

A Cognitive Metaphorical Approach to Studying the Literary Devices in English Anti-War Poetry after World War I

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ABSTRACT

This research is chiefly concerned with anti-war poems in English literature written during and immediately after World War I, which gave prominence to a new group of poets whose poetic output was built on the foundation of their personal experience of fighting in World War I, with some of them dying in that war and many of their works published posthumously. This primary research utilises Cognitive Metaphor Theory to realise how specific conceptual metaphors evoke specific cognitive responses, in the context of the anti-war poems. Using Critical Metaphor Analysis, this study identifies and interprets cognitive metaphors in selected poems and their implications for the effects on the readers. Findings suggest that these poems heavily rely on shocking and repulsive metaphorical choices to deglamourise war and challenge existing romanticism about fighting in war. Repeated invocation of death, destruction, coupled with allusions towards indignity and loss of personhood, makes a strong anti-war stance. Conversely, their clever utilisation of first- and third-person verse narrative allows readers to identify with soldiers suffering on the battlefield and reflect on their own romantic notions of war, respectively. Future studies can expand on this work by bringing in other poetic works, both before and after this era, to further scholarship on this topic.

Contribution/Originality: The key contribution this study makes is the application of cognitive linguistics to the analysis of literature, specifically early 20th-century English war poems. Through this approach, the paper attempts to show a novel way of understanding these literary works. Importantly, it opens up the discussion on the impact on the psyche of the readers, rather than simple literary analysis.

1. Introduction

Unlike classical poets, especially epic poets like Homer and Virgil, whose works prominently feature warriors as heroic, courageous, virtuous, and bold, war poetry in the 20th century underwent a massive shift from romantic to critical and from idealistic to realistic. As Pividori (2025) argues, the “myth of war” formed by World War I (WWI)

gave prominence to a new generation of people who were disillusioned and disabused of the notion of war as something glorious. Instead, they were shocked and embittered by their own experiences, which particularly confused their simplistic understanding of friend and enemy. Consequently, poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, themselves being soldiers in WWI, expressed deep resentment, a sense of futility coupled with a profound feeling of loss over the death of countless youth. By portraying the reality of war as they experienced it, these poets challenged the enthusiastic spirit of joining the war. Notably, as Solomon (2022) points out, the Anti-War voices existed at the same time as many pro-war voices in English literature, with poets like Brooke who based their literary output on nationalistic sentiments and the dominant state narrative. Thus, the rise of anti-war voices like Owen and Sassoon was not merely a reaction to the war itself, but also in debate with the pro-war voices that retained old romantic notions of war. Thus, the Anti-War poets undertook the significant task of questioning the very society and even the structure and systems of it that led to death and destruction which they deemed pointless; emotional appeal of these poems can vary between rage and anger against the war machine to profound sense of sorrow and pity for the suffering people as well as sarcastic critical remarks against civilians who were championing the war.

1.2. Study Aim

The study aims to analyse how a range of recurring metaphors and literary devices appear in selected Anti-War poems to understand how these techniques are utilised to convey a meaningful argument against war, beyond simple emotional repulsion.

1.3. Research Questions

- i. What literary techniques did 20th-century anti-war poets utilise to counter the glorification of war that can be classified as conceptual metaphors?
- ii. How do these cognitive metaphors allow the readers to think, feel, and immerse themselves in the persona of a soldier fighting in those wars?

1.3. Scope and Significance of the Study

While traditional poems often glorify war and warriors, invoking conceptions like heroism, bravery, honour, and so forth, 20th-century war poetry forswore glorification of senseless bloodshed and meaningless death by deromanticising war, emphasising its brutal, violent, unfair, and random aspects. This study moves beyond the obvious emotional impact of the rhetorical devices used in such poems, instead focusing on how such poetic devices map concept and reality, allowing readers to feel, visualise, and understand the unspeakable horrors of war.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

