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Owen and Sassoon: The Reality of Literary Influence

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Abstract

The discussion of literary influence and its effects on originality and authorship has been longstanding and continuous. By focusing on the relationship of World War One poets Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, I will be evaluating the short time frame of their meeting and the discussion of Sassoon's influence on Owen's poetry. My evaluation will reveal a potential flaw in the countless articles that document the work each poet left behind and how our understanding of literary influence morphs into narratives over time. This is significant because by better understanding how literary influence affects authorship, and the anxiety of originality that has developed in modern literature, we allow a level of self-awareness when evaluating new pieces of literature and bring into question the validity of the narrative that may be expressed about an author's body of work.

Keywords: Literary Influence, Poetry, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, World War 1

In literary research, there is a major interest, especially among critics, in defining literary influence and its effects on originality and authorship. Its purpose, as a tool in Comparative Literature Studies, is to focus on the influences of a writer and trace the conscious or even subconscious effects these influences may have had on an author's body of work. Critical discussions of literary influence seem to lean more towards connecting interpersonal relationships between authors than on environmental influences or even natural talent. This apparent bias raises the question of how critics determine where these influences originated from and why certain relationships gain more weight than other potentially more influential circumstances. The attempt to use literary influences as a fined-toothed comb for analysis has a compromised validity; the longer a time span between the birth of a piece of literature and the actual time of analysis, the more the space for interpretation and the probability of personal bias grows.

Dr. Manas Sinha states in her article, "Literary Influence: A Pivotal Aspect in the Domain of Comparative Literature" that literary influence "is a fruitful study as it can throw light upon a writer's individual talent or it can unmask a plagiarist" (Sinha 1). The focus on establishing unadulterated talent overlooks humans' natural inclination to imitate one another and often overlooks other factors that may develop an author's literary voice. Determining whether environmental, historical, political, and spiritual influences develop an author also has great significance in determining the worth of an author's body of work.

Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who met at Craiglockhart Hospital as they were being treated for shellshock, are a more modern example of literary influence becoming blurred as critics try to define a personal relationship between poets. Sassoon was seven years Owen's senior with an already established credibility from two published collections of work before meeting Owen. Owen only published five poems in his lifetime, mostly in "The Hydra", a newsletter that was established as a therapeutic outlet at Craiglockhart during World War 1. This is where later claims of Sassoon's influence over Owen often begin, with Owen's admiration for Sassoon's work before their meeting. Having his copy of *The Old Huntsman* autographed by Sassoon, who states in his autobiography *Siegfried's Journey* that Owen left a "favorable first impression" by doing so (Siegfried 58).

There also has been some speculation amongst scholars that Owen and Sassoon may have had a more romantic relationship than is known from their letters and the autobiographies left behind by Sassoon. Both poets described each other affectionately, with Sassoon describing Owen of having the "adaptability of a beautifully sympathetic nature" (Siegfried's Journey 62), and Owen giving praises like, "I think if I had a choice of making friends with Tennyson or with Sassoon I should go to Sassoon" (Letters 270). Now, Sassoon maintained a more nonchalant description of his relationship to Owen in *Siegfried's Journey*, published in 1945, but this leaves twenty-seven years between Owen's death and Sassoon's interpretation of their relationship, which means that Owen has no way of commenting on Sassoon's description of them and the works they created. Sassoon describes Owen's admiration for him more than any other potential influence Owen may have had in his life. This gives a one-sided description of Owen as a man and a poet, which then greatly affects how future readers view their relationship.

Owen's love for other writers is often overlooked. He mentions his admiration for the Georgian Poets, claiming to his mother in a letter right before his death that "I go out this year a Poet, my dear Mother, as which I did not enter it. I am held peer by the Georgians; I am a poet's poet" (Letters 306). Owen, with his passionate language and seemingly lack of shame in showing affection, spoke of all the writers that inspired his work. In letter 157 from the *Selected Letters* collection, Owen mentions "the *Bookman* Souvenir Number of Keats & Shelley" that he received as a gift and quoted from (Bell 65). Later on, he references George Eliot, Wordsworth, and modern contemporaries like Harold Monroe, demonstrating how Owen was built on many influences that are far too interwoven into his character to measure (Bell 99, 100, 172). However, the connection between him and Sassoon may interest readers more because of the inter-personal relationship they had compared to Owen's admiration for other poets who have no real-life connection to him. Claudio Guillen, a scholar on literary influence claims that, "Significant influences are usually individual, one-to-one relationships- not distant kinships by association", which seems to allow readers to better associate two pieces of literature together when a more personal relationship between the authors is seen.

