The First World War in British Theatre

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In the Somme valley, the back of language broke. It could no longer carry its former meanings. World War I changed the life of words and images in art, radically and forever.

       —ROBERT HUGHES

This thesis is submitted to Macquarie University in fulfilment of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy in English. The work is entirely my own and has not been submitted elsewhere for examination.

Signed:

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Date:

Acknowledgments

First and foremost thanks must go to Paul for the guidance and advice you gave every step of way, especially in the wayward early days of this project. Without your help I'm quite certain I never would have made it.

Second, to the people who endured living with me during this process. Anita, Tom and Angela, that means you guys. You fed me and provided much needed social interaction. But let's face it, I really am the perfect housemate.

My comrade throughout all of this, Jenn. Whenever confusion set in, or things looked dark, or I needed a second opinion on when to use a hyphen, you were always there. I can't imagine having done this without you. I think it made all the difference.

And finally, Mum and Dad, for a hundred thousand reasons that could never be listed. For everything.

Abstract

More than a century since its declaration, the First World War is universally accepted as one of the defining events of the twentieth century. Socially, politically, economically and culturally the war is viewed as having been a watershed and marks the boundary between all facets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Unsurprisingly, it has been depicted in every artistic medium, from novels, memoirs, poems, theatre, film and the visual arts. Yet, while extensive scholarship exists for the majority of these forms, the war's portrayal in theatre has been largely overlooked as a subject for study. The present project aims to redress this gap through an analysis of the most influential and commercially successful plays to be staged in Britain, set against the social atmosphere present at their time of production. What will become apparent is that the manner in which the war has been portrayed has never settled, but has remained in a constant state of flux.

The project will cover four distinct periods, beginning with the war's enactment, (1914-18). During this time the public's understanding of the war was predicated on mythic constructions. This was the result of former Victorian and Romantic literary traditions and the widespread circulation of propaganda. The second period, (1919-38), denotes a time when those who had served and returned home came to see the mythic and romantic portrayals as inaccurate representations of their experiences. Works produced during this period reveal a conscious effort to counter former traditions by taking focus away from ennobled abstractions and placing them on the object of experience. During the third period, (1960-80), new, revisionist historians began to produce critiques of the conflict that cast the commanders and national leaders as the true villains. They were seen as having been out of touch with the realities of frontline conditions and overly reliant on out dated tactics. As a direct result, the war came to be seen as progressively devoid of meaning. Since the 1980s it has been accepted that the First World War was a meaningless conflict. However, contemporary works bring focus to bear on a celebration of the male friendships that formed during the war. In the face of a meaningless conflict soldiers are shown to devote themselves to one another as a means of psychological survival. This final period will reveal that a return to romantic traditions has occurred, albeit of a different

variety from that seen during at the beginning of the century, bringing portrayals of the war full circle.

Today there no longer remain any living persons with first-hand experience of the war, and so the manner through which society constructs an understanding of the event must come from texts that portray it. As such, history itself will be shown to be a constantly shifting and evolving entity. Through performing an in-depth analysis of the selected plays and the broader themes pertinent at the time of their composition, this study will reveal that the theatre surrounding the Great War both responds to and exerts its own shaping influence on social attitudes; an influence that has been as culturally significant as any other work from any other artistic form.

Contents

Introduction

So we plunged into the romance of battle.

—WYNDHAM LEWIS

More than a century since its declaration, the First World War is universally accepted as one of the defining events of the twentieth century. Socially, politically, economically and culturally the war is viewed as having been a watershed, and is popularly seen as the boundary between all facets of the ninetieth and twentieth centuries. Because of this significance a great deal of effort has been expended in attempts to make meaning out of the war and the socio-political and cultural impacts it had. These efforts have not been restricted to social and military historians; equally it has proven to be a source of rumination and inspiration for artists also struggling to come to terms with its effects. The war has been depicted in every artistic medium, from novels, memoirs, poems, theatre, film and the visual arts. Today there no longer remains any living persons who served during the war, and so the manner through which society constructs an understanding of the event must come from the historical and cultural texts that portray it.

This study will seek to make an examination of those cultural texts with particular focus on theatrical portrayals, primarily from the British perspective. Undeniably responses to the war have been vastly different across both time and between cultures. In an attempt to maintain consistency in this study I have restricted its scope to an Allied, and principally British, perspective. Britain of course represents the English-speaking nation that arguably had the most intimate involvement in the war, not only in terms of geographical proximity, but also in terms of lives lost and resources committed. Additionally, as this project's discipline is English Literature[1] only texts originally composed in English will be considered for extended analysis.[2] Furthermore, as a study in English Literature, military histories will be largely set

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[1] This study will engage with the selected texts as published pieces of theatre. In other words, it is more interested in the works as texts than as performances. Although the performance aspect of the plays will not be overlooked, it will constitute a secondary role.

[2] With the exception of Maeterlinck's *The Mayor of Stilemonde*: to be addressed in chapter one.

aside, with focus instead being placed on theatrical productions and how they pertained to the cultural moods of their time. Having said this, certain histories will be taken into consideration when they provide the opportunity to gain greater insight into the selected theatrical pieces. This will be shown to be the case in chapter three, when the historical writings of Arthur Conan Doyle, John Buchan, Leon Wolff and Alan Clark will be considered.

While historical writings certainly provide insight into a past event, texts produced for entertainment and artistic purposes have just as an important role to play in shaping a public's perception. However, the difficulty inherent in any attempt to construct an understanding of the First World War lies in the fact that the past is not set in stone. Rather, it is a constantly shifting and evolving entity that has meant different things to different people at different times. Therefore, the purpose of this study is not to sketch a definitive meaning of the war, nor to construct a picture that reflects the reality of the event, but instead to chart the altering portrayals of the war in theatre, from its declaration in 1914 to the present day, thereby revealing how it has been perceived, understood and existed in the imagination of a public that has been largely removed from its realities. Further, it will be shown that the public's changing perceptions of the war have likewise been influenced by its portrayal in theatre.

Because of the mutually dependent relationship between audience and artwork, there is scope for the inclusion of plays composed by authors outside of Britain if they have had either a substantial impact on British audiences, or if their composition had been influenced by the prevailing British mood of the day.[3] Indeed, the British Isles are not cut off from the wider world, and works that grace its stages have an equal capacity for impact as any other play originating in that country. This will be shown to be the case with works such as *The Silver Tassie* and *The Mayor of Stilemonde*, and we will even see the reverse take place with Eugene O'Neill's *The Sniper* and *Shell Shock*, two pieces, which although never presented to a British audience, were nevertheless influenced by the social mood prevalent in Britain at the time of their composition.

If our perceptions of history can be influenced by artistic portrayals, it starts to become apparent that the way language is used to describe an event can be of far greater importance than what actually happened. This explains, in part, why

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[3] Although this project will consider plays primarily composed by British authors, there will also be some inclusion from other allied nations, particularly Ireland and the United States of America.

perceptions of the war have evolved so much over time. We need only change the way we talk about something to change its reality. As Friedrich Nietzsche states in *The Gay Science*:

> [W]hat things are called is unspeakably more important than what they are. The reputation, name, and appearance, the worth, the usual measure and weight of a thing […] has through the belief in it and its growth from generation to generation, slowly grown onto and into the thing and has become its very body (Nietzsche 2001: 69/70).

In this sense, language acts as a foreign article that dresses reality and in effect tells us more about those who clothed it than it does about the thing itself. This will be seen to be the case with representations of the war.

Language then is deceptive, and even when it appears to give one definite perspective on history this may not always be the case. To give an example of how elusive the past can be, even when examining texts from the period in question, we may consider Stephen Phillips' play, *Armageddon* (1915). This was one of the first full-length plays produced that took the war as its subject after the beginning of hostilities. Written in blank verse, the play is polemic in nature and bombastic in tone. Contained within it is almost every conceivable war cliché. *Armageddon* opens in hell with Satan marshalling his forces to unleash a new war upon Europe. The German people are said to be his greatest asset and they are all depicted as villainous, particularly their commander, who is willing to commit any atrocity, even going so far as to order the destruction of a church flying the Red Cross. 'The Red Cross Flag? What is that to us more than a treaty? The one a rag of cotton, the other a scrap of paper' (Phillips 1915: 24).

This commanding officer is described as continually drinking wine, attempts to rape a Belgian peasant girl, and is specifically directed to 'curl his moustache' (Phillips 1915: 26) – that almost cartoonish gesture of villainy – on more than one occasion. By comparison, the English and French characters are all depicted as honourable and heroic. An English commander refuses to seek vengeance on a German town that has been captured by the Allies, despite the fact the Germans are said to have levelled every town they cross, killing innocent civilians. The English will not stoop to retaliate in kind, and this opinion is maintained even after he learns that

his own son was killed and mutilated by the enemy (Phillips 1915: 81). To destroy a town out of vengeance would be a dishonourable thing to do.

Contained here are a number of overt war myths: notably, German brutality and English nobility, two themes to be explored in chapter one. These are concepts that would traditionally be associated with how the civilian population perceived the two nations at the time. As such, this play acts to validate that perception. However, as Samuel Hynes points out in his study, *A War Imagined*, the London theatre critics of the day were not as bloodthirsty as we might have otherwise believed. The play was critically slammed, could not find an audience and closed after only a week (Hynes 1991: 43). This makes apparent that from our temporally removed vantage point there are difficulties inherent in constructing an accurate perception of how the people of the time looked on the war. Chapter one will show that while these myths were in circulation during the war years the mood of the public was far more tempered than might have been expected. The plays to be examined still engage with these myths, but those that were successful are far more subtle in their handling of them.

Regardless, it is because of this underlying complexity that so much research has been devoted to works surrounding the war. However, among the critical analyses of texts, theatre has been the single most neglected artistic form as a focus for research. Comparatively, novels, memoirs, diaries, films, and particularly poetry have all received considerable attention. This tendency to disregard the theatre is best encapsulated by Ralf Remshardt:

> Unfortunately, giving war its due has been historically difficult for the stage; there are only a few plays (most readers will be able to name them quickly) that render the terrors of combat and the ignominy of warfare with anything approaching the intensity of the best films on the subject. Frequently, the more warlike a stage production wants to be, the more filmic it is apt to becoming (Remshardt 2010: 271).

Remshardt is of course making the assumption that only plays that portray frontline combat may be regarded as war plays. While it is difficult to stage live conflict with the same level of realism that film can achieve, the theatre has never sought to do so. In truth, the social and cultural impacts of the war extend far beyond the battlefield, and it has been in those areas that theatre has directed its attention, examining issues

that arose on the home front and in the aftermath of the conflict. Even so, there are still a number of excellent plays set on the battlefield.

While Remshardt is overlooking a large body of work, there are still other questions that need to be addressed when justifying why the theatre of the First World War warrants attention. First: is the theatre pertaining to this conflict of unique significance when compared to other theatrical works that depict different wars; in effect, does the First World War offer insights that other wars in history do not? And second, as this study is interested in charting shifting social changes, would it not be of greater benefit to focus on film, another performance based form that in sheer audiences numbers alone has had a far greater reach, and therefore social impact, than theatre?

As stated above, the First World War is frequently perceived as the boundary between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Likewise, it could fairly be described as the first modern war. The First World War is then unique for a number of reasons, specifically it is seen as ushering in a new modern age, born out of the industrial revolution; however, it is a conflict that it is still steeped in many traditions associated with former Victorian and Edwardian times. Because of this we find a commingling of two seemingly diametrically opposed aesthetics that is not readily apparent in any other conflict; and while it is certainly problematic to conceive of the war as a liminal boundary between these two periods, this still provides an insight into societal evolution that other conflicts cannot.

As regards the second question, although film undoubtedly has had a greater reach than theatre and is better able to offer direct depictions of conflict, the significance of theatre goes beyond mere numbers. Indeed, when looking at the major films associated with the First World War there are many whose genesis is with the stage. This is true of James Whale's *Journey's End* (1930), Richard Attenborough's *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1969), the numerous adaptations of *What Price Glory?*[4] and Steven Spielberg's *War Horse* (2011). Invariably, any examination of film will result in an acknowledgment of theatre's contribution.

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[4] *What Price Glory?* (1926), directed by Raoul Walsh; *The Cock-Eyed World* (1929), directed by Raoul Walsh; *What Price Glory* (1952), directed by John Ford. A fourth film, *Women of All Nations* (1931), also directed by Walsh, was produced as a sequel to *The Cock-Eyed World*.

For all this, though, when it comes to the question of, 'why theatre?' a valid response may be, 'why not theatre?' Since ancient times the theatre has been seen as a means through which archetypes are held up as a mirror on the world's errors and excess (Brandt & Kohn 1973: 223), and so will always provide insight into a public's consciousness. Further to this, we may consider Nietzsche's opinion: theatre has 'given men eyes and ears to see and hear […] what each himself is, himself experiences, himself wants' (Nietzsche 2001: 78). All art does this, but only theatre does so with live actors actively experiencing things closely reminiscent to life before our eyes. Theatre is in this sense the imitation of action. It presents the essence of human experience, not a narration or a recital (Levy 2005: 20). For Nietzsche this represented a means by which we would be able to gain perspective on our lives. Additionally, theatre also presents a 'deviation from nature' (Nietzsche 2001: 80), and in making nature appear strange it draws our attention to how it exists in the world beyond the stage. So, while theatre may not be able to achieve the same level of realism as film, it is this very feature that allows it to evoke greater insights for its audience.

Theatre of course leaves no physical trace at its conclusion. While a production can always be revived, each new staging offers a different interpretation, a different sensibility. The only thing that remains to an audience at a performance's close is an impression. The remembered details of any show will fade over time; what remains is a memory of how our emotions were excited. Ezra Pound once stated that only emotion endures (Levy 2005: 25). How we understand something is largely defined by how we respond to it emotionally. Theatre, which immerses its audience in the recitations of life, possesses a power to excite these emotions. This is where the influence of theatre lies. When it comes to the war, theatre's ability to excite emotions will impact on how a society comes to understand and remember the event. Over time the theatre has progressively altered its portrayal of the war, allowing us to trace out altering public perceptions.

Due to its ephemeral nature and its influence through emotion, theatre's impact on society may be subtler than other artistic forms, but this in no way lessens its importance and we ignore it at our own risk. By investigating theatre it will give us a glimpse into what artists perceived to be the aspects of the war that needed examination. This will also point towards how perceptions of the war were to evolve

once an audiences' attention was drawn to these facets. For these reasons theatre is just as deserving of analysis as any other artistic form.

To this end, a secondary objective of this project is to redress a gap in the current scholarship associated with the theatre that depicts the war. Up until the 1990s almost no study existed that considered this form. Some of the more famous plays, such as R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's End* (1928), Sean O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie* (1928), W. Somerset Maugham's *For Services Rendered* (1932) and the Theatre Workshop's *Oh, What a Lovely War!* (1963), had received individual attention, but otherwise the subject was largely untouched. Two of the most highly regarded studies of the literary and cultural atmosphere surrounding the war make only passing references to its theatre. Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) references just one play, *Journey's End*; and Samuel Hynes' *A War Imagined* (1991) only discusses three at any length.[5] Even John Onions in *English Fiction and Drama of the Great War* (1990) considers fewer than ten.[6]

In 1998 L. J. Collins published *Theatre at War, 1914—18*, a study that took into consideration the state of the British Theatre industry during the war; and in 2003 Gordon Williams published *The British Theatre in the Great War*, which followed a similar vein of inquiry as Collins' work. Collins chose to focus on how the theatre industry responded and contributed to the war effort, while Williams made an in-depth examination of what was actually staged across the nation during the war years. Rebecca D'Monté published *British Theatre and Performance 1900-1950* (2015), a study that charted the evolution of British Theatre practices over the first half of the twentieth century, and considered plays staged during the war and in its direct aftermath. In her study, like Collins and Williams, she devotes space to an examination of the theatre industry during the war, and also includes an examination of how the war was portrayed in its direct aftermath. All three studies devote some space to plays that specifically dealt with the subject of war; however, this is not the focus of their research, nor do they extend any analysis to plays staged after the cessation of hostilities.

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[5] *Journey's End*, *Armageddon* and J. M. Barrie's *Der Tag* (1914)

[6] Among them, *Journey's End*, *For Services Rendered*, and three plays by Allan Monkhouse, *The Choice* (1910), *Shamed Life* (1916) and *The Conquering Hero* (1923).

To date, although overviews of the subject exist,[7] the only study that may be considered to make any holistic attempt at presenting a critique of this body of theatre is Heinz Kosok's *The Theatre of War: The First World War in British and Irish Drama* (2007). Proving just how vast the subject is, Kosok's study is based on over 200 plays, published between 1909 and 1998. Kosok broke his study into five parts. In the first he classifies the plays based on their subject matter, identifying nine different categories.[8] He then examines them in regard to their varying styles of presentation, their attitude towards the war, and finally their commercial and literary value. Whilst his scope is impressive, Kosok's study is limited by the sheer volume of primary sources he engages with. As a result, he is only able to make a cursory examination of any individual play and is unable to draw any meaningful conclusions as to how the body of work has evolved over time or how it is representative of an altering social attitude towards the war.[9]

In contrast to Kosok's study, the present one will limit itself with the number of plays it examines, thereby allowing for an in-depth analysis of each play, whilst also providing an opportunity to examine the broader themes pertinent at the time of their composition. By doing so, it will reveal how these plays are responding to, and shaping, the social attitudes of their day. The plays selected for examination will be of either significant commercial success, or composed by authors who are generally considered to be members of the twentieth-century canon.[10] Additionally, this study is just as interested in charting social trends as it is in theatre. While it is true that any play will present an insight into the social climate that existed during its composition,

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[7] For example, Mary Luckhurst's 'Drama and World War I' in *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama 1880-2005* (2006); and Clive Barker's 'The Ghosts of War: stage ghosts and time slips as a response to war' in *British Theatre Between the Wars, 1918-1939* (2000).

[8] Plays set on the frontline; the home front; that focused on the returned soldier; that charted the journey of the soldier from departure, combat to return; that examined the Irish experience; the aftermath of war; that foreshadowed a new conflict; were set in fantastic locations; or were written as an intellectual debate.

[9] Curiously, Kosok's study contains no formal conclusion.

[10] For example, *Journey's End*; *Oh, What a Lovely War!* and *War Horse* were all highly successful productions that are frequently revived. By comparison, plays by Eugene O'Neill, W. Somerset Maugham and Maurice Maeterlinck did not achieve widespread acclaim in their time, but are nevertheless important examples of the genre, composed by authors generally regarded as having been influential on the theatre of their day.

this selection criteria has been imposed for the reason that commercially successful or theatrically significant works also exert an influence on the social attitude towards the war.[11]

An unintended outcome of these selection criteria has resulted in a notable absence of female authors (with the exception of Joan Littlewood). This is not to say that no female British playwrights have engaged with the subject of the First World War. Kosok makes note of some 27 such authors in his expansive catalogue of British plays. However, it should be noted that they represent a mere 15% of the authors under examination. It is inevitable that in restricting the number of plays to be examined in this study that female representation will be minimal. This is, however, more representative of the general trend within a subject that is naturally male-dominated, than a conscious decision made by this study.[12]

To achieve the goals of the study it will be presented chronologically, with each chapter drawing connections between the plays of the period and the dominant public perception of the war that prevailed in Britain at that time. The first chapter will deal with the war years, 1914-18. It will be argued that during the war the predominant way of portraying it was based on mythic and romantic constructions. This was the result of former Victorian and Romantic literary traditions, and the widespread circulation of propaganda. Although many plays were staged during the war that overtly acted as propaganda (often as a recruitment tool), this study will only consider works produced as legitimate theatre, independent of any government agenda. What will be shown is that these works, nevertheless, adopted many of the mythic constructions – so naturalised into the culture of the day were those concepts.

Plays written through this period were composed by authors removed from the conflict. As such, mythic and romantic constructions were able to be maintained. The second chapter, though, will look at plays produced during the interim war years, 1919-38. This time denotes a period where those who had served and returned home came into conflict with the mythic mode of representing the war. They saw these traditions as placing undue emphasis on abstractions like honour, bravery, duty,

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[11] For example, *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, which was first staged in the 1960s, will be shown to have had a substantial influence on many of the works produced right up to the present day. This is revealing of its influence on social trends.

[12] Eleven authors come under extended consideration in this study, one of which is female. This more or less replicates the natural ratio of female authorship within the subject.

loyalty and the glorification of the stoic soldier who willingly sacrificed himself for the good of the nation. These themes were seen as diverting attention from the gritty reality of what they endured, and were not accurate representations of their experiences. Works produced during this period reveal a conscious effort to counter former traditions by taking focus away from ennobled abstractions; instead they chose to focus on the object of their experiences. Many of the best known war plays were produced during this time, such as *Journey's End* and *For Services Rendered*. These plays were seen as presenting new, harsh and realistic portrayals of war.

The advent of the Second World War acted to cast a shadow over the earlier conflict, and it would be twenty years before the First World War was to once again capture the public's imagination. By that time, in the 1960s, another cultural shift had occurred. During the 1920s and 30s the disillusion expressed by veterans had been met with some resistance by a society still invested in the belief that the war had been fought for honourable reasons, and that the massive loss of life had not been in vain. However, over time the sense of disillusionment came to be broadly accepted by a public now removed from the events by more than a generation. The war was now understood to have been a pointless conflict that had resolved nothing and resulted in the meaningless deaths of millions. New, revisionist historians, such as Alan Clark and Leon Wolff, had produced popular critiques of the conflict that cast the commanders and national leaders as the true villains. They were now seen as having been out of touch with the realities of frontline conditions and overly reliant on out-dated and ineffective tactics. Regardless of these points, they pressed on, unconcerned by the deaths their actions precipitated. Of this period, the Theatre Workshop's *Oh, What a Lovely War!* came to be the theatrical embodiment of this belief. The musical proved to be a huge commercial success and has continued to exert a significant influence on all subsequently produced theatre.

Since the 1980s, even though interest in the war has not waned, public discourse has consistently positioned the First World War as having been a meaningless conflict – as regards its objectives, conduct and outcomes – despite the fact that military histories produced today continue to work at dispelling this belief. For example, pains are now taken to assert Britain's war objectives and how they were achieved, and to provide context as to how the commanders conducted the war. Regardless of this fact, the massive death toll and the seemingly abstract nature of these arguments has had little impact on the general public who continues to interpret the war as largely devoid

of meaning. This is testament to the power cultural portrayals have in shaping public perceptions, for no recent theatrical production has disputed the belief that the war was a meaningless conflict. Chapter four will seek to explore this occurrence. Of recent years Nick Stafford's *War Horse* (2007) has come to represent the new archetype of how the war is portrayed on stage. Now removed from the events by a century, texts no longer attempt to problematize the war, or reach an understanding as to what its events came to mean.

The assumption now is that the significance and subtleties of the conflict need not be illuminated for the audience. Rather, contemporary works focus on a celebration of the male friendships that formed during the war. In the face of a meaningless conflict, where death is a constant threat and the men were made to endure horrendous living conditions, they are shown to devote themselves to one another. In the context of war it is their support and love for each other that sustains them through the trials they endured. Ideas of disillusionment and pointlessness established in earlier periods are not dispelled; rather they are embraced because these themes give greater significance to the bonds that formed between the men who only had these relationships to rely on in the face of so much waste. In this sense this final period, and the idealised friendships depicted therein, will reveal that although the broad reading of the war has remained unchanged a return to romantic traditions has occurred.

In one sense this brings portrayals of the war full circle from where they began in 1914. However, this contemporary romanticism cannot be perfectly equated with that which will be seen in chapter one. For while during the war romanticism was used to frame the conflict in a positive, even desirable light, such illusions are no longer able to hold sway today. Rather, this romantic focus is dependent on the war being meaningless. The relationships are then set against this harsh environment, and in so doing, are used to redeem the war experience of those who served. We may never again embrace war as an honourable, chivalric pursuit, but neither in these plays is it condemned as a wholly nihilistic waste, as it was cast during the 1960s.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to chart the shifting portrayal of the Great War through the perspective of the British stage. To facilitate this objective the texts that will come under close examination will be of either significant commercial success, artistic value or have been composed by influential authors. These criteria will capture both the popular successes as well as some of the monumental failures. By

comparing the distinguishing characteristics of the two, it will provide evidence as to the prevailing public sentiments of the day. Through a chronological examination the study will thus be able to chart the shifting portrayals, and the accompanying public sentiments, which both influence the kind of work that is produced and is itself altered by those works.

In presenting this study numerous aspects of the war will come under consideration, such as the media's use of propaganda, the formation of shell shock and the camaraderie experienced by soldiers; however, the common thread between them all is the way they are utilised to construct meaning around the conflict. This study is interested in charting social sentiments and these are pinpointed by a careful consideration of how the war is positioned and described in the text. This is fitting, for just as performed theatre leaves only an impression on its audience, so too does our retrospective engagement with the Great War. We can never have first-hand knowledge of the event, so our understanding will be based on impressions, which we in part derive from the way meaning is created in the texts that depict it. Even though our experience of the war is always a step removed, there can be no doubt that the Great War still resonates deeply within society's cultural consciousness.

This fact is testified by the numerous commemoration events staged as part of the one hundredth anniversary. For example, Paul Cummins' poppy installation at the Tower of London caught world-wide attention, when, to commemorate the fallen, one ceramic poppy for every British and colonial life lost during the war was planted in the moat surrounding the tower.[13] The event struck a chord with the public, and an estimated five million people visited the installation over its four month life. What becomes evident is that the way we engage with the war, remember it and understand it is still of vital cultural importance. Despite the fact that today we may believe our perceptions of the conflict are stable, investigation reveals that society's understanding of the event has evolved radically over the last hundred years. By performing an examination of the theatre pertaining to the war this project will make a contribution to our understanding of how history alters through time, as well as showing how that history is portrayed and how it influences the way we remember.

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[13] An act that draws attention to the massive loss of life experienced, while ignoring the broader context of the war. This effectively perpetuates the common reading of the war: that it was a pointless conflict that achieved nothing except the deaths of millions.

The War in Context

When all was said and done the war was mainly a matter of holes and ditches.

—SIGFRIED SASSOON

While it is true that the focus of this study is the representation of the First World War on stage, the war was an historical event. By implication, any comprehensive understanding of the theatre will be predicated on an appreciation of certain aspects of the conflict. This is no mean task as the causes, enactment and repercussions of the First World War are complicated, nuanced and, still today, heavily contested issues. In addition, the breadth and depth of the topic is such that a thorough examination would constitute several volumes of study and so is beyond the scope of this project.[1] Nevertheless, in order to make an examination of the theatre that depicts the conflict and aftermath it is prudent to give an overview of the war, and in particular to chart the reasons for Britain's involvement, the events that enabled the Allied victory, and finally the outcomes that ensued from an Allied victory.

Today the perception continues to persist that the conflict was pointless. In the aftermath, participants came to believe that the causes they had sacrificed themselves for were hollow and meaningless, and that the war had achieved nothing. When looking at many of the mythic constructions that circulated during the war it is easy to see how this perception arose. The war had been depicted as an honourable struggle against a barbarous enemy; duty, loyalty, patriotism and honour were said to have been the cornerstones of the conflict. In the aftermath much of the writing produced sought to

[1] Numerous studies have been made on the broader influences and aspects of the war. Although this introduction is too brief to incorporate a wide body of study, some recent, well regarded studies that examine the nuances of the conflict beyond a simple re-telling include: Keegan, John (2000), *The First World War*, New York: Vintage; Bond, Brian (2002), *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Neiberg, Michael S. (2005), *Fighting the Great War: A Global History*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press; Hart, Peter (2013), *The Great War: A Combat History of the First World War*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press; and Gilbert, Martin (2004), *The First World War: A Complete History*, New York: Holt Paperbacks.

dispel these illusions, and in the process the war was left devoid of meaning. This has been a problematic point for many historians, and one that Samuel Hynes succinctly outlines:

> One can see easily enough why military historians and generals deplored the version of war that the war books told. It was not simply that in that version the war was bloody and cruel; it was that it was meaningless. If the myth-making authors of those books were right, then the war had no history, in the sense of a story expressing the meaning of events, but was anti-historical, apocalyptic, an incoherence, a gap in time. The myth accomplished this demolition of meaning […] by telling the story of the war not in the traditional way – that is, in terms of the big battalions – but through the stories of individuals, and obscure ones at that: junior officers and men in the ranks. But to the individual personally, […] 'all operations of war are meaningless and futile.' The story that he wanted told instead was the other story, of 'the conflict of armies', where the meaning was clear, and the values unambiguous (Hynes 1991: 455).

From this, it is important to closely examine the reasons as to why a European war came about, why Britain chose to enter that war, and to take stock of what was actually achieved.

On the eve of war the United Kingdom was a long-established and stable nation. The reign of Queen Victoria had seen a period of unprecedented growth in prosperity and it possessed an empire in size and wealth second to none. The 'Scramble for Africa' of the previous century had played out and Britain now controlled vast tracts of land stretching almost continuously from the horn of Africa to the Nile Delta. Additionally, Britain also held India and regions in Malaysia, Papua New Guinea and Oman. By 1914 Britain's standing on the international stage was well established, and so she had an interest in preserving this position of dominance, both territorially and militaristically. This desire led to concerns centring on Germany's rapid industrial growth, which even before the onset of war had already eclipsed France and was beginning to threaten Britain as the preeminent European power (Bond 2002: 3).

Although Britain initially wavered as to whether she would commit to war in late July 1914, by the beginning of August it seemed apparent that France was in danger of

imminent defeat. It is thus important to put into perspective what a German victory over France would have meant if Britain had remained neutral. Germany's intention was to weaken France to a point where it would not be able to rise again to a powerful status. In their *Septemberprogramm* Germany set out plans to make various annexations, including the coastal strip from Dunkirk to Boulogne, as well as absorbing Belgium and Luxemburg into the German Empire. Such actions would have rendered France economically dependent on Germany. In turn, this would have had a disastrous economic impact on Britain, which would have been isolated from continental trade (Bond 2002: 5). Brian Bond goes on to state that Britain's secondary purpose was to gain a peace settlement that would enhance its empire security vis-à-vis its allies and co-belligerents (Bond 2002: 6). So while the invasion of Belgium acted as an excuse that received favourable public support, Britain's strategic reasons for entering the war may be thought of as far more calculated. In effect, the war was fought with Britain specifically seeking to maintain its dominance and strengthen its international position.

On the other side of the conflict, Germany had sought to strengthen its position, primarily through diplomacy and good international relations, since its unification in 1870. Otto von Bismarck, First Chancellor of the German Empire, had been a great advocate for peace, and believed that Germany would thrive best under those conditions. To this end, he strived to have good relations with all nations, particularly Austria-Hungary and Russia, whilst encouraging France's isolation (Albrecht-Carrie 1965: 31). However, after 1890, with Wilhelm II's ascent to the throne, and Bismarck's removal from office, Germany started on a new political course.

Under this new regime Germany sought to capitalise on its industrial and economic growth, which led to her attempt to follow Britain's and France's example and acquire an empire for itself. Although there were some gains to be made in Africa, by and large the world had already been partitioned and as a result Germany's goals were frustrated and its large economic power remained concentrated in a relatively small national territory (Ferro 1973: 19). Nevertheless, the rise of Germany through the late nineteenth century caused it to overtake France as the main continental power, bringing it into direct rivalry with Britain. The main outcome of this was the rise of Germany as a naval force (Ferro 1973: 20), which sparked an arms race for ocean supremacy between the two nations. This

rivalry was brought into sharper focus and prodded along by the press in both countries (Ferro 1973: 20), and as the eve of war approached Germany's attitude increasingly became one of aggression and expansion.

Beyond the German state lay the vast empire of Russia, stretching from the Vistula River to the Bering Straits. In the years preceding the war Russia had been expanding its empire, primarily into the largely empty East, but also into the West, principally dislodging the Ottomans from the land around the Black Sea (Albrecht-Carrie 1965: 18). Russian expansion was primarily propelled by the desire to reach open water, for as large as the country was it had no viable access to the sea. Its eastward expansion towards the Pacific had led to war with Japan in 1905, ending in Russian defeat and so causing them to turn attention west. In 1877-8 a war between the Russians and the Ottomans culminated in the acquisition of the Black Sea coast line (Evans 2011: 4). However, the other European powers, notably Britain, who wished for the straits to stay in Turkish hands, intervened to prevent Russia from acquiring the land that would have provided access to open water (Albrecht-Carrie 1965: 27). So by 1914 Russian desires were still unfulfilled. Britain was adamant that the Dardanelle Straits leading into the Black Sea should not fall into other hands, as she believed (along with Russia) that the state which controlled the straits would hold the key strategic position in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, as well as the means to penetrate Asia Minor, and bring about hegemony in the Balkans (Evans 2011: 7).

Austria-Hungary was another nation with its eyes set on the Balkan region. The Austro-Hungarian state was organised with a system of parity between the Hapsburgs and the Hungarian Magyars, creating the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary (Albrecht-Carrie 1965: 17). Within Hungary the Magyar rule was supreme with the Hapsburgs controlling the rest of the state. Internally each power was autonomous in regard to its own affairs, but internationally they acted as a single unit (May 1989: 306). Despite the agreement, one of the main problems for the state was that the ruling parties represented an ethnic minority within their own nation. The majority population of Austria-Hungary constituted primarily of Slavs of various persuasions (Czechs, Slovaks, Poles and South Slavs) as well as Romanians and Italians (Albrecht-Carrie 1965: 17). These peoples desired equality within their state and yet it was denied them, especially by the Magyars who sought to

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carry out a policy of Magyarization that failed to assimilate the Slavs into Hungarian culture, and instead stirred up stronger nationalistic sentiments (May 1989: 306). On the whole Austria-Hungary was a polyglot, multi-racial assemblage, making it an anachronism of its time when the principle of nationality was receiving ever greater recognition (Albrecht-Carrie 1965: 17). It were these growing nationalistic tensions that led directly to the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and the outbreak of war.

The Balkan states did indeed act as the catalyst for the Great War, but for them the conflict began long before Sarajevo and would last long after Versailles. For the Serbs who assassinated the Archduke they would have had, at most, an eye towards starting a conflict with Austria-Hungary, not a European war (Ferro 1973: 25). Within the Ottoman Empire these areas had been allowed to maintain their Christian religion and as a result had never been fully integrated into the state (Albrecht-Carrie 1965: 20). Now they were yearning for their own independence. Serbia was one of the earliest regions to achieve its independence, gradually gaining autonomy throughout the nineteenth century until it was granted nationhood in 1878 (Stoianvich 1989: 603). By 1912 other nations in the region had begun to appear on the map, including Greece, Bulgaria and Romania. By the outbreak of the war the Turks had been more or less evicted from Europe, save for the area immediately surrounding the straits. Austria-Hungary had been given administrative control over Bosnia following conflict during the 1870s between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, but attempts by Bosnia to declare independence led Austria-Hungary to annex the territory in 1908. This only stirred up further nationalistic sentiments. The Yugoslavs within the state were divided and wanted numerous things, from joining the neighbouring Serbian state, joining the Austro-Hungarian state, maintaining the status quo or pushing for independence (May 1989: 307).

On 28 June 1914, the heir to the Hapsburg crown, Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated in Sarajevo. A group of South Slavs associated with the underground military society, The Black Hand, were behind the assassination. The objective of this group was to bring unification to the territories containing significant Serb populations annexed by

Austria-Hungary, specifically Bosnia and Herzegovina.[2] The repercussions of this event led to the outbreak of the war. The assassination certainly caused a sensation amongst the international community when it occurred, but no more so than any other act of violence had done in the past. It was clear the deed had been committed by South Slavs, and that the problem of nationalism in the Austro-Hungary Empire had been the catalyst. Tension between Austria-Hungary and Serbia had also been mounting for several years, ever since a coup in 1903 shifted Serbia from a position of subservience to Austria-Hungary to that of a Russian outpost in the Balkans (Albrecht-Carrie, 1965 40). Austria-Hungary believed that Serbia's very existence supplied a focus for Slav unrest, and so the decision was made that Serbia needed to be taught a lesson – a lesson that should take the form of military action.

Austria-Hungary placed the blame for the assassination on the Serbian Government, a manoeuvre that is now seen as an act of convenience to achieve its goals. Austria-Hungary first sought German support for any action they should take, and Germany gave it. However, Russia seemed determined to resist any Austro-Hungarian ultimatum laid against their Serbian ally. Nevertheless, with German backing, Austria-Hungary delivered its ultimatum to Serbia. Serbia accepted all terms of the ultimatum except for one.[3] This supplied Austria-Hungary with the excuse it needed, and so on 28 July, the Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war on Serbia. In the interim period Russia had mobilised its troops, which caused Germany to deliver its own ultimatum, stating that if Russia refused to demobilise then war would be declared. Russia of course refused, prompting Germany to declare war on 1 August.

From the sidelines France decided that the developments in the Balkans had escalated enough to warrant its involvement. Germany, being fully aware of this, took the

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[2] There were three interconnected groups associated with the assassination: The Black Hand, Young Bosnia and Narodna Odbrana. The assassin, Gavrilo Princip, was a member of Young Bosnia, which itself had ties to the Black Hand. During his trial Princip said: 'I am a Yugoslav nationalist, aiming for the unification of all Yugoslavs, and I do not care what form of state, but it must be free from Austria.'

[3] Serbia rejected point six of the ultimatum: 'To take judicial proceedings against accessories to the plot of 28 June who are on Serbian territory; delegates of the Austro-Hungarian Government will take part in the investigation relating thereto.' More specifically, Serbia refused to allow Austro-Hungarian officials to enter the country to take part in the investigation.

initiative on 3 August to also declare war on France (Albrecht-Carrie 1965: 41). Germany now faced war on two fronts. However, the plan was first to strike against and neutralise the French forces giving them time to react against the much slower moving Russian army. Only one obstacle stood in Germany's way, and that was the French fortification along their shared boarder. Germany intended to avoid the fortification through the enactment of the Schlieffen plan: essentially they could bypass the fortifications by first marching through Belgium.

Yet, here another problem arose: Belgian neutrality had been assured by all the major powers, including Germany. Germany believed that its cause was greater than this agreement, so she sought Belgian approval to march through its territory. This request was refused, so Germany invaded, prompting Britain to declare war against them on 4 August on the grounds of liberating the Belgium nation. And so it came to pass that by the end of August all of the major European powers were at war. By the end of 1914 they would be bogged down in entrenched positions forming a front that stretched from the North Sea to the Swiss Alps – a position that would remain largely unchanged for more than three years.

A point frequently glossed over by historical retrospectives is the fact that the Allies won. Understandably, the horrors endured and the massive death toll that was suffered have tended to take precedence, both in the public's imagination and in historical analyses. Like many things associated with the war, how the British victory came to pass is poorly understood. It may even be looked on as a paradox, given the belief that the war commanders were incompetent and unable to adopt new tactics suited to modern, industrialised warfare. However, there are some points that bear remembering. Brian Bond, a vocal defender of the British staff, has argued that the officers of the First World War suffered from bad press, from war poets speaking for disgruntled rankers and later from critics who were largely ignorant of the subject (Bond 2002: 19). While it is true that during the middle period of the war the battles of attrition represented some of the greatest losses of the conflict, many historians now recognise that a 'learning curve' existed, and that it took time for commanders to successfully utilise the new weapons of warfare.

Victory came in the end not because of any new weaponry development, nor because of the American arrival on the front[4] (although they provided an important morale boost), but from the utilisation of pre-existing weaponry, whereby each element provided maximum support for every other element. In basic terms, the key tactical development made between 1916 and 1918 was the provision of accurate artillery protection for advancing infantry. By employing a combination of heavy guns, mortar, machine guns, tanks and aircraft the British could dominate the enemy's artillery and trench defences and get their infantry forward in short advances under this fire cover (Bond 2002: 21). The tactic was termed 'Bite and Hold' and it proved crucial in allowing the allied forces to finally break through the Hindenburg Line.[5]

The British public met victory with much fanfare and celebration. At the time the national war effort was widely appreciated, and rightly so as almost every household had contributed and made sacrifices that led to this victory. Additionally, Britain achieved all of its war aims: the German navy was destroyed, its army restricted and European hegemony avoided. France's and Belgium's independence was regained, and Britain secured its imperial aims both in holding off French/Russian rivalry in the Near and Middle East, and in acquiring mandates in the former Ottoman Empire, which extended its own Empire to its greatest geographical extent (Bond 2002: 22). For Britain then, as far as its aims were concerned, the war had been a great success.

Although for the most part the above account is tangential to this study, it will assist to highlight the gradual evolution of the war's portrayal on stage. As we move forward to examine the theatre pertaining to the First World War, it will be seen that many of the points raised in this section will become increasingly important. Significantly, the way in which the theatre relates to these issues will be revealing as to how society conceives of the conflict at any given time. This will become more telling in chapters three and four, as society became increasingly separated temporally from the event.

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[4] In actuality many American commanders adopted the same tactics that had been previously used and abandoned by British and French commanders. Because of this not all American offensives were effectual.

[5] There were numerous factors that led to Germany's final defeat. In no small part Britain's successful naval blockade took a heavy toll on Germany's ability to maintain resources during the war.

Chapter I – The Mythical War, 1914-18

All realities of this war are things of the mind.

—H. G. WELLS

During the war years, 1914-18, a debate raged in Britain as to what stance the theatre industry should adopt towards the conflict. One camp argued that it should act as a distraction from the deaths and hardships being experienced. Many critics retrospectively describe this as having been the case: 'The theatre was […] for both civilians and servicemen, a temporary release from the agonies of the war' (Collins 1998: 3). Musicals, comedies and revues proved to be the most financially successful productions of the day, (although arguably they always are irrespective of the period). The opposing camp posited that the theatre's role was to interpret and process the mood of the nation. From 1914 to 1916 over 200 plays were produced that took the war as its primary subject (Collins 1998: 178). Of those, some 65 still remain available today (Kosok 2007: 257-9).[6] While lighter distractions certainly dominated the nation's stages, this figure reveals that there was also some attempt to portray the conflict seriously as well.

The theatre's involvement in the war effort of course went far beyond simple portrayal. It would be nearly impossible to catalogue in every detail the important role that theatre played during the war. It underpinned the government's policies by engaging with everything from flag waving to Hun-hating. It raised revenue for the war effort, stimulated patriotism, cheered soldiers on leave and kept the public in good spirits (D'Monté 2015: 61). The purpose of this study, though, is to chart the evolving representation of the war on stage from its beginnings in 1914 to the contemporary day. What will be revealed is that the theatre acts as both an indicator of the public's attitude towards the war and

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[6] L. J. Collins notes, 'that within the first twelve months of the conflict nearly 120 war plays were passed by the Lord Chamberlain's office', and that a further 90 were passed in the preceding year (Collins 1998: 178). While the literary quality of these plays is questionable, as many represented propagandistic attempts at recruitment, or were light spy adventures, their sheer volume is testament to the fact that the theatre was an important early avenue for representations of the war.

likewise assists in influencing and altering that attitude. Because of this mutually influential relationship between the art form, those who created it, and those who consumed it, it is important to remember that the theatre does not exist in a vacuum, but within the cultural milieu it describes. In this chapter three plays will be taken into consideration, each originating from a different Allied nation: J. M. Barrie's *The New Word* (1915) from Britain, Maurice Maeterlinck's *The Mayor of Stilemonde* (1918) from Belgium and Eugene O'Neill's *The Sniper* (1915) from the United States of America. Before examining these plays, though, some time will be taken to consider the social atmosphere that existed during their composition.

While it would be too vast a task to attempt an exhaustive analysis of the social and cultural climate of Britain and the other Allies from 1914 through 1918, this study will restrict itself to an examination of one aspect specifically designed to control the public's attitude: that of propaganda. Propaganda naturally appeared in a wide variety of media and was produced by both official and unofficial sources: for example, the government and the print media, respectively. An examination of these forms will reveal that much of the propaganda produced relied on the use of myth, as defined by Roland Barthes, in the construction and communication of its message. That is, propaganda relied on concepts and ideals associated with war that were established during the Romantic and Victorian eras. By associating concepts of romanticism with the imagery of war it was possible to naturalise the idea that the war was a grand adventure and a noble pursuit. Likewise, the same process can be applied to the construction of the Germans as barbaric others.

In the environment of the home front, though, the public remained resistant to many overly overt forms of propaganda, both in their official forms and those disguised as entertainment. For example, many pro-war plays failed at the box office: Harold Owen's[7] anti-pacifist play, *Loyalty* (1917), proved to be a commercial flop, as did Henry Arthur Jones' *The Pacifists* (1917), which itself closed after only ten days (Kosok 2007: 196).[8] This is not to say that anti-war plays proved to be any more successful, as George Bernard Shaw's satirical works met with a similar reception. What will be shown, though, is that the more successful plays, although far from propagandistic in tone, all still present

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[7] Although Wilfred Owen had a brother called Harold, this Harold Owen is of no relation.

[8] Stephen's *Armageddon* (1914) and Barrie's *Der Tag* (1914) are two other similarly themed failures.

portrayals of the war that are consistent with the myths to be described. What becomes evident is that when a myth is successful it is not interpreted by its audience as being a myth, but rather as an accurate representation of reality. The most successful plays were those that were able to handle myth in this more subtle way.

Propaganda & Myth

It is commonly bemoaned today that the twenty-four hour news cycle is responsible for taking social and political issues and reducing them to a single catchphrase. Inevitably these sound bites ignore the underlying complexity of the issues and present them in simplistic terms. This style of communication is not, however, limited to contemporary issues. The same is true of our understanding of many things, even the First World War. For example, we all know that on 28 June 1914, in Sarajevo, the Crown Prince to the Hapsburg throne, Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated by a group of South Slav youths, and that this event led to the outbreak of the war.

Naturally, the event, and those that preceded and followed it, were far more complex than this description, and indeed innumerable studies have been made to examine the causes and contributing factors that led to the outbreak of the war. But the above sound bite represents the common social understanding of how the war began. This example is taken from an historic standpoint, but was it any different for those living at the time? In Britain it was widely understood and accepted that their country entered the war to protect Belgian neutrality. This was the sound bite of the day. It was only in the war's aftermath that it became known that the British Government's motives for entering the conflict were far more varied and complex, and indeed they would have entered the war in support of France eventually, even if Germany had avoided marching through Belgium (Ponsonby 1928: 56).[9] So what stock can be placed in these basic and sometimes deceptive explanations?

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[9] See The War in Context above for further details on Britain's war objectives.

In actuality they reveal a lot; not about the reality of what terms the war was fought on, but about how the war was perceived by civilians. If we restrict our analysis of the war's representation to this domain it is possible to conceive of it as a commodity that was sold to, and consumed by, the general public. This makes the First World War significant as the first modern war where it was recognised that public support and home front morale were vital to overall victory. To maintain this morale the war was marketed to the public in a way comparable to that of traditional advertisement. This advertisement sought to craft and present an appropriate image of the war that the public could support. Sometimes they were even quite literally asked to purchase it: for example, people were expected to invest in war bonds or sacrifice their consumption of certain luxuries in order for resources to be directed towards the war effort,[10] and the public would not spend their money or make sacrifices if they did not believe in the war's cause.[11] It could then be argued that the war was marketed to the public in a similar way to how adverts function: it was made palatable through the close association of an appealing idea. In the context of war this process is usually described as propaganda.

If we turn to Roland Barthes, and his collection of essays, *Mythologies*,[12] we can see that Barthes conceives of advertisement, across a range of media, as being based on the construction of myth.

> The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense dressed up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history. In short, in the account given in our contemporary circumstances, I resent seeing Nature and History

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[10] See Celia Malone Kingsbury's chapter, 'Food will Win the War', in her study, *For Home and Country* (2010), for a discussion on how these concepts were sold to the public.

[11] The theatre actively contributed to this, as many plays encouraged people to sacrifice for the war effort. This will be further discussed when considering J. M. Barrie's *A Kiss for Cinderella*.

[12] Barthes wrote his study in the 1950s on topics quite removed from war; nevertheless, by making an examination of how he describes images as being utilized by concepts to communicate messages far removed from the images' original purpose will provide an explanation as to how the myths associated with war came to be accepted.

confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there (Barthes 1972: 11).

In other words, people will accept certain ideas because of an advert's ability to make something that is a human construction seem natural, and therefore correct. (Barthes looks at such varied things as soap-powder and Citroën cars.) The war was presented to the public in a similar manner. Therefore the war, for the people of the time – and even today – became a constructed one, which did not necessarily reflect the reality of the conflict – it was instead understood in terms of myth.

To appreciate how myth operates in this context we must first look to how it is defined by Barthes. First, myth functions as a system of communication (Barthes 1972: 109) and is a language in its own right, constructed out of signifiers (images) that represent the signified (concepts), which carry meaning. The myth is then read by people and its meaning so communicated. The only difference between myth and conventional language is that myth is constructed upon a pre-existing language (Barthes 1972: 115). A myth will take a pre-existing image, drain it of its original meaning, and fill it with a new concept.

Barthes gives the example of a Negro soldier saluting the French flag. Within the social context where the picture appeared, the magazine *Paris-Match*, the identity and history the image that particular man might have otherwise carried in another context is reduced and instead he becomes an anonymous figure that communicates the concept that France is a great imperial power that enjoys the support of those under its influence (Barthes 1972: 116). For a more contemporary example we may consider the lighting of the London 2012 Olympic Games' cauldron. Six young athletes were selected to light it. In the context of the ceremony the identities of these children, what sports they competed in and even their names were irrelevant. Any meaning that the image any one of these children might normally have carried was drained away and instead they became the collective symbol of the next generation of athletes. This concept filled their image, displaced the old meaning, and so the myth communicated itself. From Barthes' perspective this is myth in action.

The reason why this phenomenon occurs, and the reason why we do not recognise the myth as being a myth, is due to a process of naturalisation that occurs between the concept and the image. This is what allows a myth to be read innocently as an inductive system instead of a semiological one (Barthes 1972: 131). The concept the myth carries, when attached to the image, appears as though it naturally belongs to it. This occurs because the original concept that the image carried is not totally destroyed; it is diminished by the myth, but always remains and so is read in tandem with the new concept. The trace of the former meaning is what naturalises the myth and allows it to be accepted. The image of the Negro soldier reduces the individual's identity, but a trace of how that picture would normally be read still remains and is applied to the interpretation of the picture, therefore allowing it to be seen as a naturalistic depiction. If, however, the myth is too overbearing or obvious the reader may see through it and recognise the image not as a true carrier of the concept, but as the myth's alibi (Barthes 1972: 128).[13]

Given this mode of communication, myth is by its nature concise and gives clarity to the concept being expressed. In essence, it simplifies and presents its ideas not as explanation, but as a statement of fact (Barthes 1972: 143).

> Myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics […] it organises a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves (Barthes 1972: 143).

When Barthes says myth is a 'statement of fact' and 'things appear to mean something by themselves', he is referring to the consequence of the naturalisation between the concept and the image. Because, in this sense, if concept and image appear to belong together then the ideas they represent need no explanation as they are presented as if they were naturalistic and therefore self-evident facts.

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[13] This explains in part why select theatrical pieces that were particularly overt in their use of myth proved to be commercial failures.

