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“Canning the Kaiser” in Words and Images: Case Studies of Patriotic American Propaganda from WWI

ABSTRACT

The article examines how the US government used poetry and posters as instruments of propaganda during World War I to mobilize the nation and resources for their war effort and to denigrate the enemy, especially the German Emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm II. Two case studies are presented: the poem “Canning the Kaiser” by the American writer Upton Sinclair and the poster “Can Vegetables, Fruit and the Kaiser Too” by the Belgian-American artist Jozef Paul Verrees. The article explores the historical context of Sinclair’s poem as well as the use of humour, irony, and visual metaphors in both pieces of art to persuade the American public to conserve food, support the troops, and thus help defeat the Kaiser. A particular interest of this study lies in the idiomatic meaning of the phrase “Canning the Kaiser”, which is not only an intriguing linguistic issue but had a considerable impact on the development of the campaign.

Keywords: propaganda, Canning the Kaiser, Upton Sinclair, World War I, United States of America, Jozef Paul Verrees

»Konzerviranje kajzerja« v besedi in podobi: študiji primera ameriške domoljubne propagande iz prve svetovne vojne

IZVLEČEK

Prispevek prinaša dve študiji primera uporabe poezije in propagandnih plakatov, s katerimi je ameriška vlada v času prve svetovne vojne poskušala pritegniti prebivalstvo k podpori svojim vojnim prizadevanjem in hkrati očrniti sovražnika, zlasti nemškega cesarja Wilhelma II. Analiza vključuje pesem »Canning the Kaiser« ameriškega pisatelja Uptona Sinclairja in plakat »Can Vegetables, Fruit and the Kaiser Too« belgijsko-ameriškega umetnika Jozefa Paula Verreesa. Članek pojasni zgodovinski kontekst Sinclairjeve pesmi ter uporabo humorja, ironije in vizualnih metafor v obeh delih, ki naj bi ameriško javnost prepričali, naj konzervira hrano in podpira vojsko ter tako pomaga premagati »kajzerja«. Posebna zanimivost te študije je analiza pomenov frazema »Canning the Kaiser«, ki ni le jezikovno zanimiva, ampak je pomembno vplivala na razvoj ameriške propagandne kampanje.

Ključne besede: propaganda, »Konzerviranje kajzerja«, Upton Sinclair, prva svetovna vojna, Združene države Amerike, Jozef Paul Verrees

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1 Introduction

The United States of America joined World War I in April 1917.[1] In order to mobilize the nation for the war effort, the Woodrow Wilson administration established the Committee on Public Information (CPI), also referred to as the Creel Committee, an independent government agency whose main mission was to foster enthusiasm for the war and support for the war effort among the multi-ethnic population on the home front (Hazemali and Matjašič Friš 2018, 914). This was particularly welcome for providing food supplies for the army the population, but also for helping to increase the enthusiasm of young men to become soldiers. At the same time, the committee's job was to counter various agencies and individuals who made attempts to act against the US war effort (Creel 1920, 1–10). During the period of its existence, i.e., from 14 April 1917 to 30 June 1919, the Committee – alone or through other private organizations such as the National War Garden Commission (NWGC) and federal agencies like the United States Food Administration (USFA) – made every effort to promote its aspirations via all available media. This fostered a change in American food culture, as home-grown and canned produce replaced fresh fruit and vegetables (Tunc 2012, 193). Even today its activity is frequently considered one of the most significant propaganda campaigns in the history of the United States:

> There was no part of the great war machinery that we did not touch, no medium of appeal that we did not employ. The printed word, the spoken word, the motion picture, the poster, the signboard – all these were used in our campaign to make our own people and all other peoples understand the causes that compelled America to take arms in defense of its liberties and free institutions. (Creel 1920, 2)

Two significant communication channels used for propaganda that are of particular interest to this study include poetry, which in this case was written to an existing well-known tune, and visual art in the form of public posters which – owing to their predominantly visual content – relied heavily on visualized rhetorical figures like visual metaphors and visual irony. Figurative language, particularly the use of carefully chosen or constructed metaphors, is often used for the purposes of political propaganda or manipulation, particularly – as maintained by Ramadan Shunnaq, Radwan and Shuqair – "in addressing large heterogeneous audiences" (2020, 258).[2] Kennedy and Kolar (2023) develop the argument that such discourse is even more effective when combined with music, e.g., when used in songs. This article focuses on two such case studies that prominently featured in this campaign: the poem "Canning the Kaiser"[3] by the distinguished American writer Upton Sinclair and the poster "Can Vegetables,

[1] America formally declared war on the German Empire on 6 April. Contrary to what the Entente Powers had hoped, the US armed forces were still in the process of significant expansion (see Hazemali, Turnšek and Očko 2019, 428). As such, American war preparations on the home front proceeded and progressed in parallel with the military organization.

