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Siegfried Sassoon and Rebecca West: A Dual-Commentary on the English Home Front in World War I

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CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE

**SIEGFRIED SASSOON AND REBECCA WEST: A DUAL-COMMENTARY ON THE
ENGLISH HOME FRONT IN WORLD WAR I**

SUBMITTED TO
PROFESSOR WALSH
AND
DEAN GREGORY HESS
BY
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INTRODUCTION

The glory of war is dead, and the Great War killed it. Soldierly dignity, heroism, and proper field chivalry; all laid to waste by a single mortar round at Arras. This ethos—a vestige of Greek warrior worship—stood little chance against the trenches. It either drowned in the fecal trench muck at the Somme or staggered back—in tatters, if that—a broken soul; another victim of the so-called “Good Fight.” And there were *many* victims. An entire generation, even, lost to the trenches. But that’s not even the worst part. The worst part is that home front in England didn’t even get it. What’s *it*, you ask? It’s the camaraderie of corpses in December; the death machines of modern warfare; the sulfurous sting of mustard gas in your lungs. In short, “it” is industrial warfare—and the mayhem it wreaks on land, body, and mind. And the British were blind to it. The family unit? Antiquated, and still talking about Waterloo. The Press? Propaganda-pushers. Military Officers? Unforgivably inept, and repulsively negligent. Of course, the home front wasn’t ready for this. In fact, English *culture* wasn’t ready, either. After all, wars were still fairs; soldiers fought in “good taste”; and frilly outfits were all the rage. And then modern warfare happened.

The trenches left no room for humanity—much less luxury. The human form had never experienced such deathly machines, effectively knocking decent taste and chivalry out of the picture. Trouble is, news never got to the Isles—and if it did, well, most ignored it. The consequences of this deferred comprehension were psychologically devastating, preventing a whole generation of men from reconciling their inconceivable trauma from the war. English

soldiers sacrificed both soul and sanity, but for what? Decorations? A pat on the back? Soldiers came back with baggage their families didn't want to unpack...if they came back at all, that is.

These men were pushed into corners; boxed into chivalric crates born from centuries of knight worship. Someone, in short, had to make room for these soldiers. While other writers like Wilfred Owen, Ford Maddox Ford, and Thomas Hardy focused more on the conflict itself,¹ one author, Siegfried Sassoon, rose from the tedious, terrible trench work of the Great War to wage “war on war,”²—or at least the way England does it. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, his anti-war compilation, represents an incredible attack on the misperceptions of the war in England. He criticizes fathers and mothers, wives and sweethearts, majors and generals; lambasts war correspondents and politicians; and rallies relentlessly against the English institution of good taste. The poems are uncompromisingly sharp, balancing grotesque, inhuman imagery with biting, sarcastic, even playful tones. Sassoon's imagery constitutes an incredibly effective counter to the suffocating forces of cultural and political naïveté. In this way, *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* doesn't tell a story. It makes a point.

Rebecca West, on the other hand, tells a story. Her novella, The Return of the Soldier expands on many of the images and themes discussed above. It's no coincidence, either. West consciously draws from Sassoon's *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, exploring his images and positions in a narrative form. The evidence is clear, dramatic, and incredibly revealing. The Return of the Soldier addresses many of Sassoon's issues, but from the perspective of the home front, rather than of the soldier. This relationship—and the dual-commentary it presents—was discovered during the course of this thesis' research, directed by Professor Keri Walsh. What at first appeared to be mere coincidence soon became far more than that—and this thesis project

¹ Paul Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory (New York, Oxford University Press, 1975).

² Paul Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory (New York, Oxford University Press, 1975) P 91

consequently followed the line of thought. The results of this study of the relationships and crossover between Siegfried Sassoon's *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* and Rebecca West's The Return of the Soldier shed new and necessary light on the anti-home front culture of the war, the failings of social institutions, the damaged underpinnings of the male conscience, and, of course, Sassoon and West as commentators on the war. Sassoon, for his part, uses the poetic form to imprint images of truth to his naive audience, while Rebecca West elaborates on such themes, conveying Sassoon's ideas to the reader through the form of a story. This thesis will methodically explore this relationship, first establishing Sassoon's fundamental criticisms of the home front, then illustrating West's fascinating, effective, previously unrecognized usage of his ideas as the backbone and inspiration for her novella.

Chapter 1: SASSOON AGAINST THE WORLD (WAR)

To call Sassoon's war-experience a "rude awakening" would be an injustice to the vulgar initiation he experienced. The overwhelming, sickening world of the Great War strong-armed Sassoon into a deep and bitter cynicism with which he would rage against both the violence itself and, more importantly, the institutional vehicles which bred and proliferated the "false" perceptions of the war to an ignorant, unacceptably naive society. Indeed, it is this second enemy that draws the brunt of Sassoon's cold blade of wartime disillusionment, and not the Germans, England's hated nemesis, the suffocating hell of gas, or the trenches themselves. No, Sassoon's enemy is not the Front...but those who fail to understand it, and those who contribute to this unforgivable misdirection of truth. Nowhere is this bitter condemnation of home front naïveté more poignant and comprehensive than in Sassoon's 1918 compilation, *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*. Sassoon methodically scrutinizes the forces buying, selling, and condoning the "myth" of the Good Fight, laying bare the blind ignorance of fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, politicians, priests, the Press, and even the soldiers themselves. Sassoon's searing deconstruction of WWI's myths of "glory" and "chivalry" leaves no sacred cows untouched and no social stones unturned. His incredible work of criticism and dissent—along with his choice of poetry and its significance—represents an incredible portrait of the Great War's harsh realities and unforgivable misperceptions.

Born in 1886, Siegfried Sassoon grew up in Kent under luxuriously comfortable circumstances. “The local society in which he matured was pastoral and traditional,” writes Paul Fussell in The Great War and Modern Memory. This life-affirming simple world, where “he spent his time in cricket, fox-hunting, book-collecting, and poeticizing,” instilled Sassoon with an early, earnest appreciation of both the land and the people in it. Far removed from the London and its spiritually reductive mechanizations, Sassoon developed an intimate connection with the world around him. He noted the delicate dance of the seasons, basked in Kent’s tranquil vistas, and understood the nobility of a stray Hawthorn tree. In short, life was *good* for Sassoon. People were decent, nature was beautiful, and life was written in “dreamy Keatsian...verse.” Siegfried Sassoon’s antebellum perspective wasn’t so much innocent as it was *idyllic*—life as it *should* be. And Sassoon understood and appreciated his existential luxury, living not in innocent bliss but a conscious, comprehended enjoyment. And this beautiful background, routinely invoked in Sassoon’s poetry, both lays the initial framework for his later transition to pacifism *and* establishes Sassoon as an ideal commentator on the horrors of the Great War. He comes from a sort of cultivated naïveté and brings this fresh, world-adoring attitude into WWI’s blood-laden labyrinth, which, well, “changed all that.” According to Arthur E. Lane, Sassoon “was all the more alert to the contrasts provided by the conditions of life at the front.”³

Siegfried Sassoon’s literary assault on the home front begins with the title itself: *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*. Although “*Counter-Attack*” literally refers to the compilation’s dark, dizzying opening poem, it figuratively establishes Sassoon’s aggressive intention to repel society’s advances on the soldiers’ sanity and sacrifice. *Counter-Attack* isn’t just the name of the poem, but a strategy—a *movement* against propaganda and myth mongering. The idea is to

³ Paul Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory (New York, Oxford University Press, 1975), P. 92

create space—freedom, if you will, for veterans to come back as they are, respected for what they have done *and* seen. Sassoon certainly loathes the “storms of death,”⁴ but he understands that he cannot stop them. The war is what it is: “death’s gray land.”⁵ While Sassoon certainly laments the unfixable problems of the war (the “enemy,” trench warfare itself, etc), he focuses the majority of his energies on the public’s insulting ignorance of this new, horrible brand of conflict. Reflecting this multi-tiered emphasis, the compilation both illustrates the soldiers’ condition and highlights the world’s blindness to it. Sassoon’s choice in emphasis echoes the nature of the work itself, confirming the *home front* as *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*’ chief adversary—not the Germans themselves. Now, that isn’t to say Sassoon pulls punches on the war itself. Rather, he uses the conflict-commentary as a springboard for his attack of home front, inviting the audience to feel and understand the pain in ways that society has not. In order to “understand the pain,” however, the reader must be first pulled through the “foundered trench-lines”⁶ and “shapeless gloom” of the war experience. It’s a horrifying, gut-wrenching journey—and ultimately the backbone of Sassoon’s figurative counter-attack against an unforgivably ignorant public.

