Forever England
Nationalism and the War Poetry of Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon

Henrik Blomqvist
# Table of Contents

**Introduction**  
*Purpose*  
*Questions*  
*Method, Theory, and Disposition*  
*Primary and Secondary Sources*  

**Analysis**  
*The Handsomest Young Man in England*  
*Quite Not Quiet on the Western Front*  
*Cry ‘Havoc!’ and Let Slip the Dogs of War*  
*“Peace”*  
*“Absolution”*  
*Land of Hope and Glory*  
*“The Dead”*  
*“To My Brother”*  
*“The Soldier”*  
*I Love Not Man the Less, But Nature More*  

*The First Explosion Burst in Our Hearts*  
*“How to Die”*  
*“Survivors”*  
*“Suicide in the Trenches”*  

**Conclusions**  

**Bibliography**  

**Appendixes**  
*1914 – Rupert Brooke*  
 I. *Peace*  
 II. *Safety*  
 III. *The Dead*
IV. The Dead 34
V. The Soldier 35

*Early War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon* 36
  Absolution 36
  To My Brother 36

*Counter-Attack and Other Poems – Siegfried Sassoon* 37
  How to Die 37
  Suicide in the Trenches 37
  Song-Books of the War 38
  Survivors 39
Introduction

In its own age the First World War (1914-1918) was known as the Great War. What had initiated as a minor conflict developed into a tragedy of unprecedented nature. When it came to an end eight and a half million soldiers had been killed and the great empires of Central and Eastern Europe had collapsed. A major reason for this horrific outcome was the technological development before and during the war itself. In the stalemate of the trench warfare new weapons, such as the machine gun and mustard gas, were used with uttermost fatality; the face of war would never be the same again. The nationalism that preceded and resulted in the outbreak of the war was eventually exchanged for a widespread disillusion.¹

The literary response to the First World War was huge. At first, nationalistic sentiments were principal; poets from all over Europe rose up to defend their country with pen and sword alike.² Among these was Rupert Brooke. However, confronting the reality of modern warfare the nationalistic attitudes yielded. War criticism increased; a name like Siegfried Sassoon’s is forever tied to his fierce poetic response to the idealistic notions of the public back home, the incompetence of the officer staff and the horrors of trench warfare, whereas nationalists like Rupert Brooke came to be viewed as naïve in their representation of the war.

Purpose

The purpose of this essay is to examine the war poetry of Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon. I will try to find differences as well as similarities in their depiction of the war, especially on a thematic level, as well as discuss how they use form and style to convey their ideas and opinions. My main focus is the nationalism, or lack of nationalism, in their literary production. Siegfried Sassoon eventually came to be known for his war criticism, but previous to the war, both he and Rupert Brooke belonged to the romantic Georgian Movement.³

To achieve this goal I will take a closer look at Brooke’s collection of war sonnets *1914* (1915), and Siegfried Sassoon’s *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (1918) along with some of his earlier war poetry. With these poetic works as my starting point I will examine how the nationalistic sentiments were conveyed, and, in the case of Sassoon, how the development away from these ideas compares to the nationalistic starting point.

**Questions**

With the stated purpose as a basis I will examine the following questions concerning Rupert Brooke’s and Siegfried Sassoon’s war poetry: What stance do they take towards the outbreak of the war? Do they share common themes and styles? How is the nationalistic and personal sacrifice of the soldiers who fought for their country viewed? In what way, and with what means, does Sassoon eventually react to Brooke’s and his own early view of the war? To tie these questions to each other I will also examine *why* their poetry was expressed in a certain way and *why* Sassoon became critical of the war.

**Method, Theory, and Disposition**

I will use a comparative method to analyse a selection of Rupert Brooke’s and Siegfried Sassoon’s war poems. Though Brooke wrote a lot during the war, and left behind much unpublished material, I have chosen to limit this study to the five sonnets published as *1914*, though only three of these are analysed in depth. Sassoon, on the other hand, published a lot of poems in magazines and newspapers, and in 1918 a large collection entitled *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*. It would be impossible to encompass his entire body of work in a study of this length, and I have therefore selected five of his poems to examine further. The poems selected correspond to and treat the same themes as Brooke’s, though they are not necessarily of the same view. With such a selection I risk choosing work that asserts my prejudices about Sassoon’s view of the war, or poems that treat the nationalistic aspect I set out to examine, though they may not be typical of his poetry on the whole. Hence this study should not be viewed as representative of Sassoon’s poetry and the way it developed. Rather it aims to examine certain themes found in his poetry and stances he expressed towards the war. Thus I have selected Sassoon’s first war poem “Absolution,” treating the outbreak of the war, “To My Brother,” concerned with sacrifice, which characterizes Brooke’s sonnets, and three poems from *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, which correspond to both Brooke and to Sassoon’s earlier poems, but offer an anti-war perspective on the same themes.
In this study I have refrained from a biographical approach to the poets’ works. It is in general hazardous to try to find traces of an author in his work and equally risky to say something about an author based on his writing. In spite of this objection, it might still be a relevant method in the case of the war poets of the First World War—as their poetry is undoubtedly tied to their experiences of the war—but I have chosen not to take the biographical material available into account. Studies of that kind are already bounteous. My concern is restricted to the themes of the poetry itself and how these are expressed.

“War poetry” is an important term in this study and it needs to be defined. My use of the term is—since I use it explicitly in reference to Brooke and Sassoon—limited to poetry concerned with and written in a time of war by poets who experienced the war themselves. This does not, however, imply that war poetry needs to be concerned with actual fighting. As will be seen, both Brooke and Sassoon approach the war on other levels as well.

The history of nationalism and the First World War is forever entwined. Two theories on nationalism thus form the backdrop of this essay. The first of these was authored by Czech-British philosopher and social anthropologist Ernest Gellner and presented in his book *Nationalism*. Gellner’s principal idea is that the history of nationalism is inseparable from the history of modernity. He claims that industrial society requires a uniform high culture in each sovereign state; opposed to agrarian society, education and language need to be standardized to enable the mobility of workforce necessary to industrialization.4

Although nationalism was originally a close ally of liberalism, it eventually developed into the virulent ideology we know from the first half of the 20th century. Gellner attributes this development to a combination of Romanticism and Darwin’s theories on evolution and survival of the fittest. Once recognizing a cultural entity as different from another, Darwin’s theories were easily transferred to nations, resulting in a universal *Kulturkampf*. To make the situation even more complex, Gellner points out the nationalistic concern with “the soil”; the territory inhabited by a nation became equivalent to the nation itself. The strength of the nation was therefore assured by the size of its territory. This concern is best summarized as a struggle for *Lebensraum*—the main reason for the two world wars.5

This theoretical background is important to the understanding of the nationalistic sentiments at the outbreak of the First World War and, as will be seen further on, to the understanding of themes in Brooke’s poetry. However, it is not enough to answer the last of my questions; *why* was the poetry expressed in a certain way and *why* did Sassoon begin to

---

5 Ibid., s. 59-74.
criticize the war? To answer this question I have employed Swedish Professor of Literature Claes Ahlund’s theories on nationalism as presented in *Diktare i krig: K. G Ossiannilsson, Bertil Malmberg och Ture Nerman från debuten till 1920*. The main focus of this work is Swedish poetry during the First World War; however, I believe that Ahlund’s theory is especially applicable to poets of the belligerent nations, experiencing the war at first-hand.

Ahlund owes inspiration to several other theoreticians—among them Gellner—but his theory differs in some ways. Opposed to Gellner he regards nationalism as a reaction towards modernity, rather than being an integral part of industrial society. Nationalism therefore becomes an escapist ideology, where the inability to cope with modern reality results in a search towards one’s roots as found in a romantic and idealized version of one’s national history. There, too, lies the understanding of the pre-war sentiments and the militarization of society. The public in general believed that a great nationalistic war would save society from the grey reality of modernity and allow the return to a nobler and more romantic world believed to have been lost. However, this Great War proved to be yet another expression of modernity. Death could be dealt from great distances and war was no longer a matter of personal confrontations; industrialization and technological advancements had killed out individualism and heroism, rendering war a very inglorious business. This is to explain the disillusionment of the generation who fought in the war, expressed by poets such as Sassoon.6

I have divided my analysis into three parts, following a short presentation of the poets. Each of these three parts will deal with one of the questions previously introduced. The first part, “Cry ‘Havoc!’ and Let Slip the Dogs of War;” will examine the poets reactions to the outbreak of the war and how their reactions were manifested. In “Land of Hope and Glory” I will take a closer look on the theme of selfless sacrifice, both on a nationalistic and a personal level, as well as on how nature, romanticism and nationalism are intertwined in Brooke’s poetry. Part three, “The First Explosion Burst in Our Hearts,” is concerned with Sassoon’s later war poetry and how it corresponds to the themes found in Brooke’s sonnets and his own earlier response to the war.