[2] In literary and non-literary public discourse, metaphors often serve a propagandistic or manipulative purpose as reported by many contemporary stylistic or discourse analysis studies (e.g., see Plemenitaš 2017, 2020; Furlan and Kavalir 2021).

[3] In order to avoid ambiguity regarding several song lyrics dealt with in this article, we chose to refer to Sinclair's text "Canning the Kaiser" as to a poem, even though, in the narrow sense, this main object of literary and stylistic analysis is song lyrics written to an existing tune of a marching song from the American Civil War period with the title "Marching through Georgia".

Fruit and the Kaiser Too"[4] by the Belgian-American artist Jozef Paul Verrees (1889–1942). Sinclair's poem draws its inspiration from the slogan "Can the Kaiser", and later a song adopted by the US troops shortly after they arrived in Europe, thus contributing to bolstering American patriotism by utilizing and channelling the already negative national sentiment towards the German Emperor and King of Prussia, Kaiser Wilhelm II, as a symbol of the main enemy.[5] Similarly, Verrees' equally engaging poster visually neutralizes and defeats the Kaiser by encapsulating him in a glass jar; simultaneously, it foregrounds the importance of food conservation for securing the American and Entente Powers' victory. Both products thus agitate against the Kaiser's Germany, i.e., the then existing German Empire, by actively involving the addressees in the propagandist activity to shape public opinion.

2 "Canning the Kaiser" in Song

War songs have frequently played a part in the side activities of military conflicts. According to the Russian-American musicologist, pianist and composer Nicolas Slonimsky (2013, 72), World War I saw the creation and widespread use of more than a hundred songs, referred to as the "Kaiser-hanging songs", by the Entente Powers and their US ally. These heavily satirical poems with strong propaganda elements threatened the then German Emperor Wilhelm II, popularly referred to as the Kaiser, with hanging or some other form of execution. One such poem was written by an unlikely advocate of the US involvement in the war, the prolific American writer and social reformer Upton Sinclair. Sinclair held strong socialist beliefs and actively supported progressive social change, including the rights of workers. These convictions are reflected in many of his literary and socially critical works, such as the novel *The Jungle* (1906) and the critical exposé *The Brass Check* (1919), which made him a prominent figure in the socialist movement. He believed in peaceful solutions for international political problems and preferred diplomacy over armed conflict. During World War I, however, he underwent a notable transformation in his political stance regarding this issue: before the war and after it, Sinclair held strong pacifist beliefs and actively opposed the war as well as any form of American involvement. During the war, however, his anti-war stance changed significantly, since in 1916, even before the US entered the war, he wrote and circulated a letter that endorsed the war "from a socialist perspective" (Coodley 2013, 77). In February 1917, he abandoned the branch of the Socialist Party who favoured "peace at any price" ("Joins Hands with Mars", *The Princeton Union*, 1917, 7), and in July, he publicly withdrew from the party owing to its opposition "to conscription and to the war America is waging upon 'German autocracy'". He compared the "Prussian ruling class", i.e., the German Emperor and his political elite, to "a beast with the brains of an engineer" ("Upton Sinclair Quits Party over War Idea." *Star-Tuesday*, 1917, 2). Sinclair's temporary change of heart – he later returned

[4] American WWI propaganda posters are usually referred to by the caption they contain or the most prominent part, which in this case is "Can Vegetables, Fruit and the Kaiser Too". This poster, however, was frequently referred to simply as "Can the Kaiser" – probably owing to its popularity but also to the popularity of the phrase. The term "Can the Kaiser" was also used by the NWGC founder Charles Lathrop Pack (See Pack 1919, 21).

[5] The US aligned itself with the Entente Powers, commonly referred to as the Entente, while the German Empire played a significant role within the Central Powers. It is worth mentioning that Emperor Wilhelm II was the grandson of Queen Victoria and there were, therefore, dynastic connections running counter to his current status as head of an enemy empire.

to his anti-war stance[6] – was affected by his belief that the autocratic and oppressive regime in the German Empire needed to be eradicated. This earned him the label in *The New York Tribune Review* of "a socialist who refuse[d] to be un-American" ("A Socialist Who Refuses to be Un-American", *The New York Tribune Review*, 1917, 6).

