**Prelude: The Troops -** Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967)

Dim, gradual thinning of the shapeless gloom

Shudders to drizzling daybreak that reveals

Disconsolate men who stamp their sodden boots

And turn dulled, sunken faces to the sky

Haggard and hopeless. They, who have beaten down

The stale despair of night, must now renew

Their desolation in the truce of dawn,

Murdering the livid hours that grope for peace.

Yet these, who cling to life with stubborn hands,

Can grin through storms of death and find a gap

In the clawed, cruel tangles of his defence.

They march from safety, and the bird-sung joy

Of grass-green thickets, to the land where all

Is ruin, and nothing blossoms but the sky

That hastens over them where they endure

Sad, smoking, flat horizons, reeking woods,

And foundered trench-lines volleying doom for doom.

O my brave brown companions, when your souls

Flock silently away, and the eyeless dead

Shame the wild beast of battle on the ridge,

Death will stand grieving in that field of war

Since your unvanquished hardihood is spent.

And through some mooned Valhalla there will pass

Battalions and battalions, scarred from hell;

The unreturning army that was youth;

The legions who have suffered and are dust.

**About the poet**

Siegfried Loraine Sassoon (8 September 1886 – 1 September 1967) was an English poet, writer, and soldier. Decorated for bravery on the Western Front, he became one of the leading poets of the First World War. His poetry both described the horrors of the trenches and satirised the patriotic pretensions of those who, in Sassoon's view, were responsible for a jingoism-fuelled war.

**First Hand Experience of War**

Motivated by patriotism, Sassoon joined the British Army just as the threat of a new European war was recognized, and was in service with the Sussex Yeomanry on 4 August 1914, the day the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland declared war on Germany. He broke his arm badly in a riding accident and was put out of action before even leaving England. Following the outbreak of the World War I, Sassoon was commissioned into the 3rd Battalion (Special Reserve), Royal Welch Fusiliers, as a second lieutenant on 29 May 1915. On 1 November his younger brother Hamo was killed in the Gallipoli Campaign, and in the same month Siegfried was sent to the 1st Battalion in France.

He soon became horrified by the realities of war, and the tone of his writing changed completely: where his early poems exhibit a Romantic, dilettantish sweetness, his war poetry moves to an increasingly discordant music, intended to convey the ugly truths of the trenches to an audience hitherto lulled by patriotic propaganda. Details such as rotting corpses, mangled limbs, filth, cowardice and suicide are all trademarks of his work at this time, and this philosophy of 'no truth unfitting' had a significant effect on the movement towards Modernist poetry.

Sassoon's periods of duty on the Western Front were marked by exceptionally brave actions, including the single-handed capture of a German trench in the Hindenburg Line. Armed with grenades, he scattered sixty German soldiers.

He went over with bombs in daylight, under covering fire from a couple of rifles, and scared away the occupants. A pointless feat, since instead of signalling for reinforcements, he sat down in the German trench and began reading a book of poems which he had brought with him. When he went back he did not even report. Colonel Stockwell, then in command, raged at him. The attack on Mametz Wood had been delayed for two hours because British patrols were still reported to be out. "British patrols" were Siegfried and his book of poems. "I'd have got you a DSO, if you'd only shown more sense," stormed Stockwell.

Sassoon's bravery was so inspiring that soldiers of his company said that they felt confident only when they were accompanied by him. He often went out on night-raids and bombing patrols and demonstrated ruthless efficiency as a company commander. Deepening depression at the horror and misery the soldiers were forced to endure produced in Sassoon a paradoxically manic courage, and he was nicknamed "Mad Jack" by his men for his near-suicidal exploits. On 27 July 1916 he was awarded the Military Cross; the citation read:

2nd Lt. Siegfried Lorraine [sic] Sassoon, 3rd (attd. 1st) Bn., R. W. Fus. For conspicuous gallantry during a raid on the enemy's trenches. He remained for 1½ hours under rifle and bomb fire collecting and bringing in our wounded. Owing to his courage and determination all the killed and wounded were brought in.

Robert Graves described Sassoon as engaging in suicidal feats of bravery. Sassoon was also later recommended for the Victoria Cross.

**Anti-War**

The ugliness of war had a profound influence on his poetic outlook. He was also influenced by fellow poet Robert Graves. The work of Graves, combined with his own first-hand experiences about the horrors of war, encouraged him to write gritty, realistic poetry, emphasising the tragedy and futility of war.

Siegfried Sassoon is best remembered for his angry and compassionate poems about World War I, which brought him public and critical acclaim. Avoiding the sentimentality and jingoism of many war poets, Sassoon wrote of the horror and brutality of trench warfare and contemptuously satirized generals, politicians, and churchmen for their incompetence and blind support of the war. He was also well known as a novelist and political commentator. In 1957 he was awarded the Queen’s Medal for Poetry.

Meetings with several prominent pacifists, including Bertrand Russell, had reinforced his growing disillusionment with the war and in June 1917 he wrote a letter that was published in the Times in which he said that the war was being deliberately and unnecessarily prolonged by the government. “I believe that this War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it,” he wrote in the letter. At the urging of Bertrand Russell, the letter was read in the House of Commons. As a decorated war hero and published poet, this caused public outrage. Sassoon expected to be court-martialed for his protest, but poet Robert Graves intervened on his behalf, arguing that Sassoon was suffering from shell-shock and needed medical treatment. In 1917, Sassoon was hospitalized.

Public reaction to Sassoon’s poetry was fierce. Some readers complained that the poet displayed little patriotism, while others found his shockingly realistic depiction of war to be too extreme. Even pacifist friends complained about the violence and graphic detail in his work. But the British public bought the books because, in his best poems, Sassoon captured the feeling of trench warfare and the weariness of British soldiers for a war that seemed never to end. “The dynamic quality of his war poems,” according to a critic for the Times Literary Supplement, “was due to the intensity of feeling which underlay their cynicism.” “In the history of British poetry,” McDowell wrote, “[Sassoon] will be remembered primarily for some one hundred poems … in which he protested the continuation of World War I.”

**Form/Structure**

Written in Blank Verse (lines of iambic pentameter but no rhyme scheme)