“Arms and the Boy”: Wilfred Owen’s Homosexuality and the Selective Histories of the Great War

By

Kiri McGhee
May 2016

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts in History
Dual-Degree Program in History and Archives Management
Simmons College
Boston, Massachusetts

The author grants Simmons College permission to include this thesis in its Library and to make it available to the academic community for scholarly purposes.

Submitted by

____
Kiri McGhee

Approved by:

__________________________	__________________________
Dr. Sarah Leonard (Thesis Advisor)	Dr. Zhigang Liu (Second Reader)

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements……………………………………………………………………………3

Introduction and Background Information……………………………………………………4

Historiography…………………………………………………………………………...12

Section I: Owen as a homosexual man: "All women, without exception, annoy me"…………..22

Poetic Works………………………………………………………………………..28

Correspondence……………………………………………………………………..42

Section II: Owen's Sexuality in Post-World War II Britain (1945 – 1975)……………………..52

Section III: Contemporary Representation (1975 – present)……………………….....................64

Conclusion………………………………………………………………………………73

Appendix………………………………………………………………………………....77

Bibliography……………………………………………………………………………..83

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks goes to Dr. Sarah Leonard, my thesis advisor. Her guidance helped me in all the time of research and writing of this thesis. I could not have imagined having a better advisor and mentor. I would also like to thank the rest of my professors for their insightful comments and encouragement. Lastly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my father, Jim McGhee, for his stalwart support of my academic career, sense of humor, and seemingly endless patience.

Introduction and Background Information:

In 1976, Joseph Cohen, a New York Times reader, critiqued Jon Stallworthy's 1974 biography, *Wilfred Owen*, in an open letter to the *New York Times Review of Books* entitled "The Conspiracy of Silence." Cohen specifically criticized Stallworthy's "selective" reference choices, the influence of Harold Owen, and the author's omission of Owen's sexuality.[1] It is worthy to note that Cohen did not purport that Stallworthy had done Owen an injustice. Rather, that Owen was an "injustice collector" and that this was not to be seen as a uniquely "homosexual quality."[2] In his response in the *New York Times Review of Books*, Stallworthy claimed that Cohen was purporting a "conspiracy theory" that Owen was a homosexual and that if Cohen had factual evidence of Owen's "perverse acts or perverse thoughts or perverse writings," then Cohen should present it.[3] Cohen highlights a frequently underrepresented facet of Wilfred Owen's history: his homosexuality. While hinted at in biographies and occasionally used as contextualization in the analysis of his poetic works, Owen's sexuality remains relatively unexplored. Cohen's public criticism of Stallworthy's allegedly "selective" histories underscores the potentially intentional rewriting of Owen's history.

Within the vast political complexities that made up the beginnings of World War I, important individual elements can be lost, forgotten, or rewritten. British society was shaken by the Great War. While the British paralleled the reactions to the carnage and the attempts at reconstruction of their allies and enemies, the British had the luxury of being one element removed from the abject destruction. While most of the ground fighting was taking place in

---

[1] Jon Stallworthy and Joseph Cohen, "In the Closet?," (*The New York Review of Books* (New York City), May 27, 1976), accessed January 30, 2016. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1976/05/27/in-the-closet/.
[2] Cohen, "In the Closet?,"
[3] Stallworthy, "In the Closet?,"

France, the British people who stayed at the home front had to endure the torture of waiting for their young men to come home. These young men, in many ways, were damaged beyond words. Haunted by nightmares, torn apart by shells, blinded by gas, or immobilized by shellshock, the effects of war on the bodies and minds of these men echoes throughout British culture to this day. World War I is a frequent topic of study in British schools—historically, literarily, and sociologically.[4] The impact of World War I on British society cannot be overstated.

Before the War, British society set high masculine standards for their young men. Masculinity is not a cohesive identity in contemporary terms, nor was it in pre-and post-World War I Britain. However, there was (and remains) an accepted societal masculine standard. The British masculine ideal in the early twentieth century was partially informed by Britain's declining economic position and increasing dependence on militaristic power. Though many masculine ideals existed at the time in Britain, the military man was—and in many ways, remains—the ideal exemplification of British masculinity.[5] The "manly" ideal was based on a militaristic ethos, underscored by being unflappable, disciplined, and possessing physical hardness. This masculinity was most frequent communicated via physical prowess which was cultivated for soldiers of the Great War, beginning with basic training.

---

[4] Key works on the Great War include John Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, (New York: Viking Press, 1976); Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989); J. M. Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); and Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), which will be discussed further in the historiography. Fiction, such as Erich Maria Remarque, and A. W. Wheen. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, (Boston: Ullstein Verlag, 1929) has also had a lasting impact on society's understanding of the Great War. Perhaps even more so after it was adapted for the screen.

[5] Danielle Thorton, "Not a 'Normal, Manly Fellow': Wilfred Owen's Contested Masculinities 1900-1918." *Melbourne Historical Journal* 31, (January 2003): 41-53. *Historical Abstracts with Full Text*, EBSCO*host* (accessed October 18, 2015).

Military training heightened this focus on masculine physicality by taking men from the lower and middle classes, such as British poet and icon Wilfred Owen, and made them taller by way of perfecting posture, their bodies fitter and cleaner, more confident, and "hardly recognizable" as the men who went away. On average men, particularly those of the middle class, would typically leave training a stone (fourteen pounds) heavier and an inch taller. Physical training was masculine and patriotic as it prepared men's bodies for war.[6] This hyper-focus on the body appears in the poetic works of many Great War poets, such as Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves. However, the focus on the body is rarely portrayed as sexual within the constructs of historical scholarship, and rather falls in the category of mere artistic expression. As such, a male composing poems about the male form within the scope of the Great War is not inherently sexual or sexualized.

In a time in which men were returning home with missing limbs, the notion of masculinity and its focus on the body was further underscored. Historian Danielle Thornton has argued that within this masculine standard, which is so exemplified by the tales of World War I soldiers, one loses the humanity of the men and in turn, loses some of the obvious realities. To be an ideal British man (and perhaps more importantly, an ideal British veteran) in the nineteen teens and twenties, one could not be a homosexual. As literary scholar Herbert Sussman writes, the feminization of culture during the Victorian Age made the masculine identification of male artists and poets often deeply problematic. The markers of effeminacy and Victorian aestheticism

[6] Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War*, (London: Reaktion Books, 1996), 175.

were excessive study and emotional openness.[7] For example, biographers of prominent poets, such as Byron and Shelley, were "careful to assert the manliness" of these poets.[8] As such, one could argue, the making of British masculinity was deeply steeped in physicality.

According to biographers, Wilfred Edward Salter Owen MC was born on March 18, 1893 into a poor family in Oswestry, a civil parish in Shropshire, England, that was largely concerned with upward social mobility.[9] Owen was heavily influenced by his mother, Susan Owen, who remained his strongest and longest relationship until his death in 1918. Susan often encouraged her children (Wilfred Owen was the eldest) to act as if they were gentlemen and avoid socializing with fellow lower class children on neighboring farms.[10] His parents, in particular his mother, were devoted Evangelical Christians and attempted to instill their faith in their children.[11] As a young man, Owen admired the Romantic poets, particularly Keats. He yearned to be a poet, a dream his mother encouraged and his father lamented.[12] Harold Owen, Owen's younger brother, elaborates on Owen's disinterest in "normal, boyish pursuits" in his memoir *Journey from Obscurity: Wilfred Owen 1893-1918: Memoirs of the Owen Family.* Harold Owen frequently highlighted how as a boy his older brother was "preoccupied with his reading" and that their father and Owen were at odds over their father's wish for Owen to "undertake a practical and adventurous one," of which Owen had little interest.[13]

---

[7] Herbert L. Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 67.
[8] Thorton, "Not a 'Normal, Manly Fellow': Wilfred Owen's Contested Masculinities 1900-1918," 43.
[9] Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003), 1-15.
[10] Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1974), 7-12.
[11] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 287.
[12] Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen*, 57.
[13] Harold Owen, *Journey from Obscurity: Wilfred Owen, 1893-1918. Memoirs of the Owen Family*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 23-24.

At age nineteen, Owen described himself (primarily in association with his interest in aesthetics and poetry) as not a "normal, manly fellow," in a letter dated July 21, 1912 to his mother, stating: “[…] unless it were to a normal, manly fellow like John or Bill, might after all not be preferable as a son—to an eccentric being like me.”[14] Owen’s masculine identity differed from his peers, and yet, he would still categorize himself as a masculine being—just not “normal.” His work certainly engaged with masculine themes—the male body, war, Christ. However, there was a social understanding and expectation of what it was to be masculine that Owen arguably did not think he represented. According to his biographer, Owen was an anxious, empathetic, and passionate man.[15] Coming from a family of “genteel poverty,” he yearned for formal education. Owen’s early education is unknown. Hibberd, one of his biographers, hypothesizes that he may have gone to an infants’ school, or was taught by his mother.[16] Regardless, he could read and write quite competently by age five.[17] Throughout his teenage years, Owen took correspondence and botany classes, and visited museums when his finances would allow.[18] Owen attended the Birkenhead Institute in England from 1900 to late 1907, where his brother Harold Owen joined him at the school in April of 1904.[19] For his last two years of “formal education,” Owen was a pupil-teacher at the Wyle Cop School in Shrewsbury, England. In 1911, he took and passed his matriculation exam for the University of London, but

[14] John and Bill Bulman were medical students, and friends of the Owen family. This letter and its contents are discussed in detail in Danielle Thorton, "Not a ‘Normal, Manly Fellow’: Wilfred Owen’s Contested Masculinities 1900-1918." *Melbourne Historical Journal* 31, (January 2003): 41-53. *Historical Abstracts with Full Text*, EBSCO*host* (accessed October 18, 2015).
Wilfred Owen, *Selected Letters*, ed, John Bell, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 59.
[15] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* xxi.
[16] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 16.
[17] Owen’s first letter (labeled “Wilfie’s first letter” by his mother) is dated 1898. Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 16.
[18] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 60, 67, 99.
[19] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 37-41.

Owen did not receive first-class honors, and therefore did not obtain the scholarship he needed in order to attend.[20] As he grew older, he developed an inner struggle with the "Established" theology of his dear mother and what literary scholar Paul Fussell calls the "homoerotic humanism" of Owen's own life.[21]

On October 21, 1915, Owen enlisted in the Artists' Rifles Officers Training Corps. Eight months later, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Manchester Regiment. He suffered two significant injuries, one of which was a concussion from being thrown into shell hole after being blown into the air by a trench mortar. He spent several days lying in an embankment in Savy Wood. During this time, Hibberd explains, he hallucinated that he was lying next to the remains of a fellow fallen soldier.[22] Soon after this traumatic event, Owen was sent to Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland after being diagnosed with neurasthenia, or as it now known, post-traumatic stress disorder.[23] Here, he joined a tight circle of literary-minded friends, the most noted of whom was Siegfried Sassoon. The two became quite close during their joint stay in Craiglockhart, and it is often asserted by biographers and literary scholars alike that Owen's poetry would have been nothing without Sassoon's influence.[24]

In July 1918, Owen returned to active service in France, a decision that Sassoon did not support. After Sassoon was sent back to England due to injuries from a shot to the head, he wrote

---

[20] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 130-131.

[21] "Homoerotic humanism" implies sentimentality, primarily that Owen's work was a product of his natural fondness for young men and their bodies. His poetry, Fussell argues, was a vehicle for "intimate identification" with sensuous bodies. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 293-298.

[22] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 208-350.

[23] "Owen's Medical Register," First World War Poetry Digital Archive, accessed April 9, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/items/show/8122.

[24] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 310-335; Stallworthy, Wilfred Owen, 216; Cuthberson, *Wilfred Owen*, 204; Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 291.

to Owen, telling him that he would “stab [him] in the leg” if he went back to the front.[25] Owen chose not to inform Sassoon of his decision and returned to the front line in August of 1918. On October 1st, he led units of the Second Manchesters to attack a number of Central Powers' strong points near the village of Joncourt in Northern France.[26]

Owen was killed in action on November 4th, 1918, during the crossing of Sambre-Oise Canal, exactly one week, nearly to the hour, before the signing of the Armistice. He was promoted to full lieutenant the day after he was killed. On November 11, the war ended, and as the church bells were ringing out in celebration, his mother received the telegram informing her that Owen was dead.[27] For his courage and leadership in the Joncourt action, he was awarded the Military Cross:

> 2nd Lt, Wilfred Edward Salter Owen, 5th Bn. Manch. R., T.F., attd. 2nd Bn.
> For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in the attack on the Fonsomme Line on October 1st/2nd, 1918. On the company commander becoming a casualty, he assumed command and showed fine leadership and resisted a heavy counter-attack. He personally manipulated a captured enemy machine gun from an isolated position and inflicted considerable losses on the enemy. Throughout he behaved most gallantly.[28]

Owen remains a symbol for the British of the terrors of war and is often regarded as the greatest poet of the Great War.

This paper argues that Owen's sexuality is notably absent from accounts of his life and works and deconstructs why this absence has occurred and why it matters.[29] To read and understand Owen's letters and poems, it is necessary to understand (to the greatest extent that

---

[25] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 415.
[26] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 419-444.
[27] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 460.
[28] "Supplement to the London Gazette, 30 July, 1919," *The London Gazette*, no. 31480 (1919): 9761, accessed January 2, 2016, https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/31480/supplement/9761.
[29] The intention is not to “prove” whether or not Owen was a homosexual, but rather, to deconstruct the information that is readily accessible and try to configure why this information was not used, or used in such a calculated way.

one can) the societal, personal, and cultural constraints under which he wrote, as well as how he is anthologized and remembered. Existing within the cage of masculinity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, any individual who sought pleasures outside of the accepted circle, or questioned the morality of violence, specifically war, was considered a systemically abnormal citizen.[30] Owen, as an anti-war protestor, poet, and homosexual defied the norms of 20th century Britain, not only in his life, but within his poetry. Owen is typically portrayed in two modes: an ideal British soldier who suffered the true tortures of war, or as being very childlike in nature, soft, and pitiable. Even with the publication of novelist Pat Barker's *Regeneration* in 1991 and Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* in 1976, and the creation of the history of sexuality as a field, particularly queer studies, the historical study of homosexuality during World War I has begun to gain some traction.[31] However, the stringent military standard of 1915 is still applied to the representation of the Great War veteran today, which creates an environment of uncertainty regarding the discussion of Owen's life as homosexual veteran with a sexual identity.

This work is organized into three sections. The first section will tackle the poetic works and letters of Wilfred Owen and offer an in depth analysis of the ways in which sexuality in present within his writings. The second section seeks to contextualize the society in which the in flux of Owen-centered scholarship was created. Specifically, the tension surrounding homosexuality in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s and how these attitudes are reflexed in the works of Harold Owen and the first Owen biography published written by Jon Stallworthy. The third and final section will delve into the two contemporary biographies on Owen, and how their

[30] Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War,* 178.
[31] Pat Barker, *Regeneration*, (New York: Plume, 1991).
Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

treatment of Owen's alleged homosexuality is treated, primarily the ways in which the biographies, Dominic Hibberd and Guy Cuthbertson, employ historical context and rhetoric to frame Owen and his sexual prowess.

Before one can begin to analyze and contextualize Owen's work and the scholarship surrounding him, one must understand the scholarship on World War I and homosexuality as a whole. Though sparse, the historical and literary works that broach the topic of homosexuality in the time of the Great War offer significant insight into the life of Wilfred Owen, the constraints under which Owen scholars operate, and the importance of the discussion of homosexual World War I soldiers.

Historiography

Owen's sexuality have received sparing historical scholarly attention over the last century. Frequently cited as the premiere World War I poet and lauded for his shocking and realistic rhetoric, Owen is one of the most studied literary figures in British colleges of the last hundred years, second perhaps only to Shakespeare.[32] While he has been the subject of dozens of literary studies, the historical analysis on Owen and his sexuality, particularly his sex life, is sparse.[33] Shaped by the emotional effect of war, little primary source material, and the

---

[32] *Wilfred Owen: A Remembrance Tale*. Directed by Louise Hooper. Performed by Samuel Barnett and Deborah Findlay. (2007, BBC One.), Televised Program.