2.1.1. Cognitive or Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)

Metaphorical usages being an integral part of the English language itself, with diverse ways of using it contextually, it can also be morphed into different types to serve specific textual functions. Romero and Soria (2005) identify three kinds of metaphorical

linguistic devices, namely marginal, conceptual (or conventional) and new metaphorical concepts. Specifically, conceptual metaphors include both literal and non-literal metaphors, which can be further subdivided into dead and live metaphors. Notably, dead metaphors arise out of literal metaphors that have fallen out of common usage, whereas live metaphors utilise the basis of existing metaphorical concepts and novel metaphors that are emergent from new metaphorical concepts. Thus, conceptual metaphors are understood as relational dimensions between two distinct concepts where one of them can be understood in terms of the other, and this phenomenon is normally unidirectional. Beknazarova et al. (2021) opined that the underlying cognitive directionality of linguistics for the usage of metaphors is anthropocentric, as it generally attempts to explain a new concept or idea in terms of the ability of an individual to grasp it, compared to images and ideas already known or familiar to them. That is to say, metaphors are only effective if the ideas being newly introduced are already born in the knowledge and experience the person has acquired previously. In relation to Anti-War poems, the presumption regarding the usage of conceptual metaphors includes comparing or drawing equivalence between realities of wartime situations and ideas and concepts that bear a negative or unflattering connotation. Kiseleva and Trofimova (2017) opine that the recent evolution of understanding metaphor has moved past considering it as a linguistic tool only, to understanding it as a cognitive phenomenon. Hence, this new understanding views metaphor as holding two thoughts that are expressed in unison by associating one with the other. This process of mapping one concept onto another is considered a phenomenon inherent to language and systems of knowledge, while the mental ability is understood as a universal cognitive phenomenon.

2.1.2. Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA)

Critical Metaphor Analysis or CMA is understood as a process of identifying metaphors and interpreting and explaining them, to understand their subtext. Imani (2022) advocates for the importance of close reading of a text to excavate the words being used metaphorically, mapping the target and the source of metaphorical expressions, and argues that conceptual metaphors can be "composed of a target and a source but at a broader scope than metaphorical concepts," such that it can incorporate multiple conceptual evocations in the same source domain. Under this view, conceptual metaphors are the original association between two objects or entities or concepts that is linguistically reflected through metaphorical expressions. As such, conceptual metaphors are subjective and dependent on context. As per Liu et al. (2024), in the context of the recent COVID pandemic, deploying war metaphors enhanced negativity towards the pandemic, and CMA can examine the implications of metaphors being used, besides analysing the metaphors themselves. While the secondary subject matter of this cited work (COVID pandemic) is different from this present research, the usage of metaphors and deployment of CMA in metaphorical expressions born out of a massive global crisis remains highly relevant to both the present topic. As such, this study critically analyses metaphors in World War I era Anti-War English poems using CMA techniques, while CMT builds the philosophical and linguistic skeleton of the study.

2.2. Impact of World War I on English Poetry

Having personal experiences of fighting in a war, especially in the context of World War I, which at the time was the largest (and most destructive) war to date, opened a new horizon of English war poetry. Promee (2016) argues that the new genre of English war poetry was more or less established by the young poets during WWI, who wrote about

soldiers on the battlefield, their personal experiences and sometimes also assumed the perspective of civilians. These poems, written by soldier poets, were not explicitly Anti-War, but exposed a complexity of situations in the war by questioning the greater philosophical implications of it, including questions of existence, loyalty, duty, violence and bloodshed, loss of innocent lives and so forth; the Anti-War implications are not necessarily explicit but made through a holistic reading of their corpus which repeatedly highlights the internal contradictions and morally questionable nature of the war machine. Maiti and Naskar (2017) point out that WWI altered the landscape of English poetry by sharpening specific sensibilities, including "courage and fear, nobility and disgust, hatred and pity" (p. 77). This was achieved chiefly by soldier poets who recorded their feelings and experiences, such as their encounters with death on the frontline of warfare. Notably, as per Maiti and Naskar (2017), most of these poets did not get critical acclaim during their lifetime (partially owed to the fact that many of them died in battle); however, poets such as Owen and Sassoon merit a "careful study." The intense emotions that these soldier poets felt in battle were channelled to their poems, making these literary works not just authentic or exceptional in literary value and quality, but also highly interesting from a cognitive linguistic perspective, since these function as examples of how feelings of extreme trauma, witnessing death and mutilation en masse can be conveyed through poetic devices. The similarity of their experiences should reflect in their poems through equivalent metaphorical choices that can be found through critical metaphor analysis.