**Primary and Secondary Sources**

The primary sources of concern in this analysis have not been available to me in critical editions, though a few such have been published in the Anglo-Saxon world. Instead I have, as far as possible, used early editions. Brooke’s five sonnets originally appeared in the magazine

---

New Numbers in December 1914, and later in the collection 1914 & Other Poems by Sidgwick & Jackson in London in 1915. I have used the thirty-sixth impression of the first Sidgwick & Jackson edition—printed in 1930—in which form the poems were most circulated. Sassoon’s Counter-Attack and Other Poems was first published in 1918 by Heinemann in London and was available in its original edition. However, the early war poems of Siegfried Sassoon have not been available in neither critical nor early editions. In consequence I have also used a Faber and Faber edition of Siegfried Sassoon’s collected poems, published in London in 1962. All poems analysed and referred to in this study can be found in the Appendixes.

Previous studies of Brooke and Sassoon have been mainly concerned with the biographical aspects of their work, tying the personal experiences of the authors to the themes of their poetry. Extensive non-fiction sources, such as letters and diaries, are available in the case of both poets, and they offer interesting insights into their poetry, but as previously stated I have settled for a thematic analysis.7 That being said, thematic analyses have been done before, but they differ in nature from my approach to the nationalism of Brooke’s and Sassoon’s poetry, having focused mainly on Christian and sexual aspects. Several of both the biographical and thematic studies have been of importance to this essay.

Harold Bloom’s Poets of World War I: Rupert Brooke & Siegfried Sassoon has been a faithful companion and has presented me with an introduction to the war poets and the state of the art, although it does not present an original study on Brooke and Sassoon.8

Adrian Caesar’s study, Taking it Like a Man: Suffering, Sexuality and the War Poets Brooke, Sassoon, Owen, Graves, has offered me some insight into the problematic relationship between the poets, their work, and their sexuality. Caesar advocates that Brooke and Sassoon viewed suffering as something good—an opinion inherited by a Christian ideology. In addition, he argues that the war became a relief from the perplexities of Victorian morals, which had condemned erotic love but promoted chaste love between men.9

Bernard Bergonzi has examined the war poetry in general in his book Heroes’ Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War—encompassing all the major English war poets, including Brooke and Sassoon. Despite his biographical approach to the poetry he has been of

---

8 Harold Bloom, Poets of World War I: Rupert Brooke & Siegfried Sassoon, Broomall 2003.
9 Adrian Caesar, Taking it Like a Man: Suffering, Sexuality and the War Poets Brooke, Sassoon, Owen, Graves, Manchester 1993, s. 226 f.
benefit to this study; his harsh criticism of Rupert Brooke on a poetical level and the poet’s supposed egocentrism has offered interesting insights.10

Patrick J. Quinn has in The Great War and the Missing Muse: The Early Writings of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon studied Sassoon’s development as a writer from early years until after the war, focusing only a small part of the study on the war poetry. He offers a critical view of Sassoon’s early war poem, pointing out the poet’s naivety.11

Arthur E. Lane has offered another study of Siegfried Sassoon’s poetry in An Adequate Response: The War Poetry of Wilfred Owen & Siegfried Sassoon. His concern is mainly with the poetry written in the trenches, although he treats the early general response to the war among British poets as well as gives an analysis of the form and structure used by Sassoon and Owen in their poetry.12

Siegfried Sassoon: A Study of the War Poetry by Patrick Campbell gives a comprehensive study on Sassoon. As the previous studies presented, he is mainly concerned with the biographical material, but he mixes this biographical approach with thematic analyses. However, as his study encompasses Sassoon’s entire poetic production during the war, these analyses only manage to scratch the surface. Still, he has opened my eyes for perspectives other than my own and allowed me to delve deeper into Sassoon’s poetry.13

Among the many biographical readings there is nevertheless a study by Elizabeth A. Marsland which focuses on nationalism, The Nation’s Cause: French, English and German Poetry of the First World War. She too uses Gellner as a theoretical background, but her study, contrary to mine, has a broader perspective and is a survey over the poetry of the war, rather than focusing on individual poets. Her approach to nationalism is in addition concerned with the interplay between nationalism in society and in literature. Thus I have only had limited use of this study, despite sharing a similar theme. Although she paints a comprehensive image of the sentiments that characterized society and is passed over to the war poetry, she lacks the in-depth examination of single poets, which I hope to achieve.14

10 Bergonz 1965.
Analysis

The Handsomest Young Man in England

Rupert Brooke (1887-1915) was born in a well-to-do English family and attended the University of Cambridge. After graduation, he spent most of the following years travelling. In 1913, while sailing the South Pacific, he wrote some of his greatest non-war poems. Nonetheless, these were difficult years for Brooke. He suffered from nervous breakdowns and a suppressed homosexuality, causing him sexual ambivalence and the prospect of a lonely middle-age life. The war offered him an escape from these problems.

When war broke out, Brooke enlisted in the army as a volunteer. He spent the initial months of the war in Belgium, where he saw some action and composed the five sonnets of 1914, published in December that year—the only war poems he published. The sonnets became a success after one of them, “The Soldier,” had been recited by the dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral on Easter Sunday in 1915; the nationalistic themes of heroism and glorious death spoke directly to the English public. However, about the time the poems were published, Brooke’s regiment was ordered to the Dardanelles, where the Gallipoli campaign was to take place. In April, passing the Aegean towards the Gallipoli peninsula, Brooke died from blood poisoning after a mosquito bite. His tragic death consecrated his position as a nationalistic war poet and made him a martyr in defence of the nation. Posterity has, despite his popularity, come to view his poetry as naïve in comparison with later war poets, who became less idealistic in face of the enormous death toll of the trench warfare of 1916-1917.

Quite Not Quiet on the Western Front

Born into a wealthy Jewish family Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) spent the years previous to the First World War writing poetry and fox hunting. His pre-war poetry—characterized by the same romanticism as Brooke’s—was of little importance and was mostly privately printed. Sassoon’s greatest literary achievements were to be seen during and after the war.

---

16 Bloom 2003, s. 11 ff.
17 Ibid.
18 An allusion to Erich Maria Remarque’s famous novel about the war, Im Westen nichts Neues (1921),—translated into English as All Quiet on the Western Front—and Sassoon’s harsh criticism of the war.
19 Bloom 2003, s. 43.
The war offered an escape to Sassoon as well, who had struggled between the attraction of leisure life on his family’s country estate and the effort required to become an intellectual and literary personage. He saw his first action in late 1915. By that time Brooke was already dead and worshiped as a national hero. In time Sassoon too would become a hero, although of a different kind; he was awarded a Military cross for his bravery. Still, he grew increasingly critical of the war. Unlike Brooke, he lived to see the end of it and experienced the horrors of the trench warfare first-hand. This made him compose an anti-war letter, read aloud in Parliament, in which he argued that the war—once honourable—had become a war of profit, thus betraying the soldiers who fought and died in defence of their country. The letter proved to be a scandal. To prevent Sassoon from being court-martialled he was said to suffer from shell-shock, and he became hospitalized in Craiglockhart outside of Edinburgh. During his stay there he wrote the poems eventually published in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, in which he made a final stand against the war. The nationalistic sentiments of Brooke’s poetry had been exchanged for realism and satirizing over the naïve notions Brooke represented; the horrors of the war were made evident.

**Cry 'Havoc!', and Let Slip the Dogs of War**

The outbreak of the First World War was preceded by a militarization and polarization of European society and public opinion. Many believed in the necessity and unavoidability of a war between European great powers, which would allow the cleansing and rebirth of European civilization. This belief owed much to the aggressive stance of nationalism at the turn of the 20th century. Ernest Gellner ascribes the origins of nationalistic virulence to Darwinism, and writes, concerning these ideas: “If ruthless competition has brought us where we are, might it not be a permanent precondition of excellence, psychic health and genuine fulfilment?” When war finally broke out in August 1914 it was not only expected, but welcomed by the public. This part of the analysis is concerned with Brooke’s first sonnet, “Peace,” and Sassoon’s earliest war poem, “Absolution,” and their responses to the war.

---

20 Quinn 1994, s. 19f.
21 Bloom 2003, s. 43 ff.
23 Ahlund 2007, s. 12 ff.
24 Gellner 1997, s. 70.
“Peace”

Rupert Brooke is the most famous of the poets who celebrated the coming of the war. His five wartime sonnets earned him the reputation he still enjoys today.²⁵ “Peace” was the first of these sonnets and it sets the mood for the entire collection. Worth noting is that Brooke never uses the word “war”, but considering the context in which the poem was written I have read it as a response to the outbreak of the war and the rebirth and happiness that followed it.

