The Death of the Knight: The Relationship between British Heroic Art

and Literary Tradition to the First World War

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Abstract

Art and literature are tools that can be used to gauge the mood of a particular time. Paintings, poetry, and other works hold clues which tell popular opinions and ideals of the era. Leading up to World War I, British art and literature defined the heroic figure as one who resembled the chivalrous knight of days gone by. Warriors were to be virtuous and fight for the vulnerable, upholding peace through their God-given quests. During and after the war, however, British art and literature painted the warrior to be a bleak, even disfigured and incomplete, character. The Great War's severity was a shock that drained the romanticism of the hero from the British mind.

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Arguably, the knight was the most iconic English warrior throughout history. As concepts of honor, came and went through the Middle Ages, the idealization of knights such as those in Arthurian legends circled around again in the mid-nineteenth century. Known for their strict code of chivalry, civilians remembered the gallantry of knightly conduct, and how they were willing to sacrifice themselves for their God, king, and country. Yet, this ideal was quickly erased by World War I. In its place was a beaten and marred warrior who no longer found meaning in the divine. A careful look at British art and literary movements in relation to heroes before and after the Great War reveals the drastic impact World War I had on British concepts of warriors.

In searching for the heart of British heritage through legend and art, the Pre-Raphaelites' influence inspired an overall idealization of the valor of the Middle Ages. This movement was a likely product of the Romantic movement, starting about twenty years prior. Britain's cultural history, like any cultural history, has been shaped by past ideas and events. As time continues and more and more ideas and events spring up, culture reacts to them. It may be thought of as a river. The Romantic era flowed into the Pre-Raphaelite movement, which created a bend in the river that wrapped back around to the Medieval era. The river continued to move forward, but drew on influences from an earlier time. Events such as the First World War acted as a boulder, causing a major shift in the river.

Pre-War Literature

Paintings and fairy tales of knights in shining armor continue to grace the pages of children's books even to this day. Even moreso for children growing up in Britain in the years before World War I. The Grimm Brothers' Fairy Tales were the most popular collection of folk

tales at the turn of the twentieth century for the entirety of the Western world, even though they

were never originally intended to be ready by children.[1] Although the collection was Germanic in

origin, it had made its way to England about a century before the Great War.[2] Through stories

such as these, children learned to associate knights with heroism and honor. They were figures to

look up to, and the ubiquity of these tales undoubtedly inspired children far and wide as they

listened to their mothers read these stories before bed. Children looked up to knights and

adventurers as the epitome of bravery and chivalry. Like so many others following the age-old

"Hero's Journey," the protagonists of these stories always left the security of their homes behind

to fight monsters, win battles, and save damsels in distress. As they triumphed over their

situations, the heroes restored honor and justice to their lands, adored by friends, family, and

countrymen alike.

The Legends of King Arthur resurfaced in popular culture at the coming of the nineteenth

century and gained widespread popularity, especially in the second half of the century.[3] Stories

of ancient myths provided an escape for the reader or listener. This material focused on events

which relied heavily on fantastical elements, and true details had been reshaped or stretched over

hundreds of years. "Romance, more than any other genre, embodied the spirit of these fictions,"

which were "more valuable than reality," according to author of nineteenth century popular

culture and scholarship David Matthews, quoting Thomas Warton, who had himself written

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[1] Jack Zipes, "How the Grimm Brothers Saved the Fairy Tale," *Humanities* 36, no. 2 (March/April 2015), para. 3.

[2] Zipes, "How the Grimm Brothers Saved the Fairy Tale," para. 2.

[3] David Matthews, "Scholarship and Popular Culture in the Nineteenth Century," in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. Helen Fulton (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 356.

works of romance and poetry.[4] Both children and adults were intrigued with the stories of this

heroic figure. The most popular Arthurian legend was Le Morte d'Arthur, by Thomas Mallory.[5]

The timing of this surge of interest in Medieval knights was not random. Matthews poses that

this enthusiastic reception of the honorable warrior, and all the romantic ideas of battle that came

along with it, took hold because the British memory of the Napoleonic Wars had faded over

time.[6] As each year passed, it became easier for the public to forget the devastation the

Napoleonic Wars had caused in Europe and start to romanticize the idea of battle.

The War's Effect on the British Mind

The popularity of King Arthur waned at the onset of World War I. Matthews states, "the

apparent lessening of interest after 1913 could suggest that World War I cured readers' appetites

for chivalric sacrifice and endless combat."[7] Matthews goes on to downplay this explanation

because he believes that even though publication rates dropped, the British public could still read

the literature that had already been printed.[8] However, Matthews' idea is an argument from

silence and lacks any evidence that the population was still reading this material. The fact that

publishers were no longer printing as much literature on Medieval stories seems to show that

there was a lessened demand for it. The fall of British interest in these types of works at the onset

of World War I is better explained by the reality of war and the shock that it was not as romantic

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[4] Matthews, "Scholarship and Popular Culture in the Nineteenth Century," 357.

[5] Ibid., 356.

[6] Ibid., 358.

[7] Ibid., 363.

[8] Ibid.

as the public was led to believe. As the Great War commenced, the British soon got their fill of

battle from newspaper headlines of the real world instead of imagined and romanticized stories.

The grim horror of the situation curbed their desire for knights in shining armor as fresh soldiers

faced deadly problems such as machine guns and poisonous gas, as well as nasty inconveniences

like lice-infested trenches and meager food rationing.[9]

World War I began to see a shift from previous times concerning the relationship

between children and war. In earlier wars and during World War I, children's stories, like most

other literature, were turned into propaganda.[10] Yet, a humanitarian objection was heard as well.