2.3. Diverse Perspectives on War

While the scope of this study is limited to poems expressing Anti-War sentiments (implied or obvious), in exploring the literature, it must be mentioned that not every soldier poet expressed similar opinions and reported different experiences. Notably, as Maiti and Naskar (2017) clarify using Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen as examples, sometimes the opinions of soldier poets were opposite of one another. While the poems of Brooke are characterised by their patriotic, even nationalist tone, celebrating martyrdom and praising heroic acts of soldiers, Owen is significantly more critical with his portrayal of senseless cruelty and loss of young lives, making him realistic as opposed to the idealistic or romantic time of Brooke. Fleshman (2019) argued that in the sonnet 'Peace', Brooke expresses gratitude for being able to serve his country (in battle) and posits that WWI is an opportunity for his generation to rise and take the position of the older generations; comparatively, Sassoon contemplated the dilemma between choosing to sacrifice oneself and being outright suicidal and after witnessing the death of his close friends became more defiant of war, reflecting in his poetic tone. This is comparable to the deromanticisation of war itself in the poetry of Owen, who compared the mass death of youth in war to raising cattle for slaughter (Fleshman, 2019). Thus, the impact of WWI did not fully nullify the romantic tendencies regarding war and the sentiment of serving the country, but it made Anti-War thoughts more prominent in literature, especially in the poems posthumously published, written by soldier poets who died in war. Méndez López (2024) argued that the poetry of Sassoon rarely criticises the soldiers directly, but the civilians and ranking officials who "direct the war, instead of fighting themselves" (p. 17). Notably, Sassoon often assumes the perspective of an active soldier on the battlefield (himself being one) and focuses on crude realism with vivid depictions of the brutalities of war; this attitude of anti-war poems should be reflected in their language.

2.4. Metaphor in Anti-War Poetry

The individuality of the early 20th-century English poets notwithstanding, the shared experience of World War I makes it expectable to identify common metaphorical usages in anti-war poetry of contemporary time. Muttaleb (2022) argues, giving the example of Herbert Read, that anti-war poems can integrate realistic depictions of war and personal experiences of an individual soldier, presenting a morally ambiguous picture of WWI. Specifically, such poems can depict how first-hand experiences of war can alter romanticism regarding combat. Muttaleb (2022) invokes the poem *Kneeshaw Goes to War* to highlight in this poem how the protagonist changes his thinking after witnessing the war personally, metaphorically presenting his life as a "gloom" that surrounds him. Depending on the aspect of war being criticised, the utilisation of metaphor can vary significantly, in tone and impact. Božić (2021) argues that war poets like Sassoon felt it to be inadequate to simply portray a romantic, idealised version of war, thus moving past Georgian tradition; this realisation largely shaped his poetic diction. Specifically, anti-war poems in his time exemplify the usage of simple, everyday words to convey complex situations and concepts, which is captured in their choices of metaphors. Consequently, metaphorical expressions in anti-war poems under discussion should reflect how the negative aspects of war are associated with concepts that are also familiar to common people, who lack direct experience of any war.

Conveying the realistic picture of war in a dry, descriptive way being hardly evocative of strong emotional reactions, anti-war poetry sought to deliver not just images but the very concepts and contradictions that troubled anti-war poets, by juxtaposing expectation and actuality. Hardwick (2025) provides an example in the form of Mary Borden to show how the environment itself "became a site for allusions" in anti-war poetry, as present in the poems written by Borden in a field hospital during heavy bombardment, making environment the antithetical presence to war, symbolising peace and tranquility compared to the destruction and chaos of battlefield (p. 13). Consequently, these kinds of conceptual approaches to literary devices (especially metaphors) became a common trait of anti-war poems in the early 20th century. Alkan (2025) highlights that anti-war poems use metaphors regarding land to "indicate belonging of the individual," structuring them as objects to be traded; moreover, these poems tend to use the backdrop of nature, animals, forests and so forth as metaphors or a romanticised backdrop that accentuates the tension in the human world (pp. 8, 17). Hence, the invocation of contrasting pictures in the same breath is a noteworthy characteristic of English Anti-War poetry of the time. While wartime poetry invokes conceptions of 'just war', anti-war poems problematise the concept of 'enemies', thereby questioning the rationale behind engaging in warfare (Hardwick, 2025). Unlike classical poems, where metaphors are utilised to make grandiose claims about warriors and their skills and prowess, 20th-century Anti-War poems deploy metaphorical expressions to underline the vulnerability of the soldiers, contradictions in thinking (questioning underlying assumptions that drive conflicts) and so on. This approach is expectedly reflected in the literary devices in the poems during and after WWI.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Paradigm and Design

