Poetic Voices of World War I: Rosenberg, Sassoon & Kipling

Jodi Lynne Ierien

English – Creative Writing
Undergraduate

Dr. Wendy Barker

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If any question why we died...
-Rudyard Kipling

World War I changed the face of Europe. It also changed the face of war poetry. Instead of the noble heroes and glory invoked by Tennyson’s *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, twentieth-century poet Isaac Rosenberg introduced his readers to the common men in the trenches, more focused on the everyday art of survival than on glory. His contemporary Siegfried Sassoon showed how the war changed men who fought in ways the civilian population could never understand. Finally, Rudyard Kipling, as a grieving father, gave voice to the men who never made it back.

Although Rosenberg (See Fig. 1) was a British citizen, he shared the sentiments of the Jewish immigrant community he had grown up in. When World War I began, he planned to stay out of the conflict. Rosenberg’s plans changed when he realized his mother could receive half his military pay as well as a separation stipend. Since the family was barely scraping by on what his father earned as an itinerant peddler combined with the money his mother made selling her needlework, military pay proved an irresistible incentive to join the war effort. He enlisted in mid-October 1915 and shipped out to France, where he served twenty-two months. Rosenberg only had ten days of leave during his time in France, an indication of how bad things were for the British Army. On April 1, 1918, he shared the fate of nearly 100,000 British officers and men who were listed as “missing, presumed killed.” In 1926, remains of eleven members of the King’s Own Royal Lancaster Regiment (KORL) were recovered. While Rosenberg was not identifiable, he was known to be among them. He rests with his comrades in a cemetery near Arras. (See Fig. 2)
During his time at the front, Rosenberg sent poems to friends in England, chronicling life for the British “Tommy,” and providing a brutally honest account of events from an enlisted man’s point of view. His readers learned of a common pastime in the trenches in *Louse Hunting*. Using words to paint a vivid picture, Rosenberg shows his audience “a shirt verminously busy” burnt over a candle, while the soldier’s trenchmates “…sprang up and stript/To hunt the vermin brood.” Rosenberg strips away the elevated language Tennyson would have used had he tried to draw the scene. Instead, Rosenberg tells of the “lurid glee” of the men who join the hunt. The troops are reduced to “gibbering shadows” and “hooked fingers.” It is doubtful that anyone would have recognized any of these creatures as men they once knew.

In *Break of Day in the Trenches*, Rosenberg introduces his readers to another trenchmate, “a queer sardonic rat” of “cosmopolitan sympathies.” Rosenberg harbors no illusions of loyalty, but accepts that the rat will shortly leave the British line, cross the field between, and make his rounds of the German trenches. Rosenberg is not repelled by the rat. Rather, the rat is recognized as a routine visitor. Rosenberg’s rat is a neutral observer, with Rosenberg wondering “What do you see in our eyes/At the shrieking iron and flame/Hurled through still heavens?” The rat is as much a part of the scene and life at the front as the troops themselves.

“*Louse Hunting*” and *Break of Day in the Trenches* speak of the living, but Rosenberg speaks of the dead as well. “*Dead Man’s Dump*” presents some of the grimmest realities of war. His readers may shudder at the thought of “wheels lurch[ing] over sprawled dead…their bones crunched” but not so Rosenberg and his fellow soldiers. There is no sentimentality to be found in *Dead Man’s Dump*, merely a factual presentation of the death of wounded soldier, shot through the head, his “brains splattered on/A stretcher-bearer’s face;” left at the side of the road “with the older dead.” (See Fig. 3) Even the final indignity of being ground beneath the wheels
has ceased to shock Rosenberg and his compatriots. Rosenberg’s readers are brought face to face with the same realities of life and death enlisted men faced on a daily basis.

Lice and rats may have abounded on the field of battle and in the camps of previous wars, but they never appeared in the verses celebrating the glory and honor to be gained in the service of one’s country. Making no effort to sugarcoat the realities of war, Rosenberg brings his readers face to face with the dead, the dying, and the vermin they faced. Gone is the elevated language of the previous war poets. There is no mention of “King and Country” or “glory.” Such concepts do not belong in the world Rosenberg and the rest of England’s youth now inhabit. Patriotism is the currency of the politicians. Enlisted men in the trenches deal in survival and Rosenberg’s readers cannot escape that knowledge.