If we now turn to examine how the First World War was presented to the civilian population, we will be able to see how myth lends itself to those portrayals. This can be seen in both the romanticisation of war and the propaganda that was produced, as both sought to present their concepts in simple, clear forms, organising a worldview free from contradiction, and, most importantly, they did so by affixing their concepts to pre-existing images. In this chapter it will be argued that the romantic literary traditions in pre-war society were constructed out of myth. Additionally, that the propaganda produced once war was declared both reinforced earlier pre-war myths and produced new ones. Attention will be given to what myths were in circulation, how they were circulated and how the theatre consciously, and unconsciously, adopted myth (or reacted against it) in producing portrayals of war. But before looking at representations of World War One it is necessary to first briefly consider how war was depicted in popular Victorian and Edwardian culture, because it is from these traditions that many of the war's myths spring. They will also provide an impression of how the war was perceived upon its declaration.

What we find during this period is a tradition of romanticisation. Of course, the romanticisation of war in fiction has a long history. The tradition can be traced back to ancient times: we may consider Homer's *The Iliad*, with Hector, Odysseus and Achilles, all 'heroes' capable of great feats of bravery in battle. This tradition is also present in medieval romances, which encapsulate ideas of chivalry with knights in armour performing deeds of valour. Even the historical romances of Alexandre Dumas maintain this with his swashbuckling heroes going forth to do battle in *The Three Musketeers* (1844) with their cry of, 'all for one and one for all', conjuring ideas of camaraderie and self-sacrifice in the face of adversity. War was seen as a glorious adventure undertaken for the most noble of causes.

These same traditions can be found in Shakespeare, notably in *Henry V* and the stirring Saint Crispin's day speech:

> If we are marked to die, we are enough
> To do our country loss; and if to live,
> The fewer men, the greater share of honour.
> Gods will, I pray thee wish not one man more. […]
> He that outlives this day and comes safe home

Will stand a-tiptoe when this day is named

And rouse him at the name of Crispian.

He that shall see this day and live t'old age

Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours

And say, 'Tomorrow is Saint Crispian.'

Then will he strip his sleeves and show his scars

And say, 'These wounds I had on Crispian's day.' […]

This story shall the good man teach his son,

And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by

From this day to the end of the world

But we in it shall be remembered,

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers. […]

And gentlemen in England now abed

Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,

And hold their manhoods cheap while any speaks

That fought with us upon Saint Crispian's day, (Shakespeare 2008: 1526/7).

This speech is peppered with the kind of rhetoric intended to rouse the patriotic spirit and portrays the pursuit of war as noble and honorific, even going so far as to establish it as a criterion for masculinity. This final point will be shown in chapter two to have been one of the most significant romantic myths responsible for pressuring men into service.

Unsurprisingly, *Henry V* was staged numerous times during the war by many famed Shakespearian actors, including John Martin Harvey and Ben Greet. Greet acted as the director of the Old Vic Theatre during the war and believed *Henry V* was just the play to draw all the soldiers in London (Williams 2003: 249). Indeed, the play was even used for recruitment, with Frank Benson[14] playing Henry, stating after the speech cited above that while Henry had relished the idea of honour and glory for the few, Britain's present need was for men and more men (Williams 2003: 251). Much of Shakespeare's work was seen as encompassing the kind of romantic ideals and patriotic sentiments that inspired people to enlist. Benson himself toured many of London's suburban theatres performing specially

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[14] Frank Benson (1858-1939) founded his own theatre company dedicated to producing Shakespeare's plays.

written short pieces of Shakespeare purposefully pitched to encourage enlistment (Collins 1998: 7). Shakespearian scholar, Israel Gollancz, insists: 'Shakespeare's love of country is no mere poetic fervour; it is solidly based upon his belief that English ideals make for righteousness, for freedom, for the recognition of human rights and liberties' (Williams 2003: 243). All these concepts were to become romance myths associated with the war.

It should also be noted that in 1914 Britain had not been involved in a major European conflict since the Napoleonic Wars, one hundred years previously.[15] Additionally, there had been no continental conflict between major powers since the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Therefore, the public's only way to conceive of war came from how it was portrayed in popular culture. One of the most important, and popular, genres to arise in the early nineteenth century was that of the war memoir, written by those who served during the Napoleonic Wars. Just as with the First World War a distance existed between those who experienced the conflict and those who did not. As a result, this period saw the beginnings of a British public that engaged with war primarily through forms of cultural meditation (Ramsey 2011: 6).

Increasingly these meditations took the form of veterans' accounts. Written during the height of the Romantic period, the memoirs produced came to be associated with two themes that predominated at the time: sentimentalism and the sublime (Ramsey 2011: 13). Early writing focused on the sentimental, the purpose of which was to place the reader in the soldier's shoes so they could hear their thoughts and feel their pain. These writings sought to highlight the hardships and horrors experienced by those who served. As such, they were primarily seen as anti-war writings. On the other hand, the sublime offered portrayals of war that reflected a traditional concern with military grandeur and war-like acts of heroic stature and strength. There is, therefore, a potential disjunction between the sublime heroism of military glory and the forms of virtuous suffering that constituted the sentimental object of pity (Ramsey 2011: 13). However, with the emergence of a post-war culture of commemoration in the 1820s, the war memoir began to receive wider

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[15] This represented a similar conflict where large amounts of British manpower and resources were marshalled for a war effort. Marilyn Butler even hypothesises that, proportional to the population, the death toll was even greater during the Napoleonic Wars than the First World War (Butler 1981: 115).

readership, and it was portrayals aligned with the sublime that proved to be the most popular.

It is from traditions established in these writings that the image of the suffering British soldier as the stoic hero is drawn. While the portrayal of suffering had the potential to act as part of the anti-war tradition, when aligned with the sublime, suffering could be framed in relation to the glorious defense of the nation. The soldier had to be seen to stoically embrace his suffering without exhibiting traces of private dejection (Ramsey 2011: 17). Ramsey describes how the stoic image of the soldier came to be read:

> To act stoic meant seeing oneself through the eyes of an impartial spectator enabling another to share our feelings. Translated into the realm of war, we might say that the stoicism of the soldier was dependent upon the soldier viewing himself, and being viewed, from the vantage point of the nation. The private, suffering man is thus ennobled by his stoicism, transformed into the abstract, collective and immortal vision of the soldier though his sublime act at the same time that the viewer is incited to identify with the soldier in the process of serving the nation (Ramsey 2011: 18).

Increasingly memoirs written from the officers' perspectives would keep the reader distanced from the pain of the common soldier. So while they would detail the violence of war they would avoid its effects, thereby presenting a portrayal that detailed glory rather than misery (Ramsey 2011: 17).

This idea was most famously embodied by the image of Horatio Nelson, heroically giving his life during the battle of Trafalgar; and was further developed in the memoirs that were to become popular in the years that followed.[16] While these books began to wane in popularity after 1835, they nevertheless had a strong influence on the Romantic and Victorian literary responses to war that were produced over the remainder of the nineteenth century. British culture became steeped in these kinds of traditions. As Paul Fussell points out, for two generations before the war people had read the tales of George

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[16] For a list of memoirs see the appendix in Ramsey's study, *The Military Memoir and Romantic Literary Culture, 1780-1835*.

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Alfred Henty;[17] the male romances of Rider Haggard;[18] the Arthurian poems of Tennyson[19] and the pseudo-medieval romances of William Morris[20] (Fussell 1975: 21), and the register of these texts was one of grandeur, elevating particular ideas and concepts to romantic heights: a horse was a steed; the enemy your foe; the dead naught but ashes and dust; and there were four kinds of bravery: one could be gallant, plucky, staunch or have valour. Mere actions became grand deeds and cowardice was tantamount to dishonour. Even blood was elevated to 'the red/Sweet wine of youth', courtesy of Rupert Brooke (Fussell 1975: 22). These texts encapsulated a particular sensibility towards war, and it was one of romance, grandeur and adventure. No doubt these modes of romanticisation contributed to the eager enthusiasm of those first volunteers.

These various traditions in popular culture, theatre and literature played an important role in establishing the romantic myth, which constructed war as a noble cause and grand adventure. So much so that when Britain declared war in 1914 it was all too easy for this well established concept of 'war as romance' to attach itself to the image of this new war and for it to appear as though the two belonged together. We can consider Brooke's renowned poem, 'The Soldier':

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[17] George Alfred Henty (1832-1902), wrote over a hundred historical adventure novels, mostly for children. His stories were frequently set during times of war, such as the Punic War, the Napoleonic War and even the American Civil War. The heroes of these stories are generally courageous, honest and resourceful, whilst also possessing a level of modesty. These attributes represent part of the British soldierly ideal.

[18] Sir Henry Rider Haggard (1856-1925), famed for the novels *King Solomon's Mines* and *She*, was another writer of adventure tales, generally in an African setting. His novels are usually described as swashbuckling and frequently espouse British colonial ideals.

[19] Lord Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892), was the Poet Laureate during the reign of Queen Victoria. His poem, *The Charge of the Light Brigade* is a narrative poem detailing events during the Crimean War. The story of the Light Brigade has many parallels with World War One, as it, like many attacks made during the war, was made against a well-positioned enemy and had little hope of success. In Tennyson's poem, though, there is no mention of wasted life, rather the event is held as an example of the nobility and courage of the British soldier. The event is glorified, and the honour and bravery of the men who carried out orders despite outcomes is emphasised as being a desirable trait.

[20] William Morris (1834-1896), worked in many fields, but towards the end of his life he began writing fantasy prose in the style of medieval romance. Morris saw his novels as being a revival of the medieval tradition of chivalrous romance.

If I should die, think only this of me:

That there is some corner of a foreign field

That is forever England. There shall be

In that rich earth a richer dust concealed (Brooke 2006: 1955);

Note the use of 'dust' to symbolise the fallen, in true romantic fashion. Here we see the stoic solider who couples the concept of noble sacrifice with the image of dying in battle. Anything else that might otherwise be associated with this image is drained away: ideas of pain, futility or tragedy are not evoked and instead we are left only with the myth of nobility.

As far as Georgian pastoral poets went Brooke was the most popular during the war. On his death in 1915 Winston Churchill stated:

Joyous, fearless, versatile, deeply instructed, with classical symmetry of mind and body, he was all that one would wish England's noblest sons to be in days when no sacrifice but the most precious is accepted, and the most precious is that which is most freely proffered (Churchill 2006: 1955).

Brooke's popularity lay in his ability to infuse his writing with as many of the romantic abstractions related to war as possible (Hynes 1991: 109). This not only reinforced and perpetuated the myth of war as a romantic endeavour, but it can also be argued that he became a tool of propaganda. The mythical image his poetry depicted of a glorious and virtuous war is here endorsed by the government, as testified by Churchill's words, for it was that image which inspired people to enlist.

The result of these literary traditions was to create a distance between war as it existed, and war as it was imagined, which had become an increasingly abstract concept. Wyndham Lewis noted that 'war' was just a word to him, something that only existed in history books (Lewis 1967: 57). Therefore, the only source for understanding war came from its depiction in popular culture, as has been described. This made it easy for the romance myths to be transplanted into the First World War, for at the time it was the dominant mode of understanding war. Lewis is no doubt aware of this. In his 1937

memoir, *Blasting and Bombardiering*, he alludes to the attraction the myth of romance had on people:

> Need I say that there is nothing so romantic as war? If you are 'a romantic', you have not lived if you have not been present at a battle, […] If your mind is of a romantic cast, there is nothing for it […] The likelihood that you will get your head blown off cannot weigh with you for a moment. You must not miss a war if there is one going! You cannot afford to miss that experience (Lewis 1967: 114).

While this is satire, Lewis reveals the tendency people had for removing the unpleasant concepts usually associated with war, such as danger, to leave only the romantic myth. He goes on to define romance as not concerned with the literal image of something, but rather with feelings and emotions, in other words the higher concepts instilled into the image by myth. Pre-war literature and the romantic myth instilled the idea that war evoked these feelings.

For evidence of what Lewis is talking about we need look no further than Wilfred Owen. Owen was of course to become one of the poets responsible for dispelling the myths of war; however, prior to arriving on the front his understanding of what the war would be like is very much aligned with the naturalised myth of romance. Before going to France he had sought to get a transfer into the flying corps, and what follows is his impression of what it, and the war, would be like:

> By Hermes I will fly. Though I have sat alone, twittering, like even as it were a sparrow upon a housetop, I will yet swoop over Wrekin with the strength of a thousand Eagles, and all shall see me light upon the race course, and marvelling behold the pinion of Hermes, who is called Mercury, upon my cap. […]
>
> If I fall, I shall fall mightily. I shall be with Perseus and Icarus, whom I loved; and not Fritz, whom I did not hate. To battle with the Super-Zeppelin, when he comes, this would be chivalry more than Arthur dreamed of.
>
> Zeppelin, the giant dragon, the child-slayer, I would happily die in any adventure against him (Owen 1985: 179/80).

There are a number of striking features about this passage: the numerous references to Greek mythology; the Arthurian legend; the use of romantic register; metaphorically casting the Zeppelin as a dragon, and so in effect positioning himself as Saint George, patron saint and protector of England: a heroic knight ready to do battle and willing to lay down his life for a noble cause. Taken all together it makes for an overblown romantic depiction of war. The myth of the noble sacrifice is here again, and it provides evidence of how successfully this romance myth was naturalised and accepted by the public.

Of course, it was not only the individuals who enlisted that believed in the romance of war, but the broader populace as well. Owen states that as they marched through London, 'we came in for a good deal of cheering and staring from windows and pavements' (Owen 1985: 180), and that there was a band to see them off. Likewise, in T. E. Hulme's account of the war, 'Diary from the Trenches', he speaks of girls leaning from windows, waving and cheering as the men marched to the quay (Hulme 1955: 147). Why did they cheer? These men were leaving to fight in utterly appalling conditions in which most of them would die. In 1914 when Maurice Baring[21] witnessed troops marching into battle he noted: 'the thought of these men swinging on into horror undreamt of […] came to me like a stab of a sword' (Pearce 1999: 102). Why was this interpretation not shared by others? True, the people at home had little real notion of what conditions on the front were like, but the reason for the celebration had to do with the myth of romance. The image of marching soldiers was not read as men marching to their death, that concept had been supplanted by the notion that they were marching into glory.

Of course, the myth of romance is able to take on many different forms and is easily applicable to numerous situations. For a second example of a myth that became associated with the war we can again turn to Wyndham Lewis:

> Arrival at the front […] was not unlike arrival at a big boxing match […] The same sinister expectancy, but more sinister and more electric, the same restless taciturnity of stern-faced persons assembling for a sensational and bloody event, their hearts set on the knock-out (Lewis 1967: 113).

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[21] Maurice Baring (1874-1945) was an English poet. During the war he served in the Royal Air Force and the Intelligence Corp.

Lewis blends the attitudes of those new to the front with the perspective of one who has shed off these notions. However, it is the sports reference that is of particular note. It is no accident that Lewis likens the war to a sporting event, as many historians point to the resurgence of sport at the turn of the century (for example, the revival of the Olympics) as a source of patriotic and nationalistic pride and competitiveness between nations that helped fuel the conflict (Ferro 1973: 13).

The link between war and sport re-emerges in numerous texts: a satirical example is found in *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*: a violent game of schoolyard football is depicted on a muddy field that seamlessly transitions to the Western Front (Jones 1983), thereby coupling the idea of sport with war, and primarily that schoolyard games are a prelude to the act of fighting. This is an apt juxtaposition to make, as the First World War is noteworthy for the numerous regiments that went over the top with a football in hand:

> The tactic was even employed at the Somme, when Captain W. P. Nevill gave a football to each of his four platoons, urged his amazed men to dribble the ball and offered a prize to the platoon which first got a football over the German lines (Kibred, 2005, 294).

Outside of the front there were also those who believed sport instilled desired militaristic qualities: 'Sport calls for endurance and sangfroid, and keeps youth in a warlike frame of mind' (Ferro 1973: 13). We can see here the coupling of image and concept to create another myth that plays into the romantic notions of war. The sporting ideals of competitiveness, with rules, fair-play and sportsmanship became associated with war, and led people to think of it as an extension of childhood.

The myth of sportsmanship also contributed towards the Germans being perceived as barbaric when they introduced new weapons, such as mustard gas, as this was seen as not keeping with fair competition between rivals, which the myth of war as sport created. The myth of sportsmanship in war was readily accepted by many people, both civilian and

military, and sometimes soldiers even carried these myths with them into battle. This can be seen to occur in Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire* (1916).[22]

> Now a heavy parcel of green cotton wool fizzes and lands on the target area, spreading in every direction. This splash of colour clashes with the general picture and attracts our attention. All the faces of the caged prisoners turn towards the frightful burst.
>
> 'That looks like mustard gas. Get your face sacks ready.'
>
> 'Pigs.'
>
> 'That's a really unfair move,' says Farfadet. […]
>
> 'Yes, not decent,' (Barbusse 2003: 196).

Although this shows the possibility for the naturalisation of myth, for most men these myths were rarely maintained on the front, as is revealed in the very next exchange:

> 'Don't make me laugh,' says Barque, 'you and your fair and un-fair weapons. When you've seen men cut open, chopped in half or split from top to bottom, spread around in pieces by ordinary shells, their bellies gaping and the contents dug out, skulls driven right into the lungs as if from a blow with a mallet or a little neck in place of the head with a blackcurrant jam of brains dripping all round it, on the chest and back … When you've seen that then come and tell me about clean, decent weapons of war!' (Barbusse 2003: 196).

When faced with the reality of war, soldiers came to see the myths for what they really were, and ultimately ideas of fair-play and clean warfare were cast aside.

The disillusionment of myths for those who experienced war is a common theme among the war memoirs published in the aftermath: as pointed out by Hynes, those who served in the war often engaged in a counter-language that sought to dismantle myth with depictions of reality (Hynes 1991: 113). This can be seen in Owen's collected letters and poems, Lewis' memoir and Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoir of an Infantry Officer*. A striking

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[22] Originally published in French as *Le Feu*, Barbusse's novel was one of the first to depict the war from the perspective of the ordinary soldier, and as it did so without the veneer of myth it did much to dispel the illusions the romance myths had created.

example comes with Owen's revelation that the war he had been led to believe in was indeed a myth:

> The dead, whose unburied bodies sit outside the dugouts all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them the most glorious. But to sit with them all day, all night … and a week later to come back and find them still sitting there, in motionless groups, THAT is what saps the 'soldierly spirit' (Owen 1985: 217/8).

Here we see the break between the image of the dead and the concept of their nobility. If myth functions as a type of language, then Owen's letter can be understood as reacting against it with a counter-language. While myth seeks to instil idealistic concepts into an image, counter-language reacts against this by focusing only on the object as it exists in reality, thereby allowing its description to speak for itself. When faced with reality the myth cannot survive and so it breaks down. The use of counter-language will be further explored in chapter two, but for the moment focus will remain on the manner in which the war was read by those on the home front, for it is in that environment, a step removed from the conflict, that myth was able to flourish and influence the way the war was interpreted.

It is to be expected during times of war that rumours, stories, lies and myths regarding both the enemy and one's own nation should be in circulation. In this regard, the First World War makes an excellent study of un-truth in the public domain, as it was the first modern war where the control and perpetuation of information to the general public, internally and abroad, was recognised as being of importance. As stated, maintaining public support for the war was vital as they were asked to forgo pleasures for the sake of the effort. Money and materials needed to be collected from them, so the loss of their support would place the nation's chance of victory in jeopardy. Myth, then, became an important tool in maintaining support. It has already been briefly explained how the myth of romance played its role, but there were many other war myths in circulation.

One of the most important was the myth of German barbarity. The myth that the Germans were an uncivilised people who threatened the moral fabric of society was

gradually constructed over the course of the war. The image the German soldier took in Allied propaganda is still readily recognised today: consistently the Germans were depicted as hulking figures, more beast than man (sometimes even with a tail), often in darkness or as a silhouette, and generally threatening a young, presumably Belgian, girl (Kingsbury 2010: 221). If we consider this image in terms of myth, we can conclude that the concept it signifies was that the Germans were an undeveloped people, had no morals, scruples or self-control, and threatened to destroy anything pure or wholesome.[23]

Many stories were utilised to communicate this concept. Arthur Ponsonby examined some of the most famous rumours of German atrocities in circulation during the war,[24] including the mutilated nurse, the Belgian children who had their hands cut off and the crucified Canadian.[25] These stories all reinforced the notion that the Germans were a barbaric people, and were intended to incite outrage and hatred towards them, thus fuelling support for the war. Of course, although there were many civilian casualties, as is the case with most wars, Ponsonby showed that the worst atrocity stories were almost all unfounded.

One well documented rumour from the war was that of the German corpse factory (Ponsonby 1928: 102).[26] The rumour states that the German army was boiling down the corpses of their own dead for the production of nitro-glycerine. The British Government spread the rumour through the issue of official pamphlets, and it became one of the most successful rumours of the war (Reeves 1986: 11). It was even deliberately sent overseas to

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[23] As with the myth of romance, the myth of German barbarity was for the benefit of those at home: Robert Graves in his memoir, *Goodbye to All That*, states, 'Propaganda reports of atrocities were, we agreed, ridiculous, […] we no longer believed accounts of unjustified German atrocities, such as rape, mutilation and murder, against Belgium' (Graves 1929: 234).

[24] The terms 'myth' and 'rumour' should not be confused with each other. When the term 'myth' is used it is in reference to Barthes' definition, as previously described. 'Rumour', in this context, applies only to an unfounded story. Rumours on their own are not myths; however, they may make a contribution to the concept behind a myth.

[25] Stephen alludes to these rumours in *Armageddon*, when describing some of the German acts of atrocity, such as the General's mutilated son.

[26] Also see Nicholas Reeves' *Official British Film Propaganda During the First World War* for a detailed account of the rumour's origin and how it was officially adopted by the British Government, 11.

countries like India, where such accounts would cause maximum outrage among Buddhists and Hindus (Ponsonby 1928: 103). The rumour was readily believed by both civilians and soldiers alike, with my own great-grand uncle writing home, earnestly: 'I suppose you won't believe me, Mum, but the Germans are boiling down their dead to make fat for shells.'[27] As a rumour it played a key role in the establishment of the myth of German barbarianism.[28]

At this point it is important to acknowledge once again that myth functions as a form of communication. As such, the media that carried the myths requires examination. This study is of course interested in dramatisation; however, it must be remembered that no artistic piece exists in a vacuum and that during the war's enactment all forms of media were engaged in the perpetuation of myth. Texts that depicted myth dramatically existed within a broader social environment of myths that their audiences would have been exposed to, and would have carried with them to any viewing. Indeed, the First World War is significant as the first major conflict to utilise all forms of mass media to spread messages. Almost every form of communication was utilised: posters, radio, pamphlets, advertising, public announcements, newspapers, film and of course theatre.[29] It should also be made clear that in the context of the war myth existed primarily in the form of propaganda. Having said that, not all myth is propaganda (just as not all propaganda is myth); however, its structure does lend itself to propaganda.

In basic terms, propaganda is a piece of communication that attempts to excite a response or an attitude from its audience that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist. This differs from persuasion insofar as persuasion is an interactive process and attempts to satisfy the needs of both parties. The propagandist seeks to change (or maintain) behaviour that is advantageous to them, even if it is detrimental to the audience

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[27] Caesar, A. J. (1917), unpublished letter dated 23/3/1917.

[28] Rumours of this kind are far too numerous to make an exhaustive list; however, others will be referenced as the chapter continues.

[29] Studies that give a more thorough examination of these forms of media include: Kingsbury's *For Home and Country* (2010) and *A Call to Arms: Propaganda, Public Opinion, and Newspapers in the Great War* (2004) edited by Troy R. E. Pabbock. Also see Leslie Midkiff DeBauche's *Reel Patriotism* (1997) for an analysis of the US film industry's contribution to the war effort, and Nicholas Reeves' *Official British Film Propaganda During the First World War* (1986) for an analysis of propaganda's utilisation of film.

(Jowett & O'Donnell 1986: 13). One key feature of propaganda is that it presents a clear ideology and objective (Jowett & O'Donnell 1986: 15). In this regard, myth, which presents concepts as facts in clear, unequivocal terms, can be easily utilised for propagandistic purpose.

It should be noted, though, that in 1914 the term propaganda did not have the same meaning as it does today. Today the term attracts primarily negative associations and is synonymous with lies, deceit, distortion and manipulation. On the eve of World War One propaganda was understood as a process of disseminating or publicising, which could be a morally neutral or benign activity, for example, the circulation of a scientific report (Messinger 2011: 17). By today's standards most official propaganda of the time was not overly deceptive. Charles Masterman, who was appointed by the Asquith Government to coordinate official propaganda, initiated a policy whereby great pains were taken by the government to ensure that their propaganda would be 'confined to the presentation of facts and of general arguments based upon those facts' (Reeves 1986: 10). This policy was carried over into the official production of films, which, if they had been produced today, would at worst be thought of as 'white propaganda.'[30]

It was, however, with the advent of new media, which possessed the potential to reach a mass audience, that propaganda came to be seen as a sinister manipulation of public opinion by official elites (Messinger 2011: 17). Despite the huge potential of these new media, notably film, the British Government was slow to embrace them, with official propaganda relying primarily on the written word. There is some defense for this. In 1914 the British population had one of the highest literacy rates in the world, second only to the United States of America (Gregory 2004: 15). As is also well documented, and to be expected with a high literacy rating, the nation's newspapers played a significant role as a source of un-official propaganda. It is also interesting to note that the British

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[30] Propaganda is traditionally split into three categories: white, grey and black. Generally the propagandist is easy to identify in white propaganda and the information presented is more or less factual. However, this information is generally presented in a way to convince the audience that the sender is the 'good guy'. By contrast black propaganda uses maximum deception, the identity of the propagandist is almost always concealed and the information presented is false. See Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (1986) for a full definition, 17/8.

Government's attitude to the press was one of aloofness. In the decade before the war the British foreign office only employed a relatively small number of people who dealt with the press, and there was a tradition amongst high-level diplomats (who at this time were still primarily drawn from the aristocracy) to look down on journalists as members of the lower class (Gregory 2004: 17).

It may be because of this attitude that in 1914 the British press was by and large free and almost totally unrestrained by any form of censorship. However, with the advent of war, two regulations were imposed upon the press under the Defense of the Realm Act (DORA): regulation 18, whose purpose was to prevent information from leaking to the enemy; and regulation 27, which contained clauses making it an offense to spread false reports, disaffect His Majesty, prejudice relations with foreign powers, prejudice recruitment or undermine public confidence in the currency or banking system (Gregory 2004: 22). No doubt a broad interpretation of regulation 27 could have been very restrictive, but remarkably it operated with a light touch.[31] Military censorship was concerned with restricting the flow of information directly from the front and this was handled by censoring all in-coming and out-going telegrams between the press and the front.

No other material in the press was pre-censored. In this context, censorship applied almost exclusively to militarily sensitive material, not political opinion (Gregory 2004: 24). Edward Cook,[32] joint director of the Press Bureau and responsible for the introduction of the regulations cited above, was in favour of a free press and believed that in a war it could be an asset to the nation. He put forward four arguments for this. He stated that the press would act as a guardian of the home front, as a conveyor of

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[31] In practise its more wide-ranging applications were almost never evoked. It remained voluntary for papers to submit stories for official censorship throughout the war, but the papers tended to exercise a process of self-censorship (Gregory 2004: 24).

[32] Sir Edward Tyas Cook (1857-1919) had been a journalist in a previous career and sat on the liberal side of politics. As such, he was in favour of a free press.

information, as a critic,[33] and as a propagandist (Gregory 2004: 23). It is with this final point that our current interests lie.

Since the end of the war it has become a truism that the press was responsible for the widespread propagation of false atrocity stories and the construction of both German barbarity and romance of war myths. Ponsonby states that an author with any literary bent could make 'the narrowest patriotism appear noble, the foulest accusation an outburst of humanitarianism and the meanest and most vindictive of aims falsely disguised as idealism' (Ponsonby 1928: 25). This has been the perceived role of the press in the First World War. However, as is generally the case with blanket statements, closer examination reveals a situation of greater complexity. There are several aspects of the print media's environment that need to be acknowledged.

On the eve of war the press was essentially uncensored; however, each paper tended to have close informal ties with a major political party (Gregory 2004: 19). This meant that newspapers were either conservative or liberal in tone.[34] The circulation ratio of conservative to liberal papers was roughly three to two (Gregory 2004: 17). The *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror*, both owned by Alfred Harmsworth,[35] represented the stable of conservative newspapers. The *Daily Mail* targeted lower-middle-class workers and advertised itself as being a 'penny paper for a half penny', thus billed as value for money. The paper also contained material that was of interest to women and this added to its popularity. This having been said, the paper that enjoyed the widest circulation at the time was *John Bull*, which boasted a weekly circulation of 900,000 copies, suggesting a

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[33] It is perhaps surprising how wide ranging permissible content in the press was. Almost every element of government policy came under criticism in the press during the war. This was sustainable due to the fact that up until 1916 the press was calling for more vigorous prosecution of the war effort (Gregory 2004: 25).

[34] There was an absence of a major socialist paper in Britain at the outbreak of the war. The reason for this can most likely be attributed to the fact that there was no powerful socialist party or movement active in the country at the time.

[35] Alfred Harmsworth (1865-1922), later Lord Nothcliffe after his elevation to the peerage, controlled a vast press empire and held considerable power over opinion in the public domain. He is sometimes credited with fuelling the movement that caused the collapse of the Asquith Government, which resulted in Lloyd George replacing him as Prime Minister. After becoming Prime Minister George appointed Harmsworth Director of Propaganda.

readership in excess of a million (Gregory 2004: 16). To call *John Bull* a newspaper by today's standards would be a stretch, as its content was far more akin to that found in modern tabloids. It carried a populist voice and was 'rabble-rousing, militantly anti-religious and sceptical about state interference with the "little man"' (Gregory 2004: 16).

In direct competition was the liberal press, represented by the *Daily Chronicle* and the *Daily News*. The *Times* represented the 'newspaper of record'; however, by 1914 it had come under the control of Harmsworth and readers were sceptical it was becoming a more expensive version of the *Daily Mail*. Outside of London the *Manchester Guardian*, a liberal publication, was one of the most widely read regional papers (Gregory 2004: 18). The ability of these papers to sway public opinion must not be overstated, because as Gregory points out, the public tended to buy the publication that spoke to their pre-existing political tendencies (Gregory 2004: 19), and so papers generally preached to the choir.

As would be expected, the political inclination of a paper influenced its attitude towards the war. With Serbia's rejection of the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum the issue of war found its way into the newspapers for the first time. In the period between the ultimatum's rejection and Britain's entrance into the war the papers tended to fall into their default political positions: the conservative press stressed the obligation to stand by France, while the liberals firmly opposed any sort of involvement (Gregory 2004: 19). Regional papers also argued that Britain had no interests in a continental conflict and should therefore remain neutral. The divide between the papers remained largely unchanged from 31 July to 4 August, and even Germany's incursion into Belgium did little to sway opinions.

When war was officially declared, though, a change occurred that is best surmised by the *Manchester Guardian*'s response, printed on 5 August 1914:

England declared war on Germany at eleven o'clock last night. All controversy therefore is now at an end. Our front is united. […] Some day we shall regret it. We ourselves have contended to the utmost of our power and with deep conviction that we were doing a patriotic act. The memory of those efforts will not weaken our resolve now, but rather strength it. […] Now there is nothing for Englishmen to do but to stand together and help by

any means in their power to the attainment of our common objective—an early and decisive victory over Germany (Gregory 2004: 44/45).

Despite the fact that the *Guardian* and many other papers had opposed the war, once it was declared most set aside former positions to present a united front and support the conflict in the hope of a speedy and decisive victory.

The manner in which the papers reported the war, the German acts of atrocity, and, in effect, their construction of the German people, has been widely analysed and critiqued over the years.[36] For the purpose of this project it does bear review, as the manner in which the German people were depicted in the press and other forms of propaganda played an important role in how the war existed in the imagination of the public, which will be seen to permeate other modes of representation, so reinforcing and further naturalising that image and concept. As Gregory argues, though, the suggestion that the press presented and overwhelming and unwavering propagandistic attack on Germany is untrue.[37]

While this is the case, certain factors need to be taken into consideration. First and foremost Britain was at war with Germany – to not print stories that appeared to have some credibility, and which also incriminated the enemy, would have been unthinkable. Second, the social climate of the time also needs to be considered: certain military practises were undertaken that, through subsequent familiarity, seem un-shocking today, but that in 1914 were seen as gross violations of civilised standards (Gregory 2004: 26).

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[36] For example: Thompson, J. Lee (1999), *Politicians, Propaganda, and the Press: Lord Northcliffe and the Great War*, Kent: Kent State University Press; Pearce, C. (2001), *Comrades in Conscience: The story of an English Community's Opposition to the Great War*, London: Boutle; Jeffries, J. M. N. (1935), *Front Everywhere*, London: Hutchinson; McCullen, Kerry & Putris, Peter (2008), 'Media Management in War Time', *Media History*, Vol. 14 No. 1, 17-34; Nelson, Robert L. (2010), 'Soldier Newspapers: A Useful Source in the Social and Cultural History of the First World War and Beyond', *War in History*, Vol. 17 No. 2, 167-91.

[37] Gregory methodically examines the stories that appeared in the *Daily Mail* during the opening months of the war to reveal that they were not favouring atrocity stories over other forms of news relating to the war, nor were they setting out to consciously demonise the enemy. In truth, the editors would go to some length to determine a story's validity. Indeed, many stories were sourced from foreign governments and agencies, which implied, at the time, a level of credibility.

And third, it is a fact that many of the things done by the German army are today considered war crimes. Regardless, if the press was not inundated with atrocity stories, the manner in which they handled and presented them still engaged in a process of negative construction that evolved as the war continued.

To see an early example of how the actions of the German army were portrayed we can consider an excerpt from the *Daily Mail*, 12 August 1914, page 6:

> In the North Sea, the Germans have proceeded to show their system of maritime warfare is as cruel and callous as their system of war on land. By scattering mines in the highway of international traffic they have imperilled the shipping of neutral powers and brought the most terrible risks upon innocent non-combatants—women and children (Gregory 2004: 27).

The facts in the article are accurate: Germany had been mining the North Sea. We should, however, note the use of the emotive terms 'cruel' and 'callous' to describe these actions. The concept of civilians has also been narrowed to exclusively mean women and children, when in reality those at the greatest threat would have been merchant sailors, who were almost exclusively male. The intent of this article was to portray the Germans as conducting war in a cruel way, with no regard for innocent life, and so constructed them as a barbaric people. This shows that even early in the war lines were being drawn that would eventually come to dominate the public's perception of the German army, and hence maintain support for the war.

As the war continued through those first weeks more stories began to leak from the continent, and although it was inherently difficult to determine their validity, the sheer number of stories in circulation began to sway opinion as it became accepted that some of them had to be true. On 21 August Hamilton Fyfe[38] reported that it was now 'clear beyond any doubt that the Germans were conducting a war in a wholly uncivilised manner' (Gregory 2004: 28). He followed this statement with four paragraphs of atrocity stories written in the same vein as those mentioned above. From this point it is possible to see

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[38] Hamilton Fyfe (1869-1951) was a journalist for the *Daily Mail* during the war and would later go on to become its editor.

how rumours expressed in a particular rhetoric, when presented as news, could begin to naturalise the concept of barbarity with the German soldiers and so forge a myth that is then accepted as fact.

Although the propagation of atrocity stories played a major role in developing the German image, there were other factors. The German invasion of the Belgian town of Louvain represents one of the key points in the solidification of German depiction. The importance of Louvain was twofold. First, the town was of specific cultural significance: it boasted fifteenth-century churches, a fourteenth-century Cloth Hall and, most importantly, a university library that housed some quarter-of-a-million books, incunabula and manuscripts, all of which were destroyed by the German occupation. Second, Louvain was recaptured by the Allies shortly after the German siege, meaning that for the first time accounts of what happened could be readily verified with physical evidence.

The first reports of the town's destruction appeared on 29 August in the *Daily Mail* in an article entitled, 'The War Lords Awful Vengeance; a Belgian Town in Ashes' (Gregory 2004: 29).[39] The focus of this story, and the numerous ones that followed, was not the crimes committed against the people, but those committed against the symbols of civilisation. In part this was due to the impact of photographs. This was a crime that could be physically seen and measured, as opposed to atrocity stories that would always maintain a certain level of abstraction for a reader. The manner of such reporting was to have a crossover effect on the continued blackening of the German character. The apparent wanton destruction of culturally significant buildings and documents cast the Germans as the enemy of civilisation. What follows naturally from this idea is that if the Germans destroy the physical symbols of the civilised world then how is it possible for them to hold any regard for the other virtues, morals and ethics that are upheld by society?

It is possible to trace the meaning of the term 'Hun' in its usage by the papers. Directly following the attack on Louvain it was synonymous with the word 'vandal', insofar as they were destroyers of property (Gregory 2004: 31). However, as the above links were made, the meaning of the term expanded to encompass a people who were murderers with no regard for human life; in essence, enemies of the virtues of the civilised

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[39] In actuality only 12% of the town was damaged. The fact that many of the culturally significant buildings had suffered damage is what made for the scathing headlines.

world. Gradually the idea became naturalised that the atrocities the Germans committed were done because it was in their nature:

> They drove the women and the children into the fields, perpetrating on them atrocities which cannot be detailed in cold prose. […] But those who know the repulsive torture chambers of Nuremberg and Regensberg […] in the fatherland will not be surprised by these cruelties (Gregory 2004: 30).

From Louvain on, the myth of German barbarity had been naturalised. Once established other developments could easily be orientated to align with this myth, for example the introduction of mustard gas, the execution of Edith Cavell[40] or the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Such events became further proofs of the fact, and so this image of the enemy came to dominate the public's perception.[41]

Outside the realms of overt propaganda the most telling sign of myth's social acceptance is its appearance in texts that were not produced specifically to act as propaganda. For example, American commercial films were more than willing to adopt myth in their portrayal of the war and the enemy. There are numerous examples of this, such as Charlie Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms* (1918) and Mary Pickford's *The Little American* (1917). However, the theatre also served as an outlet for mythical modes of representation. As is frequently pointed out, the public's attitude towards the war underwent a shift during its enactment: from the initial up swell of patriotism to that of disillusionment. Accordingly, we can see a shift in how the theatre of the day handled this:

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[40] Edith Cavell (1865-1915) was a British nurse who assisted over 200 Allies in their escape from German occupied Belgium. She was arrested by the German authorities for this, court-martialled and executed by firing squad. Her execution received widespread media coverage and international condemnation.

[41] In regard to propaganda, this study is restricting itself to an overview of print media as representative of its engagement with myth; however, a similar approach could be made for all forms of media utilised for both official and un-official propaganda purposes during the war.

At the beginning emphasis was on ensuring that enthusiasm and enlistment was kept high. As the horrors of the battlefield became apparent the tone shifted to negative representations of the enemy (D'Monté 2015: 92).

While this may be the case, what will be seen is that both perspectives use myth as a vehicle to communicate their messages. Although this project is not an examination of the state of Britain's theatre industry during the war years, before delving further into the subject of myth on stage, it does warrant a brief overview of what was popular in the nation's theatres at the time.[42]

Theatre

There are inherent difficulties involved when attempting to make an assessment of the war's portrayal on stage during its enactment. First, few of the plays produced have survived through to today and are now no longer available. Second, even at the time there appears to have been little consensus as to what the public wanted and what the theatre was delivering. For example, critics at once bemoaned the unreality portrayed by war plays, whilst at the same time insisted that the war's reality was unwelcome (Williams 2003: 187). In 1918 R. G. Knowles, writing for the then theatrical publication, *Era*, concluded that the war was 'too vast for condensation at present,' and that aside from a few inadequate melodramas it had not been touched (Williams 2003: 177). The argument ran that the time had not yet come to attempt a proper portrayal of the war, and that only once it was over would it be appropriate to make an examination (Williams 2003: 181). Some returned soldiers baulked at the notion of portraying the war on stage, with one commenting that, 'no real man should describe the revolting detailed life out there'

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[42] Gordon Williams' study, *British Theatre in the Great War* (2003) gives a detailed overview of the shows produced during this period across a wide range of genres, including, musical, variety hall, revue, new and revived theatre, as well as opera. L. J. Collins' study, *Theatre at War 1914—18* (1998), also gives a detailed analysis of the different types of theatre provisions offered during the war.

(Williams 2003: 18). Additionally, numerous theatre managers shared the opinion that the war, as a topic for serious theatre, was taboo (Williams 2003: 178).

The fact that for a long time critics regarded this period as theatrically uneventful also makes it difficult to properly assess. Arthur Marwick[43] wrote that 'undoubtedly the intellectual content of almost all the theatrical productions was minimal' (Collins 1998: 3). Likewise, G. T. Watts wrote in 1916 that 'the drama for the time being may be said scarcely to exist, having been replaced by a species of inanity' (Collins 1998: 3). A harsh assessment, yet it cannot be denied that through 1914-18 no new plays of any real artistic significance were produced, certainly nothing that would be recognised by the theatre-going public today. All of the established playwrights were conspicuous only by their silence. W. Somerset Maugham was serving with the army, and would not write *For Services Rendered*, his treatment of the war, for another fourteen years. John Galsworthy[44] wrote two plays, *A Bit o' Love* (1915) and *The Foundation* (1917); neither of which enjoyed an extended run.[45] John Drinkwater[46] made only one small contribution when his short, pacifist play, *X=0*, was staged with the Birmingham Rep in 1917 (Luckhurst 2006: 304). The play presented an allegorical story set around the happenings of the Trojan War, and featured soldiers who had long since forgotten what they were fighting for. The piece provoked some controversy, as Drinkwater was embraced by pacifist and conscientious objectors, whilst also being painted as someone who was acting against the interest of the country (D'Monté 2015: 76).

Generally speaking, most overtly pacifist or outspokenly anti-war plays did not get past the censor. George Bernard Shaw was something of a serial offender during the war and this acted as one of the causes for his own silence, although Luckhurst notes that he regarded the continual skirmishes with the Lord Chamberlain's Office as something of a performance in itself (Luckhurst 2006: 304). These difficulties aside, Shaw did contribute

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[43] Arthur Marwick (1936-2006), was an historian who specialised on the social impact of war.

[44] John Galsworthy (1867-1933). Although he produced many plays during his life, he is today best remembered for his prose, specifically *The Forsythe Saga*.

[45] *A Bit o' Love* ran for seven days, *The Foundations* ran for twenty-three. At most these plays make only a veiled engagement with the war.

[46] John Drinkwater (1882-1937), was a minor British poet and dramatist. Little known today, his biggest success was a dramatisation of Abraham Lincoln's life, although it is now rarely staged.

several short playlets,[47] but he made no contribution to the main stage.[48] *O'Flaherty V. C.* was not even staged in Britain, but had its premiere at the 40 Squadron Base in Trezennes, Belgium. One reason for Shaw's comparative absence during the war (even revivals of his works were rarely done) had to do with the unpopularity he had garnered for himself over a collection of essays where he attacked the war, consistently advancing the opinion that the conflict was not a fight for freedom, but was first and foremost an imperialistic power struggle (Collins 1998: 193). Public detestation for Shaw culminated when he published the pamphlet *Common Sense About the War*. In this piece he suggested that the rank and file of both the British and German armies should shoot their officers and go home (Collins 1998: 193).

Even *O'Flaherty V.C.* was deliberately pitched to rouse hecklers with a couple of choice lines: 'You'll never have a quiet world until you knock the patriotism out of the human race'; 'Don't talk to me or any soldier about the war being right. No war is right' (Shaw 1919: 174). And he even disputed the belief that the war was capable of uplifting the nation's spirit:

> They never thought of being patriotic until the war broke out; and now the patriotism has took them so sudden and come so strange to them that they run about like frightened chickens, uttering all manner of nonsense. But please God they'll forget all about it when the war's over. They're getting tired of it already (Shaw 1919: 176).

Even setting aside the controversial Irish themes within the piece, the public had no appetite for these opinions, and so, for the short term at least, Shaw had to endure his partially self-imposed exile from the stage.

By 1914 Henry Arthur Jones had already come off the apex of his career, which he enjoyed during the 1880-90s. He was to write only one full-length play through the war, *The Pacifists* (1917), famous only for having been a spectacular failure. *The Pacifists* presented a critique of those who favoured the 'peace at any cost attitude' and argued that such a stance could never work and would only lead to the ruin of Britain (Williams 2003:

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[47] *O'Flaherty V.C.* (1915), *Augustus Does his Bit* (1917) and *Annajanska, the Bolshevik Express* (1918).

[48] Although completed during the war, *Heartbreak House* was not staged until 1920.

231). Possibly its publication date of 1917 reveals that it was produced too late to enjoy the initial up-swell of support for the war, as the public became increasingly jaded. By another token, though, it is also an additional testament to the subtlety of the theatre-going public. While Shaw's attack on the war would never find support, neither did works of the opposite extreme. This was shown to be the case with Stephen's *Armageddon*, and will also be shown to be comparable with J. M. Barrie's *Der Tag*. Barrie does, however, stand as the only exception of an established playwright who had any significant output during the war, and so will be examined individually below.

If there was a general lack of work being produced by recognised playwrights, it did not mean there was a lack of material gracing the British stages. The theatre, as an industry, actually flourished through the war: in London it was reported in 1915 that 28 out of the 31 theatres were in operation and frequently playing to full houses (Williams 2003: 148). The war period came to represent something of a golden age for theatre. It was a time when nearly every person was a theatre-goer (Williams 2003: 2), and attending live performance became part of the weekly routine. The longest-running shows, and biggest money-makers, were musicals: the two most successful being *The Maid of the Mountains* and *Chu Chin Chow*, with the latter enjoying an impressive run of over 2200 performances (Williams 2003: 18).[49] The war years also saw out the last great period of music hall and vaudeville (Williams 2003: 92), but other forms of theatre also enjoyed success.

It is interesting, however, that those involved in the British theatre industry could not decide what the role of the theatre should be. A popular argument was that audiences desired plays that were light, bright, entertaining and of sufficient interest to distract them, temporarily, from the war (Williams 2003: 150). The popularity of musicals, variety shows, pantomime and revues supports this. However, a counter-argument also ran stating that people turned to the theatre for an insight into the meaning of their mood (Williams 2003: 150). Naturally enough there were plays produced that abided by both these positions, and so along with the light, bright plays, pieces that explored the social issues

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[49] Both productions were directed by Oscar Ashe (1871-1936). *The Maid of the Mountains* opened at Daly's Theatre on 10 February 1917 and ran for 1352 performances. Ashe also wrote and performed in *Chu Chin Chow*, which opened at His Majesty's Theatre on 3 August 1916 and ran for five years. Interestingly, *Chu Chin Chow* was revived in 1940 during the Second World War and actually had its run interrupted by the London bombings.

of the day were also produced.[50] A popular theme that came under examination was the role of women in society: a social issue created by the war with the sudden absence of the male population, causing women to fill their roles in numerous occupations. Other themes included the altering class system, drug usage, poverty and sex (Williams 2003: 154-60). But what of direct representations of the war?

Although there were only scant contributions from the established playwrights, this is not to suggest that the war went untouched; even given the capricious sentiments of the theatre managers. That being said, much of what was produced was staged in haste, and it is difficult to separate pieces intended for recruitment purposes from those that were merely advancing a patriotic sentiment – because for the former to be successful it must excite the same sentiments as the latter (Williams 2003: 179). The theatre does of course hold a potential to engineer a corporate sense of patriotic identity, as it gathers a large group of people into close proximity and presents scenes designed to ignite that sentiment, making it possible under the right circumstances for the group collective to take over.[51] However, this project is more interested in works removed from this ulterior motive.

Speaking broadly, the plays that enjoyed the greatest popularity were spy stories – even Barrie's *A Kiss for Cinderella* engaged with elements of this genre in its opening scenes. The other popular theme was that of sacrifice for one's nation. There were several variants on the theme; for example, sometimes women were used as mouth-pieces for social sentiments, claiming they could not love a man who was not willing to do his part for King and Country (Williams 2003: 182). J. E. Macmanus' play, *The Man Who Wouldn't* stands as an example of another angle usually adopted to encourage people to sacrifice for the nation. The title gives the play away: the main character initially begins in seeing no reason to serve, but through some revelation (and in most plays this usually took the form of an act of German atrocity) he revises his original opinion. This was a common pattern for many plays, and this plot structure can be found in Matthew

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[50] A similar argument was being simultaneously debated in the American film industry. See DeBauche, *Reel Patriotism*, pages 41/2.

[51] For a full discussion on the utilisation of theatre for recruitment purposes see Collins' study, *Theatre at War*, pages 5-32.

Boulton's *Sword and Surplice* and Edward Knoblauch's *England Expects*, the latter of which was even used for overt recruitment purposes (Williams 2003: 182).[52]

This final selection of plays (along with the musicals and comedy revues) represents the main fare of the London stage offerings during the war. Most of these works are today unavailable or were never published in the first place. Rather than perform a more in-depth review of these pieces,[53] the final section of this chapter will focus on a small collection of plays by readily recognisable authors: J. M. Barrie's *The New Word*, Maurice Maeterlinck's *The Mayor of Stilemonde* and Eugene O'Neill's *The Sniper*. What each of these pieces reveals is a ready engagement with mythic constructions. Significantly, Barrie's *The New Word* will provide an example of the myth of romance, while Maeterlinck's *The Mayor of Stilemonde* engages with the myth of German barbarity. O'Neill's *The Sniper* readily engages with both forms of mythic construction and further deconstructs the romance myth, pointing the way forward to the productions that appeared in the war's aftermath.

Barrie's *The New Word*

While the bulk of established playwrights fell silent over the war years, Sir James Matthew Barrie (1860-1937) wrote seven plays that were staged through 1914-18, all of which (with the exception of *Dear Brutus*) touch on the theme of war. Given this catalogue it is worth providing a brief overview of Barrie's output before turning to *The New Word*. Like Shaw's few contributions, five of Barrie's six plays were short pieces best described as playlets. But whereas *O'Flaherty V.C.* was both critical of the war and satirical in tone, Barrie readily engaged with the more socially accepted mythic constructions of the time. Tellingly, while Shaw's approach made him box office poison, by comparison Barrie was viewed as the most significant playwright of the day, with

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[52] There are of course many other examples. For a full discussion see Williams' study *British Theatre in the Great War*, pages 147-214.

[53] See Williams' *British Theatre in the Great War*, and Collins' *Theatre at War 1914—1918* for a full discussion.

William Phelps lauding him as the 'foremost English-writing dramatist since Sheridan' (Phelps 1920: 829). If nothing else, this is revealing of the broad acceptance that mythic modes of portraying the war had among the general population.

Even Phelps, though, had to concede that Barrie's first effort during the war, *Der Tag*, was not his best. Produced mere months after the declaration, *Squire* described the play as 'the worst thing on the war that has yet emanated from a distinguished writer' (Williams 2003: 228). The play is set in Germany, with the Kaiser laying forth his plan to overrun Europe. He is shown as arrogant, believing that Britain's heyday is over, 'Britain has grown dull and sluggish; a belly of a land, she lies overfed [...] —and timid, too— without red blood in her, but in its stead a thick, yellowish fluid' (Barrie 1914: 6/7). His desire is to dominate the world and make it a better place with the introduction of German culture:

> I carve America in great mouthfuls for my colonists, for now I strike the seas. [...] I feel it's as good as done before I set forth to do it. Dictator of the world! And all for pacific ends. For once, the whole is mine. We come at last to the great desideratum, a universal peace. Rulers over all! God in the heavens, I upon the earth—we two! (Barrie 1914: 11).

