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Emily Erdlen

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“You have fixed my life- however short,”- Wilfred Owen’s Homosexuality in His Poetry and
Prose

Emily Erdlen

Elizabethtown College

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Famed World War One poet Wilfred Owen is perhaps best known for his poems that provide insight into the minds of men who suffered from PTSD, or “shell shock” caused by fighting in the Great War. He lived from 1893-1918, dying in battle at the age of twenty-five, just a week before the war ended (Ramazani and Stallworthy). Owen, along with being an incredible poet, was likely a gay man, but many critics have glossed over this probable aspect of his history for myriad reasons. While the sexuality of Wilfred Owen cannot be posthumously confirmed, the evidence pointing away from heterosexuality cannot be ignored. Several of his poems support this idea, namely “Greater Love,” a World War One poem with vivid homoerotic imagery. His sexuality also bleeds through many letters of his, most of them written to his probable lover Siegfried Sassoon. Owen died tragically young leaving critics with little writing and life experience to extrapolate from. However, his relationships and writings make it clear that his feelings toward his fellow soldiers surpassed camaraderie.

Wilfred Owen volunteered for service in 1915 (Campbell 826). His poems convey anti-war tone with a strong focus on the grotesque and horrible conditions the men faced. While these poems would likely make anyone feel less inclined to support the war, most of his poems were published postmortem (Eason 71-72). While they read as very anti-war, this deep feeling of grief shifts these poems further from pushing an agenda relating to the war and further toward simply noting the horrors he saw. This feeling of grief can connect to sexuality in that he mourned the war dead in a deep way as a result of their closeness to him. He knew them as people, not merely as men fighting the good fight. Many of his poems focus on the tragedies that men face both during and after fighting. His poem “Greater Love,” describes the beauty and virtue of dying in battle, with homoerotic undertones. In “Disabled,” he follows the experience

of a man who returned from war heavily wounded and how “the women’s eyes/ Passed from him to the strong men that were whole,” suggesting both pity toward the man and discontent toward women for viewing him differently (Owen, “Disabled,” lines 43-44). One of his most famous poems, “Dulce Et Decorum Est” describes, in detail, the dreams that haunt him from his time on the front lines. This paints a clear picture of what it was like for men, including himself, suffering from “shell shock”, or PTSD as it is known today.

After suffering from shell shock fighting the months-long Battle of the Somme, he was sent to the Craiglockhart Hydropathic Establishment, a war hospital in Edinburgh (Stallworthy 189) (Ramazani and Stallworthy 2034). It was here that he finally met Siegfried Sassoon, whose poetry Owen was already a fan of. In August of 1917, he wrote to his mother about Sassoon, saying that “if I had the choice of making friends with Tennyson or Sassoon I should go with Sassoon. That is why I have not yet dared to go up to him and parley in a casual way,” (Stallworthy 204). A few days later, Owen worked up the courage to meet him in his room, having him autograph his personal editions of Sassoon’s poetry (Stallworthy 204-205). This first meeting sparked a lifelong relationship for Owen. After making Sassoon’s acquaintance, Owen felt he finally had an event “worth” writing his cousin Leslie about. In the letter, he describes Sassoon as “very tall and stately” (Norton, August 22, 1917). The fact that his meeting Sassoon was the first letter-worthy event of his stay at Craiglockhart shows how important this was for Owen, and how enamored he was of Sassoon.

Siegfried Sassoon and Owen both had much of their correspondence destroyed, with Owen asking his mother to burn a sack full of his papers after his death (Norton). While the ones that remain are exclusively from Owen’s point of view, they provide strong insight to the nature of their relationship. Among the earliest of their letters is dated from a few months after they

met (Eason 75). This letter contains perhaps the strongest written evidence of a relationship between the two:

Know that since mid-September, when you still regarded me as a tiresome little knocker on your door, I held you as Keats + Christ + Elijah + my Colonel + my father-confessor + Amenophis IV in profile.

What's that mathematically?

In effect it is this: that I love you, dispassionately, so much, so very much, dear Fellow, that the blasting little smile you wear on reading this can't hurt me in the least.

If you consider what the above Names have severally done for me, you will know what you are doing. And you have fixed my Life – however short. You did not light me: I was always a mad comet; but you have fixed me. I spun round you a satellite for a month, but I shall swing out soon, a dark star in the orbit where you will blaze.

(Norton, November 5, 1917)

His mathematics essentially put Sassoon above every other figure in his life. Owen had a very deep admiration, bordering on obsession, for Keats, so calling Sassoon nothing more than greater than Keats puts him above one of the most important and formative figures in his life. Owen was greatly inspired by Keats through his life, even as a teenager, and “grew to worship him in almost a religious sense,” (Stallworthy 57). His recollection of religious figures demonstrates both Sassoon’s importance to him and possibly the dwindling of his religious beliefs, since he puts him above Christ. He grew up in a religious family and was a devout Christian himself until his late teenage years (Stallworthy 39, 60). While many people grow up and move further from their family’s traditional ideals, this could correlate to the discovery of his sexuality. As a

military man, he would have had a deep respect and loyalty for his Colonel. Amenophis IV was an Egyptian Pharaoh. This figure may have had personal significance to the men, but regardless, he was a powerful figure who is well remembered, fitting, since Owen looked up to him so (Lili). The word profile relates to looks, so it was likely also a compliment on his physical appearance. The phrase “you have fixed my Life- however short” is tragically prophetic, since he died only a year later, but the hope he had at this moment is very telling. He feels that Sassoon has drastically changed his life for the better, making him the most important figure to him. The term “fixed” is also used by Owen to mean being set in orbit of, as Owen is set in Sassoon’s orbit.

