



## Trench Wars and Emotional Articulations: A Poetic Study

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### Abstract

Mass media and poetry had a great influence on the soldiers and people during World Wars. Poetry, in particular, was employed consciously and unconsciously, for various purposes including governmental propaganda to recruit young men through the expression of a romantic sacrifice of one's own self for his own country through images of romantic heroism and patriotism. On the other hand, it was used by the poets young and old to express fear, satire, protest and resistance. This study argues that the hypothesis presented by Isma'eel & Abdulmajeed, that Romance is found in war poetry a shrinking and expansion phases depending on the meaning expressed with a conclusion of high frequency of the two meaning 'idealization' and 'heroism' in selected poems of the First World War. The study challenges this conclusion by examining I. M. Parsons theory of the different phases of emotional articulations other than romance as the truthful feeling expressed by the poets by considering the element of time through which these poems were written whether before during or after the war.

**Keywords:** Pity, Protest, Romance, Satire, Trench War, War Poetry



## حروب الخنادق والتعبيرات العاطفية: دراسة شعرية

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### المستخلص :

ان لوسائل الإعلام والشعر تأثير كبير على الجنود والشعب خلال الحربين العالميتين. وقد استخدم الشعر، على وجه الخصوص، بوعي أو بغير وعي، لأغراض متنوعة، بما في ذلك الدعاية الحكومية لتجنيد الشباب من خلال التعبير عن التضحية الرومانسية بالنفس من أجل الوطن عبر صور البطولة والوطنية. من جهة أخرى، استخدمه الشعراء، الشباب والمخضرمين، للتعبير عن الخوف والسخرية والاحتجاج والمقاومة. تجادل هذه الدراسة بأن الفرضية التي قدمتها الباحثة جنان كاظم اسماعيل وآخرون، والتي تضمنت ان الرومانسية في شعر الحرب تمر بمرحلتين انكماش وتوسع تبعا للمعنى المعبر عنه، خلصت الى وجود تكرار كبير لمعنيي "المثالية" و"البطولة" في قصائد مختارة من الحرب العالمية الأولى. وتناقش الدراسة هذا الاستنتاج من خلال دراسة نظرية آي . إم. بارسونز حول المراحل المختلفة للتعبير العاطفي بخلاف الرومانسية باعتبارها الشعور الاصدق الذي عبر عنه الشعراء، وذلك من خلال مراعاة عنصر الزمن الذي كتبت فيه هذه النصوص، سواء قبل تجربة السواتر أو خلالها أو بعدها.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** شعر الحرب، حرب السواتر، الرومانسية، السخرية، الشفقة، المقاومة

## 1. Introduction

According to Stallworthy "there can be no area of human experience that has generated a wider range of powerful feelings than war: hope and fear; exhilaration and humiliation; hatred-not only for the enemy, but also for generals, politicians, and war-profiteers; love- for fellow soldiers, for women and children left behind, for country (often) and cause (occasionally)." (1984: p. xix). Love, historically, formed the main subject of poems, with the development of the concept of war poetry had to find an alternative meanings to express romance in the harsh drastic conditions of the battlefield. Stallworthy believes that the chivalric tradition of heroism and heroic romance had to be "transmuted into the courtly tradition of the high Renaissance, required proficiency in the arts of war as well as in such peaceable arts as music and poetry." (1984: p. xxi). As history approached the massive development in the form of war in the modern age, war poetry started to be the medium through which poets articulated condensed feelings from the warfront to the civilians who were eager to listen to the first-hand war experiences. War poetry provides insightful and enlightening images of such human experience and it presents clear and distinct aspects of war at different times. War may become the price of peace when the peace is based upon justice and liberty. The form of war poetry that has been undertaken in this spirit has also exalted and touched special qualities such as patriotism, self-sacrifice, courage, enterprise, and endurance. Thus, the poetry of war has tended to glorify war in itself though ardent and lovable youths have been slain and has brought misery and despair to women and families on the home-front. Still influenced by the chivalric Renaissance traditions of war heroism some poets, at their initial stages, expressed the patriotic enthusiasm and handled the romantic concept of war that glorified nationalism, freedom, patriotism, liberty and martyrdom which were to be seen at this stage.