Having previously acknowledged the subjectivity of the process of CMA, the choice of research paradigm becomes limited, especially when considering the target of the

analysis being qualitative (literary works), hence the selection of interpretivism, coupled with inductive reasoning. Interpretivism by default acknowledges the subjectivity or the ability of humans to “create further depth in meanings,” making it ideal for research concerning the human factor, such as social sciences (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). In doing so, interpretivism assumes that objective reality as perceived by human beings cannot be decoupled from the observer, i.e. the human, and that humans cannot be separated from what they know. Consequently, it argues that reality is perceived through “intersubjectivity,” which is integrated into broader contexts of sociopolitics, culture and so on. In other words, this paradigm assumes the subjective aspect of reality itself and that realities can differ between individuals. As per Heit (2000), inductive reasoning is about recognising patterns to make predictions based on available information, and the paper also highlights the propensity among humans to utilise inductive logic, which may point to an underlying cognitive phenomenon. Since the core of this study is concerned with cognitive metaphors in specific literary works, inductive logic becomes suitable for it. The study is designed to identify, interpret and analyse usage of metaphors in 20th-century English Anti-War poetry emerging as a consequence of WWI, specifically addressing the cognitive purpose served by those metaphorical expressions in terms of evoking strong antipathy towards war. With CMT being the theoretical backing, the study addresses how shared experiences of war shaped poetic devices at that time by conducting a CMA of selected poems by Owen and Sassoon.

3.2. Data Source and Collection

The nature of this study, being a critical analysis (CMA) of selected poems, the data is provided by the texts themselves, making it a qualitative research, which is consistent with the above-mentioned research design and paradigm. Unlike quantitative data, which can be expressed in numeric or mathematical form, qualitative data cannot be expressed similarly, and it is also more diverse and complex than quantitative information, as argued by Kuckartz (2019). This study, being a CMA of selected poems, must utilise qualitative data. Importantly, this also makes it a primary research since it will directly analyse literary outputs of selected poets, without being mediated by previous scholarly works. While a multiplicity of poets have written English poems expressing negative or detractive opinions regarding war across different periods of literary history, the study narrows the focus down to the specific time period of WWI, including poems written during and soon after that period. Furthermore, to increase specificity, the study only considers soldier poets who fought in WWI, selecting only two major figures among them, namely Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon (refer to Table 1). The primary qualitative data is collected from three selected poetic works of each of these poets, as listed in Table 1. The methodology discussed here is to be applied to these selected poetic outputs.

Table 1: Selected Poets and Poems

| Selected Poets | Selected Anti-War Poems |
|----------------|---|
| Wilfred Owen | Dulce et Decorum Est Anthem for Doomed Youth Futility |

Siegfried Sassoon

The Hero

Suicide in the Trenches

Does It Matter?

Source: Self-created

3.3. Ethical Considerations

While ethical considerations of primary research are generally extensive, being concerned mainly with selected literary works, reduces the scope of many such considerations. The key ethical dimensions include properly citing the sources used in the study, both the analysed texts (literary works) as well as academic literature used to build theoretical foundations, so as to maintain academic integrity. In the same vein, the study is careful in its interpretation of the selected texts, maintaining logical consistency and congruency with pre-chosen methods. Having maintained transparency in methodological choices, the study facilitates replication of the results.