Some decried the victimization of children by the war. As writer Elizabeth A. Galway says,

"competing portrayals [of child soldiers] illuminate the processes by which notions of childhood

are constructed and manipulated in times of war…"[11] Galway argues that children as victims of

war is a fairly new concept. In World War I British children's literature, Germany was scolded

for using children to gather scrap for ammunition. Only a barbaric nation could make children do

the dirty work of finding materials that would be turned into lethal bullets. Somehow, the author

saw this as a completely different task than his own urging of the Boy Scouts of Britain to collect

eggs from farms to give to wounded soldiers.[12] Despite both Britain and Germany using their

children to perform tasks for the war effort, British authors managed to use this as propaganda in

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[9] John Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 89.

[10] Elizabeth A. Galway, "Competing Representations of Boy Soldiers in WWI Children's Literature," *A Journal of Social Justice* 24, no. 3 (2012): 298.

[11] Galway, "Competing Representations of Boy Soldiers in WWI Children's Literature," 298.

[12] Ibid., 301.

painting the Germans to be cruel and the British to be resourceful when it came to the activities

in which they encouraged their children.

During the First World War, a close reading of literature of the time reveals that authors

were sending two contradictory messages, sometimes even in the same paragraph.[13] Children

were victimized as casualties of war when they were grouped with women, yet glorified as

young heroes when categorized with men. Such an unclear rendering of the war situation tried to

please a large audience. As victims, children were shown in their vulnerability, unable to save

themselves from the war machine.[14] This victimization had appealed to those who had suffered

already because of the war. It also could have been used to grab the hearts of parents worried for

the safety of their families during the conflict. In contrast, boys' magazines told stories of

schoolboys itching to enlist, eager to serve their country. Writers knew that young boys' minds

were malleable, and used it to their nation's advantage through propaganda: "yet the very notion

of childhood is constantly in flux, and in times of military need, images of child innocence,

passivity, and naivety are often replaced by depictions of children as ready, willing, and able to

serve their nation."[15] Children who had so readily consumed fairy tales purely for pleasure were

now taken advantage of through literature which intentionally tried to make a young boy out to

be the brave knight in shining armor to which he had looked up.

Children's literature during the war had various purposes in describing the appropriate

relationship children should have with the war. This built off previous writings, such as fairy

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[13] Galway, "Competing Representations of Boy Soldiers in WWI Children's Literature," 300.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., 298.

tales and folklore. Ideals of heroes were already in place in Britain, propaganda simply molded

them to fit the author's goals. This is certainly evident with the younger generation of boys, but it

did not stop there. These children's fathers had grown up with the same Grimm's Fairy Tales and

other stories. Adults who were inspired by the values in these stories still sought adventure and

heroism.

The Romantic Ideal

Writers in the early twentieth century used language which propagated the romanticism

of living a life of adventure. One American author describes the excursions of those he met on a

train ride through the Great Plains as "[a] band of 'knights errant and ladies fair' [who] climbed

Pike's Peak, a task compared to a struggling saint's 'steep ascent of heaven.'"[16] This whimsical

choice of words shows the events of life, such as travel, were more than just routine. People saw

train rides as adventures, and mountain climbing to be compared with a divine quest. While one

may argue this example pertains to images of the American West, American authors actually

acquired this spirit of romanticism directly from the British Pre-Raphaelites.[17] The Pre-

Raphaelite Brotherhood was a group of artists who believed in rekindling the purism of art

created before the Renaissance. This group banded together in 1848, a tumultuous year of

revolution for greater Europe.[18] It is noteworthy that while other European countries such as

Germany and France were pushing to move forward, these English makers of culture were

reviving a tradition that had fallen out of popularity over 300 years ago. Although the

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[16] Kirsten H. Powell, "Cowboy Knights and Prairie Madonnas: American Illustrations of the Plains and Pre-Raphaelite Art," *Great Plains Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1985): 43.

[17] Powell, "Cowboy Knights and Prairie Madonnas," 43.

[18] Ibid.

Renaissance had swept Europe with its mastery, precision, and lifelikeness in art, the Pre-Raphaelites were interested in the time just before this, when the Medieval style still reigned supreme.

Pre-War Art

At the time of World War I, the Pre-Raphaelite movement had been in effect for well over sixty years. Therefore, its artwork and the ideas associated with it were widespread. One such example was the reprinting of all four issues in 1901 of *The Germ*, which was the short-lived journal created by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Originally started in 1850, the journal included articles written by members of the Brotherhood discussing beauty, art, and nature. It also included poems they wrote, some of which deal with themes of heroism and reflections on the natural world.[19] Although they were written many years earlier, some of the topics included find particular relevance to World War I.

Art With Purpose

The fourth and final issue of *The Germ* included a discourse in the style of Plato, as the Pre-Raphaelites were always looking to mimic the past. One particular part of this imaginary question and answer session discusses the purpose of art. To the Pre-Raphaelites, these were the virtues of purity and excellence. Dante Rosetti notes, "In perfect art the utmost purity of intention, design, and execution, alone is wisdom. Every tree—every flower, in defiance of adverse contingencies, grows with perfect will to be perfect: and, shall man, who hath what they have not, a soul wherewith he may defy all ill, do less?"[20] Good, well-made art was to have a

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[19] Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ed. 1901. *The Germ*, no. 4 (May).