[33] Key works include the aforementioned Danielle Thornton's "Not a 'Normal, Manly Fellow': Wilfred Owen's Contested Masculinities 1900-1918," Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Anderson D. Araujo, "Jessie Pope, Wilfred Owen, and the politics of pro patria mori in World War I poetry." *Media, War & Conflict* 7, no. 3 December 2014.; James S. Campbell. "for You May Touch Them Not": Misogyny, Homosexuality, and the Ethics of Passivity in First World War Poetry". *ELH* 64 (3). Johns Hopkins University Press.; Douglas Kerr, *Wilfred Owen's Voices: Language and Community*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.; and Max Egremont, *Some Desperate Glory: The First World War the Poets Knew*. New York: Farrar, Struas, and Giroux, 2014.

permanently cultural and sociological standards placed upon veterans, Owen makes for an elusive figure in the world of historical scholarship.

When delving into Owen's history, one cannot help but notice the historical turns present in the shifting identities and the mythos of Owen. Through the last century, the perspective of Owen appears to have shifted with the times, and has been molded by the generations, culminating in the beginning of the twentieth-first century, in which most methodologies seek to fit Owen into their own tortured artist stereotype while muting his sensuousness and sexuality. One example is literary scholar Douglas Kerr's 1993 book, *Wilfred Owen's Voices: Language and Community,* which addresses Owen's homosexuality but frequently buries the physical aspect of Owen's sexuality in his analysis. When analyzing Owen's poem "Smile, Smile, Smile" Kerr discusses the "secret men" Owen may have encountered in the "homosexual community in London" and wonders whether Owen's smile was one of past guilt or a shared "psychopathological symptom" that masked the trauma of war.[34] "Smile, Smile, Smile" is one of Owen's more blatantly homoerotic works. Kerr constructs a careful analysis that does not deny the reality of Owen's sexuality, but rather sidelines it to employ an analysis that favors Owen's use of the male body as a Romantic artistic license. Thus making the work not intrinsically homosexual in nature. Instead, Kerr inquires if the work betokens "past guilt, present delinquency, sinister intentions?[…] Is it related to Owen's recent contact with the 'secret men' of the embattled homosexual community in London? Is it the germ of fascism, military coup, revolution?"[35] Kerr does not delve into these "secret men," but rather quickly moves on to

---

[34] Douglas Kerr, *Wilfred Owen's Voices: Language and Community*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 182.
[35] Kerr, *Wilfred Owen's Voices*, 182.

underscore Owen's attempt to discourage the reader from believing the military's "lying speech."[36]

Typically, Owen's hospitalization, his relationship with Sassoon as a writing partner, and his relationship with Christianity are used to contextualize his work as a poet and soldier.[37] According to these histories, Owen was a young, naïve poet seeking out friendship with fellow writers, such as Sassoon and Robert Graves. They focus on how writing was a crucial component in curing their post-traumatic stress.[38] This is a very narrow representation of Owen that belittles his class, his own unique masculine identification, politics, and particularly, his sexuality. This is the specific aspect (or absence) of scholarship in regards to Owen that this work seeks to highlight. The primary and secondary histories, published after Owen's death in 1918 to 2015, ranging from the memoirs of Owen' younger brother, Harold Owen, to a near five-hundred-page hardback biography. These sources showcase the absence or small use of sexuality in the historical analyses of Owen and the shifting narrations of his life within the realm of scholarly pursuits and highlight the overarching themes that make Owen such a compelling figure. For now, we will examine the major secondary sources grappling with World War I and sexuality. The anthologization of Owen's works and the examination of the changing methodologies of

---

[36] Kerr, *Wilfred Owen's Voices,* 182.

[37] Key works include Jon Stallworthy's biography of Owen, Dennis Sydney Reginald Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1960.; Guy Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.; Ben Townsend, "On the Front Lines of an Empire: The Rhetoric of Poetry of the First World War." War, Literature & The Arts: An International Journal Of The Humanities 26, (January 2014): 1-25. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed September 28, 2015).; and Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight; a Study of the Literature of the Great War*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1966.

[38] Examples of these analyses include: Alfier, Jeffrey C. "The Poetry of Shell Shock--Wartime Trauma and Healing in Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney and Siegfried Sassoon." War, Literature & The Arts no. 1-2 (2006): 344. Academic OneFile, EBSCOhost (accessed March 9, 2016).; and Sánchez-Pardo, Esther. "Writing war: Owen, Spender, poetic forms and concerns for a world in turmoil." Nordic Journal Of English Studies 12, no. 2 (June 2013): 103-124. Communication & Mass Media Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed March 9, 2016).

Owen-centered scholarship in regards to the representation of Owen's sexuality specifically will be discussed further in Section II and III.

Studies of Sexuality and World War I

Substantial secondary sources that engage with homosexuality amongst British soldiers during World War I are, sadly, carefully constructed and frequently framed by the time in which they were composed. Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* makes sporadic reference to Owen's sexuality and pacifism. He refers to Owen's work as an exercise the aforementioned "homoerotic humanism."[39] Fussell, an American cultural and literary historian, published his seminal work in 1975. Functioning as literary criticism, Fussell's work analyzes the literary responses of British soldiers during World War I. Fussell argues that the Great War was composed of two strands: the rhetorical patterns that it produced, and this war set the tone for modern understanding. Fussell has been criticized by some of his peers for his "selective" textual choices. Historian Jay Winter remarks in his work *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War and European History* that Fussell engaged in a "vigorous mining of eighteenth and nineteenth century images and metaphors to accommodate expressions of mourning [and this is] is one reason why it is unacceptable to see the Great War as the moment when 'modern memory' replaced something else, something timeworn and discredited."[40] However, *The Great War and Modern Memory* remains a staple of World War I scholarship and is considered what John

---

[39] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory,* 287.
[40] Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5.

Keegan, a British military historian, called "revolutionary."[41] Fussell states that there is "one dominating form of modern understanding; that it is essentially ironic; and that it originates largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War."[42] This landmark piece of literary criticism brought forth new ideas not only in regards to war poetry, but the way in which war poets are remembered.

In the section entitled, "The Homoerotic Sensuousness of Owen," Fussell analyzes the "shy, sensitive, and intense" nature of Owen's work and the ways in which Owen evokes the homoeroticism of the Romantic poets that preceded him.[43] Fussell employs the works of Cecil Day Lewis, an Irish poet, and Bernard Bergonzi, a British literary scholar, to support his central argument that Owen's work is a representation of "homoerotic humanism."[44] Fussell argues that war glorified Owen's "sentimental homoerotic" themes.[45] Fussell's analysis on Owen was quite contemporary given the time in which it was written. Scholarly works on gender and sexuality pre-Foucault were typically not as direct as Fussell's work is.

Perhaps most importantly in regards to the history of Owen's sexuality, Fussell makes a point to highlight the marked difference between Owen's collected works before and after the death of Owen's mother. Fussell states that after Susan's death, Day Lewis published seventy-nine never-before-seen drafts and works, with themes differing greatly from what was previously known of Owen's work, such as the perils of youth. Twenty-five of these poems, nearly a third,

---

[41] Susanna Rustin, "Hello to All That," *The Guardian*, July 30, 2004, accessed January 04, 2016. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/jul/31/featuresreviews.guardianreview10.
[42] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory,* 35.
[43] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory,* 287.
[44] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory,* 288.
[45] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory,* 288.

refer to "boys" or "lads."[46] While Owen was certainly not the focus of his three hundred and thirty five page work, Fussell, in 1975, argued that the shifting identity of Wilfred Owen as the perfect, nostalgic Great War hero was a result of changing social ideas.[47]

A major influence over all of historical study after 1976, particularly when grappling with queer history, is Michel Foucault's theory of social construction developed in his *History of Sexuality* (1976-84).[48] What makes this theory so substantial is it allows sexuality to be studied under the light of history and sociology. Foucault argues that sexuality is not innate, but is rather "constructed" by society.[49] Homosexual culture certainly existed in the early 1900s and Owen could and can be labeled as gay under Foucault's ideas of homosexuality. In this sense, by way of the Foucauldian logic in regards to homosexuality: if the culture determines the existence of that sexuality, Owen was writing and came into maturity in a post-Oscar Wilde Britain, and as such would have the cultural and societal framework of homosexuality would have already been in place.

In the early 2000s, there was a profound shift in the historical study of homosexuality in modern Britain, in which World War I is not absent, but rather a focus. Though grappling with France, not Britain, Carolyn J. Dean in *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France*, specifically the chapter entitled "Homosexuality and the War," offers an interesting understanding of homosexuality during World War I, particularly within the context of the military. Dean's work is crucial in contextualizing queer historical studies of World War I.

[46] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory,* 291.
[47] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory,* 296-299.
[48] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).
[49] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 76-103.

In her chapter "Homosexuality and the War," Dean highlights how homosexuality was conflated to reflect the corruption of the politicians who "had sent young men to the war" within in pulp-novels.[50] Dean employs primary sources such as novels and medical treatises to contextualize the reality of a devastated post-war France, attempting to reconstruct their "bodily integrity" by highlighting the social and cultural dangers of pornography and homosexuality.[51] Dean's central argument is that bodily integrity is indicative of "first class citizenship" in France. The body, Dean argues, cannot be exist in rectitude while engaging in culturally shocking behavior, such as pornography and homosexuality.[52]

Dean closes her short section on homosexuality and the war by stating that homosexuality was a direct threat to French masculine ideals, and more importantly, that the homosexual body was viewed as "boundaryless," making the national attempt to restore integrity impossible.[53] Within this work, Dean begins to compound the issue of relating homosexual sexual activity with the French Great War veteran, and perhaps even the British Great War veteran. In the case of Owen and the scholarship surrounding him, his perhaps "boundaryless" body makes it difficult to fit him into the greater British nationalist narrative. Dean's argument of "bodily integrity" underscores what one could argue the central issues facing modern British homosexual veterans in post-war scholarship, the potential to be found wanting of honor.

Literary scholar Sarah Cole's 2001 article, "Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War," presents two key points about male friendship during the First World War. Cole argues

---

[50] Carolyn J. Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 146.
[51] Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France,* 145-172.
[52] Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France,* 155-170.
[53] Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France,* 161.

through literary analysis that masculine intimacy and male friendship did not "function" as the "culture demanded" in Britain the time of the Great War, because it was too intimate and the war required close living quarters.[54] Her second point was the recurring figure of the "bereaved male friend," a trope that Cole argues became the war's "representative *par excellence*."[55] What makes Cole's work significant to the historical study of homosexuality in World War I is her analysis of Owen's participation in the "bereaved male friend" trope, particularly his nearly morbid fascination with pity and self-sacrifice.[56] It is worth noting—and will be discussed later in more detail—how this fascination with the "bereaved male friend" trope can in many ways cloud the sexual nature of Owen's work. Establishing the growth and power of the trope is important in understanding the full scope of the historical context surrounding Owen's work and the somewhat narrow interpretations that have occurred over the last near century in relation to his poetry, and by proxy, his biography.

Historian Max Egremont has published many biographies on World War I greats, including Sassoon. In 2014, he published *Some Desperate Glory: the First World War the Poets Knew*, an anthology of the Great War poets, such as Owen, Sassoon, and Rupert Brooke, offering poems, along with their historical and biographical context. This book is unique in its organization, having each chapter represent a year of the war, and within each chapter, each individual writer is discussed concurrently. When discussing homosexual war poets, Egremont

---

[54] Sarah Cole, "Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War," (Elh no. 2, 2001: 469. Project MUSE, EBSCOhost, accessed April 17, 2016), 470.
[55] Cole, "Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War," 470.
[56] Cole, "Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War," 471.

mentions Sassoon but noticeably not Owen.[57] However, Egremont does assert that Owen's relationship with his mother Susan must have been "strained" due to his homosexuality.[58] He offers little evidence of this, aside from his own perception that Owen excluded certain stories from his letters to his mother. He also is careful to suggest biographer Dominic Hibberd's hinting that Owen "found sex" in Paris is based on flimsy evidence.[59] Egremont's discussion of homosexuality amongst other World War I poets, specifically Sassoon, is minimal. Both Cole and Egremont authored significant works and as such, they are significant contributors to the study of Wilfred Owen and his sexuality.

What these works do is assist in the framing of Owen's sexuality, particularly within the context of his poetry. These works paint Owen as a war poet in a very close relationship with his mother. However, what the works do not delve into is the absence of the erotic and sexual within the presentation of Owen as a man. This paper seeks to establish not only Owen's sexuality, but the importance of it. While sexual activity is not the maker of a person, I will argue that the absence of his physical sexuality within a number of major works analyzing his life and poetry is symptomatic of the larger internalized homophobia begotten in pre-and post-Great War Britain. Owen is an example of the stigmatization of homosexual sex within British society. While details of Owen's activity are not of import, what is significant is the way in which Owen presented his own sexuality not only within his poetry, but within letters to his mother, siblings, cousins, and friends. These sources, I will argue, demonstrate Owen's sexual interest and agency.

---

[57] Max Egremont, *Some Desperate Glory: The First World War the Poets Knew*, (New York City: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 3.
[58] Egremont, *Some Desperate Glory: The First World War the Poets Knew*, 31.
[59] Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France,* 32.

In terms of the language that will be employed throughout this work, “homosexual” will be employed to describe Owen’s purported sexual persuasion and the society in which he lived. “Queer” would be unfitting in the context, given its contemporary rebirth of meaning. In order to avoid the proto-typical reaction to Owen’s relationships—that being that there is no evidence to prove that they were ever physical—the terms “homosocial” and “homoromantic” will be used where appropriate as to denote the difference between social and more intimate relations. These terms are crucial to the discussion of Owen and his relationship with his cousin Leslie Gunston and fellow poet Sassoon. Perhaps, Owen’s romantic relationships did at times become physical. However, it is impossible to establish this, and as such, it is important to demonstrate the sexual nature of both of these relationships rhetorically, which will be accomplished by the employment of the aforementioned term, homoromantic.

This paper seeks to answer the following inquires: What were the cultural components that led to the erasure of Owen’s sexuality up until this point in scholarship? In what way are they still affecting one’s understanding of Owen now? What evidence is there of Owen’s homosexuality within primary sources? What damage does this absence do to the memory of Wilfred Owen? Though this topic has been touched upon since the mid-1960’s, this work seeks to take a deeper look into the systematic undermining of Owen’s unique masculinity and sexual prowess.

The sources that will be employed in Section I are poetic works, those that have been published and some that are in draft form, as well as correspondence to and from Owen. In Section II, memoirs and government papers will be employed to contextualize major biographic

and scholarly works on Owen composed by British scholars post-World War I, while in Section III contemporary biographies will be explored.

Section I: Owen as a homosexual man: "All women, without exception, annoy me."

Owen, more than most poets, has an extremely malleable posthumous reputation, which allows critics to employ his work in order to support their own ideological problems, such as theories on the effects of war on the writing mind in Max Egremont's *Some Desperate Glory: The First World War the Poets Knew*. With this reality in mind, it stands to reason that his sexuality would in turn become a tool. The reason for the controlled absence of his sexuality is the result not only of the calculated effort on the part of the Owen family, but because of societal constructions that existed before and during Owen's life and permeated decades beyond this death. These were the effect of the Oscar Wilde scandal, the protection of "male friendship," British attitudes about sex, Owen's own omissions of his sexual life in correspondence (which is understandable and will be delved into later), and perhaps most importantly, the protection of homoerotism in poetry as simply "art." The presentation of these issues within the biographizing and scholarship of Owen will be discussed more in depth in Section II.

On May 25, 1895, Oscar Wilde, a British writer, was sentenced to jail after enduring three trials. The first was Wilde**'s** failed suit against the Marquess of Queensberry who libeled him for "posing as a sodomite." The subsequent two involved the British Crown's prosecution of Wilde for committing acts of gross indecency with other men. While these trials are not the sole molder of the modern identity of the male homosexual in Britain, they did cultivate a culture in which specific fears existed in regards to homosexuals, such as the assertion that all

homosexuals are potential predators.[60] Wilfred Owen would have been two at the time of the Wilde trials. Though far removed from the trials metropolitan landscape, Owen decidedly grew up in a post-Wilde society.

