

Salem State University

The Graduate School

Department of English

The Classes and The Masses: Exploring Britain's Evolving Notion of Class During the Great

War

A Thesis in English

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Degree of

Master of Arts

May 2017

The First World War—or, the Great War, as it is commonly referred to in Britain—was a turning point of the twentieth century. Those who lived through the war saw their world transformed. National borders were redrawn; political ideals were shaken; and future certainties became less certain. The horrors of the fighting left many traumatized, as antiquated battlefield tactics and modern warfare technology clashed with catastrophic results. Traditional notions of heroic, single combat were replaced with an impersonal, mechanized destruction, the result of which was the killing of approximately fifteen million people (Puchner 1682). To many, the changes heralded by the war were unbelievable: literary giant Henry James could not believe that the years of prosperity leading up to the war ended in such a disastrous climax (713). The war's vastness, brutality, and mechanization also helped destroy many nineteenth century social ideals. Looking back at her war experience, Vera Brittain remarked that the war "will make a big division of 'before' and 'after' in the history of the world, almost if not quite as big as the 'B.C.' and 'A.D.' division made by the birth of Christ" (Brittain 317). Noted World War One historian Paul Fussell feels the war left "a deep dividing line" across the twentieth century, with the post-war world appearing "recognizably 'modern,' its institutions precarious, its faith feeble, its choices risky, its very landscapes perverted into Waste Land" (Introduction vii).

The literary world reflected many of these changes. In fact, a strong argument could be made that the war era fueled the modernist literary movement. Many works of modernism confront the war and its aftereffects: the horrors of war in Hemingway's *A*

Farewell to Arms (1929), the hypocrisy of nationalism in Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), the social and moral complexities of wartime Britain in Ford's *Parade's End* tetralogy (1924-28), the plight of a shell-shocked veteran in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), the alienation of modernity in Eliot's poem "The Wasteland" (1922), and so on. Many more works draw inspiration from the war and its unsettling nature, and it is clear that the war roused the literary imagination. Study of this literary period underscores how the war helped create a modern and fragmented world. Even though there is much analysis of the modern period, and though much has been gleaned about how the works of modernism reflect a war-changed world, there is one area that merits further investigation: the evolving notion of class in wartime Britain.

Britain is a nation obsessed with class (Cannadine xi). But Britain's notion of class changed during the war, evolving from a reverent, hierarchical view to a more adversarial, bifurcated one. David Cannadine observes that the Great War had a profound effect on how Britons viewed their society. He attributes this changing attitude to the failures of British military: "the war itself, by discrediting much of the military caste, 'discredited also the pre-war social hierarchy to which it was attached'" (131). Cannadine's point is that, to many Britons, the hierarchical structure of the military mirrored hierarchical British society. And as the military had proved a considerable failure during the war, many began to wonder whether the structure of society itself was equally problematic. Cannadine concludes by noting that "this change in attitudes was the most pronounced consequence of the First World War, as ordinary people no longer saw their society hierarchically or their place within it deferentially" (131).

This change in class attitudes is vividly portrayed in the memoirs of Robert Graves, Vera Brittain, and Siegfried Sassoon. Each memoir covers a broad period, ranging from before the war to after it. As such, each memoir highlights the various social norms that constructed the British class structure, providing an understanding of both how class ideas were sustained and how they began to change. In depicting the period from before to after the war, these memoirs reflect the changing class attitudes Cannadine discusses: that is, the shift away from a hierarchical notion of class. In *Good-Bye to All That* (1929), Graves's growing cynicism towards British class structure is emblematic of the changing perspective across British society. Graves's memoir is particularly insightful because of its examination of British institutions and how they perpetuate Britain's hierarchical view of class. Graves's observations are both horrific and humorous, yet this combination of horror and humor is a powerful lens through which to view the absurdities of British culture and British institutions.

Sassoon, employing the pseudonym "George Sherston," wrote a series of memoirs to capture his war experience: *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), and *Sherston's Progress* (1936)¹. Sassoon's war experience is similar to Graves's. They both served in the trenches, and they both began their service enthusiastically before growing cynical toward what seemed to them a futile endeavor. But whereas Graves's account of the war is "broad and rowdy," Sassoon's is "quiet and subtle" (Fussell, Introduction xviii). The differences continue when considering what the memoirs of Graves and Sassoon say about the British class system. Graves's background is upper middle-class, while Sassoon's is aristocratic. As such, each comes from a slightly different

class perspective, so examining both memoirs alongside one another presents a broader view of Britain's change during the war.

Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933) offers a different perspective than Graves and Sherston: namely, she presents the implications of Britain's class structure and its eventual change from the view of a middle-class English woman. The view of a British woman is particularly insightful in light of Cannadine's notion that Britain became less deferential as a result of the war. For even though Brittain serves admirably as a nurse in the Voluntary Aid Detachment, the British class structure demands belittling deference from her because she is a woman. The demands of deference are difficult for Brittain to endure for a variety of reasons, most pointedly because the war costs her so much personally. She loses her fiancé, a friend, a beloved brother, and her youth—all to a thankless cause. Graves is ironic and humorous, and Sassoon is subtle and quiet, but Brittain is angry and mournful. And this anger fuels her resentment of the inequalities of the British class structure.

Overall, these three memoirs present a changing Britain. Graves and Brittain offer middle-class perspective; Sassoon provides an aristocratic view; and Brittain shows a side of England often overlooked in the study of the war—English women. As such, these memoirs are insightful for examining the change that Cannadine suggests occurred as a result of the war: Britain's notion of class moving away from hierarchical and deferential.

Defining Class in Britain: Reconsidering Marx, Societal Narratives, and The Pattern of Culture

Before evaluating how the Great War memoirs depict Britain's evolving notion of class, it is useful to define the term "class." The term arises throughout the war memoirs,

so clearly Graves, Brittain, and Sassoon have it in mind. But relying on the traditional Marxist meaning of class is problematic because identifying real-world class divisions has never been an easy task. As such, in evaluating what class means in the war memoirs, it is necessary to reconsider its meaning. Rather than class representing actual, identifiable divisions between groups (e.g., lower, middle, or upper class), the new definition of class concerns the narratives people use to understand and describe their society. In other words, rather than class being solely a description of tangible reality, it is also, in large part, a state of mind. Before further reviewing the new definition of class, it will be useful to summarize its traditional definition.

Any contemporary discussion of class is indirectly a discussion of Marxist philosophy, for the concept of social class underpins much of the traditional Marxist worldview. For Marx, social classes were critical to understanding European history. Social classes, he argued, were not only integral for maintaining social structures, but also essential for driving historical progress. On the one hand, the rigidity and quasi-deterministic nature of these social classes helped perpetuate the dominant economic regime: whether that regime be the feudalism of the past era or the capitalism of the modern one. On the other hand, conflict between the classes builds over time, ending—in Marx's view—with social revolution.

Marx developed his theory, in part, by looking to historical precedent. For example, the modern capitalist era came into being only after a series of bourgeois revolutions ended the era of feudalistic aristocracy (Cannadine 4). After the aristocracy lost dominance, the capitalists gained power. In time, Marx theorized, the capitalists would be overthrown by the labor class, and the era of capitalism would give way to an era of communism. The

engine of this social change, a change Marx saw throughout history and felt would occur in the future, was class (Cannadine 3). Marx's class analysis is compelling, and it remains a central component of Marxist study.

Yet the traditional Marxist understanding of class is problematic; for it is, in essence, a grand narrative calling for postmodern deconstruction. On closer inspection, Marxist class divisions often do not correspond with the complexities of the real world; the divisions drawn between classes are too broad or ill-defined. This incongruity between theory and reality is the thrust of Cannadine's criticism of Marx. Cannadine argues that Marxism's understanding of class is too general. Concerning Britain, Cannadine notes that Marxism "grossly oversimplified the way in which the social structure of modern Britain has actually evolved and developed"; moreover, the clear boundaries of lower, middle, and upper classes do not adequately account for Britain's "many gradations of skilled and unskilled labor" (9). In short, Cannadine critiques Marxism as an "overdetermined," "reductionist" grand narrative that cannot withstand postmodern scrutiny (13).

All of this is not to say that class does not exist. Cannadine's own historical review of class shows that the British talked and thought about it long before Marx. Rather than dismiss the notion of class, Cannadine aims to redefine and re-envision it (17). Just as Cannadine rejects the Marxist approach that classes are finite, observable groups, he also rejects the opposite extreme—that class identity is merely a trick of linguistics: "social reality always keeps breaking in. Classes, like nations, are sometimes more and sometimes less than imagined communities" (18). Cannadine's point is that class exists somewhere between absolute observable reality and purely linguistic construction.

To split the divide between Marxist generalizations and linguistic subjectivity, Cannadine suggests that class consciousness developed as Britons attempted “to make sense of the unequal social worlds they have inhabited, settled, and conquered, across the centuries and around the globe...” (20). In making this observation, Cannadine asserts class developed as Britons defined the world around them. And while this definition approaches the realm of linguistic construction, Cannadine stresses that this linguistic construction has material consequences. How people see their society, how political leaders govern a society, and how historians record society very much depends on how each views and understands society. In these instances, linguistic construction is more than an abstract academic concern; such linguistic constructions define and drive a society’s material reality. If reality is defined by these constructions, it is critical to understand and define them.

For British society, Cannadine defines three constructions that operate as competing societal narratives. These narratives, Cannadine asserts, are used by society to define and understand itself. Often these narratives are expressed in the language of class, but using the term “class” does not mean that traditional Marxism is an objective reality. Instead, the term “class” is a generic term used throughout British society to describe perceived divisions of people—however big, small, or real the perceived divisions are is subjective to whoever uses the term at a given moment.

Over time the three narratives clash in the public discourse, each waxing and waning in popularity and in perceived validity. Political speeches, literary texts, and media each contribute to the popularity of one narrative over another. At certain historical points, all the outlets of discourse converge and promote one narrative; while at other

historical points, there is a perceptible clash, as the subordinate narratives begin an insurgency. The three narratives that Cannadine identifies as key to Britons defining their society are hierarchical, triadic, and dichotomous. Each is worth further inspection.

In the hierarchical narrative, people view society as inherently unequal (Cannadine 107). As such, the narrative accounts for inequality as natural and ordinary. Rather than classes jostling for position and power—something implied by the other two narratives—the hierarchical narrative sees society as “a procession: as a hierarchy on parade, a carefully graded ordering of rank and dignity, in which each layer meld[s] and merge[s] almost imperceptibly into the next” (Cannadine 19). From the monarchy down to the lowest individual, the British penchant for ranks and orders provides a position for everyone. That the system stems from royalty implies something important: “prestige and honor can be transmitted and inherited across generations” (22). Given the hereditary nature of the hierarchy, it is the favored narrative of Britain’s elite.

In the triadic narrative, society is divided into “three collective categories of modified estates: the nobility, the bourgeoisie, and the common people” (20). The triadic view of society resembles Marx’s view of class, but Cannadine notes that this narrative was already in the parlance of British commentators when Marx published his work. Nonetheless, the narrative gained particular traction in mid-nineteenth century Britain, as popular Victorian institutions like the railroad and the educational system tended to group people by upper, middle, and lower class (Cannadine 92-93). That institutions helped perpetuate the triadic narrative is worth noting, as institutions play a large role in perpetuating each of the societal narratives.

Unlike the Marxist view of the three classes, the British triadic narrative did not assert that the bourgeoisie had usurped power from the aristocrats (Cannadine 93). Instead, the triadic view held that British aristocracy continued to wield too much power and influence, despite the relative advances of the bourgeoisie. Proponents of the triadic view argued that if the bourgeoisie (typically represented by the business or merchant class) attained greater influence, then the ensuing “businessman’s government would accomplish more than an effete aristocratic government” (Cannadine 97). As such, the triadic view became popular with moderate political reformists.

In the dichotomous narrative society is divided into two groups: “patricians” and “plebeians” (20). Cannadine sees the dichotomous narrative as the most adversarial of his three options because its proponents typically see society in terms of “us versus them” (20). The divide between “us” and “them” draws inspiration from the competing hierarchical narrative. Whereas the hierarchical narrative used a person’s heredity and social distinctions to place him or her with the hierarchy, the dichotomous narrative sees these distinctions as signs of a person’s being an “us” or a “them” (Cannadine 95-96).

As Cannadine describes them, the triadic and dichotomous narratives are the tools of social reformers. The triadic narrative suits moderates and incrementalists, and the dichotomous narrative suits radicals and revolutionaries. Both of these narratives arise throughout history during moments of widespread societal discontent (Cannadine 172). But, Cannadine argues, both the triadic and dichotomous narratives suffer the same weakness as traditional Marxism, namely that they both rely on subjective divisions of society. Historical attempts to define classes—whether it be three classes or two—inevitably fail, as no one can agree where one class begins and another ends. Highlighting

the subjectivity of the triadic and dichotomous narratives is not meant to suggest that they are a wrong or incorrect way to view society—simply that they are inherently subjective. In being subjective, it is difficult for these two narratives to attain consensus in either their definition or their application to society.

So it is the hierarchical narrative that Cannadine sees as the most fitting description of British society. He describes the hierarchical narrative as more “pervasive and persuasive” (172). And he sees British society as historically inclined toward hierarchy, noting that for most Britons “hierarchy remained...the natural, omnipresent, time-honored, and divinely sanctioned way of seeing British society and of understanding their own place within it” (87-88). To see hierarchy at play, one only need look at Britain’s long-standing hereditary peerage system. To facilitate the peerage system, books are written to explain such matters as “the relative standing of the younger son of a baronet vis-à-vis the elder son of the younger son of duke” and whether a Master of Arts from Oxford outranks a provincial mayor with no university degree (Cannadine 23). In addition, even seemingly mundane considerations such as a person’s “accent...deportment, mode of dress, patterns of recreation, type of housing, and style of life” establish an individual’s rank in the societal hierarchy (23). Considerations like these might strike outsiders as absurd. But if one must know his or her position within the multitude of hierarchical gradations, then every nuance of identity is consequential.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hierarchy was not sustained by heredity and education alone. Various institutions perpetuated and reinforced the narrative. Cannadine observes that “the monarchy, Parliament, the law, the armed services, education remained organized around the social principles of assumed inequality,

order and station, deference and subordination” (107). These institutions, Cannadine asserts, created “hierarchies of their own,” which served to reinforce the overall societal narrative (107).

Social organizations also fostered the hierarchical narrative. For instance, there was the Primrose League, a conservative organization that at its height was one of Britain’s largest political associations (Cannadine 125). Members of the Primrose League were sorted along an intricate ladder of titles and stations, ranging from “associate” to “grand master,” and typically one’s rank in the league coincided with one’s position in society (126). Moreover, honors awarded by the league typically had little to do with actual achievement and relied more on rewarding people in ways “appropriate to their social rank” (126).

Hierarchy was also on display through the pomp of British royalty. Again, if British society is a hierarchical procession, then the crown is at the front. Cannadine notes that the “hierarchical vision” of Britain was strengthened by the late nineteenth century’s “revived cult of royalty” (127). And the unique spectacle of events like Queen Victoria’s jubilee reaffirmed the crown as the “symbol of authority, hierarchy and duty” (127). Such public rituals become standard fare across Britain, as towns and cities strived to outdo each other when staging royal rites of passage (128). As a result, royalty—and the hierarchy it represented—were continually emphasized as true and natural to British life.

Yet the hierarchical narrative was anything but natural. It was no accident that British institutions reinforced the hierarchical narrative. With its emphasis on rank and heredity, its reliance on complex rules favoring those with the leisure and pedigree to learn them, and its claims of divine sanctity, the hierarchical model was a useful tool for Britain’s

ruling elite. The ruling elite believed that “hierarchy had to be defended and asserted” (Cannadine 90). In fact, any deviation from hierarchy was seen as a break from tradition, an unraveling of “things that [had] been secure for centuries” (112). Moreover, despite the occasional use of the triadic and dichotomous narratives by a minority of politicians for political pasturing, British politicians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were unified by the goal of perpetuating the hierarchical view of society (107). More and more, the hierarchical narrative can be seen as an imposed system of belief. The interests of the elite are served by its continuation, so they exert power and influence to ensure hierarchy is the dominant narrative of British life.

That Britain’s ruling elite would desire to preserve the hierarchical narrative is not surprising. The hierarchical narrative emphasizes order and stability, whereas the triadic and dichotomous narratives provoke change. Additionally, the hierarchical narrative seemingly provides a role for everyone. In many respects, living within the hierarchy could be comforting: there is no class conflict, a person’s role is ordained and somewhat secure, and the rightness of the system is buoyed by its centuries of precedent. But hierarchy benefits the ruling elites more so, for hierarchy’s stability and order come at the expense of social mobility. When everyone’s role is divinely sanctioned, changing roles becomes a difficult task. Moreover, because the British hierarchy begins with the royals, the hereditary implications within the narrative are strong. Therefore, as it is a commoner’s role to be a commoner, it is a patrician’s role to be a patrician—and so on down the hereditary line of each person. Meanwhile, divine sanction places the whole system beyond reproach.

To summarize Cannadine, hierarchy is the dominant way in which the British view and describe their society. When the British speak of class, they refer not to traditional Marxist notions of upper, middle, and lower; instead, references to class are imprecise allusions to the descriptive narratives—triadic, dichotomous, and hierarchical. And though these models are linguistic constructs, they deeply influence how individuals perceive and engage with society. Furthermore, each narrative can be used to serve social and political interests. As Cannadine illustrates, the British elite foster the hierarchical narrative because they reap the benefits. In many respects, the hierarchical narrative is the dominant British ideology.