[20] Rosetti, *The Germ*, 151.

didactic quality to share with mankind. It was to be an example of excellence and virtue. This was not only a virtue of the content of the art, but of the skill and precision in creating it. Rosetti continues, "A picture, poem, or statue, unless it speaks some purpose, is mere paint, paper, or stone. A work of art must have a purpose, or it is not a work of *fine* art: thus, then, if it be a work of fine art, it has a purpose; and, having purpose, it has either a good or an evil one: there is no alternative."[21] This explanation of art proves the high morality of Pre-Raphaelite artwork. Stemming from the calling of such a virtuous cause, the artist's task was elevated to a noble and weighty deed. Such influence was bound to have heavy consequences to consider if it was not up to the meticulous standard of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

Elsewhere in the discourse, the author revealed that men should not create art that comes near to touching what is impure, lest their entire work become defiled as well. Rossetti writes concerning an artist's moral legacy, "An artist's works are his children, his immortal heirs, to his evil as well as to his good; as he hath trained them, so will they teach."[22] While communicating the virtue art was to have, the speaker make it clear that this is not without purpose. Over and again, the teacher explained the wickedness that is natural for a man's heart, and the questioners ask about the evils of the world. The teacher explained how the artist's conscience must be the judge of whether his art is pure or not.[23] In one example, the teacher showed how an artist may paint a nude to show that he can do so skillfully. Although his intentions are pure in trying to perfect his craft, others may see the work through unclean eyes and fall into immoral thoughts.

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[21] Rossetti, *The Germ*, 152.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., 153.

The teacher reveals the moral dilemma in creating this work to be between the artist's conscience and God.[24] Such a high ethical standard for one's craft and art shows how seriously the Pre-Raphaelites took their work.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had a strong academic quality to their paintings. They looked down on folk art, and art for art's sake.[25] Rather, they believed art should be serious, virtuous, and masterfully constructed. In this, the Pre-Raphaelites took inspiration from the Medieval art that so often awed them. Medieval art, most often created to be religious in nature, depicted biblical stories, and pointed to truths about God for an illiterate society. Likewise, Pre-Raphaelite art was intended to teach through storytelling in the same way Medieval art was. It was to be "*dramatic not theatrical.*"[26]

The British Patriotic Spirit

One noteworthy aspect of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood is that it was a uniquely British art movement. Of course, it did accept features of other cultures on a minor scale, such as the French Joan of Arc, as the subject matter of some paintings.[27] However, the Pre-Raphaelites longed to revive the earlier days of England, outside of the Industrial Revolution, which was erupting around them as they formed. The members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood focused on Ophelia, from the plays of Shakespeare, St. George, the patron saint of England, and the

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[24] Rossetti, *The Germ,* 152-53.

[25] Ibid., 153-54.

[26] Lucy Hartley, "Putting the Drama into Everyday Life: The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and a Very Ordinary Aesthetic," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 7, no. 2 (2002): 177.

[27] John Everett Millais, *Joan of Arc*, 1865, oil on canvas, Private Collection, https://www.millais.org/joan-of-arc/.

knights of King Arthur in the poetry of Tennyson.[28] Such an elevation of characters uniquely tied

to England bolstered patriotism for the nation. By the time the movement waned, it had

successfully revived ideas of valor and bravery associated with British heroes of old, which so

many had looked up to in their youths. The Pre-Raphaelites presented the notion of a knightly

order, where men of valor came together to serve their God, their king, and their lands, as an

ideal to which men should aspire in their relationships with one another.[29] Once World War I

erupted, these ideologies had enough time to marinate in the minds of Britain. The Pre-

Raphaelite movement finally ended in the 1920s, but it certainly left its mark on British society.

One painting that acted as an example of patriotism before the war is *The Dedication*, by

Edmund Blair Leighton.[30] Painted six years before the outbreak of the war, the painting can be

divorced from claims of propaganda for enlisting in the war. Nonetheless, had it been painted

later, it may have been. The painting depicts a knight kneeling before an altar, offering up his

sword. This gesture devotes his quest to God. Outside the church, his squire has made the

knight's horse ready for battle. A woman kneels beside him, head bowed in prayer. Her hands

are raised as well, but they are offering prayers for his safety. The colors of the painting are fairly

dull, mostly greys. Only red, green, and white stand out. The knight displays a red cross over his

chest, connecting him to the red of the mosaic before the altar and the red in the church's stained

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[28] John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851-52, oil on canvas, Tate, London, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-ophelia-n01506; Edward Burne-Jones, *St George Slaying the Dragon*, 1868, oil on canvas, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/8536/; Frederic George Stephens, *Morte d'Arthur*, 1849, oil on panel, Tate, London, https://link-springer-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/content/pdf/10.1007%2F978-3-030-51338-2.pdf; Matthews, "Scholarship and Popular Culture," 356.

[29] Heather Bozant Witcher, and Amy Kahrmann Huseby, eds., *Defining Pre-Raphaelite Poetics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 118.

[30] Edmund Blair Leighton, *The Dedication*, 1908, oil on canvas, Private Collection, https://www.artrenewal.org/artworks/the-dedication/edmund-blair-leighton/51793.

glass window. Through this, the painter shows that the knight's quest is divinely ordained. The

lady's green dress ties her to the verdant land outside, symbolizing that the man is fighting for

his homeland and those he loves. The man, woman, and God are related through the use of white

fabric. The knight wears a white surcoat, the lady's head is covered by a veil, and a white cloth is

placed atop the altar. Once again, the purity the Pre-Raphaelites thought so highly of is the factor

which unifies the three subjects of the painting. Pre-Raphaelite art valued religion as a key

motivation for fighting in battle. This divine connection between knights and their quests had an

effect on the British mind at the beginning of World War I. Matthews writes, "the idea that one

might imitate Arthurian heroes was a key theme in an important Victorian phenomenon: the

notion that Arthurian chivalry should inform modern behavior."[31] British citizens wanted to

emulate their heroes of old.