Writing poetry depends largely on the poet's personal and inner affairs. This means that in order to write an effective war poem, the poet has to experience active service. In this case the tone and attitude of the poetry will be conditioned by the ideological and actual impact the war has made on the poet. The poetry assigned with the horrors of the great wars broke new grounds and gave a realistic account of the warfare through actual vocabulary, literary devices, formal poetic innovations, rhetorical devices, and shocked the traditional artistic and aesthetic presentations of their familiar techniques and enriched poetic language with new literary devices. War poetry in the twentieth century had to take on its shoulders the

responsibility of expressing the neo-technological and devastating horror of war, nevertheless war poetry does not necessarily express an 'anti-war' reflection. It could be about the very large aspects of life: identity, loyalty, innocence, guilt, courage, duty, desire, love, compassion, humanity, and death. The response to these aspects, gives war poetry an extra-literary importance.

War poetry in its modern terminology was added and established as a genre in literature during the First World War (henceforth WWI). Many combined voices of young soldiers who used to write poems during that time to express their emotions and experiences of war. It becomes a special genre since it involves the speaker as both actor and acted upon. In *War Poetry Review*, Stallworthy (2015) says that in 1942, Robert Graves observed that war poet and war poetry were terms used for the first time in WWI and they are peculiar to this period. This kind of poetry, i.e, war poetry, has formed the ground of WWI memory. In addition, it has supplied the template for the poetry of all future wars (p. 5). In 1914, as a way of striving to express ultimate emotion, hundreds of young men in uniform started to writing poetry at the edge of experience and their poetry is largely associated with war poets who belong to their first-hand war experience and to their actual presence in the battlefields and front combat actions. It, as a literary trend and a genre, has developed with the enormous impact of the great modern wars of the twentieth and twenty first centuries. It is largely presented in literature in different directions (Abdulmajeed, R.K. & Yunis, L.L., 2018, p. 6).

Kendall (2007), in his introduction, states that war poetry, as a term, has become so familiar that its internal tensions are not noticed. Yet it is difficult to imagine how two different human activities, i.e. experiencing a war and writing a poem, go together. The former suggests destruction, chaos, and pain and the latter suggests creation, order, and pleasure. In war poetry, there are the most notable binary oppositions; life and death. The best war poets put themselves in a negotiation between the pleasures of art and human suffering (p.1). Muriel Rukeyser, another poet included in Williams' (1945) review, states that poetry cannot be restricted to the subject of war. War enters human life, thus war is in the poetry just like in the imagination, "as a meaning, as a relationship, or simply as a fact." Muriel believes that war poetry is a part of human life and part of human feelings and passion where one can find love, intimacy, compassion and furthermore, romance (p. 25) which one can unexpectedly touch in war poetry. This article aims to examine these two contradictory images in the literature of war poetry of the twentieth century.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Isma'eel & Abdulmajeed (2019) argued in the article "The pragmatics of Romance in the First World War's Poetry" (2019) that Romance covers wide meanings of war poetry. Its occurrences and themes are expressed through phases that could shrink and expand depending on the meaning it aims to manifest. The term romance was expressed throughout history to show the different emotional articulations of traditional expression such as: "1. adventures, 2. chivalric knights, 3. love and Intimacy, 4.idealization, 5. Mystery, 6.excitement, 7. sentiment, 8. Nostalgia, 9. Romantic Nostalgia, 10. courtly love, 11.boldness, 12. heroism, 13. rescues others who were in distress, 14. rules of behavior, 15.Bravery, 16. Gentlemanliness, 17. Maintain order in society by presenting sources for entertainment, 18. Heroines beautiful, 19. Villains villainous, 20. Frustrations, 21.Ambiguities, 22. Embarrassments, 23. the Analogy of innocence, 24. wish-fulfillment dream, 25. Persistent nostalgia, 26. Imagination, 27. Virtuous heroes, 28. Virtue, 29.propriety, 30. Duty, 31. Passion, 32. Masculine military heroism, 33. Sexual love, 34.Patriotism and Domesticity". (2019; p. 69). These meanings underwent a long history of development since its first Anglo-Norman Old French meaning of Chivalry and love to its modern connotation of intimacy and physical connection.