The strength of the Great War memoirs lies not only in their depictions of the cataclysmic war, but also in their portrayal of Britons transitioning from one view of class to another. At the start of the memoirs, Britain is fully hierarchical, yet by the end of the war, the dichotomous narrative takes root. But to fully appreciate the transition between narratives, to understand how Britain views class before the war and after it, it is useful to consider the work of cultural critic Raymond Williams. Williams's work incorporates a number of key concepts from Marxist cultural analysis, and several of these concepts illuminate how society establishes and changes its dominant narrative. For now, however, understanding two of William's concepts will suffice. Other concepts will be developed as the analysis progresses.

First, "pattern of culture" is the term Williams uses to describe the "learned systems of behavior and attitudes" to which a society wishes to train the majority of members (104). Pattern of culture is similar to the traditional Marxist concept of ideology, for embedded in the pattern of culture is the notion that there is an established, dominant

norm and that this norm permeates all reaches of society and its institutions. But the benefit of using the pattern of culture to describe societal training is its lack of totality. Because Williams specifically notes that a society aims to train *most* of its members to the pattern of culture, there is space for nonconformity. If, for example, one relied on ideology alone to analyze the hierarchical narrative, the possibility to nonconformance would be debatable, as many would contest that subjects cannot remove themselves from their ideology. Therefore, the pattern of culture allows for the important aspects of nonconformance and rebellion, both of which will be needed for Britain to transition from one narrative to another.

Pre-war Britain's pattern of culture is the hierarchical narrative. All of Britain's societal institutions foster "learned systems of behaviors and attitudes" that perpetuate the hierarchy—whether it be social organizations, peer groups, or the monarchy. These institutions train members of British society to conform to the hierarchy, while simultaneously discouraging dissent. Ideally, everyone adapts. But with the pattern of culture, it is enough that most people conform.

The second important term to know is "member." A member is an individual who conforms to the pattern of culture. According to Williams, a member of a society is someone who "feels himself to belong to it, in an essential way: its values are his values, its purposes his purposes, to such an extent that he is proud to describe himself in its terms"; moreover, the member is secure in the "values, attitudes and institutions of the society," and he accepts the life society presents to him (Williams 109). It is important to note that while membership is the goal of the pattern of culture, being a full-fledged member is an ideal. In reality, conformity is achieved along a spectrum—some individuals conform more

and some conform less. As more individuals conform less, the more vulnerable the pattern of culture is to change. Williams identifies several alternatives to the member (i.e., nonconformists), and what these alternatives are and how they apply to Britain's changing pattern of culture will be better understood later in the analysis. For now, it is sufficient to understand that the pattern of culture aspires to create societal members.

In summary, there are two points to note about the connections between Williams, Cannadine, and the Great War memoirs. First, the hierarchical narrative is the dominant way in which Britons viewed their society, and this view was nurtured by the British elite and various societal institutions. As a result, the hierarchical narrative can be better understood as Britain's pattern of culture. Second, by viewing the hierarchical narrative as the pattern of culture, one can employ Williams's insights to better assess the societal forces that shape the pattern of culture. Recognizing these forces will highlight the changes—on an individual level—that shift the view of society from the hierarchical narrative to a dichotomous narrative.

Pre-War Britain: Creation of the Hierarchical Pattern of Culture

When Graves, Brittain, and Sassoon were born in the late nineteenth century, Britain was staunchly hierarchical: social organizations, government, and monarchy all presented a consistent narrative. For example, in the 1890s, the Primrose League was in its "heyday," grooming its many members with hierarchical honors (Cannadine 125). In 1895, Britain's aristocracy dominated the general election, leading to a conservative government represented by "landowners of the country who had been accustomed to govern for generations...[governing] from duty, heritage and habit—and, as they saw it, from right"

(Tuchman 1). Moreover, Queen Victoria's 1897 Diamond Jubilee roused the British public with a nationalistic parade, reaffirming the monarchy's place atop Britain's empire (Tuchman 54-55). Finally, if social organizations, the government, or the monarchy were not successful in delivering the hierarchical message, the daily papers helped fill the void. The conservative-leaning *Daily Mail* was the highest circulating daily paper of the time, and its popularity led to an expanding circulation, which grew from 400,000 to 989,000 between 1898 and 1900 (Williams 239).

The pre-war lives of Graves, Brittain, and Sherston illuminate Britain's pattern of culture. At early ages, each of them is introduced to the hierarchy by their family, and training in the pattern of culture continues as each grows and attends school or forms social groups. These early societal institutions—the family, schools, and social groups—aim to prepare individuals for societal membership. Through these societal institutions, Graves, Brittain, and Sherston learn what could be called hierarchical social behaviors. In essence, these behaviors are the tools that individuals need to identify placement within the hierarchy: how to distinguish people based on accent, clothes, or other pedigree, for example. As such, the early introduction to these societal institutions plays a significant role not only in the development of each individual, but also in how each will respond to continued hierarchy encountered during the war.

The Family: Laying the Foundations of Hierarchical Pattern of Culture

The power of social institutions is limited if individuals are not prepared to accept the institutional message. So, before entering a school or engaging with a social group, an individual must have foundational training in the pattern of culture. This job falls to the

family. The family is where social conditioning beings. As Williams notes, “the family is...the community’s agent in creating this desired social character in individuals. If it is successful, the individual’s social activity will be at one with his personal desires...” (103). In other words, the family primes the individual to accept the pattern of culture. In the family home, social norms are set and value systems erected. Ideally, these norms and values will be constructed to align the individual’s personal desires and beliefs with society’s pattern of culture. The family homes of Graves, Brittain, and Sassoon each provide introductions to British hierarchy. At a young age, each memoirist learns the foundational lessons of the hierarchical order: that each person is expected to play a role within the hierarchy; that there are different groups of people that one must learn to differentiate; and that it is not suitable to mix with certain groups, as doing so could weaken one’s own hierarchical position.

In *Good-bye to All That*, Graves becomes aware of his social position at an early age. At four years old, he catches scarlet fever and spends time in a hospital, noting that his ward “contained twenty little proletariats, and only one bourgeois child besides myself” (Graves 14). But in the hospital, the boys in the ward wear medical gowns, and Graves does not immediately recognize any differences between himself and the others. He even shares moments of innocent camaraderie with the other children, learning from one about the game of cricket. The hospital scene Graves presents is the socialist utopia Marx dreamed of in miniature: the boys wear matching medical gowns, removing a key distinguishing feature (clothes) from the social equation, and they are free to socialize as equals. Nonetheless, Graves does notice that the ward nurses treat some boys differently

than others, although he does not appreciate the full meaning of the differing treatment until later.

When Graves returns from the hospital, his family “deplore[s]” the effect the other boys have had on his accent, and the family refers to the other boys as “vulgar” (14). A year later, Graves sees one of his former ward mates in the street. The hospital gowns that once equalized the two boys are gone, and Graves sees the ragged state of his friend’s clothes. With the two boys in their natural environment, their disparity is impossible for Graves to ignore. He says:

I suddenly realized with my first shudder of gentility that two sorts of Christians existed—ourselves, and the lower classes. The servants were trained to call us children “Master Robert,” “Miss Rosaleen,” and “Miss Clarissa,” but I had not recognized these as titles of respect. I had thought of “Master” and “Miss” merely as vocative prefixes used for addressing other people’s children; but now I found that the servants were the lower classes, and that we were “ourselves.” (14-15)

Graves’s realization is an important introduction to the hierarchical narrative. His family provides him with several of the tools needed to begin identifying placement in the hierarchy. His family stresses the superiority of their accent over the one Graves adopts from the boys in the hospital. Simultaneously, by referring to the hospital boys as “vulgar,” they establish Graves’s mindset for when he later sees his friend. And the titles used by the family’s servants toward the children—“Master” and “Miss”—suggest the hierarchy’s attraction to titles and honors, however dubiously earned they may be. Later, while considering what his family has told him, Graves reflects on the divine sanction of his new

knowledge, noting such divisions between people even appeared in his hymn book: quoting an unnamed hymn, he recites, “he made them highly and lowly, and ordered their estates...” (15). In the end, Graves comes to accept these divisions “as naturally as [he] had accepted religious dogma” (15).

Similar to Graves, Brittain apprehends early the social perils of consorting with the wrong group. Unlike Graves, however, Brittain’s education in the pattern of culture is tinted with an additional facet: gender. The expectations surrounding Brittain’s gender role are central to her memoir. An early example is a case in point. As a young girl, Brittain harmlessly plays with her brother’s friends one day at a local playground. The group spends “a few moments of pleasant ‘ragging’” at each other (Brittain 28). It is an innocent act that would not draw attention nowadays. But when Brittain returns home, she discovers she was seen with the boys, and she is “severely reprimanded for [her] naughtiness in thus publically conversing with [her brother’s] companions” (28). As with Graves, Brittain is reprimanded for befriending the wrong people. For Brittain, however, the wrong people are not necessarily the lower ranks of the social order, although that would have been problematic, too. Instead, the wrong people are boys. As such, this is the first instance of Brittain being reprimanded for being “unladylike.”

Many similar reprimands dog Brittain in the future. Her eventual drive to attend university, her brief courtship with Roland Leighton, and her tenacious service as a military nurse offer many opportunities for societal criticism. Again, the pressures to conform to a gender role permeate Brittain’s memoir, and there are many ways in which these pressures could be analyzed. Exploring all of the analytical possibilities is clearly beyond the scope of this study. Brittain’s gender is central to her story; but for the purposes of this study,

gender is assumed to be an additional aspect of the hierarchical pattern of culture. As Cannadine notes, all aspects of a person's identity contribute to his or her placement in the hierarchy. If clothes and accents are major factors, so must be a person's gender. Nevertheless, not all implications of gender to the hierarchy can be reviewed here. Suffice it to say that gender is imbedded within the pattern of culture; the two are linked. The insistence that Brittain conform to the pattern of culture carries with it the insistence that she conform to a specific gender role.

One of Brittain's constant struggles stems from her drive to earn an education. In particular, her desire to attend university draws resistance. Her family—her father, in particular—opposes her determination to attend university. Receiving a university education would place Brittain in a small minority of British women, and her family cannot abide such a strong deviation from social norms. Instead, her father insists that she embody the traits of her class status, that she be “an entirely ornamental young lady” (Brittain 32). And he continually thwarts her educational progress; he even prevents boarding school administrators from encouraging his daughter's educational aptitude (32-33).

When Brittain wishes to attend university, her father dismisses the idea, claiming that “little girls' must allow their elders to know what is best for them” (Brittain 52). And though Brittain's father uses the expense of university as one reason not to send her, he has no qualms about spending a large sum on a piano and music lessons for her (52-53). It is through such means that Brittain's family attunes her to the expected markers of her class: namely, that upper class women are “ornamental” and play piano; they do not attend university.

In the first installment of the Sherston series—*Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*—Siegfried Sassoon, through his alter ego George Sherston, has a similar introduction to his hierarchical position. After the death of his parents, Sherston lives with his aunt on a country estate. The estate is small compared to estates owned by the titled aristocracy, but Sherston and his aunt live a comfortable, work-free life, surrounded by a handful of servants. But estate life is not so perfect, as Sherston is lonely on the quiet estate. Despite his longing for playmates, Sherston is “strictly forbidden to ‘associate’ with the village boys. And even the sons of the neighboring farmers were considered ‘unsuitable’...” (*Fox-Hunting* 4). Like Graves’s hospital boys and their perceived vulgarity, the village boys are unsuitable—never mind the alternative of mixing with the son of a farmer.

The prohibition on “associating” with the village boys comes from Shertson’s Aunt Evelyn. She, as Sherston observes, was “merely conforming to her social code which divided the world into people whom one could ‘call on’ and people who were ‘socially impossible’” (*Fox-Hunting* 4). Again, like Graves, should Sherston associate with the wrong types—village boys or farmers’ sons—he might develop habits that betray his position in the hierarchy. An incorrect accent or improper behavior could damage young Sherston’s potential. Every social cue is an indicator of one’s place in the social order. Remember, this is a society in which entire books are written about the particulars of hereditary peerage, and there are important distinctions between a Master of Arts from Oxford and a provincial mayor. Education, manner of dress, and accent all figure into one’s status. Any slip could position an individual lower on the hierarchical continuum. In that light, it is understandable why Aunt Evelyn would be so careful about training Sherston in the pattern of culture.

Despite Aunt Evelyn's warnings about mixing with the wrong sort, Sherston forms his strongest familial relationship with the estate's groom, Tom Dixon. The two grow close, and there is a real sense that Dixon looks after Sherston in a manner befitting a father or an older brother. Dixon's guidance saves Sherston from growing soft under his overprotective aunt. Dixon's affection is highlighted when Sherston rides his horse alone into town for the first time. During the ride, he is thrown from the horse and forced to walk home covered in filth and shame. Were Aunt Evelyn to learn about this, she would revoke Sherston's riding privileges. Sherston's humiliation is palpable when he encounters laughing reactions from several of the estate's servants. Yet when Sherston meets Dixon the next day, Dixon makes no reference to the shameful event—even though he clearly knows about it. Instead, Dixon's "tactful silence" reassures Sherston, and all of Sherston's "embarrassment [fades] out of [him]" (*Fox-Hunting* 11-15). Dixon clearly cares for the boy, and Sherston feels similarly. For a time, it seems that their vastly different positions in the hierarchy do not affect their relationship.

It is Dixon who has the biggest impact on Sherston's life. He introduces Sherston to Sherston's lifelong passion: horses. And through Dixon, Sherston learns the basics of horse riding and fox hunting. In true fatherly fashion, Dixon engineers episodes that build Sherston's confidence. For instance, Dixon enrolls Sherston in his first fox hunt, despite Sherston's social anxiety. Dixon does not leave Sherston to face his anxiety alone; instead, Dixon goes along to the event and offers support (*Fox-Hunting* 20-21). In another, non-horse related instance, Dixon secures Sherston a spot on a local cricket team, knowing it will give the boy a thrill. The cricket match is an exciting event for both of them, and the joy

that Dixon takes in securing the spot for Sherston is telling of the affection between the two (40-42).

Without Dixon's influence, Sherston says that he "should never have earned the right to call myself a fox-hunting man" (6). This is high praise; for as the Sherston memoirs shows, much of Sherston's self-worth derives from his knowledge and abilities as a fox hunter and horseman. In many ways, Dixon, through his warm, fatherly companionship, is responsible for the man Sherston becomes. Nonetheless, an important aspect of this relationship is to confirm Sherston's own sense of hierarchical prestige. As such, it is disheartening when Dixon's role as servant in the hierarchy is affirmed. Early in *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, Sherston says the following of Dixon:

And since [Dixon] was what I afterwards learnt to call "a perfect gentleman's servant," he never allowed me to forget my position as "a little gentleman"; he always knew exactly when to become discreetly respectful. In fact, he "knew his place." (4)

Later, at that introductory fox hunt, the one Dixon insisted that Sherston attend despite Sherston's social awkwardness, Dixon exhibits his ability to "know his place":

Once we had arrived, Dixon seemed to become a different Dixon, so dignified and aloof that I scarcely dared to speak to him. Of course, I knew what it meant: I was now his "young gentleman" and he was only the groom who had brought me to "have a look at the hounds." (22)

It is disheartening to see Dixon relegated to the background. As portrayed in the Sherston series of memoirs, Dixon is a man of wit, discernment, and warmth. He stewards Sherston's development when the somewhat aloof Aunt Evelyn cannot. Moreover, Dixon

appears to take pride in the boy—his fatherly nature seems genuine. Yet for all of Dixon’s smarts, aptitude, and kindness he remains in “his place,” even in the eyes of Sherston, a boy who practically could be his son. Their positions in the hierarchy—the distance between “a perfect gentleman’s servant” and “a little gentleman”—will always separate them.

A key point, however, is that the distance between Dixon and Sherston does not represent a betrayal. Sherston did not turn on Dixon; and Dixon does not feel wronged. Even after Sherston realizes Dixon’s “place” and begins treating him more like a servant, the two remain close. The two accept their positions because of their training in the pattern of culture. In considering the roles of servant and served, Dixon’s fatherly demeanor assumes an additional dimension. Dixon’s affection remains genuine, but it also hints at a servant’s submissiveness: Dixon’s needs are secondary to Sherston’s. Even though Dixon’s parental nature helped Sherston learn important skills and overcome boyhood anxieties, it emphasizes Sherston’s dominance.

That Dixon seemingly can play dual roles—kindly mentor and discrete servant—might strike some as strange, but it is necessary for the gentleman/groom dynamic to work effectively. To be an aristocratic gentleman, Sherston will need a close relationship with a servant. That way, the servant can fade into the background while also attending to his master’s needs. Most important, however, is that Sherston not be *too* close to his servant. Appropriate distance between the two must be maintained so that hierarchical norms not be broken. Put differently, Sherston and Dixon must be close for their dynamic to work, but Sherston must never consider Dixon an equal. In fact, Sherston even muses that Dixon is perfectly happy in his role, reflecting that Dixon was “shrewd enough to realize that he was very well off where he was” (Sassoon, *Fox-Hunting* 8). Beyond this superficial

consideration of Dixon's happiness, Sherston offers little. Given how much Sherston grows to take Dixon for granted, it could be argued that he does not view Dixon as a person. Dixon's existence is simply a given.

As presented in each memoir, family life greatly influences the creation of the societal member. Families introduce skills needed for Graves, Brittain, and Sherston to navigate life in hierarchical Britain. Each child learns the essentials of identifying acceptable social groups, and each child learns the foundation of their societal role—Graves an archetypal bourgeois-type, Brittain an “ornamental young lady,” and Sherston an aristocratic gentleman. The early introduction to the pattern of culture creates a strong hierarchical foundation, preparing each individual for future reinforcement. This future reinforcement will come through the next stage of societal institutions.

