. Wars might come and go but farming has to continue even though several dynasties pass. This stanza shows the continuity of the rural life, even amidst war. By this stanza Hardy presents the contrast that lies between construction and destruction. Elements like fire which can be destructive to livelihood and burn the peace of human beings at war field can actually be constructive in the case where the farmer burns the weeds for agricultural purposes. Burning fire is a metaphor for the continuity of life. The third and final stanza describes a young woman and her lover whispering to each other. Hardy by presenting the readers with the lovers show how things like war have no control on human emotions. War can't stop emotions like love. Even at times



when there is war and devastation going on everywhere, there are people falling in love, expressing their love to each other. In the final two lines Hardy writes how the details of war will be forgotten before their 'story' i.e. love will die. Their love story will therefore continue even after the documents of war will fade into oblivion. In the poem Hardy presents the situation at home rather than in a foreign field. He shows how war creates few changes in the world, where all the budding men are sent to the battleground leaving the old and weaker ones in the country. But war can't change the basic necessities of life like food so the frail ones have to work hard to cultivate food for the people. Apart from that we see that even at times of the war there are young people falling in love, because love cannot be controlled. War can change the outer circumstances and bring hatred among countries but the love within the people cannot be neglected. Hardy shows the artificiality of war which cannot control the lovers' emotions. War can bring destruction but cannot destroy human emotions. War is a temporary phenomenon and will fade away soon.

### Siegfried Loraine Sassoon (1886-1967)

Siegfried Sassoon was an English poet, writer, and soldier. He became one of the leading poets of the First World War. Sassoon is best remembered for his angry and satirical poems on war. His poems evoke the soul wrenching terror and brutality of trench warfare, poetry characterised by bleak realism, his contempt for war leaders and patriotic cant and his compassion towards his fellow soldiers. He wrote both war poems and religious poems. He was also an achieved prose writer. Few important war poems of Sassoon are *Enemies*, *Conscripts*, *Attack*, *Dreamers*, etc. We will focus on his *Dreamers*, which deals with the feelings of a soldier at a battlefield. *Dreamers* is a poem written during the time of the First World War about a soldier. This poem focuses on the soldiers rather than the war itself. Sassoon himself being a soldier is able to portray the feelings of a soldier at the battlefield facing the enemies. The message of the poem is that the brutal soldiers who kill each others at the battlefield are also 'normal' human beings. They are in fact dreamers who dream about their normal/personal lives which rest beyond the Warfield. The first two lines of the poem display what ordinary people's conceptions of a soldier are. The line "*Citizens of death's grey land*" shows how a soldier is looked up as a bringer of death and as a ruthless one who doesn't think twice before killing someone, but the readers also made aware that in spite of all these they are themselves not free from deaths fatal grasp and gain nothing. The next two lines take a dramatic turn by stating that the soldiers stand staring at destiny but is thinking about "*feuds, jealousies, and sorrows*", which resembles their ordinariness in feeling emotions just like any other human being. Soldiers must be active, they must be victorious, and that is what they are always told to. They are expected to earn victory for their countries by sacrificing their lives. They are expected to be mechanical, without any proper emotions or longing but Sassoon points out that beyond their lives at the battlefield they have their individual lives which they long for. Sassoon says that all soldiers are dreamers, who dream of the happy lives that they left behind, when the guns begin and the war is on, they think of their fire lit homes. They reminiscence their homes, clean beds and their loving wives who is waiting eagerly for them. At times when the soldiers are so close to death, they recall their happy times and loved ones. They long to go back to their own homes. The poem is filled with imagery that shows both the soldier's wishes for a peaceful life and the horrors they experience such as when they are in "*foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats/And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain.*". These lines paint a vivid picture for the reader of what life the soldier experiences at war. A soldier has to be active in all circumstances and situations away from the peace that he deserves. When a war takes place and soldiers are sent out to fight for their country, people imagine that they are fighting honourably and in a chivalric manner and their death is glorified. Sassoon does not write about the physical state of war at the fields but the mental war going on in the minds of the soldiers at the battlefield. He points out the horrible environment the soldiers have to live in, and also the simple things that they dream of before their death. The poem has only two stanzas with a simple "ABAB" rhyme scheme. The irony lying in the