Sassoon sets this grim stage in the compilation’s first poem, “Prelude: The Troops.” The poem, composed of three eight-line stanzas, introduces the reader to the cold, inglorious world of the Great War soldier. Sassoon begins:

DIM, gradual thinning of the shapeless gloom
Shudders to drizzling daybreak that reveals
Disconsolate men who stamp their sodden boots

⁴ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “Prelude: The Troops” P. 9

⁵ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “Prelude: The Troops” P. 19

⁶ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “Prelude: The Troops” P. 9

*And turn dulled, sunken faces to the sky
Haggard and hopeless.*⁷

Sassoon doesn't ease the reader into this new, terrifying sphere of conflict. Nor does he attempt to establish the fundamental decency and honor of the British soldier before beginning his work. No, Sassoon immediately jumps into the reality of the war—bringing the reader with him. Absent are the traditional framings of glorious cavalry, well-dressed soldiers, and heroic captains; the type of description you would find in William Thackeray's Vanity Fair, for example. Sassoon has replaced them with the murky skeleton of a hopeless, intangible world filled with a “drizzling daybreak” and “disconsolate men...haggard and hopeless.” War isn't presented as a fair or fantasy, but an unyielding oppressor to all that men hold dear—including nature itself: “sad, smoking, flat horizons, reeking woods.” This particular detail suggests a very different world than that of Sassoon's provincial youth, in which war has stripped men and nature alike of their essential brilliance. Indeed, man, “haggard and hopeless” couldn't look less brilliant! This sad, pitiable image departs heavily from England's traditional idea of the glorious, chivalric soldier. Sassoon continues,

*O my brave brown companions, when your souls
Flock silently away, and the eyeless dead
Shame the wild beast of battle on the ridge,
Death will stand grieving in that field of war
Since your unvanquished hardihood is spent.*

Sassoon's comrades, “brown” from the trench's muck, do not go down in a blaze of glory, but rather merely cease to exist. These soldiers do not shine like national idols, but are, as Sassoon later writes, “dust.” The scene, particularly haunted by the Hades-like “eyeless dead,” conveys an uncomfortable sense of meaningless loss. Even “Death” itself grieves for lost “hardihood”

⁷ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “Prelude: The Troops” P. 9

and, later, “the unreturning army that was youth.” Sassoon’s “Prelude” discards the expected images of grandeur and greatness in favor of a more realistic depiction of the general war experience. The universality of this sadness is magnified by Sassoon’s omission of nationality. The “troops,” thus, are no more British than German. They are a representation...a general picture of the conflict’s greatest victims.

If “Prelude: The Troops” sketches an unbecoming outline of the soldier’s situation, then the compilation’s later poems fill it in—often in gruelingly bloody fashion. Consider the “Rear-Guard”:

*Groping along the tunnel, step by step,
He winked his prying torch with patching glare
From side to side, and sniffled the unwholesome air.*⁸

The poem’s protagonist blindly stumbles through an underground passage filled with some “unwholesome,” seemingly immoral air. He is, it seems, lost in the war’s gross underbelly. It’s an ungodly place, home to “the livid face / Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore / Agony dying hard ten days before.” After passing this corpse, the protagonist searches for a way out. However, as Sassoon reminds us, there’s no real way out of hell. The soldier’s conciliatory prize is “Dawn’s ghost,” an unnerving metaphor suggesting that even the *day* has died. And the protagonist, figuratively dead, unloads “hell behind him step by step.”

Sassoon does an excellent job of putting the reader in the soldier’s unenviable position. In “Trench Duty”, the narrator is “Shaken from sleep, and numbed and scare awake/ Out in the trench with three hours watch to take.”⁹ It’s an ignoble awakening, and one that’s sure to affect the reader. In “The Effect”, the protagonist recoils from corpses “sprawled in yellow daylight

⁸ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “The Rear Guard” P. 14

⁹ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “Trench Duty” P. 36

while he swore / And gasped and lugged his everlasting load / of bombs along what once had been a road.”¹⁰ As Sassoon grotesquely illustrates, the daily life of the soldier is regularly, unceasingly sickening. It’s full of destruction, decay, and, amidst it all...labor. In “Wirers”, Sassoon invokes the comparative meaninglessness of this labor: “Young Hughes was badly hit; I heard him carried / away, / Moaning at every lurch; no doubt he’ll die today. / But *we* can say the front-line wire’s been safely mended.”¹¹ The narrator’s seemingly dismissive mention of “Young Hughes” death highlights the dehumanization of modern warfare and the tragic helplessness of fellow soldiers. Sassoon again invokes the idea of metaphysical death, noting that “clumsy ghosts / Stride hither and thither.” Again, war has departed heavily from its classical greatness. All that remains are those that have died—and those that will soon.

Sassoon, drawing on his idyllic background, makes a point of differentiating between the world that could be (tranquil, warm, and safe) between the hell it has become. Nowhere is this more evident than in “Dreamers”, a poem that powerfully establishes the simple humanity of the soldiers. Sassoon writes,

*Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
They think of firelit homes, clean beds, and wives...
See them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
And mocked by hopeless longing to regain,
Pink-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,
And going to the office in the train.*¹²

¹⁰ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “The Effect” P. 21

¹¹ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “Wirers” P. 16

¹² Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “Dreamers” P. 19

The soldiers in *Dreamers* are simple—in the most humane, sympathetic manner of the word. They could care less about medals, accolades, and classical glory. All the troops want is *decency*. That’s it. And what’s decency? It’s “firelit homes, clean beds, and wives”; a far cry from the routine vulgarity of the war experience. Hell, even “going to the office in the train” feels like a dream to these poor soldiers. The underwhelming “magnitude” of these dreams speaks to the troops’ sorry state; they’re burdened, besieged, and simply want to go home.

Having established this connection to the soldiers, Sassoon moves forward in his condemnation of the “war-myths” back home. One of the first falsehoods he engages is the myth of the decently-dying soldier, an unspoken—and sometimes spoken!—expectation of decency in the face of certain death. This culture of chivalric, stoic honor harkens back to the Victorian Age, a time in which lord like civility reigned supreme. Sassoon not only breaks from this tradition; he downright abuses it through biting satire in “How to Die”. The choice of satire as vehicle reflects the need to convey the absurdity of this situation, which is: how is a soldier supposed to die decently in a trench? The poem’s title immediately establishes its satirical slant, and its understated, matter-of-fact simplicity is cruelly effective. The question is not whether the soldier will die, but whether he will do it *honorably*. Sassoon’s “How to Die” contains two biting satirical stanzas. The first paints a portrait of the ideal, romantic military death:

*Dark clouds are smoldering into red,
While the craters morning burns.
The dying soldier shifts his head
To watch the glory that returns:
He lifts his fingers toward the skies
Where the holy brightness breaks in flame;
Radiance reflected in his eyes,*

*And on his lips a whispered name.*¹³

The soldier, nearly overwhelmed by this apocalyptic scene, nevertheless endures towards the light of day, struggling valiantly to go out in honor—even in some small way. The soldier's simple nobility is quite striking. The mere shift of his head inspires the reader. Its movement towards a "holy," beautiful sky sets a heavenly scene, in which the soldier triumphs over death and darkness in this witnessing of the dawn. "On his lips a whispered name," the protagonist not only goes out with decency—he does it with Jesus. Bathed in the "radiance" of this divine portrait, the soldier surely invokes the name of his Savior. He is with Him now, Sassoon explains. All in all, the depiction is an admirably decent one and, as we know, an absolute illusion. However, Sassoon continues in this satirical voice, providing would-be social commentary on the "decency of dying":

*You'd think, to hear some people talk,
That lads go West with sobs and curses,
And sullen faces white as chalk,
Hankering for wreaths and tombs and hears,
But they've been taught the way to do it
Like Christian soldiers; not with haste
And shuddering groans; but passing through death
With due regard for decent taste.*¹⁴

Sassoon's scathing impression, juxtaposed with the genuine war experienced explored earlier, coolly conveys the Englishman's inability to understand both humanity *and* modern warfare. The speaker, supposedly an older man, comes across as a presumptuous, rock-minded ass. He rejects the idea that soldiers are dying ignobly and instead maintains that the troops' English

¹³ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). "How to Die" P. 20

¹⁴ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). "Dreamers" P. 20

decency triumphs over all. This curmudgeon fails to understand the nature of the war itself, which leaves no room for humanity. As such, he places a certain expectation on them—that they die “like Christian soldiers...with due regard for decent taste.”

