

In me the tiger sniffs the rose.
- Siegfried Sassoon -

Uranians on the Battlefield
Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen in the First World War

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Note:

Parts of this thesis are loosely based on an essay written by me in the same period of writing this thesis. The essay is titled “A Uranian on the Battlefield” and was submitted to the Modern Poetry course at Utrecht University. It is available upon request.

1. The Great War and Great Social Change in Great Britain

On the 28th of June 1914, Gavrilo Princip assassinated the Archduke of Austria-Hungary Franz Ferdinand and his wife. No one at that time would have predicted that this rather minor event would eventually be cause for the First World War to break out and would permanently change the relations between Western countries for the worse (Means, par. 1). At the time of the assassination many countries had already been silently making plans for a possible war to fight out, all for different reasons, and unrest was already heavily brewing beneath the surface of each country. The assassination of Franz Ferdinand therefore simply acted as the first push that caused a gigantic domino effect, setting the wheels of the First World War in movement. Princip, who carried out the assassination of Ferdinand and his wife, was a member of the Black Hand, a Serbian nationalist secret society (Duffy, "Causes"). Austria-Hungary claimed that this secret society was also intimate with the Serbian government and in turn declared war on Serbia (*ibid.*). Germany accordingly joined the War and allied with Austria-Hungary, becoming known as the Central Powers (*ibid.*). These Central Powers in turn declared war on Russia, France and the United Kingdom, known as the Entente Powers, who had already for a long time been strengthening their bonds as allies (Duffy, "Causes"). Britain at first affectively named The First World War "The Great War", wanting to avoid the connotation that they were in any way engaged in a war as big as the First World War (Harper "great," par. 2). However, it was a fact that could not be denied anymore, especially after the fall of France and the subsequent trench war that had started. The frenzied start of the First World War caused all of the aforementioned countries, and several others later on, to start an enormous war that would not end until 1918. Ultimately, a relatively simple act by one man led to a war that encompassed the whole of Western civilisation.

The First World War, today lives on in the history books as a trench war. It was a war fought by soldiers who dug deep trenches in which they seemed to lie and wait forever and,

occasionally, would engage in combat, in the end not moving as much as a meter. It was an immovable war, and the trenches that the soldiers dug took on the impression of impassable borders. However, as immovable as it might seem, it did not turn out to be a futile conflict geared only around politics. Instead, the Great War was crucial in the development of the West as it was not only an important political and international war, laying bare the framework of Western civilisation, no, it also caused complete societies to undergo substantial changes, both socially and culturally.

For Great Britain, the Great War represented a turning point in social life and culture. Not only did it change politics and the outlook on the rest of the world, it also caused a considerable shift in the framework of British society. Part of this change, accelerated by the Great War, was the move from the older conservative Victorian social life and sexual prudery to a freer, less inhibited culture in which sexuality was no longer deemed the great taboo. (Robb 32). The Great War caused British society to take up a looser norm, taking its first steps towards moving away from strict rules on love, sexuality and taboos on subjects such as venereal disease, homosexuality and inappropriate behaviour that was previously thought to be sexual deviant and still prohibited by law. Specifically, it caused an enormous change in the way that gender was perceived and dealt with. The start of the First World War was cause for a considerable discussion regarding the correct social roles for British men and women. For men, the roles that they would fit in a war were set in a very long tradition of conflict and combat. Simply put, the men, where possible, were expected to enlist and go to war, where they would fight for their motherland (*ibid.*). They might survive and come home, some badly wounded, or they might die a hero. However, for women there was no clear role defined, other than the recommendation that they should carry on their regular life schedule, taking care of their household and children (*ibid.*). They most certainly were not expected to go to war, and they did not perform heavy physical labour either, as that was the task of the men.

However, the Great War did not fit in as a supposedly traditional situation, and the reality was that there was work to be done, especially now that almost all the capable men had been sent out to the battlefield (*ibid.*). For women, this was a promising outlook, as they were now offered real careers that, consequently, opened up a completely new world of possibilities for them, both socially and politically. They took on employment as nurses and munitions workers, filling in for the missing men. It was work that they were praised for, and work that was promoted by the government (*ibid.*). In fact, it did not seem to matter anymore whether someone was a man or a woman, everyone had to help in the War, if it was to be won. For the men who went to war a similar new world of experience opened itself up to them. From their youth onwards, these men had been raised on Victorian and Edwardian morals and ideas. These were times in which “muscular Christianity” (*ibid.* 33) and chivalry were promoted as life saving morals worth believing in. Organisations such as the Boy Scouts and the Boys Brigade propagated ideas of chivalry, painting romantic images of war and heroism. This went as far that in 1914, over 40 percent of adolescents were a member of a youth organisation, most of them paramilitary (*ibid.*). The War seemed the perfect possibility for these men to show what they were made of. If the War would be anything like the romantic adventure stories that they grew up with it would become a wonderful war, and they would be able to demonstrate their masculinity and power just as the brave soldiers in their stories did. However, after having been at war for some time the formerly noble and chivalric soldiers quickly found out that war was nothing like the romantic pictures that they had at the back of their minds. Their chivalric fantasies turned into horrifying nightmares (*ibid.* 47). In a way their world, both socially and emotionally, was now turned upside down. Where traditionally the men used to be free and the women were bound to the household, the women now worked and enjoyed their newfound freedom while the men were caught in a terrible and

horrific battle from which they could not easily escape other than by choosing the path leading to death.

At the same moment that the discussion about gender started at the Home Front in Great Britain, the soldiers and officers at the front in France were also faced with a social situation that they were not used to deal with, that of love between men. At the frontlines they were constantly surrounded by other men, with no women in sight, apart from the few prostitutes that worked in the local brothels or the nurses in the field hospitals. This all-male situation opened up new possibilities between men, and furthered the creation of very close and even intimate friendships between men, as they now felt freer to experiment more than they did at home (Robb 57). The men at the frontlines looked to each other for the intimate love and care that they would have normally been given by their mother, girlfriend or wife. This caring love is best described by Military historian John Ellis when he writes that “[t]here was [. . .] love for one’s comrades. The word is not used carelessly. Nothing else can describe the devotion and selflessness that characterized the relationship of men within the same platoon or company” (197). This potent, devoted and at times controversial behaviour was visible all over the frontlines of the Great War, and played an important role in the survival of those involved.

Still, this experimental behaviour among men was not necessarily new or unknown to the British public, as it had been part of British society for quite some time, although in a different place, that of the public school. Officers who had attended public schools had often already experienced this type of love and care, having grown up in an all-male environment consisting of boys in the age of puberty (Robb 57). This public school environment brought many of the boys in close contact with each other, offering its service as a testing ground for love and sexuality (*ibid.*). Throughout the War, this same affecting love for one another contrasted heavily with the rough reality of combat. In a way the men in the army lived in a

constant duality of mind, split between the feminine love and care that they showed for each other and the fact that they were engaged in a cruel and horrible war in which nothing loving or caring was to be found. However, these two ideals managed to live next to each other in peace and harmony, each even in a way continuing the other along the way as their horrible work was softened by the treatment and care of the other men.

What is important to note about most of the behaviour that is portrayed here is that although one man might have shown love for another this does not necessarily classify as homosexual behaviour and does not justify classifying these men as homosexuals. As Martin Taylor argues in his introduction to male love poetry from the trenches: “The pervasiveness of the emotion is matched only by its unselfconsciousness. This qualification is not intended to diminish the homo-erotic element of First World War literature, but simply to warn readers against adopting too unguarded an approach” (16). Often, the love that men had for each other was unadulterated and without any sexual desire, mainly because most men were simply heterosexual by nature (*ibid.* 27). Where it is now easy to read homosexual behaviour into Great War poetry, using modern theory on homosexuality to do so, most of the time homosexuality was not even there to begin with. As Taylor argues, it is best to address the asexual love between men not as a derivative kind of homosexuality but as typical homoeroticism: a temporary interest in other men that after the War soon dwindles as the country and its society returned to normal (*ibid.*). However, what about the men that really were homosexual by nature and went to war? How did the War and the clash of gender influence them, and in turn, how did they influence the War? These questions are what this thesis will focus on. It is hard to find substantial information about them, as homosexuality was against the law at the time and there are, not surprisingly, few to no publications of active homosexual behaviour at the front (*ibid.* 28). However, there is one genre of literature that grants a way into the mind of the homosexual men at the time of the Great War and that is the

genre of the war poem, specifically the poems by the homosexual British poets and soldiers Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.

The genre of the war poem had never before seen so much popularity and so many publications on it as during the Great War. This was not because the genre of the war poem was specifically new, as there had already been many war poems written before the Great War, but because these war poems had a certain specialty to them (Taylor 36). What made these new war poems so worthy of note and gain popularity was that the poets involved were not just educated men looking at the War from the sidelines, as the authors of the earlier war poems, but were actually soldiers and officers serving in the army (*ibid.*). These war poets saw and experienced the war in all its gruesome and intense detail and this personal experience in turn heavily influenced their poems. No longer was war poetry generally impersonal and heroic; instead, it now fully transformed into poetry of personal emotion and experience (*ibid.*). This change is especially visible in the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, two homosexual British poets who both served as officers in the First World War and wrote a large amount of war poems. Their Great War poems give an extensive insight in their lives as homosexuals and the theatre of war that they experienced first hand at the front. By analysing their poetry, it is possible to see how they dealt with the rough, tough masculinity of the War while on the other hand having to deal with their personal softer, feminine, homosexual side. It is this clear duality of personality, similar to the split between gender, which makes the war poetry of Sassoon and Owen so suitable as vehicles for gaining insights into the feelings and experiences of the homosexual male in the Great War.

2. Homosexuality, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen in Pre-War Britain

To be able to profitably analyse the wartime poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen in terms of how they experienced both the cruelty on the battlefield and the tenderness in the trenches one has to first become aware of their lives and the place they and their at the time controversial homosexuality took in pre-war British society.

One of the first steps towards creating the anti-homosexual society and legal system in which Sassoon and Owen grew up was taken by the passing of the first law against homosexuality in Great Britain in 1533 (Weeks 12). This law, an Act of Henry VII, brought sodomy, anal or oral copulation, into the field of the statute law (*ibid.*). It was based on ecclesiastical law, held to in Church. In Christian tradition, this law did not specifically go against homosexuality as being one of the worst vices, but was typically against any form of sex that did not lead to procreation (*ibid.* 4). Wasting valuable semen by having anal or oral copulation was seen as one of the worst sins possible as a Christian, surpassing seduction, rape or incest, as these acts at least could lead to pregnancy (*ibid.*). Another reason the Christian church was, and perhaps even still is, so strongly against homosexuality is that it was seen as a threat to the typical standard roles in a perfect Christian family (*ibid.*). Two men living together, in a sexual and emotional relationship, did not lead to any beneficial effects for the Christian belief, not leading to Christian children, and not leading to honouring the moral code of the Christian belief. The 1533 Act of Henry VIII stated that the when a person committed an “Abominable Vice of Buggery” (*ibid.* 12) they were to be sentenced to death. Generally, this 1533 Act, which was re-enacted in 1563, functioned as the base law against homosexuality up to 1885 (*ibid.*). In contrast to other acts the 1533 act was enforced with strict severity. In 1810, four out of five sodomites were sentenced to death and hanged, while only 63 out of 471 persons were hanged for other capital offences (*ibid.*). The same strictness was to be seen in the armed forces, with the navy at the top of the list of strict regulations on

anal intercourse (*ibid.* 13). Buggery had been in the Articles of War since the seventeenth century, and was dealt with as severe as “desertion, mutiny or murder,” (*ibid.*) causing many offenders to be hanged or whipped for up to a thousand lashes (*ibid.*). This severity of punishments within the army was grounded on much the same reasons as were used in the Christian church, namely that sexual contact between men, primarily across ranks, could easily destroy the hierarchy that is so important for an army to function (*ibid.*). In civil law, the death penalty for buggery was silently abandoned in 1836, and was brought to an end in England and Wales in 1861, with Scotland following in 1889 (*ibid.* 14). In an act of leniency, the death sentence was replaced by “penal servitude of between ten years and life,” (*ibid.*) remaining the base punishment for buggery up to 1967 (*ibid.*).