poem is that, when the soldiers go for a war they go as an embodiment of bravery and valour but when the actual battle begins they think of the ordinary things that they had taken for granted like their home, family etc. A serious and morbid tone is used in the poem to make the audience feel the situation of a soldier at war. We find a similar disliking of war in the works of Wilfred Owen who has a famous saying "*My subject is War, and the pity of war. The poetry is in the pity.*" Owen famously declares how the war was pitiful and the poetry is in pity. In one of Owen's famous poem "*Strange Meeting*" Owen describes a soldier who escapes from the battle and proceeds down a long tunnel, where he hears the sleepers groaning, who were either dead or too full of thoughts to get up. This poem somehow shares a similarity with that of Sassoon's *Dreamers* because in both the poems there is a sense of escapism, where the soldiers want to escape from their continual state of mind and dream being the only mode of escape. In *Dreamers* the Soldiers recall their happy times but in the *Strange Meeting* the soldier meets his enemy who is dead just like him, starving in the Hell. This shows the inner conflict lying in the minds of the soldiers at war. In both the poems we come across the horrors and pity of the war situation which is not appreciated even by the soldiers facing it.

#### **Marjorie Lowry Christine Pickthall (1883-1922)**

Marjorie Pickthall was a Canadian writer who was born in England but lived in Canada. She was once thought to be the best Canadian poet of her generation. Her poems were really famous, including her short poem '*Marching Men*' which is a religiously inspired response to the sacrifice being made by thousands of every men every week in the First World War. The poem is an example of the glorification of the soldiers and their plight. In the poem Pickthall calls the soldiers as Christ and pays homage to their sacrifices. The religious imagery shows that all the soldiers were righteous and deserves heaven. Pickthall in her poem sees the sacrifice of the soldiers in a Christian way, by saying that '*I saw thousand Christs go by*'. The marching men going for the war were like Christ carrying his cross on the way to Cavalry to be crucified. She portrayed the soldiers as brave men who marched fearlessly singing idle song, who seemed careless and coarse of lip. She says that these people deserve Heaven because they have given their '*earth-born dreams to deck the grave*'. These soldiers have sacrificed their dreams for the sake of their country; they marched bravely for their country knowing that they are actually marching towards their graves. Pickthall says how these soldiers march with their '*souls unpurged and steadfast breath*' towards '*the sacrament of death*'. And for the death of each one soldier there is a woman lamenting, whose heart feels like being hit by seven swords at once. *Marching Men* is a more thoughtful response to the First World War compared to that of her contemporaries. There is a difference in the essence of the poem because it was written by a female civilian rather than a male combatant. A female response to the war is underlying in the poem even though the poem focuses on the men folk. She was sensitive towards the plight of the soldiers so she uplifted their position to that of divine Christ. Pickthall represented the womenfolk who were an integral part of the poetic tradition in wartime. Poetry became a means of literary outlet for the women who were quite since a long time.

#### **Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae (1872-1918)**

John McCrae was a Canadian poet, physician, author, artist and soldier during World War 1, and a surgeon during the Second Battle of Ypres in Belgium. He is best known for his famous war memorial poem "*In Flanders Fields*". Though various legends have developed as to the inspiration for the poem, the most commonly held belief is that McCrae wrote the poem lamenting the death of his dear friend, who had been killed during the Second Battle of Ypres. It is one of the most quoted poems of war. As a result of its immediate popularity, parts of the poem were used in efforts to recruit soldiers. The poem is also widely known in the United States, where it is associated with Veterans Day and Memorial Day. Flanders Field is a common English name of the World War 1 battlefields. These fields were later on turn into memorials. McCrae in the poem