One of the indicators of this surprising short-term shift was the pro-war poem "Canning the Kaiser", which Sinclair wrote in July 1917 and later included in his novel *Jimmie Higgins* published in 1919, i.e., after the war. According to Sinclair, the genesis of his poem emerged from a news dispatch from London published in late June 1917, which celebrated the inventive phrase "can the Kaiser" coined by the first American troops who had landed in France a few days earlier:

> 'Our soldiers had hardly landed in France when they announced that they intended to "can the Kaiser.' At first blush this intensely amused our English friends who, with their own inimitable appreciation of humor, found great delight in contemplating the prospect of the American army's expressed intention of bottling up the German war lord and hermetically sealing him in a retainer – figuratively speaking, of course. The dense Britons apparently never heard of the derivation of the term 'can,' as used in this sense, and the thought that it might perhaps allude to the time-honored practice of tying a tin can to a dog's tail to get rid of him never once entered their heads.' ("Yankee Humor", *Goodwin's Weekly: a thinking paper for thinking people*, 1917, 1)

The same news item from *Goodwin's Weekly* reports that "a catchy song has been improvised, entitled 'Can the Kaiser', which is sung to the stirring tune of 'Dixie'" (ibid.). By "Dixie" the reporter refers to the well-known pre-American Civil War tune, also commonly known as "I Wish I Was in Dixie" written and composed in 1859 by Daniel Decatur Emmett. The lyrics of "Can the Kaiser" quoted in the same news dispatch are as follows:

> In khaki suit and army visor,
> All aboard to can the Kaiser,
> Look away! Look Away! Look Away, Germany.
> In Kaiserland he reigns alone;
> We'll push the Kaiser off his throne:
> Look away! Look Away! Look Away, Germany.
>
> We're off to can the Kaiser,
> Hooray! Hooray!
> In Kaiserland we'll take our stand
> Until we can the Kaiser.
> Let's go, lets' go, let's go and <u>can</u> the Kaiser. (In Walling 2019, 199–202)

[6] A character in Sinclair's 1919 novel *Jimmie Higgins* expresses a belief that can be seen as strongly autobiographical: "If at the beginning of 1917 I had known what I know today, I would have opposed the war and gone to jail with the pacifist radicals" (Piep 2005, 210).

According to a young American recruit, H.W. Molye, the underlined *can* in the last line of the quoted lyrics was long drawn out and accompanied by stamping of feet (Molye 1917, 1). Although several "Kaiser-hanging songs" already existed at the time, this one appeared to be the catchiest, as suggested on 23 September 1917 by Sgt. Clinton J. Peterson, who was stationed at Camp Dix, Wrightstown, New Jersey: "We have lots of others but this one strikes me as being the best" (Walling 2019, 202).

Apart from mockery of the British sense of humour by the Americans, the above passage from *Goodwin's Weekly* touches on the main linguistic issue addressed in this study, which is connected to the idiomatic meaning of the phrase "Canning the Kaiser". Apparently, *canning* as used by the American speakers of English – the soldiers as well as the general population – referred to the old inhumane practice of tying a tin can to a (usually wild) dog's tail, which would cause noise and thus scare the dog away (see "Yankee Humor", *Goodwin's Weekly: a thinking paper for thinking people*, 1917, 1). The phrase was used by soldiers on the European battlefields but also by people across the US. According to a *New York Times* (8 July 1917) report, the chief of the Belgian War Mission in the US, diplomat Baron Ludovic Moncheur, who heard this phrase at one of the mountain states train stations when travelling across the country, had to ask a representative of the US Secretary of State for an explanation. This proves not only a different (or a lack of) understanding of the phrase by the Europeans, but also the nationwide usage of the expression. To American soldiers, canning the Kaiser would thus metaphorically mean scaring him away from his position of power, possibly from the political scene in general, or simply getting rid of him and the political entity he represented. On the other hand, the British obviously understood *canning* as a process of conserving in a glass jar with the purpose of preservation, which in the case of Kaiser would be closer to the purpose of containing and neutralizing him. Thus American soldiers, when singing the Kaiser song, must have had the "American meaning" in mind, while the "conservation meaning" was closer to the British.[7] This indicates the brilliance of the CPI, USFA and NWGC poster propaganda campaign, since they cleverly adopted the "European understanding" of the phrase and supported it with a visual representation of the Kaiser in a glass jar. In this way, they achieved a double effect: the poster campaign was linked to the existing effect of the jingoistic war song, while they successfully promoted the "canning the Kaiser" concept in support of the war garden and food conservation movements. Verrees' poster and the campaign in general will be addressed and analysed later in the article.