Unfortunately, the abolishment of the death sentence did not mean that homosexuality had become more accepted. Instead, it meant the complete opposite. In 1885, an amendment to the Criminal Law Act was passed in British House of Commons that changed things for the worse (*ibid.*). It was named the Labouchere Amendment, after its writer and promoter, the anti-homosexual and demagogical M.P. Henry Labouchere (*ibid.*). The Labouchere Amendment stated that any homosexual behaviour, not restricted to buggery, was now completely illegal and offenders could and would be persecuted:

Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years with or without hard labour. (*ibid.*)

The fact that the Labouchere Amendment is vague about the meaning of the term ‘gross indecency’ made it easy for the government, judges and lawyers to persecute all sorts of so-called homosexual behaviour, even when there was no case of buggery at all. Labouchere

himself had always claimed that his Amendment was not so much geared at simply making it able to persecute homosexuals, but instead was meant to protect the pure souls of the British youth (*ibid.* 20). However, it did not turn out to be what Labouchere had claimed. The new Labouchere Amendment was passed with disastrous effects on the homosexual population, as it served as cause for a further strengthening of negative sentiments towards homosexuals in Great Britain, even causing hostility to rise to dangerous levels. In 1898 the situation for homosexuals in Great Britain worsened even more when the British government passed a new act specifically targeted at homosexuals: the Vagrancy Act (*ibid.*). This new act was introduced as a way of prohibiting homosexuals from offering their services as a prostitute, restricting homosexuals to the confinement of their own private homes, also not without its dangers as even homosexual behaviour in private homes was illegal. Together, these two new enactments made life extremely difficult and at times unbearable for homosexuals living in the last years of the nineteenth and large parts of the twentieth century.

The Labouchere Amendment was conspicuously nicknamed the “Blackmailer’s Charter” (*ibid.* 22) for the fact that it was regularly abused as a blackmailing tool. One of the most famous examples of a series of cases against a homosexual under the Amendment is the case-series against Oscar Wilde, Irish playwright, poet and novelist. The Wilde cases turned the lives of British homosexuals – and with it the perception of the general public – topsy-turvy. Like Owen and Sassoon, Wilde was an intelligent and witty homosexual author who had managed to live his life in relative peace and quiet, not having been persecuted. At least, up to the moment that he got in a public fight with the father of his homosexual lover Lord Alfred Douglas, nicknamed Bosie (Barger, par. 4). The father, the Marquess of Queensberry, was livid when he found out about the relationship that his son was having with Wilde, and did all he could in order to stop Wilde (*ibid.*). The relationship between the Marquess and Wilde turned aggressive when the Marquess left a calling card at the club that Wilde and he

frequented with a note saying that Wilde was “posing as a sodomite [*sic*]” (Weeks 14). In a fit of anger, and encouraged by Bosie, Wilde started a libel case against the Marquess (Barger, par. 6). The Marquess in turn saw this as the perfect opportunity to bring down Wilde and retaliated with full force. He was able to acquire information on a couple of boys that had engaged in homosexual acts with Wilde, as well as suggestive and confidential letters from Wilde to Bosie (*ibid.*, par 7). Wilde realised that he was not able to defend himself against this compelling evidence, and dropped the libel charges (Lindner, par. 17). However, that was not the end of it for Wilde, as the solicitor who worked for Queensberry had forwarded the statements of the young men to the Director of Public Prosecutions, who in turn sent Scotland Yard after Wilde (*ibid.*, par. 18). Wilde was charged with 25 acts of gross indecency, and “conspiracy to commit gross indecencies” (*ibid.*, par. 19). The young boys testified against Wilde, but the jury could not decide who was right, and a second case was needed (*ibid.*, par. 23). Wilde was eventually found guilty on May 25, with the judge stating the following:

People who can do these things must be dead to all sense of shame . . . It is the worst case I have ever tried . . . I shall, under such circumstance, be expected to pass the severest sentence that the law allows. In my judgement it is totally adequate for such a case as this. The sentence of the Court is that . . . you be imprisoned and kept to hard labour for two years. (*ibid.*, par 12)

The Wilde trials caused the general public to lose any respect it still had for homosexuals, who at first were often looked at with pity (*ibid.*, par. 26). The public now viewed homosexuals as threats to them and their children, people that Labouchere had argued his Amendment would protect. A side effect of the Wilde trials was that people did not only see homosexuals themselves as a threat, but also connected the arts and homoeroticism to homosexual behaviour and therefore saw them as threats as well. All of this caused the

homosexuals in Britain to become social pariah, causing them to operate in secret, as any public same sex love could end up in two years in jail. The Labouchere Amendment had changed the British society for the worse, with no possibility of turning back the changes for a long time to come.

It was into this society that Siegfried Loraine Sassoon was born on the 8th of September 1886, as the son of Alfred Sassoon and Georgiana Theresa Thornycroft (Egremont 4). Siegfried was lucky enough to have been born into a rich and noble family. His father, Jewish Alfred Sassoon, stemmed from a long line of fine merchants, while his non-Jewish mother, Theresa Thornycroft, was the daughter of two highly acclaimed sculptors (*ibid.* 3-6). Alfred and Theresa would not be long together, and their marriage soon broke up when it came out that Alfred, who had love interests elsewhere, saw no other possibility than to abandon Theresa (*ibid.* 10). Sassoon wrote about this event, saying that he had “never forgotten the look on her face, the first time I had seen life being brutal to someone I loved” (*ibid.* 10). Sassoon chose to stay with his mother and enjoyed a relatively calm and loving childhood. However, he soon noticed that there was something different about him, setting him apart from the other boys around him. Sassoon liked to be on his own and generally saw himself as “dreamy and unpractical, sensitive and ‘unmanly’, easily humiliated” (*ibid.* 12). Theresa stimulated this behaviour as she, at the time of the fifth birthday of Siegfried, already thought of him as being a poet, deeming him “acutely conscious of the natural world” (*ibid.* 14). Sassoon was very different from other boys his age, who were of a more masculine and aggressive nature. When Siegfried turned ten he gifted Theresa his first collection of poetry called the “Complete Edition” (*ibid.* 15). These poems serve as the first looks into the melancholic and at times sad character that Siegfried Sassoon would develop in later years. Max Egremont, writer of one of the most detailed biographies of Siegfried Sassoon, notes that “[t]hese childhood verses show not only a sunny country life and jokey scenes but the land at

twilight; death is there [. . .] but it is a romantic, sweetly shocking death [. . .]” (15). It is this sentiment, the fascination with twilight that would become emblematic for the life that Sassoon led. Sassoon’s brothers, Michael and Hamo, thought of him as being a bit odd, nicknaming him the “‘Onion’ because he was ‘off it’, or odd, and they drew slowly away, leaving him [Siegfried] wistfully to imagine an ideal friend” (*ibid.* 19). Apart from poetry, Sassoon also took an interest in foxhunting, a sport in which he could show that he was not just a melodramatic and emotional boy poet, but could also be a masculine and powerful foxhunting countryman, just as those that constantly surrounded him. Sassoon worked hard on his image as a foxhunting man, and did so with much success. By turning to foxhunting, Sassoon was able to create for himself and others around him the sense of masculinity that he had been secretly missing so (*ibid.* 22). This duality of on the one hand feminine care and love and on the other hand masculine power and aggression was to become a recurring theme in his later life, overlapping with his everlasting interest in the twilight and duality in all forms.

At the age of fourteen, Sassoon was sent to school, entering “the world of late-Victorian preparatory and public schools, with its tribal atmosphere of nicknames, private language and attitudes that lasted most of the pupils’ lives” (Egremont 23). For Sassoon, games played a large part in his life at school, and he did all he could to become one of the best cricketers, in which he succeeded (*ibid.*). However, this also brought along with it the unpleasant consequence that Sassoon had to quit writing poetry, as it was thought to be “shameful” (*ibid.* 24) for a cricketer. Luckily for Sassoon this dry spell did not last long. In 1901 Sassoon went to Marlborough College in Wiltshire where he was able to start writing poetry again, in secret, as it was still highly frowned upon and found to be an unfit practice for a schoolboy (*ibid.* 26). Sassoon had began to take a real interest in literature and started to collect books in order to build a personal library at the family home, Weirleigh (*ibid.* 27).

However, contrary to normal book collectors, Sassoon did not buy books for their content or uniqueness, but instead collected them because he liked “their aesthetic arrangement on the shelves, the creation of a comfortable sense of age and stability” (*ibid.*), another sign of his hidden femininity. It was during his time at Marlborough that the old dreamy, soft side of Sassoon started to grow strong, causing Sassoon to start to realise that he did not fit in. Consequently, he lost his belief in an education at Marlborough, leading to a drop in his grades and consequently his move away from Marlborough in 1904, with the final advice that he should “[t]ry and be more sensible” (*ibid.* 29).

At this point Sassoon looked back on the life that he was living as a life filled with a peculiar sort of duality. On the one hand Sassoon was masculine, a great sportsman, hunter and above all, man. On the other hand, Sassoon was caring, sensitive and a passionate writer of poetry. This duality is explainable when keeping in mind something that was also just becoming a reality for Sassoon himself, and that is that he had found himself to be homosexual (*ibid.* 29). For Sassoon, his homosexuality was the perfect explanation for why he never really felt at home at Marlborough, a school where the headmaster was noted saying that “[s]elf-abuse is adultery too; it destroys your body and your mind and you end in the madhouse” (*ibid.*), leaving Sassoon with no room to express his real homosexual feelings. Eventually, it was this repression that forced Sassoon into the role of the stereotypical, but widely accepted character of the excellent sports- and hunting man, a role that he filled with grace. It may not be surprising that the noble stereotype that he so anxiously wanted to fit also represented the type of man that Sassoon found attractive as a life partner. It is “the man of character, not intellect, whose conversation inclined towards sporting metaphors, who liked cricket or golf, who distrusted display and loathed conceit – the clean, decent man” (*ibid.*) that Sassoon longed to be, and be with, at the same time. However, due to the fact that he was

not able to openly love these men, he instead attempted to become one of them in order to stay close to them and to enable him to still fit in with the rest of the prude, Victorian world.

In 1905, Sassoon went to Clare College in Cambridge, where he “lapsed into day dreaming and Pre-Raphaelitism” (*ibid.* 30). Sassoon attempted to read law, but rather played golf and wrote poetry, eventually dropping law to take on medieval history instead (*ibid.* 33). Two memorable things happened in the life of Sassoon at Clare: he published his first volume of poems (printed at his own expense) and he told his brother Hamo that he was homosexual, leading his brother to confess that he was homosexual too (*ibid.* 33-37). Soon after starting Cambridge, Sassoon decided to leave again without taking a degree, going back to Weirleigh (*ibid.* 35). At Weirleigh, Sassoon continued his earlier life of sports and poetry writing. Sassoon successfully published his poetry in several papers and magazines such as *The Literary Post* and *Academy* (*ibid.*). However, even in a time where Sassoon could live in total freedom, he was not as happy as he could be. Instead, he felt that he was trapped between playing the “poet and frustrated homosexual” (*ibid.* 42) and “the sporting country gentleman, guest in the local grand houses where he danced, waltzing eligible girls ‘sexlessly’ but ‘with real ardour and enthusiasm’” (*ibid.*). Sassoon enjoyed living at Weirleigh, but at the same time despised himself for not being able to come out to those around him, and to be able to live the life that he would like to love. It was during these times of personal struggle that Sassoon was introduced to the work of Edward Carpenter (*ibid.* 46). At the time, Carpenter, a socialist gay rights activist, was primarily known for his “communistic utopianism,” on which he wrote books and poems (*ibid.*). Carpenter believed that homosexuality should be accepted as being part of everyday life, and stated that homosexuals were at the forefront of civilisation, both in creative thinking and in socialism (*ibid.*) Sassoon read the best-known work by Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex*, and felt that it had changed his life completely. He decided to write a letter to Carpenter in which he explained his feelings:

What ideas I had about homosexuality were absolutely prejudicial and I was in such a groove that I couldn't allow myself to be what I wished to be . . . the intense attraction I felt for my own sex was almost a subconscious thing and my antipathies for women a mystery to me. ("Sassoon's letters to Edward Carpenter," par. 10)

Carpenter had shown Sassoon that homosexuality was not wrong, as Sassoon had always thought it to be. Even more, Sassoon started to realise that his interest in music and poetry were strongly linked to it, even suspecting his own very musical father to have been a homosexual as well (Egremont 47). Carpenter replied to the kind letter, writing: "I think the Uranians [a term Carpenter used for homosexuals] have a great work to do and some time I should like to have a talk with you about it" (Egremont 47). Carpenter had actively stimulated the creative side of Sassoon, and shortly after their correspondence Sassoon wrote some of his most openly homosexual works, one of which is entitled *Hyacinth*, a short prose play. In *Hyacinth*, Sassoon tells the story of Prince Hyacinth who falls in love with a male character named Pierrot, the story ending up with them both poisoned (*ibid.* 48). Due to its mild homoeroticism it was privately printed, and Sassoon thought that that was for the best (*ibid.*) Clearly, for Sassoon, Carpenter was the miracle worker that he had missed in his life, finally giving reason and right of existence to his feelings and enabling him to express them through his works (*ibid.*).