After the Oscar Wilde trials, there was no great purging of homosexual citizens, nor was there a drop in homosexual arrests. The subculture of homosexuality endured, particularly in the city of London.[61] In addition, historian Matt Cook recounts how Roger Casement, humanitarian activist, Irish nationalist, and poet, found “plentiful sexual opportunities for casual [homosexual] sex in London” immediately preceding the Great War.[62] With this in mind, one can assume that the assault of war did not change the accessibility of homosexual sexual encounters amongst British males, particularly within more metropolitan areas, where Owen perhaps took leave. Also, the war could have potentially made homosexual encounters more likely, but also more threatening.

It is important to note that Owen existed in a world in which homosexuality, and particularly homosexual sex, faced dire consequences. As such, to assert that Owen’s nativity would have shielded him from sex, is perhaps unfounded. In the *Manual of Military Law: War Office, 1914, 1914*, which would have been in circulation when Owen and his fellow poet-soldiers were enlisted, the offense of sodomy is discussed in great detail. The *Manual of Military Law: War Office, 1914* was employed as a guideline for various offenses committed by soldiers or military personnel while they were in active duty. Sodomy is defined by the manual as when

---

[60] Joseph Bristow, "The blackmailer and the sodomite: Oscar Wilde on trial." Feminist Theory 17, no. 1 (April 2016): 41. Publisher Provided Full Text Searching File, EBSCOhost (accessed April 16, 2016).
[61] Matt Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality: 1885-1914*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 120.
[62] Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality: 1885-1914*, 120.

"a male has carnal knowledge of Sodomy or an animal or has carnal knowledge of a human being 'per anum.'"[63] This harkens back to the notion of homosexual sex equating with zooaphila, meaning that homosexual sex, particularly penetration, is base.[64] By equating the two, which still occurs in social and political realms today, it becomes nearly impossible to empathize with the male convicted of such heresy, and thus homosexual sex can be viewed as an inhuman act that should be punished. The manual goes on to stipulate that not unlike charges of rape, penetration is required to constitute carnal knowledge.[65] However, within the confines of British law, it would appear that that word carnal, is meant to denote a libidinous and licentious nature. If to constitute carnal knowledge within the confines of rape and sodomy, one must penetrate, that implies a certain amount of lack of control and a near animalistic nature of homosexual sex, in that it is equated to rape and/or zooaphila. The manual goes on to state that any person over the age of fourteen allowing "himself or herself" to be known in this manner is guilty of the same offence.[66] As such, heterosexual pairings where subject to punishment as well as male homosexual pairings.[67]

The manual does become more explicit as it goes on state that it is a gross offense specifically for a male person to "in public or private, to commit, or to be a party to" any form of gross indecency with another male person, or to "procure the commission of any such act."[68] "Gross indecency"—the British people would recall memories of the Wilde trials, in which

---

[63] *Manual of Military Law: War Office, 1914*, 6th ed. London: Printed under the Authority of H.M. Stationery Off., 1914, accessed September 04, 2015.
[64] Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality: 1885-1914,* 120.
[65] *Manual of Military Law: War Office, 1914*, 97.
[66] *Manual of Military Law: War Office, 1914*, 97.
[67] Assumedly, the British government was not considering lesbian encounters at this time.
[68] *Manual of Military Law: War Office, 1914*, 97.

engaging in gross indecency was the central charge—refers to the criminal offense between men or to a child.[69] Again, the consistent legal equation of homosexual acts to inequivalent acts, such as bestiality or molestation, only further serves to stigmatize homosexual men, thus making the equation of homosexual man and war hero very difficult within British society. The manual also states that to engage in such a grossly indecent act in public, to publically expose a person, or to sell or expose for sale or view any obscene book, print, picture, or other indecent exhibition" is also punishable by law.[70]

Committing sodomy was a considered an assault charge and could result in a sentence of penal servitude for life.[71] The central difference between penal servitude for a heterosexual sex offender and homosexual sex offender was the psychological aspect. Sodomy between two men was treated very differently from sodomy between a man and woman. This harkens back to the society that Churchill continued to cultivate long after the war, that "practicing" homosexual men were mentally ill, and needed to be dually punished and cured. Given the stark and aggressive nature of the *Manual of Military Law: War Office, 1914*, the lingering threat of reprisal and the cultural momentum of homosexuals as abnormal, permeates long after the war.

In addition, the existence of male prostitutes during the Great War is well-documented. Owen, as will be discussed later this section, dealt with themes of rent boys in his poetic works. In "Male Sex Work in Modern Times," historian Kerwin Kaye discusses the varied history of male prostitution in modern times and how at the turn of the century there was a large spike in

[69] "Section 51," *Offences against the Person Act 1861*, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/24-25/100/contents, accessed 14 February 2016.
[70] *Manual of Military Law: War Office, 1914*, 97.
[71] *Manual of Military Law: War Office, 1914*, 118.

male transvestite prostitutes, commonly referred to at the time as "fairies."[72] Kaye also states that male sex workers ("fairies" and "queers") were commonly lower class, not unlike Owen himself.[73] A large schism existed between "normal" men and "fairies" and as such, "fairies" or "queers" were seen as lower class, primarily because they engaged in effeminate sexual acts.[74] Homosexual sex was a two-fold evil: predatory and emasculating. Owen himself discusses rent boys in a few of his works. One could argue this was his own special callback to his all-time favorite, Keats, who was a frequent patron of brothels, and/or merely something he observed during his time in France. But one might also argue that these works were the result of his own sexual desire, or perhaps even, sexual experience.

Owen's access and knowledge of the homosexual culture of the time perhaps was influenced and edited by his mother. And perhaps, his commitment to poetry and education combated this. As such, Owen's sexual leanings and interests are best revealed in his personal writings. Owen himself did not speak much on his sexuality directly outside of his poetic works. However, many of his drafts and letters were destroyed by family members for undisclosed reasons, and as such evidence of his sexual agency may have existed in print, but one will never know.[75] As most biographers and Owen scholars enjoy pointing out, the lion's share of his correspondence was with his mother Susan.[76] Given the nature of their relationship is portrayed as being quite close, and one could argue, in some ways, co-dependent. This combined with her religious fervor, it would make sense that Owen would choose to not mention certain aspects of

---

[72] Kerwin Kaye, *Male Sex Work and Society*. "Male Sex Work in Modern Times," (New York City: Harrington Park Press, LLC,) 2.
[73] Kaye, "Male Sex Work in Modern Times," 4.
[74] Kaye, "Male Sex Work in Modern Times," 4.
[75] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 288-291.
[76] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 288-291.

his life to his mother. Homosexuality and sexual relations outside of marriage remain a grave sin in Christianity and would not have been accepted nor tolerated by Susan Owen.[77] The destruction of documentation and the overall blurring of Owen's sexuality, or at least, sexual interest appears to stem from the notion that Owen could not be a war hero and a practicing homosexual. The practicing portion is important in the overall framing of Owen because it allows one to have an additional understanding of Owen beyond that of the narrative that is so frequently presented. Unfortunately, all that one learns about who Owen truly was can be discovered from his sparse, but lovely, correspondence, and his poetry.

Much of Owen's unpublished works and letters were destroyed and/or censored by seemingly well-meaning or fearful family members, the details of which will be discussed more in depth in Section II. Fussell recounts that the primary perpetrators of these exclusions were Susan Owen and one of his siblings, Harold Owen. His mother burned "a sack full" of his papers, apparently at Owen's own request, and his brother Harold Owen for many years prevented research into Owen's private life.[78]

However, Robert Graves, a poet, fellow soldier, and friend, asserted in an interview that Owen was a homosexual and upcoming figurehead in homosexual circles in London.[79] By Graves' account, Owen was essentially out, by contemporary terms, which is a very modern thing, and adds to the importance and significance of Owen's sexuality in not only his history as a soldier, poet, and human, but in the greater contextualization of British queer history and

[77] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 288-291.
[78] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 462.
[79] Guy Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 264.

World War I.[80] It is almost as if Owen is portrayed as believing homosexual love is better, because it functions outside of the boundaries of societal norms. This is an echoing of the previously discussed male friendship and artistic aesthetic that so permeated the minds of British males post-World War I. However, Owen's poetic and personal works when analyzed with Owen's sexual identity in mind become more complex than the simple assertion of homosexuality as a style choice.

Poetic works

As literary scholar Douglas Kerr states, "all of Owen's history is inscribed in his language."[81] Given that there is limited primary source material authored by Owen, it would be a disservice to not include his poems in the understanding of his sexuality. Also, the homoeroticism in his works has been downplayed over the years to be not erotic but rather artistic. Owen's art was his poetry, and as such, the homoerotism expressed within it can be described accurately as artistic expression. However, that is perhaps not all his poetry was representative of. Again, Owen falls under the protection of "artistic license." Rather, Owen most likely fell somewhere in between. His primary idols were John Keats and Byron, who famously wrote primarily about women.[82] Their sensuousness perhaps influenced Owen's works, which, both before and during the war, in many ways act as an homage to his great idols. However, Owen was his own artist and put himself into his writing. It is not far-fetched to say that Owen was writing Romantic poetry about forms and people that he found to be erotic and

[80] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 348.
[81] Kerr, *Wilfred Owen's Voices, 332.*
[82] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 89.

romantic—often the male body. His poetry delves into a complex duality of masculinity and homosexuality. This section will offer a close reading of seven of Owen's works composed both before and during the war: "Disabled," "Mental Cases," "Arms and the Boy," "I am the Ghost of Shadwell Stair," "Has Your Soul Sipped?," "Reunion," and "Storm."[83] It will work towards an understanding of the sexuality presented within the works, and how Owen's focus on the male body speaks to his own bodily interests, outside of the artistic.[84]

"Disabled" was written in the fall of 1917 and is one of his best known works. "Disabled" deals directly with the aftermath of the dismemberment of men through the exploration of a wounded veteran. Composed in rhymed verse, "Disabled" depicts a nineteen year-old soldier confined to a wheelchair after losing all of his limbs in battle. To say the boy "threw away" his knees is yet another way in which Owen communicates to the reader that war and suffering are futile.[85] Notice Owen did not say he "sacrificed" his knees. This boy is representative of the "living dead" that returned to their homes after the war.[86] Owen goes on to describe the foolhardy and flippant circumstances in which the wounded boy had joined the British Army. He volunteered after he had "drunk a peg" and enjoyed the feeling of a "blood-

[83] All poems in full can be found in the appendix.
[84] Though the premier Great War, Owen had only five of his works published in his lifetime. Three of those were featured in The Nation and two were published anonymously in The Hydra. In 1919, just two years after his death, more of his poems were featured in Wheels, Edith Sitwell's annual anthology, and seven other poems were published in periodicals in 1919 and 1920. As such, the bulk of his poems were first introduced to the public in Poems in 1920, which was edited by Siegfried Sassoon, and contained twenty-three of his works. The Poems of Wilfred Owen was published in 1930 and added nineteen poems to the previously published. It was not until 1963 when the C. Day Lewis edited The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen was published, the contents and circumstances of this anthology will be discussed more in Section II. As such, the "publication" dates of these works are seemingly irrelevant to the overall analysis of them. Where possible, dates and corresponding events will be introduced with the poem. Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 464.
[85] Wilfred Owen, *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, "Disabled," (New York: New Directions Publications, 1965), 67.
[86] Owen, "Disabled," 67.

smear down his leg" during a game of football.[87] Owen also notes how the crowds that greeted the boy's return were smaller and less enthusiastic than those who cheered his departure. The boy felt shameful upon his return, particularly because the women no longer looked at him but at "the strong men who were whole."[88]

In this way, Owen exposes psychological trauma, the physical disabilities, and the societal shunning that soldiers faced after the war. The boy's ability to use his physical appearance and masculinity are gone. Clearly, masculinity, sexual prowess, and "looking good in kilts" was important to this young man and helped to define his self-identity, which has now been completely eliminated.[89] Owen implies that British women will have little to no interest in having sex with a man so disabled, stating:

> Tonight he noticed how the women's eyes
> Passed from him to the strong men that were whole.
> How cold and late it is! Why don't they come
> And put him into bed? Why don't they come?

Owen is not only harsh on the wives and mothers of wounded soldiers, but also the way in which society treats them when they return from battle. Here Owen appears to underscore the hypocrisy of how a society so consumed by bodies would willingly destroy them willing in the name of war only to then forsake those same bodies when they returned home in an imperfect state. Owen also directly confronts the "disability tropes of asexuality," or the assumption that the young man has lost his sexuality along with his limbs.[90] The loss of masculine representation equates to the severance of sexual prowess and desire. One could argue that the young man in

---

[87] Owen, "Disabled," 67.
[88] Owen, "Disabled," 67.
[89] Owen, "Disabled," 67.
[90] George Ewane Ngide, "A 'War Poet'or A 'Poet At War': Wilfred Owen and the Pity of War," (International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature, no. 1 2015,) 174.

"Disabled" views his body as his gateway to power. If we assume, based off of Owen's description, that the boy in the poem possesses a "Grade One" body, the boy is athletic and shapely.[91] This gives the poem an added sense of sensuality.

For a young man of the time, Owen seems to argue that a large of part of the boy's identity was his masculinity. To Owen, it was not just the ripping of a body, but a destruction of personhood. The British male identity was conscious of bodies. Particularly, good bodies (Grade One bodies) and how male shapes inform British masculine identity. As such, the destruction of male identity is performed by the destruction of the body. It is characteristic of Owen to focus on one soldier to make the reader become personally invested. His poems, particularly "Disabled," do not deal with the abstract or philosophical questions of war, but rather the consequences of those wonderings.

This personhood is perhaps what Owen would consider a "soul." Given Owen's thorough Christian background, it is not a leap to assume that he would share the Abrahamic notion that to destroy the soul is one of the basest of actions. To have a society place a young person's worth solely within the presentation of his body, and send them willingly to destroy that body and by proxy, their worth, pride, and identity is obscene. As Owen states, "Tonight he noticed how the women's eyes passed from him to the strong men that were whole."[92] Owen critiques this notion

[91] Physical examinations classified men into categories in terms of present or potential physical preparedness for combat. Initially, three categories existed (those being A, B, and C). However, in 1917 the War Office altered their classification process and expanded it into four grades (One, Two, Three, and Four). Grade One includes men who were deemed fit for service abroad, i.e. battle. Grade Two was composed of recruits that were fit for service abroad in a support capacity, or service on the home front. Grade Three were men that were deemed unsuitable for combat. Any men placed into Grade Four were deemed "utterly unfit." Grades were not simply determined by general appearance. As Bourke points out: "shape was crucial." Chest width, height, and weight also informed which grade each man would be placed into. The issue of graded bodies is discussed further in Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[92] Owen, "Disabled," 67.

two-fold in "Disabled" by showcasing how the boy feels and how society would treat him. Owen underscores the true, devilish obscenity of World War I and the society that allowed it to come into being.