The study concludes that by measuring certain use of poetic and pragmatic devices, such as 'Hyperbole, paradox, metaphor..' the two meanings with the highest frequency that manifest themselves in the poems selected are 'Idealization' and 'Heroism' having the highest score in their appearance in the poems. A matter which proves that the poet soldiers who participated in the First World Wars "voluntarily and wholeheartedly went to the battlefield and were obsessed by their pure love to their country" (2019; p. 83). Isma'eel & Abdulmajeed point out that these 'truthful feelings' of romance are expressed in war poetry of the First World War to show "their ultimate desire to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their country." (2019; p. 83).

This interpretation however significance according to I. M. Parsons Hypothesis of warfare ignores the significance influence of time before, during and after the actual participation in the trench experience. I.M. Parsons in his book *Men Who Marched Away* published in London by Chatto & Windus in (1965) argues that time is a fundamental element in defining the truthful feelings of the poets of the First World War. His edited book included poems which expressed these emotional articulations in four stages depending on their involvement in the trench warfare putting romance as an expression of only one stage which is the first stage called the "Vision of

Glory" including the idealization and heroism of the poems of Rupert Brook. While the second stage expresses the "Reality of the Trench Warfare" expressed by Robert Graves' expression of Irony. The third stage is what Parsons called "NO More Jokes" expressed by Siegfried Sassoon's satire. And finally, the fourth stage which Parsons believes is the expression of the "Pity of War" through Wilfred Owen's revelation of the untold truths of the trenches, stating that "It is necessary to have been in the trenches to appreciate "the pity war distilled." " (1965; p. 20)

Trench warfare is an expression that is used since the First World War to describe combatant actions where the military forces dug in trenches to protect themselves and survive machine guns and artillery. This was done on the Western Front in 1914-1918 on both sides and extended from the Swiss border to the Belgian coast. These trenches were made by the fighting armies in complicated systems of extended lines that allowed specific protection as well as communications. The trenches were fortified by a barren expanse between the two enemy lines that was called 'No Man's Land' representing a forbidden zone land through which the soldiers would be exposed to direct assaults by the opposite army.

Trench warfare is described by those who experienced it as a brutal experience that includes deadly physical engagement, psychological stress, and a heavy exposure to insane weather conditions and diseases. Following the first World War Trench Warfare became a 'byword for stalemate, attrition, sieges, and futility in conflict. ("Trench warfare". *Cultural Dictionary*, 2009).

### 3. Analysis

While Rupert Brook and Rudyard Kipling idealized war and expressed the romantic beauty of the death of the soldiers for their own country at the beginning of the war other poets such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves shows that trench experience is not a romantic adventure when the chivalric hero meets with aliens and dragons and defeat them.

Paul Fussell in his famous book *The Great War and Modern Memory* published by Oxford University Press in (1975) shows that these meanings of romance existed before or at the beginning of the Great War when the media showed an idealized image of the battlefield where soldiers met with great number of the enemy soldiers and achieved victory using titles for articles such as "How Three Encountered Fifty and Prevailed" (John Laffin (1973; p.12), quoted in (1975; p.136)).

