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BIBLICAL ALLEGORY AND THE CRITICISM OF BRITAIN'S WWI POLITICIANS AND ELDERLY CIVILIANS IN SIEGFRIED SASSOON'S 'ANCIENT HISTORY'

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Abstract

This article examines Siegfried Sassoon's poem "Ancient History" by approaching it as an allegorical anti-war poem loosely based on the story of Cain and Abel from the Old Testament. The article explores the ironical and critical potential of this poem, analyzing the way in which it presents the grief felt by a father who has lost both of his sons. Adam, the grieving father, is a metaphor for WWI politicians and elderly civilians, while the dead Cain and Abel are metaphors for WWI young soldiers. The poem is considered in the context of Sassoon's declaration against the war of July 1917, and this, anti-war approach to this poem makes it somewhat original as, in scholarship, "Ancient History" has so far mainly been seen as an allegory for Sassoon's internal struggle between his soldierly and his poetic spirit. Among other things, this article also stresses that "Ancient History" defied the atmosphere of enthusiasm for the war, prevalent in Britain at the time, by means of the same tool that was used by the propagandists to nourish it – namely, religion.

Key words

Siegfried Sassoon; biblical allegory; criticism; irony; pity of war; political nihilism

Introduction

When the First World War broke out in the summer of 1914, religion, which had lost much of its power by the end of the 19th century, seemed to have received a chance to rise once again and overshadow rationalism (Barbeau 2016: 25–27; Bontrager 2002: 775), for, as it is well known, it is in times of war and serious threats that religious or apocalyptic ideas gain special popularity, while rational thinking gives way to instincts and actions driven by the primeval urge to survive in the face of imminent disaster. When Britain found its empire threatened by Germany's rising militarism, it began to use Christian religion for its propagandist campaigns aimed at ensuring sufficient numbers of able-bodied youngsters on the front, and at creating a mood of unanimous support for Britain's war

effort among the British civilians of all ages (Karsten 2012: 9–23). The British government's propagandists, made up of political leaders, heads of various churches (Anglican, Presbyterian, Catholic, etc.), and pro-war writers (especially poets), went to great lengths to persuade their citizens and soldiers that Britain's WWI war effort was a godly one because it was purportedly directed against a Satanic Germany, and because it was intended to, in an apocalyptic, Armageddon-like fashion, defeat evil once and for all, and ensure a long, peacefully prosperous future afterwards (Karsten 2012: 18–23).

These propagandist efforts were more successful among the civilian, elderly strata of Britain's population, whereas, among the soldiers, it was more often possible to hear voices of dissent, which is understandable, given the appalling horrors that Britain's (and not only Britain's) soldiers were experiencing on the Western Front of history's first mechanized, and up to that point, deadliest war (Hart-Davis 1983: 174–176). Soldier-poets like Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967), who had personally witnessed the immeasurable suffering of young British men in the muddy and bloody trenches of Flanders and northern France, decided to use their literary talents to tell a different story to their civilian compatriots at home (with politicians included), who were themselves physically safe and kept urging their youth to go across the English Channel and do their "quite normal" duty.¹ In Sassoon's view (and not only his), there was nothing normal in the fact that Britain's politicians and elderly civilians were flamboyantly showing off their patriotism in the safety of their homeland, while their youth were perishing in unprecedented numbers and in ways more awful and more humiliating than ever before in the history of warfare, for goals that were obscurely formulated and seemed to shift toward profiteerism for British political leadership as the war went on.

As early as January 1917, the Central Powers, spearheaded by Germany, tried to find a way to end the Great War under terms that would not mean a decisive victory for any of the two belligerent alliances, but that would, importantly, put an end to the horrendous carnage of European youth that was going on at the time all over the world, and especially in Europe (Brunauer 1932). These, and all subsequent attempts later in 1917 by the Central Powers to end the war by means of diplomacy were dismissed by the Allies, or more precisely, by the negotiators of the Allies, chief among whom were the British politicians, because they believed that militarist Germany had to be completely and decisively crushed so that a truly safe world order would emerge from the ashes of the Great War (Brunauer 1932; Doenecke 2022). Interwoven with these geopolitical ambitions were certainly the less noble and much more covert, profit-seeking, imperialist aspirations of Britain's political leadership, in the sense of their setting their eyes on Germany's overseas colonial empire, just as, prior to the war, Germany's political leadership had set theirs on Britain's (and not only Britain's) colonial possessions.² Placing political goals above humanist standards, or in other words, being ready to continually sacrifice one's country's youth for the accomplishment of goals objectively more selfish than messianic, is what lay at the core of the outrage felt by many young free-thinking, honest witnesses of World War One's bloody affair, such as Siegfried Sassoon.

