Analyzing War Poetry: "Attack" by Siegfried Sassoon

Poetry is very much like lyrics from a song; it is another medium to express an individual's inner feelings to the audience by manipulating language in a unique way to turn words to images, images to meaning, and meaning to significance. War poetry often resembles the rawest form of human emotions. Without a doubt, the dehumanizing experiences and the dreadful scenes at the frontlines brought victims to resort to tell their story through poetry. "Attack" by Siegfried Sassoon is a good example of a soldier retelling his experience in the trenches during World War I.

As a soldier taking part in World War I, Siegfried Sassoon effectively captures the horrors of war and reanimates his memories in the poem to convey the main theme: the reality of war. The poem starts out by describing the setting, accompanied by nature's beauty in lines 1-2. However, Sassoon gradually builds suspense in the poem, slowly unmasking the hideous face of war by utilizing tone. Ultimately, the starting lines (1-2) and the ending lines (12-13) contrast each other, revealing how Sassoon challenges a common gung-ho perspective on war versus the real grievous visions of war. The universal message Sassoon delivers is that war is not an act of honor nor a celebratory event; it is nothing but torture.

Sassoon's "Attack" is composed of one stanza containing 13 lines. Although the rhyming pattern of this poem can be characterized as AABCDEFGHIIIH in its entirety, it is safe to say that this poem is a free verse with no prominent rhyming pattern recurring in the poem. Furthermore, Sassoon enhances his message to be more accessible and impacting to the audience by using literary devices such as symbolism, personification, and tone to name a few.

This poem is filled with descriptive language and not to mention, a lot of imagery. However, what is more significant than imagery is the symbolism that hides behind it. Sassoon describes, "the wild purple of the glow'ring sun," not for imagery's sake, but to imply that the colour purple represents power, nobility, ambition, and extravagance. Sassoon uses this symbol to scorn and emphasize that all of these mentioned traits are responsible for our broken perception on war as an honorary act. In addition, personification is widely used throughout this poem to visually overwhelm the audience with the ugliness of war. For example, the personification used in lines 5 and 6 to express that the tank is "creeping" and the barrages are "roaring," suggesting a hint of tension and fear, respectively. As mentioned earlier, Sassoon's shift in tone implies that his view on war has also changed over time. Sassoon had enlisted in the army to fight at the Western Front because he was motivated by patriotism. By looking at the shift in tone and the contrast, it can be inferred that Sassoon himself had also changed into a pacifist.
In my rendition, "Defend," I tried to retain the same theme as "Attack," but it also sheds light to a different message. Much like "Attack," my poem contains 13 lines all in one stanza, and follows a free verse rhyming pattern. I tried to replicate Sassoon's poem by using similar literary devices presented earlier. I used personification in lines 5 and 7, symbolism/allusion in line 4 (mushroom cloud), and imagery all throughout to maximize the impact of war—Hiroshima in World War II, to be specific. Although the title just seems like an antonym for attack, the word "defend" refers to my overall theme of defending peace. As I start out by describing the horrendous scenes of Hiroshima after World War II, I end the poem by introducing how lovely the world looked like before the war. This is the opposite of how Sassoon created contrast in "Attack." By this contrast, I wanted to illustrate how war had blinded and dehumanized people to forget about the values of life. People forget the significance of happiness and tranquility in the world, and it is important to "defend" peace, even if it is a limited amount of peace.

*The poems are on the next page*
"Attack" by Siegfried Sassoon

1 At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun A
2 In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun, A
3 Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud B
4 The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one, C
5 Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire. D
6 The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed E
7 With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear, F
8 Men jostle and climb to, meet the bristling fire. G
9 Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear, F
10 They leave their trenches, going over the top, H
11 While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists, I
12 And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists, I
13 Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop! H

"Defend" by Marvin Dotiyal

1 Loincloth skin you wear and drag from ravages, A
2 No taxidermist can replicate our bodies, O please set me free! B
3 Torn flesh, melted skulls and limbless wanderers—no surprise, C
4 Impossible to see beyond the mushroom cloud, D
5 The bombs screamed victory clear and loud, D
6 But not for us, the ashes confetti our radiated air instead, E
7 Powerless soldiers moaned, guns have talked, F
8 It all withered when the world painted red E
9 From a world once enriched with bliss G
10 Light, mercy, and peace, H
11 The sun once gleamed and the rain once purified I
12 The lush green trees and golden skies J
13 With smiles illuminating ear to ear K