For his version of "Canning the Kaiser" Sinclair used another well-known tune from the Civil War period: instead of "Dixie", he chose the marching song "Marching through Georgia", which today is widely available in multiple audio versions. As can be seen from Sinclair's lyrics provided later in this section, many phrases from the refrain resemble these lines from the original:

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[7] According to *OED*, the process of sealing food in a metal canister in British usage is also referred to as "to tin". The result of this process, i.e., the container with food, was called in the colonies a "tin can" – thus having it both ways. *Cambridge Dictionary* provides two more relevant meanings of *can*: the slang meaning of "to get canned" means "to be dismissed from the job", while the (usually) imperative form "Can it!" means "stop doing something or making noise".

"Hurrah! Hurrah! we bring the jubilee!
Hurrah! Hurrah! the flag that makes you free!"
So we sang the chorus from Atlanta to the sea
While we were marching through Georgia. (Work 1865)

The inaugural performance of Sinclair's song took place on the morning of 11 July 1917 at the First Unitarian Church in Portland, where the Department of Music Education at the National Education Association (NEA) held its session. According to the news report, the poem's presentation was the "first of its kind" ("New Song is Hit", The Morning Oregonian, 1917, 5), and it made a profound impression on the audience. When introducing the composition in the morning music session, Professor Gantvoort of the College of Music in Cincinnati expressed his pride at being among the first to perform it. Starting the familiar tune on the piano, he guided his students through the entire piece. He subsequently invited volunteers, primarily women, to join in at the Auditorium that evening. Approximately 35 individuals responded to his call, making it a memorable occasion. Gantvoort confidently anticipated that "Canning the Kaiser" would quickly eclipse the renowned "Tipperary" and predicted its resonance as a prominent war-time musical composition ("New Song is Hit", The Morning Oregonian, 1917, 5). He was right, as the song became a hit on the home front, and some US newspapers labelled it a new "classic" ("Canning the Kaiser. Upton Sinclair Makes Big Hit with New War Song." The Topeka State Journal, 1917, 8; "New Song is a "Hit". Canning the Kaiser." The Meridian Times, 1917, 8). It was quickly incorporated into US wartime propaganda, thus appearing, for example, in the Official Report of the meeting of the US National Education Association held in July 1917 (Winship 1917, 120), and as an official "War song for patriotic meetings" at the University of Texas (Shurter 1918, 12). It even reached the secluded mining town of Ely, Minnesota, where it was sung by pupils of the Ely public schools ("Pageant of Patriots", The Ely Miner, 1918, 4).

About two years after its first appearance in public, yet still while Sinclair was a patriotic supporter of the US government's war policy, the poem "Canning the Kaiser" appeared in Sinclair's novel *Jimmie Higgins*, which was published in 1919 but written over the course of 1918. This version of the poem is the one used for the literary and stylistic analysis later in this section, since this is, obviously, Sinclair's final version, over which he had full control, which is not necessarily the case for the version sung among the troops and which – at least to some extent – was disseminated orally.

Jimmie Higgins is one of Sinclair's less well-known literary works. It explores themes of labour activism, socialism, and the struggles of the working class during the early 20th century in the US. The story follows the life of Jimmie Higgins, a "working Socialist Everyman" (Coodley 2013, 81), who is an advocate for workers' rights and socialist principles, and becomes involved in socialist and labour movements. He organizes a labour union, dedicating himself to improving the conditions of workers in his community. In this respect, he shows a resemblance to Sinclair himself, particularly with regard to his beliefs and worldview. The novel portrays Jimmie's experiences, the challenges he faces and the conflicts that arise as he tries to unite and empower the working class in the face of capitalist exploitation.

Throughout the novel, Sinclair highlights the harsh realities of industrialization, economic inequality, and the resistance that labour activists encountered from both employers and government authorities. The character of Jimmie Higgins embodies the determination and sacrifices made by those who fought for social justice and workers' rights during that era. The main character's commitment to shedding light on the struggles of the working class is particularly autobiographical, since apart from writing, Sinclair also took an active part in politics at the state and federal levels and was a political activist in favour of public health, free speech and worker rights. The novel examines the complexities of organizing and advocating for change in a society marked by economic disparities and unequal power dynamics.

