Could Siegfried Sassoon Count?

Marcello Giovanelli

In a letter to Osbert Sitwell in July 1918, Siegfried Sassoon counted up the number of times words with particularly dark associations appeared in the poems in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*: ''The word death, die, dead, recurs more than 40 times in the 39 poems – Dark and darkness 16 – War 15. Night: 13. Gloom: 9. Doom: 7. Killed: 5. Corpses = only 3, I am afraid'. *quoted in Moorcroft Wilson 2013: 307).

In fact, Sassoon was a little out with his maths (hence the question in my title!): The words 'death', 'die', 'dead' collectively actually occur 29 times (add on 'dying' and 'died' and this brings the total up to 39; 'dark' and 'darkness' appear 15 times; 'war' and 'night' 17 times; 'gloom' 8 times; and 'doom' 4 times. Sassoon was right, though, with 'killed' appearing 5 times, and 'corpses' appearing on 3 occasions. Of Sassoon would have been counting these words manually, whereas my own calculations have been done by a piece of computer software, in this case a tool called AntConc*, one of several available programmes that takes a body of electronic text - a corpus - and highlights language features such as word frequency, common phrases, and the contexts in which individual instances of words appear.. The corpus can also be compared with larger reference corpora such as the British National Corpus * so that judgements can be made as how language use is more or less typical of more general patterns in language more broadly. And all of this is more accurate and far, far quicker than counting yourself!

In the remainder of this short article, I want to highlight an interesting set of observations that a quick corpus search reveals about the two most frequently occurring nouns in *Counter-Attack*, 'night' and 'war' which both appear 17 times in the collection. Functional words such as prepositions, determiners, conjunctions and pronouns aside, 'night' and 'war' aoccur more times than any other word: 'night' appears in 15 of the thirty-nine poems and 'war' in 14. Figure 1 shows each instance of 'night' in the context in which it appears in poems in the collection (the title of the poem is on the left-hand side)

The corpus tool highlights some interesting patterns that we can explore to consider the nature of Sassoon's style across the collection more generally. For instance, 'night' often appears at the end of a construction '*noun of*', such as 'despair of night' (Prelude: The Troops'), 'edge of night' ('Thrushes') and 'end of night' ('Break of Day'), poems in which the night and its associations are used to convey a strong sense of time and place. Often 'night' is quantified such as in 'Another night' ('In Barracks'), 'each night' ('Their Frailty') and 'last night' ('The Dream') to either highlight on going action, or else to single out a specific and memorable occasion such as in 'The Dream' where a 'rank smell' brings the dreamer to reimagine the horrors of war that 'in the past was hidden'. Another interesting stylistic trait occurs when 'night' is fully or semi personified, for example in 'Break of Day' where 'night' has agency 'slowly night departs', and in 'Wirers' where the emotions associated with the soldiers in wiring party are assumed to be carried by the night itself, 'night's misery ended'. In this poem, the end of night coincides with the speaker's revelation that 'Young Hughes' is injured, presumed to die later that day.

Figure 1: 'night'

Figure 2 shows the same results for 'war', which is at times capitalised and on other occasions appears in lower case. in A common construction, as with 'night', is '*noun* of war', for example in 'beast of war' and 'dream of war' ('The Dream'), and 'field of war' (Prelude: The Troops'. Again, 'war' is given prominence, whether as an agent at the head of a violent series of actions, 'bludgeons life' ('The Dream'), 'bleeds us white' ('Their Frailty'),'shatter'd

all their pride' ('Survivors') or else in a more neutral or passive form which simply mark its passing, 'drifts away' (Break of Day), and 'war is done' ('Base Details). On other occasions, the personification of war extends to behavioural or physical description, 'a fiend' ('Song-Books of the War') and 'fine and bold and bright' ('Their Frailty'). And Sassoon seems to alternate between 'the war' and simply 'war', in part it seems for aesthetic /metrical reasons.

File	Left context	Node	Right context
The Dream.txt	them nearer, day by day, To the foul beast of	war	that bludgeons life."He'd never seen so
The Dream.txt	rank smell that brought me once again A dream of	war	that in the past was hidden. II Up a
Prelude The Troops.txt	the ridge, Death will stand grieving in that field of	war	Since your unvanquished hardihood is spent. And through some
Repression Of War Experience.txt	No, no, not that,—it's bad to think of	war,	When thoughts you've gagged all day come back
Break of Day.txt	flood In joyous welcome from the untroubled past; While the	war	drifts away, forgotten at last. Now a red, sleepy
To Any Dead Officer.txt	the Heel of England. . . . Are you there? . . . Yes . . . and the	War	won't end for at least two years; But
Glory of Women.txt	place. You worship decorations; you believe That chivalry redeems the	war'	s disgrace. You make us shells. You listen with
Base Details.txt	ve lost heavily in this last scrap." And when the	war	is done and youth stone dead, I'd toddle
Twelve Months After.txt	s my platoon, the lot I had last year, "The	war'	ll be over soon." "What 'opes?" "No bloody fear!"
Fight To A Finish.txt	music of returning feet. "Of all the thrills and ardours	War	has brought, This moment is the finest." (So they
Lamentations.txt	because his brother had gone West, Raved at the bleeding	war;	his rampant grief Moaned, shouted, sobbed, and choked, while
Repression Of War Experience.txt	at home; You'd never think there was a bloody	war	on! . . . O yes, you would . . . why, you can hear
Their Frailty.txt	each night. Husbands and sons and lovers; everywhere They die;	War	bleeds us white. Mothers and wives and sweethearts,—they
Survivors.txt	drip with murder; and they'll be proud Of glorious	war	that shatter'd all their pride . . . Men who went
Remorse.txt	like pigs. . . . "O hell!" He thought—"there's things in	war	one dare not tell Poor father sitting safe at
Song-Books Of The War.txt	with silver locks Will lift his weary face to say: "	War	was a fiend who stopped our clocks Although we
Their Frailty.txt	s got a Blighty wound. He's safe; and then	War'	s fine and bold and bright. She can forget

Figure 2: 'war'

One further interesting pattern occurs on the three occasions when 'war' is prefaced by an adjective which in each case carries an ironic as well as a surface meaning in what are three utterly devastating poems: the first two, 'bleeding war' ('Lamentations') and 'bloody war' ('Repression of War Experience') highlight both the speaker's reaction to war but also explicitly point to its physically violent nature; the third 'glorious war' is grammatically positioned as an agent that utterly destroys the soldiers' bodies and minds. Of course there's much more analysis I could undertake here, perhaps using these initial observations from the corpus as a starting point to explore. This kind of analysis can also be scaled up to analyse patterns and themes more generally. For example, in a forthcoming book *, I look at instances of 'killed', 'death', and 'die'/'died'/'dying' to show the grammar of the poems in *Counter-Attack* positions readers to avoid assigning blame for the deaths of soldiers. Interestingly, although explicit in their presentation of death and suffering, the poems largely conceal blame rather than assign it. *Counter-Attack*, of course, contains most of Sassoon's poems written during his time at Craiglockhart as well as many of those that were written either side of his stay there, and represents a body of work that might be considered most typically anti-war. It's possible using the corpus to compare some of the observations mad here with other collections by Sassoon or by other war poets or the genre more generally.

Of course, the tool I have used can only highlight patterns and it remains for the reader/analyst to interpret the significance of those patterns both within individual poems and across the collection as a whole. Nonetheless the tool can identify how Sassoon uses language in a way that would be practically impossible using a manual method – or at least take either a long time or be prone to the mistakes that Sassoon himself made!