

## WAR AND WORRIES IN THE SELECTED WAR POEMS OF WILFRED OWEN

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### Abstract

*This research paper explores the themes in Wilfred Owen's selected war poems. The major theme of Owen's war poetry is the pity of war but there are certain sub themes like loss of innocence, brotherhood, horrors of trenches and gas warfare, Christianity, and irrationality of war which present a horrible picture of war in front of us. He reacts to the war by turning conventional poetic technique into something that is beyond imagination but in reality is ruined and tainted. His verse reflects his love for nature and intense anti-war sentiment, amalgamated with his Christian legacy. His war poems illustrate the realization of the disconnection between the views of war at home and the callous and ghastly realities of the battlefield. His poetry depicts both physical and mental distortion. This study provides a deep insight to the reader to visualize the atrocious effects of war from the perspectives of Wilfred Owen's war poems.*

**Keywords:** *Wilfred Owen, The pity of war, loss of innocence, brotherhood, horrors of trenches and gas warfare, irrationality of war.*

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**T**he word 'War' itself brings a picture full of bloodshed and horror in front of us, it creates an image which is very horrifying and disheartening. War can be understood as:

An organized and often prolonged conflict that is carried out by states or non-state actors. It is generally characterized by extreme violence, social disruption and economic destruction. War should be understood as an actual, intentional and widespread armed conflict between political communities, and therefore is defined as a form of political violence or intervention. (Keegan 177)

The world has witnessed two Great Wars till now, World War I & II. The political, territorial, and economic conflicts among the great European powers were some of the underlying causes that led to World War I, which began in the Balkans in late July 1914. Other prominent causes were militarism, a complex web of alliances, imperialism, and nationalism. The immediate origins of the war, however, lay in the decisions taken by statesmen and generals during the July Crisis of 1914 caused by the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie by Gavrilo Princip, an ethnic Serb and Yugoslav nationalist from the group Young Bosnia, which was supported by the Black Hand, a nationalist organization in Serbia.

Among the main long-term causes of World War II were Italian fascism in the 1920s, Japanese militarism and invasions of China in the 1930s, and especially the political takeover in 1933 of Germany by Hitler and his Nazi Party and its aggressive foreign policy. The immediate cause was Britain and France declaring war on Germany after it invaded Poland in September 1939. After World War I, disappointed Italy defeated Germany and ambitious Japan were anxious to regain or extend their power. The aggression of these powers was one of the major

causes of the Second Great War. The Great War I and II caused a great disaster in the whole world. Many people lost their lives, their families and their homes during the war.

At the time, when the world was witnessing the worst crisis and the people were becoming the victims of the traumatic conditions, how could the litterateurs of the period keep themselves aloof from the distressed happenings. A strong urge to voice the dilemma, conflicts, humiliations, and sufferings was being felt and the result was the emergence of host of writers giving voice to their experiences through their writings. Prominent among the War poets were Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), Ivor Gurney (1890-1937), Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918), Rupert Brooke (1887-1915) and Edmund Blunden (1896-1974). The anxiety, depression, dilemma, trauma, image of suffering people, horrors of war, mental state of a soldier and his family all these heart rending experiences have been sensitively captured by the bards of the times and the sad music of humanity still lingers in their lyrics.

The First World War had been “one of the seminal moments of the twentieth century in which literate soldiers, plunged into inhumane conditions, reacted to their surroundings in poems” (Seminar Introduction). The war poems created during this period are replete with images which narrate the tale of not only those who participated in the war and became victims but also of millions of those wailing and suffering who left behind as sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, and homeless children. The war poems became an effective medium for the war poets to voice the upsurge of strong feelings and emotions. Being stimulated and moved to the core after reading the poems of the great war poets, I decided to take the selected poems of Wilfred Owen who was a talented young man with a gift for poetry and like Brooke and several others belongs to the lost generation of World War I.