The poem begins with a deterministic recognition of the war as part of God’s divine plan. “Now, God be thanked,” Brooke writes, “Who has matched us with His hour.” The notion of “His hour” suggest a contrast between the present and what preceded it, which, as supported later in the poem, becomes something impious. Caesar has noted that the Christian theme is recurrent in both Brooke’s and Sassoon’s war poetry, but in his analyses this theme stands for itself.²⁶ The second line of “Peace,” however, proposes a different approach to religion; it becomes an aspect of nationalism. It is stated that God has “caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,” by bringing about the war. Though not very obvious at first, Brooke here expresses one of the main ideas of nationalism. The notion of a national “awakening” is fundamental to all nationalism. Treating the subject, Gellner writes, “Man need to be awakened [...] to his national identity and the political imperatives implicit in it: the need to protect the national culture.”²⁷ He later goes on to describe the religious aspects inherent in nationalism with its own take on the Fall of Man, and how it ruled out religiousness in its own right. However, Christianity, being an integral part of European culture, was used in the name of nationalism.²⁸ God was thus rendered subordinate to the nation. He has therefore played out his role after awakening the youth to “His hour,” an hour that rather belongs to the nation. Not only is this supported by the absence of God in the rest of the poem, but equally by Brooke’s take on the religious theme in his other sonnets, as examined later on.

The poem goes on to describe the awakened youth as “swimmers into cleanness leaping.” Caesar points out Brooke’s obsession with youth and how the war allowed him to “resurrect his Romantic worship of [...] sacrificed youth as ‘beautiful’ and ‘clean’.”²⁹ This theme is recurrent in all of Brooke’s sonnets and reaches a climax in “The Dead,” analysed in the next part of this study.

---
²⁵ Bloom 2003, s. 11 ff.
²⁶ Caesar 1993.
²⁷ Gellner 1997, s. 8.
²⁸ Ibid., s. 75 ff.
²⁹ Caesar 1993, s. 52.
Having established that the poem deals with an explicit awakening theme, which consequently must mean a discrepancy between the present and the past of the poem, what is it that the youth is awakened from? In the fifth line of the octave Brooke contrasts “His [God’s] hour” with “a world grown old and cold and weary.” The final lines of the octave elaborate on this notion when the delivered youth is contrasted to those who chose not to enlist in the army, “the sick hearts that honour could not move,” and “half-men.” War in contrast to civil life and the “world grown old ...” becomes something honourable, and warfare is what creates “real” men, opposed to those who refuse to fight. This notion is interesting to keep in mind; Sassoon will revisit it, although in a quite different way than Brooke. Concluding the octave, the awakening is contrasted with “all the little emptiness of love” left behind. Not only does war become something honourable, but, as indicated, in contrast to the emptiness of love, it also brings about meaningfulness.

After using the octave to establish how the war became an escape from a corrupt world, in the sestet Brooke’s concern is with the personal effects of war. These effects have been indicated by the octave, but are here made more explicit. War becomes something positive, despite its horrors. The mood is set already in the first line of the sestet when the youth is described as having “found release there.” This “there” proves to be a place “Where there’s no ill, no grief, but sleep has mending.” It suggests the very same naivety which posterity has blamed Brooke for. However, I would like to object to, or at least contrast, this criticism. Brooke is describing a state of mind, not of body. Is it then plausible to discard him as naïve? Eventually the physical impact of the war came to overshadow this mental happiness, but, as Bergonzi makes clear, that happened after Brooke’s death. At the outbreak of the war the sentiments of “Peace” represented a majority of the English public and the soldiers who went to war. Thus it is naïve simply in the sense that the soldiers had yet to experience the impact of modern warfare—an experience no one could possibly possess by the time.

Brooke argues a profound distinction between mental happiness and material horrors. “Naught broken save this body,” he writes, “lost but breath / Nothing to shake the laughing heart’s long peace.” Physical suffering rather becomes a prerequisite for happiness. The only problem the youths face is “agony, and that has ending,” whereas the release they experience will last forever, as their “worst friend and enemy is but Death.” The peace found in war will

---

30 Bergonzi 1965, s. 42.
31 Bloom 2003, s. 12 f.
32 Bergonzi 1965, s. 41f.
remains after death, and this peace can only be achieved by giving up the physical reality—by denying the emptiness of the old world and accepting the strains of warfare.

The contrasts between the depraved, empty world of peace and the purified and honourable world of war puts into question how the title of the poem should be interpreted. As suggested by the sestet it does not refer to an actual peace, but it rather alludes to the emotional peace received through the cleansing process of war. This paradox, which Campbell refers to as “life-through-death,” as will be seen, is a recurrent theme in Brooke’s sonnets as well as in those of Sassoon’s early war poems analysed in this study.

“Absolution”

In 1915, when he wrote his first war poem “Absolution,” Siegfried Sassoon was yet to become the fierce war critic of *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*. Written while he underwent officer training, “Absolution” shares many similarities with Brooke’s sonnets. Sassoon, as Brooke in “Peace,” recognizes the physical horrors of the war, but they are compared—and found inadequate—to the mental release offered by the prospect of meaning.

The poem begins with a religious theme, similar to that of “Peace.” Sassoon writes, “The anguish of the earth absolves our eyes / Till beauty shines in all that we can see.” Despite the world being thrown into war, its horrors deliver those who fight in it and reveal to them the true beauty of the world. It reflects “Peace” and its turning away from an “old and cold and weary” world, but rather than being a simple escape the war becomes an eye-opener to the beauty of the existence, only fully appreciated in the face of terror. Sassoon does not deny the dreadful reality of war. “War is our scourge,” he writes, “yet war has made us wise, / And fighting for our freedom, we are free.” Although a terrible experience, through the action of fighting one achieves true freedom and is likewise given the possibility to truly appreciate it. This is a nationalistic notion. To fight in defence of the fatherland is a duty for its members, and likewise, it is what allows the individual to become part of the fatherland. This suggests that by “fighting for our freedom,” in other words for England, one becomes part of England. In the next part of this study this theme is further examined in Brooke’s poetry.

“Fatherland” can be a problematic term and I will have to discuss my recurring use of it. The problem stems from the negative connotations ascribed to it since the Second World War; however, in the 19th century it was a general nationalistic term, in much corresponding to the

---

33 Campbell 1999, s. 89.
34 Caesar 1993, s. 67.
35 Gellner 1997, s. 8 ff; Ibid., s. 63 ff.
term “nation.” 36 Then why not avoid the problem and simply use the term “nation” throughout? “Fatherland,” indicating a country passed on from father to son, hits the mark of an important theme of the poetry of this study, the degeneration of one’s nation and how, by fighting in its defence, one can restore it to its glory of yore, inheriting the values and the society that one’s father’s left behind. Hence I use the term “fatherland,” with its profounder meaning, alongside the neutral term “nation,” to elucidate this theme of heritage and rebirth.

In the final two stanzas “Absolution” treats the same themes of physical strains and death found in the sestet of “Peace.” Sassoon writes that the materialistic comforts and desires must pass. Time is fickle—“a golden wind that shakes the grass”—but through the “loss of things desired” the soldiers can become “the happy legion.” Happiness is not concerned with materialism, nor is it exclusively found in life. The “happy legion” at the same time alludes to Roman legionnaires and an ancient context. References to antiquity is recurrent in both Sassoon’s and Brooke’s poetry, and constitutes part of the escape from modern reality to an ancient world of honour and beauty. Though happiness is unmaterialistic, it is admitted that “There was an hour when we were loth to part / From life we longed to share no less than others.” In the comfort of home, previous to the war, the love of life was fierce among the soldiers too, but these desires passed; “Now, having claimed this heritage of heart / What need we more, my comrades and my brothers?” Once engaged in fighting—acknowledging the happiness it brings—the reluctance to give up the comfort of home and the fear of death yields. Death becomes but a necessary evil, for only in the face of death is one able to live life to its fullest—in Brooke’s words, “the worst friend and enemy is but Death.”37 Happiness can only be achieved through acknowledging the fickleness and emptiness of life. The result is the same paradox of “life-through-death” that Brooke is concerned with. The “heritage of heart” at the same time indicates an awakening, not very different from Brooke’s, and thus connects this poem with Gellner’s theories on the nationalistic heritage that needs to be reclaimed. Likewise, it is worth noticing that Sassoon in this poem speaks of “we.” Nationalism as a collectivist ideology, where the individual is subordinate to the nation, will be examined further in the next part of this study.

The similarities between “Peace” and “Absolution” are striking, and Campbell points out that Sassoon owes much to Brooke.38 One cannot help but recognize how the theme of divine

36 Anna Wierzbicka, Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words: English, Russian, Polish, German, and Japanese, New York 1997, s. 161-175.
37 Brooke “Peace.”
38 Campbell 1999, s. 89.
absolution and deliverance of “Peace” reappears in “Absolution,” but more importantly the theme of the happiness and release found in war and how war makes the world a better place.