Schools and Peer Groups: Building the Structure of the Pattern of Culture

In many ways, the school is more important than the family in propagating the hierarchical narrative because it influences and prepares individuals for adult societal life. Rather than being bastions of enlightenment and critical thinking, schools are primarily concerned with instilling conformity (Althusser 1347). Raymond Williams expands on this, noting that education is not about teaching enduring truths but instead about teaching “a particular set of emphases and omissions” (153). That is, schools structure education around subjects society wishes to emphasize and to omit. In the case of pre-war Britain, the emphasis would be on conforming to the hierarchy. According to Williams, the goal of education is threefold: teach the student the acceptable behaviors of her society; teach her “the general knowledge and attitudes appropriate to an educated [individual]”; and teach

her a skill through which she can earn a living or, by other means, contribute to society (155). In short, the family plants the seed while school nurtures the growth.

For Graves, immersion in the pattern of culture intensifies at school. His experience testifies to the influence of the typical British boarding school—a place in which children are removed from their families and under the complete control of the institution. Unlike day-school children who have the influence of family life, the children of boarding schools are captive to institutional culture. Highlighting this captivity, Graves observes that the young men of boarding school “live in a world completely dissociated from home life” and that they develop “a different vocabulary, a different moral system, even different voices”; furthermore, the “governing classes virtually lose all intimate touch with their children” (20).

That boarding school education rests on the removal of children from the family is not surprising. For the pattern of culture to be successfully transmitted, its transmission must be conducted in an orderly fashion; any contradictions that may arise from the child’s interactions with the family social group must be avoided. The need to avoid contradiction is doubly true for the students who attend school with Graves. Like Graves, these are the children of the bourgeois; they are not aristocrats. Of this bourgeois education, Williams writes:

The conception of graded secondary schools, in nineteenth century thinking, rested firmly on the assumption that the existing class structure would be reproduced. The educational standards aimed at were, in consequence, class standards—what a gentleman, or a professional man, or a small tradesman would need. (178)

As such, school instills in them qualities appropriate for upper and mid-level managers and civil servants (Williams 180). In those roles, they will be frontline enforcers of the *status quo* (i.e., the hierarchy). Perpetuation of the hierarchical narrative depends upon them, so their complete acceptance of that narrative is critical. Graves underscores the power school holds over the boys, writing that “school life becomes the reality, and home life the illusion” (20).

Given that these young men will become enforcers among the ranks of middle-management, actual education is of little importance. To be sure, Graves learns many elements that one would assume come with a classical education—Latin, classical literature, and the humanities. But learning these subjects and, even worse, showing an interest in knowledge turns Graves into a school pariah. Rather than focus on schoolwork, the young men at Charterhouse (i.e., Graves’s school) pass time playing sports and bullying anyone who shows aptitude toward education (Graves 38). And Graves is ruthlessly bullied. His school mates ridicule his comparatively shabby clothes and his relative poverty; they rebuke him for his perceived German heritage; and they dump ink over his schoolbooks, pour water on his bed, and assault him routinely (38-39). In essence, the other boys look for any way to pull apart his hierarchical position markers: his clothes, his economic status, his heritage, and so on. By testing each of these position markers, his school mates look to find Graves’s natural position within the hierarchy.

Despite the near constant harassment, Graves finds some outlets at Charterhouse: he writes poetry of sufficient quality to gain entrance to the poetry club. But the club comprises a paltry seven members and is hardly the pinnacle of social prestige. The rest of Graves’s House sees his poetry as “stronger proof of [his] insanity” (Graves 42). At poetry

club, Graves meets boys from other Houses. And while he and the other boys share similar interests and enjoy each others' company, socializing outside the club is not possible, for at Charterhouse "no friendship might exist between boys of different Houses or ages...beyond a formal acquaintance at work or organized games..." (43). Even when Charterhouse offers opportunities (i.e., the poetry club), it works to restrict them; by limiting contact between houses, the school models the hierarchical divisions of real life.

The bullying, the emphasis on sports, the lack of contact between houses, the shunning of an educated nonconformist—each of these prepares the young men to reinforce the hierarchical narrative. Bullying trains the young men to aggressively assert their dominance in the hierarchy. Playing sports readies the boys for the hierarchy's focus on order, rules, structure, and tradition. Attuning the boys to the differences between houses trains them to discriminate. And allowing the boys to identify, humiliate, and punish nonconformists trains them in their roles as hierarchical enforcers. Life at boarding school, a life in which the boys learn their roles through humiliation and violence, equips the boys with the tools needed to be societal members. Given the brutality of the school environment, it is ironic that boarding school is their "gentleman's education" (Graves 11).

Unsurprisingly, Graves hates his days at Charterhouse. By his last year there, he does "everything possible to show how little respect [he has] for school tradition" (Graves 55). In these early days, Graves is happy only when he is away from society. Retreats to the Welsh countryside offer a reprieve, and Graves spends hours each day wandering among the secluded hills. It is there that he writes his first poem, one he writes "as himself" (34). There are no adults and there are no institutions—the hierarchy does not exist in the

hills of Wales. The memories of these hills and the happiness they induced will become the inspiration for his post-war self-exile.

Graves's experience at boarding school is meant to provide him with a "gentleman's education"; similarly, Brittain's school experience is meant to prepare her for—as she terms it—"provincial young-ladyhood" (50). Like Graves, however, Brittain has a nonconformist streak. Her assigned gender role stifles her individualistic spirit, and her life's central ambition—to attend university—directly conflicts with the role society desires her to play. And though her boarding school—St. Monica's—has some supportive teachers, it houses students who regard her as an outsider. The pressure to conform at St. Monica's is not as brutal and violent as Charterhouse, but it is heavy pressure, nonetheless.

Brittain's peers at school view her university ambitions as unnatural (Brittain 33). Most of St. Monica's students are "fashionable young women to whom universities represented a quite unnecessary prolongation of useless and distasteful studies..." (33). As with Charterhouse, actual education is a low priority. In fact, Brittain laments that St. Monica's provides no preparation for university entrance exams (32), likely because no one thinks students from St. Monica's will attend university. As such, even Brittain's school impedes her goal of attending university. Instead of educating the young students, St. Monica's "attracted but few parents possessed of more than a half-hearted intention to train their daughters for exacting careers or even for useful occupations" (33). Given that education is devalued, it is no surprise that Brittain's peers refer to her dismissively as having "brains" (33). As with Graves, Brittain's position in the social hierarchy slips because she values things the others do not—knowledge beyond the realm of hierarchy.

Unsurprisingly, Brittain's economic status contributes to how her peers view her. Brittain hails from a solidly bourgeois background (her father is a business owner in Buxton). This bourgeois status immediately puts her at odds with the other students. Brittain notes that "socially...[she] was quite without standing among these wealthy girls" (33). The wealthy girls, Brittain says, are "designed by their parents for London or Edinburgh society"; they have country houses "of which the name 'Hall' or 'Park' [are] frequently a part"; and regular trips to high society venues such as concerts or the theater are the norm (33). Comparatively, Brittain's parents cannot afford the niceties these other young women enjoy—summer homes, fashionable clothes, concerts, and the theater are out of the question (33). Although there are no violent humiliations over economic disparities (as one might expect at Charterhouse), the young women of St. Monica's have their own methods of enforcing their hierarchical position. For example, after Christmas, when the students return to school, the wealthy girls display their newly acquired treasures in a subtle show of status and wealth (Brittain 33). By displaying their Christmas gifts in this way, the wealthy young women send a clear message of dominance and superiority: they have things that Brittain does not; therefore, they are of higher rank.

But there is one goal among the students of St. Monica's that supersedes the attainment of materialistic treasures. If executed properly, achievement of this goal will ensure the highest possible positioning within Britain's hierarchical order. Brittain writes that "for the young women and their mothers, the potential occurrence that loomed largest upon the horizon was marriage" (33). Further, it is not enough simply to be married; most of the young women harbor the ambition to be the first of their class married (Brittain 33-34). Here again there is the notion of primacy and dominance: all the young women

eventually will be married, so one way to outshine all the other marriages is to be the *first* one married. That these young women think this way may strike some as odd, but again, every advantage that one has in the hierarchy must be accounted for. If the tie-breaker for hierarchical positioning between two men can come down to accents, then a similar splitting-of-hairs between two married women seems understandable.

This emphasis on marriage underscores a bleak reality that women face within the hierarchical system. Overall, the system is rigged to keep some people in power and other people out of power. The notion that hierarchical positioning is hereditary, for example, testifies to the system's rigidity. But, for men, the system is not completely rigid; it is possible for men to attain higher positioning. For women, however, the opportunities for advancement are considerably less. Unlike a man, a woman's position in the hierarchy depends on something outside of herself: the person she marries. The social posturing of Brittain's classmates is wasted if they fail to marry a man of high stature. Through marriage, these women may not only solidify their position within the hierarchy, but also gain better positioning as the result of one act. After marriage, women are, for the most part, stuck. As such, the stakes in selecting a spouse are high.

Although Brittain is critical of these women and their views on marriage, she understands their predicament. About these women and their future marriages, Brittain is sympathetic, writing:

It was, of course, typical of the average well-to-do girl of the period to assume that the desire for power, which is as universal among woman as among men, could only be fulfilled by the acquisition of a brilliant husband. (35)

Brittain's sympathy stems from the knowledge that she is not far removed from these other young women. Brittain is a "well-to-do girl," and the basis of her story is the search not for power but for empowerment. But if her determination were to weaken, she easily could succumb to the societal pressures pushing her in the traditional, marriage-oriented direction. To highlight this possibility, Brittain recounts the story of her school friend, Betty. Betty goes on to serve with Brittain in the war at several hospitals, performing her nursing roles admirably. But unlike Brittain, Betty has "no desire for a university education or the independence of a professional woman" (Brittain 36). In the end, despite her war experience and nursing skill, Betty fulfills the role society wishes of her: she turns away from her acquired skills and marries a "Conservative Member of Parliament" (36). Later in life, Brittain laments that the differences between her and Betty form a lasting rift in their friendship. Although they remain friends and retain a connection because of their shared war experiences, Brittain admits that the relationship is somewhat fraudulent, as their differing outlooks and priorities form too strong of a divide (36).

Brittain is continually at odds with her society by her instance on having "brains" and attending university. On returning home from St. Monica's, her new setting continues to exert pressure to find a husband—or, at the very least, to be more traditionally lady-like. She notes that the townspeople of Buxton likely would have tolerated her educational pursuits if they involved subjects like art or music; but her interest in English literature gets her labeled "ridiculous, eccentric, and a strong-minded woman" (73). Each of these labels is obviously pejorative, each dripping with the notion that Brittain should better know her place.

Brittain's hometown social circle—essentially, her mother's friends—continue the emphasis on marriage started at St. Monica's. This group of women exhort Brittain's mother to deny Brittain's university pursuits. Like the people of Buxton, these women let it be known that Brittain's future plans are "deplorable" (73). One of the friends puts the issue plainly to Brittain's mother: "How *can* you send your daughter to college, Mrs. Brittain! ...don't you want her ever to get *married*?" (73). Between the judgmental townspeople and the horrified circle of well-to-do women, the message from society is clear: a woman's attendance at university is bad, and her attendance may make her ineligible for marriage. In the eyes of society, Brittain is headed for spinsterhood.

Despite the pressures of the social circles at St. Monica's and Buxton, Brittain remains resolute in her determination. After much perseverance, she eventually works her way to university. But her time at St. Monica's and her brief layover in Buxton leave a lasting impression. Of her time as a provincial young lady, Brittain writes:

To me provincialism stood, and stands, for the sum-total of all false values; it is the estimation of people for what they have, or pretend to have, and not for what they are. Artificial classifications, rigid lines of demarkation [sic] that bear no relation whatsoever to intrinsic merit, seem to belong to its very essence, while contempt for intelligence, suspicion and fear of independent thought, appear to be necessary passports to provincial popularity. (55)

Although she criticizes what she terms "provincialism," the signs of the hierarchical order are clear, particularly when her criticism is contrasted with her experiences at St. Monica's and Buxton. She denounces "false values," "artificial classifications," and a system that lacks accounting for one's merit. Contrast that with the rich young women at St. Monica's

who earn positions because of their wealth and, eventually, their marriage. Meanwhile, Brittain, who is not rich and cannot enjoy similar niceties, has her one asset—intelligence—laughed off and discounted. The Buxton locals behave similarly, branding her freethinking ways unnatural. The means by which Brittain's contemporaries discredit her are the same used by the hierarchical narrative: artificial classifications are created by things like wealth or marriage. Those that do not have wealth or marry well find themselves shunted down the hierarchical ladder. By acknowledging the falseness of the hierarchy, Brittain marks herself as an outsider at an early age.

Brittain's rejection of hierarchy limits her ability to become a member of British society. Members, according to Williams, are individuals who fit into the pattern of culture; they feel that society's values are their values. Brittain rebelled when she was scolded for mixing with boys on the playground, and school and social pressures also fail to dampen her rebellious spirit. Her distaste for school recalls Graves's resentment of Charterhouse. His school experience may not leave him as recalcitrant as Brittain, but Graves is headed down a similar nonconformist path. As such, neither Brittain nor Graves are members, and one must consider how they fit into British society.

Williams suggests several alternatives to being a member. First, the rebel is one who opposes society's ways; "the rebel fights the way of life of his society because to him personally it is wrong" (Williams 113-14). An important distinction, however, lays between the rebel who is a reformer and the one who is a revolutionary. The reformer generally agrees with her society and may even consider herself a member. The reformer sees particular aspects of society that need change, and so she will work to effect these

changes within the society's existing forms (113-14). The revolutionary, on the other hand, feels no sense of membership and wishes to replace society with something new (114).

In addition to the rebel and its two permutations, Williams offers exile as an alternative to membership. "The exile is as absolute as the rebel in rejecting the way of life of his society, but instead of fighting it he goes away" (Williams 114). Sometimes, the exile will be able to gain membership in his adoptive society, but more often the exile will not be able to become a member anywhere, forever remaining apart from his old society and adrift in his new one (114).

These alternatives to membership—rebel and exile—are important to understanding Brittain and Graves's development. Brittain's determination to buck tradition and to not be simply some man's wife mark her as a rebel. Graves similarly rejects many of society's ways, only finding happiness when he is alone—like during his escapes to northern Wales. For both Brittain and Graves, society's ways are not their ways. And as each evolves into their non-member statuses, they are rejecting the hierarchy and moving toward a different view of the world. For them, that eventually will be the dichotomous narrative. Over the course of World War One, Brittain and Graves's distaste for the hierarchy will harden, but the beginnings of that dislike began in their youth.

Whereas Brittain and Graves grow incensed by the inequities of their hierarchical lives, Sherston is not bothered by them. He occasionally acknowledges social wrongs, but overall he puts them out of his mind. His different perspective stems from his different background. Graves and Brittain are wealthy (compared to many in Britain), but Sherston is practically an aristocrat. He lives a sheltered, comfortable life on a landed estate, and he does not attend boarding school. Given that he spends most of his life interacting only with

other aristocrats or their servants, it is no surprise that he accepts life as it is presented. Sherston lives a life of leisure and contentment. He is not bullied at school or expected to conform to a restrictive gender role. The only conflict he faces involves the particulars of his favorite activity: fox hunting.

Fox hunting is a “cultural performance” (Marvin 47); it is the hierarchical narrative in miniature. Each hunt is an ordered procession of individuals chasing a fox, and each individual has a role to play: a Master of the Hounds tends to the hounds; a Field Master directs the activities of the huntsmen; the huntsmen’s grooms cater to the huntsmen; and huntsmen catch the fox. As the procession descends from huntsmen to Field Master to hound handler to grooms, the level of prestige shrinks. Nonetheless, the hunt’s success relies on each individual dutifully performing his role. There is no single winner in a fox hunt. The whole hunt—the procession of individuals—succeeds or fails together.

Seeing a fox hunt as a communal effort is an ideal way to envision it. There are less ideal ways to view the hunt, and Sherston eventually highlights them. For the moment, however, consider the ways in which the ideal vision of the hunt reinforces the hierarchical narrative. The hunt is a procession that descends down from the aristocrat huntsman. Each individual in the procession is slightly more important than the next. Even within the broad positions named above—huntsman, Field Master, hound handlers, and grooms—there are gradations: not all huntsman are of equal skill, for example. And distinguishing these gradations is part of the hunt’s “cultural performance.”

As Garry Marvin notes, during the hunt “riders judge their horses and those of others in terms of their performance—how they have jumped or faltered, who showed skill, style, and daring, who got in the way of other riders, who was competitive, who fell

and who was able to keep up with the action" (54). Judging performance and "skill, style, and daring" gets to the heart of the hierarchical narrative. It is not enough simply to be a huntsman; each huntsman asserts dominance in the hunt's hierarchy by winning a battle of small details. And it is not only hunting details that the huntsmen use. For example, the huntsmen differentiate between old money and new money, as when Sir Jocelyn bemoans the inclusion of businessmen in the local hunting group; to Sir Jocelyn, these businessmen are "plebeian upstarts" who do not fit the aristocratic mold (*Fox-Hunting* 215). Although most contemporary observers likely would see everyone in the hunting group as "rich people," the huntsmen look for any detail, using it to delineate hierarchical gradations.