For making an analysis I have referred to these three most sensitive poems of Wilfred Owen - *Arms and the Boy*, *Dulce Et Decorum Est*, and *Strange Meeting*, for they arouse the conglomeration of all the rasas i.e. Bibhatsa, Bhayanaka, Vira and Karuna. Owen said, “My subject is war, and the pity of war. The poetry is in the pity.”(Ward 18) We can find several themes in the poems of Owen which present a horrible picture of war. His major theme was the pity of war and under pity he described sub themes like the loss of innocence, brotherhood and friendship; the horrors of war, disillusionment with religion, nature, the irrationality of war, emotion and feeling, etc.

Owen wrote out of his personal experiences as a soldier. We can find, in his writings, an incomparable power of the physical, moral and psychological trauma of the First World War. From the age of nineteen Owen had a keen interest in poetry and wanted to become a poet. He was very much influenced by the writings of Keats and Shelley. His reputation of a Great War poet rests on all of his poems written merely in fifteen months. While he was working in France as a private tutor, the First World War broke out. He was unconcerned with the war and felt completely untouched. Even after visiting the local hospital with his doctor friend, the nature of the wounds of soldiers coming from the Western front of the war appeared to him as someone else's story. But after reading the *The Daily Mail*, sent by his mother, he began to feel guilty of his inactivity and as a result he joined the war as a soldier at the age of 22 in 1915. Within a few days he was experiencing gas attacks and was horrified by the stench of the rotting dead; his sentry was blinded, his company then slept out in deep snow and intense frost till the end of January. That month was a profound shock for him because he now understood the meaning of war.

World War I was a terrible conflict. New terrible killing methods (gas and machine guns chief among them) had been developed by the time of the war's outbreak in 1914. Nearly 10 million soldiers died, another 20 million were wounded, and still another 7 or 8 million went missing altogether. Owen himself experienced two harrowing brushes with death: at one point, he was blown into the air by an artillery fragment and landed in a pile of human remains. At another point, he got trapped in an old German trench. These events so scared him that he was given medical leave for shell shock.

During his medical leave Owen met the famous poet Siegfried Sassoon, which was a kind of a big deal. Under Sassoon's influence, Owen's poetry took a turn for the dark and the bleak, and as the war went on, things only got darker. Sometime between 1916 and 1918, when Owen was killed (just one week before the end of the war), he wrote *Arms and the Boy*.

Owen, as a young soldier, was very much aware of the lack of experience showed by many of the soldiers who were enlisted. They were not prepared for what they were going to experience and hardly knew how to grapple with the massacre and absurdity of war. Owen captures this tragedy of war in his poem *Arms and the Boy*. Written in heroic couplets and half

rhyme scheme, the poem adverts to the loss of innocence that accompanies war. It arouses an emotion of pity for the young and innocent soldiers who have been turned into men far earlier than they should have been. They enlist in war for superficial reasons and dream only of glory; they are worried about their lack of appeal to women that if they returned home missing a limb; they wonder about the smooth weapons and do not brace their destructive power. In this poem Owen shows how the innocence of the boys is lost and they have entered a shallow world which won't give them anything but self-destruction.

Owen's constant letters to his mother detailed the horrors that he witnessed, but his poetry captures the spirit of the war in its irrationality and brutality. Most of his famous works were written during the summer of 1917 when he was convalescing from shellshock at Craiglockhart Hospital. In the last few years of the war, Owen was exposed to the work of his fellow war poets as well as the great poems of Yeats and Houseman. The poems from this fertile period include, notably, "Anthem for Doomed Youth", "Dulce et Decorum est", "Strange Meeting", "Disabled", and "Futility".

In his most famous poem "*Dulce Et Decorum Est*" he makes his reader confront the violence on the battleground and the indignities of life back home. Through this poem Owen reacts to a horrible war and the lie being told about war. He presents the soldiers who have lost their limbs and been victims of poison gas; young men mourning their dead comrades; terrible battlefield dreamscapes; a disharmony of sounds horrifying in their perpetual monotony; and Nature's fury. 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:

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,  
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,  
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
 Of gas-shells dropping softly behind....(Ward 21)