4. Findings

The following tables present qualitative data gathered from the selected poetic works mentioned above, identifying metaphorical expressions used and mapping them, using CMT, to specific ideas or concepts to facilitate a CMA. Table 2 identifies specific metaphorical expressions and what such metaphors evoke, while Table 3 presents diverse cognitive metaphors converging on specific concepts and ideas, in accordance with the poems they are taken from. In the next sections of this paper, these findings are analysed utilising the theoretical concepts mentioned above and use that analysis to answer the research questions.

Table 2: Conceptual Mapping of Metaphors

| Sl. No. | Poems | Metaphorical Expressions | Conceptual Mapping |
|---------|----------------------|--|--|
| 1. | Dulce et Decorum Est | <p>“Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, Knock-kneed, coughing like hags,”</p> <p>“We cursed through sludge,”</p> <p>“Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots, But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind; Drunk with fatigue.”</p> <p>“deaf even to the hoots Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.”</p> <p>“Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,”</p> | <p>Premature ageing or loss of youth/prime years of life</p> <p>Fighting a war as gruesome and inglorious</p> <p>Lack of direction and purpose, mockery of the chain of commands, Loss of reason to simple intuition and survival instinct</p> <p>Ever-present danger</p> <p>Survival Instinct, omnipresent danger</p> |

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|----|-------------------------|--|---|
| | | “Dim through the misty panes and thick green light, As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.” | Suffocation or asphyxiation |
| | | “smothering dreams” | Suffocation or asphyxiation |
| | | “And watch the white eyes writhing in his face, His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin; If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,” | Crude ugliness of dying, war being akin to a severe illness (like cancer) |
| | | “The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori.” | Disillusionment, loss of national pride |
| 2. | Anthem for Doomed Youth | “What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?” | Loss of personal dignity, loss of respect for human life |
| | | “Only the monstrous anger of the guns. Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle” | Mechanised warfare |
| | | “No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells; Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,” | Indignity of death, Freedom in death |
| | | “The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells; And bugles calling for them from sad shires.” | War as a perversion of religion, making light of funeral rituals |
| | | “What candles may be held to speed them all? Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.” | Lack of hope, loss of future, loss of youth |
| | | “Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,” | Funeral, death becoming a mere ritual |
| | | “And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.” | Death as habitual reality |
| 3. | Futility | “Move him into the sun— Gently, its touch awoke him once,” | Nurturing ability of nature, honouring the dead |

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| | | “If anything might rouse him now The kind old sun will know.” | Irreversibility of death |
| | | “Think how it wakes the seeds— Woke once the clays of a cold star. Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?” | Life-giving quality of nature |
| | | “O what made fatuous sunbeams toil To break earth's sleep at all?” | Pointlessness of life and death |
| 4. | The Hero | “‘Jack fell as he'd have wished,' the mother said, And folded up the letter that she'd read.” | Mythology of a glorious death, a coping mechanism to hide pain and grief |
| | | “‘The Colonel writes so nicely.' Something broke In the tired voice that quavered to a choke.” | Grief, loss, and coping mechanisms |
| | | “She half looked up. 'We mothers are so proud Of our dead soldiers.' Then her face was bowed.” | Taking pride in death, purposeful death |
| | | “Quietly, the Brother Officer went out. He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies” | Lying to dignify the dead |
| | | “That she would nourish all her days, no doubt For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy, Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.” | Heroism as a convenient lie, myth of gallantry as a coping mechanism against the pain of losing a loved one |
| | | “He thought how 'Jack', cold-footed, useless swine, Had panicked down the trench that night, the mine” | Heroism as myth, rarity of “glorious death,” equating bravery and stupidity |
| | | “...how he'd tried To get sent home,...” | Soldiers as unwilling participants |
| | | “he died, Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care Except that lonely woman with white hair.” | Indignity of death, myth of ‘a good death,’ heroism based on lies |
| 5. | Suicide in the Trenches | “I knew a simple soldier boy Who grinned at life in empty joy, | Innocence and purity of joy, unmarred by war |