But learning the distinction between old and new money occurs after many years of hierarchical influence. Sherston first must learn the basics of the hunt's cultural performance, and much of this learning will occur through observation of his peers. In this regard, the hunt is Sherston's version of school. Whereas Graves and Brittain attend school to learn their roles, Sherston learns the hunt to become an aristocrat. At his first hunt, Sherston observes a fellow young man worthy of imitation; Sherston says of the other boy:

He was near enough to us for me to be able to observe him minutely. A little aloof from the large riders round him, he sat easily, but very upright, on a cocky chestnut pony with a trimmed stump of a tail and a neatly "hogged" neck...Leaning slightly forward from the waist, he straightens his left leg and scrutinizes it with an air of critical abstraction. He seems to be satisfied with his smart buff breeches and natty brown gaiters. Everything he has on is neat and compact. He carries a small crop with a dark leather thong, which he flicks at a tuft of dead grass in a masterly manner. An air of self-possessed

efficiency begins with his black bowler hat, continues in his neatly-tied white stock, and gets its finishing touch in the short, blunt, shining spurs on his black walking boots. (*Fox-Hunting* 25)

Sherston's attention to detail is impressive, and it emphasizes the social stakes of the hunt. Sherston will need to imitate someone in order to fit in, but simple imitation is not sufficient. At the hunt, as with the hierarchy, the little details matter, for they are the things that place one person ahead of another. It is not enough, for example, for Sherston to note that the hunting attire requires breeches, gaiters, and a crop. Instead, Sherston notes the "buff breeches," "natty brown gaiters," and the "small crop with a dark leather thong." Furthermore, Sherston remarks on the importance of the hunting outfit's parts creating a total image—from black bowler hat down to "short, blunt, shining spurs on his black walking boots." The emphasis on clothes stays with Sherston. Later in life, on a trip to London, he buys a new hunting attire, noting that "in outward appearance, at least, [he] was now a very presentable fox-hunter" (*Fox-Hunting* 103).

There is another aspect worth noting about Sherston's observations of his young riding mate. The boy's demeanor is equally as important as his clothes. The boy is at ease in his surroundings. He exudes confidence when he "straightens his left leg and scrutinizes it with an air of critical abstraction." He is "aloof," but the ease with which he sits in his saddle and flicks the dead grass with his crop only faintly hides that he is "upright" and ready for action. His total image is one of "self-possessed efficiency." Surely these are the qualities of an aristocrat: at ease with his position and his surroundings, but ready to take action when necessary. The action needed on the fox hunt is the hurried scramble after the

fox. But the hunt also is training for defense of the hierarchy, as Sherston highlights in two of the more memorable hunting scenes.

During one particularly intense hunt through the countryside, Sherston realizes that his exploits across fields, over trampled hedges, and through open paddock gates negatively affect the local farmers. Indeed, the hunt does not take place on one secluded estate. Rather it is a stampede across many fields belonging to many different farmers. Sherston momentarily feels bad about this, observing that “a hole in a fence through which fifty horses have blundered is much the same as an open gate, so far as the exodus of a farmer’s cattle is concerned” (*Fox-Hunting* 90). But the feeling of guilt subsides quickly. And Sherston reminds himself of his privilege, saying that “the country was there to be ridden over” (90). It is easy to imagine that the hunt creates much headache for the farmers—fences broken by jumping riders, cattle on the loose because of open gates, and so on.

Despite the hunt’s damage, the farmers raise little objection. Not only have they been entertained by the hunt, but also they feel the hunt is providing them a service. At the end of the hunt rally, Sherston sees the Master of the Hunt regaling the local farmers with drink and ceremony. The Master gives a platitude laden speech about the “best friend of the fox-hunting man [being] the farmer” (91). The Master notes how many foxes and other vermin the hunt has killed, the implication being that the hunt rid the countryside of troublesome pests. The farmers cheer and drink to the Master’s health. The Master then asks that the hunters and farmers work together to “eliminate the most dangerous enemy of the hunting-man...barbed wire” (92). The broken fences, trampled hedgerows, and absconded cows are forgotten. Never mind that the Master glosses over these violations,

he even asks the farmers for more: shape the countryside not to the benefit of the farmers but to the benefit of the huntsmen.

This episode highlights two aspects of the aristocracy's power. First, even though Sherston briefly felt wrong about destroying other people's property, he got over it through his feeling of entitlement. Sherston refers to what he's doing as "trespassing by courtesy" (90)—a term oozing with aristocratic privilege. His training as an aristocrat instructs him to ignore the plight of the small people. Second, the farmers accept the destruction of their hard-worked farms as a favor. The Master—a term that reinforces the social positioning—endears himself to the farmers with drinks, merriment, and the implication that he provides the countryside a service. The farmers are deferential to the Master because, as Sherston notes, fox-hunting is a longstanding tradition (90). With the farmers' deferential posture, the power cultivated in the hierarchical hunting group is transferred to the real world. It is clear why Sherston should imitate the boy from his first fox hunt. The boy's easy, relaxed confidence conveyed power and control, and these are necessary tools for asserting dominance over gullible farmers.

Still, farmers are not always gullible. Aristocratic gentlemen need the tools to quell dissent, and the fox hunting group offers instruction in oppositional oppression. At another hunt, some farmers do not approve of the hunt's destruction of the countryside. This hunt's master, Captain Hinnycraft, deals with the local farmers more harshly than the previous Master. Rather than garner influence through a thin veneer of charity, Captain Hinnycraft takes a cue from Machiavelli and asserts himself through intimidation. Captain Hinnycraft ignores written complaints from the farmers, and he bullies farmers who approach him

directly; “such people, [Captain Hinnycraft] firmly believed, were put there by providence to touch their hats and do as they were told by their betters” (*Fox-Hunting* 212).

Sherston is immersed in this hierarchical, aristocratic, hunting pattern of culture. The hunting group is Sherston’s school and peer group training. Where Brittain and Graves had boarding school, Sherston has his local hunting group. The group teaches him many traits he needs to be an aristocrat. He learns the foundational importance of the hierarchy, which the hunting group, with its tiered, individual roles, represents in microcosm. He learns the culture and language of hierarchy: observation and judgement of minute details to distinguish hierarchical rank. And he learns the methods to enforce the hierarchy: manipulation or domination of the masses.

There are moments, however, like his hesitation at trespassing, when Sherston is at odds with his learned pattern of culture. In addition, at other times, Sherston is unsure why he acts in certain ways or why he likes certain things. For instance, his aristocratic pattern of culture instructs him to appreciate literature, classical music, and fine art, so he amasses a large library, goes to concerts in London, and visits museums; but he admits to being inwardly bored by such things (*Fox-Hunting* 101-02). Like his fox hunting attire, these culturally motivated pursuits offer Sherston an outward appearance, while his inner feelings often betray something different. Such feelings of inner conflict reflect the ability within each societal member to rebel against the pattern of culture.

Yet it would be a mistake to think that Sherston is a rebel like Brittain or headed toward exile like Graves. In his youth before the war, Sherston is a member. He may occasionally register the social inequalities of the system in which he lives, but he mostly accepts the hierarchy—recall that he felt no lingering guilt after destroying property on the

hunt. And it is easy to understand why he would accept the hierarchy: it works for him. The system provides him a life of leisure. He has no worries and he can do as he pleases. There is no reason for him to reject the hierarchy, as conforming to it aligns with his own needs and values. At this point in his young life, nothing has happened that would shake his faith in the hierarchical order. Still, it is worth remembering Sherston's occasional inward dissent. There is a part of him at odds with the pattern of culture, and his war experiences will exacerbate his internal conflict.

For Graves, Brittain, and Sherston, pre-war England was deeply hierarchical. British institutions, from the monarchy to the government, from the family to social organizations, all perpetuated the hierarchical narrative. British elites had a vested interest in perpetuating the narrative, as it allowed them to retain rank and position. As the narrative gained traction, it also was accepted by the population. For most, the narrative was simply the way things *were*. As Cannadine asserts, the dichotomous and triadic narratives occasionally crept to the forefront of people's minds. But the hierarchical narrative maintained dominance throughout much of British history. The narrative was—as Williams would say—Britain's pattern of culture.

The early sections of the Great War memoirs show the foundations of the pattern of culture. Graves at boarding school, Brittain as a "provincial young lady," and Sherston on the hierarchical hunt—each memoir highlights the social institutions that prepare individuals for British life. The similarities between each memoirist's experience are many, despite each being from a different background. The experiences of Graves, Brittain, and Sherston offer the tools that Cannadine identified as needed for navigating the hierarchy. Each learns of the hierarchical pecking order; each learns that seemingly insignificant

details have great consequences; and each learns that nonconformity will not and cannot be tolerated.

Despite the perils of nonconformity, each memoirist has trouble with societal membership; and, to varying degrees, does not conform to the hierarchical pattern of culture. Nonconformity is most troublesome for Graves and Brittain, who each endure social repercussions because of their inability to conform. Sherston, on the other hand, is better able to accept the pattern of culture because he benefits from it. Nonetheless, none of the memoirists are full-fledged members. And the gap between them and their culture will grow during the Great War.

The Great War: The Growing Absurdity of the Hierarchical Pattern of Culture

Many of the hierarchy's disagreeable aspects persist during the war. Overall, British elites continue to perpetuate a system that rewards individuals because of social position rather than merit. As a result, the wrangling for hierarchical position that defined pre-war Britain also defines wartime Britain, and the associated hierarchical social behaviors thrive in wartime institutions like the military and the Voluntary Aid Detachment. These institutions, like their pre-war counterparts, emphasize conformity and obedience to the hierarchy. Because of this strong emphasis on conformity and obedience, one wonders whether these institutions are more concerned with preserving the hierarchy or winning the war. If nothing else, innovative thinking and diverse opinions could offer strategic advantages and save lives. But the hierarchy will not allow contradictory opinions. Instead, British elites maintain the hierarchical *status quo* even as the war shows it be a growing absurdity.

The absurdity of the hierarchy and the war becomes apparent to Graves, Brittain, and Sherston. Each recognizes the ridiculousness of transplanting hierarchical social behaviors from pre-war life to the frontlines. Doing so causes unnecessary distractions and costs lives. The hierarchy's emphasis on appearance, its policing of ill-conceived rules, and its proclivity to grant rank based on social status all contribute to a misguided war effort. Graves, Brittain, and Sherston encounter these misguided emphases in different ways: whether it be an exacting attention to uniforms or a preoccupation with seemingly senseless regulations. But the most important revelation of the war is that its burden is not equally shared. That some sacrifice while others do not is the essence of the hierarchy, and it is the reason that Cannadine asserts the war toppled the hierarchical narrative. In pre-war Britain, the unfairness of hierarchy was tolerated because Britons felt that the system simply reflected the world's inherent inequalities. But tolerating such a system becomes difficult when its underlying flaws lead to so much loss through a mismanaged war effort. In the end, the war made long-standing societal flaws much more pronounced.

Hierarchy on Display: The Details of Attire Remain Consequential

The British military embodies Britain's pattern of culture. And while the military's hierarchical structure is underscored by its ranks, its chain of command, its medals and awards, and its ceremonial tendencies, the military's quintessential symbol of hierarchy is the uniform. Like the figurative uniforms of British social institutions, the military uniform is used to discern a great deal about the individual wearing it. As such, attention to detail is critical. Every element of a uniform plays a role in hierarchical gradation. That is, every permutation of regiment, rank, medals—and even the uniform's cleanliness and

appearance—is a factor for consideration. Uniforms are key to the military’s sense of order; and, as such, officers and British authorities place great emphasis on them. Yet this emphasis goes to ridiculous lengths: throughout the war, Graves, Brittain, and Sherston encounter situations in which the appropriateness of a uniform outweigh actual contributions to the war effort. Such misplaced emphasis is one facet that drives the eventual discrediting of the military class.

When Graves is bullied at school for the perceived poverty of his clothes, when Brittain’s classmates parade their high-society dress, and when Sherston obsesses about having the correct fox-hunting attire, each is—in effect—concerning himself or herself with having a uniform appropriate to his or her situation. Fine clothes will set one above others, while inferior clothes will cast one to the bottom of the ranks. In the military, one’s uniform is even more critical. At the most basic, a military uniform differentiates an officer from an enlisted man—consider, for example, indicators of rank.

Early in his military career, Sherston recognizes two aspects of the military uniform: its similarity to school uniforms and its ability to transform its wearer, fitting the wearer into a specified role. First, Sherston observes that his training begins with his group being split into classes—like a first day of school (*Infantry Officer* 6). The key here is that the soldiers are split into classes in which the uniform will become their primary expression of identity. Second, Sherston sees the affect the uniforms have on his fellow soldiers: “I improved my knowledge of regimental badges, which seemed somehow to affect the personality of the wearer. A lion, a lamb, a dragon or an antelope, a crown, a harp, a tiger or a sphinx, these devices differentiated men in more ways than one” (6). Here, soldiers

assume identities based on their uniform, as the uniform becomes the primary distinguishing feature between the men.

Wearing the uniform changes individuals in many ways, while also placing them within the hierarchy. In many respects, the uniforms are all the same, and their purpose is to remove individuality from the wearer. Still, the regimental badges Sherston refers to are important. These badges serve as a granular detail of distinction—not unlike the distinctions between fine and drab school clothes or expensive and inexpensive fox-hunting gear. It is easy to imagine that the various animal badges Sherston mentions—lions, lambs, dragons, and so on—endow their wearers with certain perceived qualities. In this regard, Sherston does not disclose particulars. That being said, later in the war, Sherston and his men denounce another regiment—a regiment of Welshmen—as “panicky rabble” having the demeanor of “children” (*Infantry Officer* 70). This episode highlights the tension that exists between regiments. That the regiments would develop tribal aspects is unsurprising. But it is worth remembering that little difference exists between the regiments other than the symbols of their badges. They are all British fighting the same war, yet they have been provided a means of distinguishing and dividing themselves. In doing so, they have played into the hierarchical thinking of the military, and they see each other not as fellow soldiers but as hierarchical competitors.

Graves’s experiences with his military uniform recall his time at Charterhouse school. In officer training, Graves’s superiors reproach him for ill-tailored uniforms and for not taking his valet to task for poorly shined boots; as a result, the commanding officer reports Graves as “unsoldierlike and a nuisance” (Graves 72-73). Noteworthy, though, is that this written demerit has little to do with actual soldiering. Nowhere do Graves’s

commanders criticize his skill with a weapon, his strength in combat training, his ability to strategize, or his leadership qualities. Instead, they focus on their perception of his failing to look the part of an officer. Like school, looking the part is important because others judge hierarchal position not on merit but on outward appearance.

One can almost understand why Graves received this reprimand: as an officer he is responsible for maintaining order, and his outward comportment—including the polish of his uniform—sends signals about him to those under his command. But such reasoning becomes suspect when considering the absurdity of another uniform-related episode. Upon joining a new regiment, Graves receives orders that regimental tradition requires everyone to wear shorts. Apparently, the regiment hails from India, and the hot weather of India has made shorts a regimental tradition. Now, in France, amid the mud and rotting bodies of the battlefield, the tradition continues for reasons unknown. Graves notes the dangers of night patrol in shorts—the reflective nature of his bare, white legs makes him an easy target; and the creeping and crawling of night patrol in shorts is unthinkable when Graves recalls planting his hands “on the slimy body of an old corpse” (Graves 130).

Clearly, the actual needs of the soldiers are secondary to regimental tradition. The needlessness of maintaining the tradition speaks to some aspects of the hierarchy. One could see this as incompetence of the officers—none of them dares undermine tradition, no matter how meaningless it is. Officers, like other Britons, are hierarchically trained to accept tradition for its own sake. Also, one could see this as an act of power. The officers know wearing shorts is dreadful and impractical given the frontline conditions. Yet the tradition stands because the officers have ordered it. The point of the order does not matter. Those of higher hierarchical position have ordered it, so it will be done. In every

situation, it must be clear that power comes from the top; any deviation could undermine the hierarchical pattern of culture. Such instances of hierarchical clash occur throughout the memoirs, as officers of higher social ranks lead the lower social ranks into war.

In fact, much of Graves's war scenes involve a "ritual confrontation between character types representative of widely disparate classes..." (Fussell, *The Great War* 229). And, more often than not, these scenes are absurd to the point of hilarity—despite there being a war going on! Rather than focus on winning the war, British officers seem content to police small, internal offences. In one scene, a junior officer returns to base with only a few survivors left from his unit. As he enters to make a report, his commanders are feasting on a sumptuous dinner. The junior officer expects, given his ragged condition, that the commanders may break custom and offer him a bit of warm food or a drink, a sign of sympathy toward a fellow soldier. Instead, they disinterestedly listen to his account of the casualties before dismissing him. But, as he leaves, they call him back. He thinks they have had a change of heart regarding the hospitality. But one of the commanding officers simply says, "I saw some men in the trench just now with their shoulder-straps unbuttoned and their equipment fastened anyhow. See that this does not occur in the future. That's all" (Graves 160).

Despite there being a war going on and despite men dying all around, the officers concern themselves with the minor details of the men's uniforms. The insensitivity of the commanding officer is striking given the horrid conditions of the frontlines. The episode highlights the lengths that army command goes to in order to maintain decorum and the appearance of a respectable fighting force. But more importantly, the episode shows a commanding officer enforcing his dominance over the lower ranks. He cannot control the

squalid life in a trench, and he cannot control who lives and who dies, but he can control conformity and observance of the rules; and he *will* control uniforms. Such control is a small thing, given the war occurring around them, but it presents an opportunity to affirm hierarchical dominance.

But the emphasis on clean and orderly uniforms takes an ironic turn when Lord Kitchener inspects Graves's regiment on parade. Kitchener was the leader of Britain's armed forces for much of the war; but like many of the British officers under him, he was "quite out of his depth in the job" in managing the war effort (Howard 58). And like many officers under him, Kitchener deems the inspection of parading regiments an important part of his war leadership. By this time in the war, Graves and his regiment are battle-hardened enough to know the importance of maintaining their uniforms' appearance; Graves himself has already been reprimanded repeatedly as being unsoldier-like. As such, the regiment's uniforms are in top form. And they are later told that Kitchener remarked on their "soldier-like appearance" (Graves 136). Yet Kitchener quickly adds that after a week or so in the trenches the regiment will "lose some of that high polish" (137).