presents a picture of the memorial ground in Flanders Field where poppies grow in rows between the crosses i.e. the graves. While in the sky above, larks fly 'bravely'. However, the peaceful scene is deceiving and the song of the larks can barely be heard over the sound of "the guns below". The soldiers are lying into their graves with a sense of bravery but the bravery song is overshadowed by the sounds of the guns. In the next stanza we come to know that the speaker of the poem is dead. We come to know that they were soldiers who have died during the war. The speaker tells how they 'lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow' but were dead. They loved and were being loved but now they were lying in the Flanders Fields. They enjoyed the ordinary happiness of the world but now sadly lied beneath the crosses. The speaker is seeking to remind the readers in this stanza that these soldiers were real men, they did exist and enjoyed things like any other human being do. The narrator has created this situation to make the readers emphasise with these men, who should be recognised as the heroes of their country and not to be forgotten. The final stanza is a call to arms. The poet is speaking directly to the readers telling them that it is now their turn to fight and stand up against the forces that are seeking to destroy them. McCrae is basically writing this poem from the point of view of a soldier who is dead while battling in a war. The soldier is dead and is lying underneath the Flanders Fields where he used to fight for his nation. The soldier is reminiscing his bygone times and regrets on his situation where he is dead. But he is asking his countrymen to take up the quarrel with the enemies and not let his and his other fellowmen's labour go in vain. He wants his countrymen to bear the torch from their hands and hold it high. The soldier asks them to raise high the name of their country and fight on behalf of them who have lost their lives in the name of their country. He asks them not to break their faith because if they do so then he along with the other dead martyrs won't be able to rest peacefully in the Flanders Fields, even if they lie amongst the poppies.

Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" is another beautiful poem on a soldier sharing a similar sense of patriotism as is presented in McCrae's poem. This poem is about a soldier going for a war with a sense of duty and pride who thinks about his death and sacrifice for England. He thinks that nothing could be more pleasant than to lie in a grave at England. The poem represents the patriotic ideals that consisted in the pre-war England. Just like the *Flanders Field* the soldier in this poem does not care about his death in the name of the country but instead wants his country to be victorious in whatever circumstances prevail. In this poem the soldier tells the readers that for him to die for England would be the surest way to salvation. The soldier in the *Flanders Field* does not want his sacrifice to go in vain and asks his fellowmen to fight for him and their other brothers and here in this poem the soldier is ready to die thinking this could be the best sacrifice one can make to the country.

#### Findings and Critical Analysis:

In this paper we have come across the genre of war poetry in war literature. We have come to know that war poetry was actually a means of outlet of emotions of the poets whom we know as war poets. These poets penned down their situation in the form of poetry. By taking four poems from four different war poets, we came to know that although all of them wrote in the same genre of war literature but they captured different aspects of war. War poetry not only captured the havoc caused by the countries but we see the different situations of war presented. We see McCrae presenting the aspirations of a soldier who dies in a battle but is still left with the dream of victory. He asks his fellowmen to fight for the dead ones to bring victory for their nation. While Sassoon pre-sets the inner conflict in the minds of a soldier who goes bravely to fight for his nation but is deep inside missing his former life. No soldier wants to die but they know that death is lurking over them every single day so they dream of their homes, families, happy times, etc. Pickthall on the other hands is sensitive about the dead of the thousands of her countrymen and thinks that their death is no vain and should be respected, she compares them to that of Christ and think that their sacrifice is no less.



Hardy on the other hand puts up a complete different picture where he shows the situation of a native country where no war is taking place but is involved in war and the people left in the country is affected by war. He shows how in spite of war few things never change or cannot be restricted. It depends on the perspective of looking at war and I think that all these poets had a different perspective to look into things. These poets analysed or interpreted war in different ways. A soldier saw war as a duty and only thought of victory but at the same time knows how a soldier battling at a field feels being so close to death. A female on the other hand shows her sense of loss by glorifying the soldiers. At those times women had to wait and keep longing to see the men, be it their father, brothers or lover. The news of the death of each man caused suffering for a woman waiting for him to return. Few other individuals saw the life at the country where people were always under the pressure of war but the basic necessities of life could never be ignored and institution like love could not be controlled. Love will bloom even at times of war and that is what few poets portrayed through their poetries. Close study of the poems gives us a complete picture of the times of wars from different angles and viewpoints. Few important elements in the war poems are as follows:

**Moroseness:** In all the four poems we see there is underlying theme of moroseness or gloominess. In Hardy's poem we see that the whole set up is very lethargic where a lazy man tries to do his work, a picture of moroseness' comes to our mind immediately when we read the poem. In Sassoon's poem on the other hand we see the pathos of the soldiers who are unhappy and gloomy, in Pickthall's poem although there is glorification but the main idea is based on the gloominess and sad effects of war. In McCrae's poem also there is seen how pathetic a soldier feels after death in a war. War poetries creates a sombre atmosphere to paint the actual picture of the war.