The Norton Anthology, a widely accepted literature textbook, when describing Owen's work, explicitly names Sassoon as one of his major influences. Stating that, "he had the good fortune to meet Siegfried Sassoon," and, "The influence of Sassoon's satiric realism was a useful tonic to Owen's lush, Keatsian Romanticism" (Norton 161). Only later, in the final paragraph of the biography, does the Anthology mention any other influence that may have affected Owen and his work like William Wordsworth or Percy Shelley. This was noticeably different from the biographical sketch of Sassoon in the same volume that states he simply, "befriended Wilfred Owen" (Norton 149) and then moves quickly past their interaction. The organization of both biographies gives the emotional implication that Sassoon drastically changed Owen's poetic style, and that their chance meeting served as a "Paul on the road to Damascus" moment for Owen.

This subtle implication is supported by the Wilfred Owen Wikipedia page, which is created through the public making submissions, that Owen's poetry was greatly influenced by his mentor Siegfried Sassoon. While Wikipedia is commonly considered to be an unreliable source, it is still the most readily available sight for general beliefs about any number of topics, which then reinforces bias that may have been held about a particular topic. Perpetuating a viral game of telephone through social media in some way, where facts are endlessly shifting and rarely questioned or clarified. Also, the Wilfred Owen Association, which receives a monthly traffic of approximately 1,082 people argues that "Wilfred Owen would not have written the war poems for which he is now famous if he had not met Siegfried Sassoon" (WOA). Both sites are, arguably, the most accessible to anyone wanting a general description of Owen and his work. Leaving much to be misconstrued about either poet's influence on the other. The ambiguity of literary influence allows the reader to "describe the effect of one work on another..." and, "also insinuate that this change, however slight, is not trivial" (Guillen 150). The organization of ideas within a text allows subconscious preferences to develop for readers over time. Sassoon and Owen's relationship will always be revisited and discussed because they have been written near each other within anthologies. Potentially allowing readers to believe their

relationship went far deeper than what either Owen or Sassoon may have claimed in their lifetime.

This tendency for literary critics to focus on the personal relationships between authors as a main source of literary influence may have to do with our own personal desire for human connection. As more time spans between the original publishing of a piece and the time it is studied, readers develop a natural need to relate to the author and reestablish a personhood with the dead. War literature anthologies reveal a trend in how critics viewed these poets with each new collection of poetry that was published. Earlier releases like Edith Sitwell's 1920 publication of Owen's work states, "The author has left us his own fragmentary but impressive Foreword; this, and his Poems, can speak for him, backed by the authority of his experience as an infantry soldier, and sustained by nobility and originality of style" (Sitwell, Sassoon 1). It is thus proved that the earliest known critical evaluations of Owen and Sassoon's literary influence argue that both poets maintained their own poetic voice throughout their lives.

In comparing his poetry before and after Owen met Sassoon, he maintained his "lush Keatsian" style throughout the war, with his tone becoming more focused on the horrors of trench warfare as he spent extended time on the front. Sassoon experienced the same shift in his poetry even though his satirical style maintained itself throughout his work. Logically, it makes sense to assume that each poet's style and themes would change in similar ways during the war. Each poet maintained a distinct characteristic in their poetry that was all theirs, not even similar in style to other contemporaries like Keats or Graves. Owen mastered the use of consonance and assonance in his poetry while Sassoon leaned into his satirical tone to showcase the effects of the war on soldier's minds. So then, where is the weight placed? Is it fair to associate Sassoon's friendship with Owen as the leading cause for Owen's poetic growth without considering the environmental and psychological effects at play?