Apparently, Kitchener mistakes Graves's regiment for new recruits because their uniforms are in such fine condition. He does not realize that these men are battle-fatigued veterans.

The irony that the uniform both makes Graves a soldier and robs him of his soldier patina is striking. Graves must wear the uniform to conform, but the uniform becomes a threat to the hierarchy once it displays elements of Graves's personal struggles. It is as though any sign of battle or adversity would render a soldier too individualistic to fit within the hierarchy. Or, perhaps, signs of actual fighting—whether it be a dirty, tattered, or otherwise unkempt uniform—represent a soldier having meaningfully contributed to the

war effort, which is something few officers could be accused of. Still, another possibility is that signs of fighting denote unauthorized alterations. That is to say, the hierarchy alone grants the details that will separate one soldier from another. Medals and promotion of rank come to mind, for example. Recall that details of dress are important for establishing hierarchical placement. So unauthorized alterations cannot be tolerated, lest a soldier lose track of his place in the hierarchical order. As such, the emphasis on proper attire assumes a sad, new dimension. The minor, unauthorized alterations represent the soldiers' experience of the war. The mud, the blood, the paucity of life can all be shown through a scuffed button, an undone strap, or an un-shined boot—small reminders of having been at the frontline. But the soldiers cannot have even these things. All un-pleasantries must be brushed out or hidden beneath a high shine. Otherwise, a battle-scuffed soldier may be mistaken as being worth more than a clean-cut officer.

Although unauthorized alterations of uniforms are not allowed, the military does have means of providing soldiers with differentiation. One way is through things like the regimental badges. Another way is to promote a soldier's rank. Still another way to differentiate soldiers is by awarding medals, which is widely seen among the soldiers as a great honor. But the honor is tainted because medals end up being more about recognition from commanding officers. Rather than be awarded for bravery, the awarding of medals is more akin to the honors awarded by social organizations like the Primrose League: more a matter of social standing than of valor.

When Brittain's brother, Edward, is awarded the Military Cross, his family is elated, feeling that he is a hero (Brittain 286-89). Moreover, Brittain notes that her deceased fiancé, Roland, had been "after" the Military Cross during his brief military career (287).

Indeed, Roland's romanticized view of the war led him to dream of heroism, and the Military Cross would have served as the ultimate testament to whatever heroics Roland envisioned himself accomplishing. As Roland told Brittain upon leaving for the war, his motivation for going was "heroism in the abstract" (Brittain 129). Many men had no idea what the war would bring, but the lure of adventure punctuated by medals and honors was hard to resist.

Like Roland, Sherston initially views military medals as a path to personal glory. But unlike Roland, Sherston does not see attainment of medals as the means to poetic honor. Instead, he sees them in hierarchical terms, likening them to the trophies he won horse riding. Sherston says:

Six years before I had been ambitious of winning races because that had seemed a significant way of demonstrating my equality with my contemporaries. And now I wanted to make the World War serve a similar purpose, for if only I could get a Military Cross I should feel comparatively safe and confident. (*Infantry Officer* 17)

For Sherston, there is no romanticism in obtaining a medal. He wishes for one solely to enhance his social position. He does not want the medal because he wishes to perform bravely or save the lives of fellow soldiers. He wants the medal to "demonstrate [his] equality" with his peers. Like his victories at horse racing or his triumphs during a hunt, the medal simply would be another marker of his pedigree. To him, the Military Cross is the equivalent of a new riding crop or a shiny pair of spurs. It is an ornament to declare his status.

Sherston must be forgiven for his selfish desire to win a medal. The way in which the medals are awarded supports the notion that they are not for bravery but for hierarchy. For instance, a medal cannot be awarded unless an officer provides evidence of its merit. Graves recounts an instance in which a soldier in his regiment performed an act of bravery. He is recommended for the Military Cross, but he does not receive it because no officer was there to witness his actions (Graves 164-65). That an officer's evidence is necessary suggests a nefarious aspect of the awarding of medals. It is not the heroic act itself that grants the award; instead, it is the perception of the act by hierarchical superiors that bestows it. A recurring theme of the memoirs adds a final insult: officers rarely venture to the frontline, so the likelihood that heroism will be officially witnessed is minimal. To the hierarchy, it is far better to let a thousand heroes go unrecognized than award a medal on the word of grunts alone.

Another insulting point about medals is that officers frequently award them to fellow officers. Again, a constant theme of the memoirs is that officers rarely put themselves in harm's way (more on that later). Nonetheless, medals of equal stature to those awarded on the frontlines are awarded to officers on base detail. (A well-known fact among the soldiers is that base detail is a cushy job for well-connected individuals.) Sherston, despite his initial desire to win a medal, even begins to realize the hollowness of the honor. After months of fighting, Sherston realizes that the medals awarded at base devalue the medals won for actual bravery. Concerning medals awarded for base detail, Sherston says:

But the safest thing to be said is that nobody knew how much a decoration was worth except the man who received it. Outwardly the distribution of

them became more and more fortuitous and debased as the War went on; and no one knew it better than the infantry, who rightly insisted that medal-ribbons earned at the Base ought to be a different color. (*Infantry Officer* 54)

That Sherston suggests different colors for medal-ribbons won on base detail is interesting. In a way, he is beating the hierarchy at its own game by drawing a distinction where the hierarchical order would not want one drawn. Still, Sherston's observation about the debasement of the medals marks a turning point for him personally. Whereas Graves and Brittain always viewed the pattern of culture cynically, Sherston remained somewhat aloof toward it. Now, however, after fighting a war, his own cynicism grows as he sees officers abusing their privilege and degrading an honor that should stand for something meaningful. But instead of having meaning, these base detail awards are dubious thanks to the actions of the officers. As Sherston notes, because it is known that the officers freely distribute the awards among themselves, awardees of actual merit are forever suspect in the eyes of many, as only they know whether a medal was given for genuine reasons, while others may mistake a real medal for a base detail one.

Overall, military uniforms and the awards attached to them help sustain the hierarchical order. The uniforms and medals offer indicators of an individual's place within the hierarchy. These indicators could be the stripes of rank or the medals awarded for duty; each indicator offers a detail—a fine gradation—as to where an individual is placed in the hierarchical order. And every facet of the uniform is tightly controlled, as each detail contributes to hierarchical position. The various combinations of rank, honors, regiment, and a uniform's overall appearance each have different meaning, placing an individual above or below others. As such, the hierarchy cannot distribute these things among the

masses lightly. That being said, free distribution among the officer corps is another matter. Like the honors awarded in social life from organizations such as the Primrose League, men in the officer corps are seen as honorable by virtue of their social standing, so being awarded medals is almost a certainty. Besides, if the masses at the front came home with more medals than the officer corps, it could begin to undermine hierarchical notions of honor and prestige. Thus it is almost a given that the officers would have rank *and* medals bestowed upon them, as their societal positions necessitate it.

The particulars of uniform are not confined to the military. Brittain experiences her own struggles with the uniform during her service in the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD). The VAD is a quasi-military organization; order and discipline are as prevalent as at the front line. As Brittain tells it, the volunteer nurses live hard lives that include poor living conditions and long work hours. The basis for these abysmal conditions is hierarchical thinking, which stresses obedience above all else—the details of this aspect will be developed later. For now, however, consider what Brittain says about her nursing uniform:

[The VAD's] regulations and its values are still so Victorian that we even have to do our work in fancy dress, struggling perpetually with an exasperating seven-piece uniform, always changing caps, collars, aprons, cuffs and waist-belts that accumulate germs and get lost in the laundry, or collecting innumerable studs, clips and safety-pins required to hold the cumbrous outfit together, instead of wearing one loose-necked, short-sleeved overall that could be renewed every day. (453)

The uniform Brittain is forced to wear is ridiculous considering the work she must do. Hard work abounds in a war hospital, from the horror of dressing a gangrenous leg that is

“slimy and green and scarlet, with the bone laid bare” (211) to the mundane “emptying bed-pans, washing greasy cups and spoons, and disposing of odoriferous dressings in the sink-room” (166). That she is forced to wear an outfit as dreadful as her nursing uniform is unfortunate. Its impracticality almost seems purposeful—its callback to Victorian tradition a disingenuous ploy to make decision-makers feel better about inflicting something so senseless.

The act of wearing and maintaining the uniform is exacting, as Brittain is constantly “collecting innumerable studs, clips and safety-pins” that hold the clothes together. It adds a needless burden onto the already burdensome task of nursing at a wartime hospital. That Brittain realizes a better alternative exists in the form of a simple overall adds to the insult; for the simple solution is so obvious that surely Brittain’s superiors must have realized it, too, yet they do nothing about it. As a result, one is left with three possible explanations for the needlessly cumbersome uniform: either the VAD officers hold stubbornly to “Victorian” tradition, which is a hierarchical inclination and foolish; or, the VAD officers do not see the obvious one-piece-uniform solution, which underscores their ineptness; or, finally, the VAD nurses bear the burden of the uniform because they are women, and the VAD is more interested in reinforcing hierarchical social behaviors. In other words, the VAD is simply another institution that disseminates the pattern of culture in which women are obedient, well-dressed, and dutiful.

Uniforms play an important role in fostering the hierarchy. At their core, uniforms distinguish individuals; they give official recognition to one’s role within the hierarchy. Uniforms are shorthand for the various means used to differentiate individuals in civilian life. Consider Cannadine’s example of the provincial mayor and the Master from Oxford: if

they had uniforms, the guesswork regarding their hierarchical placement would end. But by being an indicator of one's hierarchical placement, uniforms are determinative and restrictive. Graves and Sherston's uniforms remind them of their sameness to other soldiers, while Brittain's uniform is a constant reminder of her difference from the surrounding military class. Each has his or her determined role, and little will change it, with uniforms being the cornerstone of that hierarchical role.

Hierarchical Absurdities: The Military Class Begins to be Discredited

The overemphasis on uniforms is just one aspect of the hierarchy that proves absurd during the war. Another is its policing of seemingly misguided rules and social decorum. Repeatedly throughout the war, Graves, Brittain, and Sherston witness situations in which military command enforces a minor rule, custom, or social pattern for little good reason. As these situations become more common, one cannot help think that the military's true priority is monitoring these infractions rather than forming a war-winning strategy. That the military would act in this way is unsurprising. Britain's pattern of culture is hierarchy, and—like other British institutions—the military mirrors these hierarchical social behaviors. But there is a more vexing reason why military officers preoccupy themselves with staunch observance of minor rules and decorum: they do not know how to do anything else. Many of these officers obtained their position because of their social rank and not because of their skills as a soldier. Thus they are woefully unprepared for the demands of war. As they have no power to effect meaningful change in the war effort, they spend time doing what they know: enforcing hierarchical rules and norms—exactly like they were trained to do in previous British institutions. And the

animosity that stems from this policing contributes greatly to the discrediting of the military during the war and the hierarchy after.

Brittain's time in the VAD is particularly emblematic of senseless adherence to hierarchical social behaviors—even beyond the strangeness of her impractical uniform. Overall, her encounters with hierarchical social behaviors are little more than schemes to constantly remind her that she is a woman and that she should remain deferential and obedient. The poor treatment that Brittain undergoes is such that one wonders whether the British authorities value the help of the VAD nurses. Necessity may have forced the authorities to accept the VAD, but that acceptance was not total. Brittain writes that a contingent of women with medical training offered their services in 1914, but were told by the War Office that “all that was required of women was to go home and keep quiet” (195). Given that mindset, it is difficult to view the hardships endured by the VAD nurses as some sort of quasi military, character-building exercises. Instead, they are directly aimed at keeping women in their deferential roles.

The conditions at Brittain's first nursing post are hard. In addition to dreadful living conditions, which include daily walking commutes of over a mile, the VADs are expected to arrive on duty at seven in the morning “looking clean, tidy and cheerful” (Brittain 207). Such dutifulness is expected even though the women must bring suitcases “containing clean aprons and changes of shoes and stockings” to work each day, must live with one bathroom “to meet the needs of twenty young women,” and must work twelve hour shifts and give up their meal breaks if wounded arrive (207-09). Moreover, the nurses are not allowed to sit down while on duty; and because they do not have access to proper bathing facilities or get occasional sick leave, the nurses frequently work through “colds, bilious

attacks, neuralgia, septic fingers and incipient influenza" (210). Add to all of this the cumbersome, seven-piece uniform, and the insult to these hardworking women worsens.

Because of these grueling days at the military hospital, Brittain makes a connection between her situation and the plight of many working class Britons, noting that her hard work, poor living conditions, and fatigue "gave [her] insight into the lives of women who had always to toil in this way for mere maintenance" (Brittain 174). Moreover, she compares later accommodations to a "slum" (300). Such references highlight a transition for Brittain. While she has always been sensitive to gender inequalities, connecting her troubles to the troubles of the poor—to the troubles of those lower in the hierarchy—is one of her first instances of seeing things through a class prospective. Her revelation hints that she is beginning to see her life in the VAD as representative of British life in general. In other words, the things that have made her VAD life difficult—ill-conceived rules, the marginalization of women, and so on—are the same things faced by society on the whole. Brittain makes this connection sooner than Graves and Sherston, and though she may not be able to articulate its nuances yet, it will fuel her drive for change throughout the rest of her memoir.

Horrid living conditions are not the only needless annoyance that the VAD face. They must follow strict rules of protocol while on duty. For instance, unless there is a hemorrhage or fire, the VADs are not allowed to run (Brittain 279). The idea, one assumes, is that running would break the "clean, tidy and cheerful" façade the nurses are expected always to maintain. In another instance of arbitrary rules, the VADs are not allowed to walk through a particular ward in the hospital, even though going around it throughout a shift literally adds several miles to the amount each nurse walks every day (164). The

prohibited ward is one for convalescing patients, and it is unclear how passing nurses would be a disturbance—particularly if those nurses were hurrying to help another patient. But the prohibition is never explained, and one is left to wonder at its rationale.

Seemingly senseless rules and regulations continue at Brittain's next post. After her initial station at a London war hospital, Brittain sails with the VAD to Malta. The conditions on the boat passage to the tiny Mediterranean island mirror those of war hospital. Again, regulations appear designed for solely to enforce the absurd social order, with the VADs bombarded with a "frequent...repetition of the words: 'They may not...they shall not'" (294). Also, the VAD passengers are "ruthlessly divided into 'sections'" and not allowed to do anything with individuals outside of their section (Brittain 294-95). Moreover, the VADs are roped off—literally—from the military medical staff onboard, as a rope is strung across the deck to divide the two groups. The professed reason is to "terminate the age-long predilection of men and women for each other's society" (295).

The rules imposed onboard are silly, and Brittain delights that she and her fellow VADs, feeling slightly empowered at this point in their service, defy the rules at every opportunity. But in highlighting the ship's rules, Brittain further evolves her notion of class. First, the rules are another set of arbitrary regulations that undercut the credibility of British officialdom. Why the VADs are segregated not only among themselves but also from other passengers is never made clear, beyond some nonsense about keeping men and women apart. Such rationale is ridiculous in light of the war, which was killing thousands of young people each month. And it is the undercutting of the official credibility that is key, as it is the first step toward questioning the hierarchical pattern of culture.

The second aspect of this situation that moves Brittain toward rethinking the hierarchy is the rope dividing the passengers: particularly, that it divides the passengers into two groups. Here is the genesis of Brittain seeing the world dichotomously. The “worth” of the passengers is not determined hierarchically. Instead, a single division between two groups separates men from women, VADs from medical staff. Here, officialdom makes not special arrangements to determine hierarchical ranks; no one worries whether anyone in either group is, as Cannadine would say, a Master from Oxford or a provincial mayor. No, the division is clear: there is a privileged group and a not privileged group. The fine details and gradations of hierarchy do not matter.

In fairness to Graves and Sherston, it makes sense that Brittain would begin transitioning to the dichotomous view early. She has been prepared for it her whole life, being a member of the consistently marginalized half of humanity. In many respects, the line across the boat’s deck is her life in miniature: men on one side and women on the other. But Sherston and Graves must endure further absurdities before seeing things as Brittain does.

Sherston’s experience in the war has several absurd moments in which rules defy good sense, but an inspired moment of absurdity occurs when Sherston sees a group of convalescents receiving battle training. Typically, soldiers would receive additional or updated training before heading back to the trenches. Yet for the soldiers that Sherston highlights, returning to the trenches is a longshot. Of the recovering soldiers, Sherston observes:

Many of them were waiting to be invalided out of the Army, and the daily routine orders contained incongruous elements. We were required to attend

lectures on, among other things, Trench Warfare. At my first lecture I was astonished to see several officers on crutches, with legs amputated, and at least one man had lost that necessary faculty for trench warfare, his eyesight.

(Infantry Officer 191)

That these men should attend lectures on trench warfare is clearly absurd. One man has lost his legs and another his eyesight. Their fighting days are over. Nonetheless, the soldiers still must attend training because attendance reinforces the hierarchy. It is not the training itself, however, that serves the hierarchical order. Rather, it is the mandatory nature of attendance that perpetuates hierarchical thinking. It is obvious that men without legs or eyesight will no longer be soldiers. But their return to civilian life should not be mistaken as a release from the hierarchy. No, these men need to understand that they are still under the control of others. And there is no better way to deliver this message of control than the school-like setting of a military lecture. School is where these men initially learned the hierarchical pattern of culture, and in a school-like setting the culture is fortified.

