The Poet as Hero

A Study of the Clash Between the Hero and the First World War in British Trench Poetry, and Its Use in the Swedish School System Within the Subject of English.
Abstract
This thesis studies the clash between the hero and the First World War in the works of Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. It explores the impact on their poetry and attitude towards the concept of the hero as it applied to them as people and poets. The study shows that over prolonged contact with the horrors of the First World War, it is evident in both literary sources and their poetry that both Sassoon and Owen changed their attitudes negatively towards both the idea of heroes and heroism, as well as the War as a just and glorious cause. However, the myth of the hero was still a core belief of their society, and in order to not be branded cowards and discarded along with their warnings, they had to become heroes in the eyes of their society, to openly attack the concept and the war it fueled. This thesis then studies how and why First World War poetry and literature should be utilized within the subject of English in the Swedish School System, as a means to provide a multicultural and critical education.

Key words

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DULCE ET DECORUM EST

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime.—
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est

Pro patria mori. (Owen)
1 Introduction

The First World War, in Britain known as “The Great War” affected millions of lives and has shaped our world today. But the voices of its veterans and victims have fallen silent, and the year this thesis is being written marks the 100-year anniversary of the end of the war. Now, the First World War is the subject of movies like Wonder Woman and games such as Battlefield One, where you can fight in the trenches of the Western front yourself. Before the big charge, your digital officer reminds you of the Zimmerman telegram and that you must defend your wives, mothers and sisters back home. A few seconds after, your hero rushes forward and is wiped away by an incoming shell. Who is this hero that has survived into our recreation of the horrific capabilities of man? The knight on a holy quest, to defend the people back home? What norms and values were instilled in these men, to enforce them to don this mask of the hero? And how did these men change their disposition towards this concept of the hero and heroism when they were faced with modern warfare?

In reading poems such as “Dulce et Decorum Est” by Wilfred Owen, the voices awaken yet again, and for a moment, the people who endured so long ago are resurrected. Owen’s words prove the old lie false, it is not sweet and proper to die for the fatherland. These poems created by the survivors are seldom read in Swedish schools, and then only within the subject of History. But with the recent influx of interest from younger generations in the subject of the First World War, I believe it wise to introduce this aspect of the human experience to the English subject, because it is through language that these authors can convey their messages, from beyond the grave.

This thesis is therefore a fusing of interests between my two subjects, History and the English language. In my previous thesis, I studied the wartime diaries of a Swedish volunteer for the French army, Sven Blom, and his shifting attitude to and experience of the First World
War. His diaries, which stylistically were influenced by his aspiration of becoming an author, interested me. How were these ideas about the Gentleman’s war and the hero displayed in the literature created during the war? Kate MacDonald argues in her article “Rethinking the Depiction of Shell-shock in British Literature of the First World War, 1914–1918” that:

Ann-Marie Einhaus notes that, in the context of wartime memoirs, the realist approach was also favored by readers and critics. While contemporary reviewers naturally expected war memoirs to be well written, the core issue was the veracity of the author’s account of his war experiences, or the authenticity of what was depicted in comparison to the real thing, life at the front. Readers and critics alike expected war books to show them war as it really was, or rather, as they expected it to be. (57)

And what did they expect life at the front to be like? The poets themselves realized the hollow myth of the hero when they experienced the brutality of modern warfare. This prompted them to denounce it through their poetry, although they were forced to conform to the concept in life. In 2018, soldier poets such as Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon are widely read and taught, and their poetry has changed the way that British society views the First World War. However, the focus often lies on the horror they experienced, and the value of their sacrifice, rather than on the ideological and cultural influences which shaped both their preconceived ideas of heroes and heroism, and the society to which these virtues were unquestionable.

This study examines how the hero was perceived before the First World War in British literature and culture, and subsequently how Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen changed their disposition negatively towards the concept of heroism and heroes in the encounter with the deadly reality of the First World War. This is achieved by analyzing “The Soldier” by Rupert Brooke, “Absolution”, “The Poet as Hero” and “Repression of War experience” by Siegfried Sassoon as well as “Dulce et Decorum Est”, and “S.I.W” by Wilfred
Owen using a New Historicist approach with support from secondary written sources such as biographies and historical accounts. By dividing the analysis into three parts: The Idealist Notion of War, The Realities of War and The Aftermath of War, a clear shift in the poets’ sentiment towards notions of heroism and the hero can be observed. This shift is a negative, downwards spiral, in which the disillusioned poets denounce the existence of the hero, but simultaneously have to perform the duties of the hero required of them, lest being announced as cowards, and thusly being effectively silenced and disgraced.

This game between power and subversion, wherein norms and values regarding masculinity and the individual were questioned by Sassoon and Owen continues today. Now the focus on highlighting norms and societal values has become central in the Swedish educational system. In the “Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School”, norms and values have a dedicated section, and it states that teachers should “openly discuss and together with the students analyse different values, views and problems, and the consequences of these” (Skolverket 11).

Therefore, using First World War Poetry and the findings in this essay would allow teachers in the Swedish School system within the subject of English together with their students to study how norms and values portrayed in discourse such as literature and poetry have affected us and continue to influence us as individuals and as a society. Moreover, it enables the teachers of the English subject to work intersubjectively with the subject of History. Support for this type of suggested education is found in the syllabus for the English subject, which states that the course English 7 should contain core content that encompasses “Societal issues, cultural, historical, political and social conditions, and also ethical and existential issues in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket 11).
In addition, students of English 7 should be taught “Strategies for drawing conclusions about the spoken language and texts in terms of attitudes, perspectives, purposes and values, and to understand implied meaning”, as well as” How oral and written communications in different genres are built up. How stylistics and rhetorical devices are used for different purposes and how language is used as an instrument to exercise power” (Skolverket 11).

The poetry analyzed in this essay was written by white men high up in the societal hierarchy, regarding a power structure which enforced the adoption of the masculine identity of the hero. Hence, feminist and multicultural perspectives on the First World War are missing from the material. However, these perspectives are easily added in a didactic setting through the common theme of norms and values and in analyzing poetry written by, for example, Katharine Thynan, May Wetherburn or Ella Wheeler. Hence, this essay will explore the application of First World War poetry in the English Subject as a didactic tool.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter the theoretical background of this thesis is outlined. First, the New Historicist theory which has inspired my approach to the subject is defined as it applies to this thesis. Secondly, the didactic theory which outlines the approach to using the material and findings of this essay in a classroom environment is presented. After these chapters, the hero and heroism in British literature before the First World War is studied. Here, the adventure novel, the invasion novel, and the ideals and ideologies which inspired their creation and influenced the society which read them are explored. With these genres of literature came the defining features of the hero, and the masculine ideals that accompanied him. Consequently, these narratives often described, instilled and influenced nationalism, imperialism, and ideas
of racial identities in their readers. In this field of study lies also the widespread idea of war as a cleansing and rejuvenating experience, prevalent both in Germany and Britain. Furthermore, I shall point to the apparent awareness that the British government had of these ideals, which was clearly shown when these ideals were weaponized to encourage young boys and men to enlist and fight.

2.2 New Historicism: The Wish to Speak with the Dead

The critical literary theory that I will utilize in this essay, New Historicism, rests more on the foundation of strong primary and secondary sources, rather than a pre-formed theory. In their work titled *Practicing New Historicism* Greenblatt and Gallagher argue that, “The task of understanding then depends nor on the extraction of an abstract set of principles, and still less on the application of a theoretical model, but rather on an encounter with the singular, the specific, and the individual” (6). The wide scope of New Historicism is what causes it to be difficult to define, since the field encompasses everything from psychoanalysis to deconstructionism and literary criticism (Li 8). Although difficult to narrow down, the focus on the exchange between discourse and history is central. Veeser argues in *The New Historicism* that “The New Historicists combat empty formalism by pulling historical considerations to the center stage of literary analysis” (xi). Moreover, New Historicism focuses on the sociopolitical and philosophical relationship between the critic and the criticism (Li 7).

Hence, New historicist theory focuses on how literature has shaped and been shaped by historical events and systems of power, and how we as critics in our interaction with the texts in turn becomes part of the historical process. Correspondingly, Veeser argues that New Historicists “seize upon an event or an anecdote…and re-read it in such a way that as to reveal through the analysis of tiny particulars the behavioral codes, logics, and motive forces
controlling a whole society” (xi). This thesis focuses on the literary concept of the hero and heroism as a tool, used by the British society and government to shape boys into soldiers and explorers which would maintain the British Empire’s position of power. In this context, the subversion which the poetry represents created by the soldier poets is central to point to the “motive forces controlling a whole society”.

This exchange of information between art and society is discussed by Greenblatt in his chapter “Towards a Poetics of Culture” as an example of a transaction (12). Using the poetry in this essay to explain this perspective, the poetry can be viewed as currency holding information about the reality of modern warfare. In turn, this information could have led to a shift in attitude amongst the British general public towards the concept of a just and heroic war, which in turn could have relieved the soldiers of their experience of isolation in knowledge of truth, and the fear of accusations of cowardice with ramifications to social standing.

In this perspective, this cycle of influence between discourse and history is continuous, and new research such as this thesis becomes part of it. Hence, the information relayed by Owen in “Dulce et Decorum Est” is an exchange between art and society. In Owen’s case, ruling power structures and norms did not permit such an exchange of ideological currency to take place on a larger scale, instead the transaction occurred after his passing. The poetry of Sassoon, Owen and Brooke has become canon in the cultural memory of the war, shaping our understanding of the historical context, which is constantly being revalued by studies such as this one. In short, New Historicism focuses on the unceasing exchange between art and society, history and discourse. Thusly, New Historicism lends itself well as critical theory for the purpose of this essay, since the purpose of this essay is to examine the literary construct of the hero in a historical setting and the denouncement of the concept in its clash with reality. Moreover, New Historicism lends itself well in a didactical
setting because of its innate curiosity of the relationship between all types of art and societies, providing critical and multicultural elements to education.

Thusly, grounding myself in historical evidence in my analysis, I make use of secondary historical sources such as *Now it can be told* by Phillip Gibbs, as well as biographical works such as *Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967)* by John Stuart Roberts, Jon Stallworthy’s *Wilfred Owen* and Merryn Williams work *Wilfred Owen*. Moreover, I make use of Bernard Bergonzi’s *Heroes’ Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War* as a source on Rupert Brooke, Owen and Sassoon.

