

Representation of War in Wilfred Owen's Poetry

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Abstract

Wilfred Owen is the greatest writer of war poetry in the English language. He wrote out of his intense personal experience as a soldier and wrote with unrivalled power of the physical, moral and psychological trauma of the First World War. He started writing poetry from the very young age. He was very much impressed by the Romantic poets John Keats and P.B Shelley and they influenced much of his early writing and poetry. After knowing the harsh reality of war he was in great shock. He was angry with himself and the war makers for selfishly using millions of people for their own benefit Wilfred Owen was known for in his style of poetry was his ability to convey clearly his complex messages about war so that a person without any prior knowledge of war could understand. Owen's use of details of war in his poetry shows scenes that are horrific and memorable. His poems were often overdramatized with the horror of battle yet it was highly thought provoking. His use of speech and present tense gives his poems direction as well as a sense of urgency. Moreover, it is these techniques that help to underline the message of his poems. In his poems Wilfred Owen expresses of anger and bitterness especially but also sarcasm and sadness. Wilfred Owen expresses his feelings of anger, bitterness and sadness towards the war, in his poetry. Poetry became a way for him to express his own real thoughts about the war, his way to express the feeling of that horrible horror that was occurring around him. His poetry served as means to expose the lies behind the government's propaganda, which they used to feed young men for their own benefit so that they could take part in war by becoming soldiers. As he personally experienced the truth and the harsh realities of war, all this became his strength in writing poetry. This is why Owen wrote his poetry. Owen deals with the realities of war. He deals with sad aspect of war, before and after. All his poems describe that pain, anger and frustration which resides in his heart. He had pity for millions of civilians and soldiers who all had died and were yet to die because of this war. There was nothing heroic, glamorous or patriotic in dying for the war. He wanted to put an end to the war. Under Sassoon's influence, the romantic poetry Owen had been writing since his boyhood in imitation of John Keats and Shelley was transformed. His poems now were vivid with flesh and blood detail, and peppered with explosive fragments of direct speech. Sassoon was the one who showed Owen how to channel his nightmarish battlefield flashbacks into his poetry. Overall Wilfred Owen is one of the greatest poets of World War One and Owen's poetry is quite distinctive, and he is by many, considered a greater poet than any one else.

INTRODUCTION

Wilfred Edward Salter Owen (1893-1918) is regarded by historians as the leading poet of the First World War. He was an English poet and soldier. He was known for his shocking,

realistic war poetry on the horrors of trenches and gas warfare. From the very young age, he started writing poetry. He was very much impressed by the Romantic poets John Keats and P. B. Shelley and they influenced much of his early writing and poetry. His great friend, the poet Siegfried Sassoon, later had a profound effect on Owen's poetic voice.

Influenced by the propaganda, Owen badly wanted to serve his country by participating in war but within few weeks, all his dreams, with those ideal images of war were shattered. He confronted the bitter truth, the harsh reality of war as a soldier; he himself was experiencing numerous gas attacks. He was horrified by the truth, in front of him there were lakhs of rotting dead bodies of his fellow soldiers, his sentry was blinded. All that was a great shock of his life. He was angry with himself and the war makers for selfishly using millions of people for their own benefits. He knew that there was no hope left any longer for the people of England. All they could do, during that unimaginable time of destruction, was either to live miserably or die.

Owen was diagnosed as suffering from shell shock and sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh for treatment. It was while recuperating at Craiglockhart that he met fellow poet Siegfried Sassoon, an encounter that was to transform Owen's life. He was the one who showed Owen how to channel his nightmarish battlefield flashbacks into his poetry. He was the one who introduced him to well-known literary figures such as Robert Graves and H. G. Wells. It was at this time Owen wrote many of his most important poems including "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and "Dulce Et Decorum Est."

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Due to extreme frustration at his inability to do anything for his people and country and to escape himself from this traumatic situation of war, he drew attention to poetry. Poetry became a way for him to express his own real thoughts about the war, his way to express the feeling of that horrible horror that was occurring around him. His poetry served as means to expose the lies behind the government's propaganda which they used to feed young men for their own benefit so that they could take part in war by becoming soldiers. As he personally experienced the truth and the harsh realities of war, all this became his strength in writing poetry. Many of his poems express direct anger towards Generals and all those who encouraged war. Although he could have avoided a return to the front, Owen felt a pressing duty to record the experiences of his comrades. His poems expressed his own experiences and feelings of horror of war. He expresses the pity for the young soldiers who are attracted by the those fake posters and propagandas. His aim was to make people realize the truth and harsh realities of war.