While enlisted men spent their days trying to stay alive, officers spent their time trying to understand the changing face of war. At the start of World War I, the British Officer Corps was ill-prepared for the new style of warfare. Most officers had purchased their initial commission. They were promoted based not on aptitude or skill, but rather on longevity. No matter how inept an officer might be, he could expect promotions at regular intervals. Junior officers serving at the front found themselves sending their men out on ill-conceived missions that were often doomed to failure from the start.

Siegfried Sassoon (See Fig. 4) was one of those junior officers. From a background of wealth and privilege, he joined the Sussex Yeomanry the day the war broke out, ultimately securing his commission as a Second Lieutenant in the Royal Welch Fusiliers. He caught up with his regiment in France just after the Battle of Loos. Sassoon transferred to a frontline placement in 1916. By 1917, he had received the Military Cross for bravery and been wounded. As was the case with wounded officers, he returned to England to recover. During
his time in England, Sassoon was exposed to the politics of war. His poems reflect his time as an officer and his disgust at what he saw in England.

He wrote a declaration against the war and tried to resign his commission. Fearing Sassoon would be court-marshalled for treason, a friendxiv intervened, convincing authorities he was suffering from shellshock, and had Sassoon transferred to Craiglockhart Hospital for treatment. xv (See Fig. 5) After three months at Craiglockhart, Sassoon was returned to the front. Wounded a second time, Sassoon was invalided out of the service shortly before the war ended.

Sassoon made no effort to hide the ineptitude of his fellow officers. The General gives us a portrait of a man who blithely said “Good-morning, good-morning!” to the troops as they pass by on their way to the front line. xvi Two of the men marching by comment on his cheeriness, drawing our attention to the incongruity of the General’s emotions in a time and place of war. A week later, most of the men he greeted are dead. The ones who survive are “cursing his staff for incompetent swine.”xvii The General does not escape opprobrium since “he did for them both by his plan of attack.”xviii

Furthering his efforts to rid the civilian populace of their unrealistic view of war, Sassoon introduces us to men unmentioned by previous war poets. In The Hero, we learn that the hero in question exists only in a letter written by a colonel who does not have the heart to tell a mother her son was, in fact, a coward. Even the officer who visits “that lonely woman with white hair”xxix does not have the fortitude to tell her that her cherished son “had panicked down the trench that night”xxx and “…how he’d tried/To get sent home.”xxxi For the sake of the dead man’s mother, the two officers perpetuate the myth of the heroic soldier.

Many men who did not actively seek to get sent home might still find themselves hoping for a wound to allow escape. Stand-to: Good Friday Morning (See Fig. 6) illustrates the point
when speaker, having splashed his way through a rain-filled trench to the front line finishes with the prayer-like thought “O Jesus, send me a wound to-day/And I’ll believe in Your bread and wine.” Even a badly maimed man could be grateful for the injury that got him invalided out of the Army. *The One Legged Man*, having made it back from the war, looks over his farm and reflects “How right it seemed that he should reach the span/Of comfortable years allowed a man!” As appalling as the loss of a leg might seem to most, the injured man considers himself “Safe with his wound” and, as he enters his own front gate, offers up the thought “Thank God they had to amputate!”

The idea that men might actually be grateful for their wounds and might seek to escape war is a foreign concept for the civilian population. As a result, returning servicemen are somewhat alienated from a society that does not understand their experiences. Sassoon explores these diametrically opposing viewpoints in *They*. A bishop exhorts his congregation from the pulpit, telling them “…When the boys come back/They will not be the same…. “ He goes on to tell us they “fought/In a just cause,” against an “Anti-Christ” and “have challenged Death and dared him face to face.” Servicemen who hear the Bishop’s remarks try to tell of the real changes: one has lost his legs, another is blind, and a third has suffered a chest wound that will most likely kill him. Even a man who has not suffered a horrific injury is changed, for he has “gone syphilitic.” The servicemen try to point out that there is no one who has served “that hasn’t found some change.” In the face of all their efforts to show the true changes, the Bishop merely replies “The ways of God are strange!” (See Fig. 7)