      Men enlisted into the military as an act of nobility, self-sacrifice, and to achieve honor in

defense of their country. In his book *Eye-Deep in Hell*, Ellis writes, "J. Engall of the 16th London

Regiment, wrote to his parents on the eve of the Battle of the Somme: 'I could not pray for a

finer death, and you my dear Mother and Dad, will know that I died doing my duty to my God,

my Country, and My King.'"[32] This was a bold statement from a young man who was fully

committed to giving the ultimate sacrifice, if need be, for high and lofty ideals, just like the

knights he would have known about from fairy tales and Pre-Raphaelite art during his time. Ellis

agrees that he was a product of the times. Countless other boys and men shared these sentiments:

"Love of country was bound up in a whole series of obligations that came together under the

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      [31] Matthews, "Scholarship and Popular Culture," 359.

      [32] Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell*, 162.

vague heading of honor and duty. Victorian and Edwardian education and propaganda, the whole

ideology of the age, inculcated both officers and men with a real sense of being duty-bound to

come forward in defense of their family, their country, and even their country's allies."[33] It is

clear that honor, nobility, and duty were key factors in convincing one to enlist.

Ideals in Action

One may ask what defined ambiguous concepts such as honor for soldiers in World War

I. In an example experienced by Britain's allies, two American airmen received the Medal of

Honor for giving up their lives in an effort to give aid to their fellow men who had been

captured.[34] The two were shot down and killed, but their efforts were immortalized by the people

of a small French town near where they died. The intercultural memorialization of these men's

final deed shows that, at least for the Allies, sacrifice for one's fellow man was among the

highest acts of heroism. Indeed, a deep sense of camaraderie and brotherhood was forged

between the soldiers because of their shared experience and the heaviness of their situation. A

British soldier recounted, "the love that grows quickly and perhaps artificially when men are

together up against life and death has a peculiar quality. Death that cuts it off does not touch the

emotions at all, but works right in the soul of you."[35] Men were willing to sacrifice even their

own lives for each other because they had formed such close ties in the trenches of the Great

War.

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[33] Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell*, 162.

[34] Steve Ruffin, "French Tribute to WWI Medal of Honor Airmen," *Aviation History* 20, no. 4 (March 2010): 12.

[35] Ellis, *Eye Deep in Hell*, 204.

Propaganda

With the prevalence of media at the turn of the twentieth century, it was inevitable that much of it would be turned to propaganda during wartime. One such poster that helped explain to Britain's men why they should enlist showed an image of the treaty that Germany initially violated in moving into Belgium.[36] This "scrap of paper," as it was called, turned out to be much more important than Germany counted on. Germany had believed it to be long forgotten, but Britain made sure word effectively got around that honor must be restored. Through art, Britain effectively conveyed to its citizens how a proper English gentleman should respond to this threat to her ally.

After the sinking of the British ship the Lusitania in 1915, English artist John Bernard Partridge created a poster entitled *Take Up the Sword of Justice*.[37] This poster depicted the sinking of the ship as passengers' arms desperately flailed in the water, hoping for some sort of rescue. From the waters rises a woman with her arms outstretched, offering a sword by which a champion should defend her beloved country. The woman is distraught in front of a dark and stormy sky. She is clothed in classical garb, reminiscent of Athena, goddess of war. The long red veil she wears acts almost as a halo around her, making this seemingly a calling from the gods. Yet, its deep red color could represent the pain and loss of life which has already occurred in this international tragedy. In this poster, as in others, women play supporting roles. They are the voice of their land as they cry out for help, urge men to enlist, and supply comfort to weary soldiers. This reflects female motifs throughout Pre-Raphaelite art. In this art, benevolent women

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[36] Hanbury, Tomsett & Co., *The Scrap of Paper- Enlist Today*, 1914, International War Museum, London, https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30237.

[37] John Bernard, *Take Up the Sword of Justice*, 1915, https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3b53006/.

were usually innocent, trapped by some evil monster or ill-wishing villain, and awaiting rescue.[38]

Propaganda like this called British men to step up to the position of protector and rescuer, just

like their knightly ancestors.

The Turning of an Era

A painting made at the very end of the Pre-Raphaelite movement shows the rewards of a

knight who was faithful to the completion of his journey. In *The End of the Quest*, an adventurer

kneels before a lady, seated amidst a colonnade in wooded mountains.[39] They clasp hands, yet it

is not an over joyous moment. The woman seems to catch her breath as if trying to assure herself

that this is not a dream. The man looks up at her expectantly, unsure how much has changed in

his absence. Like Odysseus after his long journeys around the Aegean, the adventurer secretly

wonders whether his lady has replaced him with a new lover. Even with some hesitation from

both parties, the couple is united at last. Despite the weeks, months, or even years, they are

together again.

The warrior wears the humble brown habit of a monk. At his side, he carries only a

sword. The entirety of the painting is true to the Middle Ages. However, there is one piece that is

out of place. The warrior's helm is not that of a knight. Rather, it is a helmet of a British soldier

of the Great War. This detail, along with the year it was painted, 1921, lends the painting to be

directly connected with World War I. A cross in the tile beneath the couple connects them to the

divine. This scene conveying life after battle brings a sense of completion to World War I,

although the painting was finished a few years after the Treaty of Versailles. In a more symbolic

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[38] Powell, "Cowboy Knights and Prairie Madonnas," 45.