Unlike Owen, Sassoon’s sexuality is more known and accepted, partially due to the fact that his marriage later in his life failed as a result of his homosexuality (Ramazani and Stallworthy 2023). In 1916, David Cuthbert Thomas, a man Sassoon had a relationship with, died at war, and two of Sassoon’s poems were written in his memory (Hoare). One poem, titled “The Last Meeting,” expresses his affection quite clearly:

I called him, once; then listened: nothing moved:

Only my thumping heart beat out the time.

Whispering his name, I groped from room to room.

Quite empty was that house; it could not hold

His human ghost, remembered in the love

That strove in vain to be companioned still.

(Sassoon, "The Last Meeting," lines 58-63).

This poem clearly describes the loss of a lover. The earliest account of him recognizing his own sexuality occurred in 1911, when, in a letter to Edward Carpenter, he said that "the intense attraction [he] felt for [his] own sex was almost a subconscious thing and [his] antipathy for women a mystery," (Roberts). These accounts and accounts of other male companions of Sassoon's provide clear proof of his sexuality. Considering the fact of Sassoon's homosexuality, it is difficult to brush his possible relationship with Owen under the rug.

While Wilfred Owen's poetry clearly conveys his own feelings of grief and PTSD, it is also very telling in terms of sexuality. His poem "Greater Love" was titled "To any Beautiful Woman" in a drafted version (Stallworthy 230). The drafted title can be inferred to mean that there was no particular woman in question, and the poem itself supports that. The poem opens with the lines "Red lips are not so red/ As the stained stones kissed by the English dead, (Owen, "Greater Love" lines 1-2). These lines turn the typical passion and eroticism associated with the color red, especially describing lips, to a reference to dead male soldiers. He continues to reference feminine, romantic traits, turning them around to state how men who died in battle better fit that trait. While this can be read as merely emphasizing the importance and horror of this deadly war, the comparison to a woman gives this poem clear homoerotic undertones. These women pale in comparison to the men he mentions, both showing his feelings for them as well as implying that the women do not deserve the men. They cannot understand the experiences and horrors of war, but he does. Later in the poem, he states that "Your dear voice is not dear,/ Gentle, and evening clear,/ As theirs whom none now hear," (Owen, "Greater Love," lines 15-17). Calling the voices of these soldiers "dear" is just one example of overtly fond language being used to describe attributes of the men. The change in title from "To any Beautiful

Woman” to “Greater Love” shifts the emphasis from the unidentified woman to the men, showing what is most important to him. The final stanza of the poem is perhaps the most telling in terms of undertone, reading:

Heart, you were never hot
 Nor large, not full like hearts made great with shot;
 And though your hand be pale,
 Paler are all which trail
 Your cross through flame and hail:
 Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not.

(Wilfred Owen, “Greater Love”, lines 21-26)

While the “you” throughout this poem is the woman, the final line has strong ties to homosexuality, with the inability to touch those whom you desire. Yes, they cannot be touched by anyone because they are dead, but they cannot be touched by Owen because it was both taboo and illegal, regardless of their death.

Stallworthy’s groundbreaking 1974 biography on Owen hardly mentions sexuality or relationships at all, but in 2013, he finally writes that “It is clear from Owen’s writings that he shared [Robert Ross and Siegfried Sassoon’s] sexual orientation; but it is debatable whether he ever entered into a physical relationship that, if detected, could have resulted in a prison sentence like that imposed on Oscar Wilde, a relationship that would have horrified his mother, whose good opinion he valued above all others. There is no evidence that he did,” (Stallworthy, “On Wilfred Owen”). A physical relationship can never truly be proven, since there is no record of

one and he was never charged, but Stallworthy agrees that his sexuality does not need to be backed up with concrete proof of a physical relationship.

Fittingly, Owen died similarly to Keats, his idol, by dying young. He voluntarily returned to the front, even though he had a high chance of not being sent back (Campbell 826). He clearly felt a great connection to the war effort, since he chose to return even after everything he experienced. It is clear that Sassoon did not support Owen's wish to return to the front, as seen in one of the final letters still in existence that Owen wrote to Sassoon:

With great & painful firmness I have not said you goodbye from England. If you had said in the heart or brain you might have stabbed me, but you said only in the leg [Sassoon annotates this letter: "I had told him I would stab him in the leg if he tried to return to the Front."]; so I was afraid.

(Norton, September 1, 1918)

Sassoon was just in his fears, given that Owen was killed just two months after this letter was sent, and just one week before the war ended.

There are many reasons why Owen's sexual identity is shrouded in mystery, multiple relating to his young death. Since he died quite young, scholars do not have as much information on his life as they would have had he lived a long life. Also, Wilfred Owen has often been seen as a "Saintly" figure (Najarian 22). His Anglican upbringing and young, tragic, death contribute to this idea. Another major reason why there is so much mystery around the life of Wilfred Owen stems from the fact that his brother, Harold, got rid of many of Wilfred's papers, destroying any that could be distasteful or not well received, another reason why he has a saintly persona (Hibberd). Harold Owen also completely denied his brother's homosexuality

until his death in 1971 (Hibberd). It is due to these factors that conversation about his sexuality is a somewhat new discussion. Multiple factors have led to mystery surrounding Wilfred Owen's sexuality, but through critical examination of his poetry and prose, it is clear that he felt attracted to men. Though homosexuality cannot be proven with absolute certainty, the clear evidence in his poems and letters makes a case strong enough to challenge claims of heterosexuality.

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