Anna Balakian claims in the article, "The Concept of Influence in Comparative Literature: A Symposium" that, "In the search for influence one must stop at a certain point to determine whether it is coincidence or imitation which has been discovered, or whether by some mysterious alchemy the borrower has found, via the influence of another's writing, his own true character and originality" (Balakian 147). Unless an influence is dripping off the page by an author, the claim that literary influence is measurable is a "phenomena" that is "truly innumerable" (Guillen 150). It is far safer to determine that Sassoon and Owen, each as an individual, had a distinct character with their similarities lying within their comradery from the war front. Sassoon claimed that the influence between them both was mutual, stating that his poem *The Dugout* "was getting nearer to Wilfred Owen's method of approach" (Sassoon 71). This reveals how interwoven influences can become on authors and the difficulty critics experience when trying to analyze it.

In 1963, C. Day Lewis pointed to the war being the leading cause of Owen's poetic maturity claiming, "under conditions so hideous that they might have been expected to maim a poet rather than make him, Owen came into his own," and, "The subject made the poet: the poet made poems which radically changed our attitude towards war" (Lewis 11-12). Logically, to overlook the emotional, spiritual, and psychological impact that trench warfare would have had on Owen and how those effects then leached into his work would be an interesting stance

to have. An article published in the *Atlanta Press* by Li Hou, Jianjun Kang, and Yongli Xu called “A Study on the Influence of Human Cultural Environment on Literary Creation from the Perspective of Eco-criticism” argues that “literature is in many cases a projection of local culture in literary works, which always contains the mental history of the writer’s growth and psychological development” (1). They also state that “literary creation relies on the overall social environment of politics, economy, and culture under the long-term influence of human culture on the formation of shaping literary style” (2).

Gertrude White in her book, *Wilfred Owen*, published in 1969 states, “On Owen’s poetry, Sassoon had little direct influence, a fact he himself testifies in his autobiography...” (31), which also gives quite a different image than the media that students can easily access and what is being claimed in college textbooks. White also points out that Sassoon’s influence may be better described as the mutual encouragement between poets, stating that “What Sassoon did provide was understanding and encouragement, the stimulus and companionship of a brother poet...” (32) which did lean itself toward invaluable commentary for Owen and his work. Sassoon can be given credit for providing a sometimes-editorial eye to Owen’s work, but maybe more importantly, Sassoon introduced Owen to a new circle of fellow poets in which he built intellectual friendships that he had not experienced before. This, however, is different from what is largely defined as direct literary influence, which looks to determine the rhetorical changes within an author’s work from another author. With over forty years of narrative, the moment where each poet has their own poetic voice shifts to them having measurable, distinct influence on the other becomes unclear. So, like a giant game of telephone, there is plenty of room for facts about each poet’s work to shift slightly more into narrative as time goes on, so their stories fit better within modern day discussions.

It was only in 1973 that Dominic Hibberd, known for his extensive research on Wilfred Owen, claimed Owen’s work was “Sassoonish” in style. A term that is used frequently in literary critiques after 2002 since his popularization of it. Hibberd’s later critique in his 1979 article, “Wilfred Owen and the Georgians” argues that Sassoon tried to play down his influence by “encouraging the mistaken belief (which held sway for many years and which still misleads critics) that some of Owen’s major poems, notably ‘Exposure’, were written before the two men met” (Hibberd 24). However, this statement contradicts Hibberd’s previous findings in 1973, that “Exposure” may have dated back in early 1917 and was “likely to have been revised over a very long period” (Hibberd 125). It is often overlooked that “Exposure” was written amongst multiple poems on several pieces of paper. Meaning, researchers are still unsure of the actual dates that these poems were written, and it is nearly impossible to determine if they were written before or after Owen’s initial meeting with Sassoon. This is true for most of Owen’s poems; most are lacking dates and there is no clear understanding of the original time frame they were written. Demonstrating how easily gaps in factual evidence can be filled with speculation. Leaving room for new paths of narrative to form.

However, it is important to note that in Siegfried’s Journey, Sassoon states, “The manuscript of one of his most dynamically descriptive war poems, Exposure, is dated February 1917, and proves that he had already found authentic utterance of his own” (Sassoon 60). So, once again, how do readers establish the creditability of determining where literary influence is prominent in an author’s work? Should it be speculated, that Sassoon may have had a better

understanding of Owen and the timeframe he wrote his poems based on their friendship? Or are the interpretations made by critics more significant in evaluating the potential influences that an author had on another? This issue with deciding where the credibility should lie makes literary influence as a comparative tool deeply flawed. Without the first-person accounts from Owen himself, claims on his opinion of Sassoon's influence cannot be determined without developing a partially fictional narrative. Sassoon himself claimed that one of Owen's most notable poems, *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, "had impressive affinities with Keats, whom he took as his supreme exemplar" (Sassoon 59). Demonstrating how Owen's contemporaries saw multiple influences in him.