"Mental Cases," in many ways, is also a depiction of the loss of masculine control. Composed in May of 1918 after his stay in Craiglockhart, "Mental Cases" bears witness to the obscene violence that ultimately leaves these men incapacitated.[93] Soldiers see their hallucinations through a wall of blood—"Sunlight becomes a blood-smear; dawn comes blood-black."[94] By employing complex syntax that is reminiscent of Shakespeare, such as "like skull's teeth wicked," Owen evokes the ghost of Macbeth.[95] Owen borrows directly from *Macbeth*, using a scene in which the titular character notes that he is covered in too much blood to turn back. "Mental Cases" eludes to the haunting notions of war—"sloughs of flesh," "shatter of flying muscles"—that the soldiers can never escape or turn back from. Macbeth (both character and work) consider masculinity a display of naked aggression and sexual potency.[96]

Given Owen's voracious appetite for the written word, it is likely that he read *Macbeth* and was aware of the heightened militaristic masculinity within it. Shakespeare remains a staple of British academia and culture, and as such, his impact on the understanding of masculinity and narrative norms cannot be overstated. *Macbeth* is powerful masculine figure, and Owen takes this innate societal familiarity with the text and flips it on the reader. Owen takes a champion of masculinity and manipulates it to showcase the obscenity and terror of World War I. This parallel speaks to how Owen is not simply critiquing war, but is also critiquing the society in

---

[93] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 96.
[94] Owen, "Mental Cases," 69.
[95] Owen, "Mental Cases," 69.
[96] Owen, "Mental Cases," 69.

which war is glamorized and sustained. In Act I, Macbeth cries, “Come thick night and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell.”[97] Owen, in turn, sets the final stanza of “Mental Cases” with similar phrasing. The “night comes blood-black” and forces the “mental cases” to encounter “human squander rucked too thick” for the men to break free from the war and confines of the horrors in their own minds.[98] Owen forces the reader to encounter the “hilarious, hideous, awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.”[99]

Owen composed “Arms and the Boy” in early 1918, most likely when he was at Borrage Lane’s Ripon Army Camp. [100] It acts as another in a long list of Owen’s works that delve into the vulnerability of the young and impressionable. Cuthbertson correctly states that the influence of Virgil’s *Aeneid* is present throughout this work, particularly prevalent in the title, which references Virgil’s “I sing of arms and the man.”[101] This work ultimately deals in physical vulnerability and is inherently erotic. This eroticism has been loosely touched on by other scholars, such as Kerr and Cuthberston; however the Christian and Roman themes of the work tend to overshadow the rough physicality of it. Hibberd argues that this work is a product of a mass-writing of Owen’s during March of 1918, highlighting the “elegiac” and “expansive” themes of these works; “Arms and the Boy” being one of them.[102] All of these interpretations have an innate value in one’s understanding of Owen’s work. This analysis seeks to highlight the perhaps overlooked eroticism of the work.

---

[97] William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 16.
[98] Owen, “Mental Cases,” 69.
[99] Owen, “Mental Cases,” 69.
[100] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 390-391.
[101] Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen,* 123.
[102] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 390.

The poem is about a young, inexperienced soldier. The narrator, who reads almost as if it were the gun itself, wants him to feel his bayonet and see how cold it is. He also wants him to "stroke" his bullets and examine a cartridge of "fine zinc teeth." The boy is not made for war, however. He should be "laughing around an apple." In the first stanza, the poem begins with the narrator asking the reader to let the boy "try along this bayonet blade / How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood."[103] Bayonet blade gives the reader a sense of the phallic and the dangerous. This "blade" is "keen" with "hunger." Owen's word choice here is particularly interesting because it alludes to the reader that the blade has a sense of lust, the "blade" "hungers" for the boy's "blood."

The second stanza reads: "Lead him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-leads/ Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads, or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth/Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death."[104] This stanza highlights Owen's use of the body as a metaphor for innocence, but also with sexual implications. The "stroke" and "nuzzle" could be intended to signify to the reader the salaciousness of war.[105] The boy is tainted by the arms, and this can best be articulated to society by way of the maturation and use of the boy's body with the weapon. The speakers wants the reader to know that the weapon does damage to a seemingly innocent body. While the intent of the poem is not inherently sexual, Owen does careful work to present the gun as genital, a new and dangerous object that the boy "nuzzles" and "strokes."[106] One could argue that while seemingly damning weapons in the literal sense, Owen is also making a commentary on sex, particularly men's role in sex. Guns, fitting well into the masculine standard

---

[103] Owen, "Arms and the Boy," 43.
[104] Owen, "Arms and the Boy," 43.
[105] Owen, "Arms and the Boy," 43.
[106] Owen, "Arms and the Boy," 43.

of the time, are something a boy should desire and that British boys were taught to find interest in. Owen, unlike other boys, conversely desires another type of gun, which could potentially do equal damage. Innocence is broken in a two-fold pattern: by the constraints of masculinity, requiring young "boys" to be set off to war, and by sexual activity. Poetry, without question, is always open to interpretation. Owen presents his physical vulnerability and his observation that war enhances the beauty of the male form.[107] However, by eliminating the notion that Owen would be considering sex, one loses Owen's more complex social commentary that is present throughout "Arms and the Boy" and his other works that sex, war, and masculinity are linked—damaging, exploitive, and exciting.

"I am the Ghost of Shadwell Stair" was composed in 1918 and revised in the following summer.[108] Owen may have based this poem on Wilde's "Impression du Matin.[109] "I am the Ghost of Shadwell Stair" describes a "ghost" haunting the Shadwell Dock Stair. When the dock sirens announce the dawn, it is revealed that the ghost has "lain" with another ghost.[110] Arguably, Owen can be viewed as representative of the first ghost ("*I* am the ghost of Shadwell Stair"),[111] while the second could perhaps be a rent boy.[112] The ghost is a "shadow" who walks with flesh that is "both firm and cool."[113] The ghost possesses "tumultuous" eyes, the streets

---

[107] Kerr, *Wilfred Owen's Voices*, 128, 157-158.
[108] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 379.
[109] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 379.
[110] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 379.
[111] Emphasis added.
[112] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 379.
[113] Owen, "I am the ghost of Shadwell Stair," 94.

"shudder," and the ghost watches "always.[114] In this work, Owen presents a very romantic scenery of the dock, describing the "purple street-arc" contrasting with the moon and lamps.[115]

It seems likely that the second "ghost" then may be not meant to be a rent boy but another man 'haunting' (a contemporary term for cruising) the docks. What is remarkable is how subversive the poem remains almost a century after it was written. This reading of "I am the Ghost of Shadwell Stair" is not common. Hibberd delves into the sexual nature of the work, whereas Cuthbertson simply uses as an example of Owen's implementation of place that Owen may have observed post-Craiglockhart.[116] By grappling with Owen as a sexual entity one gains a more nuanced perspective of "I am the Ghost of Shadwell Stair."

"Has Your Soul Sipped?" was written sometime between Owen's arrival at Craiglockhart War Hospital in late June 1917 and his life-changing meeting with Siegfried Sassoon in mid-August.[117] Owen claims to have witnessed a "strange sweetness," that is sweeter than the song of the nightingale, the smell of a leaf and the passion of a love that is dying.[118] Then he goes on to say that more beautiful than all this and more is the face of a dying soldier. It is all fine for people to talk of killing one's enemy but for him the face of a dying soldier and the wan smile on his face as life ebbs out is beautiful. One of the unusual comparisons the poet makes are "sweeter than death/And dreams hereafter/To one in dearth."[119] For someone who endures abject poverty, death can be sweet and also the dreams that come thereafter. The "strange sweetness" was the smile on a "boy's murdered mouth,"

---

[114] Owen, "I am the ghost of Shadwell Stair," 94.
[115] Owen, "I am the ghost of Shadwell Stair," 94.
[116] Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen*, 189.
[117] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 325.
[118] Owen, "Has Your Soul Sipped?," 112.
[119] Owen, "Has Your Soul Sipped?," 112.

But with the bitter blood
    And the death-smell
All his life's sweetness bled
    Into a smile[120]

With this poem, the title remains of the utmost importance. In "Has Your Soul Sipped?" Owen requires the reader to ask, "who's soul has sipped?" Owen watches a young man bleed to death and finds the sight to be "supremely beautiful."[121] As Hibberd states in his analysis of "Has Your Soul Sipped?," bleeding mouths in many Romantic works are considered markers of "passionate excess."[122] Owen writes that he saw the man's "round mouth" turn "crimson."[123] This image of a bleeding mouth has a deep sexual significance for Owen, from which he gets a sense of gratification. Perhaps, the soul that has sipped is Owen's, as he finds sexual and aesthetic gratification from this Adonis with a smile as a "wan, worth myth" death.[124] As such, many of Owen's works could potentially be interpreted as possessing a sexual component as Owen engages with the destroyed male body in a voyeuristic nature. This is not a pleasant interpretation of Owen's more notable works, but it is an honest one.

"Reunion" was drafted in June/July of 1917 at Craiglockhart Hospital and revised for the final time in Scarborough in 1918.[125] It is a very explicit and sexual poem. Owen describes a narrator and a figure who were "two/ Against the town's taboo."[126] This pair become "one"

---

[120] Owen, "Has Your Soul Sipped?," 112.
[121] Owen, "Has Your Soul Sipped?," 112.
[122] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 326.
[123] Owen, "Has Your Soul Sipped?," 112.
[124] Owen, "Has Your Soul Sipped?," 112.
[125] "Reunion," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed March 19, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5180.
[126] "Reunion," by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed March 19, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5180.

under the “anger of the sun.”[127] As Hibberd points out, a manuscript entitled “Who is the god of Canongate” further alludes to the same themes. This work is seemingly about a rent boy who is represented as a “little god” who is visited up “secret stairs” by men who “lift their lusts and let them spill.”[128] While these works allude to the frequent aesthetic of young men as an artistic mode, Owen differs by taking these allusions a step further. In “Reunion,” Owen implies penetration by stating that the pair becomes “one.” The pair embraces and writhes.[129] While not one of Owen’s best works, it is a telling poem in terms of his sexual interest. “Reunion,” perhaps given that is a draft piece, is sorely under analyzed. Hibberd provides a three sentence analysis in his biography, but within his concision, he makes a point to highlight the illicit and sexual nature of the relationship presented in the work.[130]

“Storm” is a manuscript dated October 1916.[131] This sonnet imagines a poet as a tree that attracts lightning from a beautiful face, their coupling results in the birth of poetry. While this poem’s primary theme is poetic creation, it also speaks of sexual frustration. Owen places the tree in a dark wood experiencing the “horrors of an obscene mind” that cause the tree to become “afraid of self.”[132] Lines two through four (“'When it shadowed me/I shook, and was uneasy as a tree/That draws the brilliant danger, tremulous, bowed”) acknowledge a submission

[127] “Reunion,” by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed March 19, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5180.
[128] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 379.
[129] “Reunion,” by Owen, Wilfred (1893-1918). The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate via *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed March 19, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5180.
[130] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 379.
[131] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 191.
[132] Owen, “Storm,” 105.

to a dangerous attraction.[133] "Tremulous, bowed" further enhances how the "storm" equates to love and passion.

Readings of "Storm" tend to focus on its odd relationship between the metaphorical and the naturalistic. Cuthbertson states that while this poem might be a "homosexual love poem," it a "puzzling" work, and that its power lies in its "mysteriousness."[134] He later states that some of Owen's poems are open to "gay readings."[135] Perhaps a "gay reading" of "Storm" would read as such: Owen employs naturalistic and metaphorical to convey to the reader the passion he feels for the male body. Within "Storm," Owen's "tree" attempts to "tempt" the "face" to lose its "lightening." Owen then states that the gods' beauty is representative of death ("Great gods, whose beauty is death, will laugh above").[136] The male beauty, "who made his beauty lovelier than love," is perhaps a representative of the wounded and killed young soldiers that Owen bore witness to during the Great War. Beyond this, the sultry, sexiness of "Storm" is perhaps best articulated in Owen's final stanza:

> And happier were it if my sap consume;
> Glorious will shine the opening of my heart;
> The land shall freshen that was under gloom;
> What matter if all men cry aloud and start,
> And women hide bleak faces in their shawl,
> At those hilarious thunders of my fall?

The tree's "sap" could easily equate to sexual fluid that is released in the presence of the "glorious" male storm.[137] The "opening" of the tree's "heart" causes the grass to grow, and the

---

[133] Owen, "Storm," 105.
[134] Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen*, 153.
[135] Cuthbertson places gay readings within quotes within the text. This in essence undercuts the homoerotic readings of Owen's work, making them appear as frivolous. Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen,* 261.
[136] Owen, "Storm," 105.
[137] Owen, "Storm," 105.

land to flourish. This naturalistic representation of fertility again calls into question the nature and intention of the “sap.” The male storm wracks the tree, consumes its “sap,” causes light to shine through the tree’s heart, and this dual male coupling results in “freshening land.” The tree and storm’s “fall,” cause men to holler, and women to hide.[138] Women, as in “Disabled,” again take a mocking, background role; only appearing at the end of the work, almost as representatives of society who disapprove and shame.

Kerr argues that early 20th century literary homoerotism is an act of protection, laden with coded language and private editions.[139] In a post-Wilde Britain Owen found “homoeroticism unabashed” and viewed it as a legitimate “theme for poetry.”[140]As such, Owen work’s with the body in his poems can be interpreted in a two-fold way: (1) the artistic, Romantic fascination with the male form, (2) a sexual aesthetic.

What can we make of the sexual themes in Owen's poetry? One might argue that they are simply tropes, such as the Romantics “dead blonde,” and the use of the male form as an extension of society. But another way to read them, and one I propose, is that Owen was dabbling in his sexuality and this is represented wholeheartedly in his poems. When the lion’s share of his work was composed, he was in his early twenties, and away from his family, perhaps truly independent for the first time in his life. With this independence he was able to explore some aspects of life that he had always had an interest in but shirked in favor of what was required of him. His father wanted a career for him, and his mother, a lavish life. While his poems are not necessarily overt in their sexual content, it is a recurring theme. However, perhaps

---

[138] Owen, “Storm,” 105.
[139] Kerr, *Wilfred Owen's Voices,* 271.
[140] Kerr, *Wilfred Owen's Voices,* 271.

why these perspectives are not grappled with as extensively is because they are never the sole theme of the work. War, and to a lesser extent, religion, is the focus of the analysis and reverence for Owen's work. I argue that war and sex are functioning in tandem for Owen within his poems, and when the sexual agent is removed, ignored, or erased, Owen loses an important component of his manhood, and thus, his maturation.

The war perhaps brought Owen closer to what he was fascinated by most: men. In particular, beautiful men. It is not a pleasant or easy thought that Owen perhaps found pleasure in this war that he so despised. And perhaps part of what he was so horrifying for him was the destruction of the male body that he so desired. Owen, simply by nature of being a human being, existed in a world of hypocrisy and contradiction. He shames and mocks the women that ignore the "disabled," but he is eerily reverent of a man's mouth turning "crimson" with blood.[141] What is hard to negotiate and what I argue his poems as collective convey so effectively is his intellectual, emotional, political, and moral opposition to war, and his pure, sexual fascination with the consequences of it. When we embrace Owen as a hypocrite, as a wounded man, as a sexual man, we can perhaps better understand his works. He wants the "sap" of man, and understands the yearning to "nuzzle" the gun that British society so wants their men to clamor for. He abhors the damage that the arms does to the boy, but he perhaps enjoys the mural it creates.

What does this mean for the historical representation of Owen? It means that it is not easy. It means that Owen exists in a grey area, bound up by his own contradictions. These contradictions are easily handled when the sexual component of Owen's work is eliminated.

---

[141] Owen, "Disabled," 67.
Owen, "Arms and the Boy," 43.

Without the sex, Owen's poems are war poems, his immaturity can shine through, and he is more adaptable to be a British icon. However, poetry is not the only evidence of Owen's own sexual drive. While, Owen's correspondence differs greatly from his poetic works in tone, composition, and content, these letters remain a key factor in the history of Owen and one's understanding of Owen's own perception of himself, and in particular, his body and sexuality.

Correspondence

The majority of Owen's published letters were composed for Susan Owen, his mother. Within Owen's family, a personal collective memory, one consisting primarily of ritual, existed. Fussell writes that Susan Owen oversaw the publications of his work, and until her death had not allowed the publications of poems that referred to "boys" or "lads."[142] Susan Owen fought to preserve her son's memory within an acceptable societal context—heterosexual, honorable, masculine. However, the result remains the same: due to Susan's selective release of her son's work, and the tight restraints on publications while she was still alive, Owen was anthologized and presented solely as a war poet: this analysis seeks to ask the following inquiries: How do Owen's letters to his mother differ from those to his peers? Are these differences significant? More importantly, how does Owen communicate in his own words about his body, his sexuality, and where does he place himself within that space?

A few of his letters to his mother will be briefly discussed, given that the focus of much of Owen's scholarship surrounds his mother. What is of interest here in terms of shaping Owen is to remove the stranglehold of Susan, and review how he communicated outside of that

[142] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 291.

relationship. The letters that Owen wrote to his mother were very affectionate, ranging from his observations, suggestions for her health, and drafts of poems.[143] While these letters highlight the nicer nature of their relationship, they also serve as examples of the trouble Owen faced with his mother, primarily her controlling nature and his hesitancy to share parts of his life with his mother that she would not approve of.