It is interesting to observe that neither Brooke nor Sassoon, in contrast to Gellner’s theories on the aggressiveness of nationalism and Ahlund’s notion of the militarization and polarization of public opinion, are very aggressive in their responses to the war. They do not stir up animosity towards the enemy, but celebrate the happiness brought about by the war and the possibility of individual and national rebirth. At the same time, this concept of the war ties both poems strongly to Ahlund’s theories on the nature of the nationalism. The enthusiasm at the outbreak of the war originates from the escape it offers from a modern, meaningless world, and at the same time it constitutes a return to a previous era. Brooke abandons “a world grown old and cold and weary” and Sassoon gives up “things desired” in return for the “life-through-death” experience of warfare. As will be more clearly visible in the following part of the analysis this depraved modern world is contrasted with a romantic world of honour and nobility.

**Land of Hope and Glory**

Two millennia ago Horace noted how sweet it is to die for one’s fatherland. Much had not changed when the First World War broke out; it is not hard to see why Ahlund compares Rupert Brooke to the Roman poet laureate. In this part of the study I am concerned with the notion of selfless sacrifice in defence of the nation, but first I will take a closer look at Gellner’s theories on nationalism.

Gellner argues that the origin of nationalism is to be found in the socioeconomic conditions requiring a homogenous culture and in the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment. Opposed to the Enlightenment, Romanticism consisted of a strong belief in feelings and cultural specificity. Emotions became linked to cultures, because they were “sustained by shared sentiment, shared by the members, and not shared by outsiders, by non-members.” Therefore feelings must lack reason—because reason would make them universal,—which

---

39 Gellner 1997, s. 59 ff; Ahlund 2007, s. 12.
40 Ahlund 2007, s. 18 f.
43 Ahlund 2007, s. 14.
44 Gellner 1997, s. 67.
renders nations exclusive societies. When this exclusiveness later was combined with Darwinism the road was cleared for the arrival of 20th century aggressive nationalism.45 What characterizes nationalism is the separation of “we” and “them”. By definition, this “we” is concerned with the group, not the individual, which implies that the individual good is of less importance than the collective good. As I see it, the result is that the individual can be sacrificed for the greater good of the nation—and therefore, an individual believing in the nation is willing to sacrifice himself. Nationalism at the same time becomes an advocate for democracy; the most important part of the nation is the cultural homogeneity and the exclusion of “others,” not upholding a hierarchical society. As long as you belong to the nation you are equally included, despite your social class. Gellner supports this notion, as nationalism causes “vigour and health” to be “linked to soil, to peasantry,” and to “outdoor manual labour,” undermining the significance of aristocracy.46

The sacrifice of youth and beauty for the cause of the nation is the main theme of Brooke’s 1914. This is especially explicit in the third poem, “The Dead” (the fourth sonnet is entitled “The Dead” as well, but I exclusively refer to it as “The Dead” (II) to tell them apart), and in the last, “The Soldier,” which is undoubtedly the most famous of his war poems. Sassoon treats the same theme in his early poetry, distinct in his tribute to his brother, who died early in the war, “To My Brother.” As seen in the following part of this study, Sassoon was to use the same theme of heroic sacrifice, but in a satirical way, as part of his war criticism. In this part I will also take a closer look at the romanticism of Brooke’s poetry and nature’s role in it.

“The Dead”

“The Dead” begins with a bombastic cry, “Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!” The mentioning of “the rich Dead” hints at Brooke’s view of the selfless sacrifice of youth, to be more vividly expressed in the following lines. “There’s none of these so lonely and poor of old,” Brooke writes, “But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.” From this unmaterialistic viewpoint, the richness of life on earth is contrasted to the wealth found through sacrifice. Despite what economic and social standing one may have had in life, as one sacrifices oneself for the nation and the collective good one is valued on entirely different grounds. As argued previously, here is to be seen the ties between nationalism and democracy. Whatever position one held in the social hierarchy, however rich, one can make no greater contribution to the nation than one’s own life, securing the life of the nation through sacrificing the self.

46 Ibid., s. 74.
Having established the worth of the selfless sacrifice, Brooke continues to explain why this sacrifice is to be valued so high and enumerates that which the dead gave up for the country:

These laid the world away; poured out the red
Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be
Of work and joy, and that unhoped serene,
That men call age; and those who would have been,
Their sons, they gave, their immortality.

They renounced their life in exchange for the life of the nation; the immortality they gave up returned as a different kind of immortality. Though not as explicit as in “Peace,” this is another take on the “life-through-death” paradox. As Bloom notes, however, this sacrifice is not as unambiguous to Brooke as one may believe. By the time of the war Brooke had begun to regret his “misspent youth,” most of all his childlessness. I am not interested in whether or not the poem is to be read as Brooke’s personal manifest, but Bloom’s comment opens up another dimension of the theme of sacrifice. The poem offers a modern take on the ancient dilemma of Achilles. Just as Brooke’s narrator, the hero was forced to choose between a short life of glory and a long life of that “unhoped serene, / That men call age.” However, the narrator does not simply choose personal glory rather than a long life, but opposed to Achilles, he agrees that the nation, the collective, is of more importance than the individual.

While the octave of “The Dead” establishes that the soldiers “laid the world away,” the sestet is concerned with the results of this sacrifice. According to Ahlund’s theory the pre-war society was viewed as a depraved, degenerated world of moral failure that was finally allowed to be cleansed and reborn through the act of war. The sestet supports this notion with vivid images, summarizing the good brought about by selfless sacrifice. “A world grown old and cold and weary,” found in “Peace,” is here contrasted to the “Holiness,” “Love,” and “Pain” of the war, and how these delivered England from her dearth. The appearance of “Pain” among “Holiness” and “Love” stands out. Caesar has noted that it may be an expression of “sado-masochistic impulses,” and he asks whether the “Love” of the poem may rather be viewed as a love of pain rather than patriotic love. However, I think the combination of “Love” and “Pain” rather offers a Christ-like image of sacrificial love. This theme is made more apparent by the following line, “Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,” This “king” takes the form of a Messiah, returned to deliver the depraved world. He pays “his subjects a

---

47 Bloom 2003, s. 22.
49 Ahlund 2007, s. 18 f.
50 Caesar 1993, s. 53.
royal wage; / And Nobleness walks in our ways again.” Despite this apparently religious theme one should bear in mind that the Messiah of the poem is the individual soldiers who sacrifice themselves for the fatherland, and the royal wage is the “rarer gifts than gold” of their death. Once more, religion serves to further nationalism. As the soldiers are on par with Christ and their sacrifice is compared to his, the nation replaces and subordinates God. At the same time I believe the sestet further supports the democratic theme of the poem. The return of Honour and Nobleness—traditionally attributed to aristocrats—is a result of the sacrifice of the masses, the sons of the nation. Brooke’s use of capital letters (Love, Pain, Holiness, Honour, and Nobleness) marks keywords, values that are important in life, and at the same time he allows these values to be personified.

From my theoretical viewpoint it is hard not to view the sestet as an escape from modern reality and a return to a more primitive world of heroism, honour, and nobleness. Gellner stresses this return to the “roots” and the aspiration to recreate a “golden age” as important aspects of all nationalism.51 To further support this notion, the final line of the sestet declares that “we have come into our heritage.” The modern society was only a detour of history, not the fatherland intended to be left behind by one’s ancestors, but through the sacrifice of the youth this legacy is retrievable. This image of inheritance as well establishes a connection with the opening of the sonnet, speaking of the riches given by the dead. It is also a variation of the awakening theme found in “Peace”. Having come into their national heritage they have, as Gellner puts it, been awakened to their “national identity and the political imperative in it: the need to protect the national culture.”52 This, as well, is supported by the blowing bugles of the opening line, which becomes not only a signal of honour, but a signal of awakening as well, to those who have yet to realize their national duty.

“To My Brother”

In May 1915 Sassoon’s younger brother Hamo was killed during the Gallipoli campaign. Dealing with his sorrow, Sassoon wrote the poem “To My Brother,” in which the narrator reflects on the effect of personal sacrifice. As Caesar has noted, the theme of sacrifice is common in Sassoon’s poetry of 1915, and he often compares his soldiers to Christ.53 In this poem, however, the theme takes on a more personal tone, and the over-explicit religious signification of other poems is absent.

51 Gellner 1997, s. 12 f; Ibid., s. 72 ff.
52 Gellner 1997, s. 8.
53 Caesar 1993, s. 70.
The poem opens with a plea to the dead brother, “Give me your hand, my brother, search
my face: / Look in these eyes lest I should think of shame.” His brother’s sacrifice reminds
the narrator of his own duty; the gaze of the brother will prevent him to waver and his mind to
be drawn to the civil life he has left behind. As in the case of Brookes’ bugles the poem
advocates the remembrance of sacrifice. The poem goes on, “For we have made an end of all
things base.” This view of the pre-war life echoes Brooke’s “Peace,” making war something
noble in contrast. However, unlike “The Dead,” it diminishes the life left behind and in the
long run the sacrifice itself. Yet, in the final line of the first stanza the narrator concludes,
“We are returning by the road we came,” suggesting an escape to an older world in much the
same way as “The Dead.” At the same time it becomes an allusion to death and offers a
religious reading of this poem as well. From the Christian perspective, having walked the road
of life they will now return from whence they came, in other words, to their Father, or as God
himself puts it, “dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”

“To My Brother” especially defers from “The Dead” concerning the nature of the sacrifice
presented in the poem, and this is evident in the second stanza. Whereas Brooke’s sacrifice is
a nationalistic one and valued as such, Sassoon is more concerned with sacrifice on a personal
level. The brother’s death, as Campbell notes as well, becomes an encouragement for the
narrator to fight on. Continuing to speak to his brother, the narrator establishes that his “lot
is with the ghosts of soldiers dead,” and not until now is it made explicit that the brother is
dead. However, as one of the “ghosts of soldiers dead” it is suggested that he is still present in
spirit, which is eventually supported. Before that, the brother is contrasted to the narrator, who
is still in “the field where men must fight,” contrasting the dead with the living in a way that
continues in the final lines.