Sassoon continued to work on his poetry, regularly publishing poems, and getting familiar with key players in the literature scene. In his spare time, he kept himself busy with hunting and playing sports, and consequently was reasonably happy with his life (*ibid.* 60). At least, he was until July 1914. At this time, Sassoon had almost no money left, did not earn much from his poetry and his lover, Norman Loder, was engaged to be married (*ibid.*). Sassoon had fled to Selsey, Sussex to stay at a hotel and get some rest. It was here that he first heard about the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand (*ibid.* 62). Going home was no

option for Sassoon, as he had started to resent his overprotective mother, and so started to think about going to war instead (*ibid.*). Sassoon saw the Great War as a great personal opportunity, because “like most of the human race [he] had always wanted to be a hero” (*ibid.*). It was the perfect escape route for Sassoon, as it enabled him to go his own way, while at the same time enabling him to prove that he was a real and masculine man, just like any other soldier. Failing to go to war meant failing as a human being, or, more specifically, as a man. Therefore, on the 4th of August 1914 Sassoon enlisted as a private, forced to endure both the international and his personal struggle at the front for at least four years.

Just as Sassoon, Wilfred Owen was born into a rich family, on March 18th 1893 (Hibberd *Wilfred Owen* 12). Owen was born the son of Tom and Susan Owen, who at the time lived in relative wealth thanks to a small family fortune, accrued by the father of Susan, Edward Shaw (*ibid.*). However, they could not enjoy this wealth for long. When Edward retired they found out that he was not able to make ends meet, forcing Tom and Susan to give up their upper class status and forcing them to move into more affordable housing at Birkenhead (*ibid.* 21). Owen was sent to the Preparatory Department of the Birkenhead Institute Limited when he was around seven years old (*ibid.*). At the Prep, Owen worked hard, made some friends, but stood off from the rest of the boys his because of his young age (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, Owen did well, and moved onto Junior School, at the same time also attending the Sunday school at the nearby Christ Church, unknowing yet that his time at this particular church would become one of the first important stepping-stones in his life (*ibid.*).

The members of the Owen family were all passionate Evangelicals, and Christ Church was one of the best Evangelical churches around (*ibid.*). Owen became instantly fascinated by Evangelicalism through the lessons that he learned and even started to organise his own Sunday ‘service’ at home, which between family members became known as “Wilfred’s Church” (*ibid.* 25). According to Harold, brother of Wilfred, Wilfred often showed an

“unnatural religious fervour” (*ibid.*), and loved dressing up as a bishop. Owen was easily taken by the Evangelical religion and its rules, mysteries and curious order, a fascination strengthened by his mother who was always pushing him in – what she believed was – the right direction. His conviction to the Evangelical religion serves as an explanation for the love for language and poetry that Owen would develop throughout his young life. He was helped on the way to literature and poetry by the fact that the Evangelical religion mostly was a religion based on language, and emphasised the use of scripture and conversation in order to strengthen belief (*ibid.* 27). For Owen, the Evangelical religion was positioned at the centre of his life, and everything he did was and would become closely connected to it, religion helping him decide what to do in many situations that he had to face.

However, religion was not the only important factor and love in the life of young Owen. A large part of his heart was dedicated to his mother, Susan. To the young Owen, his mother was a safe haven that he knew he could visit when he got scared by the outside world (*ibid.* 28). He often wrote to his mother, as he knew that she would always write him back and offer him the comfort and peace of mind that he was looking for. Paradoxically, it was this motherly love that eventually would prove to be bad for him, as later on in his life he started to develop a fear for his mother and her powerful enveloping love, which, at times, left him gasping for a breath of fresh air and freedom (*ibid.*). This image of suffocating love also played parts in some of his later poetry on women, describing it as “the ‘unhoping happiness’ of being ‘a Mother’s Boy’” (*ibid.*). However, it was also because of the love and care that Owen set his first steps towards becoming a real poet. In 1904 Susan took him to a cottage in Broxton, a Cheshire hamlet, where the landscape made Owen realise that he would like to become a poet, helped along by his mother, whom “suckled” (*ibid.* 32) him with poetry. Owen would later mention that Broxton was very special to him, saying that “was there not Broxton Hill for my uplifting, whose bluebells, it may be, . . . , fitted me for my job” (*ibid.*).

Evidently, Susan should not just be seen as a caring and loving mother, at times going too far with her love, but also as the main driving force behind the poet that Owen would soon start to become.

At school, Owen took an interest in language in general, and was fascinated by both English and French (*ibid.*). The teachers at school were not very impressed by Owen, one Institute master even saying that he was “[a] very ordinary boy, I thought, I could see nothing like this [becoming a famous poet] about him” (*ibid.* 38). Luckily for Owen, he would not stay long at Birkenhead. In 1907, the whole family suddenly moved to Shrewsbury due to Tom getting a new job (*ibid.*). Owen started at the Shrewsbury Borough Technical School, where he also enrolled into the pupil-teacher system (PTC), which offered him the opportunity to be trained to teach in elementary schools, while at the same time being taught at a secondary school for free (*ibid.* 46). As good as this choice at first seems, it also meant that Owen endured a severe drop in social status. With his choice for PTC, he had chosen to become nothing else than a simple elementary teacher (*ibid.*) The one way of escaping this fate was by studying hard to get into university and to become a secondary teacher, which was what he strived for (*ibid.*). The PTC courses were enjoyable for Owen and during them he came across the poetry of Wordsworth, whose works strengthened the belief that Owen had in the power and beauty of poetry (*ibid.* 49). At this time, Owen was a 15-year-old boy, and as such Owen was also supposed to take an interest in girls, but seemed unable to. When he went to France for a short vacation in 1908 he met a girl, Bernice, but strangely felt that he lacked the urge to get to know her better (*ibid.* 59). This event possibly opened his eyes to his sexual preferences, and he started to grasp that he really was more interested in boys, especially those belonging to a higher class, a preference stimulated by his mother who was desperate to move up in class (*ibid.*). However, Owen did not deal with relationships much

more during his school time but rather chose to work hard in order to be able to build up a successful career later on.

In 1911, Owen finished school, with distinctions in English and French (*ibid.* 66). He now had to choose between becoming a simple Uncertificated Teacher or to go for university, choosing the latter above being stuck in a dead end job (*ibid.* 67). It was during this time of difficult personal choices that Owen started to take an interest in Keats, whose poems inspired Owen to leave scripture and rather take on poetry as a “guide to life” (*ibid.* 68). Owen could easily identify with the poetry of Keats, with its repressed sexuality and hints towards homosexuality, leading Owen to proclaim that he was “in love” with Keats (*ibid.* 69). Meanwhile, Owen was still trying to figure out a way of entering university, ending up with the possibility to “read for an external London degree” (*ibid.* 70). He worked out a way to finance this in the form of working as an assistant to a parson in a rural parish, Dunsden (*ibid.*). After he had passed the Matric, he qualified as an undergraduate of London University and moved to the vicarage in order to start his studies (*ibid.* 75). It was during his time at the vicarage that he encountered one of the most controversial collections of modern poetry, *Before Dawn* by Harold Monro. *Before Dawn* describes a new world in which “[s]exuality would be open and free, and restrictions such as formal marriage would be abolished” (*ibid.* 89). Monro dedicated his poems to “those who, with me, are gazing in delight towards where on the horizon there shall be dawn. / Henceforth, together, humble though fearless, we must praise, worship, and obey the beautiful Future, which alone we may call God” (*ibid.*) For Owen, this description fitted him like a glove, and the poetry he felt that this freer morale described the world that he had started to long for, a world in which he could openly show his love for men. The collection opened his eyes, and he increasingly felt that he had started to lead a double life.

For outsiders Owen was the picture perfect parish assistant, with his parents admiring him for his work and his parish holding him dear to their hearts (*ibid.* 91). Privately, Owen had become stressed about his own feelings, not being able to express his sexual preference, and worrying over death as well, as he was facing some minor health issues (*ibid.* 92).

Around Easter that year, Owen had his first boyfriend, Vivian, a younger boy from the village (*ibid.* 97). Owen introduced Vivian to what the vicar deemed unchristian literature such as poems by Monro, and together they went for “secret expeditions” (*ibid.*). Owen made sure that the vicar did not know what they were doing, as he would never have approved of this behaviour. He wrote about Vivian to his mother a few times, but this stopped quickly. This was not because Owen did not write anymore, but because his brother Harold had censored the letters after the death of Owen (*ibid.*). An example of this censorship can be found in a letter dating from January 1913. In this letter, heavily cut up by Harold, Owen mentions something about a “furor” (*ibid.* 118) at the vicarage, involving him and Vivian, which seems to point to the fact that he and Vivian were discovered, leading the vicar to try to keep Owen on the straight path (*ibid.*). However, Owen now felt that religion “was largely a matter of language and social pressures” (*ibid.* 119) and lost the little faith he still had.

Owen moved back home in February 1913. At home, he became terribly sick, and had to deal with severe “phantasms” (*ibid.* 123). The nightmares and visions that Owen experienced were diagnosed as caused by stress, and are similar to the shellshock that Owen would suffer in 1917. The stress that Owen encountered was caused by the fact that he felt that there was nothing left to live for in his life (*ibid.*). He had no chance of finishing his studies and he had lost his faith in religion, leading him to break down in “guilt and fear” (*ibid.* 124). He went to Susan to be comforted, but was aware that she would not take kindly to the fact that he had lost his faith, being an avid Evangelist (*ibid.*). He chose to round up his belonging and took action, in the form of application for a scholarship to University College

in Reading (*ibid.* 126). This action was also represented in the poetry that he wrote at the time, often referring to sexual freedom and an open mind. The poem “O World of many worlds” serves as the perfect example for this newfound belief. In it, Owen describes how he would like to be “a meteor, fast, eccentric, lone, / Lawless; in passage through all spheres, / Warning the earth of wider ways unknown [. . .]” (*ibid.* 126). By being lawless, Owen would be able to escape the laws on homosexuality, and would be free, opening the world to “wider ways unknown” (*ibid.*). It was through his negative experiences with the vicarage Owen was now tempted to start to “speak out against repression and oppression” (*ibid.* 129). Owen felt that he had to speak for the people that could not speak, and had to lead people to freedom. The only problem was that he was still dependent on his parents, and needed a way to break away from them first (*ibid.*). On the 6th of July Owen the perfect opportunity rose as he heard he had failed to obtain a scholarship, and as a way out chose to move to France to teach there, saving him from having to work as a elementary teacher in England (*ibid.* 130-31).