### 2.3 Didactic Theory on the Use of World War One Poetry in the Classroom

The teaching of the literature of the First World War has long been a topic of debate within academic circles. How should educators go about connecting their students with the voices of people, who for them are well in the past of their society? Should one generalize, to make the history more accessible, or focus on individual perspectives? Ann-Marie Einhaus’ study, “Cultural Memory, Teaching and Contemporary Writing About the First World War” discusses how the First World War is being treated and discussed during its centenary from 2014 to 2018. Although the centenary has inspired great amounts of historical content and scores of new sources from which to gain information about the war, such as podcasts, video series and documentaries, Einhaus argues the continued importance of the use of literature in the teaching of the subject. However, Einhaus simultaneously warns of the danger of the canonizing of literature on the subject, which easily leads to generalizations and a singular perspective split between the disillusionment of the soldiers because of horrors, and the value of their sacrifice.

Einhaus arguments underlines the importance of taking a critical perspective on the canonized literature which is being taught, such as Sassoon and Owen, which feature heavily
in this thesis. Hence, the focus both in this thesis and its didactical use lies not only within the
disillusionment or sacrifice, but rather on the power structure and norms which shaped the
soldiers and their ideological perspective on taking part of the war. Supporting this line of
inquiry, Borsheim-Black et al. and their article “Critical Literature Pedagogy” outline the
pedagogical use of CLP, which they argue “aims to draw attention to implicit ideologies of
text and textual practices by examining issues of power, normativity and representation”
(123). This is achieved by teaching students to read with and against texts. Reading with a
text, the student analyses storylines, literary devices, examine the historical context and
develop thematic interpretations (Borsheim-Black et al. 124). However, in reading against a
text, the student is encouraged to identify power structures and norms in the historical context
which shaped the author and dictated its creation (Borsheim-Black et al. 125). In their study
five areas of focus are presented, these are: Canonicity, Contexts, Literary Elements, Reader
and Assessments. These areas should be considered as stepping stones for the student in their
critical reading of texts (Borsheim-Black et al. 125).

CLP and New Historicism, although different in terms of scope, with New Historicism
being more open to a number of fields such as psychoanalysis and deconstructionism, find
common ground in that they both are anthropological and ethnographic studies of literature
(Li 7-8). Both new Historicism and CLP focus on the influence of sociopolitical power-
structures on the text, as well as their influence on us as readers and critics.

In order to base the analysis on strong historical secondary sources, New Historicist
theory and method can be applied. The historical context of literary texts is the subject of the
Sidney C Li’s study “Advancing Multicultural Education: New Historicism in the High
School English Classroom”, which argues that analyzing historical texts in the English subject
using secondary sources, would enable teachers of the English subject to give their students a
multicultural and critical education (4). Li argues that it should not only be the subject of
History which should be responsible for delivering historical and cultural richness, but also
the subject of English using New Historicist theory (4). Hence, in the didactical reflections of
this thesis a combination of CLP and New Historicist theory will be used, to display how
students could benefit from the study of First World War poetry within the subject of English
in the Swedish upper secondary school. This would be accomplished by focusing on the five
dimensions outlined by Borsheim-Black et al. and the relationship between history and
discourse figuring in New Historicism.

2.4 The Hero in British Culture Before the First World War and its Early Stages

In the imperial era of Britain, the vast empire relied on a volunteer army, and was
dependent on the support and cooperation of its citizens. One must therefore imagine the
creation of heroes as role models, banners, to which young men could flock. They were ideals
created and reinforced to respond to the situation that the British society and empire was in.

Adventure novels targeted the younger generations. Here the setting and narrative of
the grand adventure in foreign lands influenced young boys to become soldiers, or, as the
adventure stories rebranded them, “explorers” (Höglund 54). “Explorers” which mapped the
vast reaches of the globe, surveying new land for the Empire which they called home.

In his study, Mobilising the Novel: The Literature of Imperialism and The First World
War, Johan A Höglund discusses the use of literature to promote political and ideological
ideas and ideals. Höglund argues that “Through the colonial novel and the tropes it employs,
young British readers were encouraged to identify with the imperial project. The adventure
novel invariably contains a white, resourceful hero, often at an age corresponding with that of
a juvenile reader” (55). Moreover, Höglund demonstrates that different tropes and
euphemisms were used such as the adventure, which “encompasses virtually everything from
apparently innocent treasure seeking to the violent suppression of indigenous uprisings” (54).
In addition, other euphemisms such as “exploration” was used instead of annexation, and “game” was used in “describing both war and the business of espionage” (54). In other words, much of the adventure literature carries many ideological justifications for the imperial practices of the British Empire.

In her work *Deconstructing the Hero* Margery Hourihan focuses on the hero and the hero’s journey in children’s literature. Here, Hourihan deconstructs the trope of the hero and the hero’s journey as well as the constant nature of these stories. A crucial step in understanding the trope of the hero is understanding when it is taught and relayed to us as readers. The concept of the hero is greatly implemented in children’s literature and would have been read to or read by the young soldiers that fought in the First World War.

One such story which is examined in Hourihan’s work is Gordon Stable’s *Stanley Grahame: Boy and Man: A Tale of the Dark Continent*. In this narrative, the protagonist and hero of the story, Stanley Grahame along with companions, encounters and fights “treacherous Arab slavers and ‘African savages’ of several races on their quest to free a beautiful white girl from slavery” (Hourihan 59). Here, the hero and his friends overcome all opponents that they face, simultaneously as the narrator, according to Hourihan, points to the inferior traits of the colored people that they encounter (59).

The story was printed in 1885, which means that it would have been a suitable story to read for the men that would take part in the First World War at a younger age. The story deals with class and race as well as masculine ideals and tropes and euphemisms that Höglund also discusses. Stories like these contributed to the myth of the hero and the idea that the white male westerner was inherently superior to other people. The nature of the narrative directly supports the imperialist political agenda of the time, relaying a very clear message to its juvenile readers.
This colonial mindset sprang from many sources, in literary terms it can be traced to famous literary works by vastly different authors and times such as *Robinson Crusoe* as well as Swedish literature in the narrative of Pippi Longstocking’s father\(^1\). The narrative of the male western hero did not start or end with the imperial tales of adventure that influenced the generation that headed into the trenches of the First World War. Instead, we can see the trend continue into literary works of our time. Both *Star Wars* and *The Lord of The Rings* are referenced in Houlihan’s work on the subject and both conform to the monomyth (14-32). Thusly, hero narratives of our generations have been augmented to fit societies, norms and values of today, the same way as they would have been augmented in the time before the First World War.

Moreover, in euphemisms used in these adventure novels such as “Game”, the practices of violence and danger are conveyed as something exciting and fun, and the end results are represented as safe for the British protagonist. Hourihan argues that “A quality peculiar to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century children’s adventure stories is the depiction of violence as fun” (100). In the previously mentioned *Stanley Grahame*, the crew of a ship which the hero is a part of, cheers when the announcement of hostilities towards another enemy is given to them. In addition, Hourihan argues that one of the most prominent such examples would be *Peter Pan*, published in 1904 (100). Here, the action of killing pirates is described as having fun and the bloody battle against the pirates is displayed as a children’s game (100). The idea that these ideals and tropes shaped the young boys’ attitude towards the conflicts and wars to come, is supported by Hourihan who argues:

> The boys who absorbed these glorifications of action and violence were ready for it when it came. Four years after “The Man from Snowy River” was published

\(^1\) Who is described as being a native King, for no other reason than him being a white western male, in the stories by Astrid Lindgren.
‘Australian Horsemen went off to fight for the Empire against the Boers, reciting “The Man from Snowy River” on the troop ships at night. (101)

For clarification, “The Man from Snowy River” is one of the most influential Australian poems with a traditional hero figure, mounted on his horse overcoming the Australian wilderness. Here, one can clearly see the practice of inspiring the white young boy to be the hero that the British Empire needed to keep its imperial dreams and identity alive.

Höglund argues that the British Empire, which at the beginning of the 1900’s were at war with the Boer in South Africa, were losing face because of the struggle of this conflict, leading many countries to doubt the military strength of Britain, as well as the moral values of the Empire. (42).

Thusly, the moral values and rhetoric that were being used to justify war were suddenly questioned in light of the mining business that could be had after the war was supposedly won. Here, the motive for the conflict, which was proclaimed to be noble and honest for the benefit of the Empire, was criticized for being a mask for greed. Höglund argues that the British Imperialism did not die with the war, but there was a shift to a more defensive stance (46). Suddenly, the focus no longer was on expanding the borders of the British empire, but rather defending them. (47).

This called for a “new” type of hero. In his book Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War, Bernard Bergonzi argues that in the final few years of the nineteenth century, when the Boer War occurred, there was a period of self-assertive imperialism, during which British writers were increasingly aware of the “martial and heroic virtues” (16). After years of relative peace, with only a small percentage of the population having experienced combat, the myth of the white male hero also reshaped the battle in which he fought. Invasion novels became popular reading. Some had the motive of opening the eyes
of the general public to invest more into the defense of the empire, while others were written with the intent to sell (Bergonzi 24). An example of one of these narratives would be The Riddle of Sands, written by Erskine Childer. In this story, an English civilian yachtsman comes across plans for a German invasion of England (Bergonzi 24). The narratives might have been written with differing motifs, but they all bear witness to the fact that there was a more direct focus on the concept of violence and armed combat, mixed with a notion of adventure in the years before the war. More than that, they spoke directly to the citizen, asking them to defend Britain, by taking up arms against a foreign unjust usurper.

Along with the invasion novels, the impact of narratives around the game of violence such as Peter Pan continued to influence the young generations. In 1914, Hourihan argues, “young men from all the countries of the Empire went to war, possessed by the myth, like ‘children ardent for some desperate glory’ (Owen qtd. in Hourihan 101). One of the men who did not make it back from the great adventure of the war was George Llewelyn Davies, one of the five boys for whom Peter Pan was written (Hourihan 101).