Asserting the encouraging nature of the dead brother,—previously seen in the first
stanza—the narrator, in the “gloom” of the battlefield, sees his brother’s “laurell’d head,” and
trough his brother’s victory he himself “shall win the light.” With the “laurell’ed head”
Sassoons once more puts the present in an ancient context, but what is most interesting with
these two lines is the pair “gloom-light” and the paradox that gloom is found in life, but light
in death—the death of the brother spreads light in a gloomy world, corresponding to the
release found in “Peace and “Absolution”. Thus the poem, as is the case with “The Dead,”
becomes a celebration of sacrifice, even though the explicit nationalism is absent. Still,

54 Genesis 3:19, King James Bible.
55 Campbell 1999, s. 91.
whether it is on a national scale or on a personal level, through this selfless act a nobler world is brought about and war becomes the escape from modern reality presented by Ahlund.56

“The Soldier”

Of Brooke’s five war sonnets the fifth and last, “The Soldier,” is the most famous.57 More than any other it is concerned with the selfless nationalistic sacrifice. This is the only one of Brooke’s war sonnets in which England is mentioned, and Brooke recalls his native soil with the most vivid expressions and a striking ability to seize the reader. Bergonzi writes, “If the Tolstoyan theory of art had any validity it would be one of the greatest [English short poems]—as, indeed, it is considered to be by the numerous readers for whom the excellence of poetry lies in the acceptability of its sentiments rather than the quality of its language.”58

The poem begins with the prophetical, “If I should die,” and indeed Brooke did die some months later with the result that he was regarded as a martyr of the fatherland.59 The narrator goes on, presumably addressing his nation, “think only this of me: / That there’s some corner of a foreign field / That is forever England.” As in “The Dead,” the price of sacrifice is contrasted with the good it will bring to the nation. Once more Brooke expresses the idea that the good of the nation is superior to the individual good. I have treated this as a democratic notion, but at the same time it threatens the value of the individual, as he can be sacrificed inconsiderately. The nation becomes an individual in its own right, and the individuals that constitute it are rendered insignificant in comparison. That is what eventually happened, as the sons of the nation where sacrificed in the shambles of trench warfare—in the case of Sassoon resulting in a critical approach to the kind of nationalism that Brooke advocated.60

In the following line the richness of the dead is made explicit, “There shall be / In that rich earth a richer dust concealed.” Bergonzi has questioned whether this is a praise of England or of the narrator.61 Another aspect of this problem is Brooke’s proposed inclination to suffering and his elevation of personal sacrifices, as presented by Caesar.62 As I am not concerned with the poet himself it is impossible to reject such notions, however, as the poem goes on, I believe, the praise of England and the noble view of the sacrifice for England, and not the

56 Ahlund 2007, s. 18 f.
57 Bloom 2003, s. 35.
58 Bergonzi 1965, s. 36.
59 Bloom 2003, s. 35.
60 Ibid., s. 12 f; Ibid., s. 43 f.
61 Bergonzi 1965, s. 43 f.
62 Caesar 1993, s. 53 ff.
self, becomes evident; the narrator explains the nature of this sacrifice, this “richer dust concealed,” corresponding to the same part of the octave of “The Dead”:

A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England’s, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

These final four lines of the octave elucidate that the richness of the narrator is thanks to the fact that he was born, shaped, and made aware by England; the body of the narrator is worthless, had it not been that it was a “body of England’s, breathing English air.” In none of his other war sonnets Brooke’s patriotism finds such an explicit manifestation. Regarding Bergonzi’s and Caesar’s theories I think it is feasible to argue that the praising of the self and the inclination for personal sacrifice is stronger in the other sonnets, whereas Brooke here ties the richness of the dead specifically to England. Though one cannot deny the existence of personal sacrifice, I believe it is worth noting that it is tied to the public good; personal sacrifice receives its value only in correspondence with the fatherland.

It is interesting to note how “The Dead” and “The Soldier” follow the same structure. Whereas the octave is concerned with what is given up when sacrificing oneself and the worth of this sacrifice, the sestet treats what this sacrifice gives back to the fatherland or the world as a whole. The other sonnets follow the same structure, though they treat different themes. Brooke is thus using the Petrarchan sonnet with its octave-sestet structure and a volta at the beginning of the sestet, rather than the English sonnet used by Shakespeare e.g. It is likewise worth noticing that the content of Brooke’s sonnets becomes harmonious in the same way as its structure, despite the fact that war is his subject. This paradox can be attributed to Brooke’s view of the war as a release from the modern world, not as the catastrophe it was to prove.

In the beginning of the sestet of “The Soldier” the narrator addresses the nation anew, “think, this heart, all evil shed away, / A pulse in the eternal mind, no less / Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given.” The first line suggests a Christian view of the profanity of the body, opposed to dying, which allows the narrator to become part of the “eternal mind.” In death the narrator will give back the beauties given by England unto him in his youth, and in a way he will become reincarnated as his fatherland—as a “pulse in the eternal mind”—once more establishing the subordinate relationship between the individual and the collective. This corresponds to the thought expressed by Sassoon in “Absolution”: by fighting for one’s freedom one becomes free, in other words, by defending the fatherland one becomes part of it.

Concluding the sonnet the narrator enumerates the gifts given back to England:
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

Through his sacrifice the narrator helps preserving the fatherland—“sights and sounds […] under an English heaven”—but also the dreams, ideas, and emotions that constitutes England; the nation becomes both territorial and cultural, as is one of Gellner’s main arguments.

Concerning the meaning of soil and roots to nationalism, he argues that the result is an almost inescapable connection between a nation and the land it inhabits.63 “The Soldier” illuminates this theme in Brooke’s poetry—even though it is made more explicit in “The Dead” (II) and its theme of immanence. The result of this territorial/cultural nation is that the sacrifice of Brooke’s sonnets becomes equivocal in the sense that it defends both the freedom of the country and the freedom of its values. Death, because of this dual sacrifice, takes on the role of something sublime and noble. Not only is England defended through this sacrifice, but, as shown from a larger perspective in “Peace” and “The Dead,” at the same time the world is reborn as it was originally intended, offering a very deterministic view of history. In Ahlund’s sense it becomes an escape to a better world, represented by the glorious history of the fatherland. This escape is made evident in another aspect, which is considered in the next passage, and which is of importance to the applicability of Ahlund’s theory.

It is interesting to note that Brooke is almost exclusively referring to the collective “we,” and when an “I” presents itself, as in “The Soldier,” he is concerned with the individual’s relation to the nation and the collective. Sassoon on the other hand, has a much more individual approach—“Absolution,” as pointed out being an exception,—which argues a lack of nationalism, though his themes are similar to Brooke’s.

**I Love Not Man the Less, But Nature More**64

In “Safety” Brooke’s Romantic style and the connections he makes between nature and the peace and nobility it offers is made most explicit. I will offer a short analysis of this theme, as it supports my nationalistic approach and the nationalistic theories I have applied to this essay. The final lines of the octave of “Safety” read:

> We have found safety with all things undying,
> The winds, and morning, tears of men and mirth,

63 Gellner 1997, s. 72 ff.
64 The fifth line of stanza CLXXVIII of the fourth canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, written by Lord Byron, one of the foremost poets of the English Romanticism. Lord Byron, *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron*, London 1896, s. 243.
The deep night, and birds singing, and clouds flying,  
And sleep, and freedom, and the autumnal earth.

Here is presented a “return to nature” theme. Thanks to the war the narrator is able to leave  
the civilized world of men and return to a state of nature where he is one with the winds, the  
morning, and the night, constituting a belief in the sublimity of nature opposed to culture. A  
parallel to these lines is found in the immanence theme of “The Dead” (II), and especially its  
sestet where the dead of the poem return to become a part of the natural world.

There are waters blown by changing winds to laughter  
And lit by the rich skies, all day. And after,  
Frost, with a gesture, stays the waves that dance  
And wandering loveliness. He leaves a white  
Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,  
A width, a shining peace, under the night.