School and military life are uncannily alike during the war. School life was dominated by the emphasis on senseless rules, and military life is much the same. And while Sherston witnessed a group of men needlessly attending a military training, an episode from *Graves* cements the similarity between school and the military. *Graves* claims that this episode is indicative of the absurdities that “sum up the various stages of [his] life” (180). *Graves* and his fellow junior officers pile into a French schoolroom several miles from the frontlines, with the men cramming into desks meant for children. Their senior officer has called them in for a reprimand: the level of familiarity between the junior

officers and their men has become intolerable. As the senior officer recounts with disgust, “You may not believe me, but it is a fact that [the enlisted man] addressed the corporal by his Christian name: *he called him Jack!*” (Graves 179). As a result, the senior officer has both men arrested—the junior officer for conduct unbecoming and the enlisted man for insubordination. Such easy blurring of class lines cannot be allowed.

Graves’s depiction of the episode is both humorous and tragic. He—a grown man, in military uniform, a gun at his side, a veteran of combat—is slouched at a desk meant for a French schoolboy, listening to a senior officer rant about a minor infraction. The frontlines are a few miles away, where war rages and men die. But a large gathering of military officers must sit and be lectured like schoolchildren. But, as school is one of the more effective institutions at transmitting the pattern of culture, it is no surprise that the military would use the setting. Nevertheless, the scene—like the point of the senior officer’s speech—is absurd. Yet the officer’s censure is another example that no opportunity to police the rules and to assert hierarchical dominance is too small. Conformity to the pattern of culture is critical, and it must be enforced at all times.

The hierarchy’s emphasis on conformity and obedience through uniforms and the policing of ostensibly senseless rules strikes each of the memoirists as a mixture of odd and annoying. As the situations of hierarchical absurdity mount, it is increasingly difficult to take the hierarchy seriously. Nonetheless, if that were the end of it—if the hierarchy were merely harmlessly absurd—then such things could be overlooked as oddities of a system that, overall, provides for the greater good. But the hierarchy is not harmlessly absurd, a fact underscored by the consequences of the war. Men suffer in the trenches because officers overemphasize the importance of uniforms or the inappropriateness of “unsoldier-

like” conduct; meanwhile, the VADs’ poor working and living conditions reduce the quality of medical care, leading to unnecessary misery.

Still, a case in support of the hierarchy conceivably could be made if one thought that its drawbacks were the result of an imperfect system created and operated by imperfect people. That is, the hierarchy would be tolerable if people thought that its gains outweighed its harms, and that its promise of elevating only the best and most worthy to lead were legitimate. But the misery of the war—a misery needlessly enhanced by poor or indifferent leadership—reveals a flaw with the hierarchical narrative: the hierarchy claims that its leaders lead by right, that its leaders are the most able and deserving, and that the whole system is divinely sanctioned. Such claims look ridiculous when one considers how the war is represented in the memoirs. Why, for example, would a divinely sanctioned leader care so deeply about nitpicking rules and uniforms when there is a war to win?

The truth of the hierarchy is that it does not elevate only the best and most qualified. That was simply the core of its narrative—the aspect that allowed it to gain and hold power. In reality, the hierarchy elevates elites and serves their interests. The elites do not gain position and power because they are the more worthy than the masses of society; they gain power because they have power. Unfortunately, having power does not translate automatically into wartime leadership skills. And so Graves, Brittain, and Sherston’s writing reflects an officer class undone by a mixture of two elements: inexperience and reversion. The officers, on the whole, are inexperienced, being the wrong people for the job; and, in being inexperienced, they revert to what they know—hierarchical social behaviors.

Hierarchical Inequalities: Understanding Not Everyone Carries the Burden of Sacrifice

The hierarchical narrative—and the pattern of culture behind it—unravels during the war. The narrative is built on the notion that those atop the hierarchy are the most qualified to lead, that they are the rightful stewards of society, and that their right to rule is divinely sanctioned. In truth, however, the wardens of the hierarchy—the elites—rule because they created and perpetuate the very system that keeps them in power. The elites dominate many aspects of British life: the government, business, education, culture, and so on. And like those institutions, in which rank is granted not because of merit but because of social status, the military is also dominated by elites, particularly in the officer corps. In fact, the pedigree of gentry-status or a public school education are virtually a prerequisite for officer commission; meanwhile, the bottom of society fills the rank and file of everyday soldiers (Sheffield 413).

In other words, because the military adhered to the norms of other British institutions, its commanding ranks were filled with individuals incapable of leading a war effort. Of course, not all officers fit such a generalization. But the memoirs present the majority of officers as inept, detached, and uncaring elitists. And like the elites of ordinary British society, the officers feel entitled to their positions, as the pattern of culture has conditioned in them a sense of superiority. Living under such entitled elites may be tolerable in ordinary life, but it becomes insufferable during the war: the stakes and costs of the conflict are too high. After all, the war is not a fox hunt nor a boarding school nor a social gathering; the war's consequences are real and horrible. In ordinary life, the difference between one hierarchical rank and another is a matter of social status. In the

war, the difference is life and death. Yet these matters of life and death are managed not by giants of intellect or military strategy but by social climbers and aristocratic men of leisure.

But the final grievance against the hierarchy comes from a simple fact: that not everyone sacrifices equally for the war effort. Britain may trumpet the call to war with a blare of propaganda aimed at instilling a sense of honorable sacrifice to the cause, but not everyone answers the call in the same way. While the rank and file are expected to give everything—including their lives—the elites (represented by the officers) give little. Instead, the elites “fight” the war in relative comfort and luxury. Through this inequality of sacrifice, the hierarchical narrative loses creditability. In its place, a dichotomy develops: a dichotomy between those who fight and those who do not, between those who sacrifice and those who do not, between the officers and the men, between the elites and the people. For many, the hierarchical view is replaced by the dichotomous one.

To understand how the transition from hierarchy to dichotomy occurs, it is useful to look at the stages that build toward it sequentially: first, the inexperience of hierarchical leadership; second, the inequality between the officers and the men during the war; third, the disparity in the expectations of sacrifice. By tracking the transition through these stages, it will be clear both how the hierarchy is discredited and how the dichotomous narrative takes root.

One does not have to search the memoirs long for an inept military officer, for Sherston himself is one. Direct from his days of leisurely foxhunting with his cohort of landed gentry, Sherston lands a commission in the British armed forces. Early in his career, he is offered the rank of captain, even though his “incompetence” causes his “presence in the ranks [to be] regarded as a bit of a joke”; nevertheless, this joke is overlooked by others

in Sherston's unit because many of them know him from his foxhunting days (*Fox-Hunting* 227-28). That these other officers overlook Sherston's shortcomings is key, and it is indicative of the problem of the hierarchical pattern of culture. Like many other officers, Sherston gains his rank not through skill or merit but by virtue of his social position: his fellow officers accept him because they know him from the foxhunts. Yet even the simplest military routines are too difficult for Sherston. For instance, getting to parade on time with his uniform and horse "properly strapped and buckled [is] ticklish work" for Sherston. Despite having trouble with these seemingly mundane tasks, Sherston is a captain and expected to lead men to war.

Sherston's ineptness remains harmless for a while. Eventually, however, he is given an assignment to take a group of men to clear a large swath of trench. His assignment is one part of a larger offensive, and much relies on all parts working in unison and succeeding. But when Sherston is brought into the planning meeting, he does not understand the overall offensive plan, much less know how to formulate a plan for his much smaller part. He notes that the meeting's "technical talk" confuses him, and he is petrified of asking clarifying questions for fear of being thought an idiot (*Infantry Officer* 167). So rather than ask questions and be thought a fool, he puffs out his Military Cross ribbon, nods his head knowingly (even though he understands nothing), and pretends to take notes when details are given to him (167). Only in hindsight does Sherston acknowledge that worrying about his own ego and reputation could have cost many men their lives. Thankfully, he finds another officer to help him develop a feasible plan. Still, one shudders to think what could have happened if Sherston had not confessed his confusion and found help.

Later, reflecting back on a war that hardened him, Sherston laments that many British officers, particularly those in the highest ranks, were simply unfit for war, being men of leisure—men who were the “products of peace, and war had wrenched them away from their favourite nooks and niches” (*Fox-Hunting Man* 245). Many of these products of peace likely were as clumsy in their command as Sherston was in his. And, as many of them earned their command through their social position, blundering a military command could be personally costly. As a result, it is easy to see why some of them might resist exposing their ignorance, for doing so could make them seem weak and unworthy, undermining their rank both in and out of the military. In that light, Sherston affords these officers a sliver of sympathy, noting that “they were as much the victims of circumstance as the unfortunate troops in the trenches” (*Infantry Officer* 135). Such an outlook makes sense. There are plenty of reasons to dislike military officers because of the way the memoirs portray them. But, like all others in the hierarchy, the officers have an assigned role, and their unfitness to play that role is not necessarily their fault. Still, it cannot be overlooked that ineptitude costs lives and allows for strategic errors.

Graves highlights the dangers of commissioning such ill-prepared dilettantes. During the war, British colonial governments are granted the privilege of nominating a few officers from their own army for attachment to the British Regular Army (Graves 153). The colonial government of Jamaica nominates the eighteen-year-old son of a rich planter, who, according to Graves, “was good-hearted enough, but of little use in the trenches, having never been out of the island in his life or, except for a short service with the West India militia, seen any soldiering” (153). Moreover, because this young man—referred to as “Young Jamaica”—is nominated by the colonial government, he enters the Regular Army at

“full lieutenant, rank[ing] senior to the other experienced subalterns in the company” (154). Graves’s emphasis on “experience” and “subaltern” is telling, as it highlights the flaw of the hierarchical military: the other men’s status as subalterns—both in the military sense and in the societal sense—overrides the merits of any soldiering experience they might possess. Therefore, Young Jamaica—inexperienced as he is—assumes command because of his social pedigree.

Young Jamaica’s shortcomings as a soldier—let alone as an officer—are costly during one skirmish in northern France. During an offensive maneuver in which the British attempt to cross No Man’s Land, Young Jamaica is charged with mortaring German gun posts that block the British’s assault path. Other soldiers performing the same task achieve their objective, knocking out their targets. But Young Jamaica leaves one target intact because he abandons his post to help a wounded friend. It is hard not to feel sympathy for Young Jamaica, as most people would want to help a fallen comrade. Nonetheless, deserting one’s post is highly problematic during an organized military maneuver—particularly when the one deserting is an officer. The one intact German gun is enough to stop the British assault, and an entire regiment is left to seek shelter from the gun in the craters of No Man’s Land, unable to move under the heavy fire. Meanwhile, as these men lay stranded and vulnerable, Jamaica tends to his one wounded friend. With one look, the more experienced soldiers know that the friend’s injury is hopeless, and they move on to figuring how best to help the stranded regiment. Young Jamaica is useless in that endeavor. Eventually, in an attempt to free the men from No Man’s Land, the British fire artillery at the German positions, but Graves notes that “a good many of the bombs [fall] short, and we had further casualties from [the stranded regiment]” (157).

Again, it is hard not to have some sympathy for Young Jamaica. He is a young man put into a situation beyond his abilities through no fault of his own. If Young Jamaica were cocky or arrogant, for example, there might be license to dismiss him or vilify him. Instead, Young Jamaica is simply incapable—incapable not only of basic soldiering but also, by extension, of commanding. That he received his commission ahead of more experienced men is horrifying, particularly when the passed-over subalterns are the ones who keep cool when Young Jamaica loses his head. His actions have dire consequences, as many men die because he fails to disable the German gun position. In short, by commissioning inexperienced men, the hierarchy undermines itself, as the costs of inexperience cannot be easily ignored during the war.

Like Sherston and Graves, Brittain sees inept leadership as a significant hindrance to Britain's war effort. Interestingly, she ascribes the ineptitude to unimaginativeness. Recall that the authorities commanding the VAD are too unimaginative to dispense with the Victorian-era sensibilities regarding lady-like conduct and nursing uniforms. But Brittain notes that this unimaginativeness has far reaching consequences. She observes of the widespread unimaginative leadership:

On a small scale it undermined the health and even cost the lives of young women in hospitals; on a large scale it meant the lack of ammunition, the attempt to hold positions with insufficient numbers, and the annihilation of our infantry with our own high-explosive shells. (207)

With Sherston and Graves, the effects of inept leadership are seen on a micro-level, but Brittain reveals the macro-level extent of the problem. Given the sweep of Brittain's comment, ineptness, unimaginative leadership—whatever one wishes to call it—is

pervasive across the British war effort. It infests not only the trenches but also the hospitals. The earlier scenes of overemphasis on rules and attentiveness to uniforms were merely the symptoms of unimaginative thinking, as the inexperience of the officers leads them to revert to those hierarchical social behaviors. But to conduct an entire war effort in this manner is absurd. Previously, the emphasis on these behaviors could be credited to being simply the way things were—just as it was the way things were in pre-war Britain.

But the war changes things. Hierarchy cannot be accepted simply because of tradition—not when the stakes are so high. The elevation of elites to commanding officers costs lives and leads to a mismanagement. Moreover, since the elites manage the war effort so poorly, one must wonder about their ability to manage society at large. If the same inept individuals rise within the ranks of the military, they must surely rise in the ranks of society, as both the military and society operate under the same hierarchical paradigm. The war, however, shows that the elites are not destined to lead; they are not imbued with some divine wisdom granting them the foresight to govern. Instead, they are as fallible and weak-minded as anyone else, and as they have never seen adversity, they lack the imagination to overcome it. Now, the notion that the elite should lead or that everyone should pay them deference defies credibility.

The ineptitude of the officer class is the first stage of the transition from hierarchy to dichotomy. The next stage is the inequality between the officer class and the men. The disparity between how officers fight the war and how the men fight it is represented, in part, by the detachment, privilege, and entitlement with which the officers have grown accustomed. Throughout the memoirs, officers indulge in privileges that are not extended to others: fine meals and accommodations at the front, keeping a distance from actual

danger, no punishments when they make a mistake, medals won for base duty, and so on. Furthermore, these privileges are not hidden or secret; they are in the open for all to see. There is no shame among the officers that they enjoy relative comfort while conditions in the trenches are abhorrent. By so blatantly claiming these privileges, the officer class unwittingly creates the dichotomous divide: there are officers and men; there are those with privileges and those without; there is us and there is them.

At the front lines, the growing dichotomous divide is most apparent. Consider, for example, Graves's earlier story about the junior officer reprimanded by his commanders for undone shoulder straps. In that story, the junior officer returned from a tiring patrol only to find his commanding officers enjoying a fine meal. The absurdity driving the story is the overemphasis by the officers on undone uniform straps. But it cannot be overlooked that the scene is set between two sides: one, the junior officer, in terrible need and the other, the officers, in luxury and comfort. The officers even appear upset that their meal was disturbed, looking up "dully" from their meal to hear the report of many men dead (Graves 160). To the junior officer making the report of many casualties, the officers merely say, "So you've survived, have you?" (160). In acting so detached, the officers make clear that they do not care; men can die because men regularly die, and making a fuss will not solve that. The officers might as well return to their meal. That is, of course, until they call the junior officer back to reprimand him about uniform violations.

Sherston presents another example of officers being disinterested and detached, being far more interested in their own needs than those of the war effort. At the Depot (i.e., base training camp), the commanders ostensibly prepare the men for a large, upcoming offensive. Yet Sherston notes that training the men for this offensive is not forefront in the

officers' minds. Instead, the commanding officers enjoy leisurely breakfasts that include drinking and card playing (*Infantry Officer* 108). According to Sherston, the commanding officers are content to fulfill their administrative duties, as the "troops [are] well fed and looked after" the commanders "must be given credit..."; meanwhile, "the training of recruits was left to sergeant-instructors...hard-worked men who were on their legs from morning to night" (108).

According to Sherston, the officers at the Depot live a life of ease, while the soldiers prepare for a major offensive. (These officers, by the way, are the same ones that are products of peace and that win medals for base duty.) The lack of concern on the part of the officers is galling. They weakly sell the men on the coming offensive with a bit of patriotic fervor and nationalism, noting that it will be a "big push" and that it will "get the Boches on the run" (108). Then, the officers leave the actual training to underlings and quickly retire to drink and play cards. Worse, the officers do not hide their actions. It is not as though they secretly play cards or drink. No, they do these things openly, not worrying about the message it will send to the men. But there is no reason for the officers to act differently. The hierarchy has trained them to feel entitled to this sort of behavior—to be uncaring for those beneath them, to leave the work to those beneath them, to be content with their titles and administrative privileges.

Graves provides a similar account of life at the Depot, noting that during meals only the officers can enjoy whiskey and the gramophone; rank and file men are expected to "keep still and look like furniture" (125). It is bad enough that the men cannot enjoy the small comfort of a glass of whiskey or one turn of the gramophone; but also to be treated as children, to be told to be still and to be quiet is dehumanizing. The situation might make

sense if it had been truly hierarchical—if there were fine gradations up the ranks in which privileges were slowly accumulated. But that is not the case. Instead, there are again two groups: one with privileges and one without.

There are other, mundane ways in which the divide is reinforced. For instance, Sherston notes that during long marches—some as long as sixty-five miles—the men march while commanders ride in a car (*Fox-Hunting* 262). In another instance, officers routinely leave the front to attend “training,” but this training is little more than “a holiday” for those “who [need a] rest” (*Infantry Officer* 5). Also, while men in the trench sleep in mud, high-ranking officers live in deserted chateaus well behind the front line (74). Further, in the hospital, men are moved from the ward to huts outside in order to make room for incoming wounded officers (Brittain 278). Finally, the punishment for being an ineffective soldier is different for officers and the men: “several [ineffective] officers were usually drifting about at the Depot, and most of them ended up with safe jobs in England. But if a man became a dud in the ranks, he just remained where he was until he was killed or wounded” (Sassoon, *Infantry Officer* 33). Some of these disparities might be individually defensible, and military command likely has understandable reasons why some situations call for different treatment. But what the men see are benefits that they do not receive—benefits that the officers not only use but feel entitled to.