This article will aim to examine one anti-war poem by Siegfried Sassoon – namely, “Ancient History” – as only one of many works testifying to this writer’s disappointment with the war and with the way in which his country’s political leadership waged it, until a knockout outcome, over the bodies of myriads of his young countrymen. Special attention, throughout this text, will be paid to how Sassoon made use of religious ideas to attack the perceived callousness of Britain’s politicians and elderly civilians to the enormous suffering of British youth in the trenches, because this kind of approach has a particularly good power to show how religious sentiments can easily be manipulated to serve ungodly purposes. Godly purposes, as it goes without saying, are only those that support peace or denounce the nastiness of war, and such a rectifying task (in the sense of rectifying a wrong use of religion) is exactly the one that Sassoon takes on himself in “Ancient History”, addressing his audiences through biblical symbols, which WWI propagandists abundantly used for the opposite, non-pacifist cause. Yet, before the commencement of the analysis of Sassoon’s poem, it will be necessary to pay closer attention to the personality and oeuvre of Siegfried Sassoon, his relationship with other soldier-poets, and the research done so far into his poetic oeuvre, and especially into the use of biblical narratives in his poetry and the poetry of some other anti-war poets, because this discussion will ultimately reveal how original and significant the present work is for Sassoon-related and WWI-poetry-related scholarship.

Siegfried Sassoon, His War Poetry, and the Biblical Elements Therein

Siegfried Sassoon was an Englishman of Jewish descent, for whom his participation in the First World War as a fighter turned out to be a formative experience, one that “turned him from a versifier into a poet” (Hart-Davis 1983: 9). During his first two stays on the Western Front (November 24, 1915–August 2, 1916; March 11, 1917–April 16, 1917), he became so intensely disillusioned with the war, its atrocity, and the callousness of Britain’s political leaders and high officers to the terrible suffering and annihilation of British male youth in the trenches that, in June 1917, he publicly stated his opposition to his country’s war effort, protesting against a deliberate prolongation of the war “by those who have the power to end it” (Fussell 1975: 91; Hart-Davis 1983: 13–15, 174–176). This act might have had him court-martialled and might have even cost him his life, but, luckily for Sassoon, his friend and fellow soldier-poet Robert Graves interfered on his behalf and helped him get off lightly, with only a psychiatric diagnosis and transfer to the Craiglockhart Hospital in Scotland, where he would meet and befriend Wilfred Owen (1893–1918). From this friendship, it would be reasonable to say that, in terms of poetic career, Owen benefitted more than Sassoon, because it was due to Sassoon’s helpful advice, to a nonnegligible degree, that Owen learned how to refine his style and become a first-rate poet, actually the greatest World War I poet, as it is now generally held by scholars and literary critics (Karsten 2012: 27–28; Walter 1997: xxii). Yet, although Owen is today viewed as slightly above Sassoon and some other soldier-poets, such as Robert Graves, Ivor Gurney, David

Jones, and Isaac Rosenberg in terms of poetic quality, according to some, such as Hart-Davis (1983: xi), it was Sassoon who, “[m]ore than anyone, even more than Owen”, created the image, so prevalent in Britain to this day, of the First World War as a futile and immeasurably tragic enterprise boiling down to an unfortunate collaboration between “a callous, out-of-touch High Command” and sacrificed “innocents” in an “apparently unceasing hell of the Western Front.” It is this image that forms the core of all of Sassoon’s war, that is, anti-war poems – as in those pieces that tell of the fighting in the trenches in a literal way, so in the ones that tell of it through allegory.

Sassoon’s war poetry, as well as Owen’s, has been rather well researched in the existing scholarship, and a similar thing may be said of, specifically, those poems of these two writers that contained religious, biblical elements. A special subcategory within the biblically inspired poetry of Owen and Sassoon is the poetry that closely draws on Old Testament narratives, and a particularly good scholarly source on it is, perhaps, Brian Karsten’s MA thesis entitled “The Church of Craiglockhart: Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon’s Critique and Use of Religion in their World War I Poetry”. In this work, Karsten studied and compared, among other works, two poems relying on the Old Testament, allegorically using Old Testament characters and events to figuratively convey a message that would have meaning for contemporary, WWI audiences. The referred to poems that Karsten studied are “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young” by Wilfred Owen and “Devotion to Duty” by Siegfried Sassoon, the former being based on the story of God’s testing of Abraham (Genesis 22), but with a deliberately altered ending, and the latter drawing on the story of David and Uriah (2 Samuel 11), without any changes in the original narrative (Karsten 2012: 39–45). Both of these poems, as Karsten concludes, criticize the readiness of the rulers or patriarchs (that is, politicians, translated into the WWI context) to quite easily and cold-bloodedly sacrifice their subjects or descendants (young soldiers in the context of WWI) for their own selfish causes (Karsten 2012: 39–45). Karsten’s examination of both of these poems is good and insightful, particularly his analysis of “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young”, but what he clearly omits in his work is to mention Sassoon’s “Ancient History”, a poem that also relies on an Old Testament story, and in a metaphorical, that is, allegorical way.