The contradictions that lie within critic's analyzations of Owen and Sassoon's poetry do not give the appropriate credit to literary influence as an analytical tool. Hibberd does this quite a few times in his research, making claims in his 1975 book *Wilfred Owen: War Poems and Others* that, "It is not surprising that even as later drafts of 'The Dead-Beat' he moved away from Sassoon's style; his mind was in any case, more eccentric and original than his hero's" (Hibberd 24). Then later, on the same page only a couple paragraphs down Hibberd asserts that, "It was meeting Sassoon, not seeing the war firsthand, that finally set his talent free" (Hibberd 24). A bold claim that, based in his own public biographies, comes from a person that never experienced trench warfare or any kind of battlefield firsthand. Hibberd, despite all his credibility and excellent work in cataloging the works of war poets, has personal biases that develop throughout his work, such as his lack of experience of the mental affects trench warfare has on a person. Acknowledging this possible contradiction within all scholars gives a self-awareness to readers and future scholars as they analyze new literature.

Hibberd was not the only person to contradict themselves and blur the lines between measurable influence and critical narrative. Daniel Hipp in his article "By Degrees Regain[ing] Cool Peaceful Air in Wonder": Wilfred Owen's War Poetry as Psychological Therapy" evaluates Owen's progress in his poetry and how it helped Owen cope with the trauma he experienced. Hipp makes a comment about other literary critics stating, "Arthur Lane dates the poem as having been composed over a year prior to 'The Sentry' and calls the two poems 'superficially similar'" (34). This comparison is being made potentially between Owen's poems "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and "The Sentry" that have been described by critics like Hibberd to be "Sassoonish in style". However, Hipp continues this statement by saying, "Editor Jon Stallworthy's updated chronology of Owen's composition lends a value to this comparison of which Lane was not aware and which suggests that the similarity is less superficial than it is expressive of each poet's state of mind upon each poem's completion," presenting how defining literary influence is also made difficult by the detective work involved in literary research. For most of Owen's poetry, and for even Sassoon's, there is no clear date of when the poems were written. Leaving critics to make assumptions about the poetry and the people that wrote them, eventually making the perception of each poet unbalanced.

While literary influence is most beneficial when used in comparison and interpretation, human error often shifts the topic away from traditional rhetorical analyzation towards personal gratification. "Even influence studies, paradoxically enough, are being stripped today, by the non-generic mind, of their original meaning. They are being recommended for providing us with occasions for aesthetic analysis and understanding" (Guillen 149). It can't be helped

that critics allow their own personal aesthetic desires to haze their interpretation of a text or author-to-author relationship. Often, it is these personal interpretations that add great meanings to the art piece and gives audiences new perspectives that the author never intended but live within the text anyway. "Influences thus become perspectives for reading and a critic's fair game. But as soon as we examine only the aesthetic end-result of influences no genuine distinction can subsist between their study and that of conventions, traditions and other correspondences" (Guillen 149). The process of then understanding what the word "influence" means to the reader becomes an infinity loop of interpretations, with very few being arguably wrong if they add value to the analysis of a piece of literature. "This and other confusions bring out the stupendous complexity of both the phenomenon and the word. The phenomenon cannot be separated from the riddle of artistic creation" (Guillen 150). These complexities, while interesting to analysis, make evaluating literary talent in authors difficult. There has been no exception in the evaluation of Owen's and Sassoon's work.

These are only a handful of statements that demonstrate how scholarly attitudes seem to shift throughout this period. Most importantly, the small breaks of time between each critical evaluation of the literature allows space for myths to take root. Eventually the search for measurable literary influence moves away from evaluating literature, separate from the authors, and more on the romanticized aspects of their personal lives. The most interesting aspect of this, in my opinion, is how it blurs the validity of literary influence as a tool in comparative research and what that means for the work we create now. It allows us to question whether the interpretations that are made about previous literature are created out of narrative or based on measurable evidence.

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