The poem "Canning the Kaiser" is thematically in line with official propaganda against the German Empire, which was the primary war opponent of the Entente Powers on the European battlefield. The main target of mockery is the Kaiser, in the poem disrespectfully referred to as Bill (traditionally the short form for William and thus by extension for the German Wilhelm). Considering the American perspective, it is not surprising that other nations like the French, English, and even some Americans are mentioned in an ironic and patronizing tone. However, the poem does not seem to be intrinsically connected to the plot of the novel. It is introduced at the end of Chapter XIX, in which Jimmie arrives at a mobilization camp and undergoes standard procedures like inoculation and quarantine. A brief description of the other men at the camp is given, and the narrator calls attention to their particular slang, which Jimmie does not quite understand. The chapter closes with the account of how he "would sit and listen while they sang with zest a song telling about what they were going to do when they got to France" (Sinclair 1919), and then the poem is presented in full:

> Bring the good old bugle, boys, we'll sing another song,
> Sing it with a spirit that will move the world along,
> Sing it as we love to sing it, just two million strong—
> While we are canning the Kaiser.
>
> CHORUS: Oh, Bill! Oh, Bill! We're on the job to-day!
> Oh, Bill! Oh, Bill! We'll seal you so you'll stay!
> We'll put you up in ginger in the good old Yankee way—
> While we are canning the Kaiser.
>
> Hear the song we're singing on the shining roads of France;
> Hear the Tommies cheering, and see the Poilus prance;
> Africanders and Kanucks and Scots without their pants—
> While we are canning the Kaiser. (Chorus)
>
> Bring the guns from Bethlehem, by way of old New York;
> Bring the beans from Boston, and don't leave out the pork;
> Bring a load of soda-pop and pull the grape-juice cork—
> While we are canning the Kaiser. (Chorus)

Come you men from Dixieland, you lumberjacks of Maine;
Come you Texas cowboys, and you farmers of the plain;
Florida to Oregon, we boast the Yankee strain—
    While we are canning the Kaiser. (Chorus)

Now we've started on the job we mean to put it through;
Ship the kings and kaisers all, and make the world anew;
Clear the way for common folk, for men like me and you—
    While we are canning the Kaiser. (Chorus) (Sinclair 1919)

Surprisingly, the next chapter does not pick up on the poem in any way; it only provides a comment on how nobody stays long in the mobilization camp but soon catches a ship to Europe. The lack of the poem's more solid incorporation into the plot of the novel can be explained by its earlier existence as a propaganda song, but we will first look at the poem's stylistic layer and its literary theoretical interpretation.[8]

The poem features several traditional rhetorical figures, which contribute to its main theme of supporting the American war effort as well as its central motif, i.e., the neutralization of the Kaiser – in the metonymical sense – by preserving (or rather containing) him in a jar or a can. Among the salient rhetorical schemes in the poem, we find repetition, which is present on several levels. The two most noticeable ones are the refrain and chorus that continuously co-appear at the closure of every stanza. The ironic reference to the Emperor, suggesting that all everyday errands are done "[w]hile we are canning the Kaiser", occupies the closing line in each stanza and leads to the particularly mocking chorus with a disdainful perspective on Wilhelm II referred to as Bill, which is a meiosis of the English version of the name William. Both these repetitions go hand in hand with the fact that both poem's predecessors, i.e., "Dixie" as well as "Marching through Georgia", are marching songs and Sinclair's adaptation still features the rhythmic characteristics of the latter.

Similarly, Sinclair preserved the double iteration, an epizeuxis and an anaphora, which occupies the two iambic syllables in the first two lines of the Chorus "Oh, Bill! Oh, Bill!" (in "Marching Through Georgia" the anaphoric exclamation was "Hurrah! Hurrah!"). This anaphora is a strong cohesive element in the poem – in fact, it was additionally strengthened by Sinclair since it reappears in all but the last stanza, while in the original tune the anaphoric repetition appears only in the first two. Increased cohesion is also achieved through parallelism of these anaphoric phrases, since all are verbs in the imperative form that require some sort of action from the listener: *sing*, *hear*, *bring* and *come*. Their repetition is slightly varied over the stanzas, but the imperative mode as well as the climax that they create contribute to a greater engagement of the listener/reader which is typical of texts intended for or used as propaganda.

With its marching rhythm, the poem/song affirms the idea of proactive propaganda: the verse opens and closes with a strong syllable, while the other strong and light positions are equally

[8] For a similar stylistic analysis, see Boase-Beier (2021) for poetry or Zupan and Blake (2022) for prose.

distributed in a sort of marching pulse. The metrical scheme of the non-refrain lines reads as – ◡ ◡ ◡ – ◡ ◡ ◡ – ◡ ◡ ◡ – (possibly with every second syllable stressed: – ◡ – ◡ – ◡ – ◡ – ◡ – ◡ –), where "–" marks a stressed and "◡" an unstressed position. The uniform metronome rhythm, as well as the existence of the sing-along chorus, is in line with the political decision of the then decision makers to introduce the poem into American primary schools and have it sung by the pupils.