Sassoon does not grant quarter to women, either. In *Glory of Women*, he takes women to task for “lov[ing] us when we’re heroes…/Or wounded in a mentionable place.” Sassoon blames women for “worship[ing] decorations” and “believ[ing]/That chivalry redeems the
war's disgrace" while “You can’t believe that British troops ‘retire’/When hell’s last horror
breaks them and they run…" In a final effort to shock us into understanding the truth of war,
Sassoon speaks of a German mother, “…knitting socks to send your son/His face is trodden
deeper in the mud.” Once again, the men called on to fight speak not of glory and honor, but
instead of wounds that have maimed them while at the same time, saving their lives. Sassoon and
other servicemen are willing to admit that men break and run under the extreme conditions they
encounter during times of war. Only civilians still believe in the honor and glory of war.

Rosenberg and Sassoon give voice to the fighting men who are still in the thick of the
fight or recently removed from it, as in the case of the one-legged man. Rudyard Kipling (See
Fig. 8), a writer and grieving parent, speaks for those silenced by war. Kipling had been
extremely jingoistic at the beginning of the war. Like the rest of society, he believed in the
concept of “For King and Country!” When his son, John “Jack” Kipling (See Fig. 9) could not
get into the military due to his extremely poor eyesight, Kipling used his influence and friendship
with King Edward VII to get Jack into the Army. Jack shipped out to France and was listed as
“Missing” after the Battle of Loos in 1915. Kipling and his wife spent the rest of the war
scouring prisoner lists and searching hospitals and convalescent facilities for Jack.

Kipling discovered the truth of war while searching for Jack. He turned to writing a series
of epitaphs. Some of the epitaphs address the social changes occasioned by the war, specifically
the breakdown of the class system. Other epitaphs within the series are critical of the men
Kipling ultimately came to hold responsible for the war: politicians, industrialists, and men who
told tales of glory in past wars. Kipling’s about face was not well-received and his popularity
decayed after he began voicing opposition to the war.
The first epitaph, *Equality of Sacrifice*, focuses on the realization that, whatever a man’s social class may have been prior to the war (“A. I was a Have. B. I was a ‘have-not’”), all sacrifices are equal during the war (“Together. What hast thou given which I gave not?”). In *A Servant*, a member of the upper class notes “We were together since the war began/He was my servant – and the better man.” No prior war had such a profound impact on the caste system in Britain.

Kipling’s dead do not rely on the living to speak for them. At times, they take matters into their own hands. The speaker in *An Only Son* remarks “I have slain none except my mother. She/(Blessing her slayer) died of grief for me.” *The Sleepy Sentinel* laments that he was killed because he fell asleep on watch, telling us “I sleep because I am slain. They slew me because I slept.” *The Coward* has a voice, saying “I could not look on death, which being known/Men led me to him, blindfold and alone.” One of Kipling’s dead looks upon death with gratitude, telling the reader “Death favoured me from the first, well knowing I could not endure/o wait on him day by day.” For this man, death was preferable to life at the front.

We learn of the youth of the men at war. *R.A.F. (Aged Eighteen)*, “his milk-teeth still unshed…returned to play/Childlike, with childish things now put away.”

We are reminded that the dead came from throughout the British Empire. A Hindu Sepoy is lost in France. Kipling tells of *Two Canadian Memorials*, one of which reminds us that the dead died without knowing the outcome, merely “…trust[ing] that world we won for you to keep.” *A Native Water-Carrier* is among the dead, reminding us “The Gods are jealous – now, as then/Giving no quarter.” These epitaphs underscore the concept of the war as an event with a worldwide impact.
The dead for whom Kipling’s epitaphs were written are all ages and come from all walks of life. An *Ex-clerk*, freed from the drudgery of his pre-war post, finds “Strength of body, will, and mind,” perhaps one of the few such happy changes wrought by the war. *The Refined Man* is killed when he “…step[s] aside for [his] needs/Disdaining the common office.” *The Bridegroom* asks his wife, in the first stanza, not to think him false “If, from thy scarce-known breast/So little time removed/In other arms I rest.” In stanza two, we learn the man has not thrown his wife over for another woman, but for the war itself, which “Was constant at my side/Before I saw thy face.” In stanza three, we discover that the marriage was often set and delayed, but “At last is consummate/And cannot be unmade.” Stanza four finds the bridegroom acknowledging that his wife will almost surely forget him with time.