Of his time in France, not much is known, mainly because of the censoring work of Harold (*ibid.* 134). Some of the letters that survived the severe censoring portray an Owen that has come clean to his mother:

If you knew what hands have been laid on my arm, in the night, along the Bordeaux streets, or what eyes play upon me in the restaurant where I daily eat, methinks you would wish that the star and adoration of my life had risen; or would quickly rise.

(*ibid.* 146)

A general lashing out against women in general follows this obvious reference to his homosexuality:

All women, without exception, *annoy* me [. . .] And if you have not already spoken to Harold, I do implore you to muster courage and tell him a [?something] or two more than you told me, which was nothing. Still, if you never had any revelations to make

to me, at 14, I shall have no confessions now I am 21. At least none such as must make me blush and weep and you [?grow] pale. (*ibid.*)

Owen blamed his mother for not telling him anything about sex, and implores her to tell his brother at least something so he will be prepared for what was out there in the world.

Consequently, he himself now had no wish to confess to her that he was homosexual, just as she did not tell him anything when he needed to be educated about sex and sexuality. This misogynistic side of Owen would also later often come back in his poetry. Owen finally felt free in France, and was not even bothered when he heard about the shooting of Franz Ferdinand, soon forgetting about it (*ibid.* 156). In July 1914, he started work as a private teacher, which he enjoyed very much (*ibid.* 162). Meanwhile the War had started in full force, and young men were asked to go to war. Owen did not feel that he had any need to go to war, claiming that he would only go to war to if he were to fight “for the language” (*ibid.* 167). In a letter to Susan, he mentions how he feels about the War:

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 effect a little useful weeding, I am furious with chagrin to think that the Minds which where to have excelled the civilization of ten thousand years, are being annihilated . . . (*ibid.*)

Owen thought of the War as a nuisance, destroying the best minds that he deemed so important for the modern western civilization. For him, life went on, and he had no interest in sacrificing himself for his fellow countrymen. Instead, Owen thought himself to be too important for England, as he mentions in a letter: “my life is worth more than my death to Englishmen.” (*ibid.* 186). However, he also no longer really enjoyed his life in France, where Owen spent his time by working as a freelance writer and picking up young men, only to have short relationships with them, with no real love involved (*ibid.*). When Owen visited England again, now as a travelling salesman, he became overwhelmed by the English propaganda and

immediately started to think about going to the War, a thought that was fed by a note on the hotel notice board that said that he could obtain a commission by “joining the Artists’ Rifles” (*ibid.* 199). This thought about going to war grew larger in his mind, and eventually he decided that he had no choice but to go and defend his England. Just as Sassoon, Owen set aside his hidden personal doubts and, with his dual personality in the back of his mind, volunteered. As “Private Owen, TF, Number 4756, 28th London Regiment (Artists’ Rifles)” (*ibid.* 207) he joined the War in France, proudly declaring in a letter to Susan: “I am the British Army!” (*ibid.*).

3. Homosexuality and the (Anti-)War Poetry of Sassoon and Owen

The events of the Great War served as an important source of inspiration for both Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, who wrote – and in the case of Sassoon published – a large amount of poetry while enlisted in the British Army. In these poems, Sassoon and Owen documented their personal experiences in the War and it is therefore through these poems that their experience of and homosexuality in the War can be best interpreted. By analyzing a selection of their poems, it should be possible to understand what role their homosexuality played in their experience of the War, and the way they incorporated it into their poetry. However, this is not such a straightforward task. When studying the poems of Sassoon and Owen one should be aware of the fact that during and some time after the Great War they were not publicly known to be homosexuals, and those in the War therefore were never read the poems as examples of homosexuality or homoeroticism. Instead, the homosexual fundamentals of both Sassoon and Owen lie hidden within the poems, invisible to the common reader at the Home Front or frontline. They were hidden in order to protect the poets, as rumours of either one of the poets being homosexual could easily endanger their poetic and army careers. Therefore, in order to get to the homosexual core of the poetry of Sassoon and Owen, it is vital to first define how the public perceived the poems at the time of publication, looking at them from a contemporary point of view. Establishing this contemporary meaning gives an insight into the public characters of Sassoon and Owen and the way they generally thought of the War, or would like to be believed to have thought.

After having established a contemporary reading each poem will be subjected to a look into how their homosexuality influenced their poetry and changes the reading of each poem. By using contemporary theories on homosexuality by Edward Carpenter and an inquisitive eye it should be possible to pinpoint the homosexual influences of Sassoon and Owen, adding to the poetry the hidden, very personal homosexual experiences of both poets.

While for the outside world they show masculinity and chivalry, in a hidden layer of their personality they carry with them a poetic femininity and care for those around them. This gentleness of spirit should then also be there in their poems, as they are personal works expressing the thoughts of the poet. This concept of a hidden layer of meaning in the poetry of Sassoon and Owen is not a theory that mysteriously appeared out of thin air and is applied cursory, but is a truth that Sassoon and Owen both recognized and even talked about to each other while at Craiglockhart Hospital. It was there that Sassoon taught Owen how to make his sexuality central to his writing, love for men being “an entirely honourable motive” (Hibberd 346) and not something that one should be ashamed of. However, both poets were still insecure and ingenious enough to ensure that those who did not know would not be able to read it in their poetry, avoiding any chance of disapproval or prosecution (*ibid.*). To teach Owen about homosexuality and its benefits for their personal world and those around them, Sassoon used the theories of Edward Carpenter, whom he had met earlier on in his life and who played a large part of his homosexual awakening. It is these theories that offer the reader a way into the hidden layer of meaning, the homosexual influences that Sassoon and Owen incorporated in their poetry.

The theories of Edward Carpenter, a socialist gay rights activist, are bundled in his major work *The Intermediate Sex*, which was published in 1908, some time before the Great War. *The Intermediate Sex* does not directly approach homosexuality as such, as it was still against the law, but instead rephrases the subject of the book by titling it “A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women” in an attempt to avoid persecution or even a ban on the book. In his introduction Carpenter clearly tries to prevent any kind of interpretation that might lead to trouble, exemplified by his saying that the word love “is used to denote the inner devotion of one person to another; and when anything else is meant—as, for instance, sexual relations and actions—this is clearly stated and expressed” (15). However, the

content of the book is quite clear in its direction, and one does not need to know much about the subject to understand that it deals directly with homosexuality, although in covert terms. Carpenter names people of the intermediate sex “Urnings” or “Uranians” (20), both derived from the word “*Uranos*, heaven” (*ibid.*, italics in original) as Carpenter believed them to belong to a special kind of people, who belonged at the forefront of civilisation (21). In the *Intermediate Sex* Carpenter presents what he believes to be the characteristics of a Uranian male, and what both Sassoon and Owen could identify with:

The male tends to be of a rather gentle emotional disposition—with defects, if such exist, in the direction of subtlety, evasiveness, timidity, vanity, etc.; [. . .] [he] is generally intuitive and instinctive in its perceptions, with more or less of artistic feeling; [. . .]. (27)

Carpenter continues this description of the male Uranian later on in the book, stating that the Uranian males have “the tenderer and more emotional soul-nature of the woman” (32) and that “emotionally, they are extremely complex, tender, sensitive, pitiful and loving” (33). According to Carpenter, they are even so much like women, that they are also able to perfectly read characters, thus knowing exactly what is wrong with people, and being able to nurture them accordingly (*ibid.*). All this leads Carpenter to conclude that the Uranian man is best portrayed as having the “artist-nature” (*ibid.*), as these men “are enthusiastic for poetry and music, are often eminently skilful in the fine arts, and are overcome with emotion and sympathy at the least sad occurrence. [. . .] their great pity for beggars and crippled folks are truly womanly” (*ibid.*). The description of the typical Uranian that Carpenter here presents is almost too perfectly applicable to both Sassoon and Owen. Their kind-heartedness fits in with the concept of the feminine soul, tender and emotional. The fact that they are both poets also fits in with the theory of Carpenter that says that a Uranian man would often be an artist of sorts, and interested in poetry. The theories of Carpenter even deal with the fact that some of

the Uranian men, such as Sassoon and Owen, were successful warriors in war. Where this behaviour at first does not seem to fit in with the general image of the Uranian type that Carpenter draws up, he effectively replies to his own argument by writing that “there have been great generals [. . .] with a powerful strain in them of homogenic nature, and a wonderful capacity for organisation and command” (118). Not only femininity, but also masculinity is applied in the theories of Carpenter, leading to a prototype of the Uranian male that is caring, loving and pitiful, as well as powerful when needed.

Although the contents of *The Intermediate Sex* could be perceived as controversial in this late-Victorian era, there was no direct action taken against it. This was not because the government did not deem it necessary, but rather because Carpenter always made sure to keep his works in perfect balance between honesty and public scandal. In *The Intermediate Sex* he made sure to never clearly reference homosexuality of male intercourse, but instead kept to a vague vocabulary, staying away from comments that may have been deemed illegal by law. When the *British Medical Journal* tore down *The Intermediate Sex* in a review, Carpenter wrote a letter to them claiming:

I am certain that there is not a single passage in this book where I advocate sexual intercourse of any kind between those of the same sex. I advocate sincere attachment and warm friendship, and allow that this may have fitting expression in ‘caress and embrace’ –but I suppose that to some minds this is sufficient, and it is immediately interpreted as an advocacy of lust. (Weeks 81)

Rather than coming clean, Carpenter turned the argument around by claiming that the attackers read what they wanted to read into it. It was out of social and legal requirement that Carpenter kept his works vague enough to get past the censors. However, this did not mean that it had no effect on society and was easily forgotten. Instead, Carpenter attracted a large following, as many males and females recognised in his work their true potential (*ibid.*).

Among his followers were Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. As said earlier, Sassoon had come across the theories of Carpenter before the Great War and had written to Carpenter that his insights had changed his life, enabling him to see who he really was: “I cannot say what it [The Intermediate Sex] has done for me. I am a different being and have a definite aim in life and something to lean on” (Sassoon's letters to Edward Carpenter, par. 5). Sassoon passed on his knowledge of the theories of Carpenter to Owen while they were both at Craiglockhart (Hibberd 337). For Owen, the theories of Carpenter showed that his homosexuality was not something to be afraid of, but could instead help him with his poetic career, and enabled him to talk about it (*ibid.*). Just as the theories of Carpenter had freed Sassoon and Owen, they became popular, making Carpenter into a social homosexual prophet of his time (Weeks 77). By using the theories of Carpenter, and contrasting them to the contemporary readings of the poems, we should be able to obtain clear insight into the dual lives that Sassoon and Owen, both homosexual poets in the Great War, lived.

“The Hero,” written by Sassoon, is the first poem that will become subject to a thorough analysis¹. It was written by Sassoon in 1916, and was published at the end of the War in 1918. At the time of writing “The Hero,” Sassoon had been in the War for around three years and his opinion of it had radically changed since he had started his career in the British Army. At the start of the War Sassoon had been the perfect example of an officer, known for his reckless and brave attacks on the enemy, the most famous one being the single-handed capture of a German trench, for which he was awarded the nickname “Mad Jack” (“Biography”, par. 4). He was awarded a Military Cross for his bravery in July 1916 (“Supplement” 7441). However, while to the rest of the world Sassoon showed bravery, inside he felt very depressed and deemed he was only so brave because he felt that he was pushed into a “paradoxically manic courage” (*ibid.*). The death of his secret lover David

¹ For a full text version of each poem analysed in this thesis, see the Appendix on page 59.

Thomas Cuthbert, who was shot through the neck by a stray bullet earlier that year, made Sassoon lose the majority of his conviction in the War. The death of Cuthbert worsened his outlook on daily activities and the War and opened his eyes to the covered-up horrors of the War (Egremont 87). Meanwhile, his poetry was also affected by these events, stylistically helped along the way by a meeting with author Robert Graves, who helped Sassoon take on a more refined style of “gritty realism” (“Biography”, par. 4), enabling him to deeper explore his feelings about the War and to portray it as he saw it through his own eyes. With poetry as his weapon, Sassoon slowly started to fight the establishment of the army from within. It was with this split personality, Sassoon being both caring and loving as well as aggressive and bitter, that he wrote the resentful poem “The Hero,” one of his most famous anti-war poems.