[39] Frank Bernard Dicksee, *The End of the Quest*, 1921, oil on canvas, Leighton House Museum, https://www.thehistoryofart.org/frank-dicksee/end-of-the-quest/.

way, it also draws the Pre-Raphaelite movement to a close. The times of gallant knights, fair

ladies, and quests for adventure had served their purpose. They had filled England's collective

mind with a spirit of heroism, and pushed for honorable and virtuous morals. These inadvertently

led to a higher number of military enlistments nearly sixty years after the movement had begun.

It was not as if the Pre-Raphaelite movement ended with abruptly and the Modernist

movement picked up on the other side of the ravine. As mentioned before, culture is a gradual

ebb and flow integrating new ideas while letting go of the old through either reformation or

rejection.[40] *The End of the Quest* served a fitting end to the Pre-Raphaelite movement and its

response to World War I, but it was a far from typical example of post-war art. The war had

brought, above all, disillusionment. Throughout history, people had fought with swords and

bows, then muskets and bayonets. Although improvements were made, weapons looked fairly

the same as they always had. At the time of the Great War, guns had been around for hundreds of

years, and swords for thousands. Top military leaders in 1914 looked to the brilliant military

figures of the nineteenth century, such as Napoleon, as people to emulate in war. But the

twentieth century brought some atrocious changes. Now, a soldier not only had to worry about

guns and bayonets, but also mustard gas, airplanes, and tanks by the end of the war. Both the

Allied Powers and the Central Powers needed time to figure out how to win the war with the

introduction of these unprecedented weapons.[41] The prevalence of trench warfare, which literally

drew a "line in the sand," made it difficult for positions to move and either side to win a decisive

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[40] LeeAnne M. Richardson, "Currents of Art and Streams of Consciousness," in *Beyond the Victorian/Modernist Divide: Remapping the Turn-of-the-Century Break in Literature, Culture and the Visual Arts*, eds. Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada, and Anne Besnault-Levita, (Milton Park: Routledge, 2018), 83.

[41] Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell*, 4.

victory. This initial surprise that tried and true tactics would no longer work came at first as a shock, but melted into a horror.[42] Each week, month, and year the stalemate continued, men were sinking into the mud of the trenches, blown to pieces by machine gun fire, and dying of diseases like the Spanish Flu. The ignorance of higher level military leaders was costing lives by the millions.

Post-War Art

Disillusionment from the war's twentieth century technology brought about a much darker shift in artwork. Art is an expression of people's inmost thoughts and feelings, and it certainly revealed an unsettling reality about society's bleak outlook on life. One piece that exemplifies this is *A Dawn 1914*.[43] From the title alone, the viewer may expect a light pale pink sunrise; a pastoral scene with birds singing. In reality, *A Dawn 1914* depicts rows and rows of soldiers headed through a town to battle. Their heads are down, faces weary and lifeless. Details in the faces are fairly standard, with little individuality. Soldiers in the background have no face at all. As an etching, the work is devoid of color. Jagged and pointy lines create sharp bayonets and cumbersome backpacks. Shapes are heavy and show textbook geometric precision. The entire scene is uncomfortable, bleak, and quiet. Its entirety marks a sharp contrast from the soft, whimsical, and airy Pre-Raphaelite art. Themes of divinely ordained quests, and knights searching valiantly for damsels in distress are nowhere to be seen. Instead, the focus has shifted to the uniformity, harshness, and vulgarity of the natural world. The people are not driven by motives of passion or nobility, but seem to be prodded along as if by a machine. The buildings

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[42] Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell*, 4.

[43] Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson, *A Dawn 1914*, 1916, drypoint, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/746129.

around them crack just as their spirits have been broken and their society falls to shambles.[44] The

darkness of war has fully engulfed the city in the painting.

This example is highly indicative of how people were feeling during and after the war. It

is not meant to capture men heading off to war as they did in 1914, but as they would have, had

they known the horrors that awaited them. It is not a report, rather, it is a reflection. *A Dawn*

1914 was actually created in 1916. Artwork such as this ushered in a new stage in art history: the

Modernist period. The Modernist period was a movement which sought to represent things as

they were, even if that was dark, brutish, or unpleasant. Oftentimes, it was characterized by the

color grey. Author Frances Guerin argues the color grey is connected to industrialism, and moves

forward in cold, unstoppable progress: "[gray] is always in motion, and, together with the

importance of mass-mediated reproduction [that is, photography] to the growing prominence of

grey, these qualities of motion and fluidity are used for the definition of the formal explanation

of modernist abstract painting."[45] One can see that Guerin believes the movement and industry of

grey is instrumental in Modernist art. By using grey as a main color palette, Modernist art

trudges mechanically forward, leaving the old ways behind it. Grey connects this art to industry

and innovation, whether it be for good or ill. Because of the problems with technology and new

methods of warfare that emerged in World War I, Modernism was an understandable response to

the event.

German artist Otto Dix was an influential contributor to the Modernist art movement.

Dix's art is terrifying. In *The War*, bodies rot with disease, a man stumbles out of the battle with

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[44] Ellis, *Eye Deep in Hell*, 11.

[45] Frances Guerin, *The Truth is Always Grey: A History of Modernist Painting* (Minneapolis, MN:
University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 30-31.

a broken jaw and dragging along his comrade.[46] Underneath this, men are buried in their eternal

sleep. The painting takes the shape of a tryptic, which was traditionally used to present a

religious story throughout Christian history. The shape juxtaposes the content, in that it is a

godless wasteland. Soldiers enter the battle blurred by a gray fog, are ripped to shreds and

permanently maimed, and sent out either barely breathing or dead. A grim reaper-like figure,

made partly of bone, partly of metal, overarches the entirety of the painting, his bony finger

points to the next victim. If anything depicts the ugliness and brutality of battle, it is the work of

Otto Dix. The figure in a gas mask is a far cry from the knight offering his sword to God.

