

# Twelve River RIPPLES

## Favourite Poem



### **The Poet as Hero**

Siegfried Sassoon

You've heard me, scornful, harsh, and discontented,  
Mocking and loathing War: you've asked me why  
Of my old, silly sweetness I've repented--  
My ecstasies changed to an ugly cry.

You are aware that once I sought the Grail,  
Riding in armour bright, serene and strong;  
And it was told that through my infant wail  
There rose immortal semblances of song.

But now I've said good-bye to Galahad,  
And am no more the knight of dreams and show:  
For lust and senseless hatred make me glad,  
And my killed friends are with me where I go.  
Wound for red wound I burn to smite their wrongs;  
And there is absolution in my songs.

## Favourite Poem cont.

This is quite a remarkable poem for me. It speaks to rebellion, to questioning, not just of the war, but of the origins of war.

Before the war, Sassoon was very much a member of the British aristocracy – he loved poetry and fox hunting. In many ways he was an innocent; this meant that the horrors he saw on the battlefield were thrown into sharp relief, leading to an extreme bitterness which he expressed in his poetry.

His friend, Edward Thomas, was killed in action and Sassoon acted out his grief through maniacal exploits against the Germans whom he blamed for the death of Thomas. Yet his sentiment changed dramatically, and is described in this poem, where he compares his previous belief in war, and specifically the First World War, as something mythic or dreamlike, and very ungrounded. He rejected war, seeing it as engineered by

heartless politicians and bureaucrats, became a pacifist, and ‘said goodbye to Galahad.’ War was no longer noble; he returned to Britain after being wounded and wrote an open letter stating that he would not go back to the battlefield. Escaping court martial on the intervention of Robert Graves, he was hospitalised and there in the hospital met Wilfred Owen.

In these present days of a far-off war, we often get caught up in the rhetoric of aggression and death. Yet we can turn to Sassoon’s poetry – and our own poetry – to find ‘absolution’ – a return to the peace within after witnessing the horrors of war in our own living rooms. It is poetry that gives voice to our horror as well as our aspiration for peace, and this is our absolution, grounded in our own peculiar poetical state of grace that is expressed in our poems.

*Simon Black*