A few of Owen's early letters from the 1910's hint at a personal and perhaps romantic interest in a neighbor girl called Bernice Cornwall. He was charmed by a French girl called Annik, and he and his brothers would frequently take walks with Mary Ragge, a childhood acquaintance.[144] Susan would frequently tease Owen, no doubt a product of jealously, when he would attempt to make friends with girls.[145] In a 1918 letter, Owen advised her to not make the same mistake with her youngest child and son, Colin, who was presumably smitten with love:

> A fever more scarlet is already inculcating [Colin's] veins…Deny him not the thing he craves, as I was denied; for I was denied, and the appeal of which, if you watched, you must have seen in my eyes, you ignored. And because I knew you resisted, I stretched no hand to take the Doll that would have made my contentment.
>
> And my nights were terrible to be borne.
>
> For I was a child, and you laughed at my Toys, so that I loved them beyond measure; but never looked at them.[146]

This letter offers two interesting observations regarding Owen and sexual practice. First, Owen views women in object-relational terms. His childhood interests are "Dolls" and "Toys," almost serving as objects of replacement for his mother.[147] Secondly, Owen is not concerned with Colin's emotional well-being, but rather the "scarlet" in his veins.[148] Owen is concerned

[143] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 291.
[144] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 59.
[145] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 59.
[146] Wilfred Owen, *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 536.
[147] Owen, *Collected Letters*, 536.
[148] Owen, *Collected Letters*, 536.

with the lust and the physical, just as Harold Owen, his brother, so proudly touted his teenager sexual prowess, Owen seems to be overwhelmingly concerned that his youngest brother will face the same fate of emasculation, humiliation, and sexual dissatisfaction.

While in France in 1914, Owen cultivated a new friendship with Laurent Tailhade, a French satirical poet, Owen recounted to his mother how Tailhade had "slobbered" over Owen, squeezing his hand, and "pressed [Owen's] head against his shoulder."[149] Owen wrote to his mother that Tailhade has "physical admiration" for him, and Susan recounted her son's excitement to Edmund Blunden, an English poet and soldier, in a 1930 letter:

> "The poet Tailhade calls my eyes 'so very lovely!!!' etc and my neck 'The neck of a statue!!!! etc.' Because he is a poet, and unconsciously appreciates in me, *not* the appearance of beauty but the Spirit and temperament of beauty, Tailhade says he is going to write a Sonnet on me."[150] [151]

This correspondence highlights Owen growing awareness of his body and perhaps as a sexual being. Owen does not appear to be self-conscious, or unaware that his body has sexual aesthetic. When he recounts to Susan Tailhade's "slobbering" and how Tailhade received him "like a lover," Owen does not present the narrative within a context of shock or disgust.[152] Owen merely states that Tailhade appeared to be quite taken with him, and Owen appreciates the recognition of his beauty.

---

[149] Dominic Hibberd, "Wilfred Owen's letters: some additions, amendments, and notes," (The Library 4, September 1982), 286.
[150] Hibberd, "Wilfred Owen's letters: some additions, amendments, and notes," 286.
[151] Hibberd added emphasis.
[152] Hibberd notes that this letter, not unlike many of Owen's, was censored. The two lines after Owen recounts Tailhade's tendency to take his head and place it on Tailhade's shoulder are carefully crossed out, and are unfortunately illegible. Hibberd, "Wilfred Owen's letters: some additions, amendments, and notes," 286.

On Valentine's Day 1914 composed a letter to his mother from where he was staying as a tutor in Bordeaux, France.[153] In this letter, Owen recounts to his mother that he is too distracted by the power of "Home," "Poetry," and the "FORCE behind both" to engage in a relationship, presumably, a romantic one. "Fifty blandishments" could never appeal to his emotions the way music or Keats does. Owen goes on to state, "All women, without exception, annoy me."[154] Women annoy him, but he seems to be aware of their beauty and their attraction to him. He recounts to his mother that she should be pleased by the "eyes that play" upon him in restaurants.[155] Some of this letter, perhaps most interestingly has yet to be addressed by a biographer, five lines are deem "illegible" after Owen explains to his mother how women annoy him and it was never his plan to end up in the town of Bordeaux.[156] What happened two earlier? Was this a family omission? Why was it omitted? Unfortunately, these questions cannot be answered. He goes on to tell his mother that he has met more "desirable" people than the women and mercenaries he complains of earlier in the letter.[157] Such as university students and a "violin boy," whom he was to have dinner with the following evening. This correspondence highlights Owen's awareness of himself as a sexual being. He knows that he possesses a form that women (and perhaps men) are physically attracted to. He does not shy from this, or play the fool, in a letter to his own admittedly possessive mother.

Outside of Susan Owen, Owen frequently corresponded with his brothers, sister, cousin Leslie Gunston, and Siegfried Sassoon. Gunston, Owen's cousin and dear friend, frequently

[153] Owen, *Selected Letters*, 89.
[154] Owen, *Selected Letters*, 89.
[155] Owen, *Selected Letters*, 89.
[156] Owen, *Selected Letters*, 89.
[157] Owen, *Selected Letters*, 89.

received early drafts of poems and anecdotes that were seemingly not conveyed to his mother. Hibberd implies in his biography that Owen and Gunston's relationship may have gone further than friendship, but there is little evidence of this, aside from their intimacy.[158] Owen and Gunston's relationship was very friendly and they consistently exchanged letters while Owen was in boot camp and on the front. Gunston would send him books and updates on the family.[159]

Owen writes to Gunston with a tone of humor at his "success" with a couple of French girls at a bar. He laughs at his fellow soldiers' distress, writing, "the dramatic irony was too killing, considering certain other things, not possible to tell in a letter."[160] The "other things" to which Owen refers could fall into a litany of categories, but the most likely of these is Owen's sexual preference. The casual way in which Owen references "other thing[s]" implies that Leslie was aware of his cousin's sexuality, and seemingly was not disturbed by it, due to Owen's tone, which has airs of sarcasm. Owen, in this sense, is very self-aware. More importantly, this denotes that Owen knew how to flirt, meaning Owen had to have some awareness of himself as a sexual being. This notion flies in the face of the classic portrayals of Owen. Owen had to have some bearings on his sexual prowess in order to flirt (successfully!) with French girls in a bar. Beyond this, Owen seems to imply that he was so successful that his peers were angry.[161]

The nature of Owen's relationship with Sassoon is highlighted in their correspondence between November of 1917 and October of 1918. Sassoon allegedly destroyed many of the letter

---

[158] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 131.
[159] "Postcard To Leslie Gunston," *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed March 13, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/items/show/3879.
[160] Owen, *Collected Letters*, 524.
[161] Owen, *Collected Letters*, 520.

he received from Owen, and Owen's own family burned "sackfuls," as well.[162] As such, the true size of their correspondence is ultimately unknown. For example, within Owen's *Collected Letters*, only seven are with Sassoon.[163] Their relationship was not necessarily sexual, but was certainly homoromantic from Owen's perspective; it is consistently their relationship was portrayed in scholarship as a "friendship" and nothing more. Their relationship was one that is representative of the relationship and fraternity between poets, however outside of the their friendship in relation to writing existed a very intimate and complex friendship that left Sassoon feeling as though Owen's death was like an "unhealed wound," and "that the ache of it has been with [Sassoon] ever since. [Sassoon] wanted him back – not his poems."[164] However, the narrative of writer and editor, mentor and mentee still holds a tremendous amount of power with the collective memory of Wilfred Owen being represented in documentaries, anthologies, and other areas of media.[165]

In a letter to Sassoon dated November 5, 1917, Owen opens his correspondence by relating to Sassoon that when he opened Sassoon's letter to him he let out a groan.[166] Within the letter was a photo of Sassoon that Owen had "waited" for and was quite pleased by. He asserts that he holds Sassoon as "Keats + Christ + Elijah + my colonel + my father-confessor + Amenophis IV in profile." [167] What is of note, and frequently overlooked, in Owen's mathematical equation for the importance of Sassoon is "Amenophis IV in profile."Keats, Christ,

[162] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 291.
[163] Owen, *Collected Letters,* 2.
[164] Graham Cooke, *Poetry and Writing of the First World War*, (Raleigh: LULU Press, 2015), 92.
[165] Examples include Maurice Hussey, *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology*, (London: Longmans, 1967.) and *Wilfred Owen: A Remembrance Tale*. Directed by Louise Hooper. Performed by Samuel Barnett and Deborah Findlay. (2007, BBC One.), Televised Program.
[166] Owen, *Collected Letters,* 505.
[167] Owen, *Collected Letters,* 505.

colonel, and the like are simple to understand in relation to how Sassoon and Owen's relationship is frequently understood.[168] "Amenophis IV in profile" appears to be a purely aesthetic to imply that Sassoon is like a work of art to Owen at which he "groans" at the sight of.[169] In the same letter Owen writes, "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."[170] And "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."[171] In a letter dated November 27, 1917 Owen writes to his "dear Siegfried" and asks for another photo of him, claiming that he was forced due to time constraints to leave the framed portrait he had previously had.[172]

In a letter to Edmund Blunden, Sassoon wrote that "Little Owen" went to see "Robbie" Ross, Oscar Wilde's former lover, and "made a very good impression."[173] He urges Blunden to include Owen in their social circle, as Sassoon believed Owen could potentially be a "very good poet some day[sic]."[174] Perhaps most importantly, Sassoon ends this letter by stating that Owen was "a very loveable creature."[175] Sassoon's letters lack the explicit romantic intonations of Owen's. However, Sassoon's letters do convey a sense of affection and intimacy beyond that of mentor and mentee. Sassoon's views on sex were very stringent (he deemed it to be "unclean"),

---

168 Keats for his poetry, Christ for his near spiritual direction, and colonel for his commanding hand in their work together as brother poets.
169 Owen, *Collected Letters,* 504 – 505.
170 Owen, *Collected Letters,* 505.
171 Owen, *Collected Letters,* 505.
172 Owen, *Collected Letters,* 510 – 512.
173Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon: The Journey from the Trenches: A Biography, 1918-1967*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 59.
174 Moorcroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon*, 59.
175 Moorcroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon*, 59.

and perhaps this mindset created a boundary in his dealings with Owen.[176] However, the exchange of photographs and pet names would lead one to believe that Sassoon was at least peripherally aware of Owen's affections.

Owen's August 31, 1918, letter is perhaps even more revealing of his romantic feelings. "I'm much nearer to you here than in Scarborough," Owen writes, "and am by so much happier. I have been incoherent ever since I tried to say goodbye on the steps of Lancaster Gate. But everything is clear now: & I'm in hasty retreat towards the Front. [...] What more is there to say that you will not better understand unsaid."[177] Owen implies that the mere physical closeness of Sassoon is enough to calm him. Owen writes that certain elements of his feelings, while they would make the letter difficult to understand, would be better left "unsaid."[178] Perhaps the "unsaid" would have been a more explicit declaration of mental, emotional, and physical affection for Sassoon. Feelings that Owen had hinted at in the letters previously discussed. This letter, with its air of finality and clandestine romanticism, is very rarely, if ever, quoted in scholarship.

In a letter to Edmund Blunden in 1932, Sassoon asserted that he was "emotionally and physically without his foundations" after Owen died.[179] The relationship between Owen and Sassoon could be interpreted as the makings of a romance. Yet, their relationship is consistently portrayed as an intimate friendship by scholars and biographers. In the context of poetry, the "master and student" relationship is how Sassoon and Owen are presented, and with the limited knowledge we have of their interaction regarding poetry composition, this would appear to be an

---

[176] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 268.
[177] Owen, *Collected Letters,* 571.
[178] Owen, *Collected Letters,* 571.
[179] Moorcroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon*, 258.

accurate description. However, Sassoon and Owen's relationship was not composed solely of poetry. In Cutbill's scathing review of Stallworthy's 1974 biography, he states that Owen yearned for love from Sassoon but did not get it, and instead gained a mentor and friend.[180] The hesitancy to place the romantic label on Sassoon and Owen's relationship is confounding given the nature of their letters and Sassoon's devotion to Owen's work and the devastation he faced after Owen's death. Owen, undoubtedly, was taken with Sassoon not only intellectually, but in a physical sense, and he was quite interested in Sassoon's beauty and the effect that Sassoon's beauty had on himself. He groans at the sight of his portrait, he is relieved by the physical closeness of being in the same city as Sassoon, but frustrated and seemingly unable to put into words how or why that he can physically share space with him. This sexual element, while perhaps not in the cards on Sassoon's end, is an important component of Owen's history, their relationship, and one's understanding of Owen as human being. Sassoon had destroyed many of the letters, not unlike Owen's mother, leaving their history to exist in partiality. The reasoning behind this destruction is unknown, but some scholars speculate that Sassoon may have done it do prevent Harold from reading them.[181]

There are many interesting aspects of Owen that are lost with his sexuality. For one, biographers, such as Hibberd and Sassoon's biographer Jean Moorcoft Wilson, assert Sassoon viewed sex as "unclean."[182] This must have created some undue tension between Owen and his friend. While the material would suggest that the romantic feelings that Owen had for Sassoon remained relatively one-sided, perhaps Owen's typical interest in sex could have potentially

---

[180] Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen*, 221.
[181] Natasha Alden, *Reading Behind the Lines: Postmemory in Contemporary British War Fiction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 92.
[182] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 268.

caused a rift between him and his dear friend, though this can never be known. Owen himself was careful not to print anything too critical about the British government, the war, or the Germans, and his fellow soldiers' "arch comments" about girls to fill the pages of *The Hydra*, a literary magazine that Owen edited for a time while he was a patient at Craiglockhart.[183] This implies that Owen's possessed a sense of self-preservation and put forward a calculated effort to present himself in a way that would maintain his own safety. Owen's "highly strung temperament" as it was described in his 1917 medical records, becomes more nuanced and complex when sex enters into our understanding of him.[184] This neurotic man was interested in what his idol deemed to be "unclean." This assists in trumping the notion that Owen was a star-struck child. With the sexual component, one can come to understand that Owen and Sassoon were engaged in an adult relationship, and Stallworthy's "childlike" Owen was aware enough to know how to present himself to the world, while concurrently maintaining the expression of sexual interests in a controlled way.

Homosexual sex, which does not have to equate to "love," was regarded as even more grotesque than the act of homosexual love. As such, one can surmise how the trope of the "bereaved friend" came into existence in Great War scholarship. Owen's alleged homosexuality is a nuanced point, opening up a litany of scholarship angles. One of those is masculinity. In scholarship, Owen's masculinity is frequently dissected, but one of the most important components of his personality: sexuality is not effectively explored. From the little present primarily in his poetry, through letters, diary entries, and secondhand accounts, one can truly

[183] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 274.
[184] "Extracts from the War Service Record of Wilfred Owen, a Lieutenant in the British Army and a War Poet, 1917-18." The National Archives. 2014. Accessed January 13, 2015. http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/greatwar/g3/cs3/g3cs3s1a.htm?

garner how intrinsic Owen's sexuality was not only to his life and to one's understanding of it but how Owen identified himself within the world.

Given the strong themes of homoromanticism and homoeroticism in Owen's work and his letters, it is somewhat odd that scholars do not identify this as an important theme, particularly given the romantic nature of Owen's letters to Sassoon. Beyond this, what is truly of note, is the way in which Owen seemingly unselfconsciously identifies and touts his sexual prowess and his own ability to attract the opposite sex. Surely, a man who can jovially tell his cousin tales of flirting with women was aware of sex enough to be interested in it. Especially, when he pointedly notes that he did not pursue these women, for reasons Leslie should already be aware of. However, this side of Owen rarely appears in his biographies.

Section II: Owen's Sexuality in Post-World War II Britain (1945 – 1975)

Wilfred Owen, at age twenty three, was a slight man just over five foot five, and a product of the Victorian aesthetic that he so admired.[185] A lover of Keats and anything French, Owen never placed much worth on sports or other traditional activities for British men in their twenties. However, joining the Artist Rifle in October of 1915 was an enthusiastic decision for Owen stating in a letter to his mother dated June 20, 1915: "I don't want the bore entraining, I don't want to wear khaki; nor yet to save my honor before inquisitive grand-children fifty years hence. But I now do most intensely want to fight," because he felt "traitorously idle" in the face all the dead young Englishmen.[186]

---

[185] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 203-215.
[186] Owen, *Collected Letters*, 67.