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|----|-----------------|--|--|
| | | Slept soundly through the lonesome dark, And whistled early with the lark.” | |
| | | “In winter trenches, cowed and glum, With crumps and lice and lack of rum,” | War is the diametric opposite of simple joy or happiness, the hardship of being a soldier |
| | | “He put a bullet through his brain. No one spoke of him again.” | Loss of innocence and joy, pointless death, indignity of death |
| | | “You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye Who cheer when soldier lads march by, Sneak home and pray you'll never know The hell where youth and laughter go.” | Hypocrisy of society (or civilians), loss of young lives |
| 6. | Does It Matter? | “Does it matter?—losing your legs?... For people will always be kind,” | Reality of the battlefield, loss of organs as a fragmentation of the person |
| | | “And you need not show that you mind” | Masculine stoicism is encouraged by society, hiding pain and suffering, |
| | | “Does it matter?—losing your sight?... There's such splendid work for the blind.” | Losing organs is losing an aspect of the person |
| | | “And people will always be kind,” | Fruitless or superficial kindness, sarcasm |
| | | “Do they matter?—those dreams from the pit?...” | Expendability of young lives |
| | | “You can drink and forget and be glad,” | Hypocrisy of society |
| | | “And people won't say that you're mad; For they'll know you've fought for your country And no one will worry a bit.” | Superficial respect for soldiers and their sacrifice, hypocrisy of forgetting them, or only acknowledging them in a completely abstract manner |

Source: Self-created

Table 3: Conceptual Uniformity among Identified Metaphors in Context

| Concepts and Ideas | Unified Examples of Cognitive Metaphors |
|---|--|
| Loss of young lives | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, Knock-kneed, coughing like hags," 2. "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?" 3. "If anything might rouse him now The kind old sun will know." 4. "he died, Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care Except that lonely woman with white hair." 5. "He put a bullet through his brain. No one spoke of him again." |
| Inglorious and indignifying aspects of being a soldier | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "We cursed through sludge," 2. "And watch the white eyes writhing in his face, His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin; If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues," 3. "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?" 4. "What candles may be held to speed them all? Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes." 5. "O what made fatuous sunbeams toil To break earth's sleep at all?" 6. "He thought how 'Jack', cold-footed, useless swine, Had panicked down the trench that night, the mine" 7. "He put a bullet through his brain. No one spoke of him again." 8. "And people won't say that you're mad; For they'll know you've fought for your country And no one will worry a bit." |
| Criticism of society and the hypocrisy of civilians who cheer for war | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori." 2. "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?" 3. "You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye Who cheer when soldier lads march by, Sneak home and pray you'll never know The hell where youth and laughter go." 4. "And people will always be kind," |
| Death, destruction, pain, grief, loss, and suffering | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "deaf even to the hoots Of gas-shells dropping softly behind." 2. "Dim through the misty panes and thick green light, As under a green sea, I saw him drowning." 3. "Only the monstrous anger of the guns. Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle" 4. "And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds." 5. "O what made fatuous sunbeams toil To break earth's sleep at all?" 6. "She half looked up. 'We mothers are so proud Of our dead soldiers.' Then her face was bowed." |

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|--|--|
| Deglorification and deromanticisation of war | <p>7. "He put a bullet through his brain. No one spoke of him again."</p> <p>1. "The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori." 2. "Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots, But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind; Drunk with fatigue." 3. "No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells; Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs," 4. "The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells; And bugles calling for them from sad shires." 5. "He thought how 'Jack', cold-footed, useless swine, Had panicked down the trench that night, the mine" 6. "And you need not show that you mind"</p> |
|--|--|

Source: Self-created

While many more cognitive metaphors were identified initially (in Table 2), Table 3 shows the prevalence of certain kinds of conceptual evocations through poetic devices. This signals a convergence of poetic ideas and common elements within criticisms of war in the early 20th century. Although these soldier poets lived different lives, their first-hand experience of fighting in WWI unified their understanding of war. Notably, the poems retain the individuality of the two poets, evident from their diction, style, choice of phrases and expressions, metrical variations and so forth; however, for this study, the focus is only on converging conceptual metaphors, depicting a clear unified anti-war stance during and in the immediate aftermath of WWI.