A Shaken Reality

The romance of going off to battle quickly faded for the men of World War I. One feature

worth noting is the lack of religious emphasis soldiers felt in the war. For centuries in Europe,

wars had been fought over religion. Soldiers on both sides oftentimes believed God supported

them. The Pre-Raphaelite movement showed that Britain had formed at least a sentimental

connection between religion and the warrior. Yet when 1914 came, soldiers seemed to abandon

God when they reached no man's land. French soldier Raymond Joubert summed up this

experience rather bluntly: "what sublime emotion inspires you at the moment of assault? I

thought of nothing other than dragging my feet out of the mud encasing them. What did you feel

after surviving the attack? I grumbled because I would have to remain several days more without

pinard [wine]. Is not one's first act to kneel down and thank God? No. One relieves oneself."[47]

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[46] Otto Dix, *The War*, 1929-32, oil on wood, New Masters Gallery, Dresden State Art Collections, https://albertinum.skd.museum/en/exhibitions/der-krieg/.

[47] Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell*, 104.

After World War I, not only did art change to reflect the new technology of war, it reflected soldiers' altered appearances. One lasting effect of the war was how it permanently distorted the bodies of unlucky military men. These effects from the battle did not leave a person when the treaty was signed. Battle wounds were everyday reminders of the pain and terror of the Great War. Disasters from the field stayed with a myriad of veterans until their last days. There was no escaping the memory of war's brutality. Author Suzannah Biernoff writes that "Facial injury provoked an anxiety that was acutely and specifically visual. Patients refused to see their families and fiancés; children reportedly fled at the sight of their fathers; nurses struggled to look their patients in the face."[48] For a man's own children to run at the sight of him after he returns from years in a muddy trench is heartbreaking. From this, men likely felt isolated, ashamed, and even subhuman. Men with facial and bodily wounds used to prosthetics to cover their deformities. In this Industrial age, even human beings were becoming mechanized. The Great War physically turned some men into unnatural, disfigured images of their former selves, and thus soldiers carried the horrors of war back to the home front in a tangible way.

Post-War Literature

Poetry

Literature created directly from soldiers who served in World War I displays just as honestly the feelings of military men as their faces did. The poet Siegfried Sassoon was an English soldier who served on the Western Front. One poem, *The Hero*, stands out.[49] It includes three sections, each telling about a different character in the story it conveys. In the first section,

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[48] Suzannah Biernoff, *Portraits of Violence: War and the Aesthetics of Disfigurement* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 56.

[49] Siegfried Sassoon, "The Hero," in *War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon* (Project Gutenberg, 2005).

it describes a mother who is mourning over her dead son. The Colonel's letter said he died a

hero's death in battle, and she is proud despite her tears. The second section is about how the

officer, who delivered the letter, tried to offer some comfort to the woman in assuring her of her

son's bravery, and encouraged the woman. However, these were all lies to console the woman

and the officer knew it. The final section tells the truth of the woman's son. He was a useless

coward who had tried to get sent home but instead exploded in a mine.[50] No one missed him

except his mother.

  The Hero leaves the reader uncomfortable. On one side, the reader wants to sympathize

with the mother whose child was blown up in a mine. On the other, the reader feels disgust

towards the son, who did not fulfil his duty. Sassoon would have had first-hand experience either

directly watching situations like this unfold, or hearing about them from his fellow men. From

this poem, one can learn behavior what was accepted, and what was rejected on the front lines in

World War I. To not fulfil one's duty, to panic, and to abandon one's peers for the comforts of

home, even if in word only, was dishonorable behavior.[51] Conversely, being an honorable soldier

was to be brave in the face of danger, to contribute based off one's ability, and for a soldier to

stand his ground.[52] The stomach-churning nature of this poem invites the reader to question

whether all the heroic stories they had heard about soldiers were entirely true. Like a facial

prosthetic, stories from the front lines may just be covering up a less than savory secret.

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[50] Sassoon, "The Hero."

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

Another poem by Sassoon, entitled, *The Redeemer*, is a prime example of the shift World War I had brought to literature, particularly in regard to religious themes.[53] The poem outlines the dreary labor a group of army men were tasked with one bleak winter's night. Amidst rain, shellfire, and mud, the speaker sees a man's face lit up by a rocket. The man appears to be the Christ, and his countenance reveals he is suffering the pain of mortality. Instead of a crown of thorns, the figure wears a wool cap, like any English soldier. He was a man who enjoyed the common pleasures of life, but those days were over. Instead, he had taken up his cross, some planks he bore on his shoulders, and was committed to suffer and die for those he loved. This ephemeral moment when the speaker can see the Christ is ended as the light from the rocket goes out. The reader is not left wondering for long whether this figure was the Christ when he complains in the darkness, "O Christ Almighty, now I'm stuck!"[54]

For the majority of the poem, the reader is made to believe the Christ figure, humbly bearing his burdens for the sake of self-sacrifice for those he loves, is a Christophany. Yet in the end, the figure reveals himself to be a common sinner trudging along through the mud.[55] This poem bluntly puts an end to any notions of the chivalrous warriors of old. The army men fighting in the trench are not the same as the knight pledging allegiance to his God to go fight a holy war. Whereas the knights had strong, fast and nimble horses to go from one place to the next, the British soldier only had his own boots stuck in the mud.[56] The romance of the warrior is gone in Modernist writing.

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[53] Sassoon, "The Hero."

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid.