2.5 The Gentleman and Hero

In Tobert A. Seagal’s study Hero Myths, the fourth chapter, “The Gentleman and the Hero”, examines the Duke of Wellington and the narrative surrounding him. Segal discusses how Wellington’s values and characteristic traits came to define the British citizen and soldiers idea of a Gentleman. Segal argues that the Gentleman’s characteristic traits of determination and self-control, to be humble but strong, steadfast but not thwarting about with superiority, was a direct product of national heroes like the Duke of Wellington. This idea of the gentleman ran directly counter to the showmanship of previous enemies of the Empire, such as Napoleon Bonaparte. Moreover, Mosse argues in his study The Image of Man: The
Creation of Modern Masculinity that even though power over others was a key aspect of the character of the British gentleman:

The British Empire did not allow such power full play; it had to be coupled with self-control and the restraint of reckless impulses. Such self-restraint was a key attribute of the masculine stereotype ... a true man must know how to master his passions. The British Empire, in places such as the Indian subcontinent, became an arena in which to test and reinforce the Victorian character. (Mosse 15)

Moreover, Mosse discusses that this “quiet strength” should not conflict with virtues such as fair play, harmony and order (15). The concept of the gentleman is again found in the works of Hourihan, who argues that these values were integrated into literature of the time. In this context, the concept of the gentleman suggests education and well-behaved and polite manners (63). Because of this, the concept of the gentleman carries with it a larger innate moral and intellectual superiority, which Hourihan argues is used to establish and secure the innate rank of hierarchy in the society of the time.

Thusly, the concept of the gentleman is used to define good and evil, friends and enemies. The enemies of the hero are often rude, dirty, cocky, and in short everything that a gentleman is not. The innate message to the reader is therefore clear, those who are not gentlemen are inferior and most probably enemies.

However, leaving the safety of society to earn glory and wealth for oneself and Britain was not for everyone. The “adventure” was usually reserved for middle and upper-class people. The First World War, however, gave many the chance to fight and earn “glory” for oneself, and the British empire. Moreover, this was not some small conflict in a distant land, but “Heroes in battle with heroes, and above them the wrathful gods” (Cramb 136-137 qtd. in Höglund 49). This idea of heroes in battle with heroes stems from the idea of a war
between gentlemen, where the stakes were moral and ideological rather than political and territorial. A gentleman’s war, which celebrated sportsmanship, carried the euphemism of war as a game. From this concept, the idea of war as a strengthening experience can be found on both sides. A young volunteer for the German army, Otto Braun, writes in his diary “I believe that this war is a challenge for our time and for each individual, a test by fire, that we may ripen into manhood, become men able to cope with the upcoming stupendous years and events” (Mosse 64).

The concept of glory in death is not only shown between the lines of imperialist writers such as Cramb, but in action at the beginning of the conflict. In the British army as well as the French, these ideas ran hot. French officers stood up under machine-gun and shellfire, sacrificing their lives for nothing more than the idea that an officer does not take cover, but stands his ground. In the British Expeditionary Force, the same ideals about valiant combat ran high. In his study Awarded for Valour: A History of the Victoria Cross and the Evolution of British Heroism, Melwin Charles Smith refers to Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Reppington who said about Mons, and the impending fight with the Germans in a report “Glorious country for fighting in, glorious weather, and a glorious cause. What Soldier could ask for more?” (111).

The BEF was an army compiled of one of the most drilled and trained groups of soldiers in the world. Many of them were combat-tested and veterans from different conflicts and wars. Consequently, Smith argues in his work that these professional soldiers carried with them many of the Victorian ideals of masculinity and that of the hero (111). These soldiers had fought mostly colonial wars however, and when put up against the weaponry of a modern foe, the ranks thinned quickly. Smith argues that “The Victorian Army died in the mud of Flanders. With it died the Victorian ideals of heroism” (111).
When these “Old Contemptibles” died, they were replaced with fresh recruits, men who were shaped and raised by adventure novels, invasion novels and the idea of war as both a game and a duty. These men were to carry another sentiment towards heroism, death and glory, shaped by the alien battlefield, barbed wire and artillery. And so, the years before the war were filled with imaginary violence, masculine ideals, invasions, adventures, imperialism, patriotism and a distant relationship to the realities of war. At the outbreak of war, one of the young men that enlisted, J. B. Priestley, has written:

There came, out of the unclouded blue of that summer, a challenge that was almost like a conscription of the spirit, little to do really with King and Country and flag-waving and hip-hip-hurrah, a challenge to what we felt was our untested manhood. Other men, who had not lived as easily as we had, had drilled and marched and borne arms—couldn’t we? Yes, we too could leave home and soft beds and the girls to soldier for a spell, if there was some excuse for it, something at last to be defended. And here it was. (*Margin Released* qtd. in Bergonzi 32).

Of course, the machine guns and artillery of the western front cared little for personal aspirations or glory. Bravery and ideals did not make these young men bulletproof.

3 Method, Ethical and Practical Concerns

The nature of this thesis brings with it several considerations. First and foremost, this study deals with individuals and their experience of one of the most horrible events in human history. Therefore, it is of vital importance to treat the material and the memory of these people with the utmost respect and consideration. Since most of the people who I will be writing about have passed, and it is now our duty to take care of their legacy and memory.
The First World War was an infected conflict between many different groups of people, and even though one would like to include all the perspectives of those who took part in it, sadly, this is impossible for this thesis. Hence, this essay will focus on the British army, which in itself is and was an army with many different nationalities, ethnicities and groups of people from very differing classes and walks of life.

This is the second aspect of consideration: much of the material which will be covered in this essay was written by soldiers and officers from the upper classes. This has much to do with their level of education and pre-war interests and hobbies, which of course were more accessible to the fortunate few in the British society. Moreover, the limitations of time and funds constrained the ability of the author to travel abroad and visit archives or collections. Therefore, I am limited to material that is accessible in Swedish libraries and collections, and the material that is available online.

The third aspect which must be taken into consideration is the limited number of poems which I will have the opportunity to examine. In the research for this thesis, I came across several great poems that I wanted to include. Some are referenced, but sadly, because of the time and length constraints of this essay, I cannot include them all. Moreover, from a gender perspective, this essay deals almost exclusively with male poets, since their work from the front lines heavily features the hero aspect and its clash with reality. In the didactic chapter of this essay the work of female poets is implemented.

The following chapters examines six different poems by Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. These authors all played different parts in the war, and their fates differ. In order to follow the sentiment of the authors towards the concept of the hero and heroism in its confrontation with reality, the analysis is divided into three parts: The Idealist Notion of War, The Realities of War and The Aftermath of the War. Each part serves the purpose of highlighting the values that the poems hold, as well as the setting in which they
were produced. Thusly forming a conceptual timeline of the attitude to the hero and heroism. The poems have been selected because of their language and theme, as well as their tone, and how they spoke to me as reader.

Each part of the analysis of the different poems will start with an introduction to the author, their literary backgrounds and lives. They all reached fame because of their creations, and their legacy is well regarded. I hope to shed light upon their ideas of heroes and heroism through their poetry, and in the case of Sassoon and Owen, the change within them over time. The authors fall into two categories: The survivor and the one who never left the mud of the trenches. Therefore, when dealing with 1918, I have selected two poems, one by Sassoon who survived, and one by Owen, who did not. Each tell different stories about the men who took different paths in the labyrinth of mud of the First World War.

4 The Idealist Notion of War

In his study, *The Heroes Twilight*, Bergonzi argues that one should regard the poetry and literary works created at the beginning of the war as responses to a situation many had only imagined in a fictional realm. As such, the responses in the beginning would have been fictional too (41). This is evident in the analysis of poetry created by both Brooke and Sassoon. Thusly, this chapter targets pre-combat poetry written by Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon and aims to display through analysis the idealist notion of war that they both carried with them into the conflict. Amongst these ideals lies notions of war as a game and a rejuvenating experience, but also adventure, duty and honor. They were finally to become the men that society through culture and norms and values had always indicated that they should be, and the war was to be their catalyst on their journey to become heroes.
4.1 1914 - “The Soldier” by Rupert Brooke

Brooke was one of the first poets which wrote about war to become a martyr, and in many regards embodied the ideals of the time. For example, the physical properties of Brooke matched the ideals of the young strong man. (Bergonzi 37). His literary allegiances lied with the Georgian movement, which is argued to be one of the last strongholds for the slowly dying late-Victorian romanticism (Bergonzi 38). Therefore, we must not regard Rupert Brooke in too harsh of a light. He had no experience of war, apart from the influence of Victorian romanticism, and could not imagine the horrors that would face the young men that stepped into the recruiting offices with his words ringing in their heads.

One of his creations, “The Soldier” displays many of the traits of the time. In it, we can see both the masculine ideologies, imperialism, nationalism, the willingness of sacrifice on the altar of war, and the death of the young gentleman hero. His poem, which speaks of the death of a soldier in a first-person narration, coincides with his own death in 1915, and greatly accelerated the creation of the myth surrounding him (Bergonzi 41). He would become a martyr, and his death also symbolized the death of the Victorian romantic idea of war, which would fade in the eyes of frontline troops who had seen the horrors. This clash changed the traditional style and tone of war-poetry, from relying on rhyme and older language, to in the case of Owen, a shift towards half-rhyme.

“The Soldier” displays a number of traits which makes it stand out as a pre-combat poem (See Appendix A). Even if Brook speaks of death, there is no focus on the killing itself. In later poetry, there is often a focus on the horrible manner of the death of men, which signifies the hopelessness and futility of their struggle. This is not the case in Brooke’s poem. Instead the clear message is of the pride and gratitude the English soldier embodies. It is a calming constant fact, that no matter if the soldier dies, England remains. The death is a small
victory in itself, because with his body the soldiers conquer another piece of land for the British empire. The soldier is merely the carrier of the English dust, her legacy and her ideas:

If I should die, think only this of me:

That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware

…………………………………………………. (Brooke 1-5)

Brooke uses the image of the British countryside to refer to the very image of England that he loved, and that the reader could relate to. The soldier is grateful for the life that was given to him, for all the friends, the laughter, the dreams and the happiness. It is all thanks to England, and in dying he is paying back what he borrowed. His death is a natural part of a cycle, as natural as the coming of dusk after dawn:

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,

A pulse in the eternal mind, no less

Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;

Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;

And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,

In hearts at peace, under an English heaven. (Brooke 9-14)

In the poem, one can also clearly see why Brooke was made a martyr after his death, it is a beautiful poem in its own right, but also strikes a chord with the ideals and ideology of the hero of the time. The soldier hero dies with a purpose, and nothing but gratitude towards the country that sent him there to die. It is a patriotic love song, and no matter if the soldier lives or dies, the enemy will never win, and is not even worthy of mention. The poem does not
even reflect upon the act of fighting from the soldier’s perspective, implying that death is glory of the highest order. The theme of sacrifice upon the altar of England is made willingly and easily, the heart of the soldier and gentleman is at peace knowing that he has done his part.