In this case the narrator becomes part of the water and the wind in the same sense as is seen  
with the dust of “The Soldier.” The theme of immanence corresponds to Gellner’s theories on  
the importance of the native soil to nationalism, as the dead are here ascending into nature—  
literally becoming the land of the fatherland, which can be compared to Sassoon’s “fighting  
for our freedom, we are free,” and how it allows the soldier’s to become part of the nation.65  

I believe the examples brought up help prove the validity of Ahlund’s theory. Brooke’s  
style is undoubtedly romantic, and here it is especially clear. These lines offer Brooke’s take  
on the diametrical opposites “culture” and “nature”; leaving an “old and cold and weary”  
world, returning to nature, Brooke’s narrator undoubtedly escapes the modern industrialized  
society.66 The narrator returns to an ancient world where natural beauty is still to be found—a  
world of safety, of honour and nobility and selfless sacrifice—and it is the war that has  
enabled this escape, a view that forms the foundation of Ahlund’s theory.67 As seen in  
Sassoon’s “Absolution” and “To My Brother” he shared many of Brooke’s opinions. Still, as  
treated in the following part, the experience of warfare and the acknowledgment of the  
technologically advanced war as yet another expression of modernity resulted in Sassoon’s  
case in disillusionment and the rejection of nationalistic sentiments.

65 Gellner 1997, s. 74; Sassoon, “Absolution.”
66 Brooke, “Peace.”
67 Ahlund 2007, s. 18 f.
The First Explosion Burst in Our Hearts\textsuperscript{68}

By the time of Rupert Brooke’s death the true horrors of the First World War were still to be seen, but for those who took part in the trench warfare of 1916-1917 they became evident soon enough. Siegfried Sassoon was one of the war poets who experienced the Western front, and even lived to see the end of the war.\textsuperscript{69} Originally, having followed in the footsteps of Brooke, his poetry eventually took on an entirely different approach. His anti-war poetry was fierce and satirical, and his anger seems to have been as much directed towards the public at home and its naïve view of the war as towards the romanticism that characterized his own earlier works. In 1918 he published \textit{Counter-Attack and Other Poems}.\textsuperscript{70} In this final part of my analysis I will examine three of the poems of this collection, “How to Die,” “Survivors,” and “Suicide in the Trenches,” which share the same themes of death and at the same time criticize the warmongering public. “How to Die” and “Survivors” are satirical, while “Suicide in the Trenches” takes on a more serious tone.

“How to Die”

In “How to Die” Sassoon presents a satirical description of the death of soldiers on the Western front. Sassoon’s irony contrasts the idealistic and romantic view of death found in Brooke’s sonnets and his own “To My Brother,” though he still uses the same romantic style.

The scene of the poem is a soldier’s death at the break of dawn, “Dark clouds smouldering into red / While down the craters morning burns.” The break of dawn becomes a parallel to the theme of awakening in Brooke’s “Peace,” but here the awakening is not nationalistic, but as seen later in the irony of the second stanza an opening of one’s eyes to the reality of war. In the first stanza, however, Sassoon retains his romantic style. Though the soldier is dying, darkness is defeated and light returns, corresponding to the “life-through-death” paradox examined earlier in this analysis as well as the opposites “gloom-light” found in “To My Brother.” The following lines introduce the dying soldier, who “shifts his head / To watch the glory that returns.” As suggested by the continuation of the poem, the dawn may be read from a Christian perspective—the rising sun being an allusion to the Second Coming of Christ.

The first stanza is concluded as death is about to seize the soldier:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{68} Erich Maria Remarque, \textit{All Quiet on the Western Front} [1929], Eng. transl. A. W. Wheen, New York 1991, s. 88. Remarque writes, “We were eighteen and had begun to love life and the world; and we had to shoot it to pieces. The first bomb, the first explosion, burst in our hearts.” Released after the war, the novel treats many of the themes found in Sassoon’s late war poetry from a German perspective.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Bloom 2003, s. 43 ff.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
He lifts his fingers toward the skies
Where holy brightness breaks in flame;
Radiance reflected in his eyes,
And on his lips a whispered name.

The “holy brightness,” the “radiance reflected” in the soldier’s eyes, and his whispering of a name makes the reference to Christ indubitable. This grants even greater meaning to the sacrifice of the soldier. On its own, the first stanza follows the same spirit as Brooke’s sonnets and Sassoon’s earlier poetry. The themes of sacrifice, religion, and romanticism recur. However, a change appears in the second stanza, where the irony is revealed.

“You’d think, to hear some people talk,” the second stanza begins, “That lads go west with sobs and curses, / And sullen faces white as chalk.” Here the narrator takes up a position among the naïve public, which is winking the truth of the war, though Sassoon himself is well aware of this false notion. The result is a subtle satire that, as Campbell notes, undermines the idea which the narrator aligns himself to, without openly denying it. Instead the narrator goes on with reassurance:

But they’ve been taught the way to do it
Like Christian soldiers; not with haste
And shuddering groans; but passing through it
With due regard for decent taste.

The horrors of the trench warfare and its huge casualties are ironically reduced, and everyone is supposed to be able to die gloriously. Once more one is reminded about the religious theme, though opposed to earlier cases, it is hard to tie it to an explicitly nationalistic concept. The soldiers have been taught to die as good Christians, doing so with “decent taste.” It is hard not to contrast this recognition of the terror of the war with the idealism of Brooke, and especially his “rich Dead,” and their noble, selfless sacrifice. What in Brooke’s poetry was treated with utter seriousness is here used ironically. Considering Sassoon’s own view of the war at its outbreak, this marks an important change in the way the war was perceived. Bergonzi argues that Sassoon’s anti-war poetry is very similar in poetic style to “Absolution,” suggesting that a romantic poet by temperament, Sassoon’s radicalism is a result of the events he witnessed rather than his personage. Likewise it is interesting to note that his poetry sticks to its

71 Campbell 1999, s. 163 f.
72 Brooke, “The Dead.”
73 Bergonzi 1965, s. 92.
classicistic structure even after his change of opinions. Yet, the disillusion faced during the continuation of the war, as theorized by Ahlund, has made its mark.74

“Survivors”

Written from a different perspective than the other poems examined in this study, “Survivors” is concerned with convalescent soldiers, hospitalized because of shell-shock. Though the romantic style is absent, Sassoon once more makes use of satire to criticize the public notion of the war.

The poem begins with the narrator’s reassurance, “No doubt they’ll soon get well,” speaking of the hospitalized soldiers. “[T]he shock and the strain / Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk,” we are told, but as glorious defenders of the fatherland “they’re ’longing to go out again’.” The noble sacrificial soldier so common in Brooke’s sonnets is once more portrayed, yet it is not without the uncomfortable feeling that the narrator does not believe in his own reassuring words. “They’ll soon forget their haunted nights,” he goes on, accepting the horrors of the war, yet sure that the noble soldiers of England will not succumb to fear, for it is fleeting. Thus they will soon be rid of “their cowed / Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died— / Their dreams that drips with murder.”

Sassoon reuses the image of “ghosts of soldiers dead,” which appeared in “To My Brother,” a poem the very opposite of “Survivors” and signifying all that which Sassoon ironizes over in his later poetry. The “dreams that drip with murder” accentuates the uncomfortable feeling of the previous lines, and what follows firmly establishes the irony that makes this poem such a strong criticism of the public notion. “[A]nd they’ll be proud,” Sassoon writes, “Of glorious war that shatter’d all their pride …” The pride of the soldiers suggested here is rather the pride of the public of the sacrifice of the youth, fighting what the public deems a glorious war. Because of the nature of this war the soldiers, however, have been forced to commit atrocities that leave them without pride, creating an unbridgeable gap between the public and the army.

As the poem concludes one cannot mistake Sassoon’s fierce criticism, but the public alone is no longer the target. At the same time it seems to be a criticism towards Sassoon himself and his once naïve view: “Men who went out to battle, grim and glad; / Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.” Once happy at the outbreak of the war, the soldiers have come to experience the reality of warfare. Becoming disillusioned with the lies they were brought up with, they burn with hatred towards a continuing public support of a war out of

74 Ahlund 2007, s. 19 f.
hand. As Campbell expounds, instead of children becoming men through the manly business of war, men have instead become children through their horrific experiences.\textsuperscript{75} This is interesting to put into perspective with Brooke’s “Peace,” where the men who did not enlist in the war were described as “half-men.” In accordance with Ahlund’s theory, “Survivors” suggest this disillusionment to be part of the nature of the modern war, the soldiers suffering from the “shock and strain” of trench warfare.\textsuperscript{76} The impact of modern war along with its false notions of heroism is also the main subject of the last poem of this study.

\textit{“Suicide in the Trenches”}

“Suicide in the Trenches” is a short poem about youthful sacrifice, not very unlike the structure and the theme of Brooke’s “The Dead.” What differs this poem from Brooke’s sonnet is, however, that here sacrifice is neither glorious nor does it bring anything good to the fatherland—as the title suggests the strains of modern warfare have forced the protagonist to commit suicide.