Owen and his peers underwent extreme physical training to prepare them for conflict, and Owen's perception of his own masculinity changed. The physicality of training was outside of anything he had previously experienced or allowed himself to experience, and he found that he enjoyed it. "I am stupidly, muscularly tired," he wrote to his mother on October 30th, 1915. He had "never felt such devotion."[187] He cut his once longer, Romantic hair to half an inch long.[188] Harold Owen, after visiting him at the training camp, noted that his once pale, delicate brother now had "an unusual appearance of physical well-being." Harold Owen wrote, "I was particularly struck by the stockily built, robust appearance he had about him … as I looked at his bare torso, I was amazed to realise what a fine little barrel of a chest he possessed."[189] Owen seemed to enjoy these physical changes, perhaps because this physical activity allowed him to connect with men in way he had never experienced before. Owen and these men built up their bodies, took pride in the long marches, their newly muscled legs and chests. Now possessing the physical hardiness that his father, Tom Owen, and brother Harold Owen so wished for him after all these years. He told his mother in the same letter in October that he was beginning to understand "under these fellows" the meaning of authority.[190]

Before one can examine the absence the idea of Owen engaging in homosexual sex in British World War I scholarship, one must first grapple with the context in which these works were being composed and the reasons this subject has been slighted until now. Years prior to the formation of what we now know as the modern United Kingdom, English law equated buggery and zoophilia, or what is known in contemporary terms as bestiality, and deemed them to be

---

[187] Owen, *Collected Letters*, 118.
[188] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 207.
[189] Owen. *Journey from Obscurity*, 162.
[190] Owen, *Collected Letters*, 118.

offences punishable by hanging. [191] The constraints of the Christian tradition cannot be overstated when dissecting the reasoning behind the erasure of homosexual relationships and peoples during World War I. Criminologist and academic, Leon Radzinowicz described the most "horrid, detestable, and sodomitical crime (among Christians not to be named) called Buggery." Homosexuals and their sex were often regarded as subhuman in nature.[192] Though homosexual societies were prevalent throughout the history of Britain, homosexual persons, particularly men, were viewed as menaces to society.[193] Homosexuality and prostitution were linked in the eyes of the law: while the latter required punishment and regulation, homosexuality was regarded as a medical condition, which required indoctrination, psychiatric assistance, and jail time.[194]

As historian Graham Robb states in his 2003 book, *Stranger: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century*, Western society tends to be under the impression that homosexuality was not discussed before 1980 and that homosexuality is on the rise within Western societies, particularly the United States and Britain.[195] This is decidedly not the case. The impact of Oscar Wilde trials on not only the homosexual society of Britain, but Britain as a whole, remains true today. Robb states that this coy assertion that such a thing as homosexual love, sex, culture, and society was not discussed, or worse simply now becoming en vogue, it is not only untrue, it is a damaging perspective. According to Robb, the truth was rather that homosexuals, particularly

---

[191] Buggery, which in the early 1300's was defined simply as "abominable heresy," is a legal and slang term, birthed in the early 1500's, for sodomy. From this point forward, "anal sex" will be employed, unless directly quoting from a primary source material. Leon Radzinowicz, *Sexual Offenses: A Report of the Cambridge Department of Criminal Science* (London, Macmillan, 1957), 358-59.

[192] Joseph Chitty, *A Practical Treatise on the Criminal Law Comprising the Practice, Pleadings and Evidence Which Occur in the Course of Criminal Prosecutions, Whether by Indictment or Information: With a Copious Collection of Precedents* (London: A.J. Valpy, 1841), 49.

[193] Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality: 1885-1914*, 120.

[194] Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality: 1885-1914,* 120.

[195] Graham Robb, *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 3.

men, had a lively and well-documented culture in London in the nineteenth century, preceding the Great War, and as such, the sexual components of homosexuality would have been somewhat common knowledge. As such, Owen, his peers, his editors, his scholars, and biographers, existed in a word that was decidedly aware of homosexual love and sex.

After World War I there was a flux of anti-homosexual pulp fiction produced with the intent to warn off innocent boys from the evils of homosexuality.[196] If homosexuality is so firmly planted as being an illegal and immoral act well into the 1960's in Britain, how can their war heroes have been engaging in such acts and maintain any sense of nationalist integrity? Kaye asserts that homosexuals in a post-World War I world were placed into two unmanageable categories: "perverts" and "fairies."[197] Documents like these assist in shaping the perhaps unconscious homophobic attitudes present in Owen's subsequent biographers, and his own brother, Harold Owen.

Before the Second World War, there was little to no scholarship on Owen. With the passing of the Second World War, there was a great burst of Owen-based scholarship. This may have been the case because Harold Owen held a fair amount of material and requested that others scholars wait for his memoir *Journey from Obscurity: Wilfred Owen, 1893-1918. Memoirs of the Owen Family* to be published.[198] The first biography on Owen was not published until 1974 and was authored by Jon Stallworthy. Harold Owen's memoir, Stallworthy and his biography, and by proxy Owen's sexuality was perhaps framed and molded by the cultural and political nature of the time. The societal mindset in regards to homosexuals, and in particular, their sex, is reflected

---

[196] Kaye, "Male Sex Work in Modern Times," 4.
[197] Kaye, "Male Sex Work in Modern Times," 5.
[198] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 464.

in the cabinets papers of 1954, in which prostitution and homosexuality are linked together in the British parliament.[199] A cabinet report composed by the Secretary of State for the Home Department and Minister for Welsh Affairs states that the law criminalizing homosexual male sex should not be reconsidered. Rather, the psychiatry available to these men in prison should be given more funding and research.[200] When disclosing a report of whether or not the law on prostitution and homosexuality should be amended (largely due to the increase of arrests for both offenses) the government papers state that while the law might be amended it would cause "keen controversy," and that "more might perhaps be done to ensure that persons convicted of homosexual offences could obtain facilities for medical treatment."[201] While one can be certain that not all British citizens felt that homosexuality was a mental disorder, its integration into the cultural and political aspects of British life indicated that this perspective would be prevalent in historical scholarship of the time.

The cabinet's assertion that the increase of homosexual offenses underlines a deep "social problem" highlights the nationalist homophobia of the time.[202] In response to the suggestion that the government provide legislation to prohibit the publication of detailed information of criminal prosecutions for homosexual offences, Prime Minister Churchill, in 1954, stated "the prudent course would be to take no action" aside from "encouraging" a "Private Member" to introduce a Bill to the House of Commons.[203] There was clearly public anxiety regarding homosexuality—it

---

[199] Cabinet Memorandum, "Sexual Offences. Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Home Department and Minister for Welsh Affairs, [17 February 1954] The National Archives, Surrey, United Kingdom.

[200] Cabinet Memorandum, "Sexual Offences. Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Home Department and Minister for Welsh Affairs, [17 February 1954] The National Archives, Surrey, United Kingdom.

[201] Cabinet Conclusion 12, "Sexual Offences," [24 February 1954] The National Archives, Surrey, United Kingdom.

[202] Cabinet Conclusion 4, "Sexual Offences," [17 March 1954] The National Archives, Surrey, United Kingdom.

[203] Cabinet Conclusion 4, "Sexual Offences," [17 March 1954] The National Archives, Surrey, United Kingdom.

would appear, as far as the British government documented, exclusively male homosexuality—that resulted in the prolonged response from the British government. This anxiety, and need to be able to pinpoint homosexuals (thus the reporting of offenses in the paper), underscores a societal issue in Britain at the time. British officials continued to refer to this “public anxiety.” In a response to Prime Minister Churchill’s suggested Private Member report, the Secretary of State for the Home Department and Minister for Welsh Affairs referred to how the reporting of homosexual arrests appeals to the “salacious reader,” could “corrupt the innocent,” and that these reports give rise to “exaggerated ideas of the prevalence of homosexual vice.”[204] However, the disadvantages, such as the rights of the press, and most importantly, the potential for a witness to come forward and corroborate a homosexual case, far “outweighed” the benefits of suppressing the press core’s reporting of arrests for homosexual offenses.[205] As such, the press rights remained the same, and homosexual cases continued to be reported in national and local papers, thus contributing to the social stigma towards homosexual men.

In 1957, the Report of the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution or as it is better known the Wolfenden[206] Report was published in response to the succession of high profile arrests for homosexuality. The committee, composed of twelve men and three women, recommended that "homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offence.”[207] The committee also asserted that

---

[204] Cabinet Memorandum, “Restrictions on Reporting of Proceedings for Homosexual Offences,” [1 April 1954] The National Archives, Surrey, United Kingdom.
[205] Cabinet Memorandum, “Restrictions on Reporting of Proceedings for Homosexual Offences,” [1 April 1954] The National Archives, Surrey, United Kingdom.
[206] After Lord Wolfenden, the chairman of the committee.
[207] Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution, 1957. *Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution.* London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

homosexuality could not be regarded as a disease, given that in “many cases it is the only symptom.”[208] Though not a perfect report, by any means, the Wolfenden report sparked an important public debate. But despite this report, male homosexuality was not officially decriminalized until 1967.[209] The intricacies of a homosexual man or woman in Britain and their relationship with society during the First War years is complex within itself. These issues go beyond legality, into damaging religious and masculine social standards. To add on the expectation of honor and the meaning of a British soldier for the British national narrative, the waters become nearly unswimmable. When delving into the military culture of the British people, one cannot overstate the impact and the relationship of government with the mentality of the idealized British soldier. The iconic representation of the masculine British soldier could not engage in such a “vice.”

Published in 1963 just under five years after the Wolfenden Report, *Journey from Obscurity* is a three volume memoir (categorized as “Childhood,” “Youth,” and “War”) that serves as an autobiography for Harold Owen himself. This memoir deals to a large extent with his relationship with Owen. The volumes have been out of print for many years and frequently cited in tandem with Sassoon’s 1928 *Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man* because they are both of the memoirist tradition.[210] Published in 1963, Harold Owen paints an interesting and engaging picture of growing up in a middle-class family in Britain before World War I. The Owen family did not possess money in abundance, and this memoir differs from the likes of Sassoon’s who

[208] Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution, 1957. *Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution.* London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
[209] Cabinet Conclusion 3. “Legislative Programme: Homosexual Law Reform, “ [27 October 1966] The National Archives, Surrey, United Kingdom.
[210] Hibberd and Stallworthy frequently place these two works in tandem, using one to explain or contrast with the other.

came from an upper-class family.[211] While describing a hard life in Shropshire, the person Harold Owen paints his eldest brother as is quite subjective, and has been called into question by later biographers. However, *Journey From Obscurity,* not unlike *Collected Letters*, serves as the basis for same scholarship on Owen. Assumedly, his letters would not have been available for academic consumption prior to their publishing, given that Susan and Harold Owen kept them in their home.[212]

While thorough, this memoir is decidedly *post eventum* and wrought with Harold Owen's fraternal and protective love for Owen, and it has many problems. However, it is highly regarded as a near primary text source and acts as a framing for nearly all historians when researching and writing on Owen. Harold Owen carefully frames his brother in a way that would not readily open him up to scrutiny. *Journey from Obscurity* is very emotional in nature and takes a firm stance on Owen's sexuality: he was not a homosexual, and even goes so far as to assert that he was heterosexual, recounting stories of talks with his brother about women.[213] These conversations, discussing war and women in tandem, very well may have occurred. However, Harold Owen does not within the confines of this work, nor any of the other works he contributed to, such as *Collected Letters* address the rumors of his brother's homosexuality. Harold Owen was, not unlike British society at the time, hyper-focused on his brother's body and physical presence. Harold Owen claims that his brother's hands were a dead giveaway for his "abnormal" interests. Harold Owen describes them as "clean, blue-veined," and "delicate" looking.[214] The "abnormal" interest, seem to serve in the work as an argument for how Owen was an intellectual, not a

---

[211] Owen, *Journey from Obscurity,* 110.
[212] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 464.
[213] Owen, *Journey from Obscurity,* 45.
[214] Owen, *Journey from Obscurity*, 85.

necessarily a homosexual. Harold Owen did not share these “abnormal” interests, such as reading, and makes that very clear in the first volume, entitled “Childhood”. Here, Harold Owen appears to employ his brother’s atypical masculinity as a bench marker for his own hyper-masculinity, frequently highlighting his own interest in ships and fishing, and how he differed from his siblings because of his “sturdy” build that “gave the impression of a greater tendency towards aggressiveness.”[215]

Harold Owen also highlights his own sexual prowess, with an air of triumph, showcasing how he surpassed his brother in this category, recounting sexual relations that he had with a neighborhood girl in his youth.[216] What is of note is the assertion of Harold Owen’s own masculinity, and how this contextualizes the heterosexual masculine standards of the time. Naturally, his older brother’s fascination with men would not be one he would like to shout from the proverbial rooftops. However, Harold Owen’s razor focus on his own sexual experiences provides an interesting insight into the importance of heterosexual sex as a marker of masculinity. As previously discussed, masculinity acted as a framework for British’s society understanding of men, particularly soldiers. It is clear from the way that Harold Owen contextualizes his own sexual experiences that sex is a form of social conquering his brother. With this in mind, one can begin to understand the ways in which Owen’s sexuality is carefully discussed. If he was a homosexual, he is very rarely portrayed as being a sexually active homosexual. Both the memoir and the published collection of Owen’s letters act as the foundation for the study of Owen.

---

[215] Owen, *Journey from Obscurity*, 27.
[216] Owen, *Journey from Obscurity*, 45.

Owen's poetry was a very carefully published up until his mother's death in the 1930s. Susan Owen would not allow for the publication of any works that mentioned "boys" or lads."[217] How many works of Owen's that mentioned "boys" and "lads," as previously stated, is ultimately unknown due to the destruction of some of his papers. There are upwards of ten anthologies of Owen's "collected" works, all of which vary in completion. The restrictions on the release of these certain works impacted the scholarship written before Owen's death and, unfortunately, the scholarship afterward. Each anthology that has an introduction which relies heavily on the "Owen tropes": his domineering mother, his faith in God, and his uncanny ability to capture the physical and mental horrors of war in poetry. The obvious staple of the fascination with the male body and his near fixation on the destruction of the young, beautiful solider, are rarely, if ever emphasized.

Harold Owen had a hand in his brother's affairs after his death. *Collected Letters*, was published in 1967 and edited by Harold Owen and John Bell, a book editor. It is crucial to note that Harold Owen chose to remove what would be considered damning letters from *Collected Letters,* and Susan Owen, his mother, destroyed a number of Owen's letters after his death.[218] In the introduction to *Collected Letters*, in which Owen's life and various editing standardizations are contextualized, there is no mention of these omissions.[219] Before these letter were published Harold Owen took black ink to the collection of correspondence that he had received in the years leading up to Wilfred Owen's death on the Sambre-Oise canal barely a week before the cease-fire. There is little speculation as to what could have been redacted. The nature of the redacted

[217] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 291.
[218] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 291.
[219] Owen, *Collected Letters*, 1-10.

material was not necessarily sexual in nature. These lines could have detailed embarrassments, shames, and fears of Owen's that his family wished to keep private. Regardless of content, many World War I archives that hold Owen's correspondence house more than a dozen heavily redacted letters, which appeared in the *Collected Letters* with misleading and manipulative placeholders such as "one page illegible." Effectively masking that Harold Owen made these redactions.[220] This five hundred and ninety-six page collection is presented as being Owen's letters in full. This lie has echoed throughout the historization and legacy of Owen. Frequently cited in scholarship, *Collected Letters* has assisted in the erasure of Owen's sexuality. The letters that made the Owen family edition are not placed into context, but rather presented as if they were written with minor edits for clarification (for example, Owen consistently misspelled "wierd."[221])

Upon the release of Harold Owen's work and *Collected Letters*, Jon Stallworthy, a literary scholar, and poet, had already begun writing his biography on Owen with the assistance of Harold Owen.[222] Biographies and anthologies that grapple with Owen's sexuality (or, poignantly, do not) are comprised primarily of three often-cited biographies and an extensive series of scholarly articles. Stallworthy's biography entitled *Wilfred Owen* was published in 1974. This first and most frequently cited biography of Owen makes no reference to his alleged homosexuality. In fact, Stallworthy seems to strive to present Owen as asexual, frequently asserting that perhaps Owen was interested in girls and seemingly avoids the topic of sexuality

[220] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 464.
[221] Owen, *Collected Letters*, 7.
[222] Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen*, viii.

right out.[223] Stallworthy uses a tale from *Journey From Obscurity* recounting a conversation between Harold Owen and his elder brother in which the two men spoke of "war and women," the former which Owen "liked, but could not allow" them "to distract from his poetry."[224] If Owen did have women-callers, he did not mention them in his numerous letters to his mother, sister, brothers, cousins, peers, and friends. Or, perhaps, these letters were destroyed by the family. Stallworthy dedicates his work to Owen's brother Harold Owen. Stallworthy takes it a step further to assert in his foreword that his work is a mix of Owen's own letters and a "portrait of the man as an artist to balance Harold Owen's portrait of the artist as elder brother."[225] And while Stallworthy acknowledges that the single witness can be "questionable," he found Harold Owen to be a "usually faithful witness." Stallworthy, therefore, is working with a limited account, and paints an interesting, but ultimately flawed portrait of Owen of as an innocent soldier, tarnished by war.