Significantly, “Ancient History” has, so far, not received plenty of attention from scholars, and the attention it has received has mainly been concentrated on interpreting this interesting text as an allegory for Sassoon’s own mental struggle between his aggressive, soldierly nature,³ personified or symbolized in the poem by Cain, and his pacifist, artistic (poetic) nature, personified by Abel (Egremont 2005: 217; Moorcroft Wilson 1999: 508–509). The forthcoming analysis will try to interpret “Ancient History” as an allegory for the war and for Sassoon’s disgust with what he saw as a great perversity of the Great War – namely, the fact that the middle-aged and elderly politicians in Britain kept insisting on their pro-war stance and on their jingoistic rhetoric, not hesitating even to resort to religious narratives in their propagandist efforts, despite the fact that, for over four long years, their own youth was going through a hell on earth, the most horrifying war in history up to that point, whose weapons of mass destruction, used for the first

time ever in that conflict, were making many sensitive and mindful witnesses of this bloody affair question the purpose and justifiability of the war effort, no matter how noble it may have at first seemed to some people, in the sense of being aimed at securing the continued prevalence of Anglo-Saxon liberalism over German militarism in Europe and in the world.⁴ The following analysis will enrich the existing scholarship on the use of biblical stories and figures in WWI poetry, and, more specifically, in the works of those poets who were against the war (i.e., against the idea that it had a higher purpose that justified the enormous physical and mental destruction of millions of European youngsters) by adding an original interpretation of one more poem that can be understood as a biblical allegory of the Great War's wastefulness. It will ultimately strengthen the thesis that anti-war poets skillfully used biblical ideas to blunt the edge of perhaps the mightiest blade wielded by profit-seeking politicians and spiritual leaders⁵ in the pursuit of their propagandist goals, which is, of course, religion as the belief system that, with its unavoidable eschatological, purpose-giving dimension, had and still has the power to strike the most intimate chords in the souls of human beings.

“Ancient History”

“Ancient History” is a poem that Sassoon wrote shortly after his return to Europe from Palestine, where he had spent “a little over a month in the spring of 1918” (Martyris 2014: para. 1) before going back to the Western Front for one last, third time, whence he would return to England in July 1918 with a curable head wound (Martyris 2014: para. 1; Hart-Davis 1983: 13–15). According to Moorcroft Wilson (1999: 581), the poem was published on 28 September 1918 in *The Nation*, but only after being slightly modified in accordance with friendly tips given by Sassoon's friend and fellow soldier-poet Robert Graves, who particularly liked this piece. It may have been inspired precisely by Sassoon's stay in Palestine (Egremont 2005: 217), the land of his Jewish forefathers who wrote the Old Testament, including the story of Cain and Abel which served as a basis for his highly original take on this world-famous biblical story.

As far as the form of this poem is concerned, it consists of two stanzas (8 plus 6 lines), has the rhyme scheme ABBAACAC DEDEFF, and is in a meter that resembles the iambic pentameter. It formally resembles a sonnet, but its content is not one of love, as sonnets were mostly⁶ written back in the Italian and English Renaissance, in the early days of this poetic form (Encyclopaedia Britannica Editors 2024: paras. 1–3), but of somber thoughts and profound reflection. In fact, “Ancient History” is an extended metaphor, an allegory of the famous fratricidal story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4) that is meant to be read as an ironical reference to the context of the First World War or, more precisely, as a reference to the perversity that was hinted at in the previous section. The perversity in question is, of course, the impropriety of the fact that the Great War's senior political leadership heartlessly sacrificed the lives of their young compatriots for the accomplishment of, primarily, their own personal objectives (e.g., enlarging the empire and increasing personal wealth and power). The entire poem can

be seen as a reflection of Sassoon's statement against the war, where he courageously voiced his protest against the fact that the Great War, which was initially a "a war of defen[s]e and liberation", had, in the meantime, and without any sincere admission of this change to the soldiers fighting in the hell of the Western Front, "become a war of aggression and conquest" (Hart-Davis 1983: 174–175), and also against the idea that Britain's obscure and insincerely changing war goals were, from a moral point of view, worth the suffering of British combatants on the frontline.

"Ancient History", whose title implies the very oldest events in the biblical, not Darwinian, history of mankind, begins with the description of Adam, the first man on earth, the first sinner, and the father of mankind, who is depicted as "a brown old vulture in the rain", shivering under "wind-whipped olive-trees", and "huddling sharp chin on scarred and craggy knees" (20). From these first three lines it can be inferred that the first man does not look very impressive, for he is obviously shown as shivering with cold (winds are evidently sweeping through his native Levantine land, dotted by olives) and as being skinny and troubled by his hard farming lifestyle arising from his treachery to the Lord (his chin is sharp and his knees are scarred and scraggy). However, the reason for Adam's unimpressive appearance is not to be explained by either his hard-working lifestyle or the harsh weather afflicting his Middle Eastern homeland, but rather by the misfortunate fate that has befallen both of his sons. In a series of the following eleven lines, divided into two stanzas after the fifth verse (the eighth, if one also counts in the first three lines not quoted here in their entirety), the poet presents to the reader Adam's melancholic internal monologue which explains that the reason behind his dissatisfaction is the death of especially Cain, but also Abel:

He moaned and mumbled to his darkening brain;
'He was the grandest of them all – was Cain!
'A lion laired in the hills, that none could tire;
'Swift as a stag; a stallion of the plain,
'Hungry and fierce with deeds of huge desire.'