J.R.R. Tolkien

J.R.R. Tolkien, perhaps one of the most famous writers to come out of World War I, carried on the mindset of the Pre-Raphaelites in his work. According to Zimbardo and Isaacs, "J.R.R. Tolkien once said that his typical response to the reading of a medieval work was the desire not so much to make a critical or philological study of it as to write a modern work in the same tradition."[57] After graduating from Oxford, Tolkien enlisted as a second lieutenant in the Lancashire Fusiliers in 1915.[58] Tolkien did not publish his major works until 1937 (*The Hobbit*) and 1954-55 (*The Lord of the Rings*), but there is no doubt that they were strongly influenced by his time in the war.[59] While serving in France during the battle of the Somme, Tolkien was writing the beginnings of what would eventually become his stories of Middle-earth.[60] Through investigating the sort of qualities Tolkien lauds and condemns in warriors, one may better understand what people during the first world war, particularly those who still subscribed to Pre-Raphaelite ideology, considered honorable and dishonorable.

The Story of Kullervo

One of Tolkien's lesser known works, *The Story of Kullervo*, serves to explain some of Tolkien's beliefs particularly about good and evil.[61] The work, started in 1916 and based on

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[57] Rose A. Zimbardo and Neil D. Isaacs, eds. *Understanding The Lord of the Rings: The Best of Tolkien Criticism* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 123.

[58] England, War Office, Application for Appointment to a Temporary Commission in the Regular Army for the Period of the War, Application for John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, UK National Archives, WO 339/34423, June 28, 1915.

[59] David Doughan, "J.R.R. Tolkien, A Biographical Sketch," Biography, The Tolkien Society, last modified May 19, 2021, https://www.tolkiensociety.org/author/biography/.

[60] Doughan, "J.R.R. Tolkien," War, Lost Tales and Academia.

[61] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Story of Kullervo*, ed. Verlyn Flieger (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 34, 40.

Finnish mythology, is a tragedy about a youth named Kullervo who encounters a series of

misfortunes as he grows up from boyhood, including the death of his father, being sold into

slavery, and unknowingly marrying his sister. The story is highly fantastical, yet shows the true

depths of human character in unsavory situations. The story, like nearly all Tolkien's works, was

left unfinished and was posthumously edited into the beginning and middle of a book, with an

outline for the ending. Through this story, Tolkien shows the reader that he considered it

honorable to avenge innocent death and to pay for unjust deeds.[62] This makes sense in light of

Britain's attitude toward the breach of the treaty declaring Belgium's independence, further

proving that at the beginning of the war, Britain used propaganda catering to ideologies that

valued morality and valor, like the Pre-Raphaelites. [63]

Throughout Tolkien's literary corpus, he plays off his readers' fears or the darker side of

what it means to be human. Tolkien uses this as a warning for his audience to keep their desire

for power, their greed, and their willingness to mislead for selfish gain in check. The author

holds to an idea drawn from the mythology of the Middle Ages that a hero must put the lesser

parts of his humanity behind him for the sake of those he defends and maintain justice in the

world. The renowned Tolkien scholar Tom Shippey writes, "…when Sir Gawain sets off to face

apparently certain death, the poet remarks (Tolkien's translation): The knight ever made good

cheer [= put a good face on it], saying, 'Why should I be dismayed? Of doom the fair or drear by

a man must be assayed.'"[64] Despite Tolkien's subscription to a hero with virtues that lined up

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[62] Tolkien, *The Story of Kullervo*, 34, 40.

[63] Johnson Riddle & Co. Ltd., *The Scrap of Paper- Enlist Today*.

[64] Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 153.

with the Pre-Raphaelite movement, he did believe that many of the problems his world was facing were a result of the new age of Modernism and industry. Shippey notes that the sense of "defeatism" among the Allies produced by World War I was precisely the reason Tolkien wrote so strongly of courage.[65] His service in the army during the first world war heightened Tolkien's understanding of the cruelties man had produced in his time. Even through this, he maintained the same understanding of heroism as his Pre-Raphaelite contemporaries, who were seeped in the romanticism of the Middle Ages, thus showing that some individuals did not adhere to the overall sense of hopelessness brought about by the Modernist era.

The Children of Húrin

Another less-studied work by Tolkien is *The Children of Húrin*.[66] This story was, in fact, based on *The Story of Kullervo*. It differs in that it is much more complete, and it is set in Middle-earth, placing it in the same mythology as *The Lord of the Rings*. The plot is loosely similar to *The Story of Kullervo*. Húrin dares to defy the lord of all evil, Morgoth. At first, it seems like Morgoth will have mercy on him, allowing him to magically watch his wife and children from afar despite his captivity in Morgoth's lair, but this soon turns out to be a horror because Morgoth has cursed Húrin's family. Húrin's blessing of being able to see his loved ones quickly dissolves into a curse for his defiance, in that he is forced to watch his family's tragedy unfold as Morgoth's prisoner. His son, Túrin, lives out the part of the tragic hero. He obtains a magic sword fashioned from a meteorite, and it aids him in his adventures. At one point early on, Túrin is insulted by an elf. In his anger, he kills the elf and the deed is made known to the king,

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[65] Shippey, J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century, 149.

[66] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Children Of Húrin*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2007).

who had helped raise Túrin. The king gives pardon to Túrin, but Túrin refuses, believing exile to

be the just penalty for his actions. Later, Túrin defeats a dragon that had been terrorizing the

lands. Believing her husband to be dead, Túrin's wife goes to him. In its dying breath, the dragon

reveals to Túrin's wife that she is in fact his long-lost sister. Overcome by grief and horror at the

situation and her actions, Túrin's wife drowns herself and their unborn child in a river. As Túrin

regains his strength after the fight, an onlooker explains the situation to him. Ashamed, Túrin

begs his sword, which is his most cherished possession, to slay him. The sword speaks,

answering that this is a just punishment for all his wrongs. Túrin falls on his sword, taking his

own life.

