



Tikrit University

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Subject: Wilfred Owen as A War Poet

Asst. Prof Rudaina Abdulrazzaq M. Saeed Ph.D

Rudaina63@tu.edu.iq

War Poetry

War has always inspired poetry. War poetry brings to life by telling us the private thoughts of men and women who have experienced conflict between nations. Many poets are influenced by the war and most of their poems are written in the English language about war. In total over 8.5 million men were killed during the "Great War". This in turn created new poets such as Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon, who wrote in protest of the war. One of the aims of these poets is that they write to create pictures into the mind of the reader of important images and issues they want to convey. These images in war are very important for the reason that they want the reader to understand the suffering they have witnessed and experienced.

The First World War or the Great War was one of the most effected events in human history in which millions of people were killed and injured. It brought dreadful effects and dangers to humanity. It changed the ideals of heroism or the idea of fighting because of the patriotic sense. Its horrors influenced the mind of every one. So the poetry of the First World War is the poetry which is written in response or as a result of the First World War. It is normal to think that poetry is the expression of an internal or external effect, and whenever the effect is greater, the degree of the expression is higher. Many poets wrote about the terrible effects of this war, but in different manners. The war poet, who lived during the war, depicts a negative response to war, writes about his personal experiences. He uses various techniques to bring the horrors of war near to the reader's mind. He does not only use "visual images" in his poetry to expose the war scenes, but makes the reader feel pity toward the fighters and victims of the war. War poetry is described as poems which concentrate on the subject of war or poems which are written during a war that seems to have a noticeable influence on the poet. It is battle poetry or front line poetry and it is mostly composed by young fighters.

The First World War caused great damages to humanity in general as its effects reached everywhere, and war poetry constitutes a great part of Owen's, Brooke's and Sassoon poetry. Those poets write about the First World War and they tackled it differently: Owen damns the atrocities of war due to his experiences in the battlefield. He accused the politicians, according to his opinion, who were the reason of the bloody armed struggles in the world. He convinced a message to those who thought that the war is merely a little of heroics and glory. He made them see the other evil side of the war. Rupert Brooke calls for joining the military forces. According to Brooke, war is an entrance to a new life. Owen's poetry is more realistic than Brooke's. Sassoon uses realistic poetic style for his war poetry. His poems are addressed to the readers directly. His main aim is to reemphasize the reality and horror of the Great War. At the beginning of the war, he was patriotic and a supporter of the Great War. When the war broke out, he himself was in the fronts as a soldier.

Characteristics of War Poetry:

1. War poetry speaks to man. It interprets and discusses his suffering during war.
2. War Poets express everything about the actual fighter, whether a soldier, or an airman.
3. They regard the process of meeting their death as a heroic action.
4. The theme of war is one of the effective themes which were tackled by most poets.
5. The poet's attitudes to war are expressed through the use of simple and beautiful words.
6. They employed their poetic talents to expose the futility of war and the selfishness of the politicians who insisted on its continuity.
7. Most of the poems speak about young soldiers who have recently died and arouse pity at their wasted life.

8. The sonnets are considered as poems of preparation for war.

Wilfred Owen

Owen was an English poet and soldier. He was considered by many to be the leading poet of the First World War. He wrote on the horrors of war in a shocking and realistic way. The ideas he manipulated in his poetry contrasted with the public perception and the confidently patriotic sense of previous war poets. His poetry made its impact as it puts the reader in a state that he realizes the brutality of war as he said, "my subject is war, and the pity of war, poetry is in the pity".

*His attitude towards the war is that war is false and needs to be stopped.

*Through various means, he condemns war and describes it as terrible.

*He uses figurative language, illustration, tonality and the idea of juxtaposition in order to convey the readers his messages concerning war.

*His point of view towards the atrocities of war is very expressive in addition to that his poems are recounts of his own experiences at war.

*His using different techniques throughout the narration of his poems such as similes and metaphors are perfect to the point that no one can comment on him.

*His view of war is that of hatred and disgrace, and the tone of his poems is depressing and miserable.

"Strange Meeting"

It is one of Wilfred Owen's most famous, and most enigmatic poems. It was published posthumously in 1919 in Edith Sitwell's anthology *Wheels: an Anthology of Verse* and a year later in Siegfried Sassoon's 1920 collection of Owen's poems. T.S. Eliot referred to "Strange Meeting" as a "technical achievement of great originality" and "one of the most moving pieces of

verse inspired by the war." That war, of course, is WWI – the central element in all poems in Owen's relatively small oeuvre.

The poem's description of a soldier's descent into Hell where he meets an enemy soldier he killed lends itself to a critique of war. The dead man talks about the horror of war and the inability for anyone but those involved grasping the essential truth of the experience. There is more than meets the eye, however, and many critics believe that the man in hell is the soldier's "Other", or his double.

A man's encounter with his double is a common trope in Romantic literature; the device was used by Shelley, Dickens, and Yeats, among others. The critic Dominic Hibbard notes the poem does not "[present] war as a merely internal, psychological conflict – but neither is it concerned with the immediate divisions suggested by 'German' and 'conscript' [initially what the dead man calls himself] or 'British' and 'volunteer'." The dead man is the "Other", but he is more than a reflection of the speaker - he is a soldier whose death renders his status as an enemy void. Another critic reads the poem as a dream vision, with the soldier descending into his mind and encountering his poetic self, the poem becoming a mythological and psychological journey. Finally, Elliot B. Gose, Jr. writes that "the Other...represents the narrator's unconscious, his primal self from which he has been alienated by war."