5. Discussion

The results of the research clearly showcase technical similarities among the poetic devices utilised to present the Anti-War sentiments in the poems under discussion. Conceptually, both Owen and Sassoon verily bemoan the loss of youth as well as young people dying in battle, thereby becoming a prominent identifying marker of contemporary Anti-War poetry. Notably, none of these poets tries to dignify the dead youth; they are fixated on the lack of dignity in their manner of death, as well as after death. Owen in *Futility* and Sassoon in *Suicide in the Trenches* present a vivid picture of the absurdity of such loss of young blood. Thematically, the effect of regretting this loss is further accentuated by drawing attention to the lack of glory in being a soldier, portraying it as little more than the daily drudgery of domestic life, the only major dissimilarity being the constant threat to their lives. Soldiers are ill, visibly so; the conditions they endure do not impart any honour or dignity, and they are little more than mindless bodies obeying orders that they cannot influence. Both poets consistently utilise inglorious, unflattering words and phrases to refer to war and its aspects, accompanied by vivid depiction of bodily and mental damage the soldiers have to tolerate, with this aspect being especially noteworthy in Owen, compared to a somewhat more abstract approach in the selected poems by Sassoon. The details provided by both poets, but particularly Owen, heavily emphasise the gritty, brutal, and crude reality of being a soldier, while both paint this role in similarly unromantic hues. The cognitive impact of repetitive usage of this kind of language serves to associate war with the dirty, the monotonous and the horrific; this negativity of the metaphors works to subvert the cognitive appeal of heroism or being honoured or sacrificing oneself for the nation, thereby implicitly trying to reorient the perception of war itself.

The convergence of the metaphorical choices in using invocations of cruel and untimely deaths of the young, extreme physical suffering, and so on, clusters negative cognitive metaphors against war. For example, lines like “And you need not show that you mind”, “No one spoke of him again”, or “And no one will worry a bit” unify by invoking carelessness towards warring soldiers. Both Owen and Sassoon were able to draw from their personal repositories of experiences on the battlefield to portray a realistic picture of warfare that pulls the readers into immersion. Owen in *Dulce et Decorum Est* and Sassoon in *Suicide in the Trenches* deliver first-person verse narrative presenting events and commentary from the point of view of a soldier. As the readers identify with the narrator/speaker persona, reading the first-person retelling of the events becomes as appealing as going through an autobiographical account. This approach not only helps immersion, but the readers are invited to feel the pain and suffering of the soldiers on the battlefield, including the pain caused by witnessing their fellow soldiers suffer and die cruel deaths. That said, their other poems in third-person verse narrative are no less effective in conveying complex emotions pursuant to authentic portrayal and extreme realism. While the first-person verses are more immersive, the third-person verses are closer to the actual persona of the readers, assuming most of them do not have experiences similar to those of the soldier poets. Thus, in the third-person verses, the speaker assumes the role of an outside observer commenting on specific events, which also enables readers to identify with this narrative voice. Consequently, poems like *Anthem for Doomed Youth* and *Does it Matter?* invite the readers to be introspective in their perception of war, to contemplate their own biases and unrealistic romanticism regarding war and soldiers. Furthermore, this distancing between the readers and the subject of the poems delivers a greater amount of shock and awe due to the candid realism of these poets.