During the First World War various types of poisonous gases were used e.g. mustard, suffocating gases, chlorine, acid and tear gases, poisonous gases etc. The effects of these gases were horrible and they did unimaginable damage to the effected internally and externally. The horror of gas attacks and the firing were also the part of Owen's poetry. He depicts this effect of gas attack in his very famous poem "Dulce Et Decorum Est". In this poem, Owen describes the absolute pity of war and he tries to convince his people of war's futility. "Dulce Et Decorum Est" is a direct attack at the people in Britain who had been taken in by the propaganda drive. It opposes the lie of the propaganda by telling them the truth of what life is really like at the front and in what conditions their sons, fathers, brothers etc. are. He attacks the people at home who uphold the continuance of

the war, unaware of its bitter reality. He wishes they could experience "smothering dreams" which he then goes on to describe in great detail. "Dulceet Decorum Est" expresses feelings of anger and bitterness at the horrible picture of the soldiers suffering in the war. Owen's experiences with religion also heavily influenced his poetry, notably in poems such as "Anthem for Doomed Youth", in which the ceremony of a funeral is re-enacted not in a church, but on the battlefield itself. In this poem, Owen says that there is no glory or pride or honor in death. This poem is an anthem, a solemn song to commemorate the 'children' who will die in the War.

Wilfred Owen addresses his readers from different stances from his own life addressing the reader personally. This method is very effective in evoking feelings from great anger and bitterness to terrible sadness and even sarcasm, making the reader sometimes even feel guilty. Whichever way he chooses to portray the pity of war the end result is always the same.

In his another poem, 'Disabled', he describes the life of a once perfectly normal, happy boy. He uses colloquial language to show this, "It was after football, when he'd drunk a peg". Throughout the poem, the man's past and present are compared and contrasted. There is a great use of leitmotif. Wilfred Owen uses bright colors to describe the man's past, "When glow lamps budded in light blue trees" to die. He was just as any other boy of his age; he wanted to please girls. He uses the color grey to describe the man's present being "And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey". The word "ghastly" could mean that the man is like a ghost, no one notices him. This poor man is still only a young man, who used to lead a very normal life. The use of enjambment gives the effect that the man is dreaming. It then goes on to say "all of them touch him like some queer disease" at which point he ends the stanza in order to make the reader stop and realize how horrible his reality is compared to his past. The man did not want to receive fruits. He wanted girls. This poem shows the pity of the war by comparing and contrasting life before the war, and life after the war. It shows how a life of a simple boy could change just due to war. He focuses on the happy life of the man before the war, but at the end of them, the focus changes to his horrible present, at which point the stanza changes quickly. In his poems Owen's predominant emotions are those of anger and bitterness but sarcasm and sadness is also clearly visible. The poem, "Disabled" is also like "Dulceet Decorum Est" and "Anthem for Doomed Youth" because it attacks the generals of the war.

Owen deals with the realities of war. He deals with sad aspect of war, before and after. All his poems describe that pain, anger and frustration which resides in his heart. He had pity for millions of civilians and soldiers who all had died and were yet to die because of this war. There was nothing heroic, glamorous or patriotic in dying for the war which was shown by few poets like Rupert Brooke and Jessie Pope. Some of his poems are also complicated and most devastating ones for example, "Arms and the boy" and "Greater Love".

One of the many talents Wilfred Owen was known for in his style of poetry was his ability to convey clearly his complex messages about war so that a person without any prior knowledge of war could understand. Owen's use of details of war in his poetry shows scenes that are horrific and memorable. His poems were often overdramatized with the horror of battle yet it was highly thought provoking. His use of speech and present tense gives his poems direction as well as a sense of urgency. Moreover, it is these techniques that help to underline the message of his poems. Another poem, "Send-

off" is another depressive anti war poem. "Insensibility" is one of longest poems of Owen. It was written around April 1918. It depicts the psychological mechanism that soldiers utilize to stomach their horrific situation. According to Owen, the soldiers are merely just the "gaps for filing" and the numbers that make up the losses. No one really cares about them. Sassoon also contributed to Owen's popularity by his strong promotion of his poetry, both before and after Owen's death, and his editing was instrumental in the making of Owen as a poet. Owen's style of writing is best known for his use of half-rhyme which gives his poetry a dissonant and provoking quality that enhances the impact of the recurrent themes of his poetry.

Furthermore, his ability to give a poem a quiet tone comes from his use of assonance and different sounds prevalent to war. For example, in his poems it was as the speaker was whispering his message to the audience. Therefore, because of this ability he does not use physically horrific imagery but mentally tormenting ideas to support his writing. In the preface to the collection that Owen was sketching out before his death, he wrote the following words:

"This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.

Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honor, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War.

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity."¹

In short, it can easily be concluded that Wilfred Owen is one of the greatest poets' of First World War. He expresses his feelings of anger, bitterness and sadness towards the war in his poetry. In each of the poems he attacks someone, whether it be the people at home, taken in by the propaganda machine, or the government who has the power to stop the war, but doesn't.

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