There is no space for misinterpreting Barrie's critique of Germany's lust for domination, and unsurprisingly most audiences and reviewers thought it overblown and simplistic (Williams 2003: 228). Although painfully overt, this does keep in line with the mythic modes of representation that were used to depict the German peoples during this time, as the Kaiser is seen as a threat to the civilised world. Despite the fact that both official propaganda and the print media were engaging with these ideas, much like *Armageddon*, *Der Tag* was a commercial flop.[54]

If nothing else, Barrie learnt from his first foray, and the works he produced thereafter approached the war in a far less heavy handed way. *A Kiss for Cinderella* (1916), Barrie's lone full length production, fared much better, playing for 156

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[54] It will be recalled Barthes stated that if a myth is too overt it will not be accepted, but rather the image will be recognised as functioning as the myth's alibi. This partly explains why plays such as *Der Tag* failed, even though thematically they were still aligned with the popular myths of the day.

performances at the Wyndham Theatre (Kosok 2007: 197). Keeping in line with the most popular plays of the day, *A Kiss for Cinderella* opens by evoking themes consistent with the spy genre. A police officer is investigating the suspicious behaviour of Cinderella, who is briefly suspected to be a German sympathiser. However, this is quickly dispensed with, given that the play is not overly interested in the war; nevertheless, it offers something of an antidote to it. On the most simplistic level the play functions as a fantastical escape from reality, again another hallmark of the most popular pieces of the time. Cinderella fantasises about dancing with the Prince of Wales at a ball, and the centrepiece of the play presents an enactment of this dream. Kings, ladies, lords and courtiers all appear, extravagantly dressed; some reclining in rocking chairs or eating ice cream. The dreamscape is bright and joyous. Nothing could be further from the Western Front.

Among these lighter happenings, though, is another favourite theme of war plays: that of sacrifice for the nation. Cinderella has adopted four children orphaned by the war. She is nearly destitute herself, yet she is shown to be contributing to the war effort in her own way. At once we have the theme of self-sacrifice for the nation, and the stoic attitude that there is no question of making a sacrifice when it comes to doing 'your bit':

> They're just me trying to do my bit. It's said all should do their bit in war-time. It was into a hospital I wanted to go to nurse the wounded soldiers. I offered myself at every hospital door, but none would have me, so this was all I could do (Barrie 1928: 419).

What gives her deed significance is the fact that she has very little to sacrifice. By neglecting her own well-being – she ends up dangerously ill – she is able to care for the children. This is idealised stoic behaviour, which is more commonly associated with the myth of male masculinity, but is equally valid to the British sensibility of willingly sacrificing oneself for the greater good. Cinderella stands as inspiration and encouragement for people to do more for the nation.

Barrie's real contribution to the theatre during the war comes in the form of two minor plays: *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals* (1917) and *The New Word* (1915). *The Old Lady* was written towards the end of the conflict. It tells the story of an old woman, with

no child serving on the front for her to gloat about. So she claims that a soldier with the same surname as herself, whom she read of in the paper, is her son. The fraudulent women and the genuine soldier, who is without a family himself, eventually meet and gradually develop a relationship that comes to approximate that of mother and son.

The play begins in portraying the perverse pleasure taken by a group of women who brag about the menfolk they have fighting overseas: 'Me that has a son a prisoner in Germany,' 'My son is fighting in France,' claims another, and 'Mine is wounded in two places,' says a third (Barrie 1918: 10). To have a child in combat is the symbol of their contribution and dedication to the war. It is their badge of honour and they laud it over other women who lack offspring.

> TWYMLEY: I've heard of females that have no male relations, and so they have no man-party at the war. I've heard of them, but I don't mix with them.
> MICKLEHAM: What can the likes of us have to do with them? It's not their war (Barrie 1918: 14).

For the women the war is little more than something for them to debate – the same as any other social or political issue. However, this does highlight how reductive the war can become for those physically removed from the fighting. The women treat it essentially as a point of gossip and a means of social segregation.

While this theme is prominent in the opening sections of the play, it does not constitute the defining feature of the piece. As with the majority of Barrie's oeuvre what remains consistent is his evocation of the sentimental. This is readily apparent in *A Kiss for Cinderella* but also imbues *The Old Lady*. The stance Barrie adopts towards the war is secondary to the burgeoning relationship between Mrs Dowey (the old lady) and the soldier, Kenneth. The war is so distant that it is all but forgotten. Kenneth seems largely unaffected by his frontline experiences; indeed, he has very little to say for his time in combat. Instead Kenneth and Mrs Dowey are presented as two individuals alone in the world. Although they are brought together by Mrs Dowey's duplicity, it quickly becomes apparent that what each character lacks the other is able to provide. The play then operates as the coming together of these two outcasts. Kenneth makes a small show of putting Mrs Dowey on 'probation' before he accepts her, as she has to prove herself worthy after the

trick she played. But as her deception was not committed out of true malice, there is never any real doubt that the two will be reconciled.

The New Word is composed in much the same tone as Barrie's other pieces, only in this case it is the relationship between father and son that is explored. Again, an overt sentimentality is apparent, and again the war is not especially vital to the plot. *The New Word* is essentially a brief coming-of-age story, which focuses on how the changing dynamic in the father/son relationship is navigated by the pair. The war, within this context, serves only as a catalyst to push this sudden change upon them. This sole function is of far greater importance to the plot than the actual logistics of going into battle. However, for that very reason, the way the war is treated is consistent with the mythic constructions described at the beginning of this chapter.

The play opens in the home of a typical middle-class family. Mr Torrance is reading a paper and his wife is pretending to pay attention to him. But it is a significant day, as their son, Roger, is preparing to leave for the war as a Second Lieutenant. The biggest stir occurs when Roger first enters dressed in his uniform. This is the central moment of the play; and Barrie appreciates the mythical function the uniform serves. In his stage direction Barrie writes: 'Roger, in uniform, walks in, strung up for the occasion. Or the uniform comes forward with Roger inside it' (Barrie 1928: 743). Here Barrie highlights the semiological relationship between Roger, the person, and the uniform, as a symbol that functions as a myth.

The stage direction is actually quite extensive, and those familiar with Barrie's whimsical style, particularly evident in the extended asides found in *Peter Pan*, will be aware that little of what he writes in these detailed directions ever makes itself evident to an audience. However, in this instance Barrie's note helps the reader appreciate the power of myth, and reveals it to function in much the same way that Barthes' *Paris-Match* does.

> Before the war broke out he [Roger] was treasurer of the local lawn tennis club, and his golf handicap was seven; he carried a little bag daily to and from the city, and his highest relaxation was giggling with girls, or about them (Barrie 1928: 743).

This description is intended to give us a quick impression of who Roger is. Of course, for an audience, all they see on his entrance is the uniform: the officer and the soldier. The particulars of what made Roger a unique individual are drained away by the myth that now inhabits his image. In this setting Roger's character has no bearing on how his image is interpreted, for the uniform has supplanted it.

It is only to be expected that an audience would read Roger's character in this way, as it has no pre-existing inclination of who he is. The real significance comes when his family also reads their son's appearance in terms of myth. The first thing his sister, Emma, does on his entrance is to beat the tune 'See the Conquering Hero Come' out of their family piano (Barrie 1928: 743). Meanwhile, his mother is enraptured, and begs him to turn on the spot so she can admire him from every angle: 'I knew he would look splendid; but of course I couldn't know he would look quite so splendid' (Barrie 1928: 744).

What becomes apparent is the idea that the uniform, which communicates the romantic notion of the soldier, is also representative of the family's attitude towards the war as a whole. Just as the uniform supplants the mild-mannered Roger with that of a romantic soldier hero, so too is the war itself perceived as equally romantic. His mother and sister fuss over him and comment on how wonderful everything associated with the war is. Emma even goes so far as to claim, 'Have you ever noticed how fine all the words in –oon are? Platoon! Dragoon!' (Barrie 1928: 745). Evidently she is enamoured with anything associated with the war. Mrs Torrance states that she would have been disappointed had Roger not been able to serve, and evokes the memory of her elder son, who died many years ago:

> Now I see him a man of twenty-one, dressed in khaki, fighting for his country, same as you. I wouldn't have had one of you stay home, though I had had a dozen. That is, if it is the noble war they all say it is (Barrie 1928: 747).

The reality of what her son is going to face does not even register. There is only the romanticised image that has been instilled by years of literary tradition, contemporary

propaganda and mythic constructions. Her attitude is reminiscent of Wyndham Lewis'
statement:

> Need I say that there is nothing so romantic as war? […] If your mind is of a romantic cast,
> there is nothing for it […] The likelihood that you will get your head blown off cannot
> weigh with you for a moment. You must not miss a war if there is one going! (Lewis 1967:
> 114).

But whereas Lewis, writing in the 1930s, approached his subject satirically, here Mrs
Torrance, and indeed Barrie, speaks with the utmost earnestness.

The remainder of the play is an examination of the father/son relationship, yet even
here echoes of war filter through, and once again they take the form of romanticisation.
Mr Torrance laments his own inability to go into service, but now sees that his own son's
contribution is a sign of his coming of age. What is evident is that war service is shown to
confer manhood on Roger. The only threat to this is that he may prove to be a coward:

> TORRANCE: I suppose you have been asking yourself of late, what if you were to turn out to
> be a funk!
> ROGER: […] They all seem to be so frightfully brave, father.
> TORRANCE: I expect that the best of them had the same qualms as you before their first
> engagement.
> ROGER: I—I kind of think, father, that I won't be a funk.
> TORRANCE: I kind of think so too, Roger (Barrie 1928: 753/4).

This weighs on their mind, as such behaviour runs against the idealised construct of the
stoic and noble British solider, as defined by myth, and so is the only act that could
subvert Roger's new-found manhood. This belief was widespread during the war, and it is
a concept that in its own way contributed to the endemic occurrence of shell shock, as will
be explored in chapter two. Although cowardice is acknowledged, the threat of such a
thing happening is not seen as a real possibility and so Mr Torrance has nothing to feel but
quiet pride in his son.

Between father and son there is little notion of war's reality. The threats of death, hardship or horrors are not considered. The only point of importance is that Roger's enlistment is representative of the fact that he has come of age. This is of course evidence of the strength the war's romance myths had. In examining *The New Word* and Barrie's other pieces, what is apparent is the continual evocation of myth. Each piece takes a higher concept and attaches it to the image of the war. Cinderella is the stoic citizen making sacrifices for a noble cause; Roger, clad in uniform, is a hero marching into glory; even the Kaiser in *Der Tag* is endowed with the qualities associated with German barbarity – he is therefore a force to be stopped, making the war a noble cause. Each play is an attempt to instil a higher concept into the conflict, and in doing so the horrors and hardships that might otherwise be associated with battle are reduced. This would have had the result of confirming and strengthening these mythic constructions for the audience. But at the same time it should be remembered that this is what the public wanted. Compare Barrie's success with Shaw's satires and it becomes evident that Barrie's portrayal of the war (with the exception of *Der Tag*) engaged with the social climate of the day in a way that Shaw did not. Myth dominated the public's perception of the conflict. The next two plays to be examined will reveal how the myth of German barbarity was also utilised by the theatre as a way of justifying Allied involvement in the war.

Maeterlinck's *The Mayor of Stilemonde*

Turning to Maeterlinck's *The Mayor of Stilemonde* we find something different.[55] Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949) was of course Belgian, and as such he remained critical of the German occupation. The play is set in a small Belgian town, Stilemonde, at the onset of the German invasion. German officers are depicted in lead roles, and although one would expect his political inclinations to colour the depiction of the German

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[55] Published in French as *Le Bourgmestre de Stilmonde*. *The Mayor of Stilemonde* was first performed in 1918, Buenos Aires. Produced towards the end of Maeterlinck's career, it falls outside the canon of works considered to be his best: the symbolist plays of the 1890s.

characters, and undoubtedly it does, these characters are not presented without their own perspective on events, nor without redeeming qualities. Nevertheless, the play still stands as a dramatic representation of the estrangement of the German people from the European community, as they are shown throughout the play to be cold and calculating, with little regard or understanding for the suffering of others.

As the only play composed in a language other than English to appear in this study, some explanation is now required. Maeterlinck wrote the piece in 1917, specifically to be staged internationally, with the intent to gain sympathy for Belgium's plight.[56] Accordingly, it was quickly translated into English by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos[57] and published the very next year. After its first staging in Argentina it was transferred to Britain, and so was staged in English before its native French. *The Mayor of Stilmonde* opened at the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh on 4 October 1918, one month before The Armistice. From Edinburgh the production embarked on a tour of regional Britain. The play was well received and even the conclusion of the war did little to dampen its run. It subsequently opened in London at the Scala Theatre in January 1919, before going on an international tour, which included the United States and Canada. In 1929 it was remade into a silent film starring Sir John Martin-Harvey (who had also played the lead in the stage version). This brief history reveals that it was intentionally written for an English audience, and enjoyed a successful run and tour of Britain during the war, hence its inclusion.

The play opens with a wounded Belgian soldier arriving in the home of the Mayor to warn of the approaching German army. It is during this exchange that the first hints of the crimes committed against the Belgian people are given: primarily they are rumours of massacres.[58] It is also during this exchange that the audience learns the Mayor's daughter

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[56] In the text's introduction Maeterlinck noted that the piece was little more than propaganda, but on closer examination it becomes evident that to merely label the play as 'propaganda' would be dismissive. Its structure and handling of the subject are far subtler than the standard fare of the day. Something that becomes instantly apparent when comparison is made to Barrie's *Der Tag* or Phillip's *Armageddon*.

[57] Alexander Teixeira de Mattos (1865-1921), was a Dutch-English journalist and critic, who made his name as a translator. He was a close friend of Maeterlinck and translated the bulk of his work.

[58] The attack on Louvain is evoked, which would have stirred up feelings of hostility in the audience, for, as we have seen, Louvain was a central part of the myth of Germany as the enemy of civilisation.

is married to one of the German officers, Otto, who is leading the army to the town. The couple had been very much in love; however, in the months before the war Otto returned to Germany and joined the army. This leads to speculation that he had prior knowledge of the coming war:

> SECRETARY: He must have got wind of it somehow. He left us suddenly at the end of July, gave out that his mother was ill.
> JEAN: This shows again that they knew what was going to happen and were preparing for it (Maeterlinck 1918: 16/7).

This was a commonly held belief amongst those who enlisted early: 'I […] believed that France and England had been drawn into a war which they were entirely unprepared' (Graves 1929: 99); and 'He's bin getting ready for this here for twenty years' (Lewis 1967: 71), says a soldier of the Kaiser upon the declaration of war. This perception assisted in damning the German character and contributed towards the myth that they did not conduct war in a fair and sporting way. Maeterlinck taps into this idea and increases it by implying that Otto knew war was coming but made no effort to inform his adopted Belgian family.

The Mayor, however, refuses to believe the worst of his son-in-law:

> He has done the right thing, he will arrange matters and we shall have nothing to fear. […] It's war; and he can't help it. He's not responsible and he can't do what he likes (Maeterlinck 1918: 25).

This is the first hint of fatalism to enter the play. It is a sentiment both the German Major and Otto will come to echo: the war is depicted as being something greater than the individual; they are all powerless to act against it and are bound to carry out their orders just as a cog in a machine. Although this is true to a certain extent, it must be remembered that Otto elected to place himself in that position of his own free will. Nevertheless, the fatalism defense is one used by all the German characters when it comes to justifying their actions: they are just soldiers following orders.

This raises the idea that the war has the power to corrupt those who become entangled in it.[59] 'Otto is a kind-hearted chap who wouldn't hurt a soul' (Maeterlinck 1918: 25), yet when Otto arrives he states:

> I do not admit the massacres. There have been executions of hostages and reprisals necessitated by incessant acts of treachery committed by the civilian population. Here and there, perhaps, there has been some excess of zeal; that, unfortunately, is inevitable (Maeterlinck 1918: 38).

His justification is not only tantamount to an admission of the killings, but also suggests that he condones them. This shows what acts a 'kind-hearted man' will defend when placed in a war zone. Otto believes this justification absolves him and the army from the loss of innocent lives, and so he is unable to comprehend why the Belgian people should feel such hostility towards them when everything they have done is so reasonable (Maeterlinck 1918: 50); he is oblivious to the pain around him.

The play's crisis comes at the end of the first act when a German Lieutenant is mysteriously killed. The audience has already learnt that in another town, when a similar crime took place, it resulted in a large portion of the population being executed as punishment. Otto prevents a repeat of this occurring, despite the Major's better judgment:

> Anyone else, in my place, would have ordered the town to be pillaged and set on fire and sentenced a third or half of the inhabitants to death. It would have been more regular (Maeterlinck 1918: 61).

The compromise that is reached is no less sinister: if the man who committed the crime is not handed over, the Mayor himself will be executed. This compromise, and the allusion to what the usual punishment should be, both articulates the myth of German barbarity and is consistent with the mode of justification discussed above: that everything they do is absolved by the fact that they are merely observing regulations. Maeterlinck ultimately depicts them as being almost mechanical men who follow the rule of law unquestioningly,

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[59] This idea is also raised in the films *Hearts of the World* and *The Little American*, as male characters, Allied and German alike, are depicted becoming increasingly savage when placed in a war environment.

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accept its logic, and remain oblivious to the human pain and suffering it causes. The Germans believe that the Lieutenant's murderer was an aged gardener, Claus. The Mayor, after questioning Claus, believes this to be impossible and so elects to sacrifice himself rather than send an innocent man to his death.

In this instance Claus may be likened to the country of Belgium: an innocent and defenseless man persecuted by a power far greater than himself, and while it might have been easier to allow the violation to take place, to let Germany march through the Belgian frontier, it was morally wrong and so had to be resisted. This is reflected in the Mayor's decision to sacrifice himself, just as the Allies did for Belgium. *The Mayor of Stilemonde* is specifically aligned with Britain's overarching justification for entering the war: to defend Belgian neutrality, and the myths associated with it – primarily the barbarity of the Germans – adds further justification as the Germans are perceived as a threat to the civilised world that must be checked. This is made overt in the play when we consider that the coming of the Germans brings the threat of the village's total destruction. By comparison, the Mayor is portrayed as a man who creates: he specialises in horticulture and had recently developed a new species of grape with the potential to improve both the flavour and quantity of the harvest (Maeterlinck 1918: 23). In killing this man the Germans remove any hope of further advancement in that field.

Maeterlinck does, however, provide some redemption for Otto. He is ordered to command the firing squad that is to execute the Mayor; if he refuses he too will be executed. Up until that point he followed all orders and accepted them as being correct; however, with the entreaty of his wife he is swayed. The love for his wife ultimately conquers his loyalty to Germany. Nevertheless, although he is not forced to command the execution, the play still ends with his wife's rejection of him, and indeed the whole play can be read as the unfolding estrangement of Belgium from Germany. At the beginning of the play both Otto's and the Mayor's families are entwined: Otto is living in Belgium married to the Mayor's daughter, whilst the Mayor's son is living in Germany with Otto's family. But by the end of the play, because of the acts of the German army, these relations lie in tatters, just as Germany's perceived relationship with the rest of the European community did.

O'Neill's *The Sniper*

Thus far we have taken into account plays written by those living in societies directly affected by the war, and so also exposed to the propaganda that spread the myths of the day. However, when looking at British propaganda it is important to remember that the majority of the material produced was intended for an international audience (Reeves 1986: 9/10). Indeed, in the opening months of the war it was believed that the public was so in favour of the war that it was unnecessary to produce propaganda for the domestic population (as has been seen, it was believed the press was doing an adequate job on its own), so instead all official propaganda was specifically tailored for an overseas audience (Reeves 1986: 9).

Such propaganda was directed towards both the enemy – airdropping leaflets at the front was a tactic practiced by both armies (Messinger 2011: 9) – and neutral countries. In part, much of this propaganda was designed to counteract German propaganda. For example, the Netherlands, which remained neutral throughout the war, received three different film versions that depicted the Battle of the Somme: one from Britain, one from France and one from Germany. It is interesting to note how responses in the Netherlands differed from those in Britain: 'whereas British audiences saw the film as a justification of the war and an impressive spectacle in aid of the greater good, […] the response in the Netherlands turned out to be strongly pacifist, and the film was seen as further justification for maintaining neutrality' (Dibbets & Groot 2010: 441).[60]

British films were syndicated to countries as diverse as Greece, Mexico, Brazil, Portugal, the colonies, and of course the United States of America. America represented a crucial market for the Allies, for the obvious reason that Britain hoped to entice the United States to enter the war on its side. Although it is largely forgotten today, during the war American support could not be taken for granted. The United States had declared war

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[60] As Reeves discusses in his study, *Official British Film Propaganda During the First World War*, official propaganda films failed both domestically and internationally to achieve their objectives. Part of the reason for this failure could be that official films attempted to portray the war in as realistic a light as possible, and so rarely engaged overtly in the myths that were widely accepted at the time. As such, the public may have looked on the films as unrepresentative of their understanding of the conflict.

on Britain in 1812, sparking a conflict that lasted two years. Britain later sided with the Confederacy during the American Civil War, and there were boundary and trade disputes between the two countries in the years thereafter. Additionally, there was a large German population in America; and in sectors such as science and higher education there was great respect among Americans for German achievements (Messinger 2011: 25). For these reasons Britain was eager not to give Germany the upper hand and so sought to introduce propaganda in all forms in America.

Likewise, much German propaganda was also directed towards the United States for the same purpose, as they too had hopes of swaying the Americans to their side.

> Germans at that time were the largest ethnic group in the United States. In Washington, D.C., the German ambassador, Count Bernstorff, was in regular discussions with Congress and the White House. At the same time, the Germans set up a secret office in New York City with a staff of twelve. The office was successful in circulating pamphlets favorable to the German cause and supplying newspapers with informative stories. But too much of what was produced was bombastic and showed no awareness of how to package messages (Messinger 2011: 19/20).

As a result German propaganda was rarely picked up by the American press who favoured 'human interest stories about weeping women and suffering children' (Messinger 2011: 20), which the British were more skilled at crafting. Because of this American films tended to engage with mythic constructs as propagated by the Allies, and the same is true of the plays written by Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953).

O'Neill and *The Sniper* may seem a curious inclusion in this study. Although written in English, unlike *The Mayor of Stilmonde*, neither *The Sniper* nor *Shell Shock* (to be examined in chapter two) was presented to a British audience. However, O'Neill's artistic influences are often considered to be more closely aligned with European thought than American.

> Intellectually, O'Neill's ancestry also has little to do with American tradition […] Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Freud formed O'Neill's sense of what little was possible for

any of us […] His novelists were Zola and Conrad; his poets were Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Swinburne (Bloom 2006: v).

In this same vein *The Sniper* will be shown to pick up on many ideas prevalent in Britain at the time, and specifically associated with the portrayal of the German people in the press, as described earlier. So while *The Sniper* never reached a British audience, its depiction of the war was influenced by British happenings.

Throughout the course of the war O'Neill wrote two war plays: *The Sniper* in 1915, and *Shell Shock* in 1918.[61] This period represents O'Neill's apprenticeship as a playwright before his first success with *Beyond the Horizon* in 1920,[62] for which he won the Pulitzer Prize. In 1914 O'Neill enrolled in Harvard University's 'English 47' playwriting workshop, taught by Professor George Pierce Baker.[63] *The Sniper* is one of only two known plays written as part of the course.[64] Given *The Sniper*'s association with the period O'Neill spent under the tuition of Baker, it has tended to occupy a position in O'Neill criticism that is concerned with his personal development as a playwright.[65] For this study, though, focus will only be placed on the text and its position in the broader social issues of the day. The one act play was only ever performed once during O'Neill's lifetime by the Provincetown Players in New York City on 16 February 1917 (Bogard 1988: 1068). This means *The Sniper* would have had little to no influence in shaping audience opinion towards the war; however, it does act as an example of how propaganda

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[61] O'Neill wrote a third: *In the Zone*, first performed October 1917. However, as the war is incidental to the plot of *In the Zone* it will be left out of this examination.

[62] Because of this fact *The Sniper* and *Shell Shock* are usually disregarded by O'Neill scholars as juvenile or flawed pieces of writing. While these plays are less adventures in their use of form and hardly comparable to O'Neill's finest work, the way he handles and portrays the war in these texts more than justifies their inclusion in this study.

[63] George Pierce Baker (1866-1935) was a professor instrumental in developing the drama departments within both Harvard and Yale universities. Among the students he taught in his playwriting workshops were Philip Barry, Thomas Wolfe and Sidney Howard.

[64] The other is *The Personal Equation*.

[65] See Paul D. Voelker, 'Eugene O'Neill and George Pierce Baker: A Reconsideration' in *American Literature*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (1977) 206-220, for a discussion of the past critiques that have circulated around *The Sniper* and O'Neill's relationship with Baker.

and myth influenced the production of theatre, especially those written without propagandistic intent. In many respects *The Sniper* is a testament to myth's ability to naturalise its concept with image, specifically in regard to the German invasion of Belgium.

The Sniper opens on the following scene:

> The main room of a ruined cottage on the outskirts of a small Belgian village. The rear wall has two enormous breaches made by shells of artillery. The right wall is partly hidden by a mass of wreckage from the roof, which has caved in leaving a jagged hole through which the sky can be seen (O'Neill 1988: 295).

The scene description goes on in the exacting manner that was to become a hallmark of O'Neill's work. Here, even before any character enters the stage, the audience is confronted with the evidence of German destruction of civilian property. As discussed previously, the idea of the Germans as destroyers of property was heavily pushed by the papers, beginning with Louvain. Gregory claims that in the years leading up to the war's outbreak the rise of domesticity in Britain had been substantial, and it had risen in conjunction with ideas of 'the ideal home' and private ownership (Gregory 2004: 30). The idea that an invading army could cause such destruction to non-military structures was met with both horror and outrage in Britain. The images of destroyed homes in Louvain incited public rage against Germany for conducting the war in an uncivilised manner. O'Neill immediately evokes this with the setting of the play.

Throughout the play O'Neill builds upon this theme as stress is laid on the amount of domestic and economic destruction that has befallen the peasant farmer, Rougon:

> The first shell that burst in our village—do you know what it struck? […] my barn—setting it in flames—killing my two cows […] burning up all my hay. […] The cavalry ride over my field trampling my grain beneath their horses, the artillery wheels tear up the earth, the cannon blow my home to pieces—you see. (*bitterly*) Harvest? There is nothing left to harvest but dirt and stones. (O'Neill 1988: 298/9).

It is not just home and property that is destroyed by the German army, but the very livelihood of the people. What increases the outrage, as Rougon states, is the fact that Belgium is innocent and wanted nothing to do with the war, 'we who desired nothing more than to be left in peace to till our fields' (O'Neill 1988: 298). Rather, this destruction has been inflicted upon them by a callous enemy with no regard for the lives of the people left in its wake.

When a German officer briefly appears his portrayal is very similar to that already described in Maeterlinck's *The Mayor of Stilemonde*: he presents himself as a reasonable person who is merely performing his duty, but just like Otto he is oblivious to what the actions of the army have meant for the villagers, and so is unable to understand the animosity directed towards him. 'We make no war on the helpless' (O'Neill 1988: 303), he proudly states, unaware that his army has destroyed everything Rougon has spent his life building. *The Sniper* does much to construct the Germans in a way similar to that of the British press during the early stages of the war: the Hun as a vandal. As previously examined, this is how the term 'Hun' was first applied to the actions of the Germans (Gregory 2004: 31), not as attackers of humanity, but as destroyers of property. Of course, just like the British press, O'Neill does not let the depiction of the Germans rest there.

The play begins with a scene of destruction; however, when Rougon enters the audience is confronted with a portrayal of the human cost:

> A great hulking old man of sixty-five or so appears […] He is bent under some burden which, as he enters the room, is seen to be the body of a young man dressed in the uniform of a Belgian infantryman (O'Neill 1988: 295).

This is Rougon's son, Charles. Later Rougon narrates to the village priest how he witnessed his son's death during the fall of the town. The war now becomes the destroyer of domestic life on both a physical and human level. It disrupts all the workings of society, including the fabric of family and love. It should also be noted that the advent of war does not merely mean the destruction of Rougon's livelihood, but also of his future, which existed within his son. With Charles' death Rougon has lost his purpose in life.

But now—what shall I do? Look you, it was for him we worked and saved, his mother and I; that he might never have to know, as we had known, what it is to be poor and hungry. (*despondently*) And now—we are old—what use to work? There is nothing left but death (O'Neill 1988: 301).

Progressively O'Neill reveals that the coming of war has destroyed everything: Rougon's home, livelihood, son, and purpose to work. However, while the death of Charles is tragic, it is to be expected: he was a soldier, and it was war, even if the war had been unwanted by the nation. Just as with the press, though, O'Neill is yet to complete his portrayal of the Germans. Before the German army arrived precautions were taken to protect the women and children of the village: they had been packed up and were sent, via caravan, to Brussels. Rougon's wife and Charles' fiancée were among this group. After the departure of the German officer a small boy, Jean, who had been with the group, suddenly arrives. He reports what happened to the caravan:

We could hear shouts. We hurried faster. The horses galloped. The women commenced to scream and cry. Always the firing was louder. We didn't see any soldiers for a long time. Then we came upon lots of bodies—men from our army. […] Something blew up in a field by the road and threw dirt and stones on us. The horse were afraid. They ran faster. Then we came to the top of a hill. Lots of soldiers from our army were hiding in a ditch. They shouted for us to run away. […] Then everything around blew up […] When I got up I couldn't see any of the rest. I saw Mother Rougon […] she was lying on the ground. She had a big hole here (*pointing to his chest*) and blood all over (O'Neill 1988: 305/6).

He goes on to say that Charles' fiancée was also killed. This is the final blow for Rougon – he takes up a gun and fires upon a German squadron as they march by off-stage. The Germans then storm into the cottage and execute Rougon on the spot, as it is the law (O'Neill 1988: 308).

The story of the caravan being shelled bears similarity to a report printed in the *Daily Mail* in August 1914:

> The Germans have treated the villagers where resistance has been offered to their attack with something like savagery. Peasants have been shot; houses have been wantonly burnt; hostages have been seized and mutilated, or forced to march in front of German troops where they would have been most exposed to German fire (Gregory 2004: 27).[66]

Although it is unlikely O'Neill read this article, and indeed the circumstances in the play are different, this story is still representative of the reports that were coming out of Europe, and so we can assume O'Neill was familiar with this genre of atrocity reporting. It should be pointed out that nothing of what the paper reported above was untrue, but the manner and context in which it is presented has a great deal to do with the construction of the German myth.

As was argued previously, the myth of German barbarianism developed gradually over the course of the war's opening months. To begin with they were depicted as vandals: destroyers of private property and the physical symbols of civilisation. Once this idea was established it was a small leap to go from being depicted as a threat to the physical symbols of society, to being a threat to its moral values. The concept is reached through a logical progression and the ever-increasing reports of atrocities; and so, within British society, the Hun came to represent a barbarous, callous people, with little regard for human life. The same progression can be seen in *The Sniper*. O'Neill begins with a depiction of the physical destruction of property and livelihood. Once German disregard for this is established he then reveals the greater tragedy: the wanton killing of innocent civilians. The construction of the Hun in *The Sniper* is completed by the play's end: the Germans have no regard for property or life and execute Rougon with cold indifference. O'Neill's gradual construction and ultimate portrayal keeps exactly with the myth of German nature.

It should be noted that *The Sniper* is commonly seen as an antiwar play (Voelker 1977: 213).[67] However, in light of its engagement with myth and propaganda this label requires some reconsideration. It is true that portraying the consequences of war creates

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[66] This also bears a resemblance to events described in *The Mayor of Stilemonde*.

[67] It is also described as such by Margaret Ranald in 'From trial to triumph (1913-1924): the early plays' in *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill* (1998) and Zander Brietzke in *The Aesthetics of Failure* (2001).

negative associations towards it. Yet, as has been shown, O'Neill's method of constructing and representing the actions of the German army is consistent with war propaganda. The purpose of propaganda is to encourage people to support the war. Although the play is broadly considered to be antiwar, in relation to the specific conflict it depicts, and how the German army's actions are portrayed, it can in fact be regarded as supporting the Allies' cause, and so pro-war. The German army is a threat to civilisation and must be stopped at all costs.

O'Neill's handling of myth is complex, for while he supports the myth of German barbarity, he writes against the myth of romance, specifically the glory of dying for one's country; in this sense it is an antiwar play. In *The Sniper* the priest is the advocate of this myth: he arrives on the scene shortly after Rougon and attempts to comfort him. 'You must not mourn his loss so bitterly. He gave his life for his country […] You should feel proud of him.' And later, 'He died the death of the brave. Is that not better after all […] Can you not console yourself with that thought?' (O'Neill 1988: 297 & 300). These entreaties have only a limited effect on Rougon. When faced with the reality of death the higher concepts of nobility and honour, which are instilled into the event by myth, are revealed to be hollow and meaningless. A death is still a death, and the concept of whether one is good or better than another becomes meaningless. For Rougon it makes no difference that his son died the noble death of a soldier while the death of his wife is an outrage against society. It is the Germans who have killed both, circumstances mean nothing. His hatred for the Germans at the beginning of the play is no less than at the end, the only thing that stayed his hand from taking revenge for Charles was the thought that his wife still lived and would need him. With her gone nothing remained to restrain him. In this manner O'Neill dispels the myth of the glorious dead.

    The Sniper reveals the competition between mythical language and counter-language as they tussle with each other to define reality. As discussed previously, Hynes defines the difference between the two modes of representation as being dependent on where their primary focus lies. In mythical language focus is placed on concepts that are abstractions: honour, nobility, bravery. In other words, higher meaning is instilled into the image the language is attempting to communicate, which, as previously described, is the

hallmark of modern myth. Counter-language focuses solely on the object being described, and in so doing it attempts to give plain descriptions of things, hence portraying reality as it is (Hynes 1991: 116). By shifting focus from the abstraction to the object it is possible to start seeing the romantic ideals of war as myths. Many of the memoirs produced in the 1920s do just this, and they represent the first real widespread shift away from the dominant mode of representing war as romance.

Having said that, there are examples from during the war that begin this tradition, and they do so by highlighting the differences between the depictions of war that the two languages offer. An example of this can be found in Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire*. Whilst in a café a woman recognises some of the soldiers and says:

> A charge must be a magnificent thing, no? All those ranks of men marching as though on parade […] and the young lads who can't stop shouting '*vive la France!*', or who die with a smile on their lips! Oh, we civilians, we don't share in the glory like you (Barbusse 2003: 275).

Here is the mythical language with its higher concepts instilled into the event. Later, while on the front, her words are remembered by the men and they react violently against them:

> More than visible battles unfurled like standards, even more than hand-to-hand fighting where men struggle and shout, this war is about appalling, superhuman exhaustion, about water up to your belly and about mud, dung and repulsive filth. It is about moulding faces and shredded flesh and corpses that do not look like corpses anymore, floating on the greedy earth. It is this, this infinite monotony of miseries […] This is what it is—not bayonets glittering like silver or the bugle call in the sunlight (Barbusse 2003: 302).

As Hynes describes, counter-language focuses squarely on the objects of war, and describes them in simple, solid terms. It is these two forms of opposing languages – one primarily used by civilians, one by soldiers – that caused soldiers to foster such animosity

for civilians,[68] because the civilian use of mythical language acted as evidence of their inability to properly appreciate what the soldiers endured. The language created a chasm between the two that could not be surpassed because it created two different realities of what the war was (Hynes 1991: 117). This duality will be explored in greater detail in chapter two.

In looking at the theatrical representations of the First World War that were produced during its enactment it can be seen that they fall into the tradition of mythic portrayal, as established by the propaganda of the time. That similar motifs and techniques of representation were to manifest themselves in the theatre is a key indicator of how successfully these concepts were naturalised into society. During the war's enactment myth, particularly for those who remained at home, became reality.

> The language of romance and melodrama has now become true. It is becoming the language of our normal life. The old phrases about "dying for freedom," about "death being better than dishonour" – phrases we thought were fitted for the stage or for children's stories – are now the ordinary truths on which we live. – Gilbert Murray,[69] October 1915 (Hynes 1991: 111).

This is more than evident in the numerous plays produced by Barrie, and an examination of O'Neill's *The Sniper* also reveals this. As O'Neill was separated from the conflict by an ocean, he was not immersed in the same environment of patriotism, nationalism and propaganda; that his plays adopt similar sentiments as those expressed in Britain is testament to myth's success.[70] *The Sniper* portrays a progressive construction of the 'Hun' across the course of its action that closely mirrors that used by the British press: moving from destroyers of property to threatening the values of the civilised world. That O'Neill was crafting portrayals of the war consistent with myth is a clear indicator of how

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[68] An example of this can be found in the closing sentence of Sassoon's declaration: 'the callous complacence with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realise' (Sassoon 1930: 308).

[69] Gilbert Murray (1866-1957), was a classical scholar, best known for his translations of Greek dramas.

[70] It should not be forgotten that Britain produced much of its propaganda for consumption in America.

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naturalised it had become, and so it remained the dominant form of understanding the conflict.

However, this manner of portraying the war could never survive. Soldiers serving on the front became increasingly aware of the difference between how they understood the war and how civilians understood it. The difference of course lies in how language is used to construct reality. The civilian population was inundated with mythical rhetoric and so for them this style of representation became their reality, as is reinforced by the independent theatre of the time. For soldiers, though, this way of talking about the war was not representative of their experiences. To combat this they began to adopt a counter-language that focused on the physical object as opposed to the abstractions and high concepts that the mythical language sought to instil.

This counter-language was supported by the advent of shell shock victims returning home, whose very existence provided evidence against the romantic myths of war. O'Neill's *Shell Shock* is a dramatic depiction of the clash that occurred when mythic language was brought face to face with reality, as depicted by counter-language. When this took place counter-language was able to strip myth of its higher concepts and reveal its mode of representation to be inadequate for describing such events. However, so deeply believed in were these myths that it would be years before they were totally dispelled. Chapter two will look directly at the process of displacing mythical language as the dominant mode of representing the war, which occurred during the inter-war period, 1919-38.

Chapter II – Myth Under Siege, 1919-38

You think there's no limit to what a man can bear?

<div align="right">—R. C. SHERRIFF</div>

If myth began as the predominant way of understanding the war, it was a mode that could
not have survived for long, given its tendency to misrepresent reality. It is of course well
documented that even during the war the public's attitude in Britain swung away from one
of enthusiastic support to jaded war-weariness. This was prompted by a rising death toll,
the introduction of conscription, rationing and the shattered, broken and shell shocked
soldiers who began to return from the front. When faced with the reality of the conflict,
propagandist and mythic constructions proved inadequate at maintaining public support.
This is evident from the financial failure met by many plays that carried obvious
propagandistic, pro-war or anti-pacifist sentiments, such as Harold Owen's *Loyalty* (1917)
and Henry Arthur Jones' *The Pacifists* (1917), both of which closed within three weeks of
opening (Kosok 2007: 196). Additionally, many wartime propaganda films also met with
similar financial failure.[1]

  Today it has been accepted that in the years immediately succeeding the war it was
considered bad form to mention it, essentially making it a taboo subject. The war was
perceived as having been so horrible that people only wanted to forget about it and move
on with their lives. While this is a problematic presumption to make, there is some
cultural support for it. For example, the timing of the war memoirs' publications: in 1919
Herbert Read[2] wrote a short unvarnished memoir of battle, *Retreat*, but could not sell it.
He later reported that publishers were not interested in anything bleak (Yagoda 2009:
220). It was eventually published in 1925 and marked the beginning of a new wave of war

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[1] See Reeves' evaluation of the commercial success of official propaganda films, *Official British Film
Propaganda During the First World War* (1986).

[2] Sir Herbert Edward Read (1893-1968) was a literary critic best remembered for his views on art's role in
education.

writings.[3] The implication here was that the public needed time before it could re-evaluate and reflect on the horror of the war years.

When the public did finally turn to read these accounts they found something different from what had been in circulation during the war. As was pointed out in chapter one, the mythic mode of representing the war gave rise to a counter-language. Returned servicemen discovered that the dominant way of describing the war was inconsistent with their first-hand experiences. This created a chasm between those who had served and those who had not, for the simple reason that the two groups had different ways of understanding the war by virtue of the language they used to describe it. The rise of counter-language can be seen as an attempt to close the gap between the two groups, for counter-language sought to dispel myth and depict the conflict in a manner closer to reality by focusing on the tangible, as opposed to the abstract.

The theatre of this period also contributes to this tradition. However, unlike the memoirs, there were plays consistently produced from the cessation of hostilities until the beginning of the Second World War. Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House* was published in 1919 and first staged in New York a year later. Set just prior to the war's declaration, *Heartbreak House* acts as an allegorical chronical of the attitudes and behaviours that Shaw perceived as being responsible for Britain's involvement in the war. Various practices are critiqued, from ruthless capitalism, colonial arrogance and empire building, through to the exploitation of the working class. The bombing that occurs at the end of the play signals the collapse of this pre-war world. But of course, *Heartbreak House* only represents one of the first plays to be produced. In Britain and Ireland alone Heinz Kosok notes the production of some 55 full length plays and 38 one act plays staged through 1919-38 that touch on the subject of The Great War, either overtly or implicitly (Kosok 2007: 259-62).[4] In spite of this statistic, theatre managers were no less squeamish about

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[3] Although countless war memoirs were published, the best known are: Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That* (1929), Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933) and Wyndham Lewis' *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937). All published more than ten years after the close of hostilities.

[4] Although some studies posit that *Journey's End* was the first major production to depict the war in 1928, (Fordham 2000: 197) it is important to note that it was not; although it was inarguably the most successful.

producing war plays than publishers were about releasing memoirs. As will be discussed, audiences were not always responsive to the material and there was no guarantee a play would be a hit or a flop.

Obviously, there is too vast an array of plays for any fully comprehensive examination to be undertaken here. Having said that, Kosok breaks the general subject of war down into several sub-categories including: return of the soldiers plays, frontline plays, departure-conflict-return-plays and aftermath plays.[5] The four plays to be examined in this chapter are Eugene O'Neill's *Shell Shock* (1918), R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's End* (1928), Sean O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie* (1928) and W. Somerset Maugham's *For Services Rendered* (1932), representing each of the categories, respectively. Although these sub-categories differ insofar as what aspect of the war they examine, each of these plays engages with and contributes to the tradition of counter-language.

Of course, we can look at these texts and discuss the role they played in altering perceptions of the war; however, it is important to remember that this is a dual process, and although these plays contributed to the shifting nature of the war's cultural position within society, they are also responding to other aspects. But if these aspects are many and varied and cannot all be addressed, one important phenomenon that can be pointed to as contributing to this shift in the war's social perception is shell shock.[6] The way the public's perception of the condition changed throughout the war makes for an interesting parallel as to how the war as a whole was perceived by the public at its onset and then altered. Shell shock, like the war, was originally understood in terms of myth, but it eventually came to be a physical representation of just how terrible the war was, and so played a role in shifting the cultural perception of its image.

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[5] Kosok also notes the following sub-categories: home front plays, foreshadowing another war, fantastic locations and intellectual debates.

[6] The term 'shell shock' is problematic for the concept is now totally discredited and does not even exist as a medical condition. Today we would call it something akin to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. However, for simplicity's sake, I will use the term 'shell shock' to refer to the condition throughout the chapter.

Shell Shock

As a term shell shock was first coined in November 1914 by the psychiatrist Charles Myers.[7] He believed he had observed that patients displaying such symptoms as paralysis of the limbs, loss of speech, hearing, taste, smell and vision, had all been in close proximity to exploding shells.[8] Further to this theory, observations were made of men who had been killed by exploding shells without displaying any sign of external physical injury. Rather, the force of the blast had caused internal haemorrhaging, resulting in death. It was believed that those suffering from shell shock had been far enough away from the explosion to avoid death, but close enough for a minor haemorrhaging that affected the nerves to form, the result of which was the physical manifestation of shell shock's symptoms (Showalter 1985: 167). Although Myers based this theory on what appeared to be observable evidence (despite the fact that with a more thorough examination he quickly discovered it to be false), an alternative explanation for the condition was to gain popularity due to the impact of a current social theory: that of degeneracy.

Although completely discredited today, Max Nordau's 1895 study, *Degeneracy*, acted as one of the primary linchpins in the development and acceptance of the theory, and is representative of a broader social discussion. It gained popularity as a critique of fin-de-siècle decadence, and by 1914 it was regarded as an authoritative text on the subject.[9] For Nordau the art associated with this movement was a symptom of social degeneracy, which he argued was a physical (not merely moral) disease.

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[7] For Myers' biographical details and a review of his war service see Ben Shephard's *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century* (2000).

[8] Shell shock affected everyone differently and symptoms could range from mere exhaustion through to confusion or outright hysteria. Other common symptoms included: muscular contractions, chorea, palsies and tics, mental fatigue, catatonic and obsessive behaviour, amnesia, insomnia or terrifying nightmares (Stone 1985: 251). Furthermore, in the past these symptoms had often been associated with hysteria and neurasthenia, two conditions psychiatrists believed to be primarily feminine afflictions.

[9] Although theories of degeneracy had met with criticism as early as 1905, notably by Sigmund Freud, it will be seen that the theory acted as an underpinning for how symptoms of shell shock were rationalised.

The vanguard of civilisation holds its nose at the pit of undiluted naturalism, and can only be brought to bend over with sympathy and curiosity, when by cunning engineering, a drain from the boudoir and the sacristy has been turned into it. Mere sensuality passes as commonplace, and only finds admission when disguised as something unnatural and degenerate (Nordau 1920: 13).

Nordau links this idea of a social degeneration directly with a physical degeneration of the individual, suggesting that the advent of what he perceives to be a decay of social decency was the result of a literal illness.[10] So, while many people believed those cultural and artistic trends to be nothing more than a passing fashion, Nordau states:

the physician, especially if he has dedicated himself to the special study of nervous and mental maladies, recognises at a glance, in the fin-de-siècle disposition […] the confluence of two well-defined conditions of disease: […] degeneration (degeneracy) and hysteria, of which the minor are designated as neurasthenia (Nordau 1920: 15).

To define degeneracy Nordau quotes an 1857 study by B. A. Morel:[11] degeneracy is 'a morbid deviation from an original type' and anyone suffering from this infliction will pass it on to their descendants, and with each generation the level of deviation will increase.[12] Morel postulated that if given long enough the descendants would eventually become sterile and die out (Nordau 1920: 16). In the meantime, those who suffered from degeneracy could be readily identified by their physical deformities, which included: stunted growth, unequal development of the two halves of the face and cranium, imperfection in development of the external ear, etc. (Nordau 1920: 17). It was further believed that this was not only a way to identify a social degenerate, but also members of the criminal class as 'vice, crime and madness are only distinguished from each other by

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[10] The chapter headings used in his study, 'The Symptoms', 'Diagnosis', 'Prognosis' and 'Therapeutics', also contribute to this idea.

[11] Benedict Augustine Morel (1809-73) was an early French psychiatrist and an influential figure in the field of Degeneration Theory. The theory stated that civilisation was in decline and the causes for this decline lay in physical and biological systems.

[12] Both Morel and Nordau believed that those who possessed this physical deviation constituted a new sub-species of the human race.

social prejudice' (Nordau 1920: 17). Nordau sought to prove in his study that those responsible for the aesthetics of the fin-de-siècle were part of this class.

Of course, of greater interest to our current study is the identification of degeneracy not only with physical attributes (or even aesthetic), but with psychological. The most important thing to note is that it was believed all degenerates lacked a sense of morality, making it impossible for them to distinguish between right and wrong:

> For them there existed no decency, no modesty. In order to satisfy any momentary impulse, or inclination, or caprice they commit crimes and trespasses with the greatest calmness and self-complacency, and do not comprehend that other persons take offence thereat (Nordau 1920: 18).

The disease of degeneracy can of course exist in varying degrees, and although those most inflicted will be labelled as morally insane there are others, of what Nordau terms 'lesser orders', who, although they do not commit crimes, at least assent to the theoretical legitimacy of crime, and seek with philosophically sounding functions to prove that 'good' and 'evil', 'right' and 'wrong' are arbitrary distinctions, whilst claiming all the while to find beauty in the lowest and most repulsive of things (Nordau 1920: 18). Therefore the degenerate was viewed as morally bankrupt.

Other important traits identified as belonging to degeneration are, 'unbounded egoism, impulsiveness and emotionalism' (Nordau 1920: 18/9).[13] It is through these symptoms that a link between degeneracy and hysteria is then made. (It should be noted that Nordau dismissed the then commonly held notion that hysteria was an exclusively feminine condition.) Primarily it is the occurrence of so called emotionalism common between degeneracy and hysteria that links them. Other similar symptoms would appear to be a susceptibility to suggestion and an intense egoism. 'The hysterical person's own "I" towers up before his inner vision, and so completely fills his mental horizon that it

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[13] Nordau bemoans the emotionalism of the degenerate who is moved to raptures by art that he deems has no real aesthetic value. He claims that they take great pride in their ability to 'profoundly feel their inner selves' in a way ordinary people could never hope to. This, he believes, is another symptom of the disease and one closely aligned to emotionalism.

cancels the whole of the remaining universe' (Nordau 1920: 26). The difference between the hysteric and the degenerate is once again a question of degree.[14]

The link between hysteria and degeneracy is an important one to make in relation to shell shock, for soldiers suffering from shell shock were noted by physicians to possess symptoms consistent with that of hysteria. For a time this became a favourable link to make between shell shock and social degeneracy for it provided an escape: it meant that those suffering had broken down because of tainted heredities (Stone 1985: 252), and that these people would have broken down eventually even if they had not served in the war due to the normal pressures of daily life. The explanation provided a means to understand shell shock in a way that upheld the ideal of what it was to be both a man and a British soldier, as communicated by romance myths. As shall be seen, though, it was these same ideals of masculinity that contributed to the severity of shell shock.

For those removed from the horrors of the conflict shell shock proved difficult to comprehend. Emotionally incapacitated men came in stark contrast to the heroic versions of masculinity that prevailed before the war (Showalter 1985: 169). The myth of masculinity stated that 'within the male community of the war was the ability to tolerate the appalling filth and stink of the trenches, the relentless noise, and the constant threat of death with a stoic humour, and to allude to it in phlegmatic understatement,' indeed, emotional repression was an essential aspect of the British masculine ideal (Showalter 1985: 169).[15] The men were expected to tolerate any condition and, most importantly, were expected to perform their duty, in spite of the conditions, in a manner becoming of a British soldier.[16] Shell shock flew directly against this.

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[14] For example, the hysteric and degenerate both crave attention, but while the hysterical person may perform acts of self-harm and mutilation, the degenerate may only take to wearing garish and ostentatious clothing.

[15] For an evaluation of what consequences repression had for shell shock victims see Rivers, W. H. R. (1918), *The Repression of War Experiences*.

[16] W.H.R. Rivers, notes that the process of training aimed to produce this effect via habituation. 'The training of a soldier is designed to adapt him to act calmly and methodically in the presence of events naturally calculated to arouse disturbing emotions' (Rivers 1918: 1). Rivers goes on to postulate that the high rates of shell shock could be accounted for because the men had been rushed into active service without the proper training required to numb them to frontline conditions.