Wilfred Owen (1893- 1918): "Strange Meeting"

It seemed that out of the battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which Titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared

With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall;
With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
"Strange, friend," I said, "Here is no cause to mourn."
"None," said the other, "Save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something has been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress,
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery;

Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery;
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.
I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now . . .”

The title of the poem, however, may be taken directly from Shelley's work: "And one whose spear had pierced me, leaned beside, / With quivering lips and humid eyes; - and all / Seemed like some brothers on a journey wide / Gone forth, whom now strange meeting did befall / In a strange land." In *The Revolt of Islam*, Laon tells his soldiers not to avenge themselves on the enemy who has massacred their camp but to ask them to throw down their arms and embrace their shared humanity. The two sides gather together in the "strange meeting."

Wilfred Owen's —Strange Meeting‖ explores an extraordinary meeting between two enemy combatants in the midst of battle. Owen forgoes the familiar poetics of glory and honor associated with war and, instead, constructs a balance of graphic reality with compassion for the entrenched soldier.

In fact, the poetic appeal of the text comes from pity and sympathy for the work's characters rather than an inflated idea of the characters' heroism. Owen accomplishes this appeal through both narrative and device.

First, the narrative in the poem is built upon shared humanity, especially in the face of death, between the speaker and the stranger, evoking the reader's sympathies for the young men.

Second, consonance, semantic connotation, onomatopoeia, and tone subtly build an impression of the characters' piteous situation.

The author has left us his own fragmentary but impressive Foreword; this, and his Poems, can speak for him, backed by the authority of his experience as an infantry soldier, and sustained by nobility and originality of style. All that was strongest in Wilfred Owen survives in his poems; any superficial impressions of his personality, any records of his conversation, behavior, or appearance, would be irrelevant and unseemly. The curiosity which demands such morsels would be incapable of appreciating the richness of his work.

He never wrote his poems (as so many war-poets did) to make the effect of a personal gesture. He pitied others; he did not pity himself. In the last year of his life he attained a clear vision of what he needed to say, and these poems survive him as his true and splendid testament. A month before his death he wrote to his mother: "My nerves are in perfect order. I came out again in order to help these boys; directly, by leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly, by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can." Let his own words be his epitaph:—

"Courage was mine, and I had mystery;

Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery."

“Strange meeting”

The speaker escapes from battle and proceeds down a long tunnel through ancient granite formations. Along his way he hears the groan of sleepers, either dead or too full of thoughts to get up. As he looks at them one leaps up; the soldier has recognized him and moves his hands as if to bless him.

Because of the soldier's "dead smile" the speaker knows that he is in Hell. On the face of the "vision" the speaker sees a thousand fears, but the blood, guns, or moans of above did not reach into their subterranean retreat. The speaker tells the soldier that there is no reason to mourn, and he replies that there is – it is the "undone years" and "hopelessness".

The soldier says his hope is the same as the speaker's; he also tells him he once went hunting for beauty in the world, but that beauty made a mockery of time. He knows the truth of what he did, which is "the pity of war, the pity war distilled", but now he can never share it. The soldier/vision continues, saying men will go on with what is left to them, or they will die as well. They will not break their ranks even though "nations trek from progress". He used to have courage and wisdom. He would wash the blood from the wheels of chariots. He wanted to pour his spirit out, but not in war.

Finally, he says to the speaker that "I am the enemy you killed, my friend," and that he knew him in the dark. It was yesterday that the speaker "jabbed and killed" him, and now it is time to sleep.

Themes in relation with “strange meeting”

The loss of innocence

Owen, a young soldier himself, was very aware of the naïveté evinced by many of the soldiers who enlisted. They were not prepared for what they would experience and hardly knew how to grapple with the carnage and absurdity of war. These boys were turned into men far earlier than they should have been. Several of Owen's poems allude to the loss of innocence

that is a concomitant of war. The soldiers enlist for superficial reasons and dream only of glory; they fret about their lack of appeal to women once they've returned home missing a limb; they marvel over the sleekness of weapons and do not fathom their destructive power. Owen captures this tragedy of war - the march of old men sending young men off to kill and die.

Brotherhood and friendship

Several of Owen's poems depict the deep bonds of friendship and understanding that develop between soldiers. Shorn of their familial connections, these young men have only each other to rely on. This brotherly love is even more powerful than erotic love, Owen suggests. Roses and red lips and soft voices are no match for the coarse sounds and images of war, for those sounds are more authentic, constituting the brutal context in which soldiers develop camaraderie. Friendship is one of the few things these soldiers have to live for, and Owen ably conveys its significance.

The horrors of war

Owen does not shy away from depicting the horrors of war. He makes his reader confront the atrocities on the battlefield and the indignities of life back home. He presents readers with soldiers who have lost their limbs and been victims of poison gas; young men mourning their dead comrades; ghastly battlefield dreamscapes; a cacophony of sounds terrifying in their unceasing monotony; and Nature's wrath. He shows how the war affects the young men who fight both physically and psychologically. The men who survive become inured to brutality. There is little to no glory and heroism, just scared or desensitized young men fighting for a cause they do not quite understand.

Disillusionment with religion

Owen was certainly a Christian, but he expressed profound disillusionment with organized religion in his letters and poems. He disliked the close connection between church and state and how the church was complicit in stoking the fires of war. He saw the rituals of the church as being cold comfort to the boys on the battlefield or the people who loved them back at home. Churches and statues of saints lost their potency amidst the incomprehensible atrocities of war. Owen was not advocating atheism at all, but he knew that faith had to be more personal and authentic than that dictated by the church fathers who were also involved in war machinations.