Consistently, the influence of these metaphors on cognition of the readers call for the latter to associate war with things that people psychosocially perceive as negative such as a soldier dying of his own mistake in Sassoon's *Hero* and the brother officer badmouthing the deceased in the same poem, a soldier committing suicide instead of bravely facing the enemy and moreover the mention of people ignoring or forgetting his death (*Suicide in the Trenches*), the visible gore of death by poison gas (*Dulce Et Decorum Est*) and so forth. Notably, as the findings indicate, the cognitive metaphors cover not a fixed territory of repulsive objects but assume authenticity since the poets often speak from the perspective of a soldier, which adds another layer of cognitive imposition. Notably, linguistically these implications are not very subtle, barely concealed through imagery, drawing parallels, sarcasm and other devices widely used in literature. Thus, despite not being explicit in their language, the disillusionment slips through, and it is only subtle insofar as the unawareness of the reader is concerned regarding any such poetic motivation. In any case, the strong realism in the poetic diction, coupled with the cognitive and social appeal of their authentic representation, sometimes from personal recounting, makes a compelling statement. The evocative details in phrases like “...for those who die as cattle,” “the white eyes writhing in his face,” “like old beggars under sacks,” and more go beyond mere realism and lead to the immersive experience of reading these poems. The narrative voice, being in first person (in some of the poems), allows the readers to identify directly with the speaker persona, who is canonically a soldier in the Great War. However, speaking in retrospect, the possible immersive experience of the cognitive metaphors is period and place dependent, considering that poems heavily depend on evoking commonplace pictures of wars of that time, like trenches, poison gas, and even the social picture of strong nationalism and joining the war from a patriotic fervour.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary of Results and Implications

This study utilised CMT as a theoretical basis to perform a critical analysis of literary devices in WWI-era Anti-War English poetry, specifically narrowing the focus to Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. The findings suggest that the poets relied significantly on the cognitive impact of literary devices to drive home their point about the negative aspects of war, including loss of lives, particularly young lives, which Owen and Sassoon deemed futile. As such, literary devices utilised by these poets actively deglamourise war, challenging the long-established romanticism regarding fighting for the native country of the individual. These Anti-War poems clearly portray soldiers as people who are not in charge of their own fate, making their situation similar to livestock. The frank and bold yet gruesome conceptual metaphors, such as comparing poison gas to drowning or a soldier committing suicide in the trench, serve to neuter the residual romantic notions of war by realistically depicting what a soldier in WWI entailed, rather than presenting a polished and glamorous version of it. The poets emphasise the ugly, cruel, and uncivilised aspects of war, comparing it with cancer or any other dangerous disease. Recurring patterns in cognitive metaphor include senseless death, loss of young lives, and a complete lack of purpose or function beyond what the state wants them to do. Conversely, the immersive experience of reading such poems comes from not just the vivid depictions of war but also an authentic portrayal of the lives of a soldier whose job hardly entails anything glorious or noble. While such perspectives help the audience to immerse themselves in the feelings of these fictional narrators, the third-person verses with their deeply thought-provoking nature invite readers to contemplate their own romantic notions of war.

6.2. Research Gap/Limitations

While the findings of this study are comprehensive, for the sake of brevity, the research excludes other anti-war poems from the same era, with different approaches to the topic. Moreover, anti-war poems have existed before WWI, and this study makes no comparison, beyond what is claimed in existing academic literature, as to how exactly WWI altered anti-war sentiments in English poetry. Another missed opportunity is to study the pro-war poetry of the same era and contrast the two genres to assess how the wartime propaganda and popular sentiments are challenged by the anti-war rhetoric of poets like Sassoon or Owen. The study also selects extremely specific poetic works, 6 in total, which is relatively small, compared to the total breadth of poetic output of these poets.

6.3. Contribution to the Field

While literary criticism and critical acclaim are not strangers to the genre of anti-war poetry, merging cognitive linguistics with the critical analysis of conceptual metaphors makes this study rather novel. Moreover, being a primary study, it only uses existing literature to build a theoretical groundwork, with the analysis and conclusions drawn from the findings being original to this paper. It encourages a cognitive linguistics approach to understanding how poignant conceptual metaphors evoke specific mental responses from the readers, both in the context of anti-war poems and literature in general.

6.4. Future Scope

Future research works in this or related fields can expand upon these findings by taking a critical look at the larger corpus of 20th-century anti-war poems. While this study is limited to two specific poets and their selected outputs from a particular era, follow-up research can incorporate other contemporary poets of the same genre. Moving on from WWI, future academic works can also comparatively assess how both WWI and World War II shaped poetic approaches to the topic of war itself.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researcher(s) used the research ethics guidelines provided by the Ethics Committee of Southwest University. Since this is not a study involving living participants, the questions of ethics pertaining to that aspect do not arise. The scholarly works used in the study have been properly acknowledged, and the primary texts were credited/attributed to the original authors.

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Conflict of Interests

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