Brooke’s own death was not as easy, he died of blood poisoning in 1915 on his way to the Gallipoli campaign. However, there was only a short time between “The Soldier” being re-printed in *The Times* and news of Brook’s death, lending more to the legend of his martyrdom (Bergonzi 41). His death became “A pulse in the eternal mind, no less”, and in his death he clearly became the narrator of his creation (Brooke 11). Poems like these, where sacrifice is the greatest gift, and which speaks softly of the death and dying of soldiers, would be few and far between the further into the conflict the British Empire endured. To die a son of England, a gentleman in death and with his blood coloring the earth red like the uniforms of the old army, was something that could only be written before one had seen what machine-guns could do to the sons of England.

There are however other poems who speak of dead soldiers being landmarks and guidance, such as “The Night Patrol” by Arthur Graeme West from 1916. In that poem, the corpses are used for orientation back to the safety of the soldier’s own trench. In 1916, the dust of Englishmen did not sanctify the earth. Instead, West describes their decaying state: “Infected earth and air. They lay, all clothed” (28).

The second poet examined in this analysis who contributed to this idealist notion of war at the beginning of the conflict, is Siegfried Sassoon. The Sassoon banking family was upper class, and although disinherited, he amassed a small private fortune which he could live comfortably off. He was accepted into Marlborough and then later Cambridge, where he studied History. Sassoon did not however achieve a degree in his field. Instead, he left Cambridge to live off his fortune, playing cricket and hunting, living the life of a gentleman
of the upper classes. In 1906 he published his first collection, *Poems*, and started moving in literary circles (Stallworthy 205). Just before the war, he had come to know Edmund Gosse and Edward Marsh, as well as Rupert Brooke (Stallworthy 206). In many regards, Sassoon was one of the British gentlemen who were shaped by the ideals of the time. When the war started he signed up immediately, even going so far as to take his medical in advance (Stallworthy 206). On the decision of joining up, Sassoon has left words which came to him returning home from a trip to Rye:

Lit by departing day was the length and breadth of the Weld, and the message of those friendly faces was a single chord of emotion vibrating backward across the years to my earliest rememberings. Uplifted by this awareness, I knew that there was something deeply loved, something which the unmeasurable timelessness of childhood had made my own. The years of my youth were going down forever in the weltering, western gold, and the future would take me far from that sunset-embered horizon. Beyond the night was my new beginning. The Weld had been the world of my youngness, and while I gazed across it now I felt prepared to do whatever I could to defend it. And after all, dying for one’s native land was believed to be the most glorious thing one could possibly do! (Sassoon qtd. in Roberts 59)

In this quote, there are several elements pointing towards an influence of current ideology, norms, and values. Sassoon is filled with a wish to defend his home, by leaving it behind and taking on an adventure towards the east and beyond the night. It is a journey which might end with his death, a hero’s journey. Moreover, it is both his duty and destiny to take on this mission, and it is expected of him by his native land. Like Brooke, his words are filled with gratitude, national pride and awareness of a debt, which must now be repaid.
4.2 1915 – “Absolution” by Siegfried Sassoon

“Absolution” was written by Sassoon before he arrived at the trenches (See Appendix B). It shares its Georgian heritage and ideals with “The Soldier” by Rupert Brooke, showing us Sassoon’s perspective before taking part in combat. According to Sassoon, it displays the cocktail of feelings that the young man could have on his way to the front:

The significance of my too nobly worded lines was that they expressed the typical self glorifying feelings of a young man about to go to the Front for the first time. The poem subsequently found favour with the middle-aged reviewers, but the more I saw of war the less noble-minded I felt about it. (Sassoon qtd. in Bergonzi 93)

He writes of excitement, of fear of leaving everyone and everything behind “There was an hour when we were loth to part/ From life we longed to share no less than others” (Sassoon 9-10). However, he continues with the sentiment of war as a freeing and liberating concept, making the men realize what it is that they are fighting for. Thusly making time feel more tangible and real, because they all are in danger of losing it, “We are the happy legion, for we know / Time's but a golden wind that shakes the grass (Sassoon 7-8). They are all a happy legion, because war has made them realize what matters, and in marching off to war, they have awakened from the slumber of peace. The poem implies unity, brothers and comrades are legion, and in the same tone as Brooke, they all reside under an English sky: “Now, having claimed this heritage of heart, / What need we more, my comrades and my brothers?” (Sassoon 13-14).

Here, they are gentlemen, marching off into a gentleman’s war, where horror of wound and anger at the enemy fades in comparison to the unity, the nobility and the freeing capacities of war (Sassoon 5-6). In comparison with the tropes discussed by Höglund and Hourihan, the trope of the “game” comes to mind. The poem tells of an adventure and bears
strong resemblance to the narrative of the hero leaving home to partake in one. Moreover, the prospect of getting hurt or killed is only adding to the thrill of the adventure. Just like as the children’s stories and Peter Pan, it is all still fiction.

In his book *Goodbye to All That* Robert Graves recounts his first meeting with Sassoon, “At this time, I was getting my first book of poems, *Over the Brazier*, ready for the press; I had one or two drafts in my pocket-book and showed them to Siegfried. He frowned and said that war should not be written about in such a realistic way” (Graves qtd. in Bergonzi 93). This romantic tradition of writing about war would change when Sassoon changed. And he was not alone in this process. Many others, such as the Colonel described in *Now It Can Be Told* by Philip Gibbs awoke amongst the grim realities of modern war:

> One day, when we were walking through the desolation of a battlefield, with the smell of human corruption about us, and men crouched in chalky ditches below their breastwork of sandbags, he turned to a colleague of mine and said “This must never happen again! Never!” (Gibbs 8)

The following poems from 1916 and 1918 are all just a fraction of what Sassoon produced, but they illustrate the next step in his journey deeper into the conflict. He would come to fight in both Mametz wood and in the Somme offensive in July 1916 “with such conspicuous gallantry that he had acquired the Military Cross and a nickname, Mad Jack” (Stallworthy 206). This quote is an example of how words such as “gallantry”, connected to the virtues of the hero, can still be found even amongst the literature which commemorates Sassoon’s poems against heroism.
5 The Realities of War

This chapter focuses on the clash between the idealist notion of war displayed in the previous chapter and the realities of war. Here Wilfred Owen is introduced, and he and Sassoon confront their previous creations and the general attitude towards the war as a rejuvenating experience, as well as the ideals of heroism and the hero. Moreover, the rift between a society which is uninformed about the realities of the war and the now brutally awakened soldier poets becomes apparent, and the poets’ dispositions change from gratitude and excitement to hate and fear. Hate, because of the ignorance of their own leaders and families of the sacrifice which they expect them to perform with ease, and fear, for what will happen to them and their poetry if they do not perform this sacrifice.

5.1 1916 – “The Poet as Hero” by Siegfried Sassoon

In the first poem of the chapter “The Poet as Hero”, the transition between the man who believed in the purity of war and this wounded person is striking (see appendix C). The armor has fallen off Sassoon’s back and his song once innocent, “has changed to an ugly cry” (Sassoon 4). The virtues of the knight and the gentleman are in many aspects all and the same, and here Sassoon renounces them all. He renounces the dream of a quest for a holy grail, the adventure narrative. He renounces the virtues of the modern man, in control and peaceful, the unshakable just knight. In his language we can see that his anger is directed both at the society that sent him there, but also towards himself. By using words and sentences such as “silly” and “infant wails” he aims to belittle his past self, reducing him to a child who has read too many adventure-novels.

In the poem, we can also see multiple references to Christianity, such as the concept of the Holy Grail, absolution and Galahad. Galahad is, according to the narratives surrounding King Arthur and the Knights of the round table, the purest and most virtuous knight of all. He
alone succeeds in the search for the holy grail and is brought up to heaven at his choosing. In the quest for the holy grail, Galahad is portrayed as the ultimate white, Christian male hero. Several poems have been written about him in Victorian times, such as “Sir Galahad” by Alfred Lord Tennyson, which shares the narrative of the white male hero seen previously in literature:

My good blade carves the casques of men,
    My tough lance thrusteth sure,
My strength is as the strength of ten,
    Because my heart is pure.
The shattering trumpet shrilleth high,
    The hard brands shiver on the steel,
The splinter'd spear-shafts crack and fly,
    The horse and rider reel:
They reel, they roll in clanging lists,
    And when the tide of combat stands,
Perfume and flowers fall in showers,
    That lightly rain from ladies' hands.

How sweet are looks that ladies bend
    On whom their favours fall!
For them I battle till the end,
    To save from shame and thrall:
But all my heart is drawn above,
    My knees are bow'd in crypt and shrine:
I never felt the kiss of love,
Nor maiden's hand in mine.

More bounteous aspects on me beam,

Me mightier transports move and thrill;

So keep I fair thro' faith and prayer

A virgin heart in work and will.

................................. (Lord Tennyson 174-178)

In these first two stanzas, we can identify several of the traits that are shared by the previous hero-literature. Our hero, Galahad, is a warrior and strong in life and soul because of his purity, which relates to the virtues of the gentleman. Violence is a central component in his narrative, but it is displayed as the trope of Game, a display in skill and gallantry to “defend” the honor of ladies, who reward him with perfume and flowers for his deeds. This idea can be seen in Brooke’s poem as well, in defending the feminine England. However, Galahad is not a man of the flesh but of faith, and his love belongs to God. Here, Galahad symbolizes the Christian virtues of the gentleman such as self-control and belief in the higher virtues of honor and faith. The thirteenth century ideals are carried over and adapted to the Victorian ideals, which were transferred onto the coming generations.

Therefore, the symbology in referencing Galahad indicates Sassoon’s departure from the previous narrative of heroism. In saying goodbye to Galahad, he leaves the quest of both knighthood and Grail, purity and sanctity, adventure and fiction. There is no hero or adventure, only senseless hatred, and a lust for killing. However, just like Galahad, who often ventures alone on his quests, he carries his dead friends with him, alone in that terrifying world. And wound for wound, he is trying to avenge them. While openly rejecting the narrative of the hero, Galahad, he still encompasses some of those ideals in his poem. Here, the New Historicist assumptions of Veeser warns “that every act of unmasking, critique, and
opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes” (xi). Consequently, Sassoon still makes use of violence and punishes the guilty, “Wound for red wound I burn to smite their wrongs” (Sassoon 13). In addition, Sassoon is simultaneously keeping to his Christian terminology and references, “And there is absolution in my songs” (Sassoon 14).