This maddening level of ignorance was not unique. Grown men, drawing on their own glorious war experiences, were keen to impose Victorian-aesthetics on this England’s new, bustling generation of Englishmen fighting the “Good Fight.” An impossible expectation arose from this proud, paternal mindset: that the soldiers endure the conflict with the heads held high—even in times of death and tragedy. Sassoon draws attention to the absurdity of this expectation in “Lamentations”. In the poem, the narrator finds an emotionally tortured man at the base. He explains, “From the blind darkness I had heard his crying and blundered in.”¹⁵ Upon reaching this poor soul, the narrator learns that the man’s brother has died and watches as he “raved at the bleeding war; his rampant grief / Moaned, shouted, sobbed, and choked, while he was / kneeling / Half-naked on the floor.” The brutal intimacy of this scene overwhelms the reader, as Sassoon expertly lays bare the tragic sadness of this collision of war and family. Raging against the forces that took his brother, the crying soldier emasculates himself on the ground, “half-naked” and most certainly indecent. This man represents the war’s simple, powerful rebuttal to the “death should be decent” camp. Sassoon highlights the incomprehensible absurdity of the latter position in the final two lines. Of the wretched man, the narrator says, “In my belief / Such men have lost all patriotic feeling.” These lines are sinister and effective, conveying society’s numbness to the pain and plight of the soldiers through a nationalistic perspective. Society, therefore, isn’t just blindly ignorant. It’s callously, unforgivably dumb.

¹⁵ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “Lamentations” P. 27

Sassoon takes this scrutiny a step closer in “The Fathers,” another two-stanza poem in which he explores the dangers of old men living vicariously through their sons. Sassoon writes,

*SNUG at the club two fathers sat,
Gross, goggle-eyed, and full of chat.
One of them said: “My eldest lad
Writes cheery letters from Bagdad,
But Arthur’s getting all the fun
At Arras with his nine-inch gun”*¹⁶

Sassoon paints an unflattering portrait of fathers “snug at the club” (soldiers would often dine at their favorite clubs on leave, even after a day in the trenches)¹⁷. “Gross, goggle-eyed, and full of chat,” the fathers are blind to the stark, morbid reality of the conflict across the channel. War might not be something you watch anymore, but it’s certainly something to talk and gossip about—sort of like sports. The “first” father’s remarks immediately convey his absurd ignorance of the situation. He dismisses his son in Bagdad, who does not seem to be fulfilling the full potential of a soldier. He shouldn’t be writing “cheery letters from Bagdad,” but laying fire on German troops across the French countryside. The son in Bagdad is actually having a “fun,” world-opening adventure, but he’s swept aside for the son who fulfills his father’s traditional expectations of the English soldier. The “impotent” old friend, as he’s later called, seems oddly preoccupied with the phallic nine-inch gun. The father, envious of both youth and its great weapons, lives vicariously through their employment—ignoring the horrors that his son faces every day in France. The second stanza is similarly effective:

*“Yes,” wheezed the other, “that’s the luck!”
My boy’s quite broken-hearted, stuck in England training all this year.
Still, if there’s truth in what we hear,*

¹⁶ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “The Fathers” P. 24

¹⁷ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1975)

*The Huns intend to ask for more
Before they bolt across the Rhine.”
I watched them toddle through the door—
These impotent old friends of mine.*

This “second” father, somehow exceeding his companion in ignorance, openly laments his son’s tardiness in joining the Good Fight. It’s appallingly, unfaithfully stupid. The father, after all, *wants* his son to fight. And there’s no mention of national pride, either. No, this is a matter of individual glory and the vicarious living of old men who “toddle through the door.” Sassoon presents a sad satire of these old gentlemen and their ready, mindless sacrifice of England’s youth. In pointing out their absurdity, Sassoon lays significant blame for the proliferation of war-ignorance on these fathers. Indeed, it’s a main component of his “counter-attack” against false forces back home. Sassoon is making room for his soldiers to be themselves—freed from the presumptuous expectations of a naive public—so they don’t ever have to think as one soldier does in “Remorse”: “He thought—“there’s things in war one dare not tell / Poor father sitting safe at home, who reads / of dying heroes and their deathless deeds.”¹⁸ While there will always be communication gaps between father and son, this particular disconnect is much more than mere generational difference. It incorporates the fathers’ false, damaging preconceptions of war—and their sons’ consequent inability to relate. These lines imply a fear of disobedience, as the soldier doesn’t want to disappoint his father with tales of indecent dying.

Sassoon continues his attack on the family in “The Glory of Women” and “Their Frailty.” In the former, Sassoon takes on an accusatory tone, rebuking women for their role in facilitating false perceptions. “The Glory of the Women” is more aggressive in nature than Sassoon’s paternal satire. He spits, “You love us when we’re heroes, home on leave...you worship

¹⁸ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “Remorse” P. 57

decorations; you believe / that chivalry redeems the war's disgrace. / You make us shells."¹⁹

Women, thus, do nothing more than fawn at fame. They don't understand the reality of the situation, and consequently subscribe to the traditional doctrine of decency. Sassoon's women offer no sympathy for the troops back home. In fact, they "can't believe that British troops "retire" / When hell's last horror breaks them." Like the "fathers," women still regard war as a splendid, social affair in which courtly men vie for regional supremacy and personal honor. There's no room for "terrible corpses" or soldiers "blind with blood" in this fair image of war—which is exactly what Sassoon is trying to change. In "Their Frailty," Sassoon again accuses of blindness. He writes, "Husbands and sons and lovers; everywhere / They die; War bleeds us white. / Mothers and wives and sweethearts,—they don't care / So long as He's all right."²⁰ Blind to violence and ignorant of policy, the women never challenge the virtue of the war itself or the nature of the conflict. They're selfish beings, concerned only with the safety (and glory!) of their respective sons. Sassoon attacks them for their frustrating inability to translate their individual, maternal sympathies to a questioning of the violence in general. Rather than employing these concerns in a positive, policy-challenging way, the "mothers and wives and sweethearts" buy into the propaganda and accept the myth-mongering—that is, except when their own sons are in danger. These two poems offer an inelegant depiction of the maternal position on the war, raising a sobering question in the process: "if women can't understand the soldiers' plight, who will?"

¹⁹ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). "The Glory of Women" P. 32

²⁰ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). "Their Frailty" P. 33

Sassoon deftly transitions to a similar condemnation of the church's own wartime propaganda and perceptions in "The Investiture" and "Break of Day." In "The Investiture," Sassoon presents an imagined scene of God welcoming fallen soldiers into heaven. He writes,

*God with a Roll of Honour in His hand,
Sits welcoming the heroes who have died,
While sorrowless angels ranked on either side...
Then you come shyly through the garden gate,
Wearing a blood-soaked bandage on your head;
And God says something kind because you're dead,
And homesick, discontented with your fate.²¹*

Religion, according to Sassoon, offers no relief to the countless dead. The Church has promised everlasting glory and unending happiness to all that believe. And yet, "you" are "homesick, discontented with your fate." "You" do not want to enter Heaven's lonely gates. You simply want to go home—somewhere you are wanted, where people won't just "say something kind because you're dead." In "Break of Day," a group of soldiers awake to the dawn of a new trench day. The narrator wonders if "God's blank heart" has "grown kind," and "sent a happy dream to him in hell."²² These musings constitute an aggressive counter to the uninspiring religious propaganda of the time.