Stallworthys's avoidance of Owen's sexuality places the poet in an odd dichotomy. A man of his age without sex, allows critics and scholars to portray him as being childish. That in combination with his small stature, makes Owen a prime example of the tarnished innocence of the war. This pacifist, childlike portrayal of Owen echoes throughout the majority of the scholarship surrounding him, and as such, his poetry and intentions can be altered to meet other people's needs. The other identity that Owen has been assigned is one that has grown out of vogue in the last forty years, but remains a staple: trying to make Owen adhere to the British masculine standard, so that he can be acceptably taught in schools. Going into the end of the 20th

[223] Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen*, 35-89.
[224] Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen*, 261.
[225] Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen*, viii.

and the beginning of the 21st century, Stallworthy's biography remains the staple of Owen scholarship.

Section III: Contemporary Representation (1975 – present)

The year 2000 ushered in a new era for Her Majesty's Armed Forces with the allowance of gay and lesbian peoples to serve openly in the military. However, the punishment for homosexual sex while on active duty that existed in the 1914 edition of the *Manual on Military Law*, existed in varying forms until 1994, when the Armed Forces Bill 2015-2016 was amended to remove "wording that made provision for a 'homosexual act' to constitute a ground for discharging a member of Her Majesty's armed forces from the service."[226] The fear of reprisal, from all modes of life—the personal, the professional, the medical, and the social—present a world in which Wilfred Owen and many others could not be fully-fledged in their humanity. One could be a homosexual and sexually active, i.e. a fairy or pervert. One could be a homosexual and solider, but only of the romantic artistic variety. One could not be a soldier, a homosexual, and a sexual being. The internalized homophobia of the British populace is present in memoirs and documentation, and as such, stretches beyond their years, affecting scholarship, archival, and sociological practices of the time. While homosexuality within the military is seemingly accepted now, the notion of male homosexual sex remains subversive, particularly within the realm of the British patriot. The two contemporary biographies on Owen, released in 2004 and 2014, respectively, address Owen's alleged homosexuality in very different ways. This section will examine how Dominic Hibberd and Guy Cuthbertson's biographies differ in their

[226] "Armed Forces Bill 2015-16," UK Parliament, May 5, 2016, accessed May 07, 2016, http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2015-16/armedforces.html.

presentation of Owen's sexuality, and how and why their framings impact the contemporary representation of Owen.

Literary scholar Dominic Hibberd published *Wilfred Owen* in 2002 in an attempt to combat these narratives. Hibberd, who published previous books on Owen and also edited collections of his poems, produced a comprehensive account of Owen and his family, from the background of the Owens and the Salters[227] before Owen's birth, and continuing right through to his death in November of 1918. Previous biographies had been somewhat limited by Harold Owen also avoided any mention of Owen's homosexuality. In fact Hibberd managed to suggest that Owen was heterosexual, or at least inclined to be, stating that Owen was attracted to a neighbor called Bernice, a relationship that Hibberd claimed may have been based on Bernice's "social position."[228] After, his mother Susan teased him, he never recovered and therefore was not able to pursue woman. Stating that Susan Owen "teased" Owen whenever a neighborhood girl showed her son affection.[229] Or as Owen put it to his mother in a 1918 letter "the Doll that would have made [his] contentment" causing his nights as a teenager to be terrible.[230] Earlier biographies did not manage to wholly escape this influence, which was furthered by the fact that Harold "censored" his brother's surviving letters, removing various references he did not feel would add to the view of Owen he wanted to present to the world.

Roughly half of Hibberd's biography deals with Owen's experiences with the Army during the First World War, and covers his experiences including his time on the Somme front in early 1917, his time at Craiglockhart following shell-shock, and his return to France in 1918. He

---

[227] Susan's family name.
[228] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 59.
[229] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 59.
[230] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 59.

was then involved in the battles to cross the Hindenburg line, and the continuing advances made leading up to the end of the War. While Hibberd attempts to move beyond the frequently cited oral history that Harold provided to Stallworthy and Harold's own memoirs, he still, in many ways, rhetorically dances around the issue of sexuality. By employing correspondence, Hibberd asserts that Owen was a member of the "Oscar Wilde cult," while simultaneously acknowledging that Owen was undoubtedly in love with Sassoon.[231] Hibberd states that he hopes to take Owen's biography a "step further," but acknowledges that his work is not definitive.[232] Hibberd perhaps offers the most unbiased history of Owen, presenting his complexities without taking a firm stand on a side. Hibberd grapples with his sexuality more than anyone previously, but still downplays the realities. He states that Wilfred was in love with Sassoon, but it was mixed with a great deal of "hero-worship."[233]

Hibberd is careful to not take a stance on Owen's sexuality, balancing his biography by discussing how at age fifteen, Wilfred was expected to begin showing some interest in girls and when he did his mother mocked him.[234] Hibberd also makes it a point to state how Owen adored Sassoon for introducing him to "gay friends," such as Robert Ross.[235] This again, suggests that Owen was spending time with a homosexual crowd, but was not homosexual himself. Hibberd is careful to place Owen in a space of being infallible. For example, of Owen's fascination with a teenage boy he was tutoring named Andre Martin, Hibberd asserts with certainty that there was

---

[231] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 275 - 325.
[232] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 465.
[233] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 445.
[234] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 47.
[235] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 354.

no “sexual element” to this friendship.[236] However, who could be certain? This type of relationship would not have been unheard of. While Hibberd is clearly making a concerted effort to present a more rounded characterization of Owen, his unwillingness to even hypothesize that Owen was perhaps engaging in sexual relations with Andre Martin, or at least, perhaps wanted to, undercuts Owen. By highlighting his lack of physical sex this disables the narrative of Owen as a grown man.

In 2014, Guy Cuthbertson, a scholar of English literature, published *Wilfred Owen*, a three hundred page biography. Cuthbertson does not cite the most recent biography aside from his own, Hibberd’s, but rather lists it as recommendation for further reading on the topic of Owen. He does however cite Stallworthy’s biography, Dennis Welland’s 1960 *Critical Study*, and *Journey From Obscurity.* Given that this the most recent, and Stallworthy is the most cited, due to its enduring nature, Hibberd’s more controversial work gets buried in the ongoing bibliography of Owen.

Cuthbertson in his biography on Owen devotes many lines to disproving Graves’ retellings in regard to tactical decisions and referring to him as an inherently “unreliable witness.”[237] Cuthbertson instead appraises the value of Graves’s work as an interesting foray into how “difficult” it was to label someone as “heterosexual” or “homosexual” and employs Graves’s primary school anecdotes about homosexuality as an example as to how Owen was probably not engaging in sexual activities with other boys while he was a young man.[238] Cuthbertson also employs Graves’s assertion that Owen was “passive” and weakling” to imply

[236] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 182.
[237] Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen*, 264.
[238] Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen*, 266.

that he was non-sexual, or, rather, an inactive "bisexual." Cuthbertson states that Owen's "officer and gentleman" mentality, religion, fear of reprisal, and love of his mother would have kept him from engaging in any sexual activity.[239]

Cuthberston's contribution to the world of Owen scholarship is quite thorough. Employing archival materials and in-depth analysis of some of Owen's lesser known works, Cuthbertson's scholarly biography, on the whole, does a very effective job of conveying what the masses have come to expect of Owen's life. When grappling with the notion of Owen's sexuality, Cuthbertson's language is very pointed. Owen had "gay" friends, but any assertions of Owen's homosexuality were based on "assumptions."[240] This echoes Hibberd's careful framing. But where Hibberd sought to present, rather than argue the point of Owen's sexuality and sexual activity, Cuthbertson seems to take a stance. Cuthbertson devotes very little text to this very timely and important topic of Owen's sexuality. He acknowledges the work done to convey Owen's sexuality, and swiftly moves on to debunk it. He categorizes Owen's relationship with Sassoon as "hero worship" and again asserts that the homoeroticism present in "some" of his works is the result of a life-long fascination with the Romantics and Victorian aesthetes.

Cuthbertson's biography employs a backwards Foucauldian logic to assert that there is no way to know that Owen was a homosexual, and that he was rather a product of a post-Wilde society, and because Owen was fascinated with poetry, he was taken with the homosexual society present in London and Paris.[241] He states that "many interpretations of his poetry in terms

---

[239] Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen*, 264.
[240] Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen*, 188.
[241] Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen*, 202.

of its supposed homosexuality have been reductive and unconvincing, hunting out gay innuendo in the imagery of guns and bayonets and holes."[242]

For example, the untitled poem beginning "Who is the god of Canongate" seems to be about a rent boy, but Cuthbertson asserts that this is not necessarily a reflection of his sexuality, but rather his preoccupation with the "downtrodden and abused."[243] This is a fair analysis, for an interest in homosexual society and the perils faced in Owen's time does not define the author's sexuality. However, Cuthbertson's further disregard for Owen's relationship with Sassoon, and Graves repeated assertion that Owen was a homosexual is another issue entirely.[244] He refers to Sassoon as Owen's "Don Quixote"[245] Cuthbertson places Owen and Sassoon into the categories of "junior" and "senior" poet, respectively.[246] Cuthbertson appears hell-bent on explaining away Owen's seemingly obvious romantic feelings for Sassoon. He argues that his poetry is the result of a desire to understand his homosexual friends, his sympathy for the oppressed, and perhaps, his own sexuality. However, he also quotes an interview with Graves, in which, the poet states that Sassoon and Owen were "homosexuals, though Sassoon tried to think he wasn't."[247] Cuthbertson's immediately undercuts Graves comments by stating Graves was not "the most reliable witness."[248] He goes on to state that Owen was most likely not sexual active, because he was an "officer and gentlemen."[249] He leaves the possibility of Owen's homosexuality open, but

---

[242] Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen,* 216.
[243] The date of this poem is unknown. It was most likely composed during the war. Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen,* 189.
[244] Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen,* 190.
[245] Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen,* 206.
[246] Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen,* 203.
[247] Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen,* 263.
[248] Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen,* 263.
[249] Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen,* 263.

appears to guide the reader towards the negative, arguing as best that Owen could perhaps be described as "bisexual."[250]

Cuthbertson's dismissal of Graves's account is interesting, as is Graves's wording. Sassoon and Owen were both homosexuals, but Sassoon, according to Graves, "tried to think he wasn't."[251] Notice that Graves did not make the same assertion of Owen. Owen, in Graves's memory, was a homosexual and was seemingly contented—at least more than Sassoon was—with being a homosexual. This acceptance of self is markedly different from Owen that is frequently presented in film and scholarship. In essence, Owen's sexuality, and his ownership of his sexuality, makes him an agent of his own story. Without it, Owen can easily be cast as a child with a gun; simply a boy carrying arms.

There is scholarly work on Owen published as recently as January 2016. Unfortunately, the lion's share of these short scholarly works are of the literary persuasion, composed mostly by literary scholars. Works on Owen, from a purely historical perspective, are few and far between. For example, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study,* a one hundred and fifty-five page work composed by D.S.R. Welland, a lecturer in English Literature in the University of Nottingham in 1960, explores Owen's poetry from his depiction of war, his employment of half-rhyme, and the impact of his peers on his work. Welland lists Edmund Blunden's memoir, some works of C. Day Lewis, and Sassoon's memoir in his bibliography. However, he employs very little biographical information to inform his analysis and as such, Owen's sexuality is decidedly a non-factor.[252] Welland employs religious and literary context to frame Owen's work, not

---

[250] Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen,* 263.
[251] Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen,* 263.
[252] Dennis Sydney Reginald Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1960), 68.

anything biographical. This is not inherently wrong. One can never know what Owen meant to convey with his art, however, the extrication of sexuality assists in blurring the nuanced and varied messages of Owen's work. Some of which, like "Arms and the Boy," seem to exist in contradictory terms.

Literary scholar Jennifer Breen in her introduction to 1988 book *Wilfred Owen: Selected Poetry and Prose*, argues that not only has Owen's work suffered from the assertion of "the war poetry," but his biography has, as well.[253] The consumption and commentary on his works ultimately reflects on the memory of Owen as a human being. Up until the late twentieth century, Owen and his work was portrayed in biographies and scholarly works as pro-home front, masculine, and strictly war-based. There is little to no mention of Owen's class aggressions, sexuality, or more extreme politics, until the society became more open to them. However, his sexuality remains the darkest corner of his biography.

Through the protection of "artistic license" any mention of male sexuality can be explained away by asserting it was an "artistic" look at the male body. Or even worse, it is sometimes purported that he wrote about men to better understand his "gay friends." If Owen was a homosexual, he was merely a by-product of the Oscar Wilde cult of the time.[254] He wanted to be a poet, and in Britain at the time, many poets were homosexual. It is framed as if Owen was a homosexual merely to fit in with the crowd he wished to be a part of.

Unfortunately, the two people who are frequently discussed in regards to homosexuality during World War I are T.E. Lawrence and his *Seven Pillars of the Wisdom*, and Horatio Herbert Kitchener who serve as very violent, aggressive, and at times, frightening examples of

[253] Jennifer Breen, "Introduction," In *Wilfred Owen: Selected Poetry and Prose*, (London: Routledge, 1988) 3.
[254] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 354.

homosexual intercourse. Lawrence asserts that a Turkish officer beat and raped him, though Lawrence confesses that he came to enjoy it.[255] Kitchener was a known “predator,” According to A. N. Wilson, his interests were not exclusively homosexual. Wilson wrote that "when the great field marshal stayed in aristocratic houses, the well informed young would ask servants to sleep across their bedroom threshold to impede [Kitchener’s] entrance.” His compulsive objective was sodomy, regardless of their gender.[256] Perhaps this is why they are so at the forefront of modern British sex. After the horrors of Lawrence and Kitchener, why would one want to associate a timid war hero, like Owen with them?

The “child-like” portrayal of Owen that Stallworthy championed remains popular today. The last two “Remembrance Day” documentaries broadcast on BBC1 cite Stallworthy and present Owen in a similar light. Owen in BBC1’s 2007 *Wilfred Owen: A Remembrance Tale* is portrayed by a very slight and frail looking Samuel Barnett.[257] His accent is very light, he is continuously dressed in white, and presented in very bright, illuminating lighting giving the audience that sense that Owen was angelic and innocent. Owen is represented as innocence destroyed by war in these docuseries. Owen was a complex person, and in many ways, was quite childlike. He loved being around children, for example he recounted with much affection to his mother a story in which he stayed with a friend and met their son who looked like Owen’s youngest brother Colin and whom Owen found “adorable.”[258] He was quite isolated as a child given his atypical interests in poetry, meaning that he was perhaps a bit stunted socially and

---

[255] Lawrence, T. E., Jeremy Wilson, and Nicole Wilson. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: The Complete 1922 Text*. Fordingbridge, Hampshire: J. and N. Wilson, 2004.
[256] A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 598.
[257] *Wilfred Owen: A Remembrance Tale*. Directed by Louise Hooper. Performed by Samuel Barnett and Deborah Findlay. (2007, BBC One.), Televised Program.
[258] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen,* 223.

immature. But, he could also be cruel to his young sister when they were children, would make sexual jokes with his cousins, and had a general distaste for women.[259] These are highly watched programs and have a lasting effect on the collective British national memory of Owen as being essentially a eunuch with a close relationship to his mother. The removal of his sexuality in turn takes his masculinity from him (a fact that Owen was well aware of and discussed in his poem "Disabled"). The removal of his masculinity throughout history via sex, allows his work to be all the more appropriated to meet the needs of others, particularly in a post-Hitler world, which is how the majority of Owen's work is now contextualized.