Grimly he thought of Abel, soft and fair –
A lover with disaster in his face,
And scarlet blossom twisted in bright hair.
'Afraid to fight; was murder more disgrace?...
'God always hated Cain'... He bowed his head –
The gaunt wild man whose lovely sons were dead (20).

As one can see from his soliloquy, Adam, who clearly symbolizes England's WWI political leadership, laments primarily over the death of his older son Cain, whom he describes as "the grandest [...]", an indefatigable "lion laired in the hills", a "stallion" "swift as a stag", and as someone who is "hungry and fierce with deeds of huge desire." Given that Cain is described as physically superior, as matchless in stamina, speed, courage, ambition, adventurousness, and as willing to kill, it can be argued that he stands for all those physically well-prepared

British youngsters who had a natural affinity with war and therefore joined their country's fight against the Germans of their own will and in high spirits, only to become terribly disappointed in the end by the sheer horror that was part and parcel of history's first mechanized war in the trenches of Belgium and northern France.

As he muses over the misfortune that has happened to him, Adam contrasts Cain to his less dear son Abel, whom he describes as a "soft and fair" young man wearing a "scarlet blossom [...] in his bright hair" and as "a lover with disaster in his face" who is "afraid to fight." Abel can be seen as a metaphor for all those physically fragile, peace-loving youngsters in Britain who never wanted to go to war but were conscripted against their will and sent into the slaughter-house that was the Great War's Western Front.⁷

It is interesting to note that Adam, "the gaunt wild man", even though he has lost both of his sons in the war, tries to justify his support for the war by relieving himself of the responsibility for his sons' deaths and blaming these on God. In other words, he asks himself why being murderous would be regarded as any less embarrassing (i.e., any less moral) than abhorring combat and seeking peace, only to end up saying that it is all God's fault because the Lord, unlike himself, favored Abel and Abel's love of peace, instead of Cain and Cain's love of war. Even after he has lost his both sons, which has turned him emaciated with loneliness, sorrow, and lack of care, the old man seeks justification for his warmongering propagandist efforts and his warlike worldview, and refuses to reconcile himself to God, who would obviously not help Cain achieve swift victory⁸ because he wanted something altogether different from what Adam did – avoiding war and pursuing compromise instead of first entering, and then prolonging, a devastating conflict that would shroud the whole of Great Britain in death and grief. In Sassoon's "Ancient History", as it is noticeable, God is described as being against war but also as someone who does not have the power to stop the politicians (symbolized by Adam) from commencing it and turning it into a very long, drawn-out affair with millions of innocent casualties.

However, although Adam grieves for Cain's death more than he does for Abel's, this is not to say that his younger son's demise does not sadden him at all. Although he defends his love of war and prefers his war-loving son to the peace-loving one, the way we see the old man at the end of the poem is as "the gaunt wild man whose lovely sons were dead." The last line of "Ancient History," with its emphasis on the man's gauntness and the fact that his sons (not just one son) are dead, allows one to conclude, by connecting these two bits, that, after his elder son's death, Adam became even further embittered by the death of his younger son because he was eventually left with nothing, with neither of his sons. His bloodline ended due to his insistence on war and that is why he is now both gaunt and wild, mad with sorrow, discontent, and possibly also self-blame deep down in his soul despite the fact that his soliloquy, on the surface, shows otherwise, in the direction of him laying all the blame on God and none on himself.

Sassoon's Adam is an anti-hero whose defiance of God leads him to losing the affection of the heavens and becoming a childless parent. In this sense, "Ancient History" is a powerful subversive work of literary art because it points to the

impropriety of a social order based on the idea that offspring should be sacrificed for the well-being of parents. With its criticism of a social system that defies both biblical and biological laws⁹ in the sense of prioritizing the welfare and survival of its elders rather than the survival of its youth, the poem subtly tells the reader that a different, more just social system must replace the old one within the Western civilization if social life is to have any meaning in the future. It was clear to Sassoon that “the destruction of Kaiserism and Prussianism,” as the goals of Britain’s war effort right from its outset in August 1914 to its end in November 1918, were nothing but “empty words,” a goal that could by no means justify “the destruction of youth” that was taking place in the fields of Belgium and northern France (Hart-Davis 1983: 175), but, moreover, a judicious reader could perhaps notice in Sassoon’s poem a vague message that, if the Great War is, for all its glaringly obvious futility, to achieve anything in the end, if all those wasted lives are to ultimately serve any purpose, then the only course for humanity after the end of this bloodshed must be one of thorough social reforms in the direction of lesser bellicosity, greater equality among humans, and a greater shouldering of personal responsibility for all those who have huge ambitions and would attain them, not by themselves, but by sacrificing others.¹⁰ This subversive potential of “Ancient History” seems to correspond well to Alan Pratt’s (n.d.: para. 5) understanding of political nihilism, a notion that this American scholar defines as “associated with the belief that the destruction of all existing political, social, and religious order is a prerequisite for any future improvement.”