In “The Hero,” Sassoon portrays a mother in the Great War who is visited by a “Brother Officer” (Sassoon 7). The officer tells the mother that her son has died in battle. However, it was a glorious death and she should be proud of him. The message that her son has died is brought to her by means of a letter by “the Colonel” (3) in which he explains what exactly happened to the soldier. The poem consists of three stanzas and is simple in structure, and so seems the story portrayed in the poem. To the reader it appears as an average scene at the Home Front in which a mother or girlfriend is visited by an officer with some bad news, a standard procedure. The first reaction of the mother is also as one would expect of a proud mother: “‘Jack fell as he’d have wished,’ the Mother said, / And folded up the letter that she’d read” (1-2). In a “tired voice that quavered to a choke” (4) she says that “‘We mothers are so proud / Of our dead soldiers.’ Then her face was bowed” (5-6). Sassoon here portrays an ordinary mother who is emotionally broken by the news that her son has passed on. However, she tries to swallow away her emotional pains and tries to keep up a proud appearance towards the officer. So far, nothing seems to be out of context or peculiar in any way. Then, Sassoon continues with the next stanza, in which the tables are starting to turn on the reader.

When the officer leaves the house he starts thinking about what had just taken place, a thought treated to a typical dose of irony by Sassoon:

Quietly the Brother Officer went out.
 He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies
 That she would nourish all her days, no doubt.
 For while she coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes
 Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
 Because he had been so brave, her glorious boy. (7-12)

Sassoon unmask the Brother Officer as a lying army official who only told the mother “gallant lies” (8) so that she could happily live on with the idea that her son had died in the utmost heroic way possible. By contrasting ‘gallant’ and ‘lies’, Sassoon makes clear what he really thinks of the army. It is a system built on rules, order, and chivalry, but beneath it lie only lies and moral decay. The army lies to the widows and mothers so that they will never suspect what really happens at the front in France, which is what follows in the next stanza:

He [Brother Officer] thought how “Jack,” cold-footed, useless swine,
 Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
 Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried
 To get sent home' and how, at last, he died,
 Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
 Except that lonely woman with white hair. (13-18)

In reality, the son of the “lonely woman” (18) died while suffering from an intense panic attack. No one helped him to get his head together, and in turn, the army just let him die. The fact that the Brother Officer tells the woman that her son died gallantly while in reality he died in a horrible way, stricken with terror, ends the poem with a blast of ironic sadness. With “The Hero” Sassoon brings to light the hypocritical nature of the army, in which army

officials rather act like nothing gruesome happens at the frontline than having to tell what real terrors are experienced by the men and women at war. Soldiers were expendable, and should surely not be mourned over for too long, for the Home Front had to keep the faith that this war could be easily won if everyone put in an effort. By using its age-old adagio of chivalry and decorum the army successfully kept the frontline away from the Home Front. Sassoon was extremely aggravated by this situation, and showed enormous compassion for the soldiers, his men, that found horrible and painful deaths in the War, while no one at the Home Front would ever hear about it. Sassoon believed that the men who died in the War did not die with the grace and glory that they deserved, but instead died alone, gruesome and in fear, with no honour to be had.

When the poem was published in *The Old Huntsman* in 1917, Sassoon received several letters from fellow officers, writing to him about their personal impressions and experiences. One officer, 'Birdie' Stansfield, did not like "The Hero" at all, writing that it was not all correct because "it will cause many poor mothers to have doubts and unnecessarily so" (Egremont 147). Joe Cotrell, another officer, wrote that "the public have been fed for too long on their special pap . . . Men are beginning to ask what are they fighting – whilst they are fighting and struggling wearily out here day after day – night after night [. . .]" (*ibid.*). "The Hero" was cause for two types of distinct reactions. There were those who despised his poem for endangering the War, while there were also those who admired that someone finally had the courage to stand up against the major force that was the army. Sassoon took all of the negative reactions in as ammunition for his personal war that he was starting, and felt strengthened by the positive and even negative comments. "The Hero" was a personal success, and one of the first openly negative poems by Sassoon, with a promise of more to come underway.

The contemporary reading of “The Hero” has shown us a Sassoon who is purely masculine and powerful. However, beneath this layer of clear meaning lies a hidden layer of meaning influenced by Sassoon’s homosexuality. By applying the theories from *The Intermediate Sex* by Edward Carpenter the hidden homosexual influences in the poems should be possible to pinpoint and examine. “The Hero” at first appears to be a typical Sassoon poem, set against the Home Front and the Army, both here portrayed as ignorant parties to a war that is too terrible to be fully understood. However, the caring and concerned character of the prototype Uranian male is also to be found in this poem, expressed through the description of the mother who hears about the sad news that her son has died. Reading the poem again, the tender character of Sassoon is soon found in the way that he describes the persona of the mother who has a “tired voice that quavered to a choke” (4). She is not just ignorant of what is happening around her, but is really affected by the loss of her son over who she worried, leading to her tiredness. The mother then says “We mothers are so proud / Of our dead soldiers” (5-6), a sentence that one would expect from a patriotic mother. However, after pronouncing these words “her face was bowed” (6), signifying that she is not so proud after all, but is shocked by what has happened and now starts to feel different about the War. Then the focus shifts to the Brother Officer, who told the mother “some gallant lies” (8). Even for this rather harsh officer Sassoon seems to be able to bring up pity, describing that when he spoke “he coughed and mumbled” (10), meaning that he does not have control over what he has to tell the mother, and is instead embarrassed and clearly does not know how to deal with the situation. Sassoon then shifts back to the mother, who, while listening to the story has “weak eyes / [that] Had shone with gentle triumph” (10-11). The mother is again not too proud, but instead feels a gentle sense of success for her boy, who has not died in complete vain. Here Sassoon shows the reader a quite different officer and mother than in the contemporary reading. Where at first, they seemed ignorant and blatantly overtriumphant, in

reality there is a hidden layer of pity to be found in the poem, and Sassoon does indeed care for both mother and officer. Of course, in line with the theories of Carpenter, most of the pity that Sassoon has in him is reserved for the crippled soldier, Jack, who “[h]ad panicked down the trench that night the mine / Went up at Wicked Corner; how he’d tried / To get sent home; and how, at last, he died,” (14-16). Sassoon portrays the death of Jack as a blessing for the soldier, saying he died “at last” (16), as he could not cope with the War and its cruel ways. Sassoon shows his care for the men involved in the War by even seeing death as better than being at the frontline, unable to go home. What is even more remarkable is that where normally Sassoon’s status as an officer would mean condemning Jack for fleeing from the battlefield and trying to get home, he instead shows compassion and pity. Here, the personal affection of Sassoon weighs heavier than the all-important discipline laid upon men at war. By taking over the role of the mother, Sassoon shows himself to be caring and feminine. Meanwhile, the officer is also portrayed as having compassion, as he goes on thinking to himself that “no one seemed to care / Except that lonely woman with white hair” (17-18). While the officer thinks about the mother, implicitly meaning that he pities her, and “seemed to care” (17), the mother is portrayed as lonely, her hairs white, possibly because of anxiety, and not able to ‘enjoy’ the fact that her son has died for the motherland. Instead of the anti-Home Front and anti-war poem that “The Hero” seems to be, Sassoon shows that both the officer and the mother have in them compassionate feelings hidden to those around them, just as he has a large amount of pity and love for the men at war that was, at times, hidden. In the contemporary reading this compassion might have only been picked up on by a few readers, hidden beneath the layers of ignorance and cruelty that only seem to point towards the anti-war sentiment in the poem. By applying the theories of Carpenter we find that the strong compassion and pity that Carpenter attributes to the Uranian type is clearly visible throughout the poem, in line with the character of Sassoon, showing that his homosexuality has indeed

influenced and added to the poem. Where in the contemporary reading both mother and soldier appear ignorant and laden with false sentiments, Sassoon in this new reading shows that it is not the people that are ignorant and do not care, but that it is the system and the conventions of society that makes them behave in such a way. Were they free from conventions this poem might have turned out to be completely different, just as the life of Sassoon would have turned out differently were he not imprisoned in an openly anti-homosexual society.

The second poem by Siegfried Sassoon that deserves a thorough analysis, starting with a contemporary reading, is “Their Frailty,” published in *Cambridge Magazine* in December 1917 (Egremont 180). At the time that Sassoon wrote and published “Their Frailty” he had been admitted to Craiglockhart Military Hospital, to be treated for neurasthenia (better known as shellshock). However, in truth it was not for shellshock that he was admitted; instead, it was done to prevent him being court-martialled for contesting the war effort. Sassoon was ‘put away’ in this manner because in June 1917 he had published a statement against the War in several newspapers, aided by pacifist friends of his (*ibid.* 143). In the statement, Sassoon wrote that he was

making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it [. . .] I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolonging those sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust. [. . .] Also I believe that it may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of the agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realise. (*ibid.*)

By publishing this statement, Sassoon had effectively sealed his doom, and it was cause for much outrage both at the frontline and at the Home Front. Luckily for Sassoon, his old friend

Robert Graves stepped in and was able to get Sassoon diagnosed with shellshock and sent to Craiglockhart (*ibid.* 156). Again, the duality in his personality here showed, now in the form of the caring protecting officer versus the masculine and powerful officer willing to take action, this explosive mixture finally leading him into trouble. At Craiglockhart, Sassoon soon felt at home thanks to its country atmosphere and was able to write and publish a large amount of poetry, of which “Their Frailty” is one.

“Their Frailty” reveals a misogynistic side of Sassoon that had previously been slightly visible through the portrayal of the mother in “The Hero,” but has now grown to an extreme dislike. In the poem, Sassoon describes a woman who is thinking about a male relative of hers who is at war. However, this woman is portrayed as not caring about either her man or the other men at war, as one would expect, but is only obsessed by her own ‘problems’. The structure of the poem is simple and consists of three stanzas, each a quatrain. It is one of the shorter poems that Sassoon wrote during his time at Craiglockhart. In the poem, Sassoon uses irony as his main style element, employing it to bring across his message. The first application of this irony is to be found in the structure of the poem. With its three quatrains and its a-b-a-b rhyme scheme the poem is reminiscent of a Shakespearean sonnet. However, where in a Shakespearean sonnet the three quatrains are followed by a couplet containing a volta – introducing a change in theme or new way of looking at the story - in “Their Frailty” there is no couplet or volta to be found. The effect of this is clearly ironic, as the would-be-sonnet that Sassoon wrote offers no promise of change through the Volta but rather ends the story the way it began, in pure disgust. It is this disgust of the Home Front, and women in particular, that Sassoon immediately conjures up in the first quatrain:

He’s got a Blighty wound. He’s safe; and then

War’s fine and bold and bright.

She can forget the doomed and prisoned men

Who agonize and fight. (1-4)

Sassoon portrays a man who has suffered a “Blighty wound” (1) at the frontline of the Great War. A blighty was a term commonly used by soldiers in World War I and II to denote a wound that was sufficiently bad to be sent home to Britain. This is in turn also a happy occasion for the woman waiting for him at home, in this poem not specified as being either wife, girlfriend or mother. The poem describes what seems like a happy occasion for both. However, Sassoon makes it perfectly clear that this waiting woman is only interested in her own life and her own wellbeing. This is made clearer in the second quatrain, in which the man is sent back to the War:

He’s back in France. She loathes the listless strain

And peril of his plight.

Beseeking Heaven to send him home again,

She prays for peace each night. (5-9)

Instead of worrying over his life, and that of his fellow soldiers, the woman only cares about her own problems. Sassoon shows that she “loathes” (5) her man, as he went off to the War instead of entertaining her at home. She prays for peace, but it is a false prayer, as it is not for the benefit of all men and women in the War, instead she only wants her own man to come home safe. The anti-Home Front opinion that Sassoon here puts forward is then effectively summarised in the third and last quatrain:

Husbands and sons and lover; everywhere

They die; War bleeds us white.