Some of Kipling’s dead issue indictments against those responsible for the carnage. The dead of *Batteries Out of Ammunition* assign blame for their deaths in a simple rhymed couplet: “If any mourn us in the workshop, say/We died because the shift kept holiday.” Although desperately short of ammunition at the front, the British government did not suspend the holiday system for fear of harming morale and possibly inciting strikes and riots. Men who were fighting and dying because they believed the stories of glory to be gained in war and trusted the men who told them the war would be over by Christmas became embittered, as noted in *Common Form*, a rhymed couplet which admonishes the reader “If any question why we died/Tell them, because our fathers lied.” The simplicity of the poetic form allows the focus to rest squarely on the accusation leveled by the speakers.

Kipling held politicians and industrialists responsible for the war. *A Dead Statesman* first endeavors to explain his actions by saying “I could not dig: I dared not rob:/Therefore I lied to please the mob.” After trying to place the blame squarely on the mob and their expectations, he
goes on to tell the reader “Now all my lies are proved untrue/And I must face the men I slew."

As tempting as it is to believe he might finally take responsibility for his own actions, readers
learn that is not the case when he goes on to ponder “What tale shall serve me here among/Mine
angry and defrauded young?” If anyone deserves the truth, surely it is the men who died
because of the lies. The Statesman never considers telling the dead the truth. Rather, he just
searches for whatever “tale” will best serve his purpose.

Nearly 100,000 men from Great Britain were classified as missing by the end of World
War I. Those who returned were changed in ways no one could have imagined. Rosenberg,
Sassoon, and Kipling gave the civilian populace three distinct views of the war. Rosenberg’s
readers encountered rats and observed the queer spectacle of a louse hunt, while listening to dead
men’s bones crunching under the wheels of wagons, ambulances, and gun carriages. Sassoon’s
readers learned, among other things, that a leg is a small price to pay for safety and war is not a
great and glorious pursuit. The voices of Kipling’s dead, save one, speak eloquently of the
hardships they faced and the sorrows they knew. The only one of Kipling’s dead to emerge
unscathed is the Statesman, who finally acknowledges his old lies, while contemplating which
new lie will best serve his purpose when confronted by the men his lies destroyed.

Tennyson and poets of his generation spoke of glory, honor, and patriotism. Rosenberg,
Sassoon, and Kipling stripped away those ideals and spoke of the nearly unrelenting misery
endured by the men at the front. They also reminded the public that the misery did not end when
the men came home or, in other cases, died. Never again would the civilian population be able to
claim ignorance of life at the front and the incredible price paid by British troops.

\[1\] The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit
Bibliography


Fig. 1 Isaac Rosenberg (Used by permission of The First World War Poetry Digital Archive)
Fig. 2 Rosenberg’s headstone at Arras (Used by permission of The First World War Poetry Digital Archive)
Fig. 3 Unidentified Casualty (Used by permission of The First World War Poetry Digital Archive)
Fig. 4 Siegfried Sassoon (Used by permission of The First World War Poetry Digital Archive)
Fig. 5 Craiglockhart Hospital (Used by permission of The First World War Poetry Digital Archive)
Fig. 6 Manuscript Copy, Stand-To: (Good Friday Morning) (Used by permission of The First World War Poetry Digital Archive)
"They"

The Bishop tells us, "When the boys come back,
They will not be the same for they'll have fought
In a just cause: they led the last attack.
On Field Christ: their comrades' blood he bought
New right to break an honourable race.
They beat challenged Death and faced him face to face.

"We're one of us the same," the boy replies.
"For George lost both his legs, and Bill's stony blind,
For Tim's feet are shot through the lungs and left to die;
And Burt's gone syphilitic; you'll not find
A chap who's scared that's hasn't fought some time."
And the Bishop said, "The ways of God are strange!"
Fig. 8 Rudyard Kipling (Used by permission of the British Masonic Archives)
Fig. 9 John "Jack" Kipling (Used by permission of the UK Daily Mail Archives)