When it comes to having a closer look at “Ancient History’s” relationship with the biblical story of Cain and Abel, one cannot fail to notice that the poem’s narrative differs from that of the Old Testament on which it is based in that Sassoon does not have just Abel killed, as is the case in the biblical story, but both Abel and Cain, while his Adam assumes the role of the biblical Cain – that of an accursed and aimless wanderer left to grieve and wonder why things had to happen as nastily as they did. Another difference between Sassoon’s poem and the biblical story is that the latter has Cain murder Abel, whereas in the former there is no fratricide at all, but filicide, for it is the father, Adam, who indirectly kills his both sons by mindlessly and heartlessly sending them to certain death. Thus, the poet consciously and very skillfully changes the described sin in the Old Testament story from fratricidal murder, or first murder in mankind, into a filicidal murder transgressed by a father, in this way conveying a message that would suit well the situation from the First World War as he saw it. Emphasis is laid, not simply on the sin of murder as originally (and didactically) intended by the ancient author of this biblical story, but on the kind of indirect murder that was being massively perpetrated by political leaders and pro-war propagandists in all the countries fighting in the Great War. What Sassoon teaches his contemporary readers is that the greatest sin is not killing a fellow human being, but rather sending your own youth to kill or be killed by other people’s youth so that you would reap a financial and political harvest for yourself from the unfortunate affair, and this ultimately may be understood as a reflection of the belief, held by Sassoon and other like-minded critics of the war, that the real enemies of the soldiers suffering in the trenches, regardless of their nationality, were not the combatants on the other side

of No Man's Land, but rather their own respective national politicians.

Somewhat unusually for him (for he rarely ever empathizes with the villainous jingoists), Sassoon devotes considerable attention to the psychological profile of the villain. In "Ancient History" one can get an implied glimpse of a mental conflict in the mind of a man who loves war and his older war-loving son, whereas he only realizes that he also loves his younger peace-loving son after he has lost him as well and has ended up being alone and sonless. In terms of the mental hardship endured by Sassoon's villainous protagonist, it is interesting to note that Adam may be likened to Peter Jackson's Tolkien-based Denethor who, just like Sassoon's anti-hero, learns the worth of a less loved son only after that son is lost, or at least appears to be so (what is referred to here is the fact that, in the *Return of the King* film, Denethor's younger son Faramir is not really dead but only wounded at the moment when Denethor goes mad and sinks into incurable despair because of what he wrongly perceives as the end of his bloodline) (Jackson 2003: 02:36:39–02:38:45).

Speaking of the relationship between Sassoon's "Ancient History" and the *Lord of the Rings* movie franchise, it is also noteworthy to compare the pitiful condition of Theoden, king of Rohan, from the second part of the franchise (*The Two Towers*), to that of Sassoon's Adam as they both grieve over the passing of their sons (Theoden grieves for the death of his only son Theodred) (see Jackson 2002: 01:25:45–01:27:00). This comparison reveals an ironical dimension in Sassoon's poem because, unlike Theoden, who is not guilty of his son's death and is portrayed respectfully in his hour of grief, Adam is by all means responsible for the doom of his sons and is mocked because of his refusal to accept his guilt. However, irony in "Ancient History" is slightly attenuated because Adam, for all his verbal persistence in pushing blame away from himself, noticeably feels it, as evident from his wild sorrow and his gauntness.

When it comes to the grief of Sassoon's Adam over the death of his both sons, it is also good to note that Cain, the able-bodied and warlike son, fares no better than Abel, the weak and unaggressive one. They both end up dead and this, as one might argue, is to be understood as Sassoon's skillful allusion to the fact that physical capabilities and willingness to charge did not mean much in the mechanized carnage of the First World War. On the battlefields of Flanders, the Marne and the Somme, the first of their kind in history, the bravest were the first to fall and being a good racer was hardly of any use in infantry charges against the enemy's entrenched machine-gunners and artillerymen who could virtually kill thousands in a single day. In this mindless annihilation of Europe's youth, all soldiers, whether muscular or feeble, were quite the same, they were all nothing but cannon fodder, for once they set foot on the plain fields to attack the enemy trenches, none could escape the ultra-fast bullets and staggeringly powerful shell explosions. Sassoon's depiction of the equal end of two different types of men – the able-bodied warrior and the physically weak pacifist – is, therefore, a clever reference to the massive indiscriminate carnage that history's first mechanized war introduced into human history in the summer of 1914.