Mothers and wives and sweethearts, --they don’t care

So long as He’s all right. (9-12)

Sassoon describes how the Great War caused the deaths of men of all sorts, whether they be “[h]usbands and sons” (9) or a “lover” (*ibid.*). However, according to Sassoon, the women in

their lives do not care at all about these poor souls, they just want their own man to be safe and home. Sassoon plays with this idea by writing ‘he’ in the last sentence with a capital ‘H’, as one would normally only do when addressing a higher power such as God. By doing this Sassoon compares the awe of the women for their men to Christians worshipping God, thereby not only criticising the women, but taking religion with it as well. Sassoon portrays the women as arrogant, selfish creatures that are only able to care about what happens in their line of sight, and disregard anything outside their vision. Sassoon emphasises this by using the sentence “bleeds us white” (10). This saying is used, firstly, to note that the bodies of dead men are drained of blood, turning them white. However, when taking into account the fact that the poem was written around *December* 1917, this saying can also be taken literally. The snow that fell on the battlefield during winter would cover the men with a layer of white, effectively making them invisible to anyone there, just as they are invisible to the minds and eyes of the selfish women living comfortably in Britain. With “Their Frailty” Sassoon ups the ante in his campaign the War, and specifically against the hypocrisy of the Home Front.

“Their Frailty” did not receive much attention until it was published in the collection *Counter-Attack*, which appeared in 1918 (Egremont 181). The psychiatrist that had treated Sassoon while at Craiglockhart said about the collection that he could not “imagine any instrument more potent against the war” (*ibid.* 205). When he showed the collection to his regimental comrades they said it was “what *soldiers* like” (*ibid.* emphasis in original). However, the reception of the collection was not universally positive, and there were many notable negative opinions published in newspapers and personally conveyed to Sassoon. A critic with the *Daily News* noted that it was not poetry, but a “book of the protests of a tortured spirit” (*ibid.* 207), while another critic in the *Observer* noted that the poems in the collection were “grotesquely horrid” (*ibid.*). If anything in particular bothered the critics, it was the protest against the War and the Home Front that Sassoon had incorporated in his

poetry. The *Westminster Gazette* critic found that the poetry was hindered by a “monotone of protest” (*ibid.* 208) not effecting anything in particular. Even an old friend, artillery officer Geoffrey Harbord, did not like the collection, mentioning to Sassoon that he found it to be “too damn true” (*ibid.*), as it brought back “the smell of the dead and mud and that horrible pit of the stomach feeling too vividly” (*ibid.*). Again, just as with “The Hero,” the poetry of Sassoon was awarded with mixed reviews. While a large group of critics and fellow army men admired his frankness and bravery, another more conservative group of critics deemed that he was taking his protests one step too far and that he had let his poetry become corrupted by it. However, for Sassoon it did not really matter how people saw his poetry at the time. They were discussing it, and that was what was most important for him.

The poem “Their Frailty” is one of the clearer misogynistic poems that Sassoon wrote during his time at the front, and it is because of this that it is so suitable for further analysis using the theories of Carpenter, looking deeper into the dominant divide between the feminine and masculine. In “Their Frailty,” Sassoon describes how he detests the fact that women only care for their own male relatives, be it husband, son or father, and do not care for the other men in the War who “agonize and fight” (4). Sassoon shows his misogynistic side by describing a woman who “loathes the listless strain / And peril of his plight” (5-6) while her husband is in France, fighting for his and her survival. According to Sassoon these women “don’t care / So long as He’s all right” (11-12). The contemporary reading of this poem seems as misogynistic as Sassoon ever would become in his poetry, clearly blaming the Home Front and – quite specifically – women, of suffering from tunnel vision, only able to see what directly concerns them. However, this criticism by Sassoon can also be seen as a clear example of his homosexuality influencing the way he looked at the Home Front and the women portrayed. In *The Intermediate Sex*, Carpenter writes about the fact that homosexual

men are often portrayed as being misogynistic where, according to Carpenter, this is not at all correct. Instead of hating women, these

men are by their nature drawn rather near to women, and it would seem that they often feel a singular appreciation and understanding of the emotional needs and destinies of the other sex [. . .] They are not seldom the faithfulest friends, the truest allies, and most convinced defenders of women. (35)

As Carpenter claims, the Uranian male is attracted to women because of the way they think the same about certain matters, and for the understanding and comfort that they can offer each other. If we apply this concept of the Uranian male as a feminine character to “Their Frailty,” it becomes clear that instead of despising these women for not caring about all the men at war, Sassoon is simply resentful, wanting to take the same place that these women take in the lives of their men. This theory of the homosexual male replacing the female is again stressed by Carpenter when he talks about Uranian generals involved in a war, who have “a wonderful capacity for organisation and command, which combined with their personal interest in, or attachment to, their troops and the answering enthusiasm so elicited, have made their armies well-nigh invincible” (118-19). Instead of just one man to care and live for, Sassoon, as an officer, has taken up caring and loving entire troops of men in a motherly and feminine way, attempting to replace their wives and mothers at home. Sassoon does not despise the women in the poem for not being able to love more than one man, but instead is envious of their position, as he sees himself as being on a higher plain of commitment, able to love and care for more men than these women can, and therefore looks down on them. However, Sassoon shows some pity by also noting that these women cannot help that they only care for one man, a statement underlined by the title of the poem, “Their Frailty.” Frailty, being a weakness in character or morals, is something that one cannot really help having, and in the eyes of Sassoon, the singular love for one man is a fatal flaw in the female character. Sassoon, as a

male Uranian, does not suffer from this flaw and is perfectly able to care for a larger group of men, and it is with this in mind that he wrote the poem. “Their Frailty” is a perfect example of the fight between Uranian masculinity and femininity that was raging in Sassoon, who was not able to reconcile his mixed feelings of love for and power over his men. Sassoon later also acknowledged the fact that his homosexual love for men played a large part in his wanting to be commanding the troops. When at Craiglockhart, Sassoon kept a diary in which he wrote about his condition, and specifically about his homosexuality: “Sex says, ‘Go back [to war] and play the hero and indulge in noble feelings of sympathy for your men.’ [. . .] The whole thing is a combination of sex-repression, war-weariness, vanity and pride [. . .] (Egremont 211). With “Their Frailty” Sassoon does not just simply attack women out of a misogynistic urge, but rather vents his frustration at the fact that women are flawed, and that he, who has so much love to give, is not able and allowed to do so. Through this reading, “Their Frailty” by Sassoon changes from its harsh and misogynistic contemporary meaning into a poem portraying the innermost personal fights between masculinity and femininity, love and aggression. Just as this duality was so prominent in the mind of Sassoon, making the War unbearable at times, it is here cause for envy, hidden under the mask of apparent misogyny.

This same duality, or split between homosexuality and masculinity, is also to be found in the poetry of Wilfred Owen. The two poems by Owen that will be discussed in this chapter were both written in 1917 while Owen was being treated for shellshock at Craiglockhart (Hibberd 336). At the time of writing Owen had not been successful in his military career, and soon became overwhelmed by the horrors of the frontline, causing shellshock (*ibid.* 301). Owen was plagued by nightmares, visions and physical problems – such as uncontrollable trembling and sweating – rendering him useless for the war effort (*ibid.* 308). The Army Medical Board stated that it would be best if Owen were sent to Craiglockhart for treatment. Around the same time that Owen was admitted to Craiglockhart, Sassoon was also sent there,

and the two poets met. Owen already knew the works of Sassoon, and was a great fan of his life story and work, but Sassoon had never heard of Owen or his poetry (*ibid.* 331). However, although they both were poets and homosexuals, they did not become equally close friends. Rather, they started to work together in a master-disciple relationship in which Owen took the place of the disciple, eagerly listening to the man whose poetry and life he so adored (*ibid.* 332). His unique relationship with Sassoon made it possible for Owen to fully discover his own hidden creativity and feelings, taking the advice that Sassoon first laid on him to heart: “Sweat your guts out writing poetry!” (*ibid.* 335). The poems that Owen started to write after his meetings with Sassoon were heavily influenced by the thoughts of Sassoon, who had lead Owen to believe that the best way to fight against the War was by striking “at the civilian conscience, so that pressure would be brought to bear on the politicians” (*ibid.* 340). Poetry was the best medium to achieve this, as it could easily get past the censor where prose could not, and in general had more impact than a long article in a newspaper (*ibid.*). If Sassoon had not taught Owen as much as he did, Owen would probably have never written the (anti-)war poems for which he became famous after the War, just as Sassoon had already become immensely popular.

One of the first poems that Owen wrote after his initial meetings with Sassoon was “The Dead-Beat.” The poem is simple in structure, not adhering to any standard style of poetry, and therefore not bound to style or content. The rhyme scheme is irregular, and the iambic pentameter is broken throughout the poem by the irregular use of multi-syllabic words (Simcox “The Dead-Beat,” par. 5). This irregular structure fits in perfectly with the chaos that is portrayed in the poem and strengthens the story that Owen tells. In “The Dead-Beat,” Owen portrays a soldier who is at the end of his wits and can no longer go on fighting. The soldier “[I]ay stupid like a cod, heavy like meat, / And none of us could kick him to his feet; / Just blinked at my revolver, blearily;” (Owen 2-4). Although faced with a gun at his head he

cannot be motivated to go on, and appears to be severely shell-shocked. Normally, one would have expected this fatigue and even shellshock that the soldier suffers from to come from the horrors of the battlefield. However, Owen goes on to claim that this is not at all true, and does so in a typically Sassoonish ironic way. Owen writes that the soldier is:

Dreaming of all the valiant, that aren't dead:

Bold uncles, smiling ministerially;

Maybe his brave young wife, getting her fun

In some new home, improved materially.

It's not these stiff's have crazed him; nor the Hun. (10-15)

Owen here ironically points towards the fact that it was not the War, its corpses or the Germans that had forced the soldier down on his knees. Instead, it was the thought of home, of his wife living off his hard work and enjoying life without him in their new home. A misogynistic Owen, just as Sassoon, blames the Home Front, and especially women, for not caring about the men at war. Instead, they simply go on with their lives, enjoying their luxury and peace, while they do not have to deal with all the horrors of the War. It is the thought of them that demoralises the army that is fighting at the frontline, and digs their grave for them. Meanwhile, at the frontline, there is no compassion for the hurt soldier either, as Owen goes on to show. The officer who deals with the soldier “sent him down at last, out of the way” (16). At the frontline, this wounded and shell-shocked soldier is an obstacle, and is dealt with with force. Owen here points to the fact that there was no compassion, or understanding, for shell-shocked army men at the frontline, just as there was no compassion for them to be found at home. It is doubly distressing, as the soldier does not even try to mangle but instead bravely goes to war to give everything that he has left in him (18). The poem ends with Owen hearing a report from a doctor who, with a “well-whiskied laugh” (19), says that “[t]hat scum you sent last night soon died. Hooray” (20). Even the one person that should be taking care of

the wounded and sick at the frontline does not care about the fate of these young, shell-shocked, men. Rather than helping, the doctor drinks and is enjoying his time at the front, even letting out a “Hooray” (*ibid.*). With “The Dead-Beat” Owen not only points a finger towards the Home Front that was profiting from the hard work of the army at the frontline, but also points some of the blame towards the higher staff in the army, who really only think of their men as “meat” (2). With the same power in his poetry as Sassoon, Owen joins the fight against the state of the army and the ignorance of the Home Front.