There is also an underlying tone of guilt: in his declaration of departing from the old world, Sassoon is also breaking the laws and virtues of it. In his poem “Absolution”, the war itself is the absolution for the modern man, a chance to prove your worth, to be cleansed. In “The Poet as Hero”, Sassoon is instead asking for forgiveness through absolution. His combat records and medals show that he was not idle in his role as soldier, and most definitely either participated in, or was himself responsible for, the deaths of other people. Thusly, his relationship to the concept of absolution would logically be to ask for it because of these deeds. He mentions his infant wails as containing the concept of immortality and, in the context of the hero and the adventure, he refers to the immortality of the hero’s deeds, the concept of earning glory. In renouncing this perspective and worldview, Sassoon chooses to see reality and therefore his own acts in a different light, and a year later, he is instead asking for absolution.

Another possible perspective on his concept of absolution is that he is asking forgiveness for his previous “infant wails”, meaning poetic creations. Perhaps he is asking for forgiveness for his contribution to the image of war through these narratives as a quest for the holy grail, a hero’s adventure. In doing so, he might have contributed to the further enthusiasm for the war and subsequent volunteers to sign up.

This rupture, the tear between the world at home and the world of war, is referenced both by Phillip Gibbs in Now it can be told and in Sassoon's other poems. Philip Gibbs was one of the few war-correspondents that were allowed to follow the British army throughout
the war, risking his life in the process. After the war, he published a book titled *Now it can be told*, containing much of what he could not write or publish during the war. His first experience of the horrors of the First World War is with the French forces, during the first stages of the war. On the clash between worlds for him and other correspondents, Gibbs writes this about the “adventures” into France and Belgium:

> The moment’s notice was postponed for months...The younger ones did not wait for it. They took their chance of “seeing something,” without authority, and made wild, desperate efforts to break through the barrier that had been put up against them by French and British staffs in the zone of war. Many of them were arrested, put into prison, let out, caught again in forbidden places, rearrested, and expelled from France. That was after fantastic adventures in which they saw what war meant in civilized countries where vast populations were made fugitives of fear, where millions of Women and children and old people became wanderers along the roads in in a tide of human misery, with the red flame behind them and following them, and where the first battalions of youth, so gay in their approach to war, so confident in victory, so careless of the dangers (which they did not know), came back maimed and mangled and blinded and wrecked, in the backwash of retreat, which presently became a spate through Belgium and the north of France, swamping over many cities and thousands of villages and many fields. Those young writing-men who had set out in a spirit of adventure went back to Fleet Street with a queer look in their eyes, unable to write the things they had seen, unable to tell them to people who had not seen and could not understand. Because there were no code of words which would convey the picture of that wild agony of peoples, that smashing of all civilized laws, to men and women who still thought of war in terms of heroic pageantry. (Gibbs 6-7)
“Had an interesting time?” asked a man I wanted to kill because of his smug ignorance, his damnable indifference, his impregnable stupidity of cheerfulness in this world of agony. (Gibbs 6-7)

Gibbs’ contempt for the ignorant world back home is mirrored in the work of Sassoon. This contempt is showcased in one of Sassoon's poems, named “Blighters”:

The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks
Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;
“We’re sure the Kaiser loves the dear old Tanks!”

I’d like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
Lurching to rag-time tunes, or “Home, sweet Home,”
And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume. (Sassoon)

Sassoon’s need to create was likely fueled by his need to show the war for what it really was. Like Gibbs, Sassoon was struck by the rupture between these worlds. Bergonzi references Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, an autobiography written by Sassoon, in which Sassoon argues for the change in his tone and style, exhibited in the differences between “Absolution” and “The Poet as Hero”:

This gradual process began, in the first months of 1916, with a few genuine trench poems, dictated by my resolve to record my surroundings, and usually based on the notes I was making whenever I could do so with detachment. These poems aimed at impersonal description of frontline conditions, and could at least claim to be the first things of their kind. (Sassoon qtd. in Bergonzi 93)
Therefore, it could be argued that Sassoon through his literary creations tried to show the world surrounding him what they were fueling, and responsible for. The horrors which could not be printed in the papers, by men such as Phillip Gibbs were recorded in his creations. The following year, 1917, Sassoon was to stand up against what he thought was an unnecessary prolongment of the war by the leadership of the allied countries.

His formal protest had him hoping that he would be court martialed, so as to draw more attention to his protest and to the issues with the war. However, Bergonzi argues that David Graves, a friend of Sassoon, realized this, and by making use of high level connections downplayed Sassoon’s protest. Graves then tricked Sassoon to stand in front of a medical board for evaluation, which declared that he should be treated for shellshock (Bergonzi 99). Sassoon was either tactfully silenced or saved by Graves, depending on the perspective of the observer. Shortly after, Sassoon was sent to be treated at Craiglockhart military hospital, close to Edinburgh, where he came to befriend a certain Wilfred Owen (Bergonzi 99).

Wilfred Owen was born on the 18th of March 1893 in the town of Oswestry. His family, although to be considered upper class at the first few years of his life, stumbled when it had to start making due only on Owen’s father Tom’s salary. Owen’s fascination with poetry, archeology and botany started at a young age, but the lack of financial support from his parents in the matter of higher education haunted him (Williams 16). University was out of the question for the young Wilfred Owen, and he did not have high enough scores to get a scholarship (Williams 17). At this point, Susan Owen pulled some strings within the local clergy and helped him become an assistant for Reverend Herbert Wigan, Vicar of Dunsden which was close to Reading University. As assistant, he had to teach Sunday school, assist at ceremonies, and visit the people of the parish in their homes. Here, he saw the face of real poverty, which moved him deeply. After ending his service in the parish, his gaze turned to France, where he was hired as an English Teacher at the Berlitz School of Languages in
Bordeaux. He was soon invited by one of his married students to a holiday with her family to the Pyrenees, where a flirtation between them began against the backdrop of the outbreak of war in August (Williams 22). In a letter home he writes:

The war affects me less than it ought … I feel my own life all the more precious and more dear in the presence of this deflowering of Europe. While it is true that the guns will affect a little useful weeding, I am furious with chagrin to think that the Minds which were to have excelled the civilization of the thousand years, are being annihilated – and bodies, the products of eons of Natural Selection, melted down to pay for political statues. (Owen Letter 285 qtd. in Williams 22)

He did not return home to England at once, but instead signed up for the war fourteen months after it started, joining the Artist’s rifles, then being commissioned for the Manchester regiment (Williams 23). His reasons for signing up are not entirely clear, although Williams argues that the British Propaganda machine had much to do with it (23). The White feather treatment was an ingenious and horrid method, in which young women were given the task of finding young men on the streets not in uniform, and publicly shaming them for not being in khaki. They harassed the young men (and boys) and pinned a white feather to them as a symbol of their cowardice (Williams 23).

This direct attack on the masculine and male characteristics that had been instilled in these boys and men from childhood lead many to sign up out of sheer embarrassment (Williams 23). It is unclear if Owen was exposed to this treatment, but the prospect of eventually being targeted, and the ideals which had been instilled in him of self-sacrifice and deep sense of responsibility, urged him to enlist on the 21 October 1915 (Williams 23).

After joining the army, Owen was quickly promoted into the ranks of the officers. This was due in no small part to his level of education, but also to the fact that the British
Officers had suffered heavy losses in the fighting so far. He did his utmost to meet the standards of the army and his brother Harold recounts his reasoning “You know, Harold, if I have to be a soldier, I must be a good one, anything else is unthinkable. I cannot alter myself inside nor yet conform but at least without any self-questioning I can change outside, if that is what is wanted.” (JFO III 155 qtd. in Williams 24). After arriving in Beumont Hamel on the Somme in 1916, his platoon was ordered to hold a dugout in the middle of No Man’s land (Williams 24). This was his first experience of modern warfare:

I can see no excuse for deceiving you about these last 4 days. I have suffered seventh hell. I have not been at the front. I have been in front of it…My dug-out held 25 men tight packed. Water filled it to a depth of 1 or 2 feet, leaving say 4 feet of air…The Germans knew we were staying there and decided we shouldn’t. Those fifty hours were the agony of my happy life. Every ten minutes on Sunday afternoon seemed an hour. I nearly broke down and let myself drown in the water that was now slowly rising over my knees. (Owen Letter 480 qtd. in Williams 25)

This was just the first of his experiences. He would come to be exposed to gas, see men freeze to death, go over the top, and for twelve days he sheltered in a railway cutting, barely big enough to lie in, across from a colleague who had taken a direct hit from one of the shells (Williams 27). After being blown into the air by a shell, he was declared unfit to lead troops into battle (Williams 27). It is unclear if Owen lost control of himself after this incident, and Williams argues in his study that sources suggest that Owen’s commanding officer called him a coward, which would influence Owen’s future decision to go back to the front (27). Graves writes in Goodbye to All That, “it preyed on his mind that he had been unjustly accused of cowardice by his commanding officer” (Graves qtd. in Williams 27). He was diagnosed with Neurasthenia and sent home to recover at Craiglockhart War hospital,
where he made friends with Siegfried Sassoon, who assisted him a great deal in the revisions of his poems.

5.2 1917 – “Dulce et Decorum Est” by Wilfred Owen

At Craig Lockhart, the interaction with Sassoon lead to a creative burst from Owen. “Dulce Et Decorum Est” was a product of this time, and a first draft of the poem was created at the hospital, later to be revised. At its core, the poem is a direct message to someone who has not seen what Owen has witnessed. There is a wish to explain in the language of the poem, which can be observed in invitations such as “if you could hear”, “if you could pace / Behind the wagon that we flung him in” (Owen 21,17). Moreover, the setting, gas attack and the characters are all displayed clearly for anyone to read and understand. There is no military slang, and the appearance of the characters and the setting is portrayed clearly and with detail.

The language is both horrid and beautiful, with the intention of creating contrast, and in doing so underlines the horrific aspects of the poem: “Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light / As under a green sea, I saw him drowning” (Owen 13-14). The duty that poets like Sassoon and Owen felt in relaying the terrible reality of the war they were fighting has been previously mentioned, and “Dulce Et Decorum Est” is another piece of education for the uninitiated. The language is charged with contempt against what is happening, but even in blaming the target audience for its lies, the narrator addresses them as “friend” (Owen 25). Here, Owen’s empathy and humanitarian trait shines through. There is contempt and sadness in his tone, but he does not hate the audience for their lies, he simply wishes to show them the consequences.