"Ancient History" is a grim and powerful reminder of how war may easily deceive its makers and supporters and bring them an outcome they have never

expected or hoped for. With regard to Sassoon's metaphorical Adam, one cannot help but recall Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), certainly one of the most renowned literary figures in Britain at the time of the First World War, who in 1915, after the death of his son John in combat, felt how his initial staunch support for the war and for the British cause in it was undermined by skepticism and self-blame. Kipling once wrote, apropos of his son's death: "If any question why we died, / Tell them because our fathers lied" (Kipling 1919/2024: vv. 1–2). Adam, as it could be argued, stands for the fathers Kipling speaks of – first and foremost, the "fathers" of the nation, or the state leadership, and secondly, the biological fathers who, just like their politicians, unwisely talked their male children into taking up arms against Germany only to eventually realize that their sons, who would never return alive from across the English Channel, were not going to a victorious knightly adventure but to almost certain death.¹¹

Finally, it is useful to place this analysis into the context of Karsten's examination of Owen's and Sassoon's biblically inspired poetry which, as was already mentioned, left out "Ancient History," but which reached some valuable conclusions about the similarities and differences between the oeuvres of these two friends and comrades-in-arms. Sassoon's "Ancient History," as it may be said, is very similar to Owen's famous poem "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young," even more than to his own poem "Devotion to Duty," where the allegorical adaptation of the biblical story does not change at all the original biblical story of David's sacrifice of Uriah for the sake of winning the latter's wife Batsheba for himself (Karsten 2012: 43). In "Ancient History," as already noted, the original biblical narrative is altered, just as in "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young," where Abraham (the metaphor for WWI politicians) is shown as sacrificing his first-born son Isaac (the metaphor for WWI soldiers) despite this sacrificial ritual being interrupted by God's command to leave Isaac alive and sacrifice "the Ram of Pride" instead (the Ram of Pride being the metaphor for the politicians' pride) (85). In both poems the fathers (Abraham and Adam) are shown as perpetrators, the sons (Isaac, Abel, and Cain) as victims (though Cain's victimhood is arguably lesser than Abel's because of his love of fighting), and God as a faraway superior intelligence that desires peace but does not use force to make the bellicose fathers change their course of action, leaving them freedom of choice, just as in the Garden of Eden the Bible's God left Adam and Eve to freely decide whether they will follow their heavenly father's command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or be disobedient. Also in both poems, the fathers are mocked by remaining childless due to their decisions, instead of being rewarded with a numerous offspring as Abraham was rewarded in the original story of Abraham's testing; yet, an important difference between the two fathers from the world of poetry is that Sassoon's Adam is shown as possibly blaming himself for the death of his sons, whereas the reader does not get any glimpse into the mind of Owen's Abraham following his slaying of his son, and consequently, of "half the seed of Europe, one by one" (the "seed of Europe" metaphorically referring to the European youth that perished on the battlefields of World War One) (85). This is a very interesting detail because it diverges from Karsten's, generally correct, conclusion that Owen's poetry focused on "the pity

of war" (57), that is, on expressing compassion for the young soldiers horrifyingly suffering in the trenches, while Sassoon's works tended more to satirize the politicians and priesthood as selfish and profit-seeking wrongdoers, with less emphasis on the pitiful suffering of the soldiers (Karsten 2012: 64–73). As noticeable, in "Ancient History" Sassoon presents his father-politician figure as someone who implicitly mourns because of his own bad decision, and hence as someone that the reader can pity, while Owen does not seem to show any compassion for his own father-politician figure in "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young." Although a comparative look at just two poems by Owen and Sassoon cannot overturn the conclusion reached by Karsten, which, as was mentioned, is correct in a general sense, that is, in the sense of comparing the entire poetic opuses of Owen and Sassoon, it is still an interesting perspective on the works of these two poets, and particularly interesting is "Ancient History" when viewed on its own, because it reveals its maker as a man who was, after all, capable of showing at least a trifle of compassion for at least those of his country's political leaders or his government's intelligentsia who were not quite entirely indifferent to, if not the suffering of the youth in the trenches, then at least the repercussions for themselves of sacrificing their own descendants who were supposed to carry on the genes and spirit of the family into the future. Such a perspective was, presumably, a feat for Sassoon, just as it would have presumably been for the repentant warmongers, because it is neither easy for a firsthand witness of the politicians' callousness to the soldiers' suffering to feel any compassion for the politicians, nor is it easy for the politicians or close associates of the government to humble themselves into (at least implicitly, if not openly) admitting to having been wrong.