  The Children of Húrin shows a strict concept of justice and morality. From his self-

imposed exile to his suicide, Túrin displays a loyal commitment to honor. He receives the

punishment for his evils in an act of self-sacrifice. When Túrin is physically at his weakest after

fighting the dragon, he learns of his incestuous relationship with his sister. This "obscurity until

the right moment" is a tactic used to unite a hero with his purpose in Medieval literature.[67]

Tolkien uses this in a negative sense to fulfil Túrin's role as the tragic hero. As judge, jury, and

executioner, so to speak, Túrin shows that responsibility for his evil is in his own hands. Tolkien

and his fellow peers, the Inklings, fought back against new ideas blooming in the years between

the two world wars which taught that man's thoughts and actions came from forces outside of his

own control. Rather, the Inklings believed, a man should take responsibility for the evil he

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[67] Zimbardo and Isaacs, *Understanding The Lord of the Rings*, 128.

causes, and face the consequences accordingly.[68] This relates to the Pre-Raphaelite concept of aiming for virtue and purity above all, even to the bitter end.[69]

The hero, Túrin, has a strange relationship with his weapon. This relationship between sword and warrior should be noted. One unique feature is that the sword can sometimes talk in the story. Like a tangible conscience, it has never forgotten the deeds of injustice perpetrated by its master. In fact, it is pleased to finally bring about an end to Túrin who had, although at times unknowingly, shed innocent blood and committed despicable acts. The sword's capabilities of speech are taken a step further. Not only does the sword speak, but it also has memory of those it has killed. When the tragic hero is finally at his lowest point, the sword offers up death to Túrin as a dark catharsis. The sword seeks justice for those who have wielded it poorly. This translates well into Pre-Raphaelite thinking. Anyone can pick up a paintbrush, chisel, or pen. However, not everyone should. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood believed only those who would execute artwork of the highest moral and didactic quality should indulge in their gift.[70] This took a certain restraint. One was not supposed to create artwork simply because they wanted to. Rather, it was to be for the betterment of society. Nothing but humanity's best virtues should be on display. Thus, Túrin's sword displayed the mind of the Pre-Raphaelites in demanding sacrificial justice for lack of restraint and selfish passion.

Tolkien's improvement on *The Story of Kullervo* into *The Children of Húrin* is proof that the author considered their themes a worthy concept to elaborate on, even after this type of

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[68] Shippey, J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century, 158.

[69] Rossetti, *The Germ*, 151.

[70] Ibid., 152.

writing had fallen out of mainstream popularity with the rise of the Modernist movement. Some

of the warriors and heroes in his works were based on a conglomeration of personalities he knew

in the trenches.[71] While Tolkien did not outright say whether Kullervo or Túrin were some of the

characters that were directly influenced by his fellow soldiers, it is likely the qualities that made

them heroes were shared with Tolkien's peers in their bravest moments: self-sacrifice and

avenging wrongdoing. Tolkien consistently emphasized the concept of not letting industrial

progress outpace morality through most all his best known works.[72] In keeping with the theme of

high virtue, this is consistent with Pre-Raphaelite thought. It also shows an awareness of the

times that Tolkien lived through, particularly with the disillusionment caused by the Great War's

technological innovations. As a soldier, Tolkien was well acquainted with death. All but one of

his close friends at the time died in the war.[73] In having his tragic heroes' deaths pay the ultimate

price for their evil actions, even those unknowingly committed, Tolkien intertwines his ideas of

morality with those of the Pre-Raphaelites, who had the highest concept of personal purity.

Author Amy Amendt-Raduege says, "Wills and testaments can reflect burial practices and

funeral rites; chronicles give us dates, places and names; monuments mark changing attitudes

toward the fate of the soul and body. But literature puts words in the mouths of the dying and

gives them the chance to speak."[74] Through his writings, Tolkien gave a voice to the last of the

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[71] Doughan, "J.R.R. Tolkien," War, Lost Tales and Academia.

[72] Randall G. Colton, "Modeling Leadership in Tolkien's Fiction: Craft and Wisdom, Gift and Task," *Journal of Business Ethics* 163, no 3 (May 2020): 401.

[73] Doughan, "J.R.R. Tolkien," War, Lost Tales and Academia.

[74] Amy Amendt-Raduege, *The Sweet and Bitter: Death and Dying in J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2017), 8.

Pre-Raphaelites, and he gave a voice to the fallen soldiers, his friends, who believed in the Pre-Raphaelite cause as well.

Conclusion

In examining British artistic and literary ideas in the early twentieth century, one can see that World War I is a decisive turning point. Fairy tales of knights glistening on horseback protecting their beloved homes were the archetypal paradigm before the war. From child to adult, the British imagination was captured by whimsical legends of King Arthur and the Grimm Brothers' Fairy tales. The Pre-Raphaelites effectively built up the notion of the idealistic hero by placing emphasis on prized virtues such as purity and honor. The pervasiveness of these ideals led to British men gladly enlisting for military service. The advent of drastic changes in warfare regarding both weapons and the destruction they caused to the soldiers, paired with continual stalemates, made Britain's mood shift quickly regarding heroes. The war produced a bleak outlook on life and drained the romanticism from the warrior. Art during and after the war was drained of color and vitality. Dark themes prevailed and much of literature revealed a sarcastic attitude towards the idealization of war. Yet even through this, the embers of Pre-Raphaelite ideology still flickered with authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien. But in the mainstream, virtuous ideals of past heroes were lost in the trenches of World War I as the twentieth century emerged.

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