His earlier career as a teacher comes to mind in how he displays the issue. He takes the audience by the hand and in leading them to understand the reality of modern warfare and the First World War, he cuts through the trope of “game”, “adventure” and hero quickly. By
using language such as “hags” and “beggars” to describe the soldiers, he reduces the hero of
the narrative to stereotypical “weak” and poor people, stripping them of their masculinity and
splendor. These men are deaf and blind with fatigue, and do not care for any glory or treasure
but that of rest. The ultimate dream and treasure would be the life that they had back home. In
doing so Owen proves the old lie false and shows the reader that it is not sweet and proper to
die for your fatherland. Here, the intent from Owen to carry out an exchange of information
between art and society is clear, and he accommodates an unknowing reader in the language
and theme of the poem (Greenblatt 12).

The death of emotion and motivation in the soldiers is central in the poem. Upon his
arrival at the front in the beginning, Owen had described these soldiers as “expressionless
lumps” (Letter 476 qtd. in Williams 71). In this narrative, the narrator places himself amongst
them, and we can see that Owen through empathy and experience shares their plight, creating
an example of how quickly the culturally inspired courage leaked from the men. Moreover,
these nightmares of remembrance Owen speaks of in his poem were frequent for the patients
of Craiglockhart, and many of its patients fought their own minds to forget what they had
seen. Owen tried to do so too, but in the work of his poems, he egged on his own nightmares
in order to create from them, “I bring on what few war dreams I now have, entirely by
willingly considering war of an evening” (Letter 592 qtd. in Williams 38). In putting the
reader in his boots under that green sea in his poems, he must have put enormous strain on
himself and his mental health. He was bearing his cross to show us his world.

Many of Owen’s poems, like “Dulce et Decorum Est” and “S.I.W” disregard the
masculine and patriotic ideals of the hero. There is a theme of anti-war mentality, and
therefore it is hard for us today to grasp why Owen went back to the front willingly. Having
very likely been branded a coward by his commanding officer, it seems like he had a need to
further prove himself. Although renouncing the concept of the hero and heroism in his own
work, Owen still lived in a world and society which believed in them, and the shame of being branded a coward publicly would undermine the truth and credibility of his poetry. In a letter he writes that “I feel that I must first get some reputation of gallantry before I could successfully and usefully declare my principles” (Letter 550 qtd. Williams 32). He had to become a hero in order to renounce the concept. Otherwise, he would simply be publicly branded a coward, to who no one would have listened. This had already happened on a small scale, and he could not allow it to happen to his identity as poet. Unlike Owen, Sassoon was safe from these accusations because he had been distinguished with the Military Cross for his actions (Williams 41).

Not only did this “reputation of gallantry” impact his own standing and chances in life, but also the name and reputation of his family. One must remember when reading his material that he was not be widely recognized until after the war, in some respects even after the death of the last generations who had seen it. People felt like they needed to believe in the ideas of the hero and heroism, because for many, these stories were the only thing left to cling on to that made sense. Without it, the ugly truth that their sons had been sacrificed for an inch of polluted soil, might have been unbearable.

Owen’s accusation of his parents’ generation’s role in sending these young men out to die, also struck a nerve because it held them responsible for their sons’ slaughter directly, not the enemy (Williams 48). A member of that generation, Sir Henry Newbolt, declared “I don’t think that these shell-shocked war poems will move our grandchildren greatly” (Casebook 65 qtd. Williams 49). The use of language by Newbolt reveals his standing, using a word such as “shell-shocked” as a derogatory term for what he thinks are the ramblings of a weak man. This is exactly the type of attack that Owen was worried would happen on a large scale.
Moreover, in discovering his true voice in poetry, one could argue that he went back because the war had become part of him, and he felt that without the war his poetry could not exist either. On the other hand, knowing the horrors of the western front and with memories of men under his command, in combination with his empathy and humanitarianism, it is just as likely that Owen went back because he felt that he was needed. Like Sassoon, who felt he had left his friends in the mud, which he declares in his poem “Sick Leave”, there may have been similar feelings in Owen.

5.3 1918 – “S. I. W” by Wilfred Owen

“S.I.W” is unique because unlike many trench poems, which only tell of a separated incident or shorter sequence, S.I.W tells the entire story of a young soldier and his journey between worlds (see Appendix D). By doing this, Owen pinpoints the correlation between the world at home, its ideas of heroism and heroes, and the effect on the young boy trapped between the two worlds. In his narrative, the whole family is under a spell, sisters wish they too could go, brothers send their favorite cigarettes, and fathers are proud to send their sons to their deaths: “death sooner than dishonor, that’s the style!” (Owen 23). The language used when talking about the boy is that of a “lad”, who is told to show the “Hun” a brave man’s face. This line is the final piece of evidence of the influence of propaganda upon the family, since the word “Hun” was extensively used by such devices. Moreover, the boy is told to wear the mask of the hero, “a brave man’s face” (Owen 2). The only one in the narrative who understands the real danger to the son is the mother, who puts her faith in a “safe wound” to end his soldiering (Owen 6).

This stance from the soldier’s own family makes home a distant place of misunderstanding, and the soldier is crushed between keeping up appearances for his family and dealing with the horrors of trench-life. The wording of “courage leaking from the best
sand-bags after years of rain” is a clear reference to Owen’s stand that this had nothing to do with the concept of cowards. No one could stand the shelling and trenches in the end, they all just had different thresholds (Gibbs 142). Gibbs interacted with a great number of soldiers during his time at the western front. After one of these new companies’ baptism by fire, Gibbs recounts their conversation:

“Looks as if some of us wouldn’t be home in time for lunch”, was another comment, greeted by a guffaw along the line. They tried to see the humor of it, though there was a false note in some of their jokes. But it was the heroic falsity of boys whose pride is stronger than their fear, that inevitable fear which chills one when this beastliness is being done. (Gibbs 31)

The ideals of heroes and heroism might not have been real, but the soldiers still resided in a system and society in which they could not openly cast these ideals and their significance aside, with fear of both social and physical punishment:

It was optimism in the mass, heroism in the mass. It was only when one spoke to the individual, some friend who bared his soul for a second, or some soldier-ant in the multitude, with whom one had talked with truth, that one saw the hatred of a man for his job, the sense of doom upon him, the weakness that was in his strength, the bitterness of his grudge against a fate that forced him to go on in this way of life, the remembrance of a life more beautiful which he had abandoned… (Gibbs 142)

For the soldier in the poem, there is no way out. Death knocks on his dugout so many times that it drives him mad, yet never releases him from suffering. He suffers for “the pleasure of the powers of the world who’d run amock” which directly targets the idea of the war as just and meaningful (Owen 20). The torture of being constantly shelled eats away at
him until one day he cannot take it any longer, and takes his own life to end the torture. He has seen others shoot their hands but dares not because he might be found out and punished.

In the letter home, Tim is named for the first time. Only in death is he named and remembered, but not even in death can the truth be told. The fourth stanza clearly separates the two realms of the trenches and the outside world, where the same sentence, “Tim died smiling” has entirely different meanings (Owen 38). In one world it is a sign of a just and heroic cause, of which one dies with a smile, and the other is the grim face of mental illness, and the breath of war exuding from its smile: “it’s odoruer is the breath of cancer” (Owen letter 481 qtd. in Williams 24).

In his study Awarded for Valour, Smith argues that the Victoria Cross, which was given out as the highest military honor, was used to control soldiers and their officers to perform the type of acts which helped the war effort, labeling those as heroic (Smith 156). Aggression was favored, and the men should kill the enemy, even at the expense of their own lives, and not stop for wounded. The acts of the hero were deemed to be those that helped the offensives, not the ones that saved people. Doing this, Wilfred Owen won his military cross after going back to the front. In his study Wilfred Owen, Stallworthy quotes the citation for the Military Cross:

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in the attack on the Fonsomme Line on 1st/2nd October 1918. On the company commander becoming a casualty, he assumed command and showed fine leadership and resisted a heavy counter-attack. He personally manipulated a captured machine gun in an isolated position and inflicted considerable losses on the enemy. Throughout he behaved most gallantry. (Qtd. Stallworthy 279)
In a letter to Sassoon Owen writes, “I’m glad I’ve been recommended for the M.C & hope I get it, for the confidence it may give me at home” (Owen qtd. Stallworthy 279). Wilfred Owen was shot and killed trying to cross the Sambre and Oise canal with his company in the night between the 3rd and 4th of November (Stallworthy 286). The day the bells rang in Shrewsbury to celebrate the Armistice, a telegram arrived with news of Wilfred’s death to the Owen Family.

6 The Aftermath of War

This chapter focuses on the aftermath of the war experience by analyzing the poem “Repression of War Experience” by Siegfried Sassoon. In this analysis, themes such as mental health, survivor’s guilt, and the eternal young are present, and the poem represents Sassoon’s struggle with himself, his actions and his place back home. The poem represents the homecoming of the hero from the classical narrative, but in it, Sassoon denounces the existence of glory and mocks his own eagerness to join the conflict and start the journey. Here, the only surviving poet out of three, faces the prospect of future life in a society which does not hear the guns that torments him.