The poem also contains several sound figures. Particularly dominant among them is a rather straightforward rhyme scheme with unsophisticated high-frequency masculine rhyme like *day-stay-way*, *France-prance-pants* (near rhyme), *York-pork-cork*, etc. The simplicity and modesty of the rhyming scheme of all stanzas, including the chorus (aaaR, bbbR, cccR, etc., where R is the refrain), indirectly serve the goal of making the verses easier to memorize. This effect can, at least to a certain extent, also be attributed to alliteration. The central and most frequently repeated one is *__c__anning the __K__aiser*, but the others include *__B__ring the … __b__ugle, __b__oys*; *__B__ring the __b__eans from __B__oston; __k__ings and __k__aisers* and *__c__lear … for __c__ommon folk*. These are all forceful since the alliterating consonant is a plosive, which alludes to physical action and is – in this context – associated with fearlessness, certainty and determination. From this perspective, the sibilant alliteration in *__s__ing another __s__ong* is softer and more pleasant, potentially also because of the adjoining consonance containing a nasal sound.

The poem is loaded with patriotic imagery. Although its criticism and mockery are not primarily aimed at the other allied nations, it is obvious that the collective persona (the "we") still sees Americans as superior. Not only does the chorus contain the phrase "in the good old Yankee way" in an appreciative, even patronizing way, but an attempt to include various representatives of the working-class American society is seen in references to people from various geographical locations like "men from Dixieland, lumberjacks of Maine, Texas cowboys [and] farmers of the plain". The entire US territory is encompassed between "Florida and Oregon" and "boasting the Yankee strain". On the other hand, slightly derogatory nicknames are used for other nations, even allies: South Africans are referred to as Africanders, Canadians as Kanucks and the mention of the Scots is accompanied by the derogatory stereotype about their not wearing underwear under their kilts.

The central metaphor of the poem, canning (the Kaiser), is American at its core. The invention of preserving food by canning was originally European, but the US "eventually became the world leader in both automated canning processes and total can production", and in the late 1890s American scientists "set canning on a scientific basis by describing specific time-temperature heating requirements for sterilizing canned foods" (*Britannica* 2021). The popularity of the idea – in terms of canning food at home as well as using industrially canned products – is reflected in the existence of this limerick, since limericks are usually written about current and popular themes:

> A CANNER one morning, quite canny,
> Was heard to remark to his Granny
> 'A canner can can

Anything that he can

But a canner can't can a can can he?' (Acanomous)[9]

Therefore, it is not surprising that the number of canning companies in the US grew fast. Among them was Boston Baked Beans, which is mentioned in the poem ("bring the beans from Boston") with a somewhat humorous reference to the very little meat the cans proverbially contained. Even though this might be seen as an argument against the propagandist aim of the poem since it was not fully in line with the governmental food conservation policy, its prevailing function was more likely to produce a humorous effect augmented by the generally recognized fact that eating beans produces flatulence. Triggering laughter and communicating a certain lightness of the topic was an important message of the poem, since it conveyed an impression that contributing to the war effort is an easy, even pleasurable activity, and as Sarah Wassberg Johnson suggests, it "implies that home preserving has the power to defeat the might of the German Empire and the Kaiser himself" (2019). Apart from the prevailingly light and semantically positive lexical choices (*singing*, *moving the world along*, *shining*, *cheering*, *soda-pop*), the poem closes with the democratic concept of placing power in the hands of the (American) people by removing the Kaiser and thus "clear[ing] the way for common folk, for men like me and you" (Sinclair 1919).

As the analysis shows, the poem contains many openly propagandist elements, which by itself is not an obstacle for it to be integrated into a novel with relevant content such as *Jimmie Higgins*. Yet in this case the text of the poem seems to have less relevance to the plot than to the overall thematic context of the novel, and Sinclair's writing of this period in general. As the following case study will show, American propaganda of the time went beyond the verbal and into the visual arena.

3 "Canning the Kaiser" in Poster Art

The other propaganda strategy of the CPI that we address in this article is the launch of a poster campaign in support of the mission of the USFA and NWGC to feed the troops and ensure enough food for civilians at home and abroad.