Ultimately, this poem presents a different, more ambiguous picture of Sassoon, though such a representation is by no means to be taken as a rule, but rather as an exception to the rule of seeing Sassoon mainly as a sarcastic satirizer of England's villainous politicians, and as a poet who was less prepared than Owen to engage in pity-arousing descriptions of human suffering. It is, perhaps, a minor exception, but a special one, because it does not include an expression of pity for the soldiers (as was always the case in Owen's poetry), but for a somewhat repentant father or political leader. As such, it is certainly deserving of attention, regardless of being the only case of the poet's empathy for repentant villains, because it is only by taking into consideration all the sentiments that passed through the head of a writer and were put on paper at any time during their career that a full understanding of their mind and personality can be reached as the final objective of the scholarly pursuits dedicated to that author. As it turns out, "Ancient History" strengthens the general pacifist, anti-war stance of all the soldier-poets who criticized the Great War, and does so in a very interesting, original manner – namely, by presenting, with a mixture of mockery and pity, the silent repentance of those, probably not too numerous, decision-makers who happened to realize, over the course of the war, first, that one's children are more important than any political objectives, no matter how utopian these may sound, and, second, that the First World War was actually no different from any other earlier war in terms of its utopia-making potential, and that the death of their heirs was not about to solve any global issues of modern mankind, because

imperialism would endure and wars would certainly be waged again in the future, with the rich being in command and safe both during and after any armed hostilities, and the poor being used as cannon fodder for the realization of rich men's war goals, just as it was the case in the 1914–1918 global conflict.

Conclusion

Following an analysis of Siegfried Sassoon's "Ancient History," a poem that has received little attention so far in literary scholarship, it was concluded that this text is an allegory using the Old Testament story of Cain and Abel to ironically criticize Britain's political leadership in the First World War. The poem changes the original story by making Adam, not Cain, the villain, and both Cain and Abel victims of their father's excessive pride and love of war and victory. It is one of many of Sassoon's poems with which he opposed the jingoistic atmosphere in Britain, among both the profit-seeking politicians (who had turned England's war effort from a defensive into an offensive one over the course of the war) and the common civilians (who were either unaware or unwilling to note the huge suffering of their youth in the trenches), and with which he tried to persuade the British public to seek to end the war through negotiations instead of continuing to insist on carnage until knocking out Germany. Interestingly, "Ancient History" makes use of biblical ideas to counter the pro-war propaganda in Britain as largely based exactly on religious, biblical ideas, given that both the secular and sacral leaders of the nation tended to present England's war effort in the Great War as a God-pleasing crusade against Satan's armies, as an apocalyptic mission intended to put an end to evil on earth. As a man who had an honest and objective outlook on the war and what was happening in it, one that was based on firsthand experience of it, Sassoon put his literary talent to the service of defying this false rhetoric and to opening the eyes of the public because, as one might argue and as indicated by Sassoon's post-war political activism, a better world can be built only if the truth is accepted and faced such as it is without any beautifying modifications on the part of war profiteers, who see wars as opportunities for personal gain. As the truth of the First World War was very ugly, because it had left myriads of families destroyed by the loss of their youth and because it had failed to end war as such, Sassoon, along with some other like-minded soldier-poets, emerges as a true enlightener because of his honest depiction of war, and "Ancient History" is part of that story of him trying to make the world a better place. A better world, as one might assume from Sassoon's work, can be built if Christian religion ceases to be pervertedly used for the achievement of selfish worldly gains, and if Christ's words of peace are restored to their real meaning – a corrective lesson, one would say, from the pen of a writer who, in his war years at least, was far from a zealous believer in either Judaism or Christianity.

Another interesting thing about "Ancient History" is that, albeit ironical in content, its irony is slightly attenuated by the fact that its villain (Adam as a symbol of British WWI political leadership) is presented as possibly blaming himself

for sending his youth (Cain and Abel as symbols of Britain's WWI youth) to certain death. Because of this, this poem is unique in Sassoon's oeuvre as generally characterized by utter contempt for Britain's war-supporting politicians and elderly civilians, and it shows Sassoon as capable also of distinguishing among them, between those incorrigibly callous, on the one hand, staying adamant in their pro-war stance from beginning to end, and those who, on the other hand, were human enough to admit to having been wrong in their enthusiasm for the war, if not sooner, then at least when facing personal loss. It is, therefore, a valuable piece of evidence pointing in the direction of Sassoon as a particularly humane person, one capable of pitying all those who lost during the war, and not only the soldiers as certainly the most tragic war figures, which makes it possible to associate also with Sassoon that famous phrase of his comrade-in-arms Wilfred Owen – "the pity of war."