6.1 1918 – “Repression of War Experience” by Siegfried Sassoon

Sassoon would survive the war, but as Owen notes in “Strange Meeting”, “Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds where” (Owen 39). Sassoon, who was injured twice, once shot in the chest and the second time in the face, had bled visibly even upon his forehead. But the horrors which haunted both him and Owen, return to him in “Repression of War Experience”, alone in his country home, with full force (see Appendix E). The poem demonstrates the struggle against the soldier’s own mind, to repress the war experience, and references to what we would today call Posttraumatic stress disorder.
The moth represents Sassoon and the other soldiers, blundering in to the war looking for glory only to scorch their wings: “Now light the candles; one; two; there's a moth; / What silly beggars they are to blunder in / And scorch their wings with glory, liquid flame” (Sassoon 1-3). The narrator tries to clear his mind, but he cannot repress the thoughts:

No, no, not that,—it's bad to think of war.
When thoughts you've gagged all day come back to scare you;
And it's been proved that soldiers don't go mad
Unless they lose control of ugly thoughts … (Sassoon 4-7)

Like his mind, the earth is itself restless: the war hangs over everything like a damp cloth, and nothing dares to breath. “And in the breathless air outside the house / The garden waits for something that delays” (Sassoon 11-12). Sassoon, an avid collector of books before the war, does not even touch them anymore: “I tell you all the wisdom of the world / Is waiting for you on those shelves; and yet / You sit and gnaw your nails, and let your pipe out” (Sassoon 21-23). This indicates a permanent change in his character, Sassoon is unable to go back to his previous life. Moreover, the dead in the woods mentioned in lines 28 to 32 haunt him:

There must be crowds of ghosts among the trees,—
Not people killed in battle,—they're in France,—
But horrible shapes in shrouds--old men who died
Slow, natural deaths,—old men with ugly souls,
Who wore their bodies out with nasty sins. (Sassoon 28-32)

These lines could be references to Bulow wood where Sassoon himself fought, but also relates to the concept of the eternal young. This idea is similar to that of Rupert Brooke’s “The Soldier” in that, because many soldiers died young, their souls never aged, and neither did their memories in the hearts of their relatives and their society. Forever young and
beautiful without the crushing sins of a long life weighing them down, they became heroes of 
song and memory. After losing the first of his friends in the trenches, it was in a nearby wood 
that Sassoon let out his cries: “So Tommy left us, a gentle soldier, perfect and without stain. 
And so he will remain in my heart, fresh and happy and brave” (Sassoon qtd. Roberts 80).

In Sassoon’s description of these old ghosts in the woods, there is also contempt and 
traces of existential questioning. Partly, because the old men symbolize the grey-haired 
generals and officers, the men who Sassoon first encountered in training camp, with a 
sneaking suspicion that their idealistic view of war was separated from reality (Roberts 65). 
But there is also contempt, because that is his fate. This conclusion can be drawn from his 
choice of words: “And listen to the silence: on the ceiling / There's one big, dizzy moth that 
bumps and flutters” (Sassoon 24-25). Sassoon is alone now, and he is struggling with 
survivor’s guilt. He survived his friends buried in France, eternally young, and will live to 
become an old man with an “ugly” soul because of his sins in war and a long life awaiting 
him. In the quiet and peaceful summer, the sounds of guns are not apparent to anyone but 
him. The one who survived, but now must live with the sound of guns for the rest of his life, 
where all the people home safe can hear only silence.

Sassoon’s poem is a direct attack on the concept of heroes and heroism. By using the 
moth as a metaphor for himself and the other young recruits, he denounces the existence of 
that glory that they were searching for, ridiculing the classic adventure narrative and using his 
own mind as an example of what the survivors of these “adventures” will have to carry with 
them. There is such an overwhelming amount of young men that will die on both sides of the 
war that it is easy to lose sight of the burden of the living. Moreover, Sassoon’s poem 
represents this rupture between the worlds of war and peace. Not many people in civilian 
society heard the guns after they fell silent on the western front, and it would take time before 
people outside of military institutions would accept or talk about post-traumatic stress
disorder or shell-shock, as a consequence of circumstance, rather than failing courage. And when power-structures permitted it, the exchange between art and society happened through memoirs, poetry and eye-witness accounts, conveying the realities of what these survivors of the hero’s journey had found.

Sassoon lived through his injuries and passed on the 1st of September 1967, at the age of 80. He continued to write and produce after his experiences in the Great war. However, as Bergonzi argues, like others who narrowly survived the war “it was to remain Sassoon’s one authentic subject” (108). The war had been Brooke’s, Owen’s and Sassoon’s curse and source of the emotions that fueled their poetry. After experiencing the adrenaline and hatred, the feelings of emptiness and restlessness found in “Repression of War Experience” surely must have haunted Sassoon.

And so, the guns fell silent, and the men who had seen through the hero and the concept of heroism went home, to a country who was not ready to understand fully what it was that they had been through. One can wonder if Owen with all his empathy really would have felt confidence with his military cross around his shoulders. The same place where, “the boy by my side, shot through the head, lay on top of me, soaking my shoulder, for half an hour” (Owen, letter to Sassoon qtd. Stallworthy 279). Sassoon threw his M.C in the river Mersey.
7 Didactic Reflection: Highlighting Norms and Values Through the Analysis of First World War Poetry

In countries that took part in the First World War on an active level, the memory and teaching of the war and its own culture is studied and discussed in schools. Trench poetry is taught to young people, keeping the memory of poets like Owen and Sassoon alive among the generations which attend the classes. However, therein lies a conundrum. In her study “Cultural memory, Teaching and Contemporary Writing About the First World War” Einhaus discusses the teaching of First World War literature in the English subject. The study shows that there is a great focus and canonizing of poetry created by Sassoon, Owen and Brooke among educators. However, Einhaus argues that there is a problem in British schools with intent. There is both a focus on retelling the horrors that the soldiers faced and were exposed to, but also the importance of their sacrifice (Einhaus 200-201). The purpose of this thesis has been to examine how the soldiers and society were influenced by the norms and values, relayed through literature and culture, which made up the concept of the hero and how this masculine identity fared in the meeting with reality.

In doing so, the previously mentioned conflict of interest is avoided, since it focuses neither solely on the horrors or sacrifice. Consequently, it focuses on the influence of underlying power structures and exemplifies in line with New Historicism theory how societal norms and values such as the male ideology of the gentleman, the concept of honor and courage as well as heroism have influenced and impacted discourse, in this case poetry. As well as how poetry in turn has shaped the historical context and continues to influence us today.

Moreover, in the study “Advancing Multicultural Education: New Historicism in the High School English Classroom”, Sidney C. Li argues that the new challenges that face
schools in providing a diverse and multicultural perspective of our history and society are much too big to only be the responsibility of the subject of History (19). Li argues that by using New Historicist readings of historical literary texts in the subject of English, the schools would be able to provide their students with multicultural discourse and critical education (20).

This aspect can also be found in the syllabus for the subject of English in the Swedish school system, which states that teaching in the course English 7 should cover “Societal issues, cultural, historical, political and social conditions, and also ethical and existential issues in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket 11). Moreover, pupils of English 7 should be taught “Strategies for drawing conclusions about the spoken language and texts in terms of attitudes, perspectives, purposes and values, and to understand implied meaning” as well as “How oral and written communications in different genres are built up. How stylistics and rhetorical devices are used for different purposes and how language is used as an instrument to exercise power” (Skolverket 11).

Referring to the syllabus for the English subject, and the advanced nature of both the level of English used in the poetry as well as the subjects and themes in question, I believe the content and assignments would work best in the course English 7. Moreover, in dealing with poetry which could be considered canon together with students in the classroom, a combination of CLP and New Historicism could be utilized. Borsheim-Black’s et al. study on Critical Literature Pedagogy especially focuses on the reading of this type of literature, and together with a New-historicist approach in grounding oneself in historical sources, would work well as a guide for the students of English approaching the texts discussed in this thesis. The areas of interest which constitutes CLP are: Canonicity, Contexts, Literary elements, Reader and Assessments.
In this didactical setting, the students could together with the teacher first read “with” the poems sampled in this essay: “The soldier”, “Absolution”, “The Poet as Hero”, “Repression of War experience”, “Dulce Et Decorum Est” and “S.I.W”. In their reading, they are to answer modified questions based on examples compiled by Borsheim-Black et al.

Starting with the area of Canonicity the students are to answer the question, why is it important that we read these poems? And in the area of Context, what major historical movements or events took place when this poetry was written? Moreover, in regard to Literary elements, the students are to answer the question: What are the major symbols and themes in the poems? Additionally, in regard to the Reader, the students should ask themselves: How do I relate to characters or themes on a personal level? Finally, the students are to refer to other interpretations, on the topic of Assessment: What analyses or literary criticism has been written about these poems? How might I write about my interpretation of the poetry in relation to them? (Borsheim-Black et al. 126-127).

After reading “with” the poems and answered the questions posed, the students are given the questions which requires them to read “against” the poems, again touching on Canonicity, Contexts, Literary elements, Reader and Assessments. Here, they are given extracts from this thesis to establish a historical context, such as the chapters “The Hero in British Culture Before the First World War and its Early Stages”, “The Gentleman and the Hero” and the three chapters of analysis: “The Idealist Notion of War”, “The Realities of War” and “The Aftermath of War”. The students are also given access to excerpts from secondary historical sources such as Now It Can Be Told by Phillip Gibbs, biographical works such as Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) by Roberts, Stallworthy’s Wilfred Owen and William’s work Wilfred Owen, in order to explore other aspects they may find relevant. Moreover, Bernard Bergonzi’s Heroes’ Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War
could be used as a source to both Bergonzi’s analysis of the poems and information regarding Rupert Brooke.

Using the sources and reflecting on their answers to the previous questions, the students are posed the following questions regarding Canonicity: Why do you think that the works of Sassoon, Owen and Brooke are considered canonical? Who decides what is canonical? What other poems and poetry written within the same historical context are not included amongst the poetry you have read? (Borsheim-Black et al. 126-127). Here, poetry written by women such as Katharine Thynan, May Wetherburn and Ella Wheeler should be provided for reference. This aspect addresses the sociopolitical background of the canon and the ideological motives which lies behind the creation of canons like it.

Continuing, the questions about the Context of the poetry are as follows: What were the dominant perspectives and ideals in regard to the hero and heroism at the time? How do these poems reinforce and/or question dominant understandings of their historical context? Whose history is this? (Borsheim-Black et al. 126-127). Here students should be directed to the provided excerpts from this thesis which explains the dominant perspectives and ideals of the time, such as: male ideals of “quiet strength”, duty and tropes such as “game” depicting violence and war as fun and exciting, as well as giving examples of how the poetry can both question and reinforce our understanding of history. Examples of earlier poems by Brooke and Sassoon reinforce the idealistic view of war and the hero such as “Absolution” and “The Soldier”, while later poetry questions these ideals, such as “The Poet as Hero” and “S.I.W”.

