

THE THEME OF NATIONALISM IN THE SELECT POETRY OF WILFRED OWEN

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Abstract

The present study examines Wilfred Owen's select poetry in the light of nationalism. He composed several poems in his free time during the First World War directly addressing the nation. These verses deal with the theme of patriotism in other words nationalism. The paper provides thematic discourse on the poems like "1914," "Dulce Et Decorum Est," "Anthem for Doomed Youth," and "A Terre." Initially, they are memorable for the depiction of the English soldier's high valour, morals, enthusiasm, and sacrifice to protect the motherland. It communicates the love for the nation. There is a fine mingling of courage, determination, and brotherhood. He expresses the soldier's duty, devotion, and dedication to the nation. Intermittently, it throws light on the homesickness of the soldier and their indomitable spirit for fighting and living in the deadliest conditions of the trenches. However, Owen never glorified war or heroism. He composed modern verses depicting British soldiers' agony, grief, suffering, and the never-ending pain they have undergone for a national purpose. He severely attacks war generals and non-combatants who promoted the war but never dithered from the battlefield till the last breath. The main objective of the study is to analyze the war poems by Owen to achieve a critical estimation at the end as well as to bring out his message on the forefront. Through this study, an attempt has been made to show Owen's love for the motherland, infantrymen, and loyalty to the nation.

Keywords: Courage, Nationalism, Patriotism, Sacrifice, War, homeland.

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Introduction:

Wilfred Owen is perhaps the most gifted soldier-poet in England. He was born in a middle-class family in Oswestry, Shropshire in the UK. Earlier, he studied at Birkenhead Institute and later joined Shrewsbury Technical College. He was brought up in an evangelical manner and showed profound faith in religion and Bible. He was a committed Christian and became assistant to the vicar of Dunsden. The historic