Conclusion

In the early 2000s, Oxford University digitized their collection of Owen's correspondence and poems for their The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, including some of the letters Harold fought so hard to hide.[260] By then, *Collected Letters* had been in circulation for nearly forty years. Biographies, literary analysis, and staples of World War I scholarship such as Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* had already been published and already employed the purposefully incomplete collection to compose their scholarship.

Within Owen's well-documented story of protest and objection to war, one must assume that his sexuality played a part, not only in his ability to think critically and fit in with artistic types, but also with Owen's capacity for empathy. His alleged homosexuality works against him two-fold. By being gay he was deemed not masculine, and therefore cannot be taken seriously.

---

[259] Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*, 401.
[260] "The Wilfred Owen Collection." The First World War Poetry Digital Archive. Accessed February 21, 2016. http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/owen.

However, in order to see him as more than a naive child, one needs his sexuality to contextualize that he was more "worldly" than British scholars would have one believe.

Some critics have viewed his writing as one dimensional in many respects. Fussell argues that Owen saw war as a glorification of his own "sentimental, homoerotic" themes. It would be a digression to dissect this statement, but it highlights an interesting, and somewhat underplayed, component of Owen's "war poetry," which is Owen's own sexuality. Now, Owen's "war poetry" does not read as overtly sexual, nor is it, but there is a tone for the destruction of the male form that could not be made without a preexisting appreciation for the male body. Owen's homosexuality and his assumed acceptance of his sexuality not only assist in informing Owen's own perception of his masculinity and his placement in the world, but it also allows Owen to offer a unique, and differently intimate perspective on the obscene destruction of the Great War.

To understand the circumstances in which Owen was composing these poems, one must attempt to grapple with the complex masculine standards of modern Britain. Particularly, how Owen did and did not fit into the accepted social parameters. Then, one needs to dissect how and why these masculine standards are presented within his poetry. Owen's description of destroyed male bodies requires the reader to confront the obscene realities of war, and perhaps, as this work seeks to argue, the consequences of masculinity. The key to his later work is arguably his sexuality.

Without it one loses a part of his humanity, and that ultimately results in the appropriation of war narratives for other people's' needs. In order for the anti-war rhetoric of his poems to be excused, Owen has to be framed as a child. He needs to be a child that was wrecked by the horrors of war. If the child-like innocence of Owen had already been "broken" by his

being sexual as an adult, than the forerunning narrative of Owen as a kind and sensitive boy is fallible. Owen was, in many ways, very childlike. Owen was also in many ways a grown man. But when one thinks of Owen one does not think of the man who wanted to be in love, the man who teased his younger sister, the man who drew pictures in the margins of his letters for his little brother. Owen, the poet, the lover, the snob, the misogynist, the friend, the soldier is lost. Owen the man is lost when his sex life is eradicated from his history.

He was a very romantic man, who yearned for companionship and love. This is completely removed from his history without his sexuality. Thus, an element by which one could empathize with Owen is removed. If Owen continues to be presented as a child destroyed by war, his poetry, and message become diluted. The words of a child do not have lesser impact than those of an adult, just a very different one. This caricature of Owen as a pale, frail, asexual, homoromantic poet is simply not true. The fact remains that one of the most cited and celebrated war poets of all time was a homosexual, and not many people know about it. Apart from the infrequent academic dissection of his works, the image of Owen as dually sexless and a British national treasure is the accepted mode of how his narrative is constructed.

The threat of family scandal, and perhaps, the besmirching of a beloved older brother's reputation has kept the reality of Owen's life deeply buried to the average Owen fan and certainly to the British secondary school student. A scandal, or the threat of it, can mobilize emotional energy, sometimes with disastrous and momentous consequences. It is perhaps the greatest truth that Harold Owen told was the love of his brother. One cannot imagine that his calculated omissions and narrative weavings were the result of any malice. While so many stories of homosexual veterans of the Great War were lost, destroyed, or rewritten to present

them as villains, Owen's rewritten history is of value not only because of his great fame and writings, but because of the love his brother so clearly possessed, and how society can take that love and shape it to what could be considered a very ugly thing. Owen's homosexuality and his history of sexual activity should not be contextualized as a negative, or an "in spite of," but rather an addition to his stalwart bravery, his stubbornness, his shallow fixations, his friendships, and his creative spirit.

Appendix

"Disabled"

He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,
And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,
Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park
Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,
Voices of play and pleasure after day,
Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.

About this time Town used to swing so gay
When glow-lamps budded in the light blue trees,
And girls glanced lovelier as the air grew dim,-
In the old times, before he threw away his knees.
Now he will never feel again how slim
Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands.
All of them touch him like some queer disease.

There was an artist silly for his face,
For it was younger than his youth, last year.
Now, he is old; his back will never brace;
He's lost his colour very far from here,
Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,
And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race
And leap of purple spurted from his thigh.

One time he liked a blood-smear down his leg,
After the matches, carried shoulder-high.
It was after football, when he'd drunk a peg,
He thought he'd better join. - He wonders why.
Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts,
That's why; and maybe, too, to please his Meg,
Aye, that was it, to please the giddy jilts
He asked to join. He didn't have to beg;
Smiling they wrote his lie: aged nineteen years.

Germans he scarcely thought of; all their guilt,
And Austria's, did not move him. And no fears
Of Fear came yet. He thought of jewelled hilts
For daggers in plaid socks; of smart salutes;
And care of arms; and leave; and pay arrears;
Esprit de corps; and hints for young recruits.
And soon, he was drafted out with drums and cheers.

Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal.
Only a solemn man who brought him fruits
Thanked him; and then enquired about his soul.

Now, he will spend a few sick years in institutes,
And do what things the rules consider wise,
And take whatever pity they may dole.
Tonight he noticed how the women's eyes
Passed from him to the strong men that were whole.
How cold and late it is! Why don't they come
And put him into bed? Why don't they come?

"Mental Cases"

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,
Drooping tongues from jays that slob their relish,
Baring teeth that leer like skulls' teeth wicked?
Stroke on stroke of pain,- but what slow panic,
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?
Ever from their hair and through their hands' palms
Misery swelters. Surely we have perished
Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?

These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.
Always they must see these things and hear them,
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
Carnage incomparable, and human squander
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.

Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented
Back into their brains, because on their sense
Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes blood-black;
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh.
-Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,
Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.
-Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;

Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.

"Arms and the Boy"

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade
How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;
Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;
And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-heads
Which long to muzzle in the hearts of lads.
Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth,
Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.
There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
And God will grow no talons at his heels,
Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.

"I am the Ghost of Shadwell Stair"

I am the ghost of Shadwell Stair.
Along the wharves by the water-house,
And through the cavernous slaughter-house,
I am the shadow that walks there.

Yet I have flesh both firm and cool,
And eyes tumultuous as the gems
Of moons and lamps in the full Thames
When dusk sails wavering down the pool.

Shuddering the purple street-arc burns
Where I watch always; from the banks
Dolorously the shipping clanks
And after me a strange tide turns.

I walk till the stars of London wane
And dawn creeps up the Shadwell Stair.
But when the crowing syrens blare
I with another ghost am lain.

"Has Your Soul Sipped?"

Has your soul sipped
Of the sweetness of all sweets?
Has it well supped
But yet hungers and sweats?

I have been witness
Of a strange sweetness,
All fancy surpassing
Past all supposing.

Passing the rays
Of the rubies of morning,
Or the soft rise
Of the moon; or the meaning
Known to the rose
Of her mystery and mourning.

Sweeter than nocturnes
Of the wild nightingale
Or than love's nectar
After life's gall.

Sweeter than odours
Of living leaves,
Sweeter than ardours
Of dying loves.

Sweeter than death
And dreams hereafter
To one in dearth
Or life and its laughter.

Or the proud wound
The victor wears
Or the last end
Of all wars.

Or the sweet murder
After long guard
Unto the martyr
Smiling at God;

To me was that smile,
Faint as a wan, worn myth,
Faint and exceeding small,
On a boy's murdered mouth.

Though from his throat
The life-tide leaps
There was no threat
On his lips.

But with the bitter blood
And the death-smell
All his life's sweetness bled
Into a smile.

"Reunion"

I saw you, I sought you.
I sought you, I caught you.
And we were two
Were two against the world's taboo.

We wreathed us, we breathed us.
We embraced us, we enlaced us.
And we were one,
Against the angry sun.

They drove us, they clove us,
They cleft us, they left us.
And we were naught,
Against the wrought.

But sing now, and cling now.
But laugh now, and quaff now.

We shall be way,
Against the enemy.

"Storm"

His face was charged with beauty as a cloud
With glimmering lightning. When it shadowed me
I shook, and was uneasy as a tree
That draws the brilliant danger, tremulous, bowed.

So must I tempt that face to loose its lightning.
Great gods, whose beauty is death, will laugh above,
Who made his beauty lovelier than love.
I shall be bright with their unearthly brightening.

And happier were it if my sap consume;
Glorious will shine the opening of my heart;
The land shall freshen that was under gloom;
What matter if all men cry aloud and start,
And women hide bleak faces in their shawl,
At those hilarious thunders of my fall?

Bibliography

Alden, Natasha. *Reading behind the Lines: Postmemory in Contemporary British War Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

"Armed Forces Bill 2015-16." UK Parliament. May 5, 2016. Accessed May 07, 2016. http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2015-16/armedforces.html.

Barker, Pat. *Regeneration*. New York: Plume, 1991.

Bengry, Justin. "Profit (f)or the Public Good?." Media History 20, no. 2 (April 2014): 146-166. Communication & Mass Media Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed January 30, 2016).

Bourke, Joanna. *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War*. London: Reaktion Books, 1996.

Bristow, Joseph. "The blackmailer and the sodomite: Oscar Wilde on trial." Feminist Theory 17, no. 1 (April 2016): 41. Publisher Provided Full Text Searching File, EBSCOhost (accessed April 16, 2016).

Cabinet Conclusion 3. “Legislative Programme: Homosexual Law Reform, “ [27 October 1966] The National Archives, Surrey, United Kingdom.

Cabinet Memorandum, "Sexual Offences. Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Home Department and Minister for Welsh Affairs, [17 February 1954] The National Archives, Surrey, United Kingdom.

Campbell, James S.. 1997. “for You May Touch Them Not": Misogyny, Homosexuality, and the Ethics of Passivity in First World War Poetry”. *ELH* 64 (3). Johns Hopkins University Press: 823–42. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.simmons.edu:2048/stable/30030241.

Chitty, Joseph. *A Practical Treatise on the Criminal Law Comprising the Practice, Pleadings and Evidence Which Occur in the Course of Criminal Prosecutions, Whether by Indictment or Information: With a Copious Collection of Precedents.* London: A.J. Valpy, 1841.

Cloutier, Stephen. "Wilfred Owen: A New Biography by Dominic Hibberd." *The Journal of the Robert Graves Society*, 2002, 138-39.

Cohen, Joseph and Jon Stallworthy. "In the Closet?," *The New York Review of Books*. New York City, May 27, 1976. Accessed January 30, 2016. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1976/05/27/in-the-closet/.

Cole, Sarah. "Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War." Elh no. 2 (2001): 469. Project MUSE, EBSCOhost (accessed February 17, 2016).

Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution, 1957. *Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution.* London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

Cook, Matt. *London and the Culture of Homosexuality: 1885-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Cooke, Graham. Poetry and Writing of the First World War. Raleigh: LULU Press, 2015.

Cuthbertson, Guy. *Wilfred Owen*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

Dean, Carolyn J. *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Eksteins, Modris. *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989.

Egremont, Max. *Some Desperate Glory: The First World War the Poets Knew*. New York:

Farrar, Struas, and Giroux, 2014.

"Extracts from the War Service Record of Wilfred Owen, a Lieutenant in the British Army and a War Poet, 1917-18." The National Archives. 2014. Accessed January 13, 2015. http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/greatwar/g3/cs3/g3cs3s1a.htm?

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*, Paris: Gallimard, 1976.

Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Grayzel, Susan R. *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

Herzog, Dagmar. *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe's Twentieth Century*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Hibberd, Dominic. “Wilfred Owen’s letters: some additions, amendments, and notes.” The Library 4, September 1982.

Hibberd, Dominic. *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003.

Houlbrook, Matt. *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis*, 1918-1957. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Johnson, Paul. "UK Parliament Poised to Repeal Final Discriminatory Law Relating to Homosexuality and the Armed Forces." The Huffington Post UK. January 08, 2016. Accessed February 28, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/paul-johnson-1/armed-forces-bill_b_8937612.html.

Kerr, Douglas. *Wilfred Owen's Voices: Language and Community*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

Lawrence, T. E. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1935.

Mangan, J. A., and James Walvin, eds. *Manliness and Morality: Middle-class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1840-1940*. Place of Publication Not Identified: Manchester University Press, 1987.

Manual of Military Law.: War Office, 1914. 6th ed. London: Printed under the Authority of H.M. Stationery Office, 1914. Accessed September 04, 2015.

Moorcroft Wilson, Jean. *Siegfried Sassoon: The Journey from the Trenches: A Biography, 1918-1967*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Murphy, Kevin P., and Jennifer M. Spear. *Historicising Gender and Sexuality*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Ngide, George Ewane. "A 'War Poet'or A 'Poet At War': Wilfred Owen and the Pity of War." International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature, no. 1, 2015.

O'Flinn, Paul. "Wilfred Owen: Poetry, War & Pity." *Socialist Review* 7 (November 1978): 29-30. Accessed January 15, 2016.https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/oflinn/1978/11/owen.htm.

Owen, Harold. *Journey from Obscurity: Wilfred Owen, 1893-1918. Memoirs of the Owen Family*. London: Oxford University Press, 1963.

"Owen's Medical Register," First World War Poetry Digital Archive, accessed April 9, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/items/show/8122.

Owen, Wilfred, C. Day Lewis, and Edmund Blunden. *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*. New York: New Directions Pub., 1965.

Owen, Wilfred and John Bell. *Selected Letters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Owen, Wilfred, William Harold Owen, and John Ed. Bell. *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.

"Postcard To Leslie Gunston," *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, accessed March 13, 2016, http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/items/show/3879.

Radzinowicz, Leon. *Sexual Offenses: A Report of the Cambridge Department of Criminal Science*: London, Macmillan, 1957.

Robb, Graham. *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2004.

Roper, Michael, and John Tosh. *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*. London: Routledge, 1991.

Rustin, Susanna. "Hello to All That." *The Guardian*, July 30, 2004. Accessed January 04, 2016. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/jul/31/featuresreviews.guardianreview10.

Sassoon, Siegfried. *Collected Poems*. New York: Viking Press, 1949.

Sassoon, Siegfried. *Siegfried Sassoon Diaries 1915-1918*. London: Faber and Faber, 1983.

"Section 51," *Offences against the Person Act 1861*, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/24-25/100/contents, accessed 14 February 2016.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Stallworthy, Jon. *Wilfred Owen*. London: Oxford University Press, 1974.

"Supplement to the London Gazette, 30 July, 1919." *The London Gazette*, no. 31480 (July 29,

1919): 9761. Accessed January 2, 2016.
https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/31480/supplement/9761.

Sussman, Herbert L. *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Thorton, Danielle. "Not a 'Normal, Manly Fellow': Wilfred Owen's Contested Masculinities 1900-1918." *Melbourne Historical Journal* 31, (January 2003): 41-53. *Historical Abstracts with Full Text*, EBSCO*host* (accessed October 18, 2015).

Welland, Dennis Sydney Reginald. *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1960.

Wilfred Owen: A Remembrance Tale. Directed by Louise Hooper. Performed by Samuel Barnett and Deborah Findlay. (2007, BBC One.), Televised Program.

Wilson, A. N. *The Victorians*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2003.

Winter, Jay. *Sites of Memory: Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.