Fussell believes that in trench wars such as the First World War innocent was lost and hence romance did not only lost its meaning but

everything else. The meaning of being and fighting were questioned and doubted in a useless war where one soldier reported:

I had ceased to be a soldier... only my helmet remained... I found myself without waterbottle, iron ration, gasmask. My watch had lost cover and glass... then an enormous burden of responsibility seemed to roll away as if this were the end of a pilgrim's progress. There was no pain. I felt at rest. (1975; p.138).

This was describing his first day of attack at the Somme where he shouted "Now I knew it was all right. I shouldn't be frightened and I shouldn't lose my head. Imagine the joy of that discovery! I felt quite and happy and self-possessed." (1975; p. 138). The only meanings expressed here are the burden and the horror which is romanticized as a joy of discovery of survival amidst futile toll of death, where soldiers joined with enthusiasm only to end in bitterness "one leg missing, patronized by uncomprehending civilians." (1975; p. 139). Enthusiasm was encountered by shock and the new meaning left is the new type or what Fussell call "the new industrialized mass trench warfare." Articulated in the memories and the minds of the soldier poets.

Examining Wordsworth definition of poetry as 'an expression of powerful feelings' shows that poetry of the soldiers cannot be restricted to the subject of the war. War, however, breaks into the poets' lives, occupying their imaginations and becomes part of their human feelings, passion, intimacy, compassion and more. (Williams 1942). According to Fussell the use of legends, such as, those used by the Welsh poet David Jones in his war poetry collection *In Parenthesis*(1937) dealing with Roman soldiers during the time of Jesus Christ is an attempted to reverse the meaning romance with a "desire to rescue and reinvigorate traditional pre-industrial religious and ethical connotations." (1975; p. 145):

His search is always for "valid signs", for an [unimpoverished] system of symbols capable of conveying even to a modern audience the rich complications of the Christian view of history. His method is that of association: he mines the "deposits" clustering around traditional meanings , anxious that not a one be lost....In all his work, whether about trench life in the war or the military fatigues attending the crucifixion, the experience of the soldier is taken ... as a response tative of essential human experience. (1975; p. 45).

Jones here expresses an awful image of a romantic landscape of horror and vulnerability of both nature and man "and their paradoxical privilege of glory of the "No Man's Land and the unknown world beyond it" that world of "Wounded trees and Wounded men," and this is he says "are very much

an abiding image in my mind as a hang-over from the war" and that's what Jones learn from his experience at the trenches. (Blamires 1972; p. 3). This attempt of Jones to turn what is modern in paradox to traditional is in itself an attempt to change its meaning by demolishing the old one of heroism and idealizations to a contrast of fear and horror, where the heroes are victims and glory is nothing but a pity in Owen's words. The poem consists of seven parts with a central character Private John Ball approaching a scene when he will be wounded in the woods on the Somme. The name is an allusion of the priest who led the Peasant's Revolt in 1381 as the representative of Briton. However, Jones' John is no leader of revolts but nothing but a 'Sad Sack' and corporal in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers introduced in part I as arriving late for the final parade in his camp. John appears mediating with blessedness in the parading night from yesterday's remoteness:

You can hear the rat of no-man's-land  
Rut-out intricacies,  
Weasel-out his patient workings,  
Scurt, scurt, scurt,  
Harrow out-earthly, trowel his cunning paw;  
Redeem the time of our uncharity, to sap his own amphibious paradise.

(Jones 1937)

Jones explains in the preface to his long poem that "war will not be understood in traditional terms: the machine gun alone makes it special and unexampled that is simply can't be talked about as if it were one of the conventional wars of history." (1937; preface).