Sassoon saves some of his best critical blows for chief proliferators of this propaganda: the Press. His poems about the press industry explore the incredible differences between the reality reported and the reality itself. They confidently denounce the press for perverting the news and pandering to the traditional expectations of an older generation. In "The Effect," Siegfried Sassoon juxtaposes a War Correspondent's representation of a bombing with the actual effect of the attack—emotional repercussions included. The poem begins with a few lines from the War Correspondent: "The effect of our bombardment was terrific. One man told me he had

²¹ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). "The Investiture" P. 35

²² Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). "Break of Day" P. 37

never seen so many dead before.”²³ This message fails to convey the visual, moral consequences of the “bombardment.” Its sole intention is to portray an example of British excellence on the battlefield. The War Correspondent doesn’t care about what the dead look like, or the mental state of the “one man.” No, he distills the experience into something that “impotent old friends” can handle. Sassoon writes,

*He'd never seen so many dead before.
The lilted words danced up and down his brain,
While corpses jumped and capered in the train.
Oh, no; he wouldn't count them anymore...*

Notice how the phrase “he’d never seen so many dead before” signify fundamentally different ideas for the War Correspondent and the soldier. The former interprets the line as a boast—a bemused remark upon the proceedings—while the latter considers the grave tangible *and* intangible repercussions of this experience. The correspondent looks at the scene and is enthralled. The soldier? He’s terrified, shaken to the core by this unprecedented (for him) display of death. They are too many bodies to count, and furthermore, they “jumped and capered in the train.” The War Correspondent is truly out of his element here, and doesn’t even attempt to portray the reality before him.

Sassoon’s scathing assessment of the Great War culture is influenced by his compassion and concern for his fellow soldiers. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, in short, is an act of solidarity, which establishes, explains, and ultimately protects the men around him—as the collection’s later works explain. However, in order to accomplish this goal, Sassoon must first illuminate the difference between the soldiers and their military officers. This endeavor places the soldiers in stark contrast to not only the home front, but to their very leaders. These officers, as Sassoon coldly indicates, bear enormous blame for the propagation of the Great War “myth.”

²³ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “Editorial Impressions” P. 30

Their ignorance of the Front's actual conditions virtually enables the propaganda and misperceptions explored earlier in the collection. Sassoon's anger at this incomprehensible blindness is most evident in his bitter, sarcastic "Base Details." He begins, "If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath, / I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base, / And speed glum heroes up the line to death."²⁴ These lines immediately establish an image of the "Majors" as spineless, disillusioned, and most importantly, *soft*. These high officers remain behind, poorly conditioned both in fitness and in moral stature. Sassoon puts them up on an idealistic pedestal—"fierce"—only to bitterly kick them off a few words later. He contrasts the "bald...short of breath" officers with "glum heroes," laying waste to the romantic notion of British captainship through sarcastic juxtaposition. However, as always with Sassoon, this is only the tip of his argument. He builds on the idea of drunk officers—"scarlet Majors"—in the next few lines: "You'd see me with my puffy petulant face, / Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel." In this case, the officers mirror the "impotent old men" explored earlier—they bask in the luxuries of fine accommodations and alcohol while their men make daily plunges into the living hell of the Front; the officers literally drink to the death of their fellow Englishmen. Having established this despicable image, Sassoon lays the full force of his anger on the officers:

Reading the Roll of Honour. "Poor young chap,"
I'd say—"I used to know his father well;
Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap."
And when the war is done and youth stone dead,
I'd toddle safely home and die—in bed."

²⁴ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). "Base Details" P. 25

These final lines break both the heart of the reader and the image of the war itself. The officers feign concern—reducing the loss of life to a mere aside—and intimacy. Sassoon further pushes the idea of unfit, uninformed fathers perpetuating the propaganda, directly connecting the Majors to the previous generation of soldiers whose experience bears little resemblance to that of Sassoon’s and his brethren. Sassoon again turns to the word “toddle”—used earlier to describe the fathers—and the comparison hits home in ruthless fashion. The narrator—a regular soldier—bitterly illustrates the generational gap between both the officers and their soldiers. His re-imagining of himself as an officer conveys both the soldiers’ anger at their leaders *and* the sad, irreconcilable difference between the two groups. Fussell notes “its utterly unbridgeable distinctions between “the scarlet Majors at the base” and the “glum heroes” of the line sacrificed to their inept commands.”²⁵

“Base Details” succinctly conveys the consequences of this generational gap, but Sassoon isn’t done yet, as “The General” demonstrates. He takes bold aim at the higher-ups in the poem, which describes an interaction between an oblivious general and his grimly aware soldiers. Of “Base Details,” Fussell writes, “In Sassoon’s poems the oppositions become the more extreme the more he allows his focus to linger on the Staff and its gross physical, moral, and imaginative remove from the world of the troops.”²⁶ Indeed, Sassoon’s acute, intensified scrutiny of the officers expresses perhaps his most poignant discontent. He writes, “Good morning; good morning!” the General said / When we met him last week on our way to the line.”²⁷ The general’s cheery “good morning” reflects a far cry from the “Dawn’s ghost” evoked in the “Rear Guard.” British leadership, as such, is far removed from the realities of the Front—quite simply,

²⁵ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1975) P 83

²⁶ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1975) P 82

²⁷ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “Base Details” P. 26

that there is no such thing as a “good morning.” Sassoon continues, “Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of ‘em dead. / And we’re cursing his staff for incompetent swine.” The soldiers recognize their superiors’ idiocy, but are powerless to redeem it. It would be, as Sassoon has suggested, “in bad taste.” The soldiers merely remark “He’s a cheery old card,” and make their way “up to Arras with rifle and pack.” The poem’s final line pushes further, even suggesting treachery: “But he did for them both by his plan of attack.” For Sassoon, the officers’ vapidly actually borders on *treason*. And why should it not, given the lives lost by virtue of their mismanagement? In “Banishment,” Sassoon dramatically emphasizes this betrayal: “But they died, - / Not one by one: and **mutinous** I cried / To those who sent them out into the night.”

Sassoon’s poetry in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* is driven not by his own depression, unhappiness, or discontent over his loss of pastoral innocence—but rather by a soldierly sense of duty; a responsibility to his fellow soldiers, his brothers. As Sassoon explains in “Sick Leave,” “When I’m asleep, dreaming and lulled and warm—/ They come, the homeless ones, the noiseless dead...they whisper to my heart; their thoughts are mine.”²⁸ The soldiers’ plight torments Sassoon, even when he’s on sick leave from the Front. “I think of the Battalion in the mud,” Sassoon says. He asks himself, “When are you going out to them again? / Are they not still your brothers through our blood?” This profound sense of obligation drove Sassoon to return to the Front both after “convalescence”²⁹ for a shoulder wound and a medical-board instituted “mental sanitarium in Scotland.”³⁰ According to Fussell, “he was convinced he was abandoning his men at the front.”³¹ Sassoon’s relentless attacks upon the war draw from the

²⁸ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “Sick Leave” P. 43

²⁹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1975) P 91

³⁰ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1975) P 91

³¹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1975) P 91

same dedication and brotherhood that compelled Sassoon to return to the Front, despite the hardships he had faced.

Sassoon discusses this theme and the task's overall influence in "Banishment": "The darkness tells how vainly I have striven / To free them from the pit where they must dwell / In outcast gloom convulsed and jagged and riven / By grappling guns."³² And yet, despite the immensity of this task, he must go on. "Love," Sassoon explains, "drove me to rebel. / Love drives me back to grope with them through hell." *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* inflicts great damage on both the attacked parties *and* Sassoon himself. The compilation is an act of self-sacrifice, driven by duty and compelled by love.