Moving on to Literary Elements, the students should try and answer the following questions: How do the themes or symbols support or challenge normative ways of thinking about war, heroism and the hero? How do these themes support underlying belief systems, or ideas of “normal” or universal? (Borsheim-Black et al. 126-127). Here, students can refer to the analysis of this thesis, where examples of such themes as comradery, knighthood and
nationalism found in “The Soldier” and “Absolution” support normative belief systems. However, later poems, such as “S.I.W” and “Repression of War Experience” deal with mental illness, sorrow, anger and isolation, thusly challenging the same belief systems. The moth burning its wings on liquid flame used by Sassoon as a symbol for the mindless rush towards death at the beginning of the conflict can be referenced here as an example.

Regarding the Reader, the students are asked to search for other perspectives than their own, or critically view their own perspective to examine power and privilege, by asking themselves: How does my identity (meaning religion, age, ability, cultural heritage, privilege and gender) shape my reading and understanding of this poetry? (Borsheim-Black et al. 126-127). Here, the students examine their own role as critic, and how their own perspective shape the reading of the poetry, thusly shaping their interpretation of the historical context.

Finally, the students are to connect their work examining First World War poetry using secondary historical sources to the continuous need of critical analysis to detect norms, values and the perpetual cycle of exchange between art and society, discourse and history. On the topic of Assessments, pointing to the results of this thesis, the students are to discuss: Why did Owen and Sassoon both go back to the war after being sent home? It is an open question, which targets the underlying questions of why these people conformed to the norms and values that they were writing poetry against. Here, the students should take all of their previous research into account, as well as their own role as critic, to try and answer why we perpetually conform to norms and values which we know affect us negatively. Often, underlying power structures and norms may not permit us to speak or act freely, such as the case with Sassoon and especially Owen, which feared the social backlash of the term coward and the effect it would have on their credibility as poets more than their own deaths.

Finally, the students are to discuss the following question: How can the ideas and information developed in reading with and against canonical texts and poetry be used to
examine other types of media such as: articles, social media, movies etcetera? (Borsheim-Black et al. 126-127). This area of discussion is necessary for the students to create a tool which they can carry forward and apply when examining other types of content that carries traces of these hidden norms and values.

By following these five areas of analysis and reading with and against the poetry using secondary historical sources to create a second impression of insight, it is my hope that students will adopt a critical stance to their own perspective as critic, realize the importance of grounding one-self in sources, and transfer the critical literacies used to analyze canonical texts to analyze other types of texts and information (Borsheim-Black et al. 126-127). Intersubjective projects like this one could be organized together with the subject of History and Social Sciences to more clearly display the use for critical literacies in anthropological and ethnographic subjects. Adopting theory from both CLP and New Historicism would therefore give the students “Strategies for drawing conclusions about the spoken language and texts in terms of attitudes, perspectives, purposes and values, and to understand implied meaning”, as well as an understanding of “How oral and written communications in different genres are built up. How stylistics and rhetorical devices are used for different purposes and how language is used as an instrument to exercise power” (Skolverket 11). Thusly making the students aware of their own role as critic and their impact on the perpetual relationship between discourse and societies which relays norms, values and ideology.
8 Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how the hero was perceived in British literature and culture before the First World War and the beginning of the war, and then subsequently how Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen changed their disposition towards the concept of heroism and heroes in the encounter with the deadly reality of the First World War. The answer to the first question resides in the imperial practices that Britain held, and the adventure literature which was written in its spirit. The Boer war and the subsequent shift from an offensive to a defensive attitude in Imperial attitudes introduced the Invasion novel, which instructed civilians to become heroes in the defense of the home islands. Throughout, the “quiet strength” of the gentleman and the masculine ideals of self-control, honor and order were instilled in the population of the British Empire and inspired them to become what was needed to keep the Empire intact. At the start of the war, men like Siegfried Sassoon, and Rupert Brooke volunteered immediately, writing poetry about the glorious coming adventure. However, Wilfred Owen joined up later, with some of the idealistic notions of war intact, not knowing what would enfold, but with the burden of that unfulfilled debt of blood from British society hanging over his shoulder.

The answer to the second question was conclusive. Over prolonged contact with the horrors of the First World War, it is evident in both secondary sources and their poetry that Sassoon and Owen changed their attitudes from idealistic notions of war in early thoughts and poetry, to openly question the idea of heroes and heroism, as well as the War as a just and glorious cause, questioning the norms and values which forced them to do unhuman things.

However, their society continued to believe in the hero until the bitter end. And facing alienating both themselves and their families from society, as well as rendering their own warning cries in poetry worthless, they had to kill other people. Kill, in order to make
themselves heroes, so they could denounce the existence of such a beast publicly. The hero
was in this circumstance a weapon, just as the artillery or the gas, which was created out of
generations groomed for that purpose.

It would take almost 50 years before the first book about Wilfred Owen was written
after his death, studying his attempts to inform and protest. The fact that I in this essay
categorize Owen’s and Sassoon’s work as canon, speaks clearly for their impact on our
understanding of that conflict. However, the norms and values that shaped their world and the
poets are rarely questioned critically, even though they still affect us today in areas such as
negative and harmful male ideals, equality, identity and cultural heritage.

Thusly, in studying the poets of the war’s work, the hundred years that separate us feel
like minutes. By viewing their poetry as criticism towards a system which groomed them,
instead of focusing on just the horrors or their sacrifice, we come closer to understanding the
underlying power structures which have shaped and keep shaping us. As well as the
continuous exchange between art and society and in turn history and discourse.

By teaching the poetry of Sassoon, Owen and Brooke using a combination of CLP and
New Historicism, the students are taught critical literacies which in turn can be applied to
other forms of content, making them aware of the constant influence of norms and values that
shape their lives. Moreover, the students are made aware of their own impact as critic, and
how they shape the continuous exchange between discourse and history. Hopefully, after
working with these questions and content, the student playing the computer game with the
digital hero will pause the game after the announcement of protecting their mothers, wives,
and sisters back home, pick up their phone, and comment on the normative occurrence in a
group chat.
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Appendices

Appendix A “The Soldier” by Rupert Brooke

If I should die, think only this of me,
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.
Appendix B “Absolution” by Siegfried Sassoon

The anguish of the earth absolves our eyes
Till beauty shines in all that we can see.
War is our scourge; yet war has made us wise,
And, fighting for our freedom, we are free.

Horror of wounds and anger at the foe,
And loss of things desired; all these must pass.
We are the happy legion, for we know
Time's but a golden wind that shakes the grass.

There was an hour when we were loth to part
From life we longed to share no less than others.
Now, having claimed this heritage of heart,
What need we more, my comrades and my brothers?
Appendix C “The Poet as Hero” by Siegfried Sassoon.

You've heard me, scornful, harsh, and discontented,
Mocking and loathing War: you've asked me why
Of my old, silly sweetness I've repented—
My ecstasies changed to an ugly cry.

You are aware that once I sought the Grail,
Riding in armour bright, serene and strong;
And it was told that through my infant wail
There rose immortal semblances of song.

But now I've said good-bye to Galahad,
And am no more the knight of dreams and show:
For lust and senseless hatred make me glad,
And my killed friends are with me where I go.
Wound for red wound I burn to smite their wrongs;
And there is absolution in my songs.
Appendix D “Repression of War experience” by Siegfried Sassoon

Now light the candles; one; two; there's a moth;
What silly beggars they are to blunder in
And scorch their wings with glory, liquid flame—
No, no, not that,—it's bad to think of war,
When thoughts you've gagged all day come back to scare you;
And it's been proved that soldiers don't go mad
Unless they lose control of ugly thoughts
That drive them out to jabber among the trees.

Now light your pipe; look, what a steady hand.
Draw a deep breath; stop thinking; count fifteen,
And you're as right as rain ...

Why won't it rain? ...
I wish there'd be a thunder-storm to-night,
With bucketsful of water to sluice the dark,
And make the roses hang their dripping heads.

Books; what a jolly company they are,
Standing so quiet and patient on their shelves,
Dressed in dim brown, and black, and white, and green,
And every kind of colour. Which will you read?
Come on; O do read something; they're so wise.
I tell you all the wisdom of the world
Is waiting for you on those shelves; and yet
You sit and gnaw your nails, and let your pipe out,
And listen to the silence: on the ceiling
There's one big, dizzy moth that bumps and flutters;
And in the breathless air outside the house
The garden waits for something that delays.
There must be crowds of ghosts among the trees,—
Not people killed in battle,—they're in France,—
But horrible shapes in shrouds--old men who died
Slow, natural deaths,—old men with ugly souls,
Who wore their bodies out with nasty sins.

*   *   *

You're quiet and peaceful, summering safe at home;
You'd never think there was a bloody war on! ...
O yes, you would ... why, you can hear the guns.
Hark! Thud, thud, thud,—quite soft ... they never cease—
Those whispering guns—O Christ, I want to go out
And screech at them to stop—I'm going crazy;
I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns.
Appendix E “S.I.W” by Wilfred Owen

I. THE PROLOGUE

Patting good-bye, doubtless they told the lad
He’d always show the Hun a brave man’s face;
Father would sooner him dead than in disgrace,—
Was proud to see him going, aye, and glad.
Perhaps his mother whimpered how she’d fret
Until he got a nice safe wound to nurse.
Sisters would wish girls too could shoot, charge, curse …
Brothers—would send his favourite cigarette.
Each week, month after month, they wrote the same,
Thinking him sheltered in some Y.M. Hut,
Because he said so, writing on his butt
Where once an hour a bullet missed its aim
And misses teased the hunger of his brain.
His eyes grew old with wincing, and his hand
Reckless with ague. Courage leaked, as sand
From the best sand-bags after years of rain.
But never leave, wound, fever, trench-foot, shock,
Untrapped the wretch. And death seemed still withheld
For torture of lying machinally shelled,
At the pleasure of this world’s Powers who’d run amok.

He’d seen men shoot their hands, on night patrol.
Their people never knew. Yet they were vile.
'Death sooner than dishonour, that’s the style!'

So Father said.

II. THE ACTION

One dawn, our wire patrol

Carried him. This time, Death had not missed.

We could do nothing but wipe his bleeding cough.

Could it be accident? - Rifles go off…

Not sniped? No. (Later they found the English ball.)

III. THE POEM

It was the reasoned crisis of his soul

Against more days of inescapable thrall,

Against infrangibly wired and blind trench wall

Curtained with fire, roofed in with creeping fire,

Slow grazing fire, that would not burn him whole

But kept him for death’s promises and scoff,

And life’s half-promising, and both their riling.

IV. THE EPILOGUE

With him they buried the muzzle his teeth had kissed,

And truthfully wrote the Mother, ‘Tim died smiling’.