Parsons in his book hypothesises that Brook in his romanticized image of the dead soldier is not expressing glory, and heroism but an optimistic exhilaration of pre trench period of euphoria "When it was still possible to believe that war was a tolerably chivalrous affair, offering welcome opportunities for heroism and self-sacrifice, and to hope that this particular war would be over in six month". (1965; p.16)

Rupert Brooke (1887-1915) is an English poet and one of the main representatives of the patriotic pre-war poetry which later on formed a part of the political propaganda of British army. He is one of the poets whose names are tightly connected with the poetry of the First World War with the spirit of glorifying and romanticizing war as a source of peace to the soldiers who were combatant in the battlefield. During the war, Brook was in the

Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve most of his military time. He stayed in Belgium through the beginning of 1915. Though he actually never actually participated in the military actions, a matter which is never really appears in his poems and the way he thought about the war. He glorified war and he was one of the pre-war poets because he thought that war serves his country and a way to defeat the enemy, the evil people, and to protect his country.

Rupert Brooke's sonnets such as *The Soldier* and *Peace* are part of the poems in which he glorifies England during the First World War that Parsons describe as part of the vision of glory. He speaks of an English soldier who leaves his home to go to war feeling that he is doing his job towards his country.

If I should die, think only this of me;  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is forever England.  
(Brooke, 1915)

Isma'eel (2019) suggests that the sense felt in this sonnet is that joining war is a kind of idealistic job. *The Soldier* is one of Rupert Brooke's "best-known and loved work and may be the most famous single poem of war" (Bloom, 2003, p. 35). This work was a kind of British political propaganda which celebrated the war and considered it a kind of noble action to fight for one's nation, encouraging young men to join the war.

Parsons on the other hand suggest that Brooks remarks are more ironic than idealizing because it belongs to the period of euphoria and the time of optimism these young men felt when they enlisted to war which is represented by The irony in his work which is "that he didn't see the horrors of war which influenced his patriotic poems that represent an idealistic picture of war, devoid of death and destruction" (p. 12).

Now, God be thanked who has matched us with His hour,  
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,  
(Brooke, 1915)

This sense of exhilaration is optimized by his feeling of purification and awakening by joining the trench warfare as a young man speaking for

his generation. A feeling Parsons described as marked by 'crippling shallowness' and came only by those who went off to fight in the early years of the war. The romance expressed is not only of patriotism, heroism and chivalric sacrifice but that of illusion and vision that lacked the spirit of experience.

The second stage Parsons suggests is "The Bitter Truth" quoting Blunden "Agony stares from each gray face" the peace is changed and the period is different now the poets experienced firsthand frontline realities of the trench fight and discovered "the hell where youth and laughter go." Hence Wilfred Owen's title *Exposure* where the soldiers brains "ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us... wearied we keep awake because the night is silent" (Owen, 1915). And while Isma'eel & AbdulMajeed quote Allen Seeger describing himself having a 'rendezvous' with death "when spring brings back blue days and fair" (2019, p. 76) when heroism is idealized and praised, Robert Graves (1895-1985) another First World War poet denies this vision as theirs by using irony and deliberate understatement to tell the story of Sergeant-Major Money "It wasn't our battalion, but we lay alongside it, so the story is as true as the telling is frank."(1917). Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) declares that war is A Working Party from which one would never come back the same:

Three hours ago he stumbled up the trench;

Now he will never walk that road again:

He must be carried back, a jolting lump

Beyond all need of tenderness and care.

(Sassoon 1917)

The third stage Parsons points out is the 'No More Jokes' stage a phrase that belongs to Sassoon in his poem *Blighters* "And there'd be no more jokes in music-halls, to mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume." A stage of realization and protest:

There poems are not 'reports on experience', like those in the previous section, but poems of protest. Their prevailing mood is bitter, satirical. They make their point by comment, not description...this is not surprising, for we do not nowadays need psychologist to tell us that one of the basic ways in which human beings seek relief from insupportably nerve-wrecking experience is by satirising them." (1965, p. 20).

The date with death and the trenches becomes a journey of suicide and the memorable sacrifice becomes a forgotten detail which the people will ignore and will never be spoken about again as Sassoon states in his poem *Suicide in the Trenches*:

I knew a simple soldier boy  
Who grinned at life in empty joy,  
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,  
And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,  
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,  
He put a bullet through his brain.  
No one spoke of him again.