Although the images of shell shocked soldiers would eventually play a role in the growth of counter-language, the old mythic notions were so successfully naturalised within British society, and the military, that they were accepted as fact, and any man not capable of living up to these ideals was considered a malingerer. Furthermore, as many of the symptoms of shell shock were consistent with hysteria, something perceived as a primarily feminine infliction and sign of social degeneracy, it became easy to disregard those who suffered from it as merely morally bankrupt: shell shock became a sign of poor upbringing and moral weakness (Showalter 1985: 170), in brief, degeneracy. To interpret shell shock in this way is testament to the success of myth's ability to naturalise this reading within the military community. To fully appreciate this we must now examine some of the factors that contributed to shell shock's epidemic occurrence during the war.[17]

The exploitation of traditional masculine virtue, coupled with the potential to fulfil it via war experience, served as a powerful incentive to draw volunteers into the army at the war's outbreak. (Stone 1985: 261). We may recall Barrie's *The New Word* and the belief held within the play that by serving in the war Roger had come of age. War was then perceived as defining masculinity, it was a test of manhood (Shephard 2000: 18). These ideals were further buttressed by a military mysticism of the kind evident in pre-war literature, of which Rupert Brooke's poetry is a classic example. But of course, all of this had little relation to the reality of life on the front. It was a misalignment between the mythic ideals of what the war meant, what soldiers' expectations of the war were, how they should behave, and the reality of the conditions that led to the development of shell shock.

Whilst on the front the men were forced to endure terrible living conditions, and although this was a major contributing factor, there were others. One of the prevailing feelings was that of powerlessness: soldiers had little real agency, if they were ordered to march, they would march, often without knowing where to or why. 'I know nothing about this war,' says Wyndham Lewis, 'I have no idea why my battery should have found itself where it did' (Lewis 1967: 138). Here Lewis talks of never knowing what the objective of his individual actions were in the broader scheme of the war, only that he followed orders

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[17] And the levels were epidemic: by 1916 40% of all casualties were shell shock victims (Stone 1985: 249).

– and this is from an officer's perspective. For the enlisted men, like T. E. Hulme, the feeling was far more intense:

> The only thing that makes you nervous is when star shells go off and you stand out revealed quite clearly as in day light. You have the most wonderful feeling as if you were suddenly naked in the street and didn't like it (Hulme 1955: 154).

This sensation of being clearly exposed to the enemy with no course of action available to disguise oneself depicts both literally and metaphorically the lack of agency the common soldier had and what that feeling was like. During a shelling there was almost no way to defend oneself: if you were going to be hit … then that was it, and nothing could be done about it.

This feeling of helplessness would have been compounded in an attack: there the men were forced to climb out of the trench and willingly place themselves into an almost suicidal position. They had no autonomy and yet were expected to behave in a manner that upheld the British ideals of military honour, duty and manliness. As a result, a psychological conflict arose between those two positions of wanting to uphold ideals, whilst at the same time having to force oneself to endure circumstances that would normally be avoided at all costs. It was this internal conflict that acted as a cause of shell shock, for the symptoms of shell shock (being physically incapacitated) allowed the men to escape the horrors of their surroundings without literally running away: it became the mind's subconscious way of protecting the body when it was forced by the conscious mind to remain in those conditions.

Arguably it was worse for officers, as part of their duty was to present an example to the men of how to behave under fire; in order to maintain morale they had to present a semblance of calm and control in spite of the fact that they felt just as powerless. This led rates of shell shock to be far higher amongst officers than enlisted men. On average about 3-4% of enlisted men suffered from shell shock, compared to 7-10% for officers (Stone 1985: 248). Repression, and the desire to live up to expectations, coupled with an overwhelming sense of powerlessness and fear were the causes of shell shock, as opposed to any form of degeneracy or physical consequence of exploding shells.

Despite the fact psychologists quickly established that shell shock was produced by neither exploding shells, nor tainted heredity, the army proved unwilling to let go of these comfortable means of explaining away a condition that threatened the image of British masculinity. In basic terms, the military perceived men as being either sick, well, wounded, or mad (Shephard 2000: 25), and as such it conceived of two different categories of shell shock. By doing so it was an attempt to impose on shell shock the traditional military distinction between those who were wounded – something that carried honour and dignity – and sickness (or breakdown), which was only considered one grade better than cowardice. Any soldier confirmed to have been in close proximity to an exploding shell when their symptoms first appeared was deemed to have been wounded by enemy fire and so was classified as 'Shell Shocked W'. Any man whose symptoms appeared whilst removed from direct fire was deemed to have broken down and therefore classified as 'Shell Shocked S' (Shephard 2000: 29).

Creating such distinctions only acted to cause further problems. Dependent on circumstances a man suffering from shell shock might either earn a wounded stripe (thereby entitling him to a pension upon discharge), be shot for cowardice or simply told to shake it off and get back to duty (Shephard 2000: 29). Furthermore, the military was of the opinion that many of the men were exploiting the symptoms of shell shock as a means to escape frontline duty. Of course, such policies and beliefs only added to the negative stigma already attached to shell shock, which caused men suffering from the condition to feel disgusted in themselves for having broken down, because in their own eyes it was evidence of their cowardice or inability to endure what all the myths said they should have been able to.

It was, however, only a matter of time before the true nature of shell shock came to be appreciated by both the military and society. By the end of the war the distinction between Shell Shocked W and S had been removed. Shell shock's true causation was to make itself felt on the public, as the soldiers' suffering conflicted directly with the ideals believed in before the war. Just as these mythic modes contributed to the emotional breakdown of the soldiers, so in turn did shell shock assist in dispelling the very myth that gave rise to its existence, for it acted as evidence of the fact that the myth was just that: a myth. As discussed, though, the myths of masculinity, honour and duty were so ingrained,

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and believed in, that the other explanations of shell shock's cause had lingering effects. It took time for the condition to fully take its place alongside the other modes of counter-language that reacted against mythic forms. An excellent dramatic depiction of this slow shift can be found in Eugene O'Neill's second war play, the aptly entitled *Shell Shock*. Before looking at the other theatre of the post-war period, which makes up a large part of the counter-language movement, it is beneficial to examine this play, written during the war's enactment, as it acts as an early example of the shifting rhetoric.

O'Neill's *Shell Shock*

It will be recalled that in *The Sniper* O'Neill made use of two modes of rhetoric to represent war: the romantic rhetoric, as used by the priest, and counter-language, as when Rougon is faced with the reality of death, he sees through romance's mythic qualities and reacts against them. In *Shell Shock* O'Neill takes both forms of rhetoric and pits them against each other. What results is a disintegration of myth when confronted with reality. However, this process is problematised in the play, for myth is still powerful and not easily displaced once broadly accepted.

Disregarded by many critics as a dramatically static and psychologically shallow piece (Brietzke 2001: 218), *Shell Shock* is a one-act play, written in 1918 during the closing months of the war. The play was never performed in O'Neill's lifetime, so in the context of this project it acts more to offer an insight into how attitudes towards the war were shifting, and how they influenced O'Neill's writing. Coming straight after an examination of *The Sniper*, *Shell Shock* gives us a direct juxtaposition. Gone are the references to German barbarity and in its place war, as a concept, is seen as the true adversary. As we move through the rest of this chapter, and indeed the whole study, it will be seen that this was the general direction all portrayals of the war were moving in. As has been discussed, the last 18 months of the war saw a collapse in public support. *Shell Shock* can be read as a dramatic depiction of this swing in public opinion, for it begins safely in the realm of myth, but is then confronted by reality.

Shell Shock is set in a New York club in September, 1918. At the opening, the club's only patron is Robert Wayne, a member of the US Medical Corps, and an expert in the treatment of shell shock. He is awaiting the arrival of a patient recommended to him from the front, Jack Arnold, who is also a life-long friend of his. Whilst waiting, another man enters, Herbert Roylston, who served with Arnold in France. The two men get talking and it is quickly revealed that Roylston was actually saved by Arnold during a battle, even though it was believed he had been killed. It is during this first section of the play that the mythical language is evoked as a means of describing war.

Roylston begins by describing the initial battle, and his recollection is inspired by glory and adventure: 'we'd captured the first two [trenches] and should have stopped, but you get drunk with the joy of chasing them back and you don't stop to think' (O'Neill 1988: 659). Wayne also believes in the mythic mode of representation when it comes to describing the hardships that the men faced during the three days they spent cut-off and trapped in a besieged trench without supplies: 'nearly every member of the company was either killed or wounded—but they stuck it out! It's a wonderful example of what our boys can do in a pinch!' (O'Neill 1988: 659). There is no thought of the hardship, all the focus is laid on how commendable it is, and his enthusiasm is reserved for the perceived bravery and never-say-die attitude that he sees as embodied by this event.

Roylston was not with the men during their time trapped in the trench, he was lying wounded from a failed advance in no-man's-land. For a long time he was delirious, but after three days he came to his senses and attempted to make it back to the trench. He stood up and the Germans started firing, he was hit again, and it was then, amid the firing, that Arnold came out and rescued him. After this story of bravery under fire it comes as a surprise to Roylston that Arnold could be suffering from shell shock. He does not believe it for a second, stating that 'Jack's made of iron' (O'Neill 1988: 662). Here again, the mythic ideals of masculinity are evoked – real men do not break down.

Interestingly he cites Arnold's sporting record: 'You remember his senior year at college when he was all America half—and his touch down that won the Harvard game?'

(O'Neill 1988: 662).[18] From this it becomes clear that not only does Roylston look up to Arnold with a sense of awe, but he also engages in the sporting myth of war: those who were heroes with a ball must therefore be heroes with a rifle, because in this myth the two activities are intrinsically linked. To both Wayne and Roylston, Arnold is a selfless hero willing to risk his own life, and their conversation during the first section of the play sets him in the audience's imagination as such. The masculine myth has been established.

The second section of the play begins with the exit of Roylston and the entry of Arnold. Straightaway O'Neill begins to dispel the masculine myth with his description of Arnold:

> The sun tan on his strong-featured, handsome face had been faded to a sickly yellow by illness. Lines of nervous tension are deep about his mouth and nose, and his cheeks are hollow […] His dark eyes have a stained expression of uncertain expectation as if he were continually holding himself in check while he waited for a mine to explode. His hands tremble a little (O'Neill 1988: 663).

This is not the appearance of a hero, but rather someone whose nerves have been torn to shreds. Wayne does not notice this and greets him happily enough; and Arnold is quick to dismiss his need to receive medical treatment, stating that the suggestion he has shell shock is 'pure rot' (O'Neill 1988: 663). It is evident that Arnold desires to maintain the mythical image of himself. However, the signs that he has suffered are there, most tellingly in his nervous compulsion: during the war he took to smoking cigarettes as a means of coping with his surrounds, as the smell of the smoke masked the more noxious odours of the trenches. Now, however, even though he has left the front he finds it impossible to stop smoking compulsively, and he even does so unconsciously.

Nevertheless, they continue to talk and their conversation eventually turns to Roylston and the happenings of the three days spent cut-off in the besieged trench. Arnold explains that they had no rations and that nearly all the men went mad with hunger and

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[18] In *Journey's End* an almost identical relationship is set up between Stanhope, a former rugby captain, and Raleigh, a junior officer whom admires him to the point of hero worship; and just like Roylston, he is incapable of believing that his idol could fall.

thirst. Arnold himself did not succumb to this, but they were also out of cigarettes and for three days it was the only thing he could think of. Wayne still attempts to maintain the myth: 'I've read about your famous three days, Jack. It was a glorious thing but I can well imagine how terrible it was.' Arnold responds:

> Terrible? No word for it […] We'd crouch down in the mud with trench rats […] nipping at your legs […] Their artillery playing hell with us. The world seemed flying to bits. The concussion of the bursting shells—all about us—would jar your heart right back against you spine. It rained shells and splinters. Men kept falling about writhing and groaning in the mud […] And at night it was frightful, expecting a surprise attack at any minute […] We had to pile the dead up against the rear wall of the trench; and when you'd stumble in the dark you'd put your hand out and touch a—a face, or a leg—or—something sticky with blood […] Even when the guns let up for a moment there were the screams of the wounded out in No Man's Land. They'd keep the dead awake—lying out there dying by bits (O'Neill 1988: 668/9).

This is counter-language, divested of abstractions. Arnold focuses solely on the objects of his experience. The effect is to dispel the myth surrounding the event that had been established in the first section of the play, as the grander, abstracted concepts cannot survive when faced with reality.

O'Neill has a final development to make, and it is crucial in revealing how the two languages are capable of crafting different realities. Arnold now narrates the true story of how he rescued Roylston:

> I was wild [...] I suddenly remembered Roylston. He'd given me one [cigarette] just before we charged. He had a whole case full I remembered, and I knew the spot where he went down […] After that—I forget […] I must have gone over the top and brought him back (O'Neill 1988: 670).

This is the motive for his 'heroic deed', not a sense of camaraderie for a fallen friend, but the overwhelming desire for a cigarette. It is the knowledge of this fact that acts as the cause for Arnold's shattered mental condition: he was called a hero and received

decorations for this act of bravery, but the truth is he did not care for Roylston. His collapse is the result of a misalignment between mythic ideals, the desire to maintain them, and the reality of what actually happened.

However, reality is not easy to face, because it goes against Arnold's own perception of who he is. Because of this he cannot accept the reality and so desperately seeks to reposition his motives to bring himself back in line with his own self-perception, which is closer to the mythic construct: 'It couldn't have been that! I must have gone out for him—for Herb! I must have suddenly realised that he was out there—still alive— suffering' (O'Neill 1988: 670). Wayne also latches onto this, claiming he must have heard Roylson calling for help. Arnold readily agrees and instantly finds relief. The myth cannot be so simply dispelled, as the version of events it depicts is easier to live with.

The negative association that shell shock holds contributed to the characters' unwillingness to accept it as something Arnold could be suffering from. As discussed, shell shock carried a stigma that those who suffered from it were somehow weak, cowardly or had a deficient character. Arnold reacts against the notion of shell shock because the myth of masculinity he ascribes to states that only men who are cowards contract it. As previously explained, the fact that this myth is accepted by Arnold assisted in the development of his shell shock. The men who suffered from this condition believed the myth, just as Arnold does, and their attempt to live up to ideals results in a mental conflict, manifesting itself as shell shock.

It can be argued as to whether Arnold is really suffering from shell shock, or just an acute sense of guilt, which manifests itself physically.[19] Nevertheless, the idea of shell shock in the context of the play acts as part of the tradition of counter-language and takes its place alongside those other factors already discussed. Although mythic constructs are reaffirmed for the characters, counter-language allows the audience to see the fallacy in myth's representation of both events and people.

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[19] Arnold's condition could be related to the guilt he feels for his actions: that he went out into no-man's-land to get a cigarette as opposed to any heroic and selfless motives. His hording of cigarettes is an unconscious attempt to avoid such a situation again. That he appears to be superficially cured when his mythic representation of self is reaffirmed would suggest that it was guilt and not a form of post-traumatic stress that he was suffering from.

Shell Shock dramatically depicts the dual language of representation that existed during the war, and shows that the way something is spoken about plays a far larger role in crafting its reality than the truth of what actually happened does. The play opens safely in the realm of myth: being caught for three days without relief in a besieged trench is a glorious thing, and the story of Roylston's rescue is the ultimate depiction of self-sacrifice and bravery. The purpose of mythical language is to instil the event with a purpose and to give it meaning that inspires devotion to the cause. Arnold, however, is the carrier of counter-language. He has lived through the events and sees there is no higher significance to them, and his manner of speaking about the war strips it of the instilled glory established in the play's first section.

This process of disillusionment is exactly what happened during the course of the war. As has been explained, the war enjoyed popular support early on, and myth dominated the public's understanding of the conflict. But as the war dragged on, as soldiers returned from the front scarred by their experiences, and as the death tolls rose, a new language for depicting war came about, utilised primarily by returned servicemen, specifically to counter the language of myth; and their language was a simple one, divested of higher meaning and focused on the harsh reality of the situation. Slowly the mythical language was revealed to be illegitimate. *Shell Shock* presents us with a dramatic depiction of this shifting attitude.

Sherriff's *Journey's End*

Although O'Neill's play examines the impact war had on returned servicemen, when one thinks of war the first thing that comes to mind is the frontline. While rarely depicted on stage, there are a collection of plays set exclusively on the front, several of which predate *Journey's End*. Harry Wall's *Havoc* (1923) was one of the first plays set amongst the fighting. Wall himself was a veteran of the conflict and so the dialogue was peppered with slang terms common to the front and the trenches (Barker, 2000, 218).[20] The tone of

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[20] A similar stylistic choice will be shown in Nick Whitby's *To the Green Fields Beyond* (2000).

Havoc is generally bitter, and it focuses primarily on the different forms of love that sustain and betray the soldiers (Barker, 2000, 219).

Another early precursor to *Journey's End* is Hubert Griffiths' *Tunnel Trench* (1925). The play examined and contrasted the experiences and emotions of the combatants before and during battle (Baker 2000: 219). The real appeal of the play, though, was in its final act. There suspense was created and maintained, as a group of soldiers became aware of German sappers tunnelling beneath their trench with the intention of planting mines (Baker 2000: 219). So appealing was this scene that Patrick MacGill replicated it in 1930 with *Suspense*; although some critics have called it a better example of a psychological thriller than that of strict war realism (Baker 2000: 222). Together, *Havoc*, *Journey's End* and *Suspense* represent the main fare of frontline plays that met with a respectable level of success during the post-war years. All three are similar in setting, plot structure and characterisation (Kosok 2007: 20). For this reason only *Journey's End* will be taken into consideration as representative of this genre as it was both the most widely performed and skilfully crafted of the three. Additionally, the condition of shell shock can be seen as one of the primary themes in *Journey's End*, and, just as in *Shell Shock*, it is a complicated theme, for although it can be seen as an effort to dispel ideas of myth and romance, the play still implicitly supports them.

Robert Cedric Sherriff (1896-1975), like most men of his generation, enlisted soon after the war's declaration. He trained with the Artists' Rifles (the same regiment as Wilfred Owen) and saw active service at Vimy Ridge and Ypres before being wounded at Passchendaele. After the war Sherriff fell into writing short plays as fundraisers for his local rowing club (Perry 1972: 104) and it was from this start that he came to express his war experiences in *Journey's End*. Although the agency Curtis Brown thought highly of the script, they had difficulty finding anyone willing to produce it. The general consensus was that there was no audience for an unvarnished war play from an unknown writer, especially one that had no leading lady.[21] However, after receiving an endorsement from G. B. Shaw, the Incorporated Stage Society accepted it for production (Perry 1972: 105).

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[21] This well-documented experience led to the contemporary misconception that *Journey's End* was the first war play to be staged, despite the fact that other frontline plays like *Havoc* and *Tunnel Trench* had been performed and well received several years earlier.

An unknown director, James Whale, was signed onto the project. He would later go on to direct such Hollywood hits as *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Show Boat* (1936). An equally unknown actor was also secured for the lead, a 21 year old Laurence Olivier. The play was an instant success: it enjoyed a two-year run on the West End, before an equally successful Broadway run; and to this day it remains one of the most instantly recognisable theatrical depictions of the First World War.

On the surface the plot of *Journey's End* is relatively simple. Its action takes place exclusively in the officers' dugout, chronicling three days in March 1918. It details the day to day routine of being on the front, and the tension evoked whilst waiting for a German offensive. The distinguishing feature of *Journey's End* is its use of realism to depict events. Traditionally, plays that venture to the front were heavily stylised.[22] By contrast, *Journey's End* is aligned with the tradition of nineteenth-century realism, both in its depiction of set and portrayal of character. Sherriff himself makes numerous references to the importance of realistic depiction of setting and sound in the play for drawing an audience in. For Sherriff, the audience's suspension of belief was of the utmost importance (Sherriff 1968: 5).[23] This places *Journey's End* squarely in the counter-language movement, just as the war memoirs are. As discussed in chapter one, the primary difference between counter-language and a mythic or romantic rhetoric is where focus lies. While myth and romance focus on higher concepts and mental abstractions, counter-language focuses on the solid object of experience. In this regard, dramatic realism lends itself to the objectives of counter-language.

An excerpt from the opening scene's description provides an example of this:

> A dugout. […] A few rough steps leading into the trench above, through a low doorway. A table occupies a good space of the dugout's floor. A wooden frame covered in wire netting stands against the left wall and serves the double purpose of a bed and seat for the table. A Wooden bench against the back wall makes another seat and two boxes serve for other sides. Another wire covered bed is fixed in the right corner beyond the doorway. Except for

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[22] As will be seen in O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie*.

[23] The play was generally praised as an example of anti-heroic realism upon its production (Onions 1990: 92), in spite of the fact that closer examination reveals that it upholds most of the traditional values of heroism.

table, beds, and seats, there is no furniture save the bottles holding the candles, and a few tattered magazine pictures pinned to the walls of girls in flimsy costumes. The flames of candles that burn day and night are steady in the damp air (Sherriff 1937: 207).

This is not a heavily stylised setting (or one could argue that it is), rather it is an attempt to recreate a look and atmosphere as close as possible to what conditions were like on the Western Front. The rest of the play follows in this manner. By turn, the characters focus on either the appalling conditions they face, or otherwise attempt to distract themselves from those conditions with stories of home. But their concerns are always reflected in the tangible aspects of their surrounds. The audience is made aware of the wet and damp conditions (208), the constant threat of shelling (209), the woeful state of supplies (211) and the poor quality of their meals (215). All of these factors have a compounding effect; however, it is the constant threat of death that takes the largest toll on the characters' ability to cope.

What *Journey's End* does better than any previous war play is to reveal the mental toll these conditions took on the men. This is best encapsulated in the characters Hibbert and Stanhope. Hibbert is a young Lieutenant who complains of suffering from neuralgia,[24] although it is later revealed that he is lying and using it as an excuse to be sent home. Stanhope is suspicious of him from the start, calling his so-called neuralgia 'pure bloody funk':

> How long's he been out here? Three months, I suppose. Now he's decided he's done his bit. He's decided to go home and spend the rest of the war in comfortable nerve hospitals (Sherriff 1937: 228).

Stanhope is both right and wrong. He is right about Hibbert's illness, and what his intentions are insofar as trying to get away from the front; however, as is made evident in the second act, Hibbert is in all likelihood suffering from a mild case of shell shock.

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[24] Neuralgia is a pain in one or more nerves caused by change in the neurological structure or function of the nerve rather than by excitation of healthy pain receptors.

When Stanhope bars him from leaving Hibbert almost breaks into hysterics, and it is only after Stanhope threatens to shoot him as a deserter that he reveals his true feelings:

> I've tried like hell—I swear I have. Ever since I came out here I've hated and loathed it. Every sound up there makes me all—cold and sick. I'm different to—to the others—you don't understand. It's got worse and worse, and now I can't bear it any longer. I'll never go up those steps again—into the line—with the men looking at me—and knowing—I'd rather die here (Sherriff 1937: 254).

Of course, this cannot be accepted as it undermines the mythic image of British masculinity, and so Stanhope convinces Hibbert to stick it out. However, fear is the driving force here. Every sound holds a threat that could take his life and he has no control over it. Over time the constancy of the threat and the feeling it evokes became deliberating to the point that he is unable to function. Hibbert is also aware of the men: he is afraid they know about his fears and that they judge him as a coward. As a result he feels all the greater shame. This is important, for it is not only fear, but the threatening shame of not living up to social expectations – expectations that are informed by myth – that gives rise to shell shock. Sherriff successfully reveals what shell shock is and how it arises on the front.

In essence, Hibbert's character functions primarily to highlight Stanhope's own predicament (Onions 1990: 94). Just as in O'Neill's *Shell Shock*, the audience is told various stories about Stanhope before meeting him. However, unlike Arnold, the first comments begin to reveal him as a man struggling to cope: 'How is the dear young boy? Drinking like a fish, as usual?' (Sherriff 1937: 211). Stanhope's reputation as a drinker is, however, symptomatic of something more serious. A departing officer states that Stanhope's nerves are shot to blazes:

> Last time out resting we were playing bridge and something happened […] and all of a sudden he jumped up and knocked all the glasses off the table! Lost control of himself; and then he sort of—came to—and cried (Sherriff 1937: 212).

Clearly he is suffering from a form of shell shock. The alignment of his affliction with 'nerves' also supports this as shell shock was viewed as being an affliction of nerves. Osborne, Stanhope's second in command, sheds more light on his condition:

> Do you know how long he's been out here? […] Nearly three years. […] He's never had a rest. Others come over here and go home again ill, and young Stanhope goes on sticking it, month in, month out. […] I've seen him on his back all day with trench fever[25]—then on duty all night (Sherriff 1937: 212).

As with Arnold in *Shell Shock*, Stanhope has been in the trenches almost continuously for three years and the toll is beginning to show.

That this has occurred becomes increasingly evident with the arrival of Raleigh. Raleigh is the new officer assigned to Stanhope's company. The two had attended school together where Stanhope had impressed himself on the younger Raleigh, in a similar manner as Arnold had with Roylston. Raleigh tells of Stanhope's prowess as an athlete: at school he had been captain of the rugby team and kept wicket for the eleven (Sherriff 1937: 216). Raleigh also tells of how Stanhope was an advocate of clean living and never touched alcohol or cigarettes (Sherriff 1937: 218), two habits he has taken up since being on the front.[26] This all helps to highlight the adverse effect his war experience has had on him.

Osborne attempts to prepare Raleigh for the change he will be bound to notice: 'You must remember he's commanded this company for a long time—through all sorts of rotten times. It's—it's a big strain on a man' (Sherriff 1937: 218). The warning is needless though, for even in spite Stanhope's behaviour Raleigh's opinion of him is unshakable. Indeed, it was Stanhope who inspired Raleigh to enlist: 'Last time he was on leave he came down to the school; he'd just got his M.C.[27] and been made a Captain. He looked splendid!' (Sherriff 1937: 217). It was the image of Stanhope as a decorated officer,

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[25] Not to be confused with shell shock. Trench fever is a bacterial disease spread by lice.

[26] This is yet another parallel with *Shell Shock* and Arnold's character. Just like Stanhope, Arnold's attitude towards smoking changed as a result of his war experiences.

[27] Military Cross, awarded for an act of exemplary gallantry during active operations against the enemy on land.

something that carried all the romantic and mythic sensibilities of war, which made Raleigh want to enlist. In his mind Stanhope 'the image' looms far greater than Stanhope 'the man'. This is similar to what was seen to occur in *The New Word*; however, whereas the myth associated with Roger was left intact, here it is undermined.

In this manner *Journey's End* certainly reacts against the mythic ideals of war. For although Osborne encourages Raleigh to think of the war as romantic (Sherriff 1937: 220), echoing a statement once made by Hulme,[28] there is little within the play that could be regarded as romantic. Sherriff depicts a harsh scene: living conditions are trying, men are sent to their deaths for little real purpose, fear hangs over all the characters, the consequence of which is shell shock. These realistic depictions place *Journey's End* in the tradition of counter-language. However, while the play reacts against romantic portrayals of war, it still supports other myths, primarily the myth of British masculinity and heroism. To this end, Stanhope is ultimately depicted as a heroic figure.

The expectations held by society as to what a soldier, and a man, should be able to endure have been previously examined; and as a result of these expectations shell shock was looked upon as a weakness or a sign of failure, for it meant someone was incapable of enduring conditions that a proper soldier and man was expected to. This attitude is believed and upheld by Stanhope throughout the play. This is first made evident with his disdain for Hibbert's attempt to shrink from his duties (Sherriff 1937: 228). It is quickly revealed, though, that this disdain is not just reserved for Hibbert but also for himself. When talking of his girl at home (also Raleigh's sister) he worries about what she would think of him: 'She doesn't know that if I went up those steps into the front line—without being doped with whisky—I'd go mad with fright' (Sherriff 1937: 229). Osborne urges Stanhope to go on leave, but this idea is rejected. For Stanhope the image of the proper British soldier, and what has to be done to uphold that image, is of the utmost importance.

> I knew I'd go mad if I didn't break the strain […] There were only two ways of breaking the strain. One was pretending I was ill—and going home; the other was this [*He holds up the*

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[28] You've got to amuse yourself in the intervals of shelling and romanticising of the situation is a good a way as any other (Hulme 1955: 159).

glass.] [...] I thought it all out. It's a slimy thing to go home if you're not really ill, isn't it (Sherriff 1937: 230/1).

In his own eyes Stanhope has already failed to live up to the image he reveres. The fact that he needs whisky as a crutch to get by is evidence of his inability to endure. However, he is also determined not to use it as an excuse to escape the front, for that would be cowardice of an even greater degree.

For Stanhope, even though he feels he has failed, it is still important that he does all he can to preserve the image of himself. Stanhope knows exactly how Raleigh views him: 'Yes, I'm his hero' (Sherriff 1937: 228), he simply states; but this carries with it all the romantic and idealised connotations that he is striving to uphold. Stanhope's fear is that Raleigh will discover that he has been unable to live up to these ideals, and worse, that he will write home and tell his sister. *Journey's End* may help to reveal the reality of what conditions on the front were like: as G. B. Shaw said of the play, 'they are accounts of catastrophes, and sketches of trench life, useful as correctives to the romantic conception of war' (Sherriff 1968: 45); but at the same time it shows that the romantic ideal of what it meant to be a soldier was still maintained.

Some have stated that *Journey's End* yields to nostalgia, heroics and romance more associated with the war years (Wainscott 1997: 36). The men in this play see only that they have a duty to serve, an honour to uphold and do so without questioning the motives or the meaning of the war. As we have seen, the belief in this myth supplied part of the internal conflict responsible for the advent of shell shock. This makes *Journey's End* an oddity in the post-war period of theatrical presentations as it both escapes old modes of representing the war while simultaneously conforming to notions of romantic ideals. The fact that Stanhope upholds the ideal of stoic heroism – that it was one's duty to endure, and that to give in to the strain was a sign of weakness – should be seen as accounting for the play's relative commercial success.

At this point it is prudent to comment on what reception war plays received during this period, for it is revealing as to the public's attitude towards the conflict itself. In truth the sentiment expressed by Wyndham Lewis, that after the war was over it would become a taboo topic, never to be mentioned in polite society (Lewis 1967: 185), is an accurate

summary of the attitude held by the theatre managers of the day. The difficulty Sherriff experienced in finding a theatre willing to stage *Journey's End* has been well documented. In his memoir, *No Leading Lady*, he recounts how every theatre turned down the play until finally the Stage Society offered to produce it for a brief two performance run. Even then no established director would touch the play and it was only offered to James Whale as a last resort (Sherriff 1968: 46).

During its short run the play was enthusiastically received by many of the leading critics of the day.[29] Despite the excellent reviews, managers were still unwilling to grant *Journey's End* a full West End run – the consensus being that the topic of war simply would not attract an audience intent on forgetting the past (Sherriff 1968: 64). *Journey's End* may well have been lost to history had it not been for Maurice Browne[30] who, upon reading the script, set about raising funds privately to give *Journey's End* its West End run. Once on stage again, the play repeated its initial success. It toured the continent before transferring to Broadway for an equally successful run. It is believed that during this period the play earned Sherriff some £300,000 (Luckhurst 2006: 314).

Journey's End was not the only play to deal with the war that experienced difficulty in finding theatre managers willing to take a risk with the subject matter. Noël Coward's *Post-Mortem* (1930) remained professionally unproduced until 2011;[31] likewise a then

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[29] Hannen Swaffer, one of the harshest critics in London, wrote, 'R. C. Sherriff achieved the distinction of compelling to real emotion an audience who were watching a play almost without a plot, with no women in the cast! […] It was a remarkable achievement […] *Journey's End* is perhaps the greatest of all war plays […] This is English theatre at its best' (Sherriff 1968: 61). Likewise, James Agate, who was considered to be London's most influential critic, devoted an entire episode of his weekly BBC review programme to rave about *Journey's End* (Sherriff 1968: 63).

[30] Maurice Browne (1881-1955) was a theatre producer and literary critic fond of the controversial and vanguard writers of his time, such as Wilde, Shaw and H. G. Wells. In 1910 he founded The Chicago Little Theatre, which started the Little Theatre Movement in the United States. The Little Theatre Movement represented an attempt to combat the decline of theatre in the wake of cinema's growing popularity, by staging intimate, non-profit shows.

[31] In truth, *Post-Mortem* sits apart in style and theme from Coward's oeuvre. Even Coward considered the play confused and unbalanced and attempted to suppress its production of his own accord (Luckhurst 2006: 310), despite the fact that he included it in the publication of his second volume of collected plays.

unknown Muriel Box[32] failed to get her 1935 play *War Angels* staged.[33] It is difficult to say that there was no audience for such plays: as Heinz Kosok notes, between 1919 and the staging of *Journey's End* in 1928 some 44 plays that took the First World War as their subject, either overtly or implicitly, were staged in Britain (Kosok 2007: 259/60). However, the theatre managers should be forgiven for their caution. Often when a play did make it to stage it met with a fickle audience. True, *Journey's End* was a success story, but there were failures, and failures by far more established and recognised writers. Sean O'Casey's play, *The Silver Tassie*, was originally rejected by Yeats for the Abbey Theatre in 1928 (Luckhurst 2006: 308),[34] and when it did finally open at the Apollo Theatre it closed after only 26 performances.[35] William Somerset Maugham's *For Services Rendered* also met with a similar fate, closing after only 78 performances and was widely panned as a commercial flop, despite the fact that it is now recognised as his finest play (Barker, 2000, 228). In the post-war English society audiences could not be consistently relied upon to respond positively to plays dealing with the war.

While *Journey's End* went on to international prominence, the other two significant war plays of this period, *For Services Rendered* and *The Silver Tassie* became commercial failures. It is interesting to note this difference given Sherriff was a complete unknown upon the release of *Journey's End*, whereas Maugham and O'Casey were both long established and popular writers; so unsuccessful was Maugham's play that some have even speculated that it was the reason why he never wrote for the theatre again (Baker 2000: 227). Could the difference in the public's treatment of these war plays be explained by how the war was portrayed in them? For while *Journey's End* engaged with and upheld

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[32] Muriel Box (1905-1991) had greater success as a screenwriter and director than as a playwright. She shared the 1946 Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay with her husband, Sydney, for the film *The Seventh Veil*.

[33] It was subsequently first performed in 1981.

[34] The story of this controversy has become more famous than the actual play. For a detailed account of the public argument between Yeats and O'Casey see the appendix of Hogan's *The Experiments of Sean O'Casey.*

[35] Yeats later recognised the significance of O'Casey's play and it was staged at the Abbey Theatre in 1935, although only for five performances. O'Casey, however, could not forget the original slight and was never to offer Yeats another piece for performance.

many of the romance myths, as shall be seen *For Services Rendered* and *The Silver Tassie* did not. Could this be a sign of the continuing strength of myth even after the nature of the war's realities were known, and in spite of the rise of counter-language?

O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie*

The conflict between romance, myth and reality is taken up by Sean O'Casey (1880-1964) in *The Silver Tassie* (1928); however, it is done in a different way from both O'Neill and Sherriff. While myth takes a battering in *Shell Shock* and *Journey's End*, it is still able to survive. In O'Casey's much darker representation of the war harder questions are asked, and by the play's close there is little space for any of the former myths to exist. Even the significance of the Victoria Cross, a symbol of heroism and gallantry, is called into question as one of its recipients is proven to be caddish and unworthy.

Of course, O'Casey is an Irish playwright, and undeniably *The Silver Tassie* is imbued with an Irish sensibility towards the war, which is different from the British perspective being pursued by this study. However, the play was first staged at the Apollo Theatre on the West End to an English audience. Although championed by Bernard Shaw, *The Silver Tassie* struggled on the London stage, no doubt hampered by *Journey's End*, which was playing concurrently at the Savoy Theatre (Kosok 1996: 23). The fact that these two plays were playing together in the same city at the same time is the reason for its inclusion in the study at this point, despite its Irish origins.

O'Casey came to see his play as the antithesis of *Journey's End*. In his autobiography he states:

> The false effrontery of Sherriff's *Journey's End*, which made of war a pleasant thing to see and feel; a strife put spiritually at a great distance; a demure echo told under candle light, at a great fireside, of a fight informal; a discreet accompaniment to a strident song, done on a lute, played low; the stench of blood hid in a mist of soft-sprayed perfume; the yells of agony modulated down to a sweet pianissimo of pain; surly death, or death exultant, fashioned into a smiling courtier, brining himself in with a bow; a balmy breath of blood

and guts; all the mighty bloodied vulgarities of war foreshadowed into a petty, pleasing picture (O'Casey 1963: 335).

O'Casey's rhetoric aside, he does make a point. As described, Sherriff raised no questions about the war, and the romantic notions of honour, patriotism, sacrifice, stoicism and heroism go unchallenged within the context of his play (Kosok 1996: 23). By contrast, O'Casey presents a much harsher depiction of both war and its consequences.

The Silver Tassie also differs from Journey's End and Shell Shock in its chosen settings. Instead of just depicting incidents that happen on the front, or the consequences faced by soldiers on their return home, it does both, showing frontline scenes and return scenes, as well as juxtaposing them against scenes set before the characters leave for war. The Silver Tassie fits into the tradition of counter-language, but it does so in a unique way, and as such it is important to bear in mind the catalyst that caused counter-language to arise. As discussed previously, counter-language arose as a reaction against mythic modes of representation. Yet it was also symptomatic of a discrepancy between how people who had served perceived the war as opposed to those who had not. In this way The Silver Tassie not only fits into this tradition but also dramatically depicts how a war experience juxtaposed against a civilian one began to give rise to counter-language.

The play is primarily set in Dublin; and many consider it to be one of the primary theatrical Irish responses to the war.[36] As such, it deals with a number of Irish themes. For example, the play's protagonist, Harry Heegan, is being forcibly rushed by his mother to catch the boat to France, because if he misses it her separation payment will be stopped (O'Casey 1928: 20).[37] Even early in the play it can be seen that traditional romantic motives for enlisting have been cast aside. In Journey's End it can be assumed that the characters enlisted because they believed it was the right thing to do. In The Silver Tassie Harry's mother has little interest in the war's cause but willingly sends her son to the front for financial gain.

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[36] For a detailed discussion of Irish responses to the war in theatre see Kosok's The Theatre of War: The First World War in British and Irish Drama.

[37] A similar theme of 'economic conscription' as a major motive for Irish enlistment is also raised in Shaw's short play, O'Flaherty V.C.

What motivates Harry himself is never addressed, although others have seen it as nothing more than vainglory and thoughtlessness on his own behalf (Kosok 1996: 24). At the play's opening Harry is depicted as youthful, handsome and an excellent sportsman:[38] having just won his soccer team the Silver Tassie trophy. He enters the stage in uniform, surrounded by his team mates, bathed in triumph and the object of affection: two young girls, Susie and Jessie, are in love with him, or, more accurately, the image of him. Just as in Barrie's *The New Word*, myth has attached itself to the image of Harry, and he is read as being the romantic soldier hero. Harry undoubtedly believes this himself, as he boasts of his exploits and prowess on the playing field, giving him the appearance of a cocky, conceited, bullet-proof youth. For all this, Harry has no element of intellectual reflection on life. He defines himself solely by his physical abilities, and so when he is later paralysed from the waist down he loses all purpose in life; wherein lays the play's tragedy (Kosok 1985: 95).

The first act is presented in a realist manner, although at times it does descend into farce: before Harry's arrival a neighbour causes a row by breaking all his crockery and a chase scene ensues resulting in his wife and neighbour, Sylvester, hiding under a bed. Nevertheless, the first act is a representation of the civilian world that will be juxtaposed against a direct portrayal of war, which is depicted as a terrible, abstract dream (Hogan 1960: 61). As such, the second act is presented in a stylistically different way. While the first, third and fourth acts are depicted in a realistic manner (albeit with elements of symbolism) the second act is aligned with an expressionist tradition. Although by the time of the First World War expressionism existed as a dramatic mode in continental Europe, it had had little real impact in Britain.[39] Few British works of this time utilised expressionist techniques, and even works of established foreign authors, such as O'Neill and Strindberg, did little to generate interest.

Nevertheless, an expressionist aesthetic can be readily lent to representations of war. By moving away from realist constructions and adopting expressionist techniques the

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[38] Yet again sport acts as the childish prelude to war.

[39] Kosok notes several theories as to why this was the case: lack of consumer interest, West End's aversion to foreign influence, lack of translations and a theme of disillusionment that did not speak to the younger generation of British playwrights (Kosok 2007: 129).

scene is able to escape a solely individual experience of an event and instead present an emanation of a mass psyche (Hogan 1960: 12). Expressionism does this through a deliberate distortion of observable reality, yet without completely severing links with real-life (Kosok 2007: 130). Act two of *The Silver Tassie* can be seen to do this, especially when viewed directly after act one. The action takes place on the frontline; however, O'Casey creates an element of anonymity within the scene. None of the characters have names, the text refers to them merely by role, and even the other characters call each other by number: 'Hallo, there, you sleepy blighters! Number 2, a parcel; and for you, Number 3. Get a move on – parcels!' (O'Casey 1928: 61), calls the Corporal when delivering mail. In doing so the characters are divested of any individuality and instead represent universal types.

In addition the dialogue is heavily stylised:

1ST SOLDIER: Cold and wet and tir'd.

2ND SOLDIER: Wet and tir'd and cold.

3RD SOLDIER: Tir'd and cold and wet.

4TH SOLDIER: Twelve blasted hours of ammunition transport fatigue!

1ST SOLDIER: Twelve weary hours.

2ND SOLDIER: And wasting hours.

3RD SOLDIER: And hot and heavy hours.

1ST SOLDIER: Toiling and thinking to build the wall of force that block the way from here to home.

2ND SOLDIER: Lifting shells.

3RD SOLDIER: Carrying shells.

4TH SOLDIER: Piling shells.

1ST SOLDIER: In the falling, pissing rain and whistling wind.

2ND SOLDIER: The whistling wind and falling, drenching rain.

3RD SOLDIER: The God-damn rain and blasted whistling wind.

1ST SOLDIER: And the shirkers sife at home coil'd up at ease.

2ND SOLDIER: Shells for us and pianos for him.

3RD SOLDIER: Fur coats for them and winding-sheets for us.

4TH SOLDIER: Warm.

2ND SOLDIER: And dry.

1ST SOLDIER: An' 'appy (O'Casey 1928: 44/5).

The exchange is similar to that of Beckett's tramps in *Waiting for Godot*, and indeed much of the second act could be read as an early precursor to the absurdist movement. The soldiers search for meaning as to why they are there: an oft repeated question is 'But wy'r we 'ere, wy'r we 'ere—that's wot I wants to know!' (O'Casey 1928: 46). The only reply ever forthcoming is, 'God only knows,' or otherwise a parody verse to the tune *Auld Lang Syne*, 'We're here because we're here, because we're here, because we're here' (O'Casey 1928: 47). This is no noble or honourable battle they are fighting. Their search for meaning in the war hits a dead-end every time, in true absurdist tradition.

The above exchange also reveals that there is little focus on the psychological reality of the individual soldiers; rather the primary interest is in rhythm and theme. The men talk about universal issues: the conditions, their labour and their disdain for those who remained at home. What they speak of is not specific to any situation aside from war generically: no comment is made as to where they are, what unit they belong to, where they are from or even who they are fighting for. This is a hallmark of an expressionistic approach. Nevertheless, what is readily apparent is a focus on the tangible object, as is common to counter-language.

O'Casey's use of songs and chants reminiscent of dirges throughout the act also contributes to the unreality of the scene. Of course, to call the second act unrealistic would be a mistake. Although O'Casey never served in the war what he presents is not unrealistic, merely realistic points depicted in unfamiliar ways thereby drawing greater attention to them. The scenery also ties in with this concept. The setting is that of a ruined monastery: the remains of religious paraphernalia – a statute of The Virgin Mary and a life-sized crucifix – are juxtaposed against images of war: howitzer cannon, destroyed homes and a mess of barbed wire (O'Casey 1928: 41/2). Through the use of exaggeration and juxtaposition in the setting, the oddity of the songs and the unnatural rhythmic nature

of the dialogue, O'Casey is able to draw greater attention to the strangeness of war when compared to the normality of everyday life.[40]

The significance of this act only becomes apparent when set alongside the other three more realistic acts. What is created is a sense that the experience of war exists in a realm outside and beyond what can be perceived or imagined in civilian life. Paul Fussell makes some reference to this phenomenon:

> 'He was in real life a bond and insurance broker in Vancouver.' If 'real life' is 'real', the military life must be pretence. The wearing of customs not chosen by their wearers augments the sense of the theatrical (Fussell 1975: 191).

This concept of 'what do you do in real life,' became a common question that men asked of each other on the front. The implication here is that life on the front had little bearing on their lives at home and was completely alien from it. This effect was then to cross over when they returned to civilian life. As has been discussed, the difference between civilian and servicemen experiences led to a divide in the rhetoric used to describe and understand these events. We can look at this divide as being both symptomatic of and contributing to an inability for those who remained at home to empathise with those who served.

This is made evident in the final act of *The Silver Tassie*. During the course of his service Harry is severely wounded and loses the use of his legs. Without his legs he has lost his physical prowess, the one thing that gave his life meaning. When Harry arrives at a ball at his former soccer club none of the characters know how to relate to him in his wounded state. They find him awkward and attempt to avoid him: 'We'll watch for a chance to shake him off, an' if he starts again we'll make him take his tangled body somewhere else' (O'Casey 1928: 103). Likewise his father's friend is doubtful that Harry should have even been allowed to attend:

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[40] It is worth noting that O'Casey's manner of structuring the second act has been criticised. Robert Hogan believed the act fails dramatically as it is static and provides no advancement to the plot. Additionally, by removing Harry from the scene it makes it difficult to establish the impact that the war has had on him as an individual (although it should be noted that most productions have the actor playing Harry double as one of the anonymous soldiers) (Hogan 1960: 66).

To carry life and colour to where there's nothing but the sick and helpless is right; but to carry the sick and helpless to where there's nothing but life and colour is wrong (O'Casey 1928: 105).

Additionally, his former sweetheart, Jessie, is now attached to his best friend. This shows her to be just as thoughtless as the men who fight, as she naturally and unthinkingly turns to whoever is the physical superior (Kosok 1985: 97). From his own friends and family Harry receives no sympathy and is looked upon as little more than a hindrance in a club where he was once a hero. Although O'Casey presents an extreme example, it is, nevertheless, representative of a common experience: friends and family were unable to relate to the returned and wounded soldiers. This led to further isolation and hardship on their behalf.

What O'Casey encapsulates in *The Silver Tassie* is a portrayal of how the experiences of war altered people and made them other from those who remained at home. The second act, which makes use of an expressionistic aesthetic, sets it apart from the normal experiences of home. In effect, he presents the war as something unimaginable for anyone who did not serve. The result of this makes itself felt in the final act. O'Casey gives a harsh depiction of how the wounded men are met with no empathy, little sympathy and are ultimately ostracised. In truth, there was a lot of sympathy for returned servicemen: 'Families were affected, if not fractured, and although society was keen to move on […] it still felt a sense of obligation to these men' (Tyquin 2006: 115). Families and friends wanted to do right by these men, but an inability to understand or relate to their experiences created a chasm between the two groups. The root of this came from a civilian understanding of war imbedded in romantic and mythic traditions. The rise of counter-language is symptomatic of this, and *The Silver Tassie* presents a direct representation of how and why it arose.

The Silver Tassie may have been a production ahead of its time, both stylistically and thematically. It challenged audiences with its abrupt change in style, shifting between naturalism and expressionism; and its tone, moving from an essentially farcical opening scene to an absurd and bleak depiction of battle. Reviewers and audiences came away perplexed, leading to mixed reviews at both its original staging in 1929, and its

subsequent five performance run at the Abbey Theatre in 1935, which also caused considerable controversy and prompted O'Casey's self-imposed exile from Ireland. Today, though, audiences are used to seeing a mix of styles, and O'Casey's harder assessment of the war is one we are now more than familiar with. Contemporary reviews of the National Theatre's 2014 production were broadly positive,[41] and *The Silver Tassie* is now seen as an important portrayal of the Great War.

Maugham's *For Services Rendered*

The Silver Tassie begins to look at the reception returned servicemen met from their friends and family upon their immediate return from the war. These challenges were not quickly resolved, but had ongoing consequences for the rest of their lives. In *For Services Rendered* W. Somerset Maugham (1874-1965),[42] takes up this issue by setting the play some ten years after the war's conclusion. Even though it was poorly received on its initial production, today *For Services Rendered* is recognised as an important theatrical portrayal of the lingering affects the war had upon British society.

Maugham sets his play in the fictional town of Rambleston, which he places in Kent. The action transpires in the home of Leonard Ardsley, a country solicitor. As with

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[41] Charles Spencer, writing for *The Telegraph*, wrote, 'I cannot imagine seeing a better production of this troubling and rarely performed work'. For full review see:
http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/10781873/The-Silver-Tassie-National-Theatre-review.html. Michael Billington, writing for *The Guardian*, wrote, 'Yeats attacked the play for what he called "a series of almost unrelated scenes". This fine production reveals the inner consistency of O'Casey's assault on the brutalising impact of war.' For full review see:
http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/apr/24/the-silver-tassie-review-national-theatre.

[42] At the outbreak of war Maugham was forty years old and five foot six, too old and too short to enlist. Wanting to be of use though, he enlisted as an interpreter and joined the Red Cross where he served at Ypres. While there he realised there was greater need for ambulance drivers than interpreters, so he retrained and was redeployed at Montdidier, then Amiens and Doullens, before finishing in Flanders. Later in the war he worked in intelligence and his experiences found their way into many of his works, notably *Ashenden*. For more details of Maugham's war service record see Ted Morgan's *Somerset Maugham* (1980), 185-207.

Journey's End there is little plot to speak of, rather Maugham makes an examination of the Ardsley family and their circle of friends. What quickly becomes evident is that everyone has been touched by the war, and even ten years after the fact its effects are still being felt. It does, however, affect each character in a unique way. To this end, it is best to perform an individual analysis of each character, for they are all representative of a different archetype within British society.

The character most overtly affected by the war is Sydney, Leonard's only son. He is blind, an injury he suffered whilst serving in the war. Via Sydney Maugham introduces his main themes that are developed and expanded as the play continues:

> It's funny when you think of it. Everything goes on the same old way, except that we're all broke to the wide and a few hundred thousand fellows like me have had our chance of making a good job of life snatched away (Maugham 1932: 4).

He goes on to add, rather sarcastically, 'Cheer up mother. You must console yourself by thinking that you've got a hero for a son. M.C. and mentioned in dispatches.' Sydney is evoking the romance myths of old and in doing so is actively asking what value they now have. During the war the sacrifices people made were all thought of as being very fine. However, ten years after the event they do not appear to have been for much. The decorations for courage and bravery mean little now; Sydney is still blind and the medals do not help him live his life. His days have been reduced to knitting and playing chess (Maugham 1932: 4 & 6). Sydney does, however, retain his stoicism and appears more or less resigned to his fate. This trait gives him a calming effect in a play that becomes increasingly melodramatic as the plot unfolds.