Siegfried Sassoon's *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* offers powerful criticism through the poetic form, utilizing the genre's chief attributes; its emphasis on imagery, reliance on feeling, and ability to impress an immediate, acute portrayal of consciousness on the reader. Sassoon makes superbly effective use of these faculties, conveying an immediate, insistent impression to the audience. This mode of representation is fundamental to Sassoon's endeavor, which necessitates a vehicle capable of imparting his impassioned criticism. Indeed, poetry is perfectly suited for Sassoon's bitter, sometimes-sarcastic, always-striking style. That is, it serves as an ideal medium for Sassoon's urgent message.

The choice of poetry also showcases Sassoon's modernist tendencies. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* is successful, in part, because of the way in which it defies convention. This holds true for both its forms—Sassoon rarely employs conventional poetic structure—and its abstract, inventive imagery. In short, Sassoon's *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* upends convention, laying proverbial waste to an outdated ethos of warrior nobility and "due taste." The

³² Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). "Banishment" P. 44

medium of poetry allows Sassoon to take these risks and illuminates his successful overcoming of these obstacles of convention in a way that the narrative simply cannot. In World War I, Sassoon encountered unprecedented levels of inhumanity. His impressions—and indeed reality itself—could not be described in a conventional manner (and *certainly* not the Press). The horrors of the gas, trenches, and muck were simply beyond the public’s comprehension. Sassoon writes, in large, to bring that new reality to the reader’s doorstep. In Touch and Intimacy in WWI Literature, Santanu Das writes, “Sassoon’s satires...evolve the category of the horrifically sensuous.”³³ He charges fathers, mothers, officers, pastors, politicians, and “sweethearts” alike with negligence, and seeks to undue their perceptive wrongs. Poetry, as stated earlier, presents an ideal medium for this endeavor. It offers striking portraits of feeble fathers living vicariously through their endangered sons, scathing commentaries on military leadership, and, as in “The War Correspondent,” authoritative rebuttals to the press’ propaganda. Sassoon’s choice of mode and message is an amazingly successful combination. Fussell describes *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* as Sassoon’s “final blast against the war,” despite the fact that he wrote narratives after this compilation. The term “blast” is fitting. It conveys the explosive nature of Sassoon’s “war on the war.”³⁴ Indeed, Sassoon’s poetry strikes at the heart of the Great War’s myth. It combats public misperception with bold, unfiltered truth, destroys inept leadership with bitter satire, and represents a movement for soldiers against the suffocating problem of perception at home. The images and the collective messages constitute an incredible example of war criticism. His work had far-reaching effects and influenced a wide range of British writers—especially Rebecca West.

³³ Santanu Das, Touch and Intimacy in World War I Literature (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005)

³⁴ Paul Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory (New York, Oxford University Press, 1975) P 91

CHAPTER 2: The West Effect

However, poetry—and Sassoon’s in particular—does have its limitations. Rebecca West, an English writer in the early 20th century, seizes upon both *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* strengths and constraints, as this chapter will demonstrate. In essence, Siegfried Sassoon lays the proverbial foundation for the Great War soldier’s conscious anger, frustration, and reactions to the home front. Rebecca West, in turn, both builds upon it—expanding on a number of *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*’ themes and imagery—and explores the “foundation” itself through her psychologically rich novella, The Return of the Soldier. West’s work aims to explain Sassoon’s poetry, in that it takes the compilations dramatic, immediate, brutal images and gives them a narrative place. Fussell writes of *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, “we would be surprised to find the proceedings anything but remorselessly binary.”³⁵ West seizes upon Sassoon’s justifiably uncompromising position and reconciles it with reality. Sassoon’s themes prove a point in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*—but they paint a picture in The Return of the Soldier.

This crossover of themes and images is not merely coincidental. Rather, it’s repeatedly evident in the novella—given the aforementioned themes *and* a number of images and allusions to Sassoon’s unique, sarcastic style. These themes include the female role in the war’s perception and problems, the cruel juxtaposition of pastoral life and modern warfare, protest of the war itself, and the general wartime issues of memory, reality, and the inevitable psychological difficulty of the soldier’s mental return to life-as-usual. The images themselves—conjuring images of wealthy, pastoral background not unlike Sassoon’s, strike at the heart of

³⁵ Paul Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory (New York, Oxford University Press, 1975) P 82

many of Sassoon's criticisms and lamentations. The "white hawthorn tree," in particular, appears in both works and serves as an all-important bridge between the authors. It should be noted that this connection has *not* been explored in this genre. The relationship between Sassoon and West is, as this chapter will demonstrate, evident, thoughtful, and above all—revealing (both in regard to Sassoon's themes *and* the man himself).

The title of the novella, Return of the Soldier, seems to suggest an emphasis on the soldier himself—and the inherent struggles of his return from the Front. However, this couldn't be further from the truth. Instead, West immerses the reader in the full familial repercussions of the soldier experience—predominantly, how it affects the women in the soldier's life. The novella's stage, revolving around the concerns, perspectives, and behavior of the women themselves—constitutes a de facto response to *Counter-Attack*'s poems on women, "Glory of Women" and "Their Frailty." Consider the novella's opening scene, in which Kitty, Chris (the soldier)'s wife, downplays her sister-in-law's worries about his lack of correspondence.

*"Ah, don't begin to fuss! Wailed Kitty; "if a woman began to worry in these days because her husband hadn't written to her for a fortnight—! Besides, if he'd been anywhere interesting, anywhere where the fighting was really hot, he'd have found some way of telling me instead of just leaving it as 'Somewhere in France.' He'll be all right."*³⁶

Kitty's nonchalant attitude towards the Front—"if he'd been anywhere interesting"—echoes Sassoon's lines in "Glory of Women": "You listen with delight, / By tales of dirt and danger

³⁶ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 6

fondly thrilled.”³⁷ The war experience, then, is not really an experience at all—it’s a representation, a story, a *tale*. Chris’ failure to update his family on the situation in France does not suggest drama—but rather the absence of it, which poses no interest to Kitty. Her concern in the war-matter is solely informed by her own appetite—for drama, for chivalry, and for the return of domestic, financial normalcy.

Women like Kitty certainly pine for their husbands, but their longing is superficial, limited to the “chivalry (that) redeems the war’s disgrace” and the return of domestic, blissful normalcy—an idea West repeatedly invokes through Kitty and her sister-in-law, Jenny. Written from Jenny’s first-person perspective, the novella reinforces Sassoon’s criticism of the female war-perspective as narrow-minded, base, and ultimately selfish. Remarking on their lavish estate, Jenny notes, “Even now, when spending seemed a little disgraceful, I could think of that beauty with nothing but pride. I was sure that we were preserved from the reproach of luxury because we had made a fine place for Chris, our little part of the world that was, so far as surfaces could make it so, good enough for his amazing goodness.”³⁸ Chris’ character is thus established as an integral component to the home ideal; the “luxury” is redeemed by his presence in it. Without his presence, the women cannot appreciate this blissful, idealistic world. They anticipate his return with *their* happiness—and not his—in mind. Furthermore, women like Kitty expect more than the mere physical return of their significant others; they want their men to arrive in similarly *decorated* fashion—outfitted with medallions, and regarded as conquerors.

³⁷ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “Banishment” P. 44

³⁸ Rebecca West. *The Return of the Soldier*, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 6

Writes Sassoon, “You love us when we’re heroes....you worship decorations.”³⁹ Thus, the return of the soldier becomes a superficial exercise in both the aesthetic and cultural sense.

The female dependence on the soldier’s return to “fill” the space in the house—and therefore their own psychological void through the restoration of their space—is a prevalent, necessary theme in Return of the Soldier. Jenny repeatedly emphasizes the amount of work she and Kitty have put into the house—and, notably, the fact that they cannot enjoy it without its *raison d’être*, Chris. As Jenny notes, “Here we had made happiness inevitable for him.”