The divide between the elites and everyone else becomes even more clear when Graves and Sherston lunch at the same Liverpool country club. Here, they see that it is not only military officers who enjoy comfort and luxury during the war. In fact, the entire top-end of society is doing quite well despite there being a war on. Graves observes that “leading Liverpool businessmen” feast at a buffet of “hams, barons of beef, jellied tongues,

cold roast turkey and chicken”—all of this during “a time of great food shortage” in which “German submarines sank every fourth food ship, and a strict meat, butter and sugar ration had been imposed” (234). The picture of businessmen feasting while everyone else endures food rationing is almost a Marxist cliché, but it underscores the ongoing point: most of the people sacrifice for the war effort, but a very few—the elites—carry on as always. The burden of sacrifice is not shared equally.

Sherston is incensed by what he sees at the businessman buffet. He says:

Watching the guzzlers in the [country club] (and conveniently overlooking the fact that some of them were officers on leave) I nourished my righteous hatred of them, anathematizing their appetites with the intolerance of youth which made me unable to realize that comfort-loving people are obliged to avoid self-knowledge—especially when there is a war on. (*Infantry Officer* 217)

At this point, Sherston already nurses a grudge against non-combat citizens, feeling that they would never fully understand the war experience (yet another example of a growing dichotomous worldview, no less). But the scene at the country club reveals an anger in him that is seldom seen. Gone is his typically droll humor, replaced by “righteous hatred.” The image of “comfort-loving people” devoid of “self-knowledge” stands out. It is indicative of the hierarchical pattern of culture. The people at the top know nothing other than comfort and privilege, and if they were to gain self-knowledge (i.e., that they have comfort and privilege while others do not), it could be devastating to their worldview. So avoidance of self-knowledge is critical. Sherston is a man from the top who lacked self-knowledge, but the hardships of the war force him to acknowledge the unequal and unfair nature of his

culture. After all, how is it acceptable that these “comfort-loving people” enjoy these niceties while everyone else sacrifices?

The disparity of privileges is difficult to ignore, particularly when those with the privileges take them for granted. Moreover, the connection between the “comfort-loving-people” (i.e., the elites) and officers is made stronger, as both live out the war in ease and relative luxury. This connection emphasizes that the military and society-at-large reflect each other; they share the same hierarchical underpinning. Sherston and Graves realize the importance of this connection, which leads to both of them taking a somewhat misanthropic view of society, epitomized by Sherston’s “righteous hatred.”

The ineptitude of officers and the inequality with which they fight the war are the first steps toward undermining the hierarchical narrative. The most powerful step, however, is the realization that the two groups—the elites and the masses—do not sacrifice to nearly the same degree. The elites fight in privileged comfort, while everyone else gives their lives. That the men are expected to sacrifice themselves for the war effort is not surprising. Propaganda of the period strongly suggests an honorable death as the means to victory. To this point, Graves presents a typical example, a letter in the national press from a supposed mother of a fallen soldier. The “Little Mother” letter (as it is widely to be called) is a notorious propaganda tool (Fussell, *The Great War* 234). In the letter, a patriotic mother celebrates the loss of her sons to the virtuous war effort, while simultaneously rejecting calls for negotiated peace and condemning proclaimed pacifists.

Little Mother’s letter uses basic—but effective—rhetorical flourishes. It appeals to its readers’ pathos, highlighting the sacrifice of dead sons. It insists that these deaths are not in vain, envisioning a triumphant future “watered by the blood of our brave lads...”

(Graves 229). At the same time, the letter adeptly vilifies the opposing view (i.e., that of the pacifists), insinuating that they have “nothing in common” with true patriots (229). Little Mother’s letter is an ideal piece of state propaganda, perfectly designed both to incite the faithful and to sway the undecided. Noted World War One commentator Paul Fussell agrees, adding:

It is sentimental, bloodthirsty, complacent, cruel, fatuous, and self-congratulatory, all at once, and...it is accompanied by a train of earnest illiterate testimonials from third-rate newspapers, non-combatant soldiers, and bereaved mothers, one of whom says: “I have lost my two dear boys, but since I was shown the ‘Little Mother’s’ beautiful letter a resignation too perfect to describe has calmed all my aching sorrow, and I would now gladly give my sons twice over.” (*The Great War* 234)

As Fussell makes clear, the letter’s message is powerful. Other media outlets laud Little Mother’s letter, allowing its message to seep further into the collective consciousness. Its sway so strong, readers are led to believe that one woman would endure the loss of her sons a second time—all to help the cause.

Brittain offers another example of the period’s propaganda. This time, Commander-In-Chief of the British Armies in France Sir Douglas Haig writes the “Special Order of the Day,” which is sent out to the entire British war effort. In the order, he writes that only continued determination will win Britain the war. He notes that recent progress toward defeating the enemy is due, in part, to the “self-sacrifice of our troops”; he insists that only total commitment will lead to victory, saying “there is no course open to us but to fight it out. Every position must be held to the last man: there must be no retirement”; and he

closes with solemnity, saying “the safety of our homes and the Freedom of mankind alike depend upon the conduct of each one of us...” (Brittain 419).

Even Brittain, who tends to look cynically on such things, is persuaded by the Special Order. It is easy to see why Haig’s words would inspire: he likens the war to a fight for freedom, making it seem as though the war is an Olympian struggle for the fate of humanity rather than the diplomatic failure that it really was. Like the Little Mother, Haig highlights “self-sacrifice” as a thing of honor and meaning, implying that it is critical to holding back the Germans. Finally, Haig emphasizes sacrifice again, noting that “every position must be held to the last man: there must be no retirement.” Here, Haig is clear that anything less than fighting to the death could hand Germany victory. Interestingly, Haig was the prime architect of the Somme offensive, an offensive so poorly planned that 60,000 men died on the first day; history judged Haig’s plan as “unimaginative” while the soldiers colloquially referred to it as “the Great Fuck-Up” (Fussell, *The Great War* 13-14). Thus, Haig’s credentials as a wise strategist are suspect, and his cry to war rings somewhat hollow.

Despite what can be said of Haig, his type of propaganda mobilized many to commit their lives to the war effort, and similar propaganda filled England during the war (Howard 38-39). For example, the Headmaster’s speech at Roland’s graduation emphasized that “if a man cannot be useful to his country, he is better dead” (Brittain 89). The idea that Britons owed their life to England was everywhere, so it is not surprising that young men like Roland went to war looking for “heroism in the abstract” (129). Roland never quite says it, but it is clear that he is prepared to give his life to the war, if he thought that doing so would win him heroic honor. But Roland’s dreams of heroism are dashed. After he dies,

Brittain makes a point to learn the exact details of his death, as if finding some shred of heroism might redeem his sorry fate and mitigate her loss.

Unfortunately, Brittain finds that Roland died while conducting the mundane task of fixing the trench's barbed wire. While doing so, he was shot. There were no heroics—no charge against some needed strategic position or no sacrificing himself to save a fellow soldier. Instead, his death was “so painful, so unnecessary, so grimly devoid of that heroic limelight which Roland had always regarded as ample compensation for those who were slain...” (Brittain 241). Roland's fate is similar to many men who died in the war. The lack of heroism and the abundance of meaningless horror that the war inflicts undermines the narrative fostered by the elites.

But one's physical life is not the only thing sacrificed to the war. As Brittain's memoir makes clear, there often is a less tangible and more philosophical sacrifice. Like many in her generation, Brittain served the war effort with a feeling that she was contributing to *something*. She is even moved by Haig's call for patriotic sacrifice, noting that it inspires her to press on when she thought she could not. Brittain initially says that she could endure anything, so long as it did not rob her of her personality (Brittain 212). But the constant fear of losing loved ones, the ever-present horrors of the VAD hospitals, and the sacrifice of her youth leave her depleted; and the war's demands eventually leave any patriotism she feels “threadbare” (338). Finally, she meets the war's end not with jubilation but with “a permanent state of numb disillusionment,” knowing that all the sacrifice had meant only one thing: “a striving, and a striving, and an ending in nothing” (458).

She endures the war, but she is left to wonder what parts of her survived it. Because of the war, everything that “made up [her] life had vanished” with the death of her fiancé, her close friends, and her brother (463). In the end, Brittain did meet the call to patriotism, such as the one issued by Haig. And though meeting the patriotic call did not literally take her life, it did destroy a part of her that she can never get back. As she says, “the dead were dead and would never return” (463).

Graves finds that self-sacrifice to the war effort is expected of the men. He notes that “personal courage” is about the only thing that earned anyone respect, and senior officers even scoff when an opportunity to sacrifice one’s life is missed. In one instance, Graves finds a group of Germans while on patrol. Rather than put his or his men’s lives at risk, Graves has the German position shelled, avoiding a head-to-head fight. Later, a senior officer says that Graves had “cold feet,” implying that Graves should have taken out the Germans with this revolver (Graves 139). It is unclear if the officer genuinely thought a direct encounter would have been better (however one defines “better”) or if the officer simply wanted to devalue Graves’s strategic accomplishment. Either way, the message to Graves is clear: more respect would have been earned if he had died for the cause. Contrast the call for Graves to sacrifice his life with the actions of the officers. During a battle, when a colonel is “slightly cut on the hand,” he is raced back to the base as soon as possible (Graves 151).

Graves treats such situation with dry humor, and one gets the impression that these instances of officer cowardice only confirm what Graves thought all along: that the hierarchical system was a sham. Sherston, on the other hand, experiences a significant personal transformation during the war, growing from an unquestioning junior officer to

staunch war critic. Much of this transformation revolves around his change of heart on the meaning of sacrifice. When he first entered the war, Sherston accepts the notions espoused by officers that a noble self-sacrifice would be meaningful; he says that he could “glory in the idea of the supreme sacrifice” (*Fox-Hunting* 267). But the horrors of the war eventually remove the notion of “supreme sacrifice” from his head, and he—like many others—simply wants to go home (*Infantry Officer* 89). In placing the value of his own life above the needs of the hierarchy, by refusing to put himself beneath the system, Sherston places himself outside of the hierarchical order. In other words, his change of heart is a rebellion. His change of heart is understandable: he finds no good reason why he should sacrifice while the “comfort-loving” elite do not.

But adopting self-interest is not the only change Sherston makes. He starts to see through the ideology of the hierarchical narrative. His soldiering duties show him that the hierarchy does not always sort people by worth or ability. His various observations of ineffective officers contribute to his realization, but he also develops an appreciation for the men who toil in the trenches. He comes to respect and appreciate the men in his unit, as he realizes that they carry on despite horrific and unfair odds. Eventually, Sherston—initially an aloof, aristocratic foxhunter—puts the men on a pedestal above the officers, flipping the hierarchical order that he has known his whole life. For example, after a long march toward probable disaster, Sherston notes the following about his fellow soldiers: “I became increasingly convinced that a humble soldier holding up a blistered foot could have greater dignity than a blustering Corps Commander” (*Infantry Officer* 150).

In another example of Sherston’s changing views, he begins to recognize the humanity of his military valet (as junior officers, both Sherston and Graves have valets;

recall that Graves was reprimanded for being too easy going with his). In a scene before Sherston heads out on sick leave, he has a brief goodbye with his valet, Flook. During this goodbye, Flook proves himself more humane than most officers, giving Sherston a warm farewell despite the unfair social divide between them—a social divide that allows Sherston vacations and keeps Flook at the front. Of the encounter, Sherston says:

When I shook his hand and said goodbye, he winked and advised me, confidentially, not to be in too much of a hurry about getting back. A good rest would do me no harm, he said; but as he tiptoed away I wondered when he himself would get a holiday.... (*Infantry Officer* 91)

Sherston knows that Flook will never get a holiday. Like the rest of the men, Flook is trapped at the front. Flook likely knows this, too; he knows that his position is to serve, yet he is able to perform his duty with a warmth and grace that Sherston cannot help but recognize: the warmth and tenderness of the encounter recall Sherston's former groom, Dixon—a man Sherston never truly saw as a member of humanity. With Flook, however, Sherston has had his worldview altered by the war. He has seen men of all backgrounds toil through hardships. And while receiving hardship is not predicated on social status, relief from hardship is a matter of social status. Sherston, the aristocratic junior officer, gets occasional breaks to attend "trainings" or go on sick leave. Flook, the lowly valet, never will experience such reliefs; most likely, he will remain at the front until he dies. In short, Flook offers Sherston insight into the class dynamics of the war: namely, that one class sacrifices, while the other does not.

The dignity with which the British soldiers conduct themselves affects Sherston. He is inspired by the "courage" the soldiers show and the "power of the human spirit" they

represent; the men encourage Sherston to be his best, and he is awed by their ability to overcome forces that are set to destroy them (*Infantry Officer* 194). Flook, for example, will work hard and conduct himself with dignity and honor, but he will get no recognition for his efforts; he will earn no rewards. He will sacrifice just as much—probably more—than the “comfort-loving” people, but he will be forgotten while they enjoy continued luxury, and their sons in the officer corps win medals and honors. Thus, Sherston concludes that “life, for the majority of the population, is an unlovely struggle against unfair odds, culminating in a cheap funeral” (*Infantry Officer* 156). Here, Sherston begins to consider that the war reflects life in general; the same inequalities of the army are continuations of life back home. Many in Britain will live as the soldiers of the British army do: they will give their lives for the benefit of others and receive nothing in return.

By seeing the reality that awaits the majority of the population, Sherston upends the hierarchical pattern of culture in a couple of ways. First, he refutes the idea that society is made of gradations that descend from the top. Rather, society comprises those who get a decent funeral and those who do not; or, society is divided into two: the haves and the have-nots. Second, Sherston understands that the “unlovely struggle against unfair odds” has nothing to do with a person’s worth—as the hierarchical pattern of culture would have one believe. Instead, Sherston sees honorable men—Flook, the men in Sherston’s regiment, or Dixon—who struggle through hard lives. These men never got rewards comparable to their sacrifices. Conversely, Sherston sees the officers and the “comfort-loving” people enjoying luxuries that, if one were being fair, are hardly earned. The war’s life and death stakes put all of these inequalities and injustices into sharp relief.

The demands for sacrifice are made explicit to Sherston during a sick leave at the British country estate, Nutwood Manor. The estate operates as a temporary convalescence home for sick officers—regular soldiers do not appear to be welcome. At the estate, the convalescing officers enjoy a bit of luxury before heading back to the front—afternoon tea, dinner parties, fine company, and so on. Housing these officers is how the owner of the estate contributes to the war effort, but Sherston’s descriptions of the place make clear that the contribution is well-advertised to the public. One night Sherston opens up to the estate’s owner, Lady Asterisk, telling her that “life was preferable to the Roll of Honor...” (*Infantry Officer* 198). In other words, Sherston prefers living to sacrificing himself to the war.

Instead of sympathy, however, Lady Asterisk offers the cruel reality:

“But death is nothing,” she said. “Life, after all, is only the beginning. And those who are killed in the War—they help us from up there. They are helping us to win...It isn’t as though you were heir to a great name. No; I can’t see any definite reason for your keeping out of danger....” (198)

In her insistence that “death is nothing” and that “life, after all, is only the beginning,” she echoes the calls of the Little Mother, as though the blood of the dead will somehow give life to the future of England. But the real shock is how she tells Sherston that his life is worthless because he is not “heir to a great name.” Here, she reveals the truth of the hierarchy: that only those at the top count. In doing so, Lady Asterisk furthers Sherston’s growing idea that society is really dichotomous. To her, he might as well sacrifice himself. Even though he is an aristocrat, his estate is minor. He and all the men underneath him are

worthless in her eyes. These are the men Sherston has learned to revere, and she dismisses their entire lives as not worth her concern.

Sherston concludes that Lady Asterisk “symbolized the patrician privileges for whose preservation [he] had chucked bombs at Germans and carelessly offered [himself] as a target for a sniper” (198). Overall, the exchange with Lady Asterisk offers Sherston an important revelation. He sees how pointless the war has been. He and many thousand others have sacrificed their lives for a non-cause, for the preservation of privileges for a select few. A select few, moreover, that do not honor that sacrifice. In fact, rather than honoring the sacrifice, the privileged few simply expect it. Just as they expected fealty and obedience before the war, they expect it during the war—no matter the cost. But the war complicates things; those atop the hierarchy should have modulated their expectations of privilege to account for the sacrifices that those at the bottom would make. They did not do so, continuing instead to expect the vast lower ranks to bear the burden while they reap the benefits.

Overall, the hierarchical pattern of culture became discredited, as Cannadine says, because the inequalities it produced were intolerable during a war. The war and the hierarchy produced a volatile mixture: ill-prepared men were promoted to leadership; they led using the hierarchical system they best understood, which—given the war—exacerbated underlying social inequalities; and, because of their feelings of superiority and entitlement, they shifted the burden of sacrifice disproportionately to the people beneath them. Thus, the wartime environment created by the elites was adversarial, with the elites on one side and everyone else on the other. It is no surprise, then, that many began to view British society as dichotomous. Whether society is actually dichotomous by any acceptable

measure is irrelevant. The point is that people *feel* it is dichotomous. In many respects, the elites give them no alternative.

After the Great War: Diverting from Societal Membership and the Rise of the Dichotomous Narrative

By the war's end, Graves, Brittain, and Sherston have rejected the hierarchical pattern of culture, and they will not become societal members. As such, each memoir presents a different aspect of burgeoning non-membership. Graves becomes an exile. Sherston becomes a vagrant. And Brittain becomes a rebel. Each of these modes of non-membership is one identified by Williams, and by reviewing each one, a better understanding of the hierarchy's displacement can be gained. Each of the non-membership statuses—the exile, the vagrant, and the rebel—is inherently adversarial, for each status is oppositional to the dominant pattern of culture. Because Williams identifies these oppositional, non-membership alternatives, membership and its hierarchical underpinning are exposed as being far from monolithic. It is through these alternative forms of membership—alternatives brought about by the mismanagement of the war—that a full rejection of the hierarchical pattern of culture is possible. The evolving notions of British class rest in this transition from member to non-member, and in depicting this transition, the memoirs are truly powerful.