According to Kingsbury (2010, 6–7), all nations involved in the war incorporated posters and other visual propaganda to rally support from their citizens and shape public opinion. In the US, the CPI mobilized the American artistic community as well as a number of talented immigrant artists – a total of 318 – on a voluntary basis for the creation of posters, window cards and related pictorial materials designed for 58 governmental departments and committees (Van Schaack 2006, 45). Creel's report (Creel 1920, 3) states that a total of 1,438 drawings were employed for this purpose.[10] By the end of the war, these drawings resulted in approximately 3,000 different war-related posters (Vogt 2000, 45). The enterprise was supervised by the visual artist Charles Dana Gibson, the creator of the famous Gibson Girl, who oversaw the Division of Pictorial Publicity (DPP) established in November of 1917 (Van Schaack 2006, 33–34).

[9] The series of puns to *can* and its multiple derivatives wittily extends into the author-reference section, where *Acanomous* is a pun on *Anonymous*.

[10] For the collection of posters and their authors, which is available in open access in the repository of Library of Congress, see the website https://www.loc.gov/collections/world-war-i-posters/.

The first DPP posters were simple text designs that urged the public not to waste food, with suggestions on which items to save to "serve the cause of freedom". Gradually, they moved towards the employment of visual material: occasionally figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, and Joan of Arc appeared, symbolizing patriotism and self-sacrifice, while images from the frontlines, such as a food convoy moving through a snowy landscape or an American soldier standing over a fallen German, helped the public visualize the horrors of war-torn Europe and spread the idea that small sacrifices at the dinner table might be transformed into meaningful contributions to the war effort. One of the central themes the posters started to target was the potential strain on the public food supply, which was the primary purpose of the NWGC. With the war effort and recruitment of workers likely to deplete the agricultural labour force, the Commission focused on encouraging families nationwide to start their own vegetable gardens, commonly known as war gardens, effectively fostering self-reliance and reducing dependence on the country's food resources (see Pack 1919, 1–10). The lion's share of this burden was undertaken by American women. As noted by Kusovac and Mohar, "[t]he government […] had a well-prepared plan for women on the home front, which was also part of the war propaganda" (2022, 126).[11] According to the NWGC founder and one of the wealthiest American citizens before the war, Charles Lathrop Pack,

> [t]he sole aim of the National War Garden Commission was to arouse the patriots of America to the importance of putting all idle land to work, to teach them how to do it, and to educate them to conserve by canning and drying all food they could not use while fresh. (Pack 1919, 10)

The posters were reproduced in newspapers and magazines and placed on bulletin boards in public places like railway stations, libraries, stores, and factory entrances, even in clubs, banks and commercial establishments. Some inspired other media such as pamphlets, films, poetry, and music. Many were also sent abroad, in response to requests for guidance in promoting gardening efforts, thus globalizing the campaign's influence. This multifaceted dissemination strategy added an intricate layer to the NWGC's mission (Pack 1919, 1–10).

One of the most widespread and, therefore, most famous DPP posters issued by the NWGC was the one known as "Can the Kaiser". Its purpose was to motivate the country's gardeners to preserve vegetables for future use. It was created in 1918 by the Belgian-American artist Jozef Paul Verrees, who was recruited that year by the DPP (Vogt 2000, 41). He was injured in one of the earlier battles of the war while fighting for his country, and could no longer serve in the military. He moved to the US in 1915 to continue his profession and received recognition by the US authorities in 1917, when he created a propaganda poster for the US Air Force titled "Join the Air Service and serve in France", yet "Can the Kaiser" remains among his best-known creations (Figure 1).

[11] In just a few months, the contribution of women to the American war effort became not only appreciated, but indispensable. For an in-depth analysis of the women's mobilization for war, see Jensen (2014); for more on the role of women in war propaganda as a literary theme, see Kusovac, Mohar and Gadpaille (2021, 34).

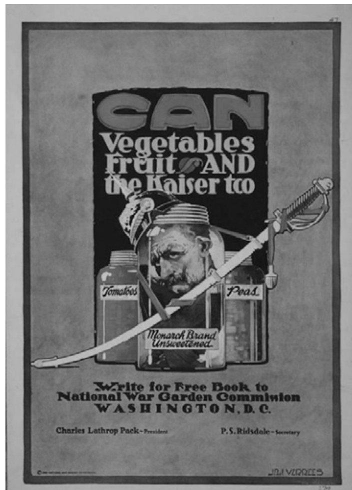

Figure 1. Poster "Can vegetables, fruit, and the Kaiser too" (Verrees 1918).