Unhappiness, therefore, is also inevitable—so long as Chris is away. The ladies’ arena—the home—and the soldier are irreconcilably linked. Jenny explains, “This house, this life with us, was the core of his heart.”⁴⁰ Here, West conveys the narcissistic truth of the female experience in the home front—that the soldier is gone, bringing his woman’s domestic contentment with him.

The soldiers’ centrality to their companions’ domestic bliss is a theme implied by Sassoon—but never quite drawn out. West, for her part, takes this idea and dramatizes it beautifully. She thoroughly explores the subject of female wartime narcissism—elaborating on an idea barely touched by *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*’ sections on women.

The theme of taste—well-established in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*—is central to Return of the Soldier. Recall Sassoon’s words in “How to Die,” describing soldiers “...passing through death / with due regard for decent taste” or his criticism in “Glory of Women”: “You love us when we’re...wounded in a mentionable place.”⁴¹ Decency, proper posture, Victorian aesthetics—they’re all at play in Sassoon’s poetry, and West seizes upon these ideas in Return of

³⁹ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “Glory of Women” P. 32

⁴⁰ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 7

⁴¹ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “Glory of Women” P. 32

the Soldier, portraying both Kitty and Jenny as superficial characters—although in varying degrees—more concerned with style (decency) than substance. West then illustrates her characters’ shallow inclinations in the face of great tragedy—echoing Sassoon’s *own* issue with society’s unfair expectation that soldiers maintain their own decency (see: taste) in the midst of trench warfare and its repercussions. In other words, West has turned the tables. She presents the reader with two affluent, proper, taste-minded ladies and then confronts them with unprecedented adversity. It’s a test, essentially, applied by West, but suggested by Sassoon. Sassoon rages against the expectation for soldiers to display chivalry and taste in the pits of the trenches. West seizes this idea and applies it to the home front, illustrating that the notion of taste isn’t only being questioned in the trenches—it’s being attacked at home, too. In Kitty and Jenny, we see two materialistic characters—as evidenced by their horrifying treatment and commentary on Margaret—attempt to reconcile their proper perspective with the difficulties presented by a soldiers’ return. One—Jenny—does find some semblance of common ground between these two sides. Kitty, on the other hand, firmly establishes herself as a superficial, shallow character, unable to see past the “properness” of things and understand the difficulties of war, the nature of its experience, and her own limitations as the ideal wife and homemaker.

However, our first glimpse of Kitty does not convey this image. Rather, we see her in the nursery, “revisiting her dead”—that is, her dead child. It’s a scene that immediately engenders sympathy, painting Kitty as an already-tragic character. Beautiful, serene, and angelic, Kitty might want to float above it all—even her husband’s dangerous set of circumstances—but who can blame her? Sympathetically, she “slipped the key into the lock and had lingered to look in at the high room, so full of whiteness and clear colours, so unendurably gay and familiar, which is

kept in all respects as though there were still a child in the house.”⁴² West presents Kitty as a character in denial, struggling to cope with not only the current void of her husband in her life—but also her past loss of a child. As West explains, Kitty has attempted to cope through superficial means—primping the house, maintaining her beauty, remembering a time when Chris lived in this lavish home, and enjoying a place in which “he could not have been happier,”⁴³ due to its aesthetic value.

West soon contrasts this sympathetic image with a near novella-long indictment of Kitty and what she represents, illustrating her shallow inclinations, narcissistic mindset, and ineffably narrow perspective in the face of adversity. Kitty attempts—in vain—to maintain her proper sense of taste and decency despite the circumstances presented by Chris’ shell-shock and consequent amnesia. This laughable, simple-minded persona rings shallow in the face of a decidedly human situation. In the same way that Sassoon’s soldiers struggle to exude “good taste” in the war-torn trenches of the Front, Kitty vainly endeavors to preserve her social superiority against the reductive forces at work in her life. Nowhere is this pedantic, simple-minded, pompous adherence to “taste” more evident than in her treatment of Margaret, Chris’ old beau and current bridge to reality, post-amnesia.

Unlike Jenny, Kitty does not budge from her pedestal of proper taste throughout her interactions with Margaret. She fails to renege on her arrogant position towards the woman—an individual she views as beneath her in the only terms that matter—those pertaining to taste. We see this attitude from the onset in Chapter 1:

*Kitty pondered and said, “I’ll come down.” As the
girl went up she took up the amber hairpins from her lap*

⁴² Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 3

⁴³ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 7

*and began swathing her hair about her head. "Last year's fashion," she commented; "but I fancy it'll do for a person with that sort of address." She stood up and threw her little silk dressing jacket over the rocking horse. "I'm seeing her because she may need something, and I specially want to be kind to people while Chris is away. One wants to deserve well of Heaven."*⁴⁴

Kitty's initial behavior towards Margaret is condescending and reproachable. She presents herself as an angelic antithesis to her "lowly" counterpart, viewing her given time as a gift in itself—striking words for a woman who sits around all day. After Margaret informs the women that Chris has been "wounded," Jenny notes, "I looked at Kitty and marked how her brightly coloured prettiness arched over this plain criminal, as though she were a splendid bird of prey and this her sluggish insect food...I felt the moment degrading."⁴⁵ This terribly unfriendly attitude is, sadly, only the beginning. Kitty, not wanting to yield from her superior, proper position, proceeds to vilify Margaret, charging her with impertinence and even criminality. Her arrogance and "taste" manifest themselves into a grotesque figure of elevated self-denial. Her decency, like those of the soldiers, has been threatened—and yet she persists with it. She attacks Margaret for her shabby clothes, unfortunate accessories, and overall absence of grace. This emphasis on looks in the face of tragedy highlights Kitty's shallow nature and parallels society's expectation that British soldiers look the chivalric, glorious part...even in a trench.

Jenny, on the other hand, comes down from her pedestal to interact more humanely with Margaret. She isn't perfect—as her scathing commentary indicates—but she, like the soldiers,

⁴⁴ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 9

⁴⁵ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 12

casts taste aside to deal with tragedy and its consequences. This process does take some time, though. Observing Margaret, Jenny notes, “Yet she was bad enough. She was repulsively furred with neglect and poverty, as even a good glove that has dropped down behind a bed in a hotel and has lain undisturbed for a day or two is repulsive when the chambermaid retrieves it from the dust and fluff.”⁴⁶ And yet, despite these decidedly Kitty-esque words, Jenny still manages a trace of humanity—and true decency!—in her assessment of Margaret. She opines, “yet there was something about the physical quality of the woman, unlovely though she was, which preserved the occasion from utter baseness.”⁴⁷ Jenny learns to overcome her elitism and accept Margaret as an individual, despite her “base” inclinations. By the novella’s end, Jenny has reconciled herself with Margaret’s existence, finally understanding her “inner beauty,” championed by Chris all along. She even compliments Margaret’s appearance, noting, “You’ve lovely hair.”⁴⁸ Margaret, in ironic turn, remarks to Jenny, “You must have very good taste.” In this scene, taste yields to humanity—as it should, especially in war.

Kitty’s attempt to “win” Chris’ mind back from its Margaret-centered recesses reflect her vanity and emphasis on appearances. She tells him “I am your wife,”⁴⁹ emphasizing the label rather than the affection itself. Furthermore, as Jenny notes, she dresses up in wedding attire in an effort to remind Chris of their marital past:

*I began to say what was in my mind to Kitty when
she came in, but she moved past me, remote in
preoccupation, and I was silent when I saw that she was
dressed in all respects like a bride. The gown she wore on*

⁴⁶ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 10

⁴⁷ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 12

⁴⁸ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 76

⁴⁹ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 24

her wedding-day ten years ago had been cut and embroidered as this white satin was, her hair had been coiled low on her neck as it was now. Around her throat were pearls, and her longer chain of diamonds dropped, looking cruelly bright, to her white small breasts; because she held some needle-work to her bosom I saw that her right hand was stiff with rings and her left hand bare save for her wedding-ring....she looked cold as moonlight, as virginity, but precious; the falling candlelight struck her hair to bright, pure gold. So she waited for him.⁵⁰

This passage highlights Kitty's naive overemphasis on taste, appearances, and the marital construction. That is, she only comprehends the tangible aspects of her relationship with Chris, which underlines the very nature of his symptoms and her inability to understand them. She appeals to Chris' physical senses with her wedding dress, failing to realize that all that exists for him now are feelings—primordial, fundamental emotions. Kitty reveals her blindness in a conversation with Jenny about Chris' attachment to Margaret: "I suppose he's had so much to do with the pretty ones that a plain one's a change."⁵¹ Margaret's emotional worth appeals to Chris' shell-shocked state—he's lost himself to his sub-conscious, a place governed by the intangible and spiritual, rather than the superficial. In this world of amnesia, Chris lives by meaning alone—that of nature, and that of love. It's something Jenny can't understand, given her extraordinarily reliance on appearances and aesthetics.