It begins with a good-humoured description of a young man the narrator once knew. He was “a simple soldier boy,” suggesting that the story about to unfold owns some general applicability. The first stanza is concerned with the boy’s life before the war, corresponding to Brooke’s elaborate descriptions of what the soldiers who sacrificed themselves had to give up. This “simple soldier boy” lived a careless life previous to the war. He “grinned at life in empty joy” and “Slept soundly through the lonesome dark.” Especially the second quote is interesting. It suggests a contrast to the dark, lonely nights in the trenches when the boy supposedly would have not slept very soundly. The first stanza ends with the boy’s whistling “early with the lark,” which evokes the images of rural life. This is worth pointing out; whereas Brooke’s sonnets are concerned with leaving a depraved modern world and finding release in war and nature, Sassoon put forward the opposite notion in this poem.

However romantic the first stanza may be, in the second the boy has been forced to leave his simple life and enter the war; we are confronted with his experiences of the trench warfare and his final demise:

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

\textsuperscript{75} Campbell 1999, s. 165 f.
\textsuperscript{76} Ahlund 2007, s. 19 f.
Being “cowed and glum,” the grenade explosions along with diseases and lack of provisions have claimed their due, so the young boy takes his own life. The theme of the dehumanizing effect of war found in “Survivors” reappears. While in “Survivors” men became children, the experience of the war in “Suicide in the Trenches” results in a soldier committing suicide, unable to sustain the weight of the reality of modern warfare.

In the last stanza the poem takes on a different perspective; gone is the protagonist (figuratively speaking and in the literal sense), as well as the distanced voice of the narrator, which served to accentuate the dread and impersonality of the protagonist’s fate. Instead we meet a previously unknown anger; the perspective turns from the protagonist on the Western front to the public on the home front. With a voice of fierce blame the narrator addresses the “smug-faced crowds with kindling eye / Who cheer when soldier lads march by.” Once more, Sassoon paints a picture of the naïve public, cheering crowds of proud parents and spouses who hail their sons and husbands as they go out to defend their fatherland. They cheer the very same sacrifice which Brooke was so concerned with—the selfless boys that “poured out the red / Sweet wine of youth” for the good of the nation. Yet, by this time, the face of the war had changed dramatically. There was no more glory to be found—if ever there had been—and the selflessly sacrificing youths are but entering a slaughterhouse.

The poem is concluded with a final addressing to the public: “Sneak home and pray you’ll never know / The hell where youth and laughter go.” The religious theme of these lines is to be compared to Brooke’s “Peace” and “Sassoon’s “Absolution,” where the war was seen as a means to salvation. In this case, the only salvation available is to never have to find out the terrible reality of the war.

Campbell has rejected this final stanza, finding it the child of “a too obtrusive anger” compared to the “coolly objective stance” of the previous stanzas. However, I believe that the final stanza creates a necessary balance to the impersonality of the previous, and its fierce rejection of the public gives further strength to the notion of the discrepancy between the reality of the war and the ideal view back home. The cleansing, releasing war of 1914-1915 has turned into an unprecedented tragedy. Having witnessed the effects of modern warfare Sassoon’s poetry is disillusioned with nationalism and romanticism and takes up a fierce stance against the war, objecting the very view he himself once advocated. As Ahlund states, the war simply proved to be yet another expression of modernity.

77 Brooke, “The Dead.”
78 Campbell 1999, s. 181.
79 Ahlund 2007, s. 19 f.
Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the war poetry of Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon from a nationalistic perspective, using the theories of Ernest Gellner and Claes Ahlund. At first sight, these poets seem very different from one another. While Brooke is remembered for his nationalistic sonnets and his martyrdom, Sassoon is recognized for his anti-war poetry. Yet, as this study has shown one finds many similarities between them.

Sassoon’s first war poem, “Absolution,” shared the nationalistic sentiments found in Brooke’s 1914. He is reusing the same styles and themes that appear in “Peace.” It is interesting that, though being a celebration of war, both of these poems are concerned with the peace it brings to the individual, contrasting Ahlund’s and Gellner’s stressing of the militarization and virulence of 20th century nationalism.

A main theme of both “Absolution” and “Peace” is war as divine salvation. They present a deterministic view of history, which echoes in other of Brooke’s sonnets as well; God has absolved modern society by bringing on the war and allowing the return to a nobler world. Yet, in “Peace” God becomes subordinate to the nation, and the return is manifested as a national awakening in connection to Gellner’s theories. A profoundly nationalistic aspect appears in “Absolution” as well, where the narrator establishes that by fighting for his freedom he becomes free. As shown, this is an important notion in all nationalism; defending one’s fatherland one becomes part of it, which reappears in Brooke’s “The Soldier.”

In these first poems one also comes across the interesting “life-through-death” paradox, which reappears in different forms throughout this entire study. Only through the act of war one is allowed to live life to its fullest, for only in the face of death do we learn to appreciate the beauty around us. Brooke makes a distinction between the men who choose to fight and the depraved half-men who refuse to enlist. In his later war poetry Sassoon takes a different stance. As seen in “Survivors,” war instead creates children out of men, proposing that the real half-men are those who went to war. This should, as suggested by the poem, be understood as a result of the horrors of the trench war and the experience of modern warfare.

The religious theme is another recurring aspect of both Brooke’s and Sassoon’s poetry. Whereas in Brooke’s sonnets God appears to be subordinated to the nation, such a distinct hierarchy is not noticeable in Sassoon’s poetry. In his case religion seem to stand more on its own. “How to Die,” as an example, parodies the Second Coming of Christ while describing the death of a soldier. However, the most interesting religious theme is that of divine salvation...
which appears in “Peace” and “Absolution,” and how it can be compared to Sassoon’s later poetry. Whereas in “Peace” and “Absolution” the war absolves the earth, in “Suicide in the Trenches” the only salvation offered is to never have to know about the truth of the war, marking a profound change of attitude.

Although the theory presented by Ahlund in *Diktare i krig* is mainly concerned with the neutral Swedish poets, it remains true in the case of the belligerent war poets as well. His main thesis is that nationalism originated as an answer to modernity and that the war offered an escape from the modern industrialized society to a world of honour and romanticism. Not only is this true in the celebrating poems treated above, but also in the poems discussed in “Land of Hope and Glory.” The poems of this part are concerned with sacrifice. In the case of Brooke this sacrifice receives its value because it is a sacrifice of the individual for the good of the fatherland. Sassoon, however, is more concerned with the personal sacrifice and the effect it has on the fellow soldier. Despite this they share the view that through death and selfless sacrifice a better, nobler world will come into being; in Brooke’s sonnets it takes the form of a nationalistic Kingdom Come. Another interesting conclusion made in this part is that modern society is presented as a detour of history; the time is out of joint, but through the act of war it can be set right. This reclaiming of one’s national heritage corresponds to the prominent awakening theme of “Peace,” and is an important aspect of all nationalism.

Both Brooke and Sassoon use a romantic style. This becomes most evident in Brooke’s sonnets, where he establishes the diametrical opposites “nature” and “culture.” The war is contrasted to industrialized society, and found superior; in Brooke’s sonnets it allows a return to nature, which becomes nationalistic in the sense that the dead return to soil and in their dying gives something back to the fatherland. Sassoon too contrasts the gloomy world with the light brought about by sacrifice. This romanticism follows the theories of both Ahlund and Gellner; the first stresses the romantic notion of the escape from industrialized society, whereas the second points out how soil and territory is linked to the nation. Brooke expresses a further concern of Gellner’s, the connection between a nation and the state it inhabits, making the nation both cultural and territorial. Yet another interesting aspect of Brooke’s poetry is that his sacrifice takes on a democratic role. No matter what position a soldier held in life, in death he is valued as high as anybody else—the worth of this sacrifice cannot be compared to earthly wealth. At the same time, this very same notion threatens to make it undemocratic, as in its extremes the individual becomes insignificant in comparison with the nation, thus being sacrificed inconsiderately.
The poetry of Brooke and Sassoon is not only romantic in style, but it is also classicistic in its use of metre and rhymes. At first one might expect a discrepancy between the harmonious structure and the content of the poems, as their subject is war and warfare. However, which is made most explicit in the case of Brooke, who wrote Petrarchan sonnets, their stance towards the war—seeing it as a release from modern society and a bringer of individual peace—renders the content harmonious as well. Sassoon keeps the classicistic structure even when he criticizes the war, and this is intriguing to point out. Here the harmony of the structure does not always correspond to his fierce attacks on the naïve public, which, I believe, results in his response becoming even stronger, thanks to this contrast. Though a change of opinion is clearly visible, Sassoon also continues to use his romantic style, but he uses it satirically. This is most evident in “How to Die,” which becomes a parody on the public notion. In “Survivors” and “Suicide in the Trenches” he is fiercer and adopts more of an impersonal style to express the horrors of the war. Yet, it is worth mentioning that in “Suicide in the Trenches” he contrasts romanticism, as expressed in the first stanza, with the horrors of the war made evident by the second. Despite taking a different stance towards the war, Sassoon makes use of the same style and themes, but he does it to argue an entirely different opinion. In accordance with Ahlund’s theory, he reveals that through the horrors of the trench warfare the war becomes just another aspect of modernity, and, I believe, this revelation achieves much of its strength through the usage of satire and themes occurring in his previous patriotic poetry. Sassoon writes as part of, and in answer to, a romantic and nationalistic tradition.