The style of "*Dulce et Decorum est*" is similar to the poetic form of French ballad. Each of the stanzas has a traditional rhyming scheme; they use two quatrains of rhymed iambic



pentameter with several spondaic substitutions which give the poem a reading pace that of which is closest to casual talking speed, clarity and volume. The poem is in two parts, each of 14 lines. The first part of the poem consists of two stanzas of 8 lines and 6 lines each; it is written in the present tense as the action happens and everyone is reacting to the events around them. In second part, we find first stanza of only 02 lines and the last stanza of 12 lines. Owen writes as though he is at a distance from the horror: he refers to what is happening twice as if in a "dream", as though standing back watching the events or even recalling them. The second part looks back to draw a lesson from what happened at the start. This powerful haunting poem has a deep and profound impact on readers of all ages and generations. The truth it speaks is that painful and inglorious war brings brutality and death only.

World War I was one of the bloodiest and most gruesome wars ever, and Owen wasn't spared. He shot and killed enemy soldiers, and was shot at himself. Owen didn't write a ton of poetry. He wrote most of his poems over a span of a year, and many of them were about the war, because there was nothing else to be written about.

Owen' childhood and wartime nightmares together form the source of the best known poem of Owen, *Strange Meeting*. Like his other poems it deals with the atrocities and futility of World War I. Owen fought in the war and became horrified by the somber realities of war. Owen wrote this poem in 1918 and it was published in 1919 after his death. The poem is narrated by a soldier who goes to the underworld to escape the hell of the battlefield and there he meets the enemy soldier he killed the day before. This poem has been described as one of Owen's "most haunting and complex war poems". The title of the poem seems to be taken from Shelley's "The revolt of Islam". As a war poem written in the context of the First World War, the theme is very unusual. Sassoon called this poem "Owen's passport to immortality". On the poet's memorial in the grounds of Shrewsbury Abbey is written, "*I am the enemy, you killed my friend.*" (Ward 19)

The poem opens with speaker, escaping from battle and proceeding 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. Owen calls this soldier "Strange friend". The conversation with this man forms the rest of the poem.

The whole poem is written in pararhyming couplets, [Pararhyme](#) or double consonance is a particular feature of the poetry of Wilfred Owen and also occurs throughout *Strange Meeting*. For example: "And by his smile I knew that sullen hall, / by his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell." Being a war poem, it tries to communicate the horror, confusion and agony that the war creates.

Wilfred Owen is the greatest writer of war poetry in the English language. All of his great war poems on which his reputation rests was written in a mere fifteen months. He returned to the front line on October 1, 1918, and led the Second Manchester. While he was trying to cross a canal, he was shot in the head and died. World War I ended one week later. He was later awarded the Military Cross, which for him validated him as a war poet.

The famous war poets like Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Ivor Gurney, Robert Graves, etc have expressed their emotions in the poems of the period. Owen can be considered a master of poetic devices; he used pararhyme, half rhyme, alliteration, onomatopoeia, and assonance often to fully involve his reader in the tone of his poem. Reading the war poems of Owen makes us recognize the worries of the poets who have written such poems full of pity and horror. Going through them can stimulate the young minds and draw their attention to the tragic waste the wars have produced in all these years. Reading about the horrors of the war and the resultant aftermath make us realize the importance and value of peace and solidarity.

The future of the nation lies in our hands, the youth of today. It is high time to be concerned and worried about the happening event and the state of affairs around us which might lead, all of us, once again to another Great War and this time most probably a nuclear one. The issues are serious and sensitive at the same time, hence an effort is made by the way of this research paper, "War and Worries in the Selected Poems of Wilfred Owen" to promote peace and to curb the growing intolerance among the nations of the world which would only lead us to disaster and destruction. An analysis and understanding of the poems of Wilfred Owen with this perspective in mind would not only facilitate a better understanding of them but also send a

message to the humanity at large to promote peace and solidarity instead of bloodshed and violence especially at a time when the world is moving towards the Third World War.

The World War I and II have already caused so much destruction that even the very thought of war is horrifying and a nerve wrecking experience. Only if the humanity at large understands the value or price of love, can the weapons of war be blunted or rusted and the earth could be turned into the most desirable place to spend one's life on.

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