⁵⁰ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 26

⁵¹ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 31

Chris' plunge into darkness reflects an unprecedented level of tragedy brought on by the harsh realities of modern warfare. His injury, like his new reality, is an intangible one. As Sassoon writes, "You love us when...we're wounded in a mentionable place."⁵² Chris' "wound" is an ironic play on this line from "Glory of Women." Kitty, for her part, cannot love a man whose "injury" goes beyond her superficial understanding. In this manner, she represents the British society as a whole. It's a world that cannot understand the consequences of modern warfare, the unending trauma of the trenches, and the psyche-breaking daily horrors of the Front. England, like Kitty, is blinded by taste, proper posturing, and Victorian ideals of decency. And the result? Sassoon knows it all too well. In "Glory of Women," he writes, "You make us shells." Chris, having lost the past 20 years of his memory, provides a striking example of this notion. Fittingly, he suffers from "shell-shock." The word "shell" here contains a double-meaning. Literally, it refers to his proximity to an exploding shell. But figuratively, the term "shell-shock" also informs the recession of his consciousness into its inner, intangible sanctum. Chris, like Sassoon, finds it impossible to relate to this unapproachably proper society after the war. As such, soldiers draw back deeper into themselves and exude a distinct lifelessness in the process. Through their illumination of this tragedy, both Sassoon and West "have striven / to free them (the soldiers) from the pit where they must dwell."⁵³

Perhaps the most exciting example of crossover between *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* and Return of the Soldier involves the importance of nature and pastoral memory. In her novella, Rebecca West firmly establishes the significance of natural beauty for Chris—both before *and* after his shell-shock. She elaborates on his pastoral childhood—a childhood not unlike that of Sassoon himself. Indeed, the parallels in youthful background between Sassoon

⁵² Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 52

⁵³ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 44

and Chris cannot be overstated. Like Sassoon, Chris matured in an idyllic, serene environment. Recalling his childhood, Jenny explains, “He thought that the birch tree would really stir and shrink and quicken into an enchanted princess, that he really was a Red Indian and that his disguise would suddenly fall from him at the right sundown, that at any moment a tiger might lift red fangs through the bracken; and he expected these things with a stronger motion of the imagination than the ordinary child’s make-believe.”⁵⁴ Jenny’s recollection undermines the spiritual liveliness nature held for Chris. His childhood, set in pastoral England, mirrors Sassoon’s in that it implanted a love for the natural world of trees, gardens, and vistas. Despite the tragedy in his life—both his father and son passed away—Chris retains an appreciation for the environment around him.

The “white hawthorn” tree, in particular, stands as a striking example of nature’s preeminent importance in Chris’ life—and, as *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* reveal, of Sassoon’s. In a conversation with Jenny, Chris recalls the tree fondly, attributing great meaning to it. Jenny explains, “he described it meticulously as though it were of immense significance—there stood a white hawthorn. In front were the dark green glassy waters of an unvisited backwater; and beyond them a bright lawn set with many walnut trees and a few great chestnuts...”⁵⁵ The hawthorn, West suggests, represents nature itself for Chris. His shell-shock does nothing to corrupt that memory—if anything, it brings him closer to it. Nature, unlike Kitty, will always be there for him. As Jenny notes later, “I imaged that white hawthorn among the poplars by the ferry on which they had looked fifteen years ago at Monkey Island, and it was more than I could bear.”⁵⁶ Jenny realizes the importance of the intangible to Chris,

⁵⁴ Rebecca West. *The Return of the Soldier*, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 8

⁵⁵ Rebecca West. *The Return of the Soldier*, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 35

⁵⁶ Rebecca West. *The Return of the Soldier*, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 62

comprehending that war has brought him closer to the emotional life and further away from the superficial.

Sassoon echoes both this image *and* theme in his poem, “The Hawthorn Tree.” In it, the speaker takes the role of a parental figure—likely a father, although it is unclear—and describes the tree’s importance to the son. The speaker writes,

*Nor much to me is yonder lane
Where I go every day...
I know my lad that’s out in France
With fearsome things to see
Would give his eyes for just one glance
At our white hawthorn tree....
Not much to me is yonder lane
Where he so longs to tread....⁵⁷*

The similarities between this poem and Return of the Soldier are not merely coincidental. West, having read Sassoon’s poetry, clearly involves herself with *Counter-Attack*’s chief nature image—the hawthorn tree. She integrates its representative meaning into her story, establishing an undeniable connection between Chris and Sassoon’s relationship with the tree. For Jenny and the poem’s speaker, the hawthorn tree is just that—a beautiful plant, sure, but no more. However, they both come to realize the significance of this tree as a symbol of pastoral healing—the ability of nature to take us back to a place before pain, war, and suffering. The white hawthorn isn’t merely a tree—it’s an eternal symbol of hope and redemption. As Jenny realizes, the tree matters because it wasn’t bought, displayed, or decorated. No, it’s a natural,

⁵⁷ Siegfried Sassoon. *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (London, William Heinemann Press, 1918). “The Hawthorn Tree” P. 34

divine image of essential beauty. Soldiers like Chris and Sassoon long for symbols like these—even in times of brutal warfare. Not even shell-shock (Chris) or terrible wounds (Sassoon) can corrupt that.

Margaret Allington's role in The Return of the Soldier casts an interesting and unique light on Sassoon's view of women in "Their Frailty" and "The Glory of Women." In many ways, Margaret represents the antithesis of Sassoon's scathing female portrayal. She is not some high-nosed, pompous, pastoral queen, but rather an embodiment of the simple beauty of the idyllic environment around her. Consider Sassoon's poem "Invocation," in which he describes the fleeting mental images of a dying soldier:

*I stumble toward escape, to find the door
Opening on morn where I may breathe once more
Clear cock-crow airs across some valley dim
With whispering trees. While dawn along the rim
Of night's horizon flows in lakes of fire.
Come down from heaven's bright hill, my song's desire.*

*Belov'd and faithful, teach my soul to wake
In glades deep-ranked with flowers that gleam and
Shake
And flock your paths with wonder. In your gaze
Show me the vanquished vigil of my days.
Mute in that golden silence hung with green,
Come down from heaven and bring me in your
Eyes
Remembrance of all beauty that has been,
And stillness from the pools of Paradise.*

Sassoon's soldier, seemingly shell-shocked ("stumble toward escape"), runs not to his favorite London club, proud father, or doting mother. No, he propels himself towards the innocence of his youth; the simple beauty of ground untouched by trench-diggers or mortar blasts. Rebecca West connects this ideal to the character of Margaret—beautiful not for her looks or taste, but for her symbolism. West beautifully articulates Jenny's understanding of this role—ironically, one she expected to occupy—in Chapter Four: "How her near presence had been known by Chris I do not understand, but there he was, running across the lawn as night after night I had seen him in my dreams running across No Man's Land. I knew that so he would close his eyes as he ran; I knew that so he would pitch on his knees when reached safety."⁵⁸ Indeed, Margaret is more than a woman—she's an image, a place, a home—a home built not on taste or lineage, but love. Chris' "closed eyes" suggest an escapism of sorts, through which his amnesia becomes a voluntary act of coping. Psychologically battered, Chris runs blindly to his most intimate idea of "home"—Margaret. As discussed earlier, Jenny and Kitty repeatedly emphasize the importance of their home to their soldier. Again, as Jenny explains, "this house, this home of ours, was the core of his heart."⁵⁹ However, Margaret's manner of "home," metaphorically speaking, isn't bound by taste or lavishness. It's unlimited, stretching as far as Chris needs. Jenny and Kitty are shackled by their preconceptions and inflexible standards of living. As such, they're unable to accept and understand Chris' plight. West illustrates this failure of comprehension near the end of the novella:

"I've always said," declared Kitty, with an air of good sense. "that if he would make an effort..."