The artist created a visual metaphor[12] thematically linked to the concept of food preservation but also hinting at the war's outcome: the Kaiser will be canned. The emperor is visually squeezed into a jar, which seems to be the reason for his irate facial expression. The imperial finery looks casual, while it is really quite meticulously positioned so that it adds to the main metaphor: the sabre, diagonally hung across the jar and ceremonially wrapped in the red ribbon, suggests ceremonial inactivity but at the same time – resembling a quick pencil stroke across the paper – cancels the Kaiser from European politics. Strategically positioned right under his throat, the blade also becomes a deadly weapon beheading him and consequently the enemy monarchy. Similarly, the helmet is carelessly placed on the jar lid to communicate a retirement from battle, even capitulation. Moreover, as a distant interpretation, the diagonally positioned helmet spike introduces a unicorn motif, suggesting that the Kaiser is an extinct species. Another visual metaphor additionally degrading the Kaiser and extending the canning metaphor is the lid of the jar, which resembles a horizontally striped prisoner's hat, placing the Kaiser not only in a jar but in prison. The reflection of light on the jar falls in the middle of his forehead as if he were somehow labelled, the implication of which is negative.

The foregrounded jar with the Kaiser carries the label "Monarch Brand / Unsweetened". In the background, there are two more jars of canned goods, tomatoes and peas. The colour symbolism of red tomatoes denotes blood and war, creating a clear contrast with the *peas* jar on the other side of the Kaiser, which is homophonous with *peace*, the latter being on the horizon now that the enemy has been neutralized. At the same time, red and green are complementary colours in the colour spectrum, so the war vs. peace contrast is supported by colour symbolism.

The rendering of *CAN* in capital letters highlights both connotations of this play on words: apart from *can* as in "conserving food in jars", there is also the reading of *can* as a modal

[12] For an in-depth case study of visualized rhetorical figures in a graphic novel, see Onič (2014, 186–96).

verb, suggesting that all that the poster promotes CAN be done or achieved: food can be preserved, war gardens can be kept, and the war can be won. For today's audience of scholars and enthusiasts interested in this period of American history, there is also an echo of a more contemporary American reference to Barack Obama's slogan of his 2008 Presidential Election campaign ("Yes, we can!"). This direct expression of ability also applies to American women, suggesting that the weakest (or, at least, the weaker) members of society can defeat the Kaiser, and even women can help win this war. The poster even promises, although distantly, that if the women win this war, the men should be home soon.

Expanding on a quote from the English novelist D.H. Lawrence, Van Schaack brilliantly summarizes the importance of Verrees' poster art and that of other DPP artists who created US propaganda during World War I: for the generation that lived through the horrors of war, "all the great words were cancelled out", but the posters showed no sign of this disillusionment, and instead they brought the "great words" to life for millions of Americans, inspiring them to make sacrifices for the war effort. They were the words men believed in and were willing to die for – and their power still resonates across the gulf that separates the beginning of the last century from its end (Van Schaack 2006, 45).

4 Conclusion

The multi-layered analysis of Sinclair's poem "Canning the Kaiser" and Verrees' poster "Can the Kaiser" presented here showcases a fertile example of the propagandistic mobilization of the American population and the American military to shape public opinion in support of the war effort. The CPI successfully combined multiple media channels to create a convincing context, within which they could persuade the population to support the war. Sinclair transformed a popular wartime slogan, "Can the Kaiser", and rewrote an existing song into a catchy satire that achieved its aim by rallying American patriotism. Together with the use of a familiar tune, a plethora of foregrounded rhetorical schemes of repetition like anaphora, rhyme and refrain made it easy to memorize, and thus appeal to a broad audience. The effect is boosted by the predominantly patriotic themes and motifs as well as the first-person plural persona.

Having understood the differences between American and British interpretations of the phrase "can the Kaiser", the CPI cleverly adopted the British understanding, which is that of conserving and can metaphorically extend to defeating the Emperor. This idea was brilliantly visualized on Verrees' poster "Can the Kaiser", whose visual metaphor not only conveyed the concept of food preservation while hinting at the war's outcome but also did it in a humorous and jingoistic manner. This efficient synergy enabled the US government to link the pro-war campaign, which included propaganda against the German Empire, with the already successful NWGC mission of promoting war gardens and food conservation on the American home front. It also serves as a prime example of how the CPI visually constructed the enemy through food. A literary artist and a visual artist thus contributed to uniting the American population and encouraging active, wide-ranging participation in the war effort by conveying a joint message that victory in the war was achievable through food conservation and collective efforts.

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