The poetry of Wilfred Owen was not published during the Great War, and many of his poems never reached the audience that he had intended for them. Instead, the first collection of poetry by Owen was only released two years after the end of the War and Owen being killed in action on November 4 1918. It is therefore near to impossible to find any sources on the reception of the poems before they were published in book form. However, some of his poetry was published in the newspaper that was made especially for Craiglockhart Hospital, called *The Hydra*. Owen was careful not to publish anything too critical of the War in it, mainly because of the ruling anti-German sentiments that were portrayed by his fellow contributors, but now and then he would put in some of his poetry, editing out bits that would be too negative towards the British Army and the War (*ibid.* 344). Owen did this for “The Dead-Beat,” of which he used only eight lines in an editorial for *The Hydra* published on September 1 (*ibid.*). Sassoon sent a copy of this particular edition to a good friend of his, Lady Ottoline Morrell, writing under the poems by Owen that “[t]he man who wrote this brings me quantities & I have to say kind things. He will improve, I think!” (*ibid.* 340). For Sassoon, “The Dead-Beat” did not amount to much, and he deemed it a feeble attempt, especially in contrast to his own poetry. This came on top of the fact that earlier, he had already pointed out several inconsistencies in the poem to Owen, who had shown it to him asking for some help (*ibid.* 335). “The Dead-Beat” is a perfect example of the first influences

of Sassoon on the poetry of Owen, making him adapt to his poetry of irony and hurt. With “The Dead-Beat” Owen had written one of his first critical and clearly antiwar poems, and from now on they would only improve.

When they were both at Craiglockhart, Sassoon had started to teach Owen about poetry, and introduced him to his gritty and realistic poetry style, which Owen would start to emulate. However, what was most important for the development of the poetry by Owen was that Sassoon taught him how to work his own homosexual feelings into it. Therefore, just as has been done with the poetry of Sassoon, the poetry of Owen should be further analyzed in order to reveal this hidden layer of homosexual influence in his poetry. In “The Dead-Beat” Owen portrays a soldier who “lay stupid like a cod” (2) and who is no longer able to fight due to what seems to be severe shellshock. After trying to get him up and going, an officer, with a “low voice” (9), claims that it is not the fear of War that incapacitates the soldier but the thought of the Home Front. The voice, describes how the soldier is

Dreaming of all the valiant, that aren't dead:

Bold uncles, smiling ministerially;

Maybe his brave young wife, getting her fun

In some new home, improved materially. (11-14)

The officer is purely ironic when he speaks about the wife being “brave” (13) and the uncles being “bold” (12). However, within this portrayal of masculinity and misogyny there is also hidden Uranian compassion and pity to be found. Owen, himself still shell-shocked while writing the poem is, at the same time that he is criticising the Home Front, also criticising the carelessness of the officers around him, who do not seem to care for the shell-shocked soldier. Sitting at Craiglockhart, himself shell-shocked, he feels regret and detests the officers for not taking this case of shellshock seriously, and for not looking at themselves and the War to find the direct cause of the shell-shocked soldier. The Uranian care and pity that Owen is

bestowed with is here focussed on the soldier who is not understood by those around him, and is instead discarded, just as Owen was. The ironic use of the term “ministerially” in this speech can also be attributed to the Uranian character of Owen, who had broken with the Catholic Church and openly resented it for not allowing him to express his homosexual feelings. After the speech from the officer, the soldier is again given no rest and is sent off, only to return on a stretcher, dead (19-20). In the contemporary reading of the poem Owen only blames the Army and its cruelty for the death of the soldier. However, if we look closer at the place that Owen takes in the poem we see that he blames himself as well, in pure Uranian style, as he too was part of the cruel war system and not actively resisting it. When he and his fellow officers are trying to get the soldier to move, “none of us could kick him to his feet” (3), meaning that Owen himself also took part in the ordeal, making him part of the problem. His sensitive homosexual character makes him confess this, and regret it, and following this he is unable to take real action against the soldier, who “just blinked at my revolver, blearily; / –Didn’t appear to know a war was on,” (4-5). Instead of punishing him, or turning to violence, he leaves it at waving with his revolver. As Carpenter dictates in his book, the male Uranian, of which Owen is one, shows pity for the cripple, in this case the soldier. In the last stanza of the poem, Owen again takes the blame for the later death of the soldier by saying: “We sent him down at last, out of the way” (16). Owen does not simply lay the blame with others, as Sassoon does, but instead poses himself as an accessory to the actions that would ultimately kill the shell-shocked soldier, who was, according to Owen, a “stout lad, too, before the strafe” (17). Although Owen does not actively take action against the system that he is in, rather enveloping himself in masculinity and chivalry, in “The Dead-Beat” he does show Uranian compassion for the shell-shocked soldier. Moreover, he does not just blame others for the acts carried out in the War, but instead takes the blame on himself for actively taking part in the bringing to death of a once brave man.

“The Dead-Beat” was not well received by Sassoon, and it would take until October 13 for Owen to write the first poems that could carry his friend’s the approval. It was then that Owen showed Sassoon his poem “Disabled,” together with some other poems, leading Sassoon to say that he should “hurry up & get what is ready typed” (Hibberd 347). Owen was still at Craiglockhart Hospital at the time and while staying there had made acquaintances with another – at that time already famous – author and poet, Robert Graves. In a letter to his mother Owen mentions meeting Graves and showing him his poem “Disabled”, about which Owen enthusiastically reports: “it seems Graves was mightily impressed and considers me a kind of Find!! No thanks, Captain Graves! I’ll find myself in due time.” (Wilcox, “Disabled,” par. 2). Although admired by an already famous author, Owen did not let this praise go to his head and stayed with both feet on the ground. Graves, however, was so taken by the poetry of Owen that he decided to write him a letter explaining his feelings:

Do you know, Owen, that’s a damn fine poem of yours, that “Disabled”. Really damn fine . . . you have seen things; you are a poet; but you are a very careless one at present . . . But I have no doubt at all that if you turned seriously to writing, you could obtain Parnassus while I’m still struggling on the knees of that stubborn peak. (*ibid.*, par. 4)

With “Disabled”, Owen had clearly found the type of poetry that he would write for the rest of his short life, never knowing what effect it would have after his death.

With its use of romantic and decadent language, “The Disabled” is a very powerful work, unique in style and metre. Its structure is built up out of irregular stanzas and rhymes and the poem runs quite long compared to the normal short poems that Owen wrote. Again, just as in “The Dead-Beat” the irregular structure fits in perfectly with the story that Owen tells in “Disabled.” In the first stanza, we are introduced to the main character of the poem, a man in a wheelchair who is sitting in the dark, in a “ghastly suit of grey” (2). Immediately

Owen makes it clear that this man is not, or has never been, happy. He goes on to say that the suit is “legless, sewn short at elbow” (3), making it clear that the man has no arms or legs. The man listens to the voices of boys in the park, and it are these “voices of play and pleasures after day” (5) that to him are “saddening like a hymn” (4). By calling a hymn saddening, Owen creates a remarkable contrast, as a hymn is normally a song of praise, and not of lament. However, to the man in the wheelchair, religion does not hold a promise of happiness. The man goes on thinking about how the town lived up in the night, with girls dancing and lights in the trees (7-10). However, this was “[i]n the old times, before he threw away his knees” (10), the throwing away implicating that his loss was essentially useless and had amounted to nothing. Owen goes on to describe how the girls now “touch him like some queer disease” (13) and he “will never feel again how slim / Girls’ waists are, or how warm their subtle hands” (11-12). The man mourns over his lost youth, describing how he had “lost his colour very far from here, / Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry” (17-18). Not only has he lost his natural colour, the dark red of his blood, gushing through from his wounds, he also lost the colour in his life by going to war, and is left with his “ghastly suit of grey” (2). He here also mentions that “a leap of purple spurted from his thigh” (20), this being not only a reference to the obvious loss of blood, but also a mentionable reference to an unmentionable wound, that of the genitalia (Campbell 832). He goes on to remind himself of how he played football, and would be “carried shoulder-high” (Owen 22), something that was not possible anymore. Thinking about why he went to war he concludes that it was because of the “giddy jilts” (27), meaning that the woman who inspired him to go to war capriciously abandoned him after he had had been wounded. This reading fits in with the earlier misogynistic attitude that Owen had shown in “The Dead-Beat.” Again, women are here to blame for the loss of a man, both mentally and physically. However, just as in “The Dead-Beat” it is not exclusively women that get blamed, the government is also guilty, as they

“wrote his lie; aged nineteen years” (29). While he was too young for combat, they sent him in and, while naively dreaming of masculine and chivalric conquests, “he was drafted out with drums and cheers” (36). When he came back, wounded, there were just a few cheers, “but not as crowds cheer Goal” (37). Here Owen cruelly contrasts these soft cheers for the large effort that the soldier put in to the earlier great celebration of a small feat at the football field. According to Owen, the soldier was cared for more when he was winning a football match than when he was fighting for his country. Instead, the soldier is thanked by being put into “Institutes” (40), where he can only “take whatever pity they may dole” (*ibid.* 42). Owen shows that there is no pity for those who fought for the lives of others and come back with parts of their body missing. Instead of getting care and attention, the soldier

noticed how the women’s eyes

Passed from him to the strong men that where whole.

How cold and late it is! Why don’t they come

And put him into bed? Why don’t they come? (43-46)

Owen here argues that the women at the Home Front are not all interested in a man without arms and legs, and the care and love that the soldier had hoped for in the beginning of his journey will never be awarded to him. With “Disabled” Owen shows that women, the Home Front and the army have crushed what was left of his belief in masculinity and chivalry. In the poem, and in reality, there seems to be no hope for those who come back wounded, as a man is only worthy of being a hero if he either dies, or lives through the whole ordeal without a scratch.

The apparent misogynistic attitude that is already visible in “The Dead-Beat” came to full force in “Disabled.” In it, Owen describes how a soldier who was wounded in the War, and has no legs and arms left, is consequently ignored by the women that he went to war for in the first place. The poem lends itself well to an analysis using the theories of Carpenter, as

there are many ways in which Owen's homosexuality is implicitly expressed in this poem. The most prominent influence is in the choice of the title, "Disabled." Just as the soldier in the poem is treated as being disabled, at the same time homosexuals were also seen as disabled persons. As Carpenter describes, homosexuality was at the time "assumed as a matter of course, that the type [Uranian] was merely a result of disease and degeneration" (23). Just as the disabled soldier, homosexuals are seen as having a disease or degeneration, and are suffering from it. Again, the theory of Carpenter here also applies by stating that "their great pity for beggars and crippled folks are truly womanly" (33). By writing a poem about a disabled man, Owen shows himself to truly be a Uranian, analogous to the theory that Carpenter poses. In the first stanza of the poem, Owen describes how the man sits in a wheelchair, and hears the voices of boys in the park. To Owen, these voices sound "saddening like a hymn" (4). The contrast of a normally joyous hymn to a saddening song can be directly attributed to the fact that Owen had broken with the Catholic Church because of his homosexuality, as stated earlier, and now felt sadness when reminded of it. There is also a clear sign of Uranian love and care, almost motherly, in the way that Owen describes these boys: "Voices of play and pleasures after day, / Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him" (5-6). The sentence "pleasures after day" (5) offers an ambiguous reading in the light of homosexuality, especially when linking this uttering to the fact that Owen had solicited young men during his time in France. Owen goes on to describe the man in the wheelchair reminiscing about the girls who used to dance with him, ending the stanza by saying that "[a]ll of them touch him like some queer disease" (13). There is a clear double meaning to be found in this sentence, specifically in the use of the word 'queer'. In the contemporary reading, the word would be perceived as meaning strange or odd, denoting that the man in the wheelchair was seen as abnormal ("Queer"). However, at the time of the Great War, the word 'queer' was also starting to become used as a term denoting homosexuals (*ibid.*). If we use the

latter meaning of the word 'queer', the description of the disabled man being seen as abnormal now perfectly fits the fact that homosexuals such as Owen were also seen as having a disease of sorts. Owen continues the reference to homosexuality in the next stanza, describing how "an artist [was] silly for his face" (14) before the War. As Carpenter argues, the Uranian male is usually gifted with "the artist-nature" (33), the underlying meaning here signalling that the disabled man, or even Owen, might have had a homosexual relationship with a painter, who adored him. However, after the War this attraction has gone, and "[h]e's lost his colour very far from here" (17). Owen continues to describe how the soldier bled: "And leap of purple spurted from his thigh" (20). Not only is this a description of blood rushing from a leg, it also refers to the loss of the unmentionable male genitalia (as noted earlier). Now that this man is no longer able to have an erection, he is made into a passive character, just as Carpenter describes the Uranian type in his theories as being as passive as the feminine character. The fact that women ignore him has destroyed his urge for sex, just as Owen's homosexuality condemned him to a hidden sex life, if he had sex at all. In the following two stanzas, Owen describes how the soldier was inspired to join the army, thinking of the "jewelled hilts / For daggers in plaid socks; of smart salutes;" (32-33). These reasons are reminiscent of the reasons for which both Sassoon and Owen went to war, to be able to prove that they were not just kind and caring homosexuals, but real men, masculine and powerful, and could enjoy the glory of chivalry. The last stanza of the poem again is an analogy of the world that Owen felt he was living in. In this stanza he describes how the soldier "will spend a few sick years in Institutes, / And do what things the rules consider wise" (40-41). Just as the soldier, Owen was deemed sick and was put in an institute, Craiglockhart Hospital. And just as the soldier, Owen had to live in a world where he had to abide to rules that other people made, rules that he did not agree with but had no choice other than following them, suppressing his homosexuality in order to fit in. The poem ends with the

image of the eyes of women passing from him “to the strong men that where whole” (44).