⁵⁸ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 59

⁵⁹ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 7

*“Effort!” He jerked his round head about. “The mental life that can be controlled by effort isn’t the mental life that matters.”*⁶⁰

Kitty’s faulty reasoning underlines not only her limited frame of reference—but also that of Sassoon’s women in general. Female understanding of the Great War plight, thus, is impossible. Margaret constitutes an exception to this rule—but then again, she’s an exception to British high society in the first place. Simple, loving, and authentic, Margaret appeals to the spirit and emotional self of the soldier—rather than his decorations, posture, and boastful anecdotes. As such, she possesses an uncanny ability to receive, understand, and ultimately “fix” Chris’ amnesia. In Chapter Four, West lays out this contrast in characters—in this case, between Jenny and Margaret—through Margaret’s first meeting with Chris, under Jenny’s guidance.

I called after her, trying to hint the possibility of a panic breakdown to their meeting, “You’ll find he’s altered...”

She cried gleefully, “Oh, I shall know him.”

Margaret Allington’s presence as the antithesis to Jenny might, upon first glance, suggest a reevaluation of Sassoon’s women in “Their Frailty” and “The Women.” Her brave, unconditional acceptance of Chris finds no parallel in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*. Indeed, Margaret stands alone as the sole, home-based character in the two works that truly *helps* the returning soldier. She doesn’t attempt to impose her own vision and impressions of the war on Chris, and doesn’t try to steer him towards those that do—such as Kitty. It is not that Margaret accepts Chris for “who he is,” but rather for “what he needs.” And he, as Margaret explains to Jenny and Kitty in their first encounter, needs *her*.

⁶⁰ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 79

The novella's conclusion, however, destroys Margaret's symbol of optimism and, of course, West's favorable impression of women. In this manner, West at once explains Sassoon's imagery—her depictions of Jenny are Sassoon'esque—and reaffirms it. She draws upon Sassoon's opinion and explores it for herself throughout the novella—thus “explaining” it to the reader.

Margaret's development in the final scene of the novella demonstrates the sad impossibility of such optimism. She bemoans the need to “bring him back,” laments the uselessness of religion (touching on another of Sassoon's pet themes), and speaks admirably to the situation of both Chris and his fellow soldiers: “I know nothing in the world matters so much as happiness. If anybody's happy you ought to let them be. So I came again. Let him be. If you knew how happy he was just pottering round the garden....Go out and put an end to the poor love's happiness! After the time he's had, the war and all. And then he'll have to go back there! I can't! I can't!”⁶¹ Margaret's empathy, understanding, and foresight all draw from her admittedly “simple” nature. She is not constrained by convention or taste or “decency.” She marches to the beat of one drummer alone: humanity. As such, Kitty's “victory” in reclaiming Chris from his amnesia—and his support from Margaret—speaks volumes about West's pessimistic attitude towards women. In short, the women who truly *matter*—that is, the wives—are hampered by their inexcusable selfishness and imprisonment within the confines of decency. Kitty does not care whether Chris is mentally stable, or even whether he'll have to return to the Front if “cured.” No, she only cares about her image, self-esteem, and domestic domain. Chris' amnesia generates a void in Kitty's life. As her actions demonstrate, it is one she's willing to fill at all costs. Consider Jenny's depiction of Kitty near the novella's end: “Now, why did Kitty,

⁶¹ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 86

who was the falsest thing on earth, who was in tune with every kind of falsity, by merely suffering remind us of reality?”⁶² Kitty’s “suffering” constitutes an interesting counterpoint to Chris’ own emotional torment. There’s no win-win in this situation, as either Kitty will be unhappy...or Chris will. The only difference is that Chris’ distress far surpasses Kitty’s—a fact she refuses to entertain. Thus, Kitty trades her husband’s happiness for her own. She exclaims, “he’s cured!”⁶³ as Chris walks back to the house as his former, war torn self. His depiction, however, casts an irreconcilable shadow on the novella’s early optimism: “He was looking up under his brows at the overarching house as though it were a hated place to which, against all his hopes, business had forced him to return....he walked not loose-limbed like a boy, as he had done that very afternoon, but with the soldier’s hard tread upon the heel.”⁶⁴ Chris returns home a broken, beaten man; in short, a soldier. This insistence on a soldierly return reminds heavily of Sassoon, especially given Kitty’s narcissistic, narrow perspective.

Chris’ seemingly imminent return to the Front parallels Sassoon’s own post-asylum return to the Front. Jenny notes this likelihood in abstract, metaphysical terms (hearkening back to Sassoon’s very own style): “he would go back to that flooded trench in Flanders under that sky more full of flying death than clouds, to that No Man’s land where bullets fall like rain on the rotting faces of the dead....”⁶⁵ The language, the imagery, the devices— it’s all *so* Sassoon. West invokes Sassoon’s language in order to both raise the stakes of Chris’ life and further link it to that of Sassoon. Chris’ early, cavalier attitude, pastoral upbringing, oneness with nature, and mental illness all draw heavily from Sassoon’s life and art. This connection, as with the others discussed above, is incredibly clear.

⁶² Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 87

⁶³ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 90

⁶⁴ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 90

⁶⁵ Rebecca West. The Return of the Soldier, (USA, The Century Co. 1918) P. 90

The conclusion of this second chapter begs the question: *why*, exactly, does this relationship matter? The answer, in my opinion, is easy: this relationship bridges gender gaps, different circumstances, and literary form in its multi-faceted, reactive commentary on the war. It's a compelling case of intra-genre influence, and the power of perspective. The relationship between West and Sassoon demonstrates the wide, varied range of literary force. Sassoon shocks—while West explains. Furthermore, the reader is able to get both the male *and* female perspective—an important and useful aspect, given poems like “Their Frailty” and “The Glory of Women.” The dual perspective itself also holds great weight. West’s exploration of Sassoon’s themes allows for the reader to first see an anti-war image—as West herself did—and then draw it out through narrative means. Thus, the reader becomes an integral component in the exploration itself. West “explains” Sassoon in that she breaks down his striking, immediate imagery and tests its merits through the dramatic process. This relationship constitutes a fascinating combination, and one that certainly widens the perspective of World War I literature on the failings of the home front.

CONCLUSION

The West-Sassoon dichotomy might not rock the literary world, but at the very least, it represents a new perspective on an unobserved relationship between two main writers of a large, complex genre. This project constitutes an effort to say something different about a timeworn subject. I believe it succeeds in that endeavor. This final “product,” however, is a far cry from its paella-eating, siesta-taking roots in Salamanca, Spain. I originally had the idea to work on World War I literature in this city during Spring of last year. My class on modernist movements in the beginning of the 20th century spurned the idea, which figured its way onto my notepad during a decidedly uneventful exercise in Spanish academia. Come this Spring semester, I had decided upon “WWI and Modernism” as my topic, with Professor Keri Walsh as my advisor. The project began with Santanu Das’ Touch and Intimacy in World War I Literature and Paul Fussell’s The Great War and Modern Memory. From that point, I moved into *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, studying the compilation’s modernist undercurrents (both in form and substance). Professor Walsh then recommended The Return of the Soldier. This advice proved instrumental, given the relationship between the two works. From that point on, I worked to understand both Sassoon’s anti-war message and West’s unique consideration of its arguments and components. The results of that research and comparative study make up the bulk of the thesis itself.

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