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye  
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,  
Sneak home and pray you'll never know  
The hell where youth and laughter go.

(Sassoon 1917)

No heroism or idealization is possible here as well as no nostalgia. The home to which those young men were sent whether dead or alive are not welcoming and not appreciating the hell they experienced in the trenches. The brains that ached in Owens words are shot to stop the pain of the fear and the horror. The idealized landscape of the battlefield is exposed to be the hell of death and torture and waste. The fair spring of the romantic 'rendezvous' with death is actually a 'winter trenches' with crumps and lice and lack of rum.

The final stage according to Parsons is "The Pity of War" a phrase that belongs to Wilfred Owen in his preface to his collected poems. A stage in Parsons words when "it was not necessary to have been in the trenches to appreciate 'the pity war distilled' or to understand, if one had the heart and wit, the larger implications of the conflict" (1965, p. 20). A stage Parsons

believe one can understand and appreciate through the poems of the poets who experienced the frontline fight such as Wilfred Owen.

Wilfred Owen (1893-Nov. 4, 1918) is one of the important war poets, whose works coined the genre and for the first time in history revealed the 'untold truth' about war. Owen enlisted in 1915 in the artist's rifle as a second lieutenant and his poetry articulated the horror of trench warfare and gas warfare. Owen died in action on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1918, a week before the Armistice Day on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1918. Owen's tragic and heroic death contrasts that of Brooke's, however Owen felt it necessary to reveal the truth about war, any war not specifically the First World War. Owen's significance lies in his universal expression. The pity of the war which he says becomes the essence of the poetry itself "the poetry is in the pity". War does not only destroy feelings but also the soldiers being and their needs and minimize it to the actual essentials of survival "Happy are those who lose imagination: they have enough to carry with ammunition." (Owen, *Insensibility*, 1965, p.124)

Parsons shows that this stage is the largest and the one includes the best names of the war poetry poets. That is because the covered period is long and painful to those who experienced it. Romance, heroism, idealization and nostalgia are no longer the right expressions of the state, the need to express themselves through techniques and meanings that best articulates the "Drained the wild honey of their youth." (Isaac Rosenberg, 1965, p. 145). Most of them used the word death or the dead; in Brookes words "these hearts [which] were woven of human joys and cares." In his poem *The Dead*, in the title of their poems or the main metaphor of their images.

In his poem *Asleep*, Owen, in an exaggerated image, shows a dead soldier under his own helmet dying, losing his life, his heart and his chances of being. His death is described as a long forced sleep "of the aborted life within him leaping..." Nothing could stop death which "took him by the brow and laid him back." No glory no memory and no land, no great wings or shiny stars, no high pillows of God's making above the clouds." Nothing but the autumns that awaits him "who knows? Who hopes? Who troubles? Let it pass! He sleeps. He sleeps less tremulous, less cold, than we who must awake, and waking, say Alas!" (Owen *Asleep*, 1965, p.166)

#### 4. Conclusion

This study has re-evaluated romance, in the form of idealization and heroism, constitutes the dominant features of First World War poetry. By examining selected poems through the perspective of I.M. Parsons's stages of war poetry and by considering the temporal context in which the poems

were written, the study demonstrates the emotional content of war poetry is neither fixed nor uniformly romantic. The study introduces poems composed before or at the early stages of the war which often reflect romantic ideals of patriotism, sacrifice, and heroic duty, while those written during and after the conflict increasingly express disillusionment, pity, satire, protest and resistance. The findings suggest that the representation of war in poetry evolves in response to the poets' direct experiences and changing perceptions of the conflict. Therefore, war poetry should be viewed as one phase among several emotional articulations rather than the predominant characteristic of the First World War poetry. The study concludes the understanding of war poetry requires attention not only to the thematic content but to the historical moment and personal circumstances surrounding its composition.

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