Where Owen felt that he was not seen as a normal human being because of his homosexuality, being ignored and neglected, the disabled soldier is abandoned by the women who do not even take notice of his existence. Ultimately, both the soldier and Owen share the same problem: that of being considered disabled, whether physically or mentally, and therefore considered not to belong to society.

Another layer of meaning that has to be considered in “Disabled” is the apparent misogyny. Just as in “Their Frailty” by Sassoon, women are considered not to be able to understand the suffering and pain that men in the War had to deal with, and were centred only on their own wellbeing. In “Disabled” we see women that do not care about a man that is severely hurt by the War but instead only look for the healthy strong men, seemingly not caring about personality, but looks only. This negative attitude towards women portrayed by Owen, just as that of Sassoon, can be coupled to the fact that he was capable of loving more than one man only, and was, as a Uranian, more sensitive to character. As Carpenter states: “they [Uranian males] read characters at a glance, and know, without knowing how, what is passing in the minds of others” (33). Owen is able to empathise with the disabled man where women are not, as they – in the eyes of Owen – only care about their personal problems and needs. Owen wants to replace these women and wants to give this disabled man the love and care that he deserves after having given so much for his country, instead of him only getting a single visit from “a solemn man who brought him fruits” (Owen, “Disabled,” 38). With “Disabled” Owen not only made a statement against the ignorance of women, but also a hidden statement for his own homosexuality that he felt was disabling him in society just as the War had disabled the soldier.

By applying the theories of Edward Carpenter, as described in *The Intermediate Sex*, new meaning is given to the poems by Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. Where in a

contemporary reading all four poems read as centred only against the War, the Army and the Home Front, they now reveal themselves to all be dealing with homosexuality and femininity in a variety of ways. Instead of simply despising the women at the Home Front, both poets are rather too much like them or even 'worse' in nature. This passive femininity forces the poets to want to take over the female role as carer and nurturer, powered by their ability to love and care for a large amount of men at the same time instead of a single person. What follows is a personal struggle between femininity and masculinity that both Sassoon and Owen had to deal with, being thrust from love and care to power and cruelty. In the poems by Sassoon and Owen, love and care are buried under the apparent harsh outer masculine shell, which consists of misogyny and criticism. By breaking open this shell, it becomes visible that Sassoon and Owen carry with them a fierce compassion and love for any person involved in the War, whether they are female or male. By further analysing the poetry, we find that Sassoon and Owen do not willingly take up a personal grudge against a particular group in society but are driven into this direction by the system of rules and regulations that they are actually imprisoned in. Sassoon and Owen are not able to express their untainted natural feelings of Uranian love and care and it is this restriction that causes them to try to take over the female passivity that is denied to them in the form of a masculine show of power and aggression.

4. Conclusion

Clearly, an analysis of four of the poems by two homosexual British poets, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, from the point of view of the reception in their own day and age, gives the impression that the war poems that they wrote during the Great War were merely skilful works of anti-war criticism and misogyny. Any sign of homosexual influence seems to be untraceable, as one would normally expect with poetry published in a society in which homosexuality was punishable by law through the 1885 Labouchere Amendment. However, a conversation held between Owen and Sassoon, both admitted at Craiglockhart Hospital for apparent shellshock, makes clear that where the public reads non-homosexual anti-war poetry criticising the Home Front, the British Army and its cruel officers, there is instead a layer of homosexual expression to be discovered in their poetry, wilfully hidden from those that do not know that it is there, avoiding prosecution and protecting their military and personal careers.

In order to unearth this hidden meaning and homosexual influence the theories of Edward Carpenter, as published in *The Intermediate Sex*, can be applied. These theories describe the typical Uranian or homosexual male, and the way their character is composed. By applying these theories to the poetry of Sassoon and Owen, we find that under the layer of masculine criticism and misogyny there are multiple influences of homosexuality to be found, some clearer than others, but all meaningful. In “The Hero” we are suddenly confronted with a homosexual Sassoon that does not blame an officer and a mother for not really caring about all the men at war, as in the contemporary reading, but instead shows himself as being able to have compassion for both officer and mother. They are all suffering in their own way because of the system that they are dealing with: that of a society filled with rules and regulations. Sassoon is found emulating the mother figure by taking over the care and pity for the soldier who died at war, as the mother is unable to give him that. In “Their Frailty” Sassoon again

shows that he would be more suitable for the men at war instead of their mothers and wives at home. Where in a contemporary reading Sassoon seems to simply attack the women sitting at home, only caring about their own man at war, in the homosexual reading we find Sassoon deeming that he is more capable of selflessly loving the men at the frontlines. He makes it clear that he feels a certain jealousy towards the flawed women, thereby appropriating feminine passivity, which in combination with his potent masculinity, is cause for aggressive poetry. "Their Frailty" and "The Hero" are both poems exemplary of the personal struggle between Uranian masculinity and femininity that Sassoon had to deal with. As Sassoon was not able to express his Uranian homosexual feelings to society, he instead chose to hide them in his poetry, the only place where he seemed to be himself.

We find this same hidden Uranian character hidden in the poetry of Owen. In "The Dead-Beat" Owen shows passive Uranian compassion by not only blaming the Army and the Home Front for not caring about a poor shell-shocked soldier, as in the contemporary reading, but instead blames himself for not taking action against the way the soldier was treated. Next to looking at himself, he also makes a sneer towards the Catholic Church, describing people as smiling "ministerially" (12) while sitting at home. This criticism comes fully from the frustration with his former Christian belief, which did not allow him to express the Uranian sentiments that were buried inside him. "Disabled" continues on this theme of active criticism on society, now looking at the way that Owen was treated, comparing it to the way a dismembered soldier is seen, or rather, ignored. Together with many textual references to homosexuality, "Disabled" shows itself to be one of the more powerful and clearer homosexual statements made by Owen. In "Disabled" Owen also shows that he, just as Sassoon, felt that he could give the men at war more love and care than they are given by the women they are with, who are self-centred and only think about their own prosperity. Just as the poetry of Sassoon, the poetry of Owen is filled with the struggle that he felt he had to deal

with during his entire life, his Uranian character being a constant point of inner discussion, phasing in and out between masculinity and femininity.

Accordingly, the duality that Sassoon and Owen carried in them throughout their life, before, during, and after the Great War, is also clearly visible in their (anti) war poems. Where at the time of publication their poems were on the whole read as straightforward antiwar poems, they now show themselves to be invested with the personal struggles of Sassoon and Owen. Their personal split between the Uranian masculine and the Uranian feminine as described in Carpenter, taken together with the illegality of their homosexuality caused them to turn to a life of secrecy, in effect causing the poets to hide their homosexuality in their poetry, making their true characters only visible to those that knew or recognised. Sassoon appropriately summarises this divide and hidden life in one of his later war poems, "In Me, Past, Present, Future Meet," by saying "[i]n me the tiger sniffs the rose" (4). Although Owen and Sassoon appeared to be masculine and powerful to the outside world, just as a tiger generally does, there existed a hidden contrastive feminine and poetic layer of character within them, as they secretly expressed romance and beauty through the sniffing of a rose.

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APPENDIX**“The Hero” – Siegfried Sassoon**

'Jack fell as he'd have wished,' the mother said,
And folded up the letter that she'd read.
'The Colonel writes so nicely.' Something broke
In the tired voice that quavered to a choke.
She half looked up. 'We mothers are so proud
Of our dead soldiers.' Then her face was bowed.

Quietly the Brother Officer went out.
He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies
That she would nourish all her days, no doubt
For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes
Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

He thought how 'Jack', cold-footed, useless swine,
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried
To get sent home, and how, at last, he died,
Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
Except that lonely woman with white hair.

“Their Frailty” – Siegfried Sassoon

He's got a Blighty wound. He's safe; and then
War's fine and bold and bright.
She can forget the doomed and prisoned men
Who agonize and fight.

He's back in France. She loathes the listless strain
And peril of his plight,
Beseeching Heaven to send him home again,
She prays for peace each night.

Husbands and sons and lovers; everywhere
They die; War bleeds us white
Mothers and wives and sweethearts, --they don't care
So long as He's all right.

“The Dead-Beat” – Wilfred Owen

He dropped, — more sullenly than wearily,
Lay stupid like a cod, heavy like meat,
And none of us could kick him to his feet;
Just blinked at my revolver, blearily;
— Didn't appear to know a war was on,
Or see the blasted trench at which he stared.
"I'll do 'em in," he whined, "If this hand's spared,
I'll murder them, I will."

A low voice said,
"It's Blighty, p'raps, he sees; his pluck's all gone,
Dreaming of all the valiant, that aren't dead:
Bold uncles, smiling ministerially;
Maybe his brave young wife, getting her fun
In some new home, improved materially.
It's not these stiffs have crazed him; nor the Hun."

We sent him down at last, out of the way.
Unwounded; — stout lad, too, before that strafe.
Malingering? Stretcher-bearers winked, "Not half!"

Next day I heard the Doc.'s well-whiskied laugh:
"That scum you sent last night soon died. Hooray!"

“Disabled” – Wilfred Owen

He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,
 And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,
 Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park
 Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,
 Voices of play and pleasure after day,
 Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.

* * *

About this time Town used to swing so gay
 When glow-lamps budded in the light blue trees,
 And girls glanced lovelier as the air grew dim, -
 In the old times, before he threw away his knees.
 Now he will never feel again how slim
 Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands;
 All of them touch him like some queer disease.

* * *

There was an artist silly for his face,
 For it was younger than his youth, last year.
 Now, he is old; his back will never brace;
 He's lost his colour very far from here,
 Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,
 And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race
 And leap of purple spurted from his thigh.

* * *

One time he liked a blood-smear down his leg,
 After the matches, carried shoulder-high.
 It was after football, when he'd drunk a peg,
 He thought he'd better join. - He wonders why.
 Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts,
 That's why; and may be, too, to please his Meg;
 Aye, that was it, to please the giddy jilts
 He asked to join. He didn't have to beg;
 Smiling they wrote his lie; aged nineteen years.

Germans he scarcely thought of; all their guilt,
And Austria's, did not move him. And no fears
Of Fear came yet. He thought of jewelled hilts
For daggers in plaid socks; of smart salutes;
And care of arms; and leave; and pay arrears;
Esprit de corps; and hints for young recruits.
And soon, he was drafted out with drums and cheers.

* * *

Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal.
Only a solemn man who brought him fruits
Thanked him; and then inquired about his soul.

* * *

Now, he will spend a few sick years in institutes,
And do what things the rules consider wise,
And take whatever pity they may dole.
To-night he noticed how the women's eyes
Passed from him to the strong men that were whole.
How cold and late it is! Why don't they come
And put him into bed? Why don't they come?