After the war, Graves finds traces of the hierarchy at each institution he encounters. At university, the academic elites regain their “self-possession” and “haughtiness,” and Graves is seen as “temperamental” for questioning their standard academic assumptions (Graves 292-94). Also, Graves's marriage to a free-spirited feminist causes a slight scandal

during his wedding, as his new wife has the audacity to enjoy her own wedding by having a few drinks and changing into comfortable clothes during the reception (272). Finally, when Graves accepts a teaching job in Egypt at a British university, he finds the school rife with the same hierarchical education system as in Britain. Namely, the sons of local elites attend school, produce laughable work, yet earn a degree. Graves is so dismayed that he quits (337). In the end, Graves leaves Britain—and its domains—and settles in Majorca. To Britain and its hierarchical proclivities, Graves says, “good-bye to all that” (343).

That Graves would find comfort in exile is no surprise. In his youth, he escaped to Harlech in the hills of northern Wales, where he found contentment away from society. Similarly, when the war ends, Graves prefers to be by himself rather than with the jubilant crowds. Instead of celebrating, Graves finds himself “cursing and sobbing and thinking of the dead” (Graves 278). The event reminds him of a poem by his friend, Sassoon; Graves says:

Siegfried’s famous poem celebrating the Armistice began:

Everybody suddenly burst out singing,
 And I was filled with such delight
 As prisoned birds must find in freedom...

But “everybody” did not include me. (278)

Undoubtedly, Graves’s reaction to the war’s end speaks to his feelings of the war being not a triumph but a waste—a hollow victory. But the important part of his reaction—in regard to his feelings toward society—is his need to be alone. He does not fit in with the cheering, victorious crowds; he is not one of “everybody.” Put another way, he has no role among those people. With no hierarchical role, he is essentially a man without a country, unable to

find a place within the hierarchical order. The same is true in the years after the war, when he is unable to be a student, a husband, or a teacher. And so, like he did to escape the pressures of Charterhouse, and like he did during the celebration after the war's end, he prefers to be alone and to be an exile.

According to Williams, the exile could "live at ease in his society, but to do so would be to deny his personal reality" (115). Graves could, if he wanted, find a place in society. His solidly middle-class upbringing ensures that society would accept him. But his own reality does not allow for his assimilation. He is an individualist and an iconoclast, and to be anything else would be a lie that he could not live. Like Graves, the exile wishes to "defend his own living pattern, his own mind...Whatever he may come to say or do, he continues, essentially, to walk alone in his society, defending a principle in himself" (115). Graves tries to defend his own principles in Britain, but he is labeled "temperamental," for example, when he does so at university. He even tries to be alone in his society by moving his family to the country, but that provides no lasting escape. Instead, his only option, when all is over, is to leave Britain. He is so disillusioned with the hierarchy that he removes himself from it.

By going into exile, Graves asserts that British culture is not for him. But an important point is that he exiles himself into *another* culture. This is important because it means he has not discarded humanity altogether. Sherston, on the other hand, takes a more extreme approach, as his righteous hatred eventually turns to apathy. In doing so, Sherston comes to represent the vagrant. His path toward this end is a long one. Sherston's righteous anger eventually leads him to make a public statement against the war. The statement is particularly damning toward the political and social authorities

leading the war effort, claiming that the reasons for the war were never clearly defined, which allows the war to have an ever-changing rationale (*Infantry Officer 229*). Such a statement would have most people court martialed. But Sherston's friend successfully argues that Sherston is too shell shocked to be accountable for his own actions. And Sherston is shipped to a military hospital for psychiatric evaluation.

It seems that Sherston is lucky, having nearly missed a court martial. But the claim of shell shock saves not Sherston but the hierarchy. Had Sherston pushed forward with his public criticism he may have become a powerful agent of change. In fact, the military is worried about this prospect from the start, as it gives Sherston several opportunities to retract his statement before it becomes official (237). But by safeguarding his self-interest, Sherston robs himself of creditability in the anti-war movement.

At the military hospital, Sherston slowly realizes he has been outflanked. The government will not allow him to protest the war, so it will keep him in the hospital either until he agrees to reenter military service or until the war ends (*Progress 27*). Furthermore, should the war end, it is unlikely that he will suffer any real repercussions for his actions; he is more useful as a quiet aristocrat than a shamed one. Quite simply, the hierarchy cannot afford to publically shame one of its own, for doing so would reveal that someone atop the hierarchy does not believe in the hierarchy. The official story accepted by the British government is that Sherston is "not responsible for [his] actions," the war having taken too great a toll on his senses (6). As such, he spends his hospital days at the nearby golf course, slowly losing himself in solitude with many rounds of golf.

Sherston's recovery is not guilt-free. He acknowledges that a carefree routine of bicycling and golf is not a "penance" but a "reward" (6). And the war is the farthest thing

from his mind as he hits “a perfect tee-shot up the [fairway]” (21). Still, throughout his hospital stay, Sherston’s mind does drift back to the men at the front. His feelings of guilt are powerful. Further, his relative safety from the horrors of the war undercuts his pacifism, and his need of validation through a noble self-sacrifice returns; strangely, it is only by returning to the war that Sherston can find peace (Fussell, *The Great War* 110).

Sherston’s return to the war is not a sign of his acceptance of the war or of the system that perpetuates it. On the contrary, Sherston continues to hate the war and what it does to his fellow soldiers. In fact, before returning to the war, Sherston reflects on his fellow soldiers burdened with shell shock, noting that “in the name of civilization these soldiers had been martyred, and it remained for civilization to prove that their martyrdom wasn’t a dirty swindle” (*Progress* 41). Here, Sherston still rages against the war—the “dirty swindle”—perpetrated by society. But he feels he has no choice but to return to that dirty swindle. Either way, his options are unappealing: if he does return, the war will get him; if he does not return, his own conscience will.

But the lack of choice is something Sherston recognized from the start of the war. Early on, Sherston remarks that war is making him use his “brains” for the first time, as the horrors of war and the disparities of combat stir him to contemplation; yet, at the same time, he quickly wonders whether such thinking is a waste, as the war deprives him of the ability to call his life his own (*Infantry Officer* 80). This undercurrent of helplessness flows throughout Sherston’s observations of the war: the war may be unjust and horrible, but there is nothing he can do about it. His one attempt to do something—to speak out with his political, anti-war statement—is turned against him. At best, the government authorities

rob him of agency, claiming the war has left him unaccountable for his actions; at worst, he is a rich coward who shirks his national duty.

And so Sherston is left feeling helpless. In his innermost thoughts, he remains a critic of the war, but he is neither as self-assured as Brittain nor as arrogant as Graves, and speaking out against the war did nothing. Instead, he is beaten down by the societal pressures. Back at the front, he is withdrawn, preferring to be alone, “ruminating on what exists within the narrow bivouac of [his] philosophy...” (*Progress* 93). Now, however, his observations about the injustices and disparities make him tired rather than angry. At one point, he envies people “too indolent-minded to think for themselves,” and he wishes for escape from the “burden” of seeing the war and society for what they are (93). Sherston cannot un-see what he has seen or un-know what he has come to know; nonetheless, he longs for the bliss that ignorance would bring. Short of magical ignorance, he simply wishes to be left alone, even if alone means being alone through death.

In many respects, Sherston has given up on both himself and society. As such, he represents Williams’s idea of the vagrant. The vagrant, according to Williams, “stays in his own society, though he finds its purposes meaningless and its values irrelevant” (115). Moreover, “there is nothing in particular that vagrant wants to happen; his maximum demand is that he should be left alone”; to the vagrant, “society is a meaningless series of accidents and pressures” (116). Each element of the vagrant easily fits Sherston’s eventual outlook on life. His helplessness, his inability to effect change, and his feeling that his life is not his own each tie into the vagrant’s feeling that life is an uncontrollable series of accidents. Fairness and justice seem unattainable, so there is no point in trying. Finally, Sherston’s wish that he could either die or be replaced to ignorance speaks to the vagrant’s

“maximum demand that he should be left alone.” For if Sherston were to die or if he were to be an unthinking member of society, reality would leave him alone.

Sherston’s move to vagrant status corresponds to his shift away from societal membership. By being the vagrant and not the member, Sherston will not help perpetuate the pattern of culture. That Sherston removes himself from society—in a figurative sense—is the critical point. His disavowal of the pattern of culture may not lead him to decisive actions similar to Graves or Brittain. But it does lead him to reject participation in the hierarchical order. Finally, given the inequalities that Sherston witnessed during the war and given his attempt to speak out publically against them, it is likely that Sherston could be roused from his vagrant status if he thought societal change were possible. It is possible that he could attain rebel status—similar to Brittain—if he were to find hope. For the period of the memoir, however, the war has left Sherston too disillusioned.

Brittain’s shift away from societal membership toward the status of rebel represents one of the strongest transitions in the memoirs. While Graves and Sherston retreat from their convictions, Brittain is motivated by her war experience; and she dedicates the end of her memoir to her attempts to bring about change in British society. Her primary focus is on the nascent feminist movement (Brittain 576-78). But her affiliation with the British Labour Party speaks to the depth of her transition from hierarchical to dichotomous worldview.

As Williams notes, the rebel, like the member, makes “a strong personal commitment to certain social purposes”; but the rebel’s strong commitment, unlike the member, is to the upheaval of society’s pattern of culture, for the “ways of society are not his ways” (113). In many respects, the rebel is the real anti-member. So it makes sense

that Britain, as a rebel, would gravitate toward the Labour Party. The party was founded on the “idea of ‘class allegiance’ and sought to give the workers an enhanced sense of class consciousness and class identity” (Cannadine 114). This founding emphasis is directly opposed to the hierarchical pattern of culture, as the Labour Party encourages people to think of themselves not as individuals along a spectrum of ranks but as classes different from each other. Moreover, according to Cannadine, as the party encouraged “workers to think of themselves as belonging to a single class...its very existence intensified the view that Britain was a deeply riven society” (114). Cannadine’s point is that the party’s emphasis on grouping workers together in opposition to those lording over them was fundamentally dichotomous. Society is riven into groups adversarial to each other

Brittain joins the effort to elect Labour to Parliament during the 1923 general election—an election that saw Labour make significant gains in the British government. When hearing the election results, Brittain says that she “realized, with a half conscious feeling of triumph, the growth of Socialist influence in the electorate...” (Brittain 572). In the years following the war, Labour increased its share of the vote from less than eight percent to twenty-four percent, superseding the Liberal Party to become the second party of the state (Cannadine 135-36). This is not to suggest a direct correlation between the war and the growth of Labour. Rather, it shows that as the war discredited the hierarchy, society looked for other narratives to define itself. In this case, the dichotomous narrative gained increasing prominence, and the political landscape of Britain changed as a result.

Examining the different non-membership statuses of the memoirists shows that society could transition from the hierarchical narrative to the dichotomous narrative. The war provided the conditions for slippage from member status. As the war raged and the

hierarchy continued to perpetrate hierarchical social behaviors, the hierarchical pattern of culture became less acceptable. The memoirists each began to see the hierarchy as a façade concealing a dichotomy of haves and have-nots. This realization of the dichotomy drove the memoirists toward alternatives to membership. Further, it is not unreasonable to think that many others involved in the war experienced similar changes in worldview. Overall, the memoirs reflect a society questioning its pattern of culture because of the war. Each memoir provides many examples of why the pattern of culture would come into question and how individuals could transition away from membership. As the hierarchy became discredited and alternatives to membership increased, a new narrative was needed, hence the growing popularity of the dichotomous narrative.

Conclusion: Britain's Evolved Notion of Class

Class long has been a dominant force in British life. Well before the Great War, Britain could easily be described as a society obsessed with class. Class determined much about a person's life, even though no one could easily define what class was, and one would have been hard-pressed to find agreement on a universally accepted definition. Nonetheless, everyone agreed that class existed and that it was important to British life. Like many aspects of British life, class changed during the Great War. But the change was not a proletariat uprising as foretold by Marx. Instead, the change was a subtle shift in societal sentiment. Still, as Vera Brittain said about life in general, with class there was a definite before the war and after the war. But there is an inherent problem trying to identify change in something that itself cannot be easily defined.

The difficulty of defining class is overcome by turning to Cannadine. For Cannadine, class is not the nebulous Marxian variants of upper, middle, and lower; instead, class is best seen as a set of competing narratives that society uses to describe itself. In a sense, class is not a matter of objective reality but of subjective thought. In other words, defining class is not a matter of identifying socio-economic realities but of recognizing how society—on the whole—thinks about socio-economic realities. By applying Cannadine's competing narratives theory to the memoirs of Graves, Brittain, and Sherston, it becomes much clearer how British notions of class evolved during the Great War.

Overall, Cannadine suggests, Britain historically saw itself as hierarchical, and that many elements of British life contribute to the furtherance of this view—or, this pattern of culture. One's accent, school, social groups—even one's clothes—are important factors in perpetuating the hierarchy. Each manner of distinction provides guidance as to how an individual fits into the hierarchical order: having a rough accent puts one down the ranks, while having posh clothes moves one up the ranks. And the scenes of pre-war life show this to be true. Graves is scolded for letting his accent drop after his childhood hospital stay; Brittain learns that fancy clothes enable fancy people to have nights out in London; and Sherston obsesses about his fox hunting attire. Each of these hierarchical social behaviors is meant to determine how an individual relates to others—hierarchically speaking, that is. Each behavior is meant to place one neatly in the spectrum of hierarchical ranks.

But the hierarchical pattern of culture was not prepared for the Great War. The hierarchical social behaviors that helped build British life could not construct a winning war effort. Although the hierarchy was presented as natural, true, and god-gifted, its true

purpose was to benefit the elite and keep them in power. It was through the hierarchy, for example, that the elites attained positions of rank and power in the government, the military, and various other societal institutions, perpetuating the hierarchy in the process. But these positions of rank and power were attained because of social status rather than because of merit. According to the memoirs, the hierarchical system that elevated social climbers over qualified individuals was disastrous to the British war effort. Instead of experienced soldiers leading the war effort, British command was staffed with gentlemen of leisure—gentlemen whose only ideas about leading were hierarchical.

The transition away from the hierarchical pattern of culture comes with the discrediting of the military. The memoirs depict military and civilian war command as, at best, unqualified or, at worst, woefully inept. Graves and Sherston show military command as poor strategists and as being more worried about decorum than winning the war. Moreover, officers are so detached from trench life and so engrossed in their own positions of power that the morale of the men and the objectives of the war are undermined. In her narrative, Brittain highlights the lengths that war command will go to keep military nurses ladylike and proper, regardless of the negative impact on the wounded men. With repeated scenes of such incompetence and uncaring indifference, it is not long before the memoirists become cynical not only toward the war effort but also toward the hierarchical society it reflects.

As the ineffectiveness of the war effort grows, the cynicism of the memoirists increases. To them, the hierarchy has brought about needless waste and suffering. Worse yet, the hierarchy demands everything from many but very little from a select few. Most of the men are expected to die, if need be, in acts of pseudo-heroism, while the officers are not

expected to make such sacrifices. Graves is dismissed as cowardly when he does not take a German position singlehandedly; Brittain sees many wounded men moved into a tent so her hospital ward can be ready for incoming officers; Sherston rages at rich civilians who somehow are exempt from the nationwide food rations. In short, the memoirist began to see that the hierarchy is not only unfair: it is unjust. Slowly, the hierarchy becomes not a hierarchy but a dichotomy. Some people sacrifice, while others do not. Sherston puts it most poetically when he observes that most people can only hope for a cheap funeral. Meanwhile, the “comfort-loving people” feast.

By turning to the dichotomous narrative and breaking from their pattern of culture, the memoirists veer away from societal membership. The hierarchical pattern of culture is no longer their own, and they each claim different relationships to it. Graves chooses exile, no longer able to see a way to fit in. Sherston elects vagrancy, no longer caring about fitting in. And Brittain chooses to be a rebel, determined to make society more equitable. The differences between each of the membership statuses is not important for the assessment of evolving British class. What is important is that each status is oppositional to membership. That is, the exile, the vagrant, and the rebel are each anti-members. The war brought the memoirists to these anti-member statuses. And, if the change of the memoirists is extrapolated across all participants of the British war effort, it becomes clearer to see how the war changed society's notions of class. More importantly, it is clearer to see how this change is reflected in the memoirs of Graves, Brittain, and Sherston. The Great War changed many aspects of British life, and the effect it had on Britain's notions of class was as subtle as it was profound. And while these memoirs have been read

for a variety of reasons through the years, they are powerful testaments to the lasting effects of the war on the British class structure.

Note

1. Sassoon's use of a pseudonym may cause some to wonder how his Sherston series could be considered a memoir. To be sure, there is scholarly debate regarding how much fiction the Sherston series contains (Fussell, *The Great War* 113); and some may see this debate as evidence that the series is not, in fact, a memoir. But to use the fictionalizations of the series to disqualify it as memoir would be to assume that memoirs, on the whole, cannot contain fiction. Such a standard would be difficult to achieve, even for the most earnest memoir. Moreover, examining the proper place of fact and fiction within memoirs is beyond the scope of this analysis of Great War memoirs. That all being said, even Fussell—a scholar who feels the Sherston series contains much fiction—refers to the series as “memoir” throughout *The Great War and Modern Memory*. And he feels that readers placing too much emphasis on the fidelity to “documentary” and “history” miss the true strength of the memoirs (*The Great War* 338).

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