Yet, despite this vague pitying dimension of Sassoon's "Ancient History," its irony still remains its key feature, clearly teaching even the modern-day reader a timeless lesson, which will never become obsolete as long as man's heart continues to beat to the rhythm of the war drum. This lesson is that war, and especially modern war, is a farce, because in it there are always some (the upper classes) who reap benefits and some (usually the lower classes) who lose everything they have. Worst of all, it is the rich national leaders who are the loudest warmongers and the poor who simply follow the orders and are soon disillusioned with the knowledge that they are sacrificed for causes far less idealistic than stated in the politicians' propaganda, or as Sassoon himself wrote in his war diary on June 19, 1917: "Soldiers conceal their hatred of the war. / Civilians conceal their liking for it" (Hart-Davis 1983: 176). That is why the grim, sorrowful atmosphere of "Ancient History," as well as of Sassoon's entire poetic opus and his post-war political activism, has only one message to convey – namely, "People of the world (especially the young), unite in your bid for peace, and stand up to all warmongering politicians, because war feeds them, but it will bury you. Peace is the only chance for mankind."

Notes

- ¹ An interesting example of the British elderly callously urging their sons to waste no time at home, but rather to hasten to the front, regardless of the very great risk of dying there, is that of Wilfred Owen's father Tom, who was "disappointed to have an 'abnormal' shell-shocked son at home" in the period between Wilfred's two stays on the Western Front, because he obviously saw his son's absence from the frontline as a sign of abnormality (Cuthbertson 2014: 274–275).
- ² Following the Great War, Britain and different British self-ruling imperial dominions took over most of Germany's extra-European colonial empire, while, on the other hand, British veterans were by no means given appropriate respect and gratification for their self-sacrificing service on the front, many of them facing "unemployment, homelessness, and no state help if they were disabled" (Kitchen 2014: sec. 4; Nugent n.d.: para. 4).
- ³ It is worth mentioning that, except for being an excellent poet, Sassoon was also an outstanding soldier, that is, lieutenant, who excelled in combat on the Western Front, being "nicknamed 'Mad Jack' by his men" because of his great bravery and ability as a commander (Fussell 1975: 91).

- ⁴ Apart from being presented in Britain as a religious, holy war between the armies of God (the Allies, spearheaded by the British) and the armies of Satan (spearheaded by the Germans), the First World War was also referred to, by some less religious or non-religious thinkers such as H. G. Wells, as a war between two political principles – namely, liberalism and militarism. However, holders of both of these viewpoints shared the belief that this war was special and that fighting in it on the British side was particularly important, because its outcome was, allegedly, supposed to end war and make it possible for peace to triumph for good. For more about the secular perspective on the war in Britain, the reader is advised to consult Wells's book *The War That Will End War* (1914).
- ⁵ It is worth mentioning that, if British politicians had their strictly secular imperialist goals that they wanted to achieve in the Great War, Britain's church leaders, and particularly the leaders of the Anglican church, had their religious goals, in the sense of conducting propaganda to restore the sacral hegemony of earlier times, and not only in Britain, but possibly also throughout the world which, as the Anglican clergy hoped, would be peaceful, anglicized, and very religious after England's victory in the war (Barbeau 2016; Bontrager 2002).
- ⁶ The word *mostly* is used here to emphasize that love and erotic feelings were the central and most frequent topic of Renaissance sonnets. However, it should be mentioned that a less frequent topic of Renaissance sonnets, particularly in the work of English Renaissance poets (such as John Donne), was religion or religious meditation, so that Sassoon's "Ancient History" could, perhaps, be seen as being derived from that tradition in the history of English literature, but in a different, ironical way that is more suited to the gloomy and cynical atmosphere of the First World War.
- ⁷ It is, perhaps, good to mention that Britain introduced conscription, that is, compulsory service in the army for sufficiently young and healthy men, in January 1916, to compensate for huge losses in manpower in the war, especially on the Western Front (UK Parliament Editor).
- ⁸ At the very beginning of the First World War, in the summer of 1914, it was widely believed that Britain was going to defeat Germany in a short period of time and that the war would be "over by Christmas", but those predictions or expectations were very wrong because the war soon entered into a grinding stalemate, with a horrifying death toll for all the belligerent nations on the Western Front (Fussell 1975: 3).
- ⁹ The defiance of biblical laws is reflected in the fact that the sacrifice of the young for the old is against the idea that a numerous offspring is a sign of God's favor (see in Genesis 22, Psalm 127: 3, and elsewhere), whereas the defiance of biological laws is related to the fact that it is upon the young that the biological survival of the human species depends, rather than upon the old.
- ¹⁰ Such an understanding of this poem finds support in Sassoon's post-war involvement in the Labor Party and in his advocacy of Wellsian pacifism and better treatment of workers and especially war veterans (Nugent n.d.). In 1919, he even wrote a poem entitled "Everyone Sang" that, according to himself, was "a vision of the socialist revolution" (Nugent n.d.: para. 9).
- ¹¹ A good example of Sassoon's poetic criticism of the English fathers' callousness in insisting on dispatching their sons to the field of battle is his poem "The Fathers" (see page 132 in the herein cited edition of Siegfried Sassoon's poems).

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