**Soldier:** The element of soldier was very important in war poetry. We come across the term soldier directly or indirectly in almost all war poetry. *Dreamers* and *Flanders Field* as we know is directly about the soldiers, where the soldier's inner mind is reflected in the poems. In *Marching Men* we find the poet compares the soldiers to Christ and in Hardy's poem there is no direct use of the term soldier but towards the beginning we come to know that there is an old man at the fields because he is unfit for war and the stronger ones might have gone to face the battle.

**Death:** Death is another common element of war poetry. As we know war leads to death and that is why war poetries are incomplete without the portrayal of death and decay. In the four poems we see that in *Breaking of Nations* there is indirect relevance to death and destruction, while in *Dreamers* there is battlefield situation where the soldier tries to escape death, in *Marching Men* the sacrifice of the soldiers is paid tribute, and in *Flanders Field* a dead helpless soldier begs his fellows. Basically death marks its presence in the war poetries.

**Anti-War:** As we know war poetries are actually anti-war poetries, so we see the poets trying hard to convey the message of forbidding war to the readers? In Hardy's poem we see a war stricken land and its dullness is showed making readers aware of the bitter impacts of war, and in spite of the wars there is blooming of love. Love is considered greater than war. In Sassoon's poem the soldier dreams about his normal course of life which is anti-war. The poet shows how a heroic figure like a soldier also opposes war internally. In Pickthall's poem there is a sense of love and respect for the soldiers but it in no way glorifies the process of war. In McCrae's poem on the other hand we find a soldier helplessly asking his fellows to fight and do what he couldn't, but there is an underlying meaning which shows how the soldiers with the passion for victory fights but it is death ultimately which surrounds them and still they don't realise what they have lost but instead they mechanically thinks about the war only.

**Impermanence:** while reading various war poetries impermanence is something that strikes us very often. We come across the fact where the impermanence of war is seen. Not only war but the impermanence of human





life is also seen. In *Breaking of Nation's* Hardy focuses on the impermanence of the wars, something so devastating as wars can also come to end. Apart from that there is a hint in the human beings impermanent existence. The old man depicts that human beings are mortal and subject to death. In the *Dreamers* there lies impermanence in the mind-set of a passionate soldier who thinks about other things while at war, it shows how a soldier like any other individual can have change in his thoughts. The poem also through the soldier shows the transience of human life. In the *Marching Men* there is direct reference to the impermanence of the life of a soldier at war, whom Pickthall shows respect. It also shows the impermanent relationship between a soldier and his ladylove. With the death of every soldier dies a woman attached to him. The relationship of a lady and her lover was very transient at times of war. In *Flanders Field* we directly see a soldier dead which shows how impermanent was the life of a soldier at war, apart from that the dream of victory is also shown as impermanent because with every soldiers life being impermanent the hope for victory also seems vague.

**Native Land:** All war poetries have mention about the native lands directly or indirectly. Either there will be praising of the native land or sense of patriotism. War poets even sometimes without mentioning their native land gives the picture of their native lands. In *Breaking of the Nations* as we see the native land of Hardy is portrayed, no matter whatever elements of the land he had brought up but the setting is that of his native land. In *Dreamers* also the soldier fights fir his native land and that makes him stay away from the better things of his life. In *Marching Men* Pickthall brings in the idea of the Canadian sacrifices at war and McCrae brings in the Flanders Field which is an important part of his native land. Even in other war poems like Rupert Brooke's *Soldier* we find the deep sense of love of the speaker for his native land, even the grave of the native land is pleasant for the soldier.

### Conclusion

War poems were basically records of history at the times of war. When read closely we get to see how the situations were at the times of war. Some of these poems were giving us a documentary on war. Some poems can be read as testimonies or testimonials. By analysing different poems from different writers we get a glimpse or insights into the minds of the people of those times. Also how war was seen differently by different genders. War was seen in a different way by men and women. Men had to go to the battlefields to participate in war and their feelings were that of bravery or the fear of facing death, whereas women were passive participants in the war. They did not directly participate in the war but were deeply affected because their dear ones were battling for their lives. The situation of women folk were definitely pathetic as they could not do anything themselves and only got news of death and destruction. Whenever a soldier died in battlefield there was a woman dying several deaths in the homes. War creates unpleasance to the society. Though some people thought war to be chivalrous but war actually created disturbance in the society. These poets were flag bearers of the anti-war poetry, which was much needed at that time to bring peace and stability in the war stricken society. They were trying to bring awareness in the society against the prevailing war mentality of that time.

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