This essay has left me with many interesting thoughts and ideas for further research. First of all one could continue this study by focusing solely on Sassoon’s early poems, rather than encompassing his later poetry as well, thus enabling a profounder comparison with Brooke and the nationalistic theme. Brooke’s romanticism would in turn allow for an in-depth analysis of this poet. Though he never published any other war poems than 1914, he continued to write poetry up until his death. In what way does this poetry correspond to 1914? Does he become less romantic as he experiences more of the war? It would also be interesting to further study Sassoon’s reuse of the romantic style and themes. A comparison between Brooke and earlier patriotic poets would make for a much lengthier study, but it would be intriguing to compare the development of nationalism in poetry over time. Such a study could include the likes of Kipling’s and Tennyson’s, and even Horace’s Roman patriotic poetry. As I am about to conclude this essay I must confess that my view of the poets has had to undergo quite a change. At first sight Brooke seems naïve; however, when examined further, it becomes evident that this naivety does not solely belong to him—it is also found in
Sassoon. This suggests that what today is viewed as naïve actually has more to do with our inability to understand reality than Brooke’s. In many aspects the First World War changed not only the face of war, but the face of the world itself. Sassoon’s later war poetry, written as part of his experience of the trench warfare, supports this conclusion. As seen by his fierce attack on the public view of the war, one may conclude that the romantic notions were shared by many others, and continued to be so, as they lacked experience of the war. Thus, in a sense both Brooke’s and Sassoon’s early notion as well as Sassoon’s later anti-war poetry were adequate responses to the war. That said, Brooke is still an idealist and a romanticist; the adequacy of his response is not to be found in a supposedly realistic depiction of reality, but rather in an impressionistic one. He expresses nationalistic sentiments that were as real to the public of his time as Sassoon’s anti-war poetry is for us today. From a contemporary viewpoint one easily forgets that neither Brooke nor Sassoon had experienced the turbulent history of 20th century Europe when composing a first response to the First World War. Should they therefore be viewed as naïve, and on what grounds? That they did not know what they could not possibly have known?

In the end, one question still remains: Why should we care about the First World War and its literary response today? The answer is simple: our modern times are not very different from Brooke’s and Sassoon’s. Though the militarization of the public is unfamiliar to us and the political map of Europe is very different from that of 1914, nationalism is once more spreading across the continent, and it is the virulent extreme nationalism that brought so much devastation in the 20th century. It is interesting how people tend to forget the past and the days gone by. Have we at all learned from history? With today’s development in mind it is important that we remember the past century and its horrors, and I believe that literature offers an easy access to the past. Brooke and Sassoon were entwined in sentiments not very different from those arising anew. Sassoon eventually changed his opinions and presented what virulent nationalism could bring and how dangerous it could be. He was not very positive about the future. In a poem called “Song-Books of the War” he writes:

In fifty years when peace outshines
Remembrance of the battle lines
Adventurous lads will sigh and cast
Proud looks upon the plundered past.80

I find it unpleasantly prophetic. Therefore it is necessary to ask, if we tend to forget history and past horrors, where will the development we are now witnessing bring us in time?

80 Sassoon, “Song-Books of the War.”
Bibliography


“Georgian Poetry,” Encyclopedia Britannica Online,

“Horace,” Encyclopedia Britannica Online,

“World War I,” Encyclopedia Britannica Online,


Brooke, Rupert, “1914,” New Numbers 1914:4, s. 165-169,

Brooke, Rupert, 1914 & Other Poems [1915], London 1930.


Caesar, Adrian, Taking it Like a Man: Suffering, Sexuality and the War Poets Brooke, Sassoon, Owen, Graves, Manchester 1993.


Remarque, Erich Maria, *Im Westen nichts Neues* [1921], Berlin 1929.


Sassoon, Siegfried, *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, London 1918.


Appendixes

1914 – Rupert Brooke

The sonnets as they appear here have been transcribed from the thirty-sixth impression of Rupert Brooke’s 1914, published in 1930 by Sidgwick & Jackson. The first impression was published in 1915, but the poems had already appeared in the fourth edition of the magazine New Numbers in December the previous year. A digitalized version of the New Numbers edition can be found online: https://archive.org/stream/newnumbers01broouoft#page/165/mode/1up (2013-11-19).

I. Peace

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,
Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,
And all the little emptiness of love!

Oh! we, who have known shame, we have found release there,
Where there’s no ill, no grief, but sleep has mending,
Naught broken save this body, lost but breath;
Nothing to shake the laughing heart’s long peace there
But only agony, and that has ending;
And the worst friend and enemy is but Death.

II. Safety

Dear! of all happy in the hour, most blest
He who has found our hid security,
Assured in the dark tides of the world that rest,
And heard our word, ‘Who is so safe as we?’
We have found safety with all things undying,
The winds, and morning, tears of men and mirth,
The deep night, and birds singing, and clouds flying,
And sleep, and freedom, and the autumnal earth.

We have built a house that is not for Time’s throwing.  
We have gained a peace unshaken by pain for ever.  
War knows no power. Safe shall be my going, 
Secretly armed against all death’s endeavour;  
Safe though all safety’s lost; safe where men fall;  
And if these poor limbs die, safest of all.

III. The Dead

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!  
There’s none of these so lonely and poor of old,  
But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.

These laid the world away; poured out the red  
Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be  
Of work and joy, and that unhoped serene,  
That men call age; and those who would have been,  
Their sons, they gave, their immortality.

Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us, for our dearth,  
Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.  
Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,  
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;  
And Nobleness walks in our ways again;  
And we have come into our heritage.

IV. The Dead

These hearts were woven of human joys and cares,  
Washed marvellously with sorrow, swift to mirth.  
The years had given them kindness. Dawn was theirs,  
And sunset, and the colours of the earth.

These had seen movement, and heard music; known  
Slumber and waking; loved; gone proudly friended;  
Felt the quick stir of wonder; sat alone;  
Touched flowers and furs and cheeks. All this is ended.
There are waters blown by changing winds to laughter
And lit by the rich skies, all day. And after,
Frost, with a gesture, stays the waves that dance
And wandering loveliness. He leaves a white
Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,
A width, a shining peace, under the night.

V.  The Soldier

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

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

The early war poems of Siegfried Sassoon has been transcribed from the Faber and Faber edition of Sassoon’s collected poems, published in London in 1962.

Absolution

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

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

There was an hour when we were loth to part
From life we longed to share no less than others.
Now, having claimed this heritage of heart,
What need we more, my comrades and my brothers?

To My Brother

Give me your hand, my brother, search my face;
Look in these eyes lest I should think of shame;
For we have made an end of all things base.
We are returning by the road we came.

Your lot is with the ghosts of soldiers dead,
And I am in the field where men must fight.
But in the gloom I see your laurell’d head
And through your victory I shall win the light.
Counter-Attack and Other Poems – Siegfried Sassoon

The poems concerned from Counter-Attack and Other Poems have been transcribed from the original edition, published in London in 1918 by William Heinemann. They appear in the same order in relation to each other as in the original edition.

How to Die

Dark clouds are smouldering into red
While down the craters morning burns.
The dying soldier shifts his head
To watch the glory that returns;
He lifts his fingers toward the skies
Where holy brightness breaks in flame;
Radiance reflected in his eyes,
And on his lips a whispered name.

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

Suicide in the Trenches

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

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain.
No one spoke of him again.
You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you’ll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.

Song-Books of the War

In fifty years, when peace outshines
Remembrance of the battle lines,
Adventurous lads will sigh and cast
Proud looks upon the plundered past.
On summer morn or winter’s night,
Their hearts will kindle for the fight,
Reading a snatch of soldier-song,
Savage and jaunty, fierce and strong;
And through the angry marching rhymes
Of blind regret and haggard mirth,
They’ll envy us the dazzling times
When sacrifice absolved our earth.

Some ancient man with silver locks
Will lift his weary face to say:
“War was a fiend who stopped our clocks
Although we met him grim and gay.”
And then he’ll speak of Haig’s last drive,
Marvelling that any came alive
Out of the shambles that men built
And smashes, to cleanse the world of guilt.
But the boys, with grin and sidelong glance,
Will think, “Poor grandad’s day is done.”
And dream of those who fought in France
And lived in time to share the fun.
Survivors

No doubt they’ll soon get well; the shock and strain
Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.
Of course they’re “longing to go out again,”—

These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk.
They’ll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed
Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,—
Their dreams that drip with murder; and they’ll be proud

Of glorious war that shatter’d all their pride …
Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;
Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.