That Sydney should have this calming effect is ironic as he is, in part, responsible for much of the play's mounting tension. Having returned from the war wounded he is a hero who made a sacrifice for the nation, and his family has attempted to treat him as such. His mother states:

> I thought it was a privilege to be able to do what we could to make life easier for him when he gave so much for us. And I thought it wasn't only for him that we were doing it, but also

for all the others who, for our sakes, and for what at least they thought was honour have
sacrificed so much of what makes life happy and good to live (Maugham 1932: 32).

It is an interesting addition Maugham makes to this speech, 'at least what they *thought*
was honour,' overtly suggesting of course that those higher concepts were nothing more
than myths. Nevertheless, the fact that such a sacrifice was inspired by false pretences in
no way diminishes its significance (at least in his mother's eyes).

This sense of duty towards Sydney is not limitless, though. His unmarried sister,
Eva, is his primary carer, but she too is suffering because of the war. Eva's fiancé was
killed during the war and she has remained unmarried ever since. Instead of marriage her
life has become what she calls a 'drudge' (Maugham 1932: 32): her days consist primarily
of taking care of Sydney, but there is a limit to how long she will willingly sacrifice her
own happiness and future. For just as Sydney lost his future to the war when he was
wounded so too did Eva when her fiancé was killed: 'Don't I spend my whole life looking
ahead? And a damned cheerful prospect it is' (Maugham 1932: 31). As an unmarried
women Eva has no future beyond the family home and the prospect of an existence made
up of her dull, repetitive routine. To this end, she sets her sights on marrying Collie,
another returned service man. But like everyone else in the play, the war has touched and
continues to touch him.

Collie had been the Commander of a Destroyer, and like Sydney had received
decorations for his service, notably the D.S.O.[43] (Maugham 1932: 9). Although Collie
managed to escape the war unscathed it has still affected him. With the end of hostilities
the British navy found itself with an excess of officers and many were decommissioned.
Collie was one of these men. He took his severance package and purchased a garage.
Unfortunately, being a naval officer was the only thing Collie knew how to do, and a
lifetime in the service left him unprepared for the business world (Maugham 1932: 17).
Indeed, Collie is virtually bankrupt at the beginning of the play and eventually comes to
postdate cheques to his creditors on an account he knew to be overdrawn (Maugham
1932: 47). He did this without realising it was a criminal offence, so ignorant of

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[43] The Distinguished Service Order, awarded for distinguished service during active operations against the
enemy.

commercial practices is he. As with Sydney, although many characters comment on and praise his war record, in the civilian world it means little.

Ultimately Collie commits suicide rather than face the prospect of gaol and dishonour. His death acts as the final catalyst for Eva's breakdown, as well as what can be considered as Maugham's point about the war and what it cost. This is best articulated by Sydney:

> I know how dead keen we all were when the war started. Every sacrifice was worth it. We didn't say much about it because we were rather shy, but honour did mean something to us and patriotism wasn't just a word. And then, when it was all over, we did think that those of us who'd died hadn't died in vain, and those of us who were broken and shattered and knew they wouldn't be any more good in the world were buoyed up by the thought that if they'd given everything they'd given it in a great cause (Maugham 1932: 67).

But now he sees the war for what it was:

> I know we were dupes of the incompetent fools who ruled the nations. I know that we were sacrificed to their vanity, their greed and their stupidity. And […] as far as I can tell they haven't learnt a thing […] It's all bunk what they're saying about honour and patriotism and glory. Bunk, bunk, bunk (Maugham 1932: 68).

Sydney's declaration of honour, glory and patriotism as bunk is the final recognition that these higher concepts were in actual fact nothing more than mere myths. To recognise these concepts as myth is in turn to recognise that the sacrifices made were all in vain.

Sydney, Collie and Eva are not the only victims of myth in the play. Leonard's eldest daughter, Ethel, like Eva, was engaged to a soldier, Howard, whom she married before the end of the war. However, Ethel married beneath her social class: her husband Howard being a tenant famer. As a result, she has taken a huge step down socially and is now required to do much of the menial labour to keep the farm running (Maugham 1932: 6). For Sydney it is a point of bewilderment that they ever married:

> SYDNEY: I shall never stop asking myself what on earth she saw in him.

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MRS ARDSLEY: Everything was so different then. He looked very nice in uniform. He was an officer.

SYDNEY: You and father should have put your foot down.

MRS ARDSLEY: They were madly in love with one another. When all that slaughter was going on it seemed so snobbish to object to a man because he was just a small tenant farmer (Maugham 1932: 4).

Of course this is not necessarily a bad thing; however, Howard is also revealed to be a drunkard and an adulterer, as during the course of the play he makes several passes at Ethel's younger sister, Lois.

The answer to the question, 'what she ever saw in him,' is partly given by Mrs Ardsley when she mentioned how fine he looked in uniform, and Ethel gives a more complete answer herself:

That first year or two when I loved him so madly. He was gallant and young. He was MANLY! I loved him because he was of the soil and his strength had its roots in it (Maugham 1932: 45).

As Lois rightly points out, Ethel was blinded by romance, and romance does not last. Howard is fond of the old mythic perception of himself, and reminisces that during the war he was an officer and a gentleman (Maugham 1932: 26), and even misses those old days. In uniform he appeared gallant and handsome, but, just as with Roger in *The New Word* and Harry in *The Silver Tassie*, it was merely the myth of war high-jacking his image and naturalising it with those higher concepts. With the war ten years over the myth has been unable to maintain the image and his true nature is now only too apparent. As Ethel admits, the only thing they still have in common is a recollection of how they once were (Maugham 1932: 45).

What becomes evident is that, although each character suffers at the hands of the war in a different way, the commonality between them is the myth of duty. Sydney and Collie did their duty by serving their country through the war, thinking it was an honourable thing they fought for; however, no positive social change resulted from the conflict and they have both paid a heavy personal price. Ethel, although caught in a

loveless marriage, is duty bound to stick it out. Eva, though, is arguably the primary victim of duty: her fiancé's devotion to duty cost him his life, likewise does Collie's; compounding on this is Eva's own sense of duty to care for Sydney, all of which has left her nerves frayed. To this end, Lois is symbolic of the next generation. She has witnessed what the myth of duty has done to her family, particularly Eva, and as a result she accepts an offer to elope with a married man despite the fact that there is a significant age difference between them, as well as her being largely indifferent towards him. Her choice of selfish pleasure is decided by the failure of social duty (Onions 1990: 97).

Ultimately Maugham does much to align *For Services Rendered* with the counter-language tradition. The myths of war are stripped off: it was not an honourable or noble cause for which they fought and made sacrifices. Even the image of the British officer comes under attack. They need not be fine upstanding gentlemen, fighting the war because it is the right thing to do, as Stanhope does; but they can be coarse, common and a cad, as Howard is. 'No responsibility and plenty of money […] All the girls you wanted and all the whiskey. Excitement' (Maugham 1932: 68). This is what the war meant to Howard. Granted this is Maugham making an exaggeration, there would have been few, if any, returned officers who would have expressed such fond sentiments of their war experiences. But insofar as dispelling the myth attached to the gallant British officer it serves its purpose. Nothing in society changed, as Sydney says. If these myths are dispelled then the sacrifices are pointless. Could it be this attitude towards the myths that caused the play's commercial failure?

Of the four plays examined in this chapter only *Journey's End* enjoyed any commercial success in its own time. Although now recognised as classics, both *For Services Rendered* and *The Silver Tassie* were closed after short runs, and *Shell Shock* was never staged. Kosok notes that the war plays that fared best with the theatre-going public were light comedies with happy endings: Maugham's *Home and Beauty* (1919),[44] Hoffe's *The*

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[44] In contrast to *For Services Rendered*, this was one of Maugham's most commercially successful plays. A farce, it chronicled the domestic mayhem caused by a women who remarried after the war in the belief that her husband had been killed, only to later discover that he had survived. The fact that the play ignored every underlying issue relevant to the war may well have been the reason for its success.

Faithful Heart (1921), McEvoy's *The Likes of Her* (1923) and Darlington's *Alf's Button* (1924) are four examples that each had runs in excess of one hundred performances (Kosok 2007: 200).[45] Meanwhile, *For Services Rendered* and *The Silver Tassie* had difficulties finding audiences willing to listen to their criticisms of the war.

We can attribute the discrepancy between those plays that succeeded and those that failed to myth. Although by the 1930s a tradition of counter-language had firmly established itself across a variety of forms, including poetry and memoir, and was working to dispel those myths examined in chapter one, the myths still maintained a residual strength. Despite the fact that during the war plays that carried overt propagandistic messages, such as Owen's *Loyalty* (1917) and Jones' *The Pacifists* (1917) failed, audiences were still unwilling to believe that the war and the sacrifices people had made were for nothing. Friedrich Nietzsche provides some insight:

> People do not want to admit that all those things which men have defended with the sacrifice of their lives and happiness […] were nothing but errors. Perhaps one calls them levels of truth. Basically, however, one thinks that if someone honestly believed in something and fought for his belief and died it would be too *unfair* if he had actually been inspired by a mere error. Such an occurrence seems to contradict eternal justice. Therefore the hearts of sensitive men always decree in opposition to their heads that there must be a necessary connection between moral actions and intellectual insights (Nietzsche 2004: 51/2).

Even though *Journey's End* represents a shift in how the war was portrayed, the fact that it still upholds many of the war myths may account for its relative commercial success, given this insight.

This chapter has argued that each of the plays examined is reacting against the mythic modes of portrayal that dominated the public's perception of the war during its

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[45] Although it would be fairer to say that these plays allude to the war, rather than engage with it, they were, nevertheless, successful. *Home and Beauty* ran for 235 performances at the Playhouse; *The Faithful Heart* ran for 194 performances at the Comedy Theatre; *The Likes of Her* ran for 228 performances at St. Martin's Theatre; and *Alf's Button* ran for 111 performances at the Prince's Theatre.

enactment. However, *Journey's End* reveals that it is problematic to think of this process as a distinct dichotomy, with myth on one side and counter-language on the other. While the myths of war certainly incited many of the combatants to react against such portrayals, certain myths would have still had value for them. The fact that Sherriff was himself a veteran speaks to this idea. For example, the process of grieving for fallen comrades on the front may be considered.

The manner in which soldiers expressed grief is fraught with complications. No doubt losing one's friends in battle, which is by nature a sudden and violent death, would have been traumatic. A veteran of modern conflicts, Hugh McManners,[46] described the experience as 'a vivid terrifying nightmare of guilt, bereavement and black impending doom souring lives thereafter' (Acton 2007: 106). Yet, at the same time there is the belief that soldiers do not, and in the context of war cannot, articulate their grief. To wallow in grief on the battlefield would have had an adverse effect on their ability to perform, or worse, could even be perceived as a weakness. This concept is of course born of the romantic myth of the stoic soldier.

The reality, though, is that the battalion would have constituted the soldiers' home during service. Within a battalion friendship, pride, loyalties and shared memories of the war were embedded, by effect creating a large part of a soldier's wartime identity (Acton 2007: 108). The death of one's fellows would precipitate a collapse of security that such feelings establish. As Eric Leeds describes:

> The unit was an unstable entity, continually devastated by shell fire; old, familiar faces were continually replaced by strange new ones. To identify with the battalion at war and with a narrow circle of one's comrades was to open a large vertiginous emotional drain and to begin a seemingly endless process of mourning.[47]

Finding a way to mourn these losses would have been of paramount importance for the common man.

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[46] Hugh McManners (1952) served for eighteen years with the British Army, he was stationed on Cyprus in 1974 during the Turkish invasion and the Falklands Islands during the war in 1982.

[47] As quoted by Carol Acton in *Grief in War Time*, page 110.

What becomes apparent, though, is a return to the tradition of romance. Mourning is the process through which grief and bereavement are mediated, and part of this process is to construct meaning and find significance for the life that has been lost. The romantic notions of war provided a ready-made framework around which meaning could be affixed. We can consider an account Sassoon makes in his diary upon the death of a close friend:

> Grief can be beautiful, when we find something worthy to be mourned. To-day I knew what it means to find the soul washed pure with tears, and the load of death was lifted from my heart. So I wrote his name in chalk on the beach-tree stem, and left a rough garland of ivy there, and a yellow primrose for his yellow hair and kind grey eyes, my dear, my dear. And to-night I saw his shrouded form lay in the earth… So Tommy left us, a gentle soldier, perfect and without stain. And so he will always remain in my heart, fresh and happy and brave (Sassoon 1984: 45).

This pastoral account evokes the ideals associated with the romantic notion of dying in battle. His soul is held up as unstained and brave, and nowhere are sentiments of futility or wasted life apparent.[48] This is a theme we find not only in this isolated example but time and again in the works of the war poets, the post-war films and literature, as Jay Winter details in his study, *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning*. This is not to say that these works engage in overly romantic portrayals of medieval nobility and chivalry. As previously discussed, these representations were so far removed from reality that they were viewed as obscene by those who served (Winter 1995: 204). A negotiation, though, was able to take place where images and metaphors from romance could be utilised and combined with elements of reality such that the dignity of those who fought could be maintained.

This creates a complex and paradoxical period. Whereas traditionally we would think of the writing surrounding the war as existing in a dichotomy – between the old,

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[48] It is interesting to note that when this same account appears in *Memoirs of an Infantry Soldier* the romantic portrayal is pared back, and instead this death comes to stand as a representation of every man killed in war, thereby highlighting the pointlessness of the conflict. Sassoon replaces the personal with the general.

traditional methods of representation, and the modern; between romance and counter-language; between those who served and those who did not – in reality, the issue is much more tempered and cross-pollination between the two is common. Indeed, in one respect the image of the war poet is quite romantic:

> He was an upholder of moral value, the truth teller par excellent, the man who fought for and faced fear and death and spoke about them to a yet unknowing public (Winter 1995: 221).

He ventured into no-man's-land and acted as an interlocutor to communities in mourning. He reaffirms the values of the men who fought and tells of the loyalty and love they had for one another. This is an undeniably romantic concept, even though the role of the war poet has been largely understood as entailing the debunking of romantic war myths. What this reveals is that just as the public was eager to extract meaning for the sacrifices made, soldiers, too, were no less willing to find and give meaning to the lives of the friends they had lost.

As a final example, J. M. Barrie's *Mary Rose* (1920) is evidence of the widespread desire to see these stories articulated in the theatre. At first glance this piece does not seem overtly interested in the war,[49] and indeed reviews of recent revivals have tended to regard it as a thematic sequel to *Peter Pan*.[50] There is some merit in this, as the play is essentially a whimsical ghost story. Many years before the play starts, while on a family holiday, Mary Rose vanished from an island for a period of twenty days. She mysteriously returns, but with no recollection of what happened to her, or any perception that time had passed. Years later she has married and, together with her husband, is visiting the same island.

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[49] Kosok pointedly excludes it from his study of over 200 hundred plays, stating: 'its main concern is with the conflict of good and evil forces and the role of the supernatural in the contemporary world, themes he has reduced to an idiosyncratic mixture of irrationality, sentimentality and whimsicality' (Kosok 2007: 3).

[50] Charles Isherwood wrote in *The New York Times* of a 2007 production: 'The play is in many ways a more mature and mournful reworking of themes Barrie explored in the tale of the boy who refused to grow up. Time is seen as a quiet despoiler of happiness and innocence, and the lure of another world unblemished by its passing has an irresistible seduction'. For full review see:
http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/21/theater/reviews/21rose.html?_r=0

Just before leaving she vanishes again, and this time remains missing for twenty-five years. When she finally returns she again has no perception that any time has passed, and for all appearances does not seem to have aged. On the surface it is almost irresistible to compare the play to *Peter Pan*, with lost children finding their way into timeless realms; however, there is a different aspect of the play that spoke to audiences of the day.

Fundamentally, the play is dealing with the issue of coping with the sudden and inexplicable loss of a loved one. Like many families that lost children during the war, Mary Rose's parents have attempted to move past the pain of her disappearance. Her father says:

> I thought I could never raise my head again, but there is a deal of the old Adam in me still. I ride and shoot and laugh […] as if nothing much had happened to me. I never think of the island now (Barrie 1928: 578).

After twenty-five years it is to be expected that the pain associated with her disappearance has started to recede. Yet there is a sense of guilt that lingers over the family that stems from the belief that they are enjoying themselves in spite of her disappearance. This would have been a common feeling among families who had lost sons in the conflict. *Mary Rose* successfully articulates the struggle of not wanting to forget loved ones, whilst also succumbing to the drive to move on with life, which results in the excitation of survivor's guilt.

Mary Rose was a moderate success for Barrie, playing for 399 performances at the Haymarket Theatre (Barker, 2000, 217). Yet, nothing is ever explained: the audience never learns why Mary Rose vanished, why she returned or where she went. The whole play is steeped in unresolved mystery. But it was this unresolved loss that spoke to the experiences of so many families.

> The great attraction of *Mary Rose* lay in its loose ends and in its inability to give answers to questions to which no answers could be found. In positing a different concept of time, a limbo we can never know or penetrate, but from which we will nevertheless return will be redeemed by love released into ease and rest. […]Barrie offered some way of coming to

terms with the agony of not knowing what had happened during the 1914-1918 War
(Barker, 2000, 217).

It is easy to understand the appeal that this offered. Mary Rose's sudden and mysterious
disappearance mirrored the loss of the young men in battle. They too vanished in a foreign
land in almost unknowable circumstances.

Barrie provides a way in which meaning could be constructed around the loss, and
this meaning is predicated on love. For it is only after her spirit is reunited with her son[51]
that Mary Rose is finally able to find peace. Perhaps this is a suggestion that those lost in
battle will be assured of peace so long as a connection is maintained in the memories of
their loved ones. Either way, instead of proffering a story of disillusionment Barrie
provided a way for the loss and mystery of death to be accepted, and this is what the
public wanted: a way to grieve for their loved ones and to construct a meaning around
their losses, even if they could never pinpoint logically where that meaning lay. More than
anything else, Barrie taps into the emotion rather than the intellect of this sensation, and it
resonated with the grieving nation.

Barrie's and Sherriff's theatre, taken together with the psychology of grieving,
reveals that both the public and returned servicemen were eager to extract meaning from
the sacrifices made and the friends that were lost. This is a very natural process and
desire. While Sherriff utilised a mode of counter-language to portray the war in his play,
he left the myths that instilled meaning into the sacrifices the men made intact. O'Casey
and Maugham did not evoke this innate desire and unsurprisingly their plays met with
commercial failure. This makes it apparent that although a shift in portraying the war was
taking place it was much slower moving than might have otherwise been expected.
Disillusionment was being expressed, counter-language was on the rise, but at the same
time the civilian public, and even returned veterans, were still desirous to see that their
sacrifices had not been made in vain. Only a play capable of navigating both of these
conflicting sentiments was guaranteed success, and *Journey's End* was a play that fit the
bill.

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[51] The fact that Mary's son is a returned serviceman may represent Barrie's subtle attempt to link the story
to the war.

In the years to come the First World War's prominent position in the public's imagination would be supplanted by the Second World War. For twenty years the First World War all but vanished from the stage, but it was to re-emerge in the late 1950s, by which time it had again undergone another development in its evolution. The coming of the 1960s represented a period where a new generation, who had no direct connection to the First World War, came of age. With this increasing distance, many of the myths that held sway during the aftermath were finally cast aside and expressions of disillusionment and waste, supported by many of the recently published historical retrospectives, came to dominate both the theatrical portrayals of the war, and the public's perception of the event.

Chapter III – War From Within, 1960-89

Our population is greater than theirs and their losses are greater than ours. In the end they

will have five thousand men left and we will have ten thousand and we shall have won.

—DOUGLAS HAIG, *OH, WHAT A LOVELY WAR!*

While the production of plays that took the First World War as their central subject

remained high in the direct aftermath of the war, the advent of the Second World War was

to supplant and overshadow the earlier conflict for several years. Through 1939-60 no

plays of any significance were produced in Britain.[1] The 1960s, though, would come to

represent a period of resurgent interest in the war. 1964 marked the fiftieth anniversary of

the war's declaration, and to commemorate the occasion the BBC released a 26-part

documentary, *The Great War*. The series was well received and is still considered to be

one of the finest historical releases by the BBC to date. Additionally, revisionist historians

began to produce new retrospectives, which were both popularly received and proved to

be critically influential. Two of the most significant studies were Leon Wolff's *In

Flanders Fields* (1959) and Alan Clark's *The Donkeys* (1961). These works not only

assisted in reinvigorating academic and public interest in the war, but were also partly

responsible for establishing a perception of the conflict that continues to persist to this day

(Chapman 2008: 131).

Revived academic and public interest naturally led to the war's re-emergence on

stage. Of this period, Charles Chilton and Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop

production, *Oh, What a Lovely War!* (1963),[2] stands as one of the most important

theatrical depictions of the war. Not only was it one of the most commercially successful

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[1] Some critics draw attention to Christopher Fry's 1951 play, *A Sleep of Prisoners*. However, no overt

reference to the First World War exists in the play, this, coupled with the work's interest in religious motifs,

means the play is of little relevance to this study.

[2] A note on the title: although *Oh, What a Lovely War!* is often published without the punctuation in the

title, the punctuation will be retained in this study to assist in distinguishing the play from its film

adaptation, which is entitled, *Oh! What a Lovely War*.

plays to take the war as its subject,[3] but, along with the historical retrospectives produced at the time, it also made a contribution to the shifting public perception of the war that would continue to persist into contemporary dramatic portrayals, as will be explored in chapter four. To this end, *Oh, What a Lovely War!* represents a significant shift in the war's dramatic depiction, whereby the war came to be presented as a class conflict between the enlisted men and those who commanded them. Additionally, the generals are depicted as out of touch with both military tactics and the conditions endured by the men. The result is a depiction of war as a pointless waste, devoid of meaning.

In conjunction with these new attitudes, literary devices not previously associated with the war's portrayal began to be utilised during this period. The use of satire as a means to draw attention to the perceived stupidity of the generals (and the former beliefs associated with the war) is a device commonly recognised today,[4] but which first enjoyed widespread use during the 60s in plays such as *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, Alan Seymour's *The One Day of the Year* (1960), Alan Bennett's *Forty Years On* (1969),[5] and, later, the BBC comedy series, *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989). Additionally, as *Oh, What a Lovely War!* is a highly politicised piece that sought to enact a social repositioning of the war, it engages with many techniques associated with Epic Theatre. Littlewood herself is often noted as one of the primary practitioners of Epic Theatre in Britain and *Oh, What a Lovely War!* is frequently cited as the most successful example of a British play staged in the Epic tradition.[6]

These techniques lent themselves to representations of the war in theatre, and allowed the theatre to make a contribution to the shifting attitude towards the conflict,

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[3] It originally ran for 507 performances at the Wyndham's Theatre (Kosok 2007: 208), and has since enjoyed numerous revivals. Additionally, the play was also adapted to film by Richard Attenborough in 1969.

[4] Although examples of satire can be seen in the works of Shaw, this period saw the first widespread adoption of the device that met with broad public acceptance.

[5] Along with Dudley Moore, Peter Cook and Jonathan Miller, Bennett co-authored the seminal comedy revue *Beyond the Fringe* (1960), which has come to be seen as the forerunner to the rise of British satirical comedy during the 1960s.

[6] It was only during the 1960s that Epic Theatre began to find popularity in Britain, despite having been developed throughout the 1920s and 30s.

being experienced both socially and critically. That *Oh, What a Lovely War!* drew heavily from the academic works of Wolff, Clark and others shows the influence these critical shifts had on the theatre of the time, but also *Oh, What a Lovely War!* acts as an example of how theatre was then able to contribute to the broader social shift in its own right. Films produced through the period likewise follow this new tradition of portraying the war as one conducted by incompetent generals that resulted in needless and massive loss of life. This is readily evident in Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957), Joseph Losey's *King and Country* (1964), Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* (1981)[7] and *Blackadder Goes Forth*. As shall be shown, although many of the old myths formally associated with the war had been cast aside by this time, history had by no means settled. New perceptions were formed, encapsulated by the simple idea forwarded by Alan Clark that the First World War had been a conflict 'fought by Lions who were led by Donkeys' (Clark 1961: 6).[8] So successful were these critical and popular texts that their vision of the war has continued to influence the theatrical portrayals that have followed, right up to the present day.

Re-evaluation of the War

The process of defining a former generation's attitude towards the war is inherently problematic. It is easy to point to examples that perpetuate a popular idea – for example, that after the war's armistice the civilian population wanted only to forget the hardships of the last four years:

> Those at home longed for normalcy, for the old orders and routines. Neither in Britain nor Australia did people much want to celebrate the string of victories in 1918 that were the counterpoints to the slaughters on the Somme and at Passchendaele (Carlyon 2006: 752).

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[7] Weir even stated that his intention was to make a film that was not strictly anti-British, but anti-British-officer (Fonda-Bonardi 1982: 42).

[8] Although Clark attributes this saying to an exchange found in Erich von Falkenhayn's memoir, there is no documented evidence of this phrase appearing anywhere prior to Clark's use.

However, as was shown in the previous chapter, the public's attitude towards the war was not so clear-cut during this period. It is true that there were many commercial failures in the theatre that would suggest the public was not yet willing to reevaluate or dwell on the war, but equally there were successes. By looking at the differing attributes held by the respective failures and successes it is possible to see that the most successful productions were those that cast the war in a positive light.[9] This would suggest that far from being disillusioned in the war's aftermath the public was still willing to accept representations that supported the old notions of heroism and honour.

For a further example, we can consider the public figure of T. E. Lawrence (1888-1935). Although we would traditionally associate Lawrence's exploits as having occurred during the war, it is important to remember that as a figure he was not introduced to the public until 1919. He first came to prominence when Lowell Thomas, an American journalist, constructed a film with accompanying slides and commentary for public viewing. The show was entitled 'With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia'.[10] Thomas constructed his portrayal of Lawrence around the ideals of heroic British masculinity, and in time Lawrence would come to be an embodiment of that ideal (Dawson 1994: 167). Thomas even overtly marketed the film as 'the greatest romance of real life' (Dawson 1994: 168). The show proved to be a huge success: it ran sell-out screenings in London at the Royal Opera House and the Royal Albert Hall before enjoying equally successful regional and international tours. In only a short number of years some four million people were estimated to have seen the show, effectively making Lawrence one of the first mass media celebrities, as well as the most celebrated soldier of the First World War.

Dawson argues that the appeal of Lawrence lay in the exotic nature of his portrayal coupled with the bluff, matter-of-fact narrative voice deployed in describing the events, which asserted the truth and reality of what is essentially a fantastical story. At all times

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[9] Similar trends can also be found in the prose of the post-war period. In *Merchants of Hope* (1993) Rosa Maria Bracco makes an analysis of what she termed 'Middlebrow Writers'. Bracco discovered that the texts that enjoyed the greatest readership during this period were those that cast the war in a predominately positive light.

[10] Edmund Allenby led the British Empire's Expeditionary force during the Sinai and Palestine campaign.

Thomas was eager to remind his viewers that what was being related was wholly grounded in fact. The appeal of Lawrence came in the striking image he provided as a Westerner, described by Thomas as Scandinavian in appearance, adorned in the robes of an Arab prince. On top of which, the story cast Lawrence as a hero who fought against tyranny to win freedom for Britain's allies (Dawson 1994: 170). Lawrence is representative of the British adventurer, a concept traditionally associated with the Victorian period (found, for example, in fictional figures like Allan Quatermain). The rise of Lawrence as a figure of romance and adventure is evidence that the public was still eager for these types of stories, even in the direct aftermath of the war.[11] In Lawrence we find the desire to maintain the heroic identity against the destruction of life and meaning experienced on the Western Front (Dawson 1994: 173/4).

These trends associated with Lawrence, theatre and prose, are also reflected in the critical examinations of the war produced in its direct aftermath. Although there were few works published, and their quality was of a questionable standard, they tended to highlight the virtues of the Allies' cause (Grieves 1991: 15). Famed authors Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and John Buchan both produced historical analyses of the war. While neither man had sought to publish a propagandistic work, it is interesting to note that their studies only offer a positive assessment of Britain's involvement in the war, and at times even engage with a rhetoric traditionally associated with the pre-war period. Both authors practiced self-censorship whilst writing and Doyle's work in particular essentially served the function of 'sustaining civilian morale by depicting the clash of armies as the advance of good over evil and civilisation over barbarism' (Grieves 1991: 25).

Buchan too, when dealing with the Battle of the Somme, describes the deaths as possessing a mystical and nobly sacrificial quality, thus diverting attention away from the blind material force and grinding war of attrition that it would come to be represented as

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[11] As Rosa Maria Bracco describes in *Merchants of Hope*, the contemporary misconception that in the aftermath of war the public felt only disillusionment stems from a split between high and popular literature. Whereas before the two tended to converge (for example Kipling and Haggard were both critically acclaimed and popular writers) after the war there was a split. So while the supposed high culture tended to focus on the experience of disillusionment the most popular works continued to support the ideals of romance.

later (Grieves 1991: 32). An extract from Buchan's *Nelson's History of the War* will serve to show the romantic rhetoric employed in his study:

> The young men who gazed on the world, the makers and the doers who left their tasks unfinished, were greater in their deaths than in their lives. They builded [sic] better than they knew for the sum of their imperfections was made perfect, and out of loss they won for the country and mankind an enduring gain. Their memory will abide so long as men are found to set honour before ease, and a nation lives not for its ledgers alone but for some purpose of virtue (Quoted in Grieves, 33)

Both Doyle's and Buchan's works are flawed in the sense that they are historically too close to the subject,[12] limited in their scope,[13] and were composed without access to numerous official documents, which at the time were still classified material. These studies are now largely forgotten, yet they still stand as an important reflection of the time when they were written – when optimism was still high and the British campaign was seen as just and right (Grieves 1991: 28).

However, this position was not to endure. Even in looking at Lawrence, we can see the seeds of disillusionment, if not in the literal figure of Lawrence himself, but insofar as what he was not. Lawrence's story took place in Arabia: compared to the industrialised war in Europe the campaigns of the Middle East provided a space that still allowed for traditional warfare. Indeed, cavalry was still successfully deployed in several battles. Significantly, Lawrence is also distinguished from the commanders usually associated with the war. He was often insubordinate in his refusal to follow strict regulations and had a tendency to operate away from traditional military hierarchies. His youthful appearance was also a point of appeal,[14] acting to further remove him from the 'old men' perceived to have been running the war. Taken together this shows that while there was a thirst for

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[12] Doyle's *The British Campaign in France and Flanders* appeared in six volumes from 1916-20. Buchan's *Nelson's History of the Great War* in 1921/2.

[13] Doyle's analysis does not even take into consideration the issues of staff work, supplies, morale, artillery or aerial warfare (Grieves 1991: 26).

[14] In his narration Thomas even claimed Lawrence was two years younger than he actually was.

romantic portrayals among the public, it was recognised that the Western Front was not able to provide them.

So it was that by the late 1920s we find the first artistic works to express disillusionment in the war.[15] Even though in 1932 W. Somerset Maugham showed in for *Services Rendered* that the public was still unwilling to accept Sydney's opinion: 'we were the dupes of the incompetent fools who ruled the nations. I know we were sacrificed to their vanity, their greed and their stupidity,' (Maugham 1932: 68), this opinion was at least being expressed. As would be expected with artistic works, though – especially those written from firsthand experiences – they focused on the individual's perspective, which is naturally limited.

> [T]hese writers were concerned with conveying personal experiences as vividly as possible, and anyway had a limited perspective, they largely evaded the crucial issues of what the war was 'about' – both on political and strategic levels (Bond 2002: 28).

It meant these works tended to focus on the blood, the death, the boredom and the squalid conditions. While this is not to say that such representations of the war are invalid or false, it must be recognised that they are limited.

Without a broader understanding of the forces that compelled and influenced the manner in which the war was conducted, it could easily be made to seem meaningless. When director D. W. Griffith[16] visited the front to research his film, *Hearts of the World*, he described what he saw:

> As you look out across no-man's-land there is literally nothing that meets the eye but an aching desolation of nothingness. […] No one can describe it. You might as well try to

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[15] Of course, much of the war poetry had been published previously; however, it is worth noting that the works of Owen, Sassoon, Graves and others were not instantly popular with the British public in the direct aftermath.

[16] David Llewelyn Griffith (1875-1948) was an early American film director, best remembered for the epic and controversial film *Birth of a Nation* (1915).

describe the ocean or the Milky Way. A very great writer could describe Waterloo. But who could describe the advance of Haig? No one saw a thousandth of it (Marcus 2005: 284).[17]

Griffith was not wrong: it was impossible for a single witness to portray the war in a fully cohesive and meaningful way, but nor did anyone attempt to. Authors presented their own limited view of events in as vivid a manner as they could; the result of this, though, was to create the belief that the war was without meaning, for seen in isolation it is difficult to place the significance of one man's experience into the broader picture of the conflict as a whole.

Although this is to be expected in personal and aesthetic responses to the war, it becomes problematic when it also appears in historical and critical responses that claim objectivity based on authoritative knowledge. B. H. Liddell Hart was one of the most prolific writers on the war during the period of 1928-38.[18] Like the memoirists and poets, Hart also saw active service.

> In January 1915 he was posted to a service battalion, and he went out to France just before the battle of Loos. […] [W]hile serving around Ypres, he was concussed by falling sandbags when a shell exploded above his dugout. However, he was back in France by spring 1916, one of eight subalterns, five of whom were killed in action on the opening day of the Somme, […] Hart himself suffered three minor wounds in the Somme fighting, […] On 16 July he was gassed in Mametz wood, and sent home (Strachan 1991: 44).

Additionally, Hart was a member of the social group that suffered the greatest losses through the war: 'the middle-class professionals from the public school and university systems committed more men relative to aggregate size than any other' (Strachan 1991:

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[17] This is a similar sentiment to that expressed by Wyndham Lewis: 'I know nothing about this war,' he says, 'I have no idea why my battery should have found itself where it did' (Lewis 1967: 138). The common soldier had no ability to perceive the wider sensibility that underlay his actions.

[18] His publications include: *Reputations* (1928), *The Decisive Wars of History* (1929), *The Real War 1914-1918* (1930), *Foch: the Man of Orleans* (2 Vols.) (1931), *The British Way in Warfare* (1932), *The Ghost of Napoleon* (1933), *A History of the World War 1914-1918*, (1934), *T. E. Lawrence in Arabia and After* (1934), *The War in Outline 1914-1918* (1936) and *Through the Fog of War* (1938).

42). For Hart the concept of the 'lost generation' was real enough. Naturally his experiences came to inform his position towards the war and this is reflected in his writing, despite his claim of objectivity (Strachan 1991: 41).

In time, Hart was to become one of the most influential critics of the war. His most significant contribution, *The Real War* (1930), is highly didactic, as Hart believed military history should serve to instruct the future. As such, he tended to focus more on the failures (or what he perceived to be the failures) than he did on the successes, believing that there is more to be learnt from failure. This essentially means that the successes of 1918 that led to the Allied victory are rarely mentioned. With this fact forgotten it allowed Hart to draw an unequivocal conclusion.

> By suppressing the culminating battles of the war, Liddell Hart allowed his portrayal of British generals to assume an easy continuum, from incompetence on the Western Front to conservatism in the 1920s and 1930s. On the foundations of this presumption, that British generals had not been and would never be truly able commanders, he was able to construct the leading ideas of his strategy (Strachan 1991: 47).[19]

Much like Doyle's study, *The Real War* is also narrow in its approach, devoting the majority of its critique to the land war and the Western Front to the exclusion of nearly every other aspect. Just as the writers of verse and prose, Hart's own work is reflective of his individual experiences. He rejected the strategy adopted by the commanders, and his tone is largely one of distress and disillusionment. Today Hart is seen as having been too polemical in his opinions; nevertheless, as Bond concludes, it was the publication of works like his, coupled with the artistic pieces, that created a perception that the war had been essentially meaningless and conducted by generals who were incompetent, out of touch with modern tactics and technology, and too blind to see any way forward other than through a grinding war of attrition (Bond 2002: 46).

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[19] This is a common occurrence when it comes to assessments of the Great War. Disproportionate attention has been given to the Somme and Passchendaele campaigns at the expense of the victories of 1918, for which Haig was equally responsible and which many argue his reputation as a commander should rest upon. Contemporaries of Hart, Cyril Falls and C. R. M. F. Cruttwell follow this tradition and it was to continue in the writings of Leon Wolff and Arthur Clark.

It should also be noted that by the 1960s there was a whole raft of other cultural and historical factors that furthered the decline of the First World War's image. Four decades had elapsed since the Allied victory, and although Britain had achieved all of its wartime objectives,[20] forty years on they had become abstractions at best and largely forgotten as their direct impact on society became less and less evident. Alan Bennett draws attention to this fact in his play, entitled *Forty Years On*:

> MOGGIE: We knew what we were fighting for last time.
> HUGH: What? […]
> MOGGIE: We were fighting for … honour and … oh lots of things I can't remember now, but I remember that I knew quite clearly at the time.
> HUGH: They can't have been very important if you can't remember them now (Bennett 1969: 22).

The Second World War also played a role in the repositioning of the First. In spite of the atrocities committed through the Second World War (in fact because of them), it is today perceived to have been a 'good war', fought with a clear purpose and objective. It cannot be disputed that the Nazi regime perpetrated gross crimes against humanity and was a force that needed to be checked. Although during the First World War the Kaiser's regime was depicted as barbaric and a threat to civilisation, by comparison to the Third Reich it was very tame. Furthermore, the Second World War is now seen to have represented a greater threat to Britain's independence, as the nation suffered intensive aerial bombing and rocket attacks on a scale unknown during the earlier conflict (Bond 2002: 56).

It is important to note, though, that in 1939 Britain's motive for declaring war was the same as in 1914, namely to defend its independence and empire, and to prevent German domination in Western Europe (Bond 2002: 56). This fact has been largely pushed aside since Germany's war crimes were uncovered in the post-war years, and as such the Second World War is now popularly remembered in terms of the Holocaust. This is a clear and easily understood concept, and it is widely believed to have been a good

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[20] See The War in Context.

thing that Britain went to war and the Nazis defeated. By comparison, the causes and objectives of the First World War appeared increasingly vague and abstract in the public's consciousness. Progressively, then, the First World War was divested of meaning, and what meaning remained appeared hollow.

The 1960s also coincided with the advent of the Vietnam War, arguably the most unpopular war of the twentieth century. During this period the anti-war movement was very strong. War as a whole was seen as a pointless waste and something to be avoided at all costs. In this atmosphere World War One quickly became the epitome of cynical, incompetent leadership, horror, needless sacrifice and futility (Bond 2002: 54). With understanding of its causes and objectives waning, the popular opinion became that the Great War had been a futile waste that could have been avoided, and as such Britain as a nation should be ashamed of its involvement (Bond 2002: 54).

Despite these sentiments, the 1960s also represented a resurgence of interest in the First World War, as mentioned above. In this new paradigm Liddell Harts' works found a receptive audience of academics historically removed from the event that now appeared as a symbol of vanity, greed and stupidity.[21] In 1959 Leon Wolff published his account of Britain's 1917 campaign, *In Flanders Fields*, which focused primarily on the Third Battle of Ypres. Ypres, along with other campaigns, such as the Somme and Passchendaele, has a long association with the stalemate war of attrition, mud and squalid living conditions. For the most part Wolff focuses primarily on the decision-making process that took place in the upper-levels of command, specifically the actions of Lloyd George, Douglas Haig, William Robertson, Ferdinand Foch and Robert Nivelle. Although never overtly stated, the implication is made that none of these men visited the front, had no real understanding of the conditions faced by the fighting man, and so never made correct assessments of the situation. Additionally, crucial decisions are shown to be made, especially by Haig, with limited intelligence of German positions, their defences or resources.

The leaders of the responsible nations are all depicted as arrogant, with especial scorn directed towards the French attitude:

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[21] The fact that Hart lived until 1970 meant he was able to exert an active influence over the next generation of historians, particularity Alan Clark, whom he mentored during the writing of *The Donkeys*.

The French General Staff had been especially sanguine. […] [U]nder the influence of General Foch, [they] felt that any morally righteous offensive had to triumph if pursued with sufficient zeal. Thus, the French were bound to triumph by merely undertaking their plainly righteous offensive with the zeal to triumph (Wolff 1959: 3).[22]

His scorn is, however, evenly shared amongst all those in command:

With no way to get around [once the conflict had settled into deadlock], with no way of crashing through, with no generals or statesmen sufficiently subtle to find another key that might turn, both sides settled down in despair and frustration to a mutual siege. Neither could enforce its will upon the other; and since the folklore of the times excluded any settlement other than military the war went on, in its fashion (Wolff 1959: 6).

Wolff portrays those in charge as blind to the carnage they were causing. Indeed, Wolff expresses his perplexity as to why the war went on for as long as it did. By 1917 he claims it had become evident that 'the causes of the war were demonstrably trivial and implausible' (Wolff 1959: 68). In his opinion the war should have been abandoned here: both sides were exhausted, a stalemate existed and it did not seem that a decisive victory could be achieved by either side. Nevertheless, the nations pressed on. Wolff essentially portrays the war as pointless, '[I]t had meant nothing, solved nothing, and proved nothing; and in doing so had killed 8,538,315 men' (Wolff 1959: 271).

Against this Wolff also presented short sketches of soldiers' accounts from the front, which provided vivid descriptions of battle. A dichotomy was then established between the two, whereby it became apparent that those in command were completely out of touch with the realities of the conflict. Not only has this become a popularly held belief, but as shall be shown, this style of presentation – with the experiences of the staff set against those of the soldiers – is also adopted in *Oh, What a Lovely War!*. As has been briefly observed, the social attitudes towards the war were in a state of flux during this period. This paradigm shift is evident in numerous aspects of the war's portrayal, both critically

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[22] A similar attitude can be found in discussions of the British sensibility towards battle. In his study of Haig, De Groot states that a popularly held belief was that the moral is to the physical as three is to one (De Groot 1988: 31).

and artistically. The purpose of this study is to chart the changing portrayal of the war through theatre. The plays are both reflective of the period in which they were produced and exert an influence over how future perspectives of the war developed. In *Oh, What a Lovely War!* we find an excellent example of this dual process.

Littlewood & Theatre Workshop's *Oh, What a Lovely War!*

The Theatre Workshop had its roots in the Workers' Theatre Movement that began to appear in the late 1920s. They were openly revolutionary and concerned with the struggles of the working class (Goorney 1981: 1). Ewan MacColl[23] formed the Red Megaphones, a troupe that acted as a protest group, performing sketches and satires depicting class struggle. Joan Littlewood (1914-2002)[24] joined the group in 1934 and thereafter she acted as the company's driving force as they reinvented themselves, first as Theatre of Action and then finally as the Theatre Workshop in 1945. The group settled into their permanent home at the Theatre Royal, Stratford in 1953 in the East End of London, where they attempted to produce work for and foster an audience-base among the working class (Goorney 1981: 98). They experienced difficulty appealing to their target audience and faced an extended period of financial hardship. Nevertheless, this time was one of rich artistic growth as they experimented with form and theatrical presentation. *Oh, What a Lovely War!* would eventually emerge as a culmination of this period, and stand as one of the company's biggest financial successes. MacColl, though, looked on the transfer of this play (and others) to the West End as a selling-out of the group's original ethos

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[23] Ewan MacColl (1915-1989), born James Henry Miller, was married to Littlewood from 1934-50. He and Littlewood were instrumental in the initial formation of the Theatre Workshop. MacColl did not support the transition of the group from a touring company to having a permeant base Stratford and left in 1953 to pursue a folk music career.

[24] Littlewood is often cited as the Mother of Modern British Theatre, and it was through her experimental work with the company during the 1950s and 60s that she gained this reputation; in particular for introducing Epic Theatre to the British public.

(Goorney 1981: 127). Even so, an examination of the play reveals a deep thematic interest in class struggle and the social ideas around which the Theatre Workshop was founded.

There are few plays that have had as strong an influence on the prose, film and theatre depicting the war created since the 1960s as *Oh, What a Lovely War!*. As a text the play had an unusual genesis: it started life in 1961 under the title, *The Long, Long Trail*; Charles Chilton[25] having originally written it as a musical for BBC radio. The piece was taken by Joan Littlewood and her Theatre Workshop where, in collaboration with the original cast, it was developed into the show it now is. This followed the ideal laid out by MacColl: that works designed for the common folk needed to articulate a collective which is, almost inevitably, anonymous (Paget 1990: 67). Anonymity is achieved when the author becomes part of the collective whole, and this represents the process through which *Oh, What a Lovely War!* was developed. This certainly creates complexity around the question of the play's authorship. On top of which, there are some thirty-four songs in the play, with the music and lyrics taken from those made popular during the war itself. Many of these songs were themselves humorous adaptations, made by the soldiers out of pre-existing songs.[26]

Additionally, the published edition contains an appendix listing other primary and secondary source material drawn upon during the play's composition (Chilton 1965: 110/1).[27] At first glance, the list seems impressive; however, even a cursory examination uncovers some oddities, and indeed this short list has itself attracted a great deal of criticism.[28] To begin with, no publication details are given for any of the texts and some of

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[25] Charles Chilton (1917-2013), never knew his father who was killed during World War One. He made his career working as a writer and producer for BBC radio from 1931-76.

[26] For example, 'They Were Only Playing Leapfrog' is based on the melody for 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic', and 'When This Lousy War is Over' is based on the melody for 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus'.

[27] Fifty-two sources are listed, among which are volumes by Winston Churchill, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Liddell Hart, Alan Clark, Leon Wolff and John Terraine.

[28] Derek Paget claims the list could be described as an example of disinformation: 'in scholarly terms it is riddled with every conceivable kind of error – authors and no book title and vice versa, wrongly spelt names ("Hanighen" appears as "Heiniger", for example), inaccurate publishing dates, and a potentially disastrous mixing of primary and secondary source materials' (Paget 1990: 121).

the entries are especially vague: for example the entry, 'Regimental Histories', which offers no further detail as to what this references. However, when one learns that the appendix was compiled in 1963 after Alan Clark sued the production for copyright infringement, it becomes evident that it was hastily produced in order to prevent any further legal action from taking place (Paget 1990: 121).[29]

The haphazard nature of the appendix also has the effect of masking the significance of the three texts from which most of the play's source material is drawn: Leon Wolff's *In Flanders Fields* (1959), Alan Clark's *The Donkeys* (1961) and Barbara Tuchman's *August 1914* (1962). Each of the texts was used for separate sections: Tuchman's study acted as the source for the play's opening scenes where the political manoeuvres of the European leaders are portrayed; Clark's study provided material for the year 1915; and Wolff's for 1917. Once again, 1918 and the Allied victory is made conspicuous by its absences. Although many of the other citations in the appendix can be seen to inform particular scenes, in comparison to the three main texts, their influence on the overall tone of the play is negligible. Derek Paget, himself a former member of the Theatre Workshop, made an in depth analysis of the historical studies drawn upon during the composition of the play:

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[29] Indeed, some scenes in the play are lifted directly from Clark's original text. For example, in the play:

> The trouble was that the men waved their hats instead of flags as His Majesty rode by. I tried the mare out the day before. The King did clutch the reins too firmly … correction … the King did clutch the reins rather firmly. No reflection on His Majesty's horsemanship. The grass was very slippery and the mare moved backwards; she was upset. I'd exercised her every day for a year […] So unfortunate it had to be my horse that threw the King (Chilton 1965: 89).

Compared with its appearance in Clark's *The Donkeys*:

> On and on rambles the text, as we read that […] Haig had ridden her regularly for a year, that she had been tried the day before with cheering men and people waving flags, that hats – not flags – were waved, that the grass was wet, that the ground was slippery, that the King seemed to clutch the reins "very firmly" (a tricky passage, this), and to pull the mare backwards, that the cheering would have upset any horse at such a distance, and so on (Clark 1961: 180).

All shared a firm conviction that the Great War was a historical mistake perpetuated by a European power-elite time-warped into the nineteenth century and caught by surprise by new weapons technology. All were accessible works of *popular* history fired by an anger that the disaster should have happened at all; all gave expression to a sense of the *waste* of lives forfeit to the errors of rulers (Paget 1990: 120/1).

However, despite the inaccuracies of the appendix, and the biased nature of the source material, the result of its presentation was to create the implication that *Oh, What a Lovely War!* was grounded in fact. This effect is also amplified by a number of other techniques employed throughout the play. Slides recounting the number of casualties sustained in exchange for the amount of ground gained in attacks are projected onto a screen throughout the whole performance.[30] For example, at the beginning of act two:

APRIL 22 … BATTLE OF YPRES … GERMANS USE POISON GAS … BRITISH LOSS 59,275 MEN … MAY 9 … AUBERS RIDGE … BRITISH LOSS 11,619 MEN IN 15 HOURS … LAST OF B.E.F. … GAIN NIL. SEPT 25 … LOOS … BRITISH LOSS 8,236 MEN IN 3 HOURS … GERMAN LOSS NIL [sic] (Chilton 1965: 55).[31]

The slides serve to highlight the massive waste experienced for no apparent gain, and the manner of their representation adds a degree of historical authenticity to the production. Indeed, one of the most important aspects of the play, and the accompanying film, is its claim to authenticity.[32] The projected facts and pictures from the time, coupled with songs that were actually sung during the war and the implied well-researched nature of the text, all lend weight to this claim and has undoubtedly assisted in the widespread acceptance of this representation as being accurate to the reality of the conflict. Likewise, it in part explains why *Oh, What a Lovely War!* has had a strong influence on the prose, film and theatre depicting the war that has followed in the interceding years.

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[30] This is also an example of the play's engagement with Epic Theatre, as will be discussed.

[31] These slides were altered in the film adaptation to resemble a cricket scoreboard that hung in G.H.Q..

[32] At the opening of the film a caption reads: 'The principle statements made by historical characters in this film are based on documentary evidence and the words of the songs are those sung by the troops during The First World War' (Attenborough 1969).

If *Oh, What a Lovely War!* claims its depiction is accurate, then the question must become, what does it actually depict? Significantly, there is no traditional plot or story, and there are no defined characters (with the exception of Haig in the second act).[33] Instead, the play is segmented into short vignettes depicting generalised scenes from the war. For example: the declaration, recruitment, training, war profiteering, a church service and reactions from home. On one level the play follows the chronology of the war from its declaration in 1914 until late 1917/early 1918, without making any reference to the eventual Allied victory.[34] However, insofar as the chronology of the war can be called the play's story, the individual scenes still remain isolated for one another and there is little sense of causality between them. In part this is due to the play being structured to resemble a music hall variety show, in an attempt to replicate those that were popular during the war's enactment. However, the result of this procession of episodic scenes assists in establishing the idea that the war was without meaning or purpose. No logical progression or sense of objective is instilled in the play's action, and by close association this is itself projected onto the war as a whole.

With that point in mind, the play can still be seen to broadly chart the shifting public attitude from the start of the war to its end. Primarily the play functions as a representation of contrasts, highlighting the difference between how the war was first imagined against how it came to be seen, as its true nature became apparent. As Nadine Holdsworth points out, the play begins light and jovial, with a master of ceremonies lulling the audience into a false sense of security that masks the play's serious material (Holdsworth 2006: 92). Likewise, *Oh What a Lovely War* contrast the different experiences of those who served from those who did not, and, most significantly, the difference between those who served as enlisted men and those who served on the staff. The film adaptation makes use of this idea through a series of pointed juxtapositions whereby the world the soldiers inhabit is portrayed realistically as harsh and gritty, while those removed from the front view the

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[33] The significance of this feature, and its relationship to Epic Theatre, will be discussed below.

[34] A brief scene concluding the war does appear in the film; however, the manner of its representation (the diplomats sitting silently signing treaties) does not make obvious who has won, and its sober tone also serves to highlight that the victory is hollow.

war from the vantage point of a carnival. The movements between the two worlds were often achieved seamlessly with a single joining shot, creating a stark contrast between the two. On stage these shifts cannot be achieved as rapidly, so contrast is established more gradually over the course of the whole play.

The play begins with the song 'Row, Row, Row' and is set just before the war's declaration. It speaks of a young man named Johnny Jones and his girl, Flo, and how they would spend their weekends in his boat, on the river, kissing (Chilton 1965: 10). This prelude song evokes the idea of 'The Last Golden Summer', a time that would be looked back on with fond nostalgia by the generation that lived through the war. This time came to represent an idyllic period of peace containing the last vestiges of the old way of life that were later supplanted by the war. Likewise does this jolly tune evoke the 'Never Such Innocence Again' myth (Fussell 1975: 18). Of course today these ideas are largely recognised as mythic.[35] However, in the context of the play they are significant myths to evoke, as it creates a contrast between the peaceful life enjoyed by the British population, which is brought to an end by a war that ushers in a new period of hardship and death.

Immediately following this scene is a depiction of the European leaders, and so begins the process of class contrast. This scene is meant to provide an explanation for the causes of the war; however, it is presented in simplistic terms: the Germans are said to 'want more say in world affairs' (Chilton 1965: 13), and beyond this little else is given as to what their, or the Allies', objectives are.[36] Yet again, a lack of information on the contributing factors associated with the declaration of war has the effect of making it appear meaningless. The only other factors mentioned are the ones that are readily recognised today: the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and the invasion of Belgium (Chilton 1965: 17-20 & 22). Although both events are important, when seen in isolation from the political, social and economic factors of the time they are limiting and misleading, as they create the impression that the war was fought on trivial terms.

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[35] In this regard, *Oh, What a Lovely War!* is curious in its handling of myths, for while it supports some myths, such as 'The Last Golden Summer' and 'Never Such Innocence Again', it subverts others, pointedly the myths that associate masculinity with war, or the depiction of the Germans as barbaric.

[36] See The War in Context above for Britain's war objectives and their justifications for declaring war.

Ultimately, this section makes the war out to be a squabble between the European leaders. The absurdity of this squabble is further heightened when the play draws attention to the fact that George V, Wilhelm II and Nicholas II were all cousins,[37] thus reducing the war to the level of a family argument. The contrast created between the first two scenes takes on greater significance as the play continues. The common man is shown to be interested in the pursuit of life's simple pleasures, whilst the aristocratic class is interested only in starting a war to increase its sphere of influence. The common man is then seen to be sacrificed on the whim of greed, as is made clear by the play's end.

These first two scenes act as a prologue to the play proper. After leaving the European leaders the play settles, and its primary point of view remains aligned with the common soldier. In the 1960s this would have represented an effort to bring voices from the fringe and place them in the centre for this re-telling of the war; and it has been put forward that this is one of the reasons for the play's popularity (Paget 1996: 85).[38] The first act is set in 1914, while the second act essentially functions as a collapsed collage of the remaining war years (Paget 1996: 88). The first act does two important things: it makes an engagement with a number of war myths prevalent at the beginning of the conflict that are then revealed to be hollow in the second act; and it subverts the idea that the Germans are the real enemy, thus removing them as the primary antagonists and establishing a void that will be filled in the second act by the figure of Douglas Haig, who himself functions as a symbol for the British leadership in general.

To begin with myths, *Oh, What a Lovely War!* engages with several that were described in chapter one – the most significant being war service as a criterion for masculinity. Woven into this myth is also the idea that the war was a glamorous, romantic pursuit. The use of the romance myth is probably most overt in the film, when right after war is declared a crowd of people is seen following a marching band into a carnival entitled 'World War One'. Similarly, this same idea is evoked in the play with the songs,

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[37] George and Wilhelm's grandmother was Queen Victoria, whilst Nicholas' wife, Alexandra Feodorovna, was another grandchild of Victoria. Further, George and Nicholas were also first cousins through Louise of Hesse, Queen Consort of Denmark.

[38] Indeed, with the exception of *The Silver Tassie*, all the plays examined thus far have had officers as the main protagonists.

'Belgium put the Kibosh on the Kaiser', 'Are We Downhearted?' and 'Goodbye-ee', all of which are cheerful, upbeat and depict the war in a light, positive way. The image of war these songs depict will come to be undermined in the second act. However, it is the recruitment song, 'I'll Make a Man of You',[39] that most overtly engages in myth, significantly that of masculinity. The premise of the song is that by only allowing enlisted men to escort her, she (the singer) is able to entice more men into joining the army (Chilton 1965: 32-35). The implication is that she will only date real men, and real men enlist. 'But on Saturday I'm willing, if you'll only take the shilling/to make a man of any one of you' (Chilton 1965: 33). In effect, the song calls upon women to hold men to sexual blackmail:

> I've got the perfect dream of a new recruiting scheme,
> Which I think is absolutely it.
> If only other girls would do as I do
> I believe that we could manage it alone,
> For I turn all suitors from me but the Sailor and the Tommy (Chilton 1965: 32).

This recruitment scene is used to expose the masculine ideal as a myth; its true purpose being a device of social pressure to shame or entice men into enlisting.[40]

Another myth discussed in chapter one was that of German barbarity and the idea that the nation was a threat to the civilised world. As mentioned above, this myth is subverted during the first act. This is done through two key scenes. Not long after the declaration of war a French officer describes the carnage the armies have suffered: '[H]eaps of corpses, French and German, lying everywhere, rifles in hand. Thousands of dead lying in rows on top of each other' (Chilton 1965: 27). The purpose of this monologue is to dispel the romantic ideals of war, which up until this point in the play have prevailed, and begin to create a contrast between reality and romance. As soon as he

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[39] Famously sung by Dame Maggie Smith in the film.

[40] Unlike the other plays that have engaged with this myth, such as *Shell Shock* and *Journey's End*, *Oh, What a Lovely War!* draws no connections between the desire to conform to ideals of masculinity and the advent of shell shock. Indeed, shell shock is not dealt with at any point in the play.

finishes speaking a German officer begins to read from a letter that contains many similarities to what has just been heard:

> 'Nothing more terrible could be imagined […] The men are desperately tired […] we were ordered to attack the enemy flank in a forest of beeches, but the enemy gunners saw us and opened fire; the men were done for, the shells fell like hail.'

Additionally, the German also shows compassion for those he is fighting: 'I feel great pity for many of the civilian population, who have lost everything' (Chilton 1965: 27) – a sentiment that would have never appeared in fiction during the war's enactment. The effect of this brief section is to align the Germans with the Allies: they are subjected to the same hardships, bear no animosity towards those they fight, and are only there because they have been ordered by their leaders, whom we may assume are just as callous as their British counterparts.

A second scene in the first act also builds on this idea, via the 1914 Christmas truce (Chilton 1965: 48-53). The German and English soldiers take turns singing carols to one another, exchange gifts and even meet in no-man's-land. Significantly, it is also the Germans that initiate this exchange. This scene is extended in the film: there the men share cigars, drinks and arrange for letters to be sent to loved ones on the wrong side of the conflict. Again, this scene serves to highlight the similarities between the common soldiers of both sides. The film also further establishes the idea that the real enemy comes from within: a German states, 'We'll never shoot again, unless you start.' Seconds later shell fire is heard:

> GERMAN: They will not shoot at us while you are here?
> ENGLISH: Don't believe that, man. It's us they're shooting at (Attenborough 1969).

Everyone then has to scatter as the shells fall upon the field. Although this line is spoken in jest it draws attention to one of the play's main points: that the true enemy is not the

one you face, but the one at your back.[41] These early scenes set the stage for the entrance of Douglas Haig, where in the second act he comes to fill the void left by the removal of the Germans as the enemy.

In the first act the audience is initially introduced to the British staff in the form of Field Marshal John French.[42] In essence he is depicted as a bumbling fool. Whilst attending a meeting with their French allies, he states that there is no reason to have an interpreter, as their goal is to maintain 'the utmost secrecy' (Chilton 1965: 35). A humorous line, no doubt, although the intention is to paint the commanders as incompetent. The French officers are not spared from this spoof: much of General Lanrezac's[43] dialogue is described in the text as 'French gibbering.' On odd occasions actual French phrases are provided, but for the most part this character has nothing intelligible to say. The effect is to make both men appear ridiculous; nationality is of no import, all commanders are equally incompetent, and there is no chance of co-operation or even communication between them. The scene is heavily satirical, with John French at one point, in an attempt to communicate with his French counterpart, reduced to describing a small woodlands as 'le clump of trees' (Chilton 1965: 37). Although the scene certainly serves to make the officers appear incompetent, and can be seen to be aligned with the sentiments of Wolff and Clark, it does not at this stage set them up as the enemy. Only with the appearance of Haig does this become fully apparent, as he is portrayed as callous, out of touch, and uninterested in anything beyond his own advancement.

Haig first appears in the ballroom scene – from the start already pointedly removed from the gritty reality of the front. In the previous scene a soldier had been ordered to hack off a limb protruding from the wall of the parapet (Chilton 1965: 67). The concerns of the officers at the ball are as far removed from what the men are facing as could be

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[41] A similar but far more malicious example can be found in Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957). There General Paul orders the battery to be turned upon his own men when they fail to advance during a suicidal attack.

[42] Sir John French (1852-1925) was the commander-in-chief of the British forces from the start of the war until he was replaced by Douglas Haig in December 1915.

[43] Charles Lanrezac (1852-1925) was the commander of the French Fifth Army at the war's outbreak. He famously had a poor working relationship with John French.

imagined. Haig, upon entry, is shown to be solely concerned with political intrigue, gossip and the advancement of his own career. By turn he has derogatory remarks to make about John French, William Robertson[44] and Lord Kitchener.[45] The troops are only mentioned in passing and even then it is only to remark that they are 'in fine heart […] just spoiling for a fight' (Chilton 1965: 73). This, of course, stands as testament to the fact that Haig is out of touch with the reality of conditions and unconcerned with the true welfare of the men.

The significance of this scene is two-fold. First, Haig is made to appear incompetent, having risen to his office only through family connections:

> VALERIE: How did that man Haig get his pips, if you told me he failed all his staff college entrance examinations?
>
> WILSON: Duke of Cambridge. […] Friend of the family.[46] […] Waivered the formalities and let him in (Chilton 1965: 73).

Second, that Haig's true concerns lie only with himself, as he is shown to slander the competition so as to secure his position.

These themes are further developed throughout the remainder of the act. The scene previously described, detailing his concern at the King being thrown from his horse, is another example of this. The brief section is framed by the results of a failed attack (presumably the Somme), where 70% of the men engaged were lost as casualties (Chilton 1965: 88). Haig shows no concern for the loss of life his actions have precipitated and only rambles inanely about the comparative triviality of the King being thrown from his horse. He is shown to be practically oblivious to the consequences of his actions. There are numerous examples of this, such as when he states: 'the loss of say another 300,000

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[44] Sir William Robertson (1860-1933) served as the Chief of the Imperial General Staff during the war.

[45] Lord Kitchener (1850-1916) served in the British cabinet as the Secretary of State for War. Kitchener was killed during the war when the HMS *Hampshire* was sunk after striking a mine during a diplomatic mission to Russia.

[46] Specifically his wife's.

men may lead to really great results', [47] and 'I thank you God; the attack is a great success. […] First reports from the clearing station state that our casualties are only some sixty thousand' (Chilton 1965: 77 & 99). These figures are casually mentioned by Haig, who has no apparent ability to grasp the reality of their meaning. One is reminded of the infamous statement traditionally attributed to Joseph Stalin: 'the death of one man is a tragedy. The death of millions is a statistic' (Stalin 2005: 173). The impression is created that this sentiment is closely aligned with Haig's perception of what the loss of life equates to. For Haig the men are little more than an abstract concept.

Additionally, Haig is also made to look pigheaded in his tactical approach to the war. At several points his officers directly question his strategies: 'Neither we nor the Germans will be able to break through. The War will end in complete stalemate'. And:

> I have been wondering, or rather the staff and I have been wondering, perhaps this policy of attrition might be a mistake. After all, it's wearing us down more than it is them. Couldn't we try a policy of manoeuvre on other fronts?

To both queries he respectively replies, 'Nonsense. We need only one more big offensive to break through and win', and 'Nonsense. The Western Front is the only real front. We must grind them down' (Chilton 1965: 75/91). In both of these examples Haig's flawed tactics are pointed out, yet he dismisses these opinions as nonsense. The second example has an added significance, as Haig is presented as now holding the minority opinion, for whilst the rest of the staff have come to see the apparent folly in their campaign, Haig still doggedly persists with his original plan, content to continue the wholesale slaughter of his men for no tangible returns.[48]

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[47] This is a misattribution and removed from context. The phrase was never uttered by Haig, but appears in a letter written from Robertson to Haig: 'The casualties are mounting up and the Ministers will persist in asking whether a loss of say, 300,000 men will lead to a really great result?' (Neillands 1999: 394). It is also worth noting that Robertson was in favour of the continuation of the Third Ypres offensive, to which this letter refers.

[48] This is a misrepresentation, for while it is true that the majority of civilian politicians believed that a change of tactics were needed, Haig's own opinion as to military strategy was shared by the overwhelming majority of military strategists of the time (Cooper 1936: 439).

We can conclude that, in popular culture at least, the representation of Douglas Haig in *Oh, What a Lovely War!* is largely consistent with how he exists in the public's imagination today. He is the 'Butcher of the Somme', single-handedly responsible for the needless deaths of millions, deaths he brought about through a lack of imagination, an inability to conceive of what conditions on the front were like, a stubborn unwillingness to change tactics once it had been revealed that a stalemate was established, and a delusional optimism that the next attack would provide the breakthrough needed to win the war. This image of Haig has been further solidified by other representations of him in popular culture, notably the BBC miniseries *Blackadder Goes Forth.*

That these themes within *Oh, What a Lovely War!* can be seen to recur in popular portrayals since the 1960s bears testament to the influence it exerted. The reason for this can be found not only in its content, but also in its form. *Oh, What a Lovely War!* is significant as one of the most successful examples of Epic Theatre in a British production. Indeed, *Oh, What a Lovely War!* proved to be influential not only in a thematic sense, but also in a stylistically one, as it introduced Epic Theatre to the mainstream British stage. [49] Epic Theatre, as a dramatic practice, was developed during the 1920s and 30s by several European practitioners in Russia and Germany, but primarily Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956). Their theatre was founded as a specific expressionistic form that could be utilised for public discussion of political and social issues (Styan 1981: 128). The First World War, as an event, readily lends itself to the political agenda generally associated with Epic Theatre.[50] That *Oh, What a Lovely War!* presents the conflict as a struggle between social classes also reveals that it has a close affiliation with the ideology apparent in many of Brecht's own works.

Bertolt Brecht was one of the most influential theatre practitioners of the twentieth century. Like many men of his generation, his formative years coincided with the First World War. At the time a sixteen-year-old Brecht had just begun working as a journalist

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[49] See Derek Paget's *True Stories?* (1990), for a discussion on the far reaching influence *Oh, What a Lovely War!* had on British theatre from a stylistic perspective.

[50] Tellingly, elements of Epic Theatre were deployed in the 1930 staging of the German First World War play *Miracle at Verdun* by Hans Chlumberg (1897-1930).

for *Augsburger Neueste Nachrichten*; and in their literary supplement, *Der Erzähler*, dated 17 August 1914, Brecht wrote enthusiastically of the war's declaration.

> Our men have gone into battle calm and composed, with iron discipline but ablaze with enthusiasm, not so much exulting in victory as with clenched teeth. And the others, those who remain behind, will show themselves worthy of their brothers and sons (Thomson 1994: 24).

This statement is consistent with many of the romantic sentiments described in chapter one. It did not take long for Brecht's opinion to change, though, as many of his friends disappeared into the German military machine. On the advice of his father, Brecht took advantage of a loophole that would provide him with an exemption from the draft: medical students were granted deferment from service, and so Brecht enrolled in medicine at the University of Munich (Thomson 1994: 24).

It is not known how seriously he applied himself to his medical studies, but it was during this period that his real interest in literature and theatre was fostered under the tutorship of Arthur Kutscher.[51] In the autumn of 1918 Brecht's service papers finally arrived; however, he was immediately posted back to Augsburg as a medical orderly. One month later the war was over and Brecht was demobilised in January 1919, having been able to more or less avoid the war. Regardless of this, war as a theme found its way into several of his works, such as *Man's a Man* (1926) and most significantly in *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939). While neither of these works are considered to be World War One plays, *Mother Courage* certainly proved influential in shaping Joan Littlewood's approach to theatre, and by turn her company's composition of *Oh, What a Lovely War!*.

Littlewood and the Theatre Workshop can actually lay claim to the auspicious honour of having staged the first English translation of any piece by Brecht in Britain,

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[51] Arthur Kutscher (1878-1960) was an influential drama and literary historian, and one of the funding figures of theatre studies in Germany. As well as Brecht, he also taught fellow developer of Epic Theatre, Erwin Piscator, in 1913. Brecht's first play, *Baal*, was written as a response to an argument that occurred in one of their seminars.

when in 1955 they produced *Mother Courage* at the Barnstaple Festival, with Littlewood herself in the title role (Willett 1990: 78). Some may find it surprising that Brecht's theatre only reached Britain for the first time twelve months before his death. While there had certainly been a gradual, growing interest in Brecht's theatre and theories from the 1930s onward, his writings were not widely available in translation, and up until 1950 it was common place for the majority of theatre-practitioners in Britain to be unaware of his work (Willett 1990: 78). It was only in 1956, when Brecht's own Berliner Ensemble arrived in Britain to stage a season at the Palace Theatre that his ideas began to gain currency in the mainstream theatre industry. In retrospect, the years following 1956, and specifically the decade of the 60s, have been looked on as an era of Brechtian influence. Martin Esslin, though, has argued that many of the productions of this time were based more on the perceptions of what theatre-practitioners believed were Brecht's ideas, as opposed to a true understanding of his theories (Esslin 1966: 63). Further, many early productions met with a hostile critical community, and many reviewers dismissed the English staging of his works; although Esslin suggests that given their quality they deserved the reception they received (Esslin 1966: 63).

Littlewood's production of *Mother Courage* falls into this category. By all accounts the rehearsal process was a shambles. Essential elements from the show were cut, such as the music and songs.[52] Brecht sent an assistant, Carl Weber,[53] to advise Littlewood; however, when he arrived bearing the photographic record of the Berliner Ensemble's production Littlewood not only refused to contemplate using the information, as it would compromise her open-ended, exploratory way of working, but, after several arguments with Weber, banned him from rehearsals (Eddershaw 1996: 46). Additionally, Littlewood had originally slated herself to play the lead role, but midway through rehearsals she recast with Avis Bunnage.[54] When Brecht discovered this he threatened to file an injunction against the company, as Littlewood appearing as Mother Courage had been one of the original conditions under which the Theatre Workshop had received the

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[52] This was done partly because Littlewood did not have confidence in her own singing abilities.

[53] Carl Weber (1925) worked as a dramaturge for the Berliner Ensemble through the 1950s. He later went on to become Professor of Drama at Stanford University.

[54] Bunnage would later star in the West End run of *Oh, What a Lovely War!*.

performance rights. Littlewood stepped back into the role a mere twenty-four hours before going to stage. Unsurprisingly, the production was harshly reviewed, with Brechtian advocate, Kenneth Tynan, writing: 'The result is a production in which discourtesy to a masterpiece boarders on insult, as if Wagner were to be staged in a school gymnasium'.[55]

Despite this, the staging of *Mother Courage* represents an important stepping-stone for the Theatre Workshop, as they moved towards adopting many of Brecht's theatrical devices that would eventually manifest themselves in *Oh, What a Lovely War!*. Significantly, in *Mother Courage* we find a piece of theatre, not only done in the Epic tradition, but which is also a meditation on war. While *Mother Courage* was written in the build up to World War Two, several of the attitudes Brecht has towards war are easily relatable to the First World War and appear in *Oh, What a Lovely War!* as well. For example, the most overt theme in *Mother Courage* is Brecht's belief that war represented the continuation of business by other means (Hayman 1984: 57). This theme, whilst not as central to the action, is readily evident in *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, particularly in the war profiteer scene. But it is a speech made by Mother Courage in the second scene that bears a striking resemblance to the themes found in *Oh, What a Lovely War!*:

> That must be a rotten General. […] Because he's got to have men of courage […]. If he knew how to plan a proper campaign what would he be needing men of courage for? Ordinary ones would do. It's always the same; whenever there's a load of special virtues it means something stinks (Brecht 1983: 18).

This opinion voiced by Mother Courage came to be the one expressed in *Oh, What a Lovely War!* and the one generally held by the public in the years that followed.

However, while both plays are war plays, *Oh, What a Lovely War!* is primarily the successor of *Mother Courage* as regards to form. Foremost to Brecht's ideology was his desire to present theatre that would affect his audience in such a way as to intervene with the shaping of society (Leach 1994: 130). More than anything else this is the driving force of Epic Theatre that is apparent in *Oh What a Lovely War!*, and as such the formal techniques employed in the play are what warrant the greatest attention. Essential to Epic

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[55] As quoted by Eddershaw, page 47.

Theatre is the principal of verfremdungseffekt, commonly translated to the alienation effect. This effect is created through a number of devices, but its primary purpose is to prevent an audience from becoming immersed in the story presented on stage. It was Brecht's desire that his works would appeal to the intellect as opposed to the feelings of his audience (Knight 2004: 149). As such, he sought to keep the audience constantly aware that they were watching a play. Brecht believed that this fact was inescapable anyway, so instead of attempting to disguise the theatricality of a performance he would draw attention to it. To this end, various techniques are deployed, all with the intended purpose of preventing an audience from being absorbed in the story and thereby inviting them to critically analyse what is being presented.

For example, actors are encouraged to make it obvious that they are playing a role and so establish a more direct connection with the audience (Styan 1981: 130). Additionally, actors frequently play multiple characters and often address the audience directly, breaking the fourth wall. The roles they played could also be more accurately described as broad social-types, instead of individually defined characters (Knight 2004: 150). In performance the actors would also rarely display any character emotion; instead they would maintain a level of distance from the characters they were portraying (Styan 1981: 141). Distancing techniques were not limited to performance, but were employed in all aspects of a production. Piscator would frequently use photographs and newsreels projected above the stage to act as a kind of commentary on what was being enacted, or to reveal what the real world implications of the themes being explored in the production were (Styan 1981: 131). Brecht favoured methods that disrupted the narrative flow, and he would break up the action with songs and musical interludes, as in *Mother Courage*. The plots of his plays were also usually episodic in nature, again a method used to disrupt narrative flow (Styan 1981: 143).

Many of these techniques are readily apparent in *Oh, What a Lovely War!*. As Holdsworth points out in her study on Littlewood: '[She] refused to have actors depicting events […] through a sustained realistic narrative and instead created a multiple theatrical experience' (Holdsworth 2006: 86). The actors were done up in pierrot costumes and adopted the role of soldiers only over the top of this. This made the audience constantly aware of the fact that they were watching actors playing pierrots who were playing

soldiers. Furthermore, the first section of the play is presided over by an M.C. who interacts with the audience and directs the other actors on stage. Almost every actor plays multiple roles that represent broad social types, such as 'soldiers', 'singers', 'officers', or even something as broadly defined as 'woman'. There are of course some exceptions, as numerous historical figures are portrayed, such as Douglas Haig and John French. Even so, no attempt is made to present any character naturalistically; they are satirical caricatures (Holdsworth 2006: 87/95).

Given that *Oh, What a Lovely War!* is aligned with many traditions of the music hall, it is able to engage with other elements associated with Epic Theatre,[56] particularly its use of music, song and dance, which has already been noted as one of the play's distinguishing features. Indeed, the whole production draws heavily from the kind of variety shows that were prevalent during the war's enactment. By engaging with these traditions the show is given a certain episodic structure, as no traditional plot unfolds.

As has been noted, one of the prominent features of the play is its frequent use of newsreels, photographs and projected panels of facts. These images would usually accompany the songs. For example, during the recruitment song, 'I'll Make a Man of You', there is a sequence of slides that are projected throughout, described in the text as follows:

> Slide 13: 1914 poster – 'Women of Britain say – "GO"'.
> Slide 14: 1914 poster – 'Everyone should do his bit – Enlist now' depicting a Boy
>   Scout in uniform.
> Slide 15: 1914 poster – 'Which? Have you a REASON – or only an EXCUSE – for
>   not enlisting NOW?'
> Slide 16: 1914 poster – '"Stand not upon the order of your going but go at once" –
>   Shakespeare – Macbeth 3.4. Enlist now.'
> Slide 17: Poster – 'Who's absent? Is it YOU?' – depicting a line of soldiers with John
>   Bull in the foreground pointing accusingly à la Kitchener (Chilton 1965:
>   32).

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[56] Brecht also borrowed from the music hall when creating some of the techniques associated with the alienation effect. This is most notable in his play *Man's a Man* (1926).

Set against the recruitment song it shows other means by which men were pressured into enlisting. Other similar sequences of images are also used at various points throughout the play.

Taken together, each of these features works to create the kind of overall effect associated with Epic Theatre. To this end, its purpose is to cause the audience to reassess the social situation being enacted on stage. As has already been noted, *Oh, What a Lovely War!* presents the war in a new light, having been heavily influenced by the historical retrospectives of the war that were published in the years immediately preceding its production. The critical works of Clark, Wolff and others provide the play with its material and assist in establishing its attitude towards the war: primarily that it was inextricably tied to capitalist profiteering, imperialism and the exploitation of the working classes (Holdsworth 2006: 79), forced to participate in a war essentially fought over nothing. The techniques of Epic Theatre provided the play with the means to convey these ideas to audiences in a way that would cause them to actively reassess their former understanding of the conflict. In part, this helps to explain why *Oh, What a Lovely War!* had such a powerful influence on the artistic depiction of the war, for as will be argued in the final chapter of this study, many of the ideas and themes raised in this piece have continued to be broadly accepted and perpetuated in the theatre of today.

Satire

Imbedded in Epic Theatre is a secondary element that until this period had been unseen in theatrical treatments of the war: satire.[57] The purpose of satire is to 'reveal folly, or even the evil, inherent in an object, person or situation by presenting them in such a way as to make their objectionable qualities apparent' (Knight 2004: 4). This has already been shown to be evident within *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, particularly as regards the portrayal of Haig. Significantly, though, this represents the first major play to utilise satire in its

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[57] Shaw's short plays written during the war represent a notable exception; however, it was not until the 1960s that this form received widespread acceptance from audiences.

depiction of the war. The technique continued to be favoured into the future, as the manner in which the war was conducted became universally accepted as ridiculous.

This can be seen to occur in Alan Bennett's play, *Forty Years On*. For example, Bennett presents an old war veteran who rejects the claim that the war had been a pointless conflict:

> I came through the war more or less intact. I lost an arm here, a leg there, but I was all right, a damn sight better off than a few million other poor devils anyway. Then I got home and there were these Weary Willies and Tired Tims in their hand-woven ties, writing gibberish they called poetry saying we'd all been wasting our time. I couldn't see it myself. If we'd done nothing by 1918 at least we'd saved the follow-on (Bennett 1969: 65).

But of course, as Bennett's play also charts the Second World War, it becomes apparent that even the triviality of 'saving the follow-on' was not achieved.

However, it was with the release of the BBC series, *Black Adder Goes Forth*, that it became apparent the themes established in *Oh, What a Lovely War!* had become entrenched in popular culture. Not only is this series a thematic successor to *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, but it also represents one of the all-time most popular portrayals of the war to have ever appeared. That it starred comedians Rowan Atkinson, Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry (all of whom still enjoy a large public following) has helped to ensure its longevity, and its episodes are still frequently rerun. For these reasons it is worth turning attention to the series to see how it adopted those ideas established in the 1960s and popularised by *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, which it then in turn further perpetuated.

The entire series is satirical in nature and renowned for its heavy criticism of the British command. Significantly, it perpetuates the concept that the war was fought by lions who were led by donkeys. Douglas Haig makes an appearance in the final episode, 'Goodbyeee'. Played by Geoffrey Palmer, Haig is depicted as the callous leader established in *Oh, What a Lovely War!*. He is seen standing over a model battlefield, casually knocking down ranks of men with his hand. He then sweeps them up with a dustpan before casting them over his shoulder (Boden 1989). He is also referred to numerous times throughout the series, with his tactical strategy being summed up as 'yet

another gargantuan effort to move his drinks cabinet six inches closer to Berlin'
(Boden1989).

Just as Haig can be considered to stand for both himself and the British command as
a whole in *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, the same is true of Stephen Fry's character, General
Melchett, in *Blackadder Goes Forth*. In the same tradition, Melchett is depicted as a
bumbling fool who frequently utters incomprehensible sounds, has no understanding of
what life on the front is like, no regard for the men lost under his command, and is fully
committed to the tactics of trench warfare, which Blackadder continuously draws satirical
attention to. There are of course numerous scenes throughout the whole series that could
be pointed to, but one key scene from the episode 'Captain Cook' should serve to
represent the series' tone towards the British command.

When talking of a new classified operation, the list of personnel with security
clearance is revealed, as dictated by Melchett, to be:

> Field Marshal Haig, Field Marshal Haig's wife, all Field Marshal Haig's wife's friends,
> their families, their families' servants, their families' servants' tennis partners, and some
> chap I bumped into in the mess the other day called Bernard (Boden 1989).

The list is ridiculous of course, but it is also quite sinister in what it implies. On one level
it pokes fun at the incompetency of the military to keep a mission classified, which
Blackadder draws attention to when asked if he understands 'it's tip-top secret?', 'Quite
clear sir, only myself and the rest of the English speaking world is to know.' This list,
however, also strikes out at Haig's own character. With the exception of Bernard, every
other name on the list is somehow connected to Haig's wife, Dorothy Vivian. As we saw
in *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, it was implied that Haig only achieved his high office through
the influence of his well-connected wife. In this scene the same idea appears, and further,
the suggestion is made that even in matters of military strategy it is Haig's wife, not Haig
himself, who holds sway.

As the scene continues Melchett comes to explain Haig's new plan. Blackadder,
however, guesses first: 'Would this brilliant plan involve us climbing out of our trenches
and walking very slowly towards the enemy?' When asked how he could possibly know

this classified plan, he replies, because it is the same plan they used last time and the seventeen times before that. Melchett claims that this is what makes the plan so brilliant: 'doing precisely what we've done eighteen times before is exactly the last thing they'll expect us to do this time.' However, he does concede that the only problem with the plan is that everyone always gets slaughtered in the first ten seconds. Again we see similar character traits that are traditionally applied to Haig and the staff in general: this plan makes him appear as a stubborn commander who, even after having seen his plan fail on numerous occasions, is determined to continue despite the consequences.

These satirical portrayals were so prevalent during the 1960s and after that they are now more than familiar to us, and have essentially become the accepted norm by which the British command is represented in popular culture. Even in contemporary studies like Wade Davis' *Into the Silence: The Great War, Mallory and the Conquest of Everest* (2011) it is commonplace to find references to Haig's command that keep to this tradition:

> He [John Noel] spent the spring and summer of 1917 engaged in the fighting on the Hindenburg line, before moving north for the assault on Passchendaele, a battle that would be remembered by the historian A. J. P. Taylor as 'the blindest slaughter of the war.'
> The goal was yet another fantasy of General Haig's (Davis 2011: 96).

Wade presents these comments in an off-handed way. Such passages act to drain any validity the strategy had – which in actuality was carefully conceived and carried out based on the available information at the time – and make Haig appear delusional and out of touch. So accepted is this opinion that in what is an otherwise well-researched study, Davis sees no need to qualify this statement. This serves to highlight the influence that popular and satirical works like *Oh, What a Lovely War!* and *Blackadder* have had on contemporary perceptions of the war.

To take Passchendaele as a case in point, a deeper analysis reveals Haig's decision making process. The Passchendaele offensive took place between July and November 1917. At the time, and subsequently later, arguments were made that instead of fighting on the Western Front, where the stalemate had by been long established, Haig would have been better advised to shift efforts to a field where movement was possible: Italy, the

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Balkans or Mesopotamia.[58] By knocking Austria-Hungary or Turkey out of the war it was believed that Britain would be able to remove the pillars supporting the German cause. This strategy was favoured by Lloyd George. The problem with this assumption is that in actuality Germany was propping up these regimes, not the other way around, and so removing either one would have had little effect on Germany's ability to remain in the war. The only way to defeat Germany was with a victory on the Western Front, and in this regard Haig was correct (Neillands 1999: 384).[59]

Further arguments were made that Britain should abstain from any additional offensives until the Americans could arrive to shore up their position (Neillands 1999: 383). Although this was no doubt an attractive idea, it too had its drawbacks. With Russia succumbing to internal instability they would soon be abandoning the war effort. This would allow Germany to shift its resources from the Eastern to the Western Front and so allow them to strengthen their position before the Americans could contribute any meaningful reinforcements in 1918. The only course of action to prevent this was a sustained British offensive. As to Passchendaele itself, the location was not chosen randomly, but because it offered numerous objectives.[60] The taking of even one of the objectives would have meant a huge strategic advantage. When this is considered, Passchendaele can be seen as a well-chosen location upon which to launch an offensive.

Of course, the battle was to end the same way as the Somme, with massive loss of life and little gain. Neillands explores the reasons for this failure in his study (see pages 379-408); what follows is a brief summary. Before the campaign could be launched there was significant political uncertainty; Lloyd George was opposed to the plan, and feared a repeat of the Somme. As a result, the timing of the battle was substantially delayed, meaning Haig was unable to take advantage of a recent success at Messines Ridge, thereby allowing the Germans to regroup their forces. This delay also meant they missed

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[58] This would also come to be one of Liddell Hart's opinions.

[59] This opinion is also shared by J. P. Harris. See *Douglas Haig and the First World War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2008), pages 1-2.

[60] The seizure of the Messines-Wytschaete Ridge gained the high ground […] If the advance proceeded beyond Passchendaele it would cut the railway line which supplied the German army […] The towns of Bruges, Ostend and Zeebrugge, where the German submarines were based could then also be reached (Neillands 1999: 388).

the fine weather. Thus, on the first day of the attack, 31 July 1917, it began to rain and continued to do so, turning the battlefield into a quagmire and significantly reducing any chance of a British success.[61] Finally, one of Haig's field commanders, General Gough,[62] was allowed to make changes to the original plan that impacted on the army's ability to achieve their objectives. Haig, though, must share some blame, as he allowed the changes to be made, despite his better judgment, as Gough was an old friend and he wished to remain loyal (Neillands 1999: 390/1). These points reveal that Haig, although possessing faults, was an able commander exposed to many factors beyond his control. Today, the subtleties of the strategy and the realities of the battles are little known. By comparison, the huge death toll and the fact that no advance was achieved are widely known, due to its popularisation in satirical, factual and fictive texts. The result is that the Battle of Passchendaele has only served to blacken Haig's reputation.

Britain in the 1960s represents a period of massive social change, and under this climate the First World War did not escape re-evaluation. As was seen in chapter two, although themes of disillusionment began to appear during the inter-war years, mythic modes of portraying the war were still enjoying popular support, as is evident by the publication of

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[61] An oft quoted anecdote is as follows:

> Lieutenant-General Sir Launcelot Kiggell paid his first visit to the fighting zone. As his staff car lurched through the swampland and neared the battleground he became more and more agitated. Finally he burst into tears and muttered, 'Good God, did we really send men to fight in that?'
> The man beside him, who had been through the campaign, replied tonelessly, 'It's worse further up' (Wolff 1959: 253).

Although its appearance in *In Flanders Fields* would seem to be one of the earliest, the same story can also be found in Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (84), where he notes that although the scene seems unlikely it is true to spirit; and in Davis' *Into the Silence* (97). However, contrary to popular belief, Haig and his generals were aware of the weather and what changes it made to the terrain. As a result, numerous attacks were cancelled because of it (Neillands 1999: 393).

[62] Sir Hubert Gough (1870-1963) was commander of the British Fifth Army during 1916-18, and was a close personal friend of Haig.

the first critical assessments of the war and the commercial successes experienced by such plays as *Journey's End*. New histories were, however, being produced, and in time the works of Liddell Hart came to exert an influence over the future assessors of the war, and it was one of cynicism, meaninglessness and waste. No longer were the Germans depicted as the barbaric other, threatening society. Those responsible for conducting and maintaining a war perceived to be fought over trivial issues, who had no perception of what the front was like, who were stuck in a nineteenth-century frame of mind and had no regard for the men whose lives they were sacrificing, came to be seen as the true enemy.

In Australia an almost identical argument was forwarded by Alan Seymour in *The One Day of the Year* (1960). Here Seymour set the new generation in conflict with those who had served during the war and sought to strip the ANZAC legend of its romantic mystique. 'I can't stand waste. Waste of lives, waste of men. The whole thing – Gallipoli – was a waste. Certainly nothing to glorify' (Seymour 1962: 20). Those who were in command are blamed for putting the soldiers in a suicidal situation: 'THEY pushed those men up those cliffs, that April morning, knowing, KNOWING it was suicide' (Seymour 1962: 83). Ultimately, the war is revealed not as a source of pride, but as a hollow and meaningless waste of life, for which everyone should be ashamed (Seymour 1962: 85). *The One Day of the Year* is a testament to the growing strength of this new opinion seen in the recently published historical retrospectives and *Oh, What a Lovely War!*. Gradually this opinion would become widespread among a new generation, coming of age in a society removed from the conflict.

As we move into the final chapter of this study it will become apparent that the traditions established during the 1960s continue to abide in contemporary theatrical portrayals. However, Robin Neillands makes a point that is worth noting:

> Although it has been depicted with overtones of class – the aristocratic officer corps and the poor, bloody Tommy – the Great War was not a 'class' conflict in which the upper class gave orders and the lower classes did the fighting and dying. Everyone felt the effects of war, and the generals were no less immune or indifferent to the suffering it caused than anyone else, whatever later generations or historians might allege (Neillands 1999: 381).

This idea has been largely taken up by historians today. Many studies, such as John Terraine's and Brian Bond's, now critique the works of Clark and argue that while mistakes had been made by all parties on both sides, to cast the commanders as totally incompetent or callous is not an accurate representation of what occurred. As such, this theme is less evident today and theatrical productions have become much more tempered. While the overarching concept that the war represented a massive waste of human life still remains, the satirical edge is not as readily apparent.

Regardless, contemporary revivals of *Oh, What a Lovely War!* are still favourably received. Even so critics today now identified that the themes prevalent in the play are just as much a reflection of 1960s' social attitudes as they are of the war. Derek Paget has noted that in some regards *Oh, What a Lovely War!* represents a staging of the British communist revolution of the 1960s that never happened (Paget 1990: 59). Despite this recognition it has done nothing to dampen the play's popularity. To mark the centenary anniversary of the war the Theatre Royal Stratford East staged a revival of the show that ran from 1 February until 15 March, 2014. In a review, Michael Coveney noted that the 'lions led by donkeys' charge is now historically disputed, but thought the real purpose of the play was about chronicling the senseless loss of life more than assigning political blame.[63] Elizabeth Purves felt similarly, saying:

> Our hunger now is for subtler understanding of the disaster: the strategic errors need, and are getting, a less simplistic perspective. What we need to remember is not one stroppy 1960's [sic] death-of-deference point of view but simple facts and feelings. From The Wipers Times and *War Horse*, to contemporary diaries and poems and small significant discoveries like Southwark's *What the Women Did*, we need to turn to the basic history, to work out our own beliefs and feel our own pity or rage.[64]

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[63] Michael Coveney, '*Oh What a Lovely War* (Theatre Royal Stratford East)'. For full review see: http://www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/reviews/02-2014/oh-what-a-lovely-war-theatre-royal-stratford-east_33489.html

[64] Elizabeth Purves, 'O WHAT A LOVELY WAR Theatre Royal Stratford East'. For full review see: http://theatrecat.com/2014/02/11/o-what-a-lovely-war-theatre-royal-stratford-east/

The revival of the play caused a certain level of controversy within the media. British Education Minister, Michael Gove, attacked the play as a source of left-wing myths:

> The conflict has, for many, been seen through the fictional prism of dramas such as *Oh! What a Lovely War*, *The Monocled Mutineer* and *Blackadder*, as a misbegotten shambles – a series of catastrophic mistakes perpetrated by an out-of-touch elite. Even to this day there are Left-wing academics all too happy to feed those myths.[65]

Despite the general appreciation that works aligned with *Oh, What a Lovely War!* present a view that is narrow in its representation of events, almost all those who reviewed the show defended it against Gove's comments, with James Hodgson stating that the fact these comments were made was evidence that shows like it still needed to be produced.[66]

These contemporary responses reveal that while society has become increasingly sophisticated in its reading of the war, the message *Oh, What a Lovely War!* carries is still readily accepted and seen to hold continual relevance. Both Hodgson and Purves point towards *War Horse* as representing a new portrayal of the war that escapes the political atmosphere *Oh, What a Lovely War!* is steeped in, and presents a more basic depiction of what occurred. While there is some validity to this opinion, as will be shown in chapter four, *War Horse* is still closely aligned with many of the traditions established by *Oh, What a Lovely War!* and is itself perpetuating a particular idea associated with the war. In fact, it will be argued that *War Horse* accepts the basic premises forwarded by *Oh, What a Lovely War!*: that the war was a meaningless conflict resulting in the needless waste of millions of lives. But whereas *Oh, What a Lovely War!* threatens to cast the war into a pit of nihilism and absurdity, *War Horse*, and the other plays associated with this next period, find a way to elevate it beyond this void of despair.

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[65] Gove, Michael, 'Why does the Left insist on belittling true British heroes?', *The Daily Mail*, 03/01/2014.

[66] James Hodgson. For full review see: http://everything-theatre.co.uk/2014/02/oh-what-a-lovely-war-theatre-royal-stratford-east-review.html

Chapter IV – Celebration of Friendship, 1980-2013

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

At the end of the previous chapter we were left with a portrayal of the First World War plunged into a crisis of meaning, akin to nihilism or the absurd. This came about through a series of cultural shifts and several thematically interconnected movements between artists and academia. We can consider *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, *Blackadder Goes Forth*, the new works of historical criticism, the burgeoning and enduring popularity of the war poets, not to mention the re-examination of earlier pieces like Maugham's *For Services Rendered*, as texts associated with this period. These combined works progressively stripped the war of meaning. As is consistent with nihilism, this created a feeling of tension, whereby a difference arose between what we wanted to value (the higher ideals of what the war was fought over) and how the world appeared to be organised (the realisation that these ideals were non-existent).

In effect this had the potential to make the war appear absurd. The absurd of course being a confrontation between our longing to extract meaning from the world set against the realisation of reality's irrationality (Cooper 1999: 141).[1] The sensation of the absurd only arises because of the innate human desire to seek meaning; however, as this chapter will reveal, the human ability to create meaning is indeed impressive, and the First World War has today successfully escaped the void of nihilism, into which the works examined in the previous chapter threatened to cast it.

Just as the perception of the war has been ever-shifting within the public's imagination since 1914, during the 1980s another shift began to occur as the war moved to occupy the place it now holds in popular culture today. By this time it had been more than sixty years since the cessation of hostilities. Other wars had been fought in the

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[1] As Albert Camus explains in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, it is from the encounters between a human need and the unreasonable silence of the world from which the absurd is born.

intervening years, and indeed the Cold War had not yet reached its close. These more recent conflicts supplanted the First World War, as their comparative temporal proximity meant their direct consequences on people's lives were more readily evident. This, coupled with the now rapidly declining number of First World War veterans, caused the earlier conflict to lose its immediate relevance in people's day-to-day lives, and it was increasingly consigned to the annals of history.

This fact, though, has not correlated with a decrease in the number of new works produced that depict the war. Indeed, in recent years, as the centenary anniversary approached, there have been a number of highly popular, critically acclaimed and financially successful film portrayals: notably the second season of *Downton Abbey* (2011); the Tom Stoppard adaptation of Ford Madox Ford's novel, *Parade's End* (2012); and the Steven Spielberg film, *War Horse* (2011). In these work, though, there is limited rumination on the war's purpose or meaning. The causes and significance of the conflict are almost always taken for granted (pointedly so in *Downton Abbey* and *War Horse*), and although its consequences are still explored,[2] most portrayals are largely limited to traditional approaches: the war is initially welcomed with fanfare and optimism, only for this to later descend into disillusionment in the wake of mass deaths and a continual stalemate.

The influence of the 1960s still holds sway today, and the war as a 'futile waste' is largely unchallenged as the dominant reading of the conflict. In place of ruminations on its meaning, what now frequently recurs as the core theme is a celebration of camaraderie and friendship. This is a theme that has long held a place of special cultural significance, especially in the case of Australia where it is seen as one of the defining attributes of the nation's cultural identity. For example, Patrick Lindsay describes the significance of mateship at Gallipoli:

> The mateship that developed through this tragic loss […] somehow ennobled their terrible ordeal. It grew to represent something more than friendship, or camaraderie or comradeship. It was greater than the shared experiences of brothers-in-arms […]. Mateship has a spiritual element, which sets it apart from the esprit de corps experienced by many other soldiers.

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[2] For example, *Downton Abbey* explores the changing nature of women's roles in society.

[…] At its centre was selflessness. This was wrapped in mutual respect and sealed with an unbreakable determination not to let each other down (Lindsay 2003: 73).

For many, this lies at the core of what is believed to be the dominant reading of how the men who served responded to the war.

It is unsurprising then that Lindsay leans on romance in his definition, and that he defines the male relationships formed at Gallipoli as being the ideal example of mateship. Although he describes the relationships that developed between the Australians as being so exceptional that the experience is completely unknowable to those who did not share it (even including other soldiers), this chapter will show it to be a sentiment that appears time and again in texts from Britain. Three plays will be taken into consideration to observe the rise of this theme and to highlight its significance on the popular imaginings of the war today. The primary texts to be analysed are: Frank McGuinness' *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985), Nick Whitby's *To the Green Fields Beyond* (2000) and probably the most commercially successful stage portrayal of the First World War to date, Nick Stafford's Tony award winning play, *War Horse* (2007).

Themes of camaraderie and friendship are certainly not unique to the First World War and can be readily found in many portrayals of war, across all literary forms. However, what is unique about this theme, in relation to the First World War, is its relative absence from theatrical portrayals prior to the 1980s. Indeed, during the inter-war years several plays can be pointed to that portray what could be called anti-comradeship. This theme is apparent in both Laurence Stallings and Maxwell Anderson's *What Price Glory?* (1924) and Sean O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie* (1928). In these plays male relationships are vengeful and descend into sexual rivalry, something that is almost never seen today. It can be argued that this reveals the concept of friendship, as one of the defining experiences of war, was not seen as being so until much later. That is not to say that friendship and camaraderie cannot be found in earlier plays; for example, many of the relationships in Sheriff's *Journey's End* could be described as such; nevertheless, they

still pale in the wake of the play's more dominant themes. This chapter, though, will show that friendships are pushed to the centre of contemporary dramas.[3]

Before examining the theatre it is necessary to first present an analysis of friendship, specifically male friendships and how such friendships develop in wartime. By doing so it will be shown that there is a difference between friendship – as it is broadly understood to exist in peace time – and camaraderie, as it forms in combat. Camaraderie, although bearing numerous similarities to friendship, can undermine the formation of genuine friendships. The plays to be examined will also be shown to align themselves, by turn, with and against this phenomenon. Furthermore, it will be made evident that camaraderie has many parallels with themes explored previously in this study, specifically in regard to perceptions of masculinity and the formation of an us/them dichotomy created between those who served and those who did not.

Ultimately, it will be shown that in contemporary society the concept of the wartime friendship is now believed to be the most significant experience for those who served. Additionally, it is also perceived as the one wholly positive experience to come out of a war that is widely accepted as representing a futile and meaningless waste of life. That this is reflected in the theatre of today is symptomatic of a broader cultural trend observable whenever the war is evoked, from poetry, fiction and documentaries through to Remembrance Day ceremonies. Therefore, I shall argue that the portrayal of friendship in these plays represents a return to romance traditions in presentations of the war, albeit modified from those seen in chapter one.

Friendship

Aristotle called humans 'the social animal', and rightly so for we all possess an innate desire to affiliate with others and to belong. We form many close bonds throughout our lives with a whole array of people and groups, including romantic partners, family and

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[3] Other plays of this period that can also be seen to take friendship as a central theme include, *The Accrington Pals* (1981) and *Not About Heroes* (1982). Additionally, the films *Gallipoli* (1980) and *Gods and Monsters* (1998) also draw heavily on the significance of camaraderie for those men who served.

friends. Unlike many other relationships, though, friendship is unique as, for the most part, it is egalitarian and democratic, without being based on either hierarchies or authoritarian structures (Pahl 2000: 167). This feature will be shown to have significance within the military setting – an environment that is traditionally based on hierarchy. However, it is problematic to discuss friendship in a broad sense, without context. The reason being that the manner in which friendships form, are maintained and what they signify for the participants, varies greatly across times, cultures and between genders. For this reason the study will attempt to keep itself relevant to the subject by focusing first on male friendships, and then the male friendship as it forms under combat conditions.

The idealised form of the male friendship is already closely associated with the romanticised military view of what camaraderie entails. Specifically, male friendships ideally reflect bravery, valour and physical sacrifice in coming to the aid of another (Bell 1981: 75), as is reflected in Lindsay's definition above.[4] However, these ideals rarely manifest themselves overtly between men in what could be thought of as the typical, modern, male friendship. The reason for this has to do with the fact that these values are generally seen to undermine accepted virtues of masculinity, as they are socially viewed as inappropriate and suspicious (Bell 1981:75), due to their strong association with what are thought of as feminine qualities. This is linked to a lingering prejudice towards homosexuality, as overt expressions of intimacy between men have long carried the threat of being interpreted as a sign of homosexual desire (Kiesling 2005: 696).

To overcome these conflicting positions a great deal of negotiation is required in the establishment and maintenance of male friendships. For example, as discussed in chapter two, the masculine ideal states that men should be stoic and not reveal their inner feelings (Bell 1981: 77). Just as the myths of masculinity played a role in the advent of shell shock, as soldiers strove to uphold the perceived ideals of proper masculine behaviour, so too do these ideals inform how friendships are allowed to develop between men. In order to maintain perceptions of masculinity and keep conflicting desires separated, a process of indirectness must be adopted (Kiesling 2005: 702). Male friendships are then generally

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[4] This has been a long held virtue of what true friendship is. For example, we can find the same sentiment in *The Bible*: John 15:13, 'Greater love hath no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.' This phrase is itself quoted by Nick Whitby in *To the Green Fields Beyond*, page 64.

mediated through, and focused outward, toward a shared activity – sport is often given as the classic example, but any external activity or shared interest could serve the same purpose.[5]

Because of this dynamic there are several features associated with male friendship that are consistent with the military experience. The fact that male friendships frequently develop around shared activities creates a tendency for friendships to be group-based, rather than one-on-one relationships. Men tend to then be more comfortable in a group orientated environment, as a group situation defuses any possible assumptions about the intensity of feeling between any two individual members (Bell 1981: 75). Additionally, as Scott Fabius Kiesling revealed in his study, the group also provides a safe receptacle into which expressions of affection can be directed towards the collective (treating it almost as an institution), thus allowing such expressions to be safely vocalised without risk of perceived weakness, or homosexual interpretations being made.

Another feature of the activity-orientated and group mentality of male friendship is that the activity has the potential to take on greater significance than the people it is shared with (Bell 1981: 79). Part of the masculine mentality is 'to do' – to be active and to get things done (Bell 1981: 79). This value can at times have greater significance placed on it than one's emotions and, as was discussed in chapter two, frequently the repression of feelings is expected and treated as the norm. This being the case, there is a potential for individuals to be easily interchanged (Bell 1981: 79). For example, if a friendship is based around the mutual enjoyment of an activity and one of the participants loses interest it is unlikely the friendship will be maintained, rather the friend will be replaced by a new participant. This is more likely to occur in a group environment. This concept of interchangeable friends, whereby a person is not seen as being a complete person, but rather as filling a single function, has a crossover to the military experience, as will be discussed. In a broad sense, male friendship has much in common with the specific relationship that is camaraderie.

In considering the events of war and friendship there are two time-frames that must be taken into consideration: the first is how friendships formed and existed during the war,

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[5] Many of these qualities are defined by Eve Sedgwick as symptomatic of the homosocial relationship. Sedgwick's work will be further expanded upon during discussions of *What Price Glory?*.

the second is how they were maintained if they survived unbroken to a time after the war. To begin, the initial formation of friendship in a war environment is quite different from the normal experience. As Perlman and Fehr explain, in normal situations the establishment of a friendship will be based on a number of factors. First, a person's attraction to another is governed by a reinforcement theory: in basic terms this theory states that we tend to like people who provide us with rewards (Fehr & Perlman 1986: 11). We will only enter into a friendship if we associate a reward with the other person. A reward can take any form – material, emotional, intellectual or sexual, with most relationships constituting some sort of combination. Naturally enough, there are two participants in any relationship and therefore an interaction must occur, and just as we will not enter into a friendship that offers no rewards for us, so no one will enter into a friendship with us if they believe there is no reward for them. For this reason each participant needs to perceive that there is an equitable level of exchange, whereby the amount of input and output is the same for both parties (Fehr & Perlman 1986: 13).

Although there are always exceptions, during war relationships are not naturally occurring: men are thrown together, and once together it is impossible to exit or remain in a relationship via an autonomous decision. While the unit does offer the type of group environment that male friendships favour, it is, nevertheless, one that is not chosen by its members. An example of friendships that establish under these conditions will be examined in *Observe the Sons*, but what is of greater interest is the number of texts that subvert this military quality by establishing the men's friendships before they go to war: this occurs in *Observe the Sons*, as well as *War Horse, The Accrington Pals* and the film *Gallipoli*. When we come to discuss the difference between friendship and camaraderie it will become evident as to why the tradition of establishing the relationship before the protagonists arrive at war is of some significance. Having said that, both *Observe the Sons* and *To the Green Fields Beyond* portray relationships that only came into being with the advent of war, and so act to reveal just how powerful the bond of camaraderie can be.

At this point it is important to make a note of the distinction between friendship and camaraderie, for although the two terms may appear interchangeable they are in fact different. In many ways war can be looked on as being subversive to the formation of a genuine friendship, and that camaraderie is a very different experience. Needless to say,

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the idea of camaraderie in wartime is held up today as the male relationship par excellence (its frequent portrayal in contemporary theatre stands as testament to this), and is idealised to the extent whereby its true meaning and significance is unknowable to anyone but those who experienced it.[6]

It is not difficult to find texts that celebrate this kind of bond forged in battle, for it has existed since time immemorial. One of the most famous examples is from the St Crispin's Day speech in *Henry V*:

> We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
> For he today that sheds his blood with me
> Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
> This day shall gentle his condition (Shakespeare 2008: 1527).

So strong is this bond that it transcends mere friendship and goes into the realm of kinship.[7] Here ideals of friendship, camaraderie and brotherhood all appear readily transferable as they are all associated with the same concepts of devotion, selflessness, loyalty and fellowship. When this idea is coupled with other images, such as the bereaved soldier who grieves for his lost comrades long after the war's end, an image that is continually reinforced through ANZAC and Remembrance Day celebrations, it becomes evident that these combined features bear testament to the power of friendship formed in battle (Cole 2001: 470).[8] Likewise the celebration of famous friendships formed in war, such as Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves, also works towards establishing this same ideal.

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[6] This in part may be seen to fit into the counter-language tradition as was seen in chapter two, whereby only those who had experienced war possessed the ability to describe it realistically.

[7] Indeed, even the phrase, 'band of brothers' has entered into popular culture as an accepted way to describe the relationship that soldiers share. The phrase has been used as a title for many works that are set during war, most notably the HBO 2001 miniseries, *Band of Brothers*, set during the Second World War.

[8] This concept first arose during the post-war period and only grew stronger as time passed. As will be examined later, though, this ideal has only recently come to wholly dominate representations of the war, as in earlier years space still existed where it could be subverted, such as in *What Price Glory?* and *The Silver Tassie.*

However, when looking at the distinction between friendship and camaraderie, what becomes apparent is that a military environment is not conducive to the formation of a genuine friendship. In actuality it is more likely to destroy it. Essentially, friendship is a concept applied to individual relationships, generally on a one-on-one basis. Camaraderie refers to a corporate or group commitment (Cole 2001: 474). Taking this one distinction into consideration several consequences immediately become apparent: in a war environment, conducive to the formation of camaraderie, people are rendered passive and indistinguishable from the group as a whole (Cole 2001: 474), which is privileged above any individual member. Loyalty, devotion and love are not directed towards a person, but to an institution or an idea that is behind it, such as the 'battalion' or the 'unit'. Likewise, the established hierarchical system within the military also subverts the formation of friendship between ranks. This is a recurrent theme, and is evident in both *Journey's End* and *Oh, What a Lovely War!*.

Niall Ferguson has stated that although the friendships that formed between men during the war are important and should not be overlooked, it is also important not to overreach in drawing conclusions as to their significance.

> The fact that units often went into action shortly after being formed, or that friendships were so often terminated by death, meant that individualist, inward ways of coping in the end probably counted for as much, if not more. At the same time, soldiers often identified with the larger organisational units to which they belonged. Carefully cultivated traditions of regimental identity were designed to forge ties of loyalty at a less intimate level, ties which could survive even decimation (Ferguson 1998: 354).

So while friendship helped the men to cope with their surroundings, it was not the only resource they had to call upon. However, this has the risk of being overshadowed by the romantic elevation of the male relationship in wartime that is found in many contemporary texts.

While there is truth to this, the strength of camaraderie should not be overlooked. In defining male relationships the concept of the group as a nexus, where feelings of

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devotion can be safely directed, is a common theme, and, as Scott Kiesling[9] explains, does not necessarily dampen the intensity of the emotion felt towards the group's members. It is worth quoting a section from his study at length, as it highlights this point. The following is a speech made by a college fraternity president on the issue of flagging membership:

> I can tell you one thing that made all the problems go away […] It's unity. I mean that's another thing that you learn when you're a pledge [a newly joined member] that gets just totally ingrained into you is unity. All this fuckin' shit things that you do together—sit around the table and eat the fuckin' shit, y'know—the reason you do it is 'cause there's strength in numbers. The best, I can tell you, the best times I ever had as a brother were when all the brothers were together and it didn't matter if you were at a party, […] the fact that everybody was together made it cool, y'know? And you could be doin' the most strenuous labor, the stupidest fuckin' job, or you could be doin' something really difficult goin' – whatever. When we're together it didn't matter, it was cool. […] I'm surrounded by all these people, I feel OK. Those were the best feelings ever, (Kiesling 2005: 708/9).[10]

The group offers a safe place and a sense of belonging, and this extract articulates the strength of that feeling. No doubt there is much in common between the two institutions of a college fraternity and a military unit, and if anything wartime would only act to intensify these feelings. Arguably, camaraderie is the form male relationships naturally take, indeed there are those who claim that for many males the experience of a genuine adult friendship is never truly felt (May & Strikwerda 1992: 111).

So although friendship is not necessarily a common male experience, war in no way assists in its formation and can actually subvert it, at least during hostilities. War breaks up friendships in two ways: first through death, and second via transfer or discharge; both methods act to separate friends once a relationship has been established (Cole 2001: 475).

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[9] Scott Kiesling, of the University of Pittsburg, has long worked in the field of linguistics, and his primary research has been the examination of how language functions in the construction of identity, particularly masculinity.

[10] We may also note here the connection between male intimacy and the concept of brotherhood.

During the First World War there was a massive turnover of men that went through a unit; to re-quote Eric Leeds:

> The unit was an unstable entity, continually devastated by shell fire; old, familiar faces were continually replaced by strange new ones. To identify with the battalion at war and with a narrow circle of one's comrades was to open a large vertiginous emotional drain and to begin a seemingly endless process of mourning.[11]

Men were killed in attacks, or wounded and sent out of the unit; replacements were forever filtering through, meaning the constituting parts of any unit were constantly dying and renewing.

Such an environment opens up the possibility for members to be constantly replaced. But, as Leeds makes clear, this is a highly traumatic process. Would it have been possible under these conditions for genuine friendships to form and last for any period of time? Camaraderie, though, with its members directing devotion towards the corporate instead of the individual, opens the potential for isolation to occur. Of course, it would be extreme to say that this was the blanket experience for those who served, for Leeds clearly expresses the emotional strain that came with this. War, in this sense, represents a paradox when it comes to the forces that acted upon relationships. Part of the paradox of war is that, by soldiers' own admissions, many formed close, personal friendships. That these friendships were constantly threatened by and ended with death is also true.

How friendships existed in the post-war environment is arguably of even greater significance, as it was from this perspective that most civilians witnessed the strength of these bonds. As has been discussed, for those who did not serve getting a sense of the realities of the front was exceedingly difficult. Even after the soldiers returned there was frequently little discussion about what they experienced, as veterans rarely opened up to their loved ones, especially if the experience had been a traumatic one. The role family played for those who returned was largely one of coping with the day-to-day practicalities of life: to soothe and distract (Hunt & Robbins 1998: 62). Those who wanted someone to

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[11] As quoted by Carol Acton in *Grief in War Time*, page 110.

talk to would join veterans' associations, in effect creating new fraternities.[12] For many, they found that it was only possible to talk openly about their experiences with someone who had also shared and understood them: 'We'd been through something special… I really can't describe the way people felt towards each other having been though an experience' (Hunt & Robbins 1998: 62).

This is indicative of a unique bond that can only exist between those who have shared the same experience and it plays a large role in the mystification and romanticism that surrounds the relationships forged during war. Although they are also associated with trauma, these friendships[13] are viewed by veterans as one of the great positives to come from their war experience. Brian Bond gives the example of friendship's frequent appearance in post-war memoirs, where writers would display pride in 'their regiment […] and [were] deeply grateful for the unique experience of comradeship' (Bond 2002: 13), and he specifically singles out the works of Graves, Sassoon and Read as examples. Likewise, much of Wilfred Owen's poetry has a heavy focus on the men and the close relationships they shared.[14] So although many of these works have been described as anti-war (sometimes contrary to the opinion of their authors) it is still possible to see this theme repeatedly used as a redeeming quality for the war.[15]

The act of meeting to recount shared experiences after the event is one of the processes that reaffirms and strengthens friendships. Often when friends gather in this manner their discussion adopts a unique quality: almost no questions are asked, no subjects are discussed or debated, rather participants take turns re-telling shared experiences (Engel 1999: 40). Usually these stories are well-rehearsed and known back to front by all those involved. To recount stories in this manner is to build a shared

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[12] Many of the prominent veterans' associations active today, such as The Royal British Legion in England and the Returned & Services League in Australia, were formed in the aftermath of the First World War.

[13] Once war is over and the relationship has been maintained we may consider them friendships as distinct from camaraderie. But of course context would be needed to accurately identify any given relationship.

[14] The poems, 'Strange Meeting', 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo' and 'Great Love' are just three examples where this theme can be found.

[15] For Sassoon particularly his desire to return to the front was prompted in part to escape those who had no awareness of what the war was like, so as to be with people who understood what was being endured (Sassoon 1930: 308).

experience of what happened, but it is also to identify and communicate what is idiosyncratic and private. The process confirms an intimacy and integrates each participant into the inner, private lives of each other. In the post-war-world the rise of an exclusive society of veterans established and maintained the theme that bonds formed during war were of a special nature.

This exclusiveness sets up a dichotomy of the like discussed in chapter two between civilians and servicemen. As was explored, counter-language assisted in creating a new discourse around the event so it could be understood in a manner different from those used by the broader population. All of these features compounded to create an almost mystic virtue around those who served together, which is believed in and perpetuated by both its members and the broader society it exists within. What this shows is that the military setting is one of the few where society deems it appropriate for intense male intimacies to form. And although the war environment does not always allow these relationships to actually arise it has not prevented them from being depicted in fictional accounts.

To clarify, although the terms friendship and camaraderie are similar and appear interchangeable, there is a fundamental difference between them. Friendships traditionally form between two individuals who share a level of personal intimacy. In contemporary western society it has been argued that men only rarely form true friendships. It has already been described how close male relationships are fraught with complications and limited by social prejudice. To appear to have a close relationship, or to express overt feelings of affection, is to run the risk of having one's masculinity undermined by a perceived weakness. Or worse, the relationship may be interpreted as having homosexual qualities. Both are a threat to the masculine ideal. To negotiate this problem, men frequently form relationships more akin to camaraderie. Camaraderie involves a group setting, usually focused around an external, shared activity. Under these conditions the group acts as a nexus into which feelings of devotion and affection can be safely directed without fear of subverting one's masculinity. The fundamental difference between friendship and camaraderie is therefore a question of a relationship between individuals on the one hand, and between an individual and a group on the other.

The war environment naturally lends itself to the formation of camaraderie over friendship. Men are placed into a group with a strict hierarchical structure,[16] and engage in an outwardly directed activity, (fighting a war). Camaraderie can actually be beneficial in a war setting, as it favours devotion to the group over devotion to any individual member. This is useful, as individuals were often separated through war via death or transfer. Camaraderie, though, allows for the replacement of individuals in the group, which would have assisted the men when it came to coping with the frequent loss of their fellows. This is not to say that the intensity of feeling towards the collective group was lesser than that of a friend, and in fact feelings of devotion and loyalty to the unit were usually encouraged.

The way the wartime relationship is socially read, though, plays just as big a role in how it appears in fictional portrayals. Within a unit soldiers are perceived as having endured hardships whilst fighting alongside each other, and may have even giving up their life to save a friend. These experiences are read as being the criteria to forging the idealised male friendship. Additionally, that veterans display an unwillingness to share their experiences with anyone who had not served only aids in the mystification that exists around the bonds that were forged in battle.

As will be seen, this perceived idealised form of male intimacy finds its way into contemporary theatrical portrayals of the war. The theme is elevated to such an extent, though, that it transcends camaraderie and becomes a depiction of what is arguably genuine friendship. Individual, close, personal relationships are favoured in these texts over the group. This will be seen to begin subtly during the 1980s and become more prominent as time passes. In effect, the relationships are elevated and idealised to an extent beyond what would naturally be expected under war conditions. The result of this is to present the relationships as a redeeming quality for the men who served, and it lifts the war out of the nihilist reading developed during the 1960s, without, however, disputing the ultimate meaninglessness of the conflict. It will be argued that what these texts represent, at least insofar as their depiction of male relationships, is a realignment of

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[16] An element that is not usually associated with genuine friendships, and often subverts them.

the war with romance.[17] The pressing issues that informed so many of the earlier portrayals of the war are no longer challenged, and to a certain degree there is a level of acceptance. Instead, each text works to reinforce the concept of the idealised male friendship, even going so far as to subvert many of the conditions of war that naturally acted to complicate and prevent friendships from forming.

McGuinness' *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*

Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme (1985), by Frank McGuinness (1953), follows eight Ulster Irishmen from their time of enlistment in the British army until the eve of the Battle of the Somme. The action of the play is framed around the reminiscings of Kenneth Pyper, who in the first scene is depicted as an elderly man reflecting on the war and the soldiers with whom he served. The rest of the play takes place in the past. In the second scene the eight men (Kenneth Pyper, David Craig, John Millen, William Moore, Christopher Roulston, Martin Crawford, George Anderson and Nat McIlwaine) are introduced after having just enlisted. From this point, although the theme of an Ulster cultural identity remains central to the plot, the significance of the men's relationships becomes the most dominant aspect of the play. In part this is made apparent by the titles given to scenes three and four, being 'Pairing' and 'Bonding', respectively.

Scene three, 'Pairing', features a split stage with the eight men organised into four pairs, allowing their relationships to develop on an individual level. The scene removes them from a military setting and places them in locations significant to the Irish province of Ulster: Pyper and Craig are on Boa Island,[18] Roulston and Crawford are in a Protestant

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[17] This, however, should not be confused with the romantic traditions explored in chapter one. Whereas in chapter one romance was employed to elevate the war as a whole, here, the harsh nature of the war is not contested, and in this case the romanticism is dependent on it, for it is used to assist in the elevation one aspect of the conflict, friendship.

[18] Boa Island, in Lower Lough Erne in Northern Ireland, is of some archeological significance as it features enigmatic stone cravings dating from approximately AD400-800.

church, McIlwaine and Anderson are on a field,[19] and Millen and Moore are on a suspension bridge, with Millen attempting to coax a fearful Moore across. This final location acts as a metaphor on several levels, but most significantly as a portrayal of how reliant the men are on each other to survive the psychological and physical hardships of war. The fourth scene, 'Bonding', brings the men back together mere hours before the Battle of the Somme. They are in the trenches, waiting, and the scene shows how they help each other prepare for battle by distracting their minds from what lies ahead. Together these scenes depict the male relationship in a group and individual environment, thereby evoking representations of both friendship and camaraderie.

First performed at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, in 1985, *Observe the Sons* is a curious piece, for although composed by an Irish playwright, it is deeply concerned with a Northern Irish sensibility, and so by extension British. *Observe the Sons* then straddles the divide been Ireland and Britain, and indeed, this was McGuinness' intent. This fact, coupled with its extensive history on British stages,[20] and its critical reputation as one of the most important plays to depict the war produced in the last decade of the twentieth century,[21] is the reason for its inclusion in this study.

Potentially, *Observe the Sons* is one of the most thematically diverse and challenging plays ever staged that depicts the First World War.[22] There are, however, those who have regarded it as being 'not so much […] about the war as a persistent inquiry into the meaning of a mystical identity defined by the term "Ulster"' (Kosok 2007: 53). Although this is arguably the primary concern of the piece, the fact that it is set during the First World War plays an important role, as do the relationships that form

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[19] They are specifically on the field where a march commemorating the victory of the Battle of Boyne takes place. McIlwaine calls it the holiest spot in Ulster (McGuinness 1986: 43).

[20] *Observe the Sons* was staged at the Hampstead theatre, London in 1986 where it was directed by Michael Attenborough, son of Richard. It was subsequently revived in 2009. It has also toured extensively across Britain during its thirty-year history.

[21] Upon its release it received several awards and accolades, most notably the London Evening Standard Award for Most Promising Playwright and the Christopher Ewart-Biggs Memorial Prize.

[22] In addition to the themes to be discussed here, there are also many critics who make a homosexual reading of the play. See Susan Cannon Harris' study, 'Watch Yourself: Performances, Sexual Differences and National Identity in the Irish Plays of Frank McGuinness', in *Genders* Vol. 28 (1998).

between the men. Undoubtedly, *Observe the Sons* is inescapably entwined with and defined by the war. Because of the play's multiple concerns some preliminary explanation will be required.

Many of the play's themes are quite esoteric, and the level of assumed knowledge expected of an audience is such that anyone unfamiliar with the political and cultural history of Ireland will miss the subtleties of the plot. First, the play is an examination of the Protestant/Catholic divide that exists in Ireland (both during the First World War and as a reflection of the climate current at the time of its composition in the 1980s). This religious divide, although not the only determinant, is the major difference between those people who favoured an independent Ireland and those who wished to remain part of the United Kingdom, with Catholics (Republicans) on one side and Protestants (Unionists) on the other, respectively.

Observe the Sons was written and first produced during the height of the Irish Troubles (1960s-1997), which saw multiple terrorist attacks and deaths. The conflicts of this period represented a continuation of tensions between the Unionist and Republican sects of Irish society over the question of sovereignty, religious persecution and discrimination, which will be discussed below. That *Observe the Sons* was staged in this atmosphere of violence adds another layer to its complexity, as the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in the play comes to mirror that which was being experienced socially at the time.[23]

Ulster is the northern-most Irish province,[24] the majority of which forms Northern Ireland, as separate from the Republic of Ireland in the south. As such, this play is written to present the Protestant perspective. However, it should be noted that McGuinness is of Catholic heritage, and, as would be expected, this had a significant impact on the play's reception. It has been seen by many to be an attempt to present the Protestant/Unionist

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[23] This aspect of the play falls beyond the scope of the study at hand and so will be set aside in favour of an examination of the relationships that develop between the characters.

[24] The four provinces of Ireland are Connacht, Leinster, Munster and Ulster. They serve no administrative or political purpose, but function as historical and cultural entities.

perspective to a Catholic audience, while others have thought of it as 'one of the most comprehensive attacks made in theatre on Ulster Protestantism' (Herron 2004: 162).[25]

The Catholic/Protestant divide that existed at the beginning of the twentieth century had been building for hundreds of years. The source of the tensions during this time dated from the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland (a gradual process beginning in the seventeenth century), a period that marked a growth in Protestant influence where political, economic and social dominance of Ireland fell into the hands of a minority of land owners who were members of the Protestant faith, and whose interests were supported by the British Crown. The gradual dispossession of land from the majority of the population, who were Roman Catholic, caused widespread resentment resulting in several unsuccessful revolts against British rule in 1594-1603, 1641-53 and 1689-91. The last conflict has special symbolic significance within McGuinness' play as the Battle of the Boyne took place on 1 July 1690, the same day as the first day of the Battle of the Somme in 1916.[26]

The Battle of the Boyne was fought between the two claimants of the British throne, the Protestant William III and the Catholic James II. In the battle James was supported by Irish Catholics who in the preceding years had lost their land, their right to hold public office, practice their religion or sit in the Irish Parliament.[27] As James was a Catholic, the Irish looked on him as a means by which these grievances could be redressed, and as a monarch willing to take steps towards granting Ireland independence.[28] By 1690 the Catholics held control of all the Irish provinces with the exception of Ulster. By comparison, William's supporters were made up of Ulster Protestants. For them the war was about maintaining Protestant and English rule in Ireland, as they feared losing their property and privileges if James were to prevail. William was victorious at the battle and further penal laws were placed on Catholics, including bans on owning weapons and land,

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[25] Comment made by David Nowlan in his 1985 review of the play.

[26] The battle took place on 1 July 1690 by the Julian calendar, the equivalent of 11 July by today's Gregorian calendar.

[27] This was the result of the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland between 1649-53, during which time the Catholics who had been involved in the rebellion of 1641 had had their lands confiscated and penal laws passed against them.

[28] James II had also proclaimed the Declaration of Indulgence in 1687, a bill that granted religious freedom to all denominations in England and Scotland. It was the Irish hope that they would receive similar favour.

and prohibition from working in the legal professions. For Protestant Unionists the battle came to stand as a testament to their loyalty and devotion to Britain.

Much of this history informs the actions of the characters in *Observe the Sons*. At the Battle of the Somme some 6000 Ulster men lost their lives on the first day of fighting and so, much like the Battle of the Boyne, the Battle of the Somme has come to be seen by the people of Ulster as another act of their loyalty to the United Kingdom. This became a point of pride they would hold over their Catholic counterparts, who are frequently depicted as not having been involved in the war.[29] Of course, the outcome of the Battle of the Somme was quite different from the Boyne. Of interest, though, is the different position the Battle of the Somme is able to occupy in Northern Irish culture. For Britons, and indeed most Allied nations, the Somme stands as the epitome of wasted life lost in a futile attack orchestrated by incompetent commanders. The battle, and the idea it carries, has then come to be seen as representative of the war as a whole. However, for Ulster and Northern Ireland the Battle of the Somme came to mean something different: for them it represented the supreme act of Ulster loyalty to the Unionist cause (Kiberd 2005: 283).

In *Observe the Sons* McGuinness recognised that for these men to see the battle in terms of futility would diminish both their perceived cultural identity and the significance of their deaths. What becomes apparent is that *Observe the Sons* begins to offer a movement away from the theme of futility that dominated the 1960s. Instead, critics generally see this portrayal as presenting a construction of the Northern Irish identity. Within this broad critical agreement, analysis of the play tends to fall into two camps. The first states that the play makes a genuine attempt to bridge the partisan divide by humanising the Protestant soldiers for a Catholic audience. Even though some early reviewers saw the play as a scathing exposé of Unionist hysteria, it is now regarded as a genuinely sympathetic, if critical, exploration of the minds and hearts of the young men

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[29] For a long time among the Catholic Irish it was wilfully forgotten that many of them also served during the war for a variety of different reasons. Some felt that the act of supporting the war could be traded for eventual home rule, while others empathised with Belgium, a country they saw as being like theirs: a small Catholic nation under occupation by a large Protestant one. Regardless, as examined in chapter two, O'Casey offered a portrayal of Catholic involvement during the war in *The Silver Tassie*. The desire Catholics had to dissociate themselves from the conflict may explain why O'Casey experienced difficulties when attempting to present the play.

who fought (O'Malley 2012: 111). By comparison, Loyalist audiences have seen the play as an attempt by a Republican to reach across partisan lines and represent the Ulster community in a manner neither hostile nor purely critical (O'Malley 2012: 111).

The process of defining an Ulster identity within the play is built primarily on a positioning against Irish Catholicism. Indeed, its most defining feature is an ardent opposition and hatred towards Republican and Catholic values. For while the Protestants perceive themselves as fighting bravely for a cause, they saw the Catholics as shirkers who stayed at home and staged mock battles (O'Malley 2012: 119). Their hostility towards Catholics is made evident early on when Millen and Moore describe what they did to a sixteen-year-old boy who had painted the Irish tricolours[30] on a Protestant lodge:

> MILLEN: We tracked down the artist. Sixteen years old. Wanted to die for Ireland. […] We
> rounded him out. […]
> MOORE: Did better than shoot him. […]
> MILLEN: Batted him down the streets of Coleraine.
> MOORE: Shaved every hair on his head.
> MILLEN: Cut the backside out of his trousers.
> MOORE: Painted his arse green, white and gold (McGuinness 1986: 27).

Likewise, when Anderson and McIlwaine arrive, McIlwaine pretends to be a dog capable of sniffing out Catholics, and attacks Crawford on suspicion of being one (McGuinness 1986: 33/4).

The way the men reconstruct the history of Ireland is important in terms of how they perceive and construct their own collective cultural identity. In her study, Helen Lojek identifies two key exchanges in the final scene that best portrays this: the first is

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[30] The tricolour is the flag of the Irish Republic: green, white and orange, although in the text the colour gold is cited as having been used in place of orange. This would have been deliberately done by the Republican youth, as orange on the Irish flag is representative of the Protestant supporters of William III, who was from the House of Orange. Substituting orange for gold in the tricolours is occasionally done and usually intended as an insult to the Protestant population.

McIlwaine's recount of the Easter Rising, where he claims Pearse[31] only took over the Post Office because he was short a few stamps (McGuinness 1986: 64).[32] McIlwaine then describes how when he was finally caught by the British he started to cry and plead before he was finally shot by his mother, 'That'll learn him, the cheeky pup. Going about robbing post offices' (McGuinness 1986: 65). In this retelling the mother figure is meant to represent Britain with the Catholic Irish cast as her unruly children. The implication of McIlwaine's story is that 'Fenians[33] can't fight,' and while the Protestants are at the Somme, engaged in a real war, the Catholics are at home playing war and cannot even do that properly. Of course, much of this tale involves embellishment, and he even admits to inventing most of the facts himself: 'To hell with the truth as long as it rhymes' (McGuinness 1986: 65). In this instance the facts are of little importance. The purpose of the story is the construction of the Catholic people, against which an Ulster identity can be established in direct opposition. To make the Catholics seem cowardly is to define themselves as courageous.

The second exchange again evokes the past when the men re-enact the Battle of Scarva[34] to distract themselves before the fighting starts. Under Anderson's direction Crawford and Moore take on the roles of King William and King James with Pyper and Miller acting as their respective horses (McGuinness 1986: 70/1). However, here there is no room for embellishment: 'And remember James,' Anderson warns Moore, 'we know the result, you know the result, stick to the result.' The exercise is one of reaffirmation: through the re-telling of a former military success the men seek to cast themselves in the role of heroic conquerors, and the narration Anderson adds to the game assists with this: 'Look at how King William, brandishing his golden blade, defies the might of haughty James' (McGuinness 1986: 70). Here, history is called upon to give them confidence and to remind them of who they are and what their people have done. But their re-telling does

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[31] Patrick Pearse (1879-1916), was one of the Irish Republic leaders responsible for the Easter Rising. He was executed by the British for his involvement.

[32] During the Easter Rising the Dublin General Post Office served as the movement's headquarters.

[33] People dedicated to the establishment of an independent Irish Republic.

[34] Scarva is the location where on 13 July each year a symbolic re-enactment of the Battle of the Boyne is staged.

not go to plan as Pyper trips, accidentally unseating the mock William. The others take this as a bad omen.

Just as with the Battle of the Boyne, the Battle of the Somme has come to occupy a similar cultural place and so *Observe the Sons* reveals the significance that the First World War has for the construction of an Ulster identity. Accordingly, analyses of the play have tended to focus on this aspect. However, what is rarely examined is the role that friendship plays – both broadly within the play and the manner in which it too lends itself to the construction of the Ulster identity, as the act of constructing a shared identity also represents an important aspect of the bonding process. This occurs because a cultural identity must encompass more people than a single individual, hence a group and, by association, friends. A cultural identity is predicated on a group mutually constructing, reaffirming and telling stories about itself to each other. Earlier in the chapter it was seen that when old friends gather they will often regale each other with past stories and shared experiences: a process that reaffirms and strengthens friendships. As such, the two are mutually inclusive.

In this sense scene four of *Observe the Sons* serves a similar function. The two stories recounted here act as a means to construct the Ulster identity: the stories define the men as strong, brave, loyal fighters who are opposed to the ideals of Catholicism, and, as Pyper says moments before the battle, are fighting for their home (McGuinness 1986: 73). This act of forming a cultural identity is also a process of bonding. McGuinness is aware of this: it is no accident that the fourth scene is entitled 'Bonding'. It is the growing relationship between the men enacted here that is of real significance. As these stories and activities are carried out it creates and deepens the bonds between the men. But these stories also serve another function: they are also told as a means to distract their minds from the impending attack. These activities then represent a collective attempt to assist and sustain each of the group's members in the face of battle.

The relationships depicted through this final scene can be thought of as being consistent with camaraderie, with their focus being on the collective group. As was stated in the introduction, though, *Observe the Sons* actually presents a dual portrayal of the male relationship: being both camaraderie and friendship. The differences between them have already been discussed and, as will be made evident in the texts still to be examined,

great effort is usually taken to present relationships in wartime in a manner closer to genuine friendship than strict camaraderie. The reason for this is that strict camaraderie does not always allow for a redeeming portrayal of the war experience to form.

In chapter three it was revealed that during the 1960s the war came to be seen as an exercise in waste and futility. By the 1980s this idea was firmly established in the public's psyche and was not to be shifted. *Observe the Sons* actually makes no effort to reposition this broad understanding of the war, indeed none of the plays to be examined in this chapter do. In fact, much of the meaning in *Observe the Sons* is built on the assumption that the war, and pointedly the Battle of the Somme, was an exercise in futility. This is made evident by the fact that all of the characters, with the exception of Pyper, die during the first day of combat. The blurb on the play's jacket even evokes this idea:

> The Somme, where the Ulster division suffered heavy casualties, has […] come to have a sacred place in the Loyalist Protestant mind. It marks the Union sealed with blood. It stands for the ultimate test of Ulster's loyalty; a blood-sacrifice to match any made by Irish nationalists.[35]

Without the massive loss of life the battle has no significance, so the theme of waste must be evoked.

What stands as having risen out of this waste are the male bonds formed in the face of adversity. While such relationships cannot redeem the war itself, in *Observe the Sons* Kenneth Pyper, as an individual, is redeemed by the friendships he makes during his war experience. At the opening of the second scene, he claims that he joined the war to die, 'I enlisted […] because I'd nothing else to do. I enlisted because I'm dying anyway. I want it over quickly' (McGuinness 1986: 19). He has turned his back on his family and country and appears to have given up on life. He makes japes and shows little regard for Ulster, believing that what they are fighting for is illusionary at best. However, by the end of the play a change has occurred, brought about by his growing friendship with the men, and particularly Craig.

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[35] The back cover of *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme,* London: Faber and Faber, 1986.

Their relationship is described by Kiberd as 'offering a countermelody to all the carnage' (Kiberd 2005: 289). 'I turned my ancestors into Protestant gods, so I could rebel against them. I would not serve. I turned my face from their thick darkness,' describes Pyper. But since meeting Craig, 'the same gods have brought me back. Alive, through you' (McGuinness 1986: 47). Craig saves Pyper's life twice, once literally on the battlefield and again through his friendship. The audience learns in old Pyper's opening monologue that after the war he devoted his life to rebuilding the world in the image of his fallen friends (McGuinness 1986: 10). Their passions and their love for Ulster became his love, and so it is their friendships that restored meaning to his life. Pyper's character arc is probably enough to reveal the importance of friendship to the plot; however, issues and portrayals of friendship are rife throughout the whole play.

War can be a force that opposes the formation of genuine friendship, and so efforts tend to be made to overcome this so that a wholly romantic portrayal may be presented. From the start of *Observe the Sons* McGuinness seeks to do this. The elderly Pyper begins the play by reminiscing about his fallen friends: 'Those with me were heroes because they died without complaint for what they believed in. […] The freedom of faith they fought and died for would be maintained' (McGuinness 1986: 10). As Lojek has noted, from the opening of the play an orthodox view of camaraderie is adopted (Lojek 1988: 46). Pyper uses a romantic rhetoric to memorialise and honour his fallen friends. When a friend dies, no matter the circumstances, to believe their life was lost in vain is difficult; the mourning process demands that significance be found, and for this reason camaraderie rises out of the waste of war to be presented as genuine friendship, and it maintains its romantic lustre even in the face of the counter-portrayals that are now so widely accepted.[36] For Pyper it is the very fact that they died that has allowed him to find renewed meaning in life: to prevent their deaths from being in vain, he has adopted their passions and so has ensured the continued survival of their belief.

One of Pyper's main concerns is the idea of what compels the men to fight. Frequently he asks,

'Answer me why we did it. Why we let ourselves be led to extermination?'

[36] See chapter two for soldiers' use of romantic myth to memorialise their fallen comrades.

'Then what are you doing here?'

'Why spend your time here?' (McGuinness 1986: 12, 15 & 22).

The common answer he gets is that they are fighting for Ulster or for the glory of his Majesty the King, or even for their religion. However, during the opening monologue Pyper notes a different reason: 'We claimed we would die for each other in battle' (McGuinness 1986: 12). Although patriotic sentiments encouraged them to enlist, once on the front the motivation becomes something different. A cause begins to seem abstract once the reality of war sets in, and instead the people who help and protect each other gradually take on a greater significance. As Ferguson has stated, this was the key to what men looking back on the war with nostalgia saw as the defining frontline experience: it was the intense friendships and the desire not to let the others down that motivated them to fight on and stick it out (Ferguson 1998: 354). Pyper's opening monologue reveals this.

Many plays seek to accentuate this point; the challenge, though, is to overcome the real-world limitation placed on the formation of genuine friendships in war. In this case history does provide some allowances. At the onset of the First World War the policy of forming 'Pal Battalions' was placed into effect by Lord Kitchener. The name itself acts as recognition of the power friendship could have on the morale and motivation of soldiers. The principle behind the policy was the belief that if men who had grown up together, or came from the same sport's team or work place, were allowed to serve together it would act to reinforce a sense of community and strengthen regimental loyalty (White 2009: 653). As a recruitment tool the Pal Battalions were quite successful as they allowed small communities to raise entire battalions drawn largely from the professional middle-class (White 2009: 653). Under this policy men entered the war with already established friendships. The 36th Ulster division, made from troops solely from Northern Ireland, contributed thirteen such battalions.[37] The drawback to such a recruitment strategy, though, was that a town's entire fighting male population could be wiped out in a single battle. This happened to many communities during the Battle of the Somme, as depicted

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[37] The most famous Pal Battalion came from Accrington, and is itself the subject of the 1981 play *The Accrington Pals*, by Peter Whelan.

in both *Observe the Sons* and *The Accrington Pals*. Because of this the policy was eventually abandoned (Kiberd 2005: 279).

Within *Observe the Sons*, though, the impact of the policy is apparent: Millen and Moore are old childhood friends, as are McIlwaine and Anderson, likewise both Pyper and Craig had met Roulston in his previous occupation as a Protestant minister. And even though Crawford comes into the barrack not knowing anyone, the fact that they all hail from the same geographic location and have a shared culture provides them with instant subjects to bond around, and they spend time discussing the local towns, environs and of course the ever ubiquitous Protestantism. As a result, friendships between the men are able to develop quickly. Further, McGuinness escapes the defining environment of the military setting by presenting the men on leave. In the third scene, 'Pairing', the eight men are placed in four groups of two: Pyper and Craig, Anderson and McIlwaine, Millen and Moore, and Roulston and Crawford.[38] In doing so McGuinness is able to develop unique individual relationships between all of the men, which is of a greater personal significance to each of them than any collective feeling of loyalty towards the unit, or an abstract belief, could be.

Observe the Sons is quite different from many of the other plays examined in this study. Its focus on how the First World War contributed to the modern Ulster cultural identity makes it unique among war plays. However, in the process of creating this, *Observe the Sons* also stands as an early theatrical example of the rise of friendship as a theme that is celebrated within contemporary texts. *Observe the Sons* presents an enactment of the communal process that is undertaken by men who are seeking to establish a cultural identity. This process is one that by its own mechanism also acts to create close bonds between all of the participants. For the men this resulted in a collective feeling of affinity for the cultural entity that is Ulster, and by association an affinity with anyone else affiliated with Ulster. This can be understood as a form of camaraderie, whereby a close-knit group of men direct loyalty and affection towards the collective they belong to. In return, the group empowers and sustains each of its members, giving them the strength to endure the war because they are doing it for the group they love.

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[38] Note, the men who already had a pre-existing relationship are paired together allowing for a level of intimacy to exist between them that would otherwise not have been possible.

This is the traditional power that camaraderie is perceived to have. However, McGuinness takes this portrayal of male relationships one step further, going beyond camaraderie (the love for a corporate collective) to friendship (the love for an individual). This portrayal occurs in the third scene. As discussed, many of the features unique to camaraderie can act to subvert the formation of genuine friendship. To counteract this McGuinness goes to some pains to escape the traditional military settings, specifically placing the characters in one-on-one scenes that are removed from the front. The fact that several of the characters have pre-existing relationships before the onset of the war also assists in quickly establishing their friendships as distinct from strict camaraderie. While camaraderie is shown to help the men cope with their surrounds, in *Observe the Sons* friendship does too, so these individual, more personal friendships serve a similar function. This is apparent during the bridge scene between Millen and Moore, where it is shown how the encouragement and support that the men give each other prevents them from succumbing to fear and defeat. In many ways this scene is symbolic of the whole play.

The individual friendships also serve another function within the play, specifically in relation to Pyper. Pyper is seen as entering the war because he has no purpose in life, but he finds burgeoning meaning born out of his friendship with Craig. As a whole, the two forms of friendship work in unison in *Observe the Sons* to create a portrayal of war whereby the relationships act as the redeeming feature of the men's war experience. While this does not redeem the war itself, it certainly provides the potential to redeem Pyper's character and so creates a dramatically satisfying story for an audience. The next texts to be examined present a continuation of this theme, and camaraderie will be seen to increasingly move into the foreground as a central motif. But, also increasingly, its portrayal will come to be more consistent with that of genuine friendship. Indeed, in *War Horse* there is almost no sense of a collective feeling of devotion or loyalty to the men with whom the main characters serve.

Whitby's *To the Green Fields Beyond*

While issues of friendship and camaraderie are of significance in *Observe the Sons* the play is still, nevertheless, deeply concerned with the construction of an Ulster identity. The First World War plays an important role in this process; however, it is not its sole source. McGuinness makes this apparent as he harks to many events and cultural issues that lay beyond the domain of the war. The next two plays to be examined, though, depict events and raise concerns that are wholly contained within the context of the First World War. Regardless, there are still many parallels between *Observe the Sons, To the Green Fields Beyond* (2000) and *War Horse* (2007).

Compared to many of the plays examined in this study, *To the Green Fields Beyond* does not hold a cultural status of any real consequence. It never enjoyed a commercial success to the same degree as *Journey's End*, *Oh, What a Lovely War!* or *War Horse*; nor is it considered to have any great literary or dramatic significance as *For Services Rendered*, *The Silver Tassie* or even *Observe the Sons* do. A mere fifteen years after its premiere it is today best remembered as the first production Sam Mendes directed after he won the 1999 Best Direction Academy Award for *American Beauty*. Even so, *To the Green Fields Beyond* is of importance as it deals almost exclusively with themes of friendship and camaraderie, and presents them in a way that gives insight to our contemporary imaginings of the war.

Nick Whitby (1963) sets his play in early autumn, 1918. On the edge of a wood the crew of a Mark IV tank are spending a nervous evening before they go into combat the next morning. The play happens in real time over the course of the evening. Although at the time of their introduction Mark IV tanks were largely impervious to small arms weaponry, by the end of the war the Germans had developed armour-piercing bullets and artillery tactics that could render the tank (which only had a top speed of three miles per hour) and its crew extremely vulnerable (Whitby 2000: xiii/xiv). Added to which, on this particular night, despite the fact that numerous observation balloons had noted their location, no counter-measures had been taken to hinder their imminent attack. The lack of enemy artillery has rattled the men; they conclude that the Germans know where they are, but as they appear happy to let them come it seems they are about to walk into a trap.

Once this is established the second half of the play focuses on their debate as to whether they should go as ordered or fake a mechanical fault so as to avoid the carnage.

On the surface their debate rehashes many of the traditional World War One issues, as it revolves around themes of duty and honour on the one hand, and pointlessness and waste on the other. It is a familiar argument: to avoid the battle is to shame their honour, but to go into battle is to go to certain death without making any meaningful contribution to the conflict's outcome. Here, once again, the tradition of depicting the war as futile goes unchallenged. Just as in *Observe the Sons* this concept is accepted as fact, for without it the men's actions lose their significance. The question of how much contribution they will make is never raised, it is accepted by all that their involvement will have no impact in this battle: ultimately it is a futile act. The play does not focus on the meaning of the war; rather it is taken for granted that it is meaningless. Instead it is the bonds that exist between the men, and the importance that these bonds have in helping them to survive in the face of such futility that becomes the real focus of the play. For this reason the war's futility must be taken for granted.

What adds to Whitby's depiction of friendship is not just the devotion they have for each other and the group as a whole; this is to be expected. Rather, it is the manner in which the friendships are enacted. The word friendship is used deliberately here as distinct from camaraderie, for like all the plays examined in this chapter, *To the Green Fields Beyond* transcend the limitations of camaraderie to depict true friendships. Whitby achieves this through a number of devices, the most significant of which is the establishment of a democratic dynamic between the men – something not normally found in a military setting.

By selecting the Tank Corp as the setting for his play Whitby had a number of unique opportunities to evoke the theme of friendship in ways not possible had he been writing about traditional infantry. In the historic note that prefaces the play he states:

> The initial Corps of a thousand men was drawn from the Motor Machine-Gun Service […].
> Recruits were then taken from all regiments and volunteers from the motor engineering
> trades. Although the initial intake was exclusively British, as the Corps dramatically
> expanded, men with the requisite skills were recruited from all over, including Empire
> regiments (among these West Indian) (Whitby 2000: xiii).

Within Whitby's tank crew of eight there are two characters of foreign ethnicity: Dice, who is a Jamaican of African descent, and Lion who is described as being Sikh. This is the first and most obvious representation of the power that serving together can have on the formation of friendships. Here friendship is depicted as having the ability to transcend racial differences, which in 1918 would have been a contentious social issue. It is worth noting that this is almost the exact opposite of what occurs in *Observe the Sons*. There, the men had a shared cultural identity around which they bonded. In *To the Green Fields Beyond* there is no such luxury; however, if anything, it provides the potential for friendships of even greater significance.

That the men share an unusual relationship based on differing ethnicity is overtly raised in the text. Early on an outsider is introduced to the group in the form of an American journalist, Kirkpatrick. He comments: 'You're an usual … collection…' (Whitby 2000: 17). This statement is mistakenly interpreted to mean that they all come from different branches of the armed services. Kirkpatrick has to clarify that he 'meant […] your two negroes.' So naturalised and integrated into the group is the pair that their differing race is not even recognised. Their commander, Child, later explains:

> Perhaps it's also to do with spending one's days in close company, and with people so 'different' from oneself. Very soon what seemed so different becomes invisible, and what is hidden clear (Whitby 2000: 26).

The men have been together for so long, and have experienced so much, that they no longer recognise superficial differences between them. They see themselves as being 'eight bits of a machine' (Whitby 2000: 18), and it is only through this unity that they have been able to survive for as long as they have.

In actuality what these cultural differences allow for is the opportunity for the men to create an insular community that encapsulates their shared heritages. This point reveals itself most tellingly through language use. The play is peppered with slang from start to finish. In the back of the published edition Whitby provides a glossary of terms and it is largely a collection of Cockney rhyming and military slang, along with phrases from

Jamaican and Indian cultures. What results is an eclectic slang language. While many of these terms and phrases would have been in popular usage throughout the military, because of the singular composition of the tank crew they are gifted with a unique brand of language that can only be wholly understood by a person with knowledge of all the cultures from which it borrows. In effect a sub-culture is created that only the initiated can fully comprehend.

At times the language used by these men can become so specialised as to make their meaning almost incomprehensible to an outsider – specifically the audience. To take the opening exchange for example:

> CHILD: No luck?
>
> COSSUM: [*Beat.*] Bogeypoke! [*He suddenly jumps up, opening his knapsack laughing for having successfully fooled them.*] Kinch! Duckboard glide … Bung … Japan… [*He brings out cheese, bread and a long string of black looking sausages.*] And four pound o'mystery!
>
> MO: Dobbs?
>
> COSSUM: Dobbs, mate … ponks like home! Not a whiff o'stiff (Whitby 2000: 3/4).

With the accompanying actions the audience can deduce that they are talking about the food. That Cossum is commenting on the quality of the sausages and comparing them to corpses may be lost, though. As the play progresses this level of obscurity is not maintained; however, we are introduced to such foreign phrases as 'doolally-tap' an Indian expression for crazy, and 'Babu' a Jamaican term for an Asian. No one among the crew ever questions the definition of such expressions, and they all communicate their meaning to each other using these unique terms without any confusion ever arising.

Having these different culturally specific modes of communication creates the effect of a distinct community shared only by those members of the crew. Just as the men in *Observe the Sons* bonded around their shared culture, so too does the same occur here, only in this instant theirs is a hybrid culture of which they are the only members. Whitby is able to highlight the extent of this by introducing an outsider, in the form of the American journalist. By doing so the uniqueness of their shared relationship is made

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evident by a person not initiated, as what is normally naturalised becomes a point of difference.

As previously stated, plays produced during this time attempt to escape the limitations a military setting normally imposes on genuine friendships, and in doing so elevates the relationships to romantic ideals. By depicting the crew as possessing their own subculture, Whitby equips them with a shared identity that acts to bond them to one another. This, however, is only able to occur because the men enjoy a certain level of autonomy from the army as a whole. As a crew they are depicted as isolated from the rest of the military, even from the other tank crews, which they do not appear to interact with. Secondly, with only a crew of eight they have a relatively small number of members, and it is made clear that the composition of this crew has remained unchanged for an extended period of time. All of these factors mean that the men have been able to forge a level of intimacy with one another that would not usually be possible in a typical military environment. As a result, the dynamic between the men has also been allowed to evolve to a degree whereby the normal military restrictions have dissolved to give way to genuine friendship. An example of this is the apparent lack of military hierarchy within the crew.

At the beginning of this chapter it was stated that friendship is a democracy without hierarchies. In war, though, military structure would subvert friendship, especially between men of different ranks. We are able to observe the restrictions that this dynamic can create in *Journey's End*, when Stanhope uses his rank to distance himself from Raleigh's attempts to bond. By contrast, Whitby presents a unit that almost totally ignores rank distinctions. Within the crew Child is the commanding officer, and although he issues orders throughout the play that are for the most part followed, there are a few key moments that reveal his authority is accepted out of a respect his fellows have for him, rather than military protocol. Indeed, there are even moments when his authority can be openly challenged without fear of reprimand. For example, midway through the play Child attacks Kirkpatrick. Ain physically restrains him:

KIRKPATRICK: He attacked me for no reason…
CHILD: Ask him why he's here.

AIN: Ey, enough enough. [*As* CHILD *goes for him again*, AIN *round the middle pinning his arms.*] Easy … easy… [CHILD *continues to struggle, trying to get at* KIRKPATRICK *with the razor.*] Be good, be good.

CHILD: Let go.

AIN: Not till you're velvet…

CHILD: That was an order…

AIN: And I don't give a fuck, old pot … not till you're kiff… (Whitby 2000: 35).

Not only does Ain ignore the order but he goes on to tell Child what to do: hushing him so he does not upset the others and sending him away to release his tension with a prostitute (Whitby 2000: 36). There are no repercussions for Ain, the reason being that their relationship is not one of officer and subordinate, but of friendship. Child was out of line and his friend prevented him from doing something stupid. After the incident Kirkpatrick says to Ain, 'I've heard of men court-martialled for less than you've just done' (Whitby 2000: 36). However, the true extent of this unit's difference is still yet to be revealed to the audience.

The main complication of the play comes when the men realise that they, and the rest of the Tank Corp, are potentially walking into a trap. Instead of blindly following their orders something else happens that is telling of the fact that the relationship they share is a democratic one. The idea is floated that instead of worthlessly sacrificing themselves they should fake a mechanical problem and avoid the battle, so as to live to fight another day. This idea is initially rejected by Child, 'You know what I'm talking about. The rule that says I don't brass, the rule that says there are no rules, except we do our job' (Whitby 2000: 41). Eventually he agrees to resolve this problem in the same way the crew resolves all of their major differences: 'We'll sit down and talk this through in our way.' Each man is offered the chance to share his thoughts, and each man is given a vote as to what they think should be done. 'A majority says go, we go. Ditch her, and we ditch her' (Whitby 2000: 42). Scene five then follows this process.

The arguments presented in the debate are not particularly original, for the men raise many familiar issues. Lion believes that as soldiers they have a duty to fight regardless of the situation. By comparison, Venus does not see any point in committing suicide when they could be of greater use later. Dice and Cossum speak of their own consciences, and

that to duck on the fight would be to shame themselves. In contrast, Mo and Duff simply do not want to throw their lives away if it can be avoided. Ain and Child both refuse to cast a vote, believing it is not their place to either condemn a man to death or force others to shrink on their honour.

While these arguments are familiar, what is of interest is that the process is allowed to occur at all. The debate does something that is usually subverted in relationships defined as camaraderie: it allows for the individual to be asserted. As was previously explained, part of camaraderie entails surrendering oneself to the unit. Here though, each man is recognised for his individuality and given a voice. In this regard, *To the Green Fields Beyond* walks a fine line whereby both aspects of camaraderie and friendship are evoked and exist alongside each other. This is so, because even though each man is afforded the opportunity to voice his opinion, once the decision has been made they must all act as one, regardless of former feelings.

The deadlock is eventually broken when Venus hears the voices of the infantry as they march past their position (Whitby 2000: 58/9). He realises that they too are going to their deaths. Importantly, though, they are relying on the Tank Corps to provide them with support during the battle. Venus comes to the realisation that there are more lives at stake than just this single crew, and to back out would be to abandon these men to a fate he is not willing to face himself. The ideals of camaraderie win out in the end. Without a word, he silently changes his vote and the crew goes on to their deaths.

The play uses a number of techniques to establish the fact that this group of men are not only comrades in the traditional sense, but that their relationship goes beyond, becoming an idealised form of friendship. This has been observed through Whitby's use of ethnic integration and the depiction of a democratic dynamic. The fact is even overtly pointed out by Ain:

Something bigger though came out this war, for *me*, than either living or dying. That's us. Not each of us. Just us. When we click I don't have no fear, of *nothing*. It must be a thousand times I've put my life in your call, you in mine, it never even crossed my mind to think. The fact that you're a bag of buckles, wogs and country inbreds is … is a freak of nature's what it is. It's something … bigger than this war … like kingdom come. It fills me with pride, and hope, and love. It fills me with love (Whitby 2000: 56).

Likewise do the men believe that it is the unique bond they share that has protected them through all the battles they have faced (Whitby 2000: 49). However, even in Ain's speech there is the hint that their relationship encompasses both elements of friendship and camaraderie: 'Not each of us. Just us.' This is the idea that they act as one and together the crew is greater than the sum of its individual members. They have loyalty and affection for each other, and in turn this transposes to the unit as a whole.

Whitby gives two scenes towards the end of the play that portray this. The first comes after they have agreed to go into battle. The eight men form up into what would be their operational positions inside the tank so they can drill the movements for the next day. Here the audience is able to see how each member makes up a vital part of the tank: in effect, they cease to be individuals and become the piece of machinery, which can only come alive when each man is playing his role. They all work in perfect unison on the stage. Whitby notes in the directions, 'its awesomeness should not be in its noise […] but in its astonishing synchronicity' (Whitby 2000: 67).

The second instant comes moments before the close of the play. Mo, who is fearful of going into battle, is comforted by the others. Just as camaraderie is shown to be a sustaining force in *Observe the Sons*, it is shown to perform a similar function here. To comfort Mo they all speak in rhyme, as one:

> DICE: Now we ice…
> Heart of ice…
> Skin of steel…
> Don't fret…
> Don't feel…
> AIN: Take a breath…
> CHILD: That's it, that's it…
> DICE: Shut out death…
> LION: Shut out your mind…
> DICE: See blind…
> CHILD: No thought…
> No fear…

AIN: We're here…

DICE: Death is short…

AIN: Let it go now… Let it go…

LION: You are strong…

DUFF: You're not alone…

DICE: Eight or one…

VENUS: One heart…

DICE: Never 'part…

DUFF: Life's a joke, Mo…

LION: Death is sleep…

DICE: Till day peep… Till sun poke.

AIN: You're with us Mo…

DICE: We late. We late…

AIN: Let's go mate, (Whitby 2000: 69/70).

In effect this presents a union of theme and form, as they talk about being one so too do they speak as one. Together these two scenes give a picture of the men united.

Much like *Observe the Sons*, *To the Green Fields Beyond* also presents a dual portrayal of friendship and camaraderie. The men are shown to share strong social and collective bonds that can be described as camaraderie. And again this bond, just as in *Observe the Sons,* is shown to be one of the significant factors that sustains the men and motivates them to endure the fears and hardships of war, as is pointedly displayed in the final moments of the play. However, this portrayal of camaraderie goes beyond the usual limits in a number of ways. As has been described, the men have created a unique subculture for themselves, and have been in a tight-knit group for so long that they have been able to transcend the restrictions of ethnic differences and military hierarchies. This has allowed the relationships between the men to develop to a level of intimacy not usually experienced in war.

As a result, *To the Green Fields Beyond* provides a powerful depiction of elevated and idealised male friendships. That this is the case is even openly acknowledged within the play: 'We're special, always have been,' even going so far as to say that they are unique among other tank crews, for while others would go in to battle 'scared of each

other, eight stiffs in a tin box […] we went in laughing … a crew' (Whitby 2000: 49). By making this point clear we are given the presentation of a group that is atypical. Whitby then is able to create a portrayal of friendship that can defy the military norm. Ultimately, the portrayal of the men's relationship is romantic: despite the dangers, they commit totally to one another and face them together, as one. While Whitby concedes that this portrayal is atypical, what this chapter reveals is that all of the texts present similar portrayals that can also be described in this way. If this is the case, as an audience we will begin to read these plays not as presentations of the unusual, but rather with continual exposure of the same theme, it will become naturalised and accepted as the norm.

This is not to say that soldiers did not experience strong feelings of devotion, loyalty and love towards each other. It has been shown in this study that for many returned servicemen the friendships and bonds they formed during the war were frequently looked back on with nostalgia and remembered as the great positive that came from their time in service. What this chapter does posit, though, is that within the contemporary theatrical portrayals of the war this theme has been inflated beyond the normal position it would have held, and further, is pushed forward as the central theme in many texts. This has already been seen to take place in *To the Green Fields Beyond* and to a certain extent in *Observe the Sons*. This theme will now be shown to repeat again, although in quite a different way, in *War Horse*.

Stafford's *War Horse*

Whilst *Observe the Sons* and *To the Green Fields Beyond* have been useful presentations of the themes prevalent in contemporary dramatic portrayals of the war, it would be overreaching to claim that either has had a substantial cultural impact. This is especially evident when compared to recent portrayals in film, such as *Blackadder Goes Forth*, *Downton Abbey* or even *Gallipoli* in Australia, each of which has enjoyed large popular followings. However, *War Horse* may well be able to lay claim to being the most

financially successful war play ever staged, outstripping *Journey's End*, *What Price Glory?* and *Oh, What a Lovely War!* in performance numbers alone.[39]

War Horse was originally written as a children's novel by Michael Morpurgo[40] in 1982. In the same year it was runner-up for the Whitbread Book Award. It was then to be another twenty years before it was rediscovered by the public when it caught the attention of Nick Stafford (1959), who adapted the story for stage. *War Horse* opened in the National Theatre in 2007 to almost instant widespread critical acclaim. It transferred to the New London Theatre on the West End in 2009 where it still, at the writing,[41] has an open-ended closing date. Additionally, the play was staged on Broadway from 2011-3, where it won five Tony Awards, including Best Play.[42] The National Theatre has toured the show extensively, with productions staged in the United States, Australia, Germany and China. The production was so successful that it was adapted into a feature film in 2011, directed by Steven Spielberg,[43] which was positively received if not as critically lauded as the stage version.[44]

The tone of *War Horse* is romantic, if thematically unremarkable, as it neither raises new questions nor challenges existing preconceptions of the war. It must be remembered, however, that this is due to the novel having been written for children in the early 1980s (as such, the legacy of the 1960s is still keenly felt). Reviewer for the *Wall Street Journal*, Terry Teachout, wrote of the Broadway production:

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[39] To compare the original Broadway runs for each show: *Journey's End*, 485 performances; *What Price Glory?*, 435 performances; *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, 125 performances; *War Horse*, 718 performances. Figures taken from the Internet Broadway Database: http://www.ibdb.com/index.php

[40] Michael Morpurgo (1943), although best known for *War Horse*, is a prolific English novelist who has served as the Children's Laureate from 2003-5.

[41] 29/07/2015.

[42] The other awards it won were for Best Direction, Best Scenic Design, Best Lighting Design and Best Sound Design. It was also awarded a special Tony for its puppetry design.

[43] While the novel is presented wholly from the point of view of Joey, the horse, both the stage and film adaptations adopt a more traditional narrative structure. This means the film is an adaptation of the play as opposed to the novel, and as such it follows the narrative structure of the play very closely.

[44] Although the film was nominated for numerous awards it won none at either the Oscars or the Golden Globes. In total box office revenue it has, however, earned in excess of $US177m, worldwide.

Nick Stafford […] has taken a book that was written for children and tried to give it the expressive weight of a play for adults. Not surprisingly [the plot] can't stand the strain. Dramatic situations that work perfectly well in the context of the book play like Hollywood clichés on stage.[45]

On seeing the production it is hard to disagree. The play evokes many of the accepted preconceptions about the war as they were established during the 1960s. It is, however, important to note that these preconceptions have also been evoked by all of the plays examined in this chapter, and are still readily accepted by contemporary audiences.

Although traditional stories of love overcoming adversity will always find a certain level of popularity, the true appeal of this production comes from its innovative and visually stunning use of puppetry. As a piece of theatre it is built on pure spectacle, presented on an epic level that is awe-inspiring to witness. The puppets themselves are no less impressive. Designed by the South African Handspring Puppet Company, the centrepieces of the production are five life-sized horses, each requiring three puppeteers to operate. Alongside the horses are various other animals, with the goose as a particular audience favourite. The effect is that the war itself is elevated to an epic level, and arguably the event warrants this; however, it makes it all the more easy for Stafford's portrayal to slip into romanticism.

The play begins in 1912, and the first six scenes are concerned with matters wholly removed from the war. Joey is a foal purchased at auction by local Devon farmer, Ted Narracott, after a bidding war. Although he wins he can ill-afford the animal, especially as there is no practical task it can perform on his farm. These opening scenes focus on the developing relationship between Joey and Ted's son, Albert. Gradually Albert trains Joey, who is initially skittish around people, to trust him and, what would be the first act, culminates with Joey ploughing a field. This is a significant feat as Joey is the wrong breed of horse for this work, and had he failed he would have been lost, in a bet, to Ted's landlord, Arthur Warren. Already at this early stage it is possible to see how, when performed, this scene would be played for heightened sentimentality. The pair is required

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[45] For full review:

http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748704529204576257154004608860?mg=reno64-

to overcome adversity to stay together, and in the process they forge a strong bond. This becomes the play's primary motif.

After war is declared the plot becomes more episodic. Joey is sold to the army by Ted, unbeknownst to his son. From this point the play focuses on a recounting of Joey's experiences: he takes part in two disastrous cavalry charges, is captured by the Germans and made to pull an ambulance, he then escapes and finds refuge with French civilians on a farm, but finally ends up entangled in wire in no-man's-land. In the meantime, Albert joins the army for the sole purpose of finding Joey. Against all odds the pair is reunited, with Albert saving Joey mere seconds before being euthanised. Overlooking the drawn-out sentimentality of the plot, the depiction of the war is almost wholly consistent with that which was established during the 1960s. Within the context of *War Horse* it can only be assumed that the conflict is a meaningless one. None of the characters ever examine their reasons for taking part in the war. Albert is the only exception; however, he enlists only so he may find Joey. The war is given no context, the battles no meaning and the characters no purpose. *War Horse* does not seek to form any sort of historic understanding of the war; rather, these reasons remain vague and the plot relies on the fact that the First World War stands out in popular culture as the archetype of war as a futile waste.

To build on this, the play also draws on the idea that the war was fought using outdated tactics, hence the persistent use of cavalry. It is true that in 1914 the cavalry was still an important part of the British army. At the outbreak of the war over 100,000 horses and 17 regiments were deployed to France (Pagliero 2012). However, they were only actively used in battle on rare occasions, significantly at the onset of the war during the Battle of Mons in August 1914, and again at the close when fighting conditions opened. The advent of the machine gun and trench warfare quickly revealed the unsuitability of cavalry, and although the Battle of Mons was a success, it came with a high casualty rate. By the beginning of 1915 the German army had largely converted their cavalry forces to infantry units, likewise had the British, although they would continue to hold a number of reserves in anticipation of a breakthrough, notably during the Battle of the Somme

(Pagliero 2012). Despite these British intentions conditions rarely allowed for the use of cavalry up until the closing months of the war.[46]

Traditional cavalry was certainly deployed in the First World War and suffered heavy losses initially. However, *War Horse* emphasises its use and the extent of time over which it was tactically committed to, making the implication that it was still widely utilised by both sides into March 1915 (Stafford 2007: 53). Early in the play Joey's cavalry unit is decimated by German machine guns (Stafford 2007: 36/7); in a traditional trope, though, the British army remains committed to the cavalry and doggedly refuses to change tactics. Another charge occurs and it meets a similar end (Stafford 2007: 44/5). While this is a popular representation of what occurred and helps to establish the futility of war theme, it is an inflated portrayal, influenced by traditions established in the 1960s, which have gone largely unquestioned in theatrical portrayals up to the modern day.

When it comes to the portrayal of the German soldiers the play also follows traditions first established by *Oh, What a Lovely War!*. By this stage of the study three distinct categories of authorial representations of the enemy can now be identified: they may be vilified, humanised or ignored. Virtually no play written after the close of hostilities vilifies the Germans, although it was a common enough theme through the war. The majority of plays written in the direct aftermath tended to ignore the Germans, leaving them as a vague entity, rarely seen, bunkered down in their own trenches. In these plays the concept of 'war' is seen as the real enemy, as is the case in *Journey's End, For Services Rendered, What Price Glory?* and *The Silver Tassie*; even *Observe the Sons* and *To the Green Fields Beyond* fit this category. The choice to humanise the enemy is, surprisingly, rarely done, although today it is readily accepted that the common soldiers on both sides were essentially the same: victims, caught in a conflict over which they had no agency. *War Horse* then, like *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, is one of the few plays that actively works to humanise the common German soldiers. After the second failed charge Joey and Topthorn (another horse) fall into German hands and are made to pull a hospital wagon. They are placed in the care of Friedrich, a former cavalry man, who is

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[46] This only applies to the Western Front. On the Eastern Front and in Palestine cavalry was still deployed with some success. Notably, in October 1917 at the Battle of Beersheba the Australian 4th Light Horse Regiment conducted what is widely considered to be the last successful traditional cavalry charge.

representative of the everyman, essentially a simple, good-hearted person caught up in a war, trying his best to make it through.

Despite these thematic parallels with *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, *War Horse* portrays a more sanitised version of events. The play's origin as a children's story in part explains this. Irrespective of the fact that many of the characters die, including Friedrich, their deaths have no impact. Their characters are largely undeveloped so the audience has no great affinity with them; and when they die no other characters ever seem affected. Additionally, there are no consequences for the characters that survive: there is no evidence that shell shock exists and the multiple deaths appear to mean little to those left behind. At the close of the play Albert and Joey are reunited and shown returning to their farm unscathed, both physically and psychologically, and it is assumed that they will return to their lives without any repercussions.

The scope of the play is very limited as the war's meaning and consequences are not addressed at any point. So although there are many thematic similarities between *War Horse* and *Oh, What a Lovely War!* it is evident that *War Horse* has not gone to any pains to align or define the war in the same manner as *Oh, What a Lovely War!*. In actuality *War Horse* is relying on the fact that its audience has a preconceived understanding of the war, and it is merely tapping into this accepted cultural understanding. This is revealing of the influence representations of the war established in the 1960s still hold, as they remain the dominant and largely unchallenged perception of what the war was like and what its historic significance is. Essentially the war was meaningless; men were sacrificed to the vague whims of an elite class and led by out of touch generals using outdated tactics. *War Horse* needs only to gesture towards these ideas for its audience to fill in the blanks and accept the plot.

While this is the case, what *War Horse* continues to reveal is that a celebration of friendship in wartime has now become the primary focus of contemporary texts. Indeed, it is the driving narrative force within the play, for while other issues long associated with the war are placed in the periphery, friendship is pushed to the centre. The only difference in this example is one of the human participants has been replaced with a horse. The first six scenes of the play, which take place before the declaration of war, are devoted to

establishing the friendship between Albert and Joey.[47] Joey is initially shown to be timid and unwilling to let any human approach him. Through persistence Albert is first able to win Joey's trust (Stafford 2007: 13/14), before teaching him to take a rider and then finally to plough a field. In overcoming these trials, which include dealing with Albert's alcoholic father, the pair forms a strong bond.

The friendship between the two is sustained throughout the rest of the play despite their separation. Albert is motivated to enlist for no other reason than to find Joey (Stafford 2007: 43). The audience never learns what Albert's, or any other character's, opinion of the war is; much like in *Journey's End* the characters all appear to accept it, and are participating because it is the natural thing to do. While it is friendship that drives Albert to the army, theirs is not one that has been forged in war. As discussed, this is a common occurrence: contemporary portrayals of war elevate male friendships to a romantic ideal that is often unobtainable in the environment of battle. Establishing the relationship prior to the onset of hostilities is one method frequently used to transcend this. While *War Horse* can certainly be read as a celebration of Albert and Joey's friendship, given the fact that this friendship exists independent of the war and that they do not even interact during the war, it is possible to argue that the type of relationship celebrated in these war texts is not necessarily conducive to the war environment, indeed the war is a force that separates them.

However, within the play there is another friendship that is forged through battle: the relationship between the two horses, Joey and Topthorn, which can be read in the context of the play as operating in the same way as any human relationship. The pair encounter each other for the first time in scene nine, and they are shown to quickly form a bond. Stafford's stage direction states, 'they become friends,' and that a 'piece of elastic is between them' (Stafford 2007: 34). Their friendship continues to develop in the same manner that soldiers' do: through shared hardship, mutual experiences of battle, and having to rely on one another for survival. As cavalry they face two charges together and escape to the German lines after their unit is destroyed.

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[47] It is significant to note that Albert and Joey have no interaction with each other after the declaration of war. Their relationship is solely based around events that occurred whilst removed from the conflict.

For the remainder of the play the pair is inseparable (until Topthorn's death), and their relationship displays traits usually associated with the ideal soldiers' bond. When being forced to pull German artillery Topthorn is shown to struggle with the load, and it is only through Joey's encouragement that the pair is able to carry on (Stafford 2007: 68). This moment is heightened in the film when Joey literally places himself on the pulling team in Topthorn's place, thus saving him at his own risk, once again displaying the ideal of physical self-sacrifice for another. Joey's devotion to Topthorn is displayed a final time after the latter's death. Topthorn eventually dies from exhaustion; moments later a tank rolls onto the stage, levelling itself at Joey. Joey is shown to be unwilling to leave his friend and remains behind until the last second in a final attempt to protect Topthorn (Stafford 2007: 77). Parker-Starbuck attests that the tank may be read as being symbolic of the advancement of technology that occurred during the First World War, specifically whereby the tank came to fill the role cavalry once played in the army (Parker-Starbuck 2013: 379).

It is curious to note that while *Observe the Sons* and *To the Green Fields Beyond* both still present relationships that can be described as containing elements of camaraderie and friendship, *War Horse* does not. No character displays any sort of feeling that could be described as camaraderie. Albert shows no affinity for his unit, or the men with whom he serves. Albert follows orders, and interacts amicably with another soldier, David, but at no point does either character express any devotion, love or loyalty for the unit to which they are attached. Even when stating what helps him to endure the conditions David says it is the thought of his girl back home (Stafford 2007: 56), the support of comrades does not feature. Friedrich is also shown to have little regard for the men he serves with; he even abandons his unit, leaving them to go into battle without him. Instead, there are numerous examples of strong individual relationships being formed between Albert and Joey, Topthorn and Joey, and Friedrich with both Topthorn and Joey. This replacement of traditional camaraderie with genuine friendship acts as a sign of the continual growth of this theme in contemporary culture.

Ultimately, the play is a reaffirmation of friendship. Albert is able to save Joey from being euthanised in the penultimate scene. The pair is reunited and they are able to return home together. So singularly focused on this theme is the play that by all appearances the

pair seems to have escaped four years of war without suffering any lasting consequences. The play is a portrayal of the devotion of friendship, which although forged outside of the war environment, is, nevertheless, tested and strengthened by the obstacles that separated the pair. The process of overcoming these obstacles elevates their friendship to revered and celebrated heights. Albert does after all willingly enlist in the army, placing himself at personal risk, for the purpose of saving Joey. Once again, *War Horse* shows that while representations of the war have settled on those established in the 1960s, contemporary plays take friendship as their main theme and present them as a celebration.

Stallings & Anderson's *What Price Glory?*

During this chapter the assertion has been made that friendship, as a significant theme, has only been a recent phenomenon in theatrical representations of the First World War.[48] While other plays have been written that do not necessarily engage with this theme, the celebration of friendship is a theme that is almost totally absent from plays that pre-date the 1980s. None of the plays taken into consideration in the previous chapters focused on the importance that friendship had for the men who served during the war.[49] This may be unexpected given the fact that it has long been recognised that the relationships formed between the men were of great significance to them, and made up a large part of their war experience.

Since the end of the war non-combatants have been aware of the unique bond shared by these men: as discussed earlier, many soldiers would only feel comfortable reliving past experiences with others whom had been there. This dynamic forms part of the civilian/soldier divide, which is itself part of the counter-language tradition, as explored in chapter two. Regardless, the theatre surrounding the events of the war is largely devoid of

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[48] Other plays of this period (1980-2013) that take friendship as one of their central themes include Whelan's *The Accrington Pals* (1981), McDonald's *Not About Heroes* (1982), Bryden's *The Big Picnic* (1994) and Murphy's *Absent Comrades* (1997). Weir's film *Gallipoli* (1980) and Condon's *Gods and Monsters* (1998) can also be seen to fit into this category.

[49] *Journey's End* may be seen as an exception, particularly the relationship between Stanhope and Osborne.

this theme prior to 1980. Furthermore, texts can be pointed to that actively depict animosity between men who served together. At this point I would like to briefly diverge chronologically and from Britain to examine *What Price Glory?*[50] (1924), written by Laurence Stallings (1894-1968) and Maxwell Anderson (1888-1959).

Of its own accord *What Price Glory?* holds an important place in the history of American theatre.[51] Along with O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, and Sidney Howard's *They Knew What They Wanted*,[52] *What Price Glory?* is noted as ushering in a new period in American drama. They marked the beginning of realism on the American stage, specifically in their extensive use of vernacular and profanity (Jacobs 2005: 309/10). This began a shift away from formality and decorum in stage dialogue. Although shocking at the time, the play's real significance lies in its treatment of the war. As has been discussed in previous chapters, in the aftermath of the war there remained a tendency for audiences to want portrayals that remained positive in tone and continued to engage with the old mythic notions of heroism. Ronald Wainscott notes that across the Atlantic there was a similar trend:

> Although there were some fresh attempts at tragic, violent, and psychologically scathing material, most treatments of the war experience were comic or sentimentally melodramatic until *What Price Glory* (Wainscott 1997: 8).[53]

The play itself has frequently been lauded as portraying a realistic depiction of war,[54] in a manner similar to *Journey's End*, without, however, slipping into nostalgic

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[50] Although the play was originally published without the question mark in the title I have chosen to include it as this is how it appears in the published collection of *Twenty-Five Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre*, edited by John Gassner, New York: Crown Publishers, 1952, which is the text this study references. When quoting resources that mention the play by title I have preserved their author's preference of adding or omitting the question mark.

[51] The play has also been adapted into two films: once as a silent film in 1926, directed by Raoul Walsh, and again in 1952 by John Ford. Walsh also directed a musical version of the story in 1929 under the title *The Cock-Eyed World*.

[52] All three plays were first performed in 1924.

[53] For a full analysis of early American portrayals of the war on stage see chapter two of Wainscott's study, *The Emergence of the Modern American Theatre 1914—1929*.

romanticism. The play is certainly satirical in tone, and denounces the war in several passages as having achieved little, aligning it thematically with *For Services Rendered*. Even so, the play could not be described as simply anti-war, with one critic of the day, Heywood Broun, lamenting that the play depicted the war as ultimately being fun (Krutch 1957: 36). However, to think of *What Price Glory?* in terms of its moralistic leaning towards war may be a futile task. Joseph Krutch provides an account of the play's attitude to war that is worth quoting at length:

> The purpose of the play was to discover how the experience of two uncultivated but emancipated individuals who found themselves committed to a conflict which they were unable to idealize could be arranged into a satisfactory pattern. In another age their experiences would have taken shape around the ideas of patriotism, heroism, and honour. Their exaltations and their sufferings would have acquired a meaning by reference to these fixed points. But for these particular heroes these particular fixed points no longer existed. They could no more reconcile themselves to their adventure by conceiving themselves as heroic defenders of a mystic father-land then they could dignify their interlude with the farmer's buxom daughter by attributing to it the traditional values of romantic love. When life becomes as painful and as precarious as theirs was, then the human need to make life justify itself becomes desperately acute, and, in their case, the justification had to be made in terms of that witty animality which alone had been left to them (Krutch 1957: 39).

Within this can be seen the makings of the crisis that arose in the war's aftermath, namely the desire to create meaning out of what had happened. As previously discussed, plays that sought to strip away the former romantic imagery associated with the war met hostility from the theatre-going public. While *What Price Glory?* is certainly grappling with a conflict it perceives as being devoid of meaning, it never takes itself too seriously. Instead, for the most part, the audience's focus is brought to bear on the rivalry between the two protagonists. In doing so Stallings and Anderson may have helped assure *What Price Glory?* its commercial success.[55]

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[54] Stallings had served on the Western Front. During the course of the war he lost his left leg.

[55] *What Price Glory?* ran at the Plymouth Theatre from 3 September 1924 until 12 September 1925, for 435 performances, making it one of the most successful plays to depict the First World War ever staged.

There is a great deal that could be written on *What Price Glory?* in relation to both its place in the history of American theatre and its portrayal of the war. However, for the purpose of this study the discussion will be restricted to the representation of male relationships, and in particular those that can be defined as being homosocial. In her study, *Between Men* (1985), Eve Sedgwick defines a friendship that exists between people of the same gender as being homosocial. However, this is specifically applied to activities of 'male bonding' that operate in a social setting that frequently has a fear of the homosexual (Sedgwick 1985: 1). For Sedgwick there is no distinct difference between the homosocial and the homosexual, rather she conceives of the two as operating on a continuum. In contemporary culture, though, the homosexual has become taboo and, as a result, issues pertaining to male friendship, or the homosocial, have to be mediated through the use of an intermediary, in order to avoid the risk of being interpreted as homosexual. Referring back to the beginning of this chapter, this can be seen as keeping in line with current thought.

Sedgwick approaches her subject from a feminist perspective; as such her study is largely devoted to examining how male relationships make use of an intermediating female figure, which offsets any homosexual overtones a close male friendship might otherwise convoke. War, though, represents one of the few settings society deems as acceptable for close male relations to form. In addition, war also provides a space almost exclusively populated by males. It is for these reasons that Sedgwick's work has not been evoked in this study until now. However, *What Price Glory?* stands as the exception among the theatre of the First World War and provides a key example of male relationships developing along homosocial lines.

Stallings and Anderson set their play in an Allied-occupied French village. The plot follows the rivalry of Sergeant Quirt and Captain Flagg as they compete for the favours of the local innkeeper's daughter, Charmaine. This three-pronged relationship constitutes what Sedgwick defines as an erotic triangle. These are relationships where an object of desire is fought for by two rivals, such that one may become the lover. In this situation the female acts almost totally as an intermediary for the real relationship to play out, that of the rivalry between the two men. In *What Price Glory?* the audience quickly learns of the long running sexual rivalry that has existed between Quirt and Flagg. They had previously

served together in China and Cuba:[56] on the first occasion Quirt had stolen Flagg's girl, and on the second Flagg stole Quirt's (Anderson & Stallings 1924: 64). This pattern is now set to repeat itself. Quirt has been called to the unit to relieve Flagg whilst he goes on eight days' leave. Flagg has hardly left camp before Quirt sets about trying to win over Charmaine.

It is important to note that neither Flagg nor Quirt has any genuine affection for Charmaine. As Krutch explained, Charmaine represents that 'animality' – a brief pleasure that is allowed to the men between the brutalities of battle. She is little more than an object to the men, and as a character functions primarily as a device. By turn, Charmaine has no true affection for either man and will willingly offer her favours to whoever seeks them. This allows the play to be solely a competition between the two men, for if either can outwit the other they are automatically guaranteed her favour. Although the pleasures offered by Charmaine are desired by both men, as Quirt states: 'it's a small world but the number of soldiers' sluts is numerous' (Anderson & Stallings 1924: 64), making it evident that she is not the only person capable of delivering them.

This is an important feature of the homosocial relationship: Charmaine acts as a mediator through which the real relationship is enacted. Indeed, Charmaine is not selected as an object of desire because of any particular attribute she holds, but because she has previously been selected by the person deemed to be a rival. The choice to select the other as their rival is made in recognition of the fact that they actually respect the other's abilities, even if grudgingly, and so each has anointed the other as being worthy of entering into a rivalry with. On their first meeting Flagg states:

> Well, Quirt, I'm glad to see you, because if there was ever a good soldier needed I need one here, and you're as good as there is; but I'm damned if I take any particular joy in meeting you again. You've been poison to me everywhere I've served with you (Anderson & Stallings 1924: 64).

Quirt shares this sentiment. This opening exchange sets the tone for the rest of the play.

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[56] These are presumably references to the Battle of Peking in 1900 and the Second US Occupation of Cuba in 1906.

Although the relationship between Quirt and Flagg can be understood in terms of the homosocial, it still, nevertheless, presents a portrayal that is at odds with the classic depiction of camaraderie we have come to expect in fictional accounts of war. Charmaine is selected as an object of desire merely so Quirt can spite Flagg. Sedgwick states that in these relationships the world is not shaped by a traditional brotherhood view, but by extreme compulsory and intensely volatile mastery and subordination (Sedgwick 1985: 26). Although respect exists between the men, their relationship is one of intense sexual rivalry, driven by a compulsion to undermine and subvert the other at every possible opportunity.

The only thing that causes them to set aside their attempts of one-upmanship is the war. During the second act Flagg, through his cunning, manages to entrap Quirt, such that he has to marry Charmaine. Although both men want her neither has any intention of marrying her because of the financial restrictions such an arrangement would place on them. Quirt, though, is able to get out of the ceremony when he discovers that their unit is about to move up the line. 'And I suppose if I don't marry her you'll lock me up. If you think you can take your men tonight without a first sergeant, you lock me up' (Anderson & Stallings 1924: 73). Flagg immediately relents. The war takes precedence over their grudge. This occurs again at the end of the play. The pair has just had another fight, this time shots have been fired, but Quirt manages to escape. Moments later Flagg is informed that the unit is once again to move up the line. Quirt, now with an opportunity to finally have Charmaine, passes it up, and instead leaves with the rest of unit.

While the men have no affection for each other their loyalty to their profession and the war is absolute. Flagg defines their attitude to the war:

> There's something rotten about this profession of arms, some kind of damned religion connected with it that you can't shake. When they tell you to die, you have to do it, even if you're a better man than they are (Anderson & Stallings 1924: 88).

Both men follow this philosophy. No matter how strong their hatred for the other is they will always set it aside when ordered to do so.

This is probably the opposite of what would normally be expected. Our expectations would be for the men to display a loyalty to their friends so strong that it transcends their fear and hatred for the war and compels them to remain, because you cannot let your mates down. This is a commonly recurring theme, and is all too evident in *Observe the Sons* and *To the Green Fields Beyond*. However, in this play there is little loyalty for the men with whom they fight. In the second act, when the unit has been deployed to a disputed town, Quirt suffers a superficial wound to his leg. He expresses glee, for this means he has an opportunity to leave the others in the thick of the fight and return to Charmaine. He has no regrets over this abandonment and even taunts Flagg:

> Think of her sitting on my lap, lighting my pipe in the kitchen, and you dodging machine guns. I wonder I don't burst out crying. You know, I wouldn't wonder if you got bumped off and never came back. As a matter of fact I hope you damn well get your head blown off (Anderson & Stallings 1924: 81).

Flagg accuses Quirt of deliberately wounding himself: 'God damn you, Quirt, I believe you stuck your leg out' (Anderson & Stallings 1924: 81). Although this is denied by Quirt, the matter is left ambiguous; however, it seems unlikely, given his aforementioned devotion to the soldiering profession. What must also be remembered, though, is in this situation Quirt is not only abandoning Flagg but he is also leaving the whole unit, many of whom are young, inexperienced recruits. Quirt's only concern, though, is to spurn Flagg; any other consequences his actions might have do not even warrant consideration.

There are some sections of the play where a genuine concern is shown for the lower ranked men: for example, when Private Leiwsohn is mortally wounded both Quirt and Flagg attempt to comfort him (Anderson & Stallings 1924: 82). But aside from these isolated incidents the play consistently presents men who share no special affinity for each other, with their loyalty going to their profession long before any other living person or even the unit with which they serve. If *What Price Glory?* seems to be an exception among the plays examined in this study, let us return briefly to Sean O'Casey's play of the same period, *The Silver Tassie* (1928).

A similar theme of sexual rivalry can be seen to exist between Harry and his best friend, Barney. To recap, Harry is wounded in the war and loses the use of his legs. When

this happens Barney takes his girlfriend and then actively shuns his former comrade, finding his presence now distasteful: 'We'll watch for a chance to shake him off, an' if he starts again we'll make him take his tangled body somewhere else' (O'Casey 1928: 102/3). Again this kind of relationship is not one that we would expect to find in contemporary portrayals of war. These two men have served together in battle, it would be expected that a bond would now exist between them, a bond that is perceived as being the most powerful form of friendship. For audiences in the post-war period, though, this theme does not appear to be a prerequisite.

Looking back at these earlier plays, written in the 1920s, it becomes evident that friendship did not occupy the same idealised place it does today. There can be no denying that soldiers held a special affection for the men with whom they served, and that in the aftermath of war their former comrades became some of the few people they were capable of opening up to and sharing their past experiences with, for they were perceived as being the only ones capable of fully appreciating what had happened. While this is the case, it has only been in recent years that these relationships have been elevated to the idealised position they now hold in contemporary society. This is reflected in the plays examined.

What is now evident in contemporary theatrical portrayals of the war is a broad acceptance of many of the themes established during the 1960s. Each of the plays examined dramatically relies on the undisputed principle that as a conflict the First World War was a pointless one, in which millions of men were sent to fight in squalid conditions to suffer meaningless deaths. While this theme first began to find its way onto stages during the 1920s, audiences were unwilling to accept it and instead preferred plays that maintained many of the former ideals of heroism, duty and honour associated with the romance of the pre-war years. This desire to maintain a semblance of meaning and purpose in the conflict is the same compulsion that has caused friendship to appear as a central theme in these contemporary plays.

This theme creates a redeeming quality for the war. While friendship is not capable of redeeming the war itself, it is, however, capable of redeeming the war experiences of the soldiers. In this regard, the importance of reading the war as an exercise in futility can be understood. The friendships are shown to function as a means to support and sustain

the soldiers in the face of so much waste. If the war is not read as meaningless the friendships lose their dramatic potency. This reveals that the rise of friendship as a central theme leads directly from the traditions established in the 1960s.

While it cannot be disputed that the relationships shared by the soldiers were of great significance to them during the war, this chapter has revealed that the theme is frequently idealised and inflated to occupy a position that, under normal military conditions, would not have been possible. This is best observed in the depiction of relationships going beyond camaraderie to become genuine friendships, which occurs increasingly through *Observe the Sons* and *To the Green Fields Beyond* until, in *War Horse*, there are no readily identifiable expressions of traditional camaraderie, it having been replaced in favour of individual friendships.

These idealised friendships are all presented as being, to a certain extent, atypical of the military environment. However, as all of these plays engage with a similar style of portrayal it has the effect of naturalising the relationships such that they will be accepted by audiences as the norm. As a result, contemporary depictions represent a return to romanticism, as the soldiers' relationships are elevated, idealised and mystified to an extent not experienced by the men at the time. We must be careful, though, not to conflate this with the romantic traditions explored in chapter one. The romantic traditions chronicled here do not glorify or justify the war, as former romantic traditions sought to do. Indeed, in order for these relationships to be elevated they are dependent on a reading of the war that portrays it as fundamentally meaningless. Only then will the friendships be seen to redeem the war experience of the soldiers. Audiences today may no longer accept romantic portrayals of war as accurate depictions; however, the popular success of plays like *War Horse* reveals that audiences are more than willing to accept these idealised portrayals of friendship in its place. In many ways, this has become the new, modern, romantic myth of the war.

Conclusion

At the going down of the sun…

<div style="text-align: right">—LAURENCE BINYON</div>

While the body of work constituting the theatre of the Great War is neither as vast nor as readily recognisable as the poetry, prose or film, it has nevertheless been shown to occupy an important cultural position within British society, as it both influences and is indicative of the ever-changing public perception of the conflict. Indeed, some of the most influential texts to portray the war have been works of theatre: *Journey's End*; *Oh, What a Lovely War!* and *War Horse* are each representative of broad trends that existed, both in the theatre and the wider cultural environment. Each play had a role in shaping the dominant public perception of the war. As posited at the onset of this project, history is not a stable entity but is ever-shifting and -changing. The theatrical works that portray the First World War are reflective of this fact, and through the course of this project the public's fluctuating attitude has been charted from the time of the war's declaration in 1914 to the current day. As such, we are now in a position to draw some assertions, not only about the nature of the theatre that portrayed the war, but also about the audiences that consumed those plays.

Since the onset of the war there have been two opposing paradigms that continue to exert their influence on theatrical portrayals. On the one hand there is romance and myth. These forms of representation seek to instil meaning and significance into the conflict. On the other hand there is futility, nihilism and the absurd. These readings are built on the belief that the First World War was a conflict without meaning, and only precipitated the needless deaths of millions. Although these two positions seem diametrically opposed, they frequently work in tandem. By examining the theatre that portrayed the war since 1914, we are able to chart how each position has altered perceptions of the war and rose in dominance only to be eventually supplanted by its opposing counterpart in a continual cycle.

At the outbreak of war romantic myths associated with the Victorian and Edwardian eras were readily attached to the conflict. These ideals were born out of popular literary traditions stretching back over one hundred years and carried with them concepts of honour, duty, nobility and loyalty – all beliefs that instilled meaning. Likewise, the war itself was seen as a just cause: Germany was cast as the barbaric enemy of civilisation: they were a destructive people who would wantonly destroy everything held to be virtuous. This is all too evident when looking at plays like *Armageddon* or *Der Tag*; and even subtler writings, such as *The Sniper* and *The Mayor of Stilemonde*, readily evoke this theme. For those who enlisted and fought at the time, the war had a clear purpose and objective.

Of course, these were mythic representations, which could not be sustained by reality. Conditions on the front were harsh, and once there many soldiers came to appreciate that the romantic constructions associated with war were grounded primarily in myth and unrepresentative of their own experiences. Inevitably, feelings of disillusionment were to follow. In the aftermath of war counter-language arose as a reaction against mythic constructions. This represents the first of these cyclic shifts. However, the desire to extract meaning from the war was still high in its aftermath, especially for those mourning the loss of loved ones – this was true for veterans and civilians alike. As a result, although portrayals reacting against mythic constructions were coming into prominence during this period, those that maintained a romantic lustre proved to be the most popular, largely because these texts continued to instil a meaning into the conflict that the grieving so desperately desired.

Gradually, though, as time passed, as more historians began to reevaluate the war, and as the poetry of Owen, Sassoon and Graves began to rise in popularity, the opinion that the war represented a pointless endeavour that precipitated the needless deaths of millions finally came to supplant romance as the dominant perception. The advent of the Second World War assisted in this, as its very occurrence was perceived as bearing testament to the fact that the First World War had been incapable of resolving the initial grievances upon which it had been fought. Other traditions – like the war being understood as a class conflict, the recasting of the German soldiers as victims akin to the Allies, and the commanders' portrayal as incompetent fools – also arose during this

period. While not all of these themes have been maintained since the 1960s, the undisputed belief in the war's lack of meaning has remained unchallenged.

Although this may be the case, the drive to create meaning did not abate. Despite the fact that the war is now broadly accepted as having achieved nothing, a realignment has taken place in recent years that seeks to instil meaning back into the conflict. Focus has been placed on the friendships forged during the war; these relationships have been celebrated as examples of the idealised form of male bonding. To this end they have the ability to redeem the war experiences of the soldiers and so overcome the futility it is perceived as possessing. Ironically, this reading is predicated on the war being a futile act. Regardless, the focus on male relationships that has taken place since the 1980s represents the final shift in the war's portrayal. In effect these portrayals represent a resurgence of romance (albeit a different kind from that seen during the war's enactment) and by association it re-establishes a higher meaning that can be attributed to the conflict, despite the belief that historically it had been pointless.

The same broad trend can be seen to play out in other cultural activities outside of the theatre. For example, in Australia during the 1960s and 70s ANZAC Day celebrations were in decline. Alan Seymour in *The One Day of the Year* gives a portrayal of how new generations had come to look on the war as a source of shame and needless waste. This is consistent with the cultural attitude seen in the theatre of the 1960s. Yet today, by all accounts ANZAC Day is enjoying a resurgence, as the recently passed one hundredth anniversary of the Gallipoli landings testifies. Media and ANZAC Day events were all enthusiastically attended, without any sign of the rhetoric of despair or defeat. In Australia this campaign is seen as having been part of the nation's baptism of fire – it is representative of the young country finally coming into its own. Much like the celebration of camaraderie, this is a myth built upon the belief that the war had been a futile endeavour. Yet, through this kind of rhetoric meaning is instilled into the conflict, and it is now looked on as being a source of pride and a cause for, if not strictly celebration, than certainly reverence.

All of this may make it appear that portrayals of war will naturally tend towards romanticism, in one form or another. However, I would rather say that it is a human tendency for us to recalibrate towards an opposite whenever we find ourselves in excess

of a single quality. So, just as the Enlightenment led to an interest in the Gothic, so too do overly romantic portrayals lead to an interest in nihilism, and vice versa. Equilibrium and balance are what we desire.

To this end, while it is tempting to think of these two paradigms as being fundamentally opposed to each other, it is important to recognise that, more often than not, the two work in unison. This is especially true of the most successful plays to have been produced. Although it is possible to point to plays that overwhelmingly fall into one category or the other, with the exception of *Oh, What a Lovely War!*,[1] the plays that enjoyed the greatest success blended the two themes to present works that were neither entirely romantic nor nihilistic, but in which an equilibrium existed. *Journey's End, What Price Glory?* and *War Horse* are all examples of this. A spectrum may be said to exist between romance and nihilism, with the most successful plays falling in the middle and appealing to both sentiments.

We are now within the centenary anniversary of the war's enactment, which means that for the short term at least it will continue to adorn our stages. While revivals of many productions have been mounted in the last few years, original works are also being staged. Many of these pieces represent a potential shift in portraying the war. Much like *Oh, What a Lovely War!* was one of the first plays to bring fringe voices to the mainstream, in the form of enlisted men, so too do these works represent a similar objective. Tom Wright's *Black Diggers* (2014) and Cheryl Ward's *Through These Lines* (2014) both attempt to do so with Indigenous Australians and women, respectively. Both pieces are inspired by historical documents, such as letters, diaries and interviews. Additionally, they represent a new objective: to utilise the theatre as an avenue for education.[2] For the most part these

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[1] Yet, even with *Oh, What a Lovely War!* it is not a simple question of a wholly nihilistic portrayal. It must not be forgotten that the play is infused with gala songs and pageantry. Indeed, George Harvey Webb, who helped develop the original script, felt that the piece did not go far enough and ultimately 'played down the war and made it seem fun' (Goorney, 127, 1981).

[2] Ross Mueller's *A Town Named War Boy* (2015), is another example of a new work conceived in the same vein. R. H. Thomson's *The Lost Boys* (2000) and Stephen MacDonald's *Not About Heroes* (1985) are earlier examples of plays that were similarly inspired by historical documents, although they were not composed with the overt purpose to educate.

works do not engage with traditional narrative structures, so it is unlikely that any production performed in this vein will have the same broad cultural impact or financial success as traditionally told stories, for the simple reason that such pieces can never generate the same mass appeal. Nevertheless, they do represent a broad body of work, currently being produced.

Even so, these plays continue to portray the war in a manner that is essentially the same as that already described. *Through These Lines* is told from the perspective of nurses who served alongside Australian troops. Whether consciously done or not, the influence of *Oh, What a Lovely War!* is readily apparent in the piece, even insofar as its structure is concerned. With the exception of the central character there is no other readily identifiable character from the opening to the close of the play, with the ensemble of five actors playing multiple roles. Instead, Ward presents the war as a collage of events strung together in a loose chronological order. This all occurs from the perspective of the play's single focal character. The result is to create a depiction of the war that is anti-historical – to once again quote Hynes:

> One can see easily enough why military historians and generals deplored the version of war that the war books told. It was not simply that in that version the war was bloody and cruel; it was that it was meaningless. If the myth-making authors of those books were right, then the war had no history, in the sense of a story expressing the meaning of events, but was anti-historical, apocalyptic, an incoherence, a gap in time (Hynes 1991: 455).

As with all plays produced in the preceding twenty to thirty years, the cause, meaning or purpose of the war in *Through These Lines* is unexplored, on both the social and individual level – not unlike *War Horse*. What does get highlighted, though, is the sheer volume of human waste experienced; as well as the traditional transition from excitement at the prospect of adventure at the beginning of the conflict, through to eventual disillusionment. The female and indigenous perspectives may represent a new direction into which portrayals of the war could continue to move; however, in a broad thematic sense, *Through These Lines* and *Black Diggers* act to reveal how stabilised contemporary perceptions of the war have become within the social consciousness.

It is difficult to predict how the war will continue to evolve in the public's imagination. Although a pattern of evolution for the last one hundred years has been identified by this project, it would be overstretching to assume it will continue to evolve in the same manner into the future. Bearing this in mind, it is difficult to identify any major shifts that have occurred over the last thirty years. A collection of plays produced in the 1980s, including *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, *The Accrington Pals* and *Not About Heroes* set the current trend, which *War Horse* later solidified. Further evolution will undoubtedly occur, but given that the war is now safely confined to the annals of history, at the very least its progress should be far more gradual now.

Appendix – The Great War on Stage

The following is a list of plays that take the First World War as their primary subject. This list is not meant as a thorough resource of World War One plays, rather it is a chronological listing, by performance date (or composition in the cases where plays were first produced many years after having been written) of all pieces referenced in this study.

Barrie, J. M. (1914), *Der Tag*, London: Hobber and Stoughton. First produced London, Coliseum, 1914.

Barrie, J. M. (1928), *The New Word*, London: Hobber and Stoughton, 737-758. First produced London, Duke of York, 1915.

Phillips, Stephen (1915), *Armageddon*, London: John Lane. First produced London, New Theatre, 1915.

Barrie, J. M. (1928), *A Kiss for Cinderella*, London: Hobber and Stoughton, 391-460. First produced London, Wyndham's Theatre, 1916.

O'Neill, Eugene (1988), *The Sniper*, New York: The Library of America, 293-308. First produced New York, Province Town Players, 1916.

Shaw, G. B. (1919), *O'Flaherty V.C.*, London: Constable and Company, 167-190. First produced by the Officers of the 40th Squadron R.F.C., Treizennes, Belgium, 1917.

Barrie, J. M. (1918), *The Old Lady Shows her Medals*, London: Hobber and Stoughton 3-58. First produced London, New Theatre, 1917.

Jones, Henry Arthur (1955), *The Pacifists*, London: Blakie. First produced Southport, Opera House, 1917.

Owen Harold (1918), *Loyalty*, London: Hobber and Stoughton. First produced London, St. James's, 1917.

Maeterlinck, Maurice (1918), *The Mayor of Stilemonde*, trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos, New York: Dodd, Mead and Company. First produced in Buenos Aries, 1918.

O'Neill, Eugene (1988), *Shell Shock*, New York: The Library of America, 655-672. Unproduced until 2014, written 1918.

Maugham, W. Somerset (1932), *Home and Beauty*, London: Heinemann. First produced London, Playhouse, 1919.

Shaw, G. B. (1919), *Heartbreak House*, London: Constable and Company. First produced London, Garrick Theatre, 1920.

Barrie, J. M. (1928), *Mary Rose*, London: Hobber and Stoughton, 529-594. First produced London, Haymarket Theatre, 1920.

Hoffe, Monckton (1922), *The Faithful Heart*, London: Heinemann. First produced London, Comedy Theatre, 1921.

McEvoy, Charles (1929), *The Likes of Her*, London: Harrap. First produced London, St. Martin's Theatre, 1923.

Wall, Harry (1926), *Havoc*, London: Readers Library Publishing Co. First produced London, Regent Theatre, 1923.

Darlington, William (1925), *Alf's Button*, London: Jenkins. First produced Portsmouth, Theatre Royal, 1924.

Anderson, Maxwell & Stallings, Laurence (1952), *What Price Glory?*, New York: Crown Publishers, 57-90. First produced New York, Plymouth Theatre, 1924.

Sherriff, R. C. (1937), *Journey's End*, London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 205-290. First produced London, Apollo Theatre, 1928.

O'Casey, Sean (1928), *The Silver Tassie*, London: Macmillan. First produced London, Apollo Theatre, 1929.

Chlumberg, Hans (1930), *Miracle at Verdun*. First staged Leipzig, Germany, 1930.

MacGill, Patrick (1930), *Suspense*, London: Jenkins. First produced London, Duke of Yorks, 1930.

Coward, Noël (1979), *Post Mortem*, London: Eyre Methuen, 277-361. Professionally unproduced until 2011, written 1931.

Maugham, W. Somerset (1932), *For Services Rendered*, London: Mandarin. First produced London, Globe, 1932.

Box, Muriel (1935), *Angles of War*, London: Lovat Dickson & Thompson, 7-74. Professionally unproduced until 1981, written 1935.

Fry, Christopher (1971), *A Sleep of Prisoners*, London: Oxford Press, 1-57. First produced London, St. Thomas's Church, 1951.

Seymour Alan, (1962), *The One Day of the Year*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson. First produced Adelaide, 1960.

Chilton, Charles and The Theatre Workshop (1965), *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, London: Methuen. First produced London, Theatre Royal Stratford, 1963.

Bennett, Alan (1969), *Forty Years On*, London: Faber and Faber. First produced London, Apollo Theatre, 1968.

Whelan, Peter (1982), *The Accrington Pals*, London Methuen. First produced London, Royal Shakespeare Company, 1981.

MacDonald, Stephen (1983) *Not About Heroes*, London, Faber and Faber. First produced Edinburgh, Netherbow Theatre, 1982.

McGuinness, Frank (1986), *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, London: Faber and Faber. First produced Dublin, Peacock, 1985.

Whitby, Nick (2000), *To the Green Fields Beyond*, London: Faber and Faber. First produced London, Donmar Warehouse, 2000.

Stafford, Nick (2007), *War Horse*, London: Faber and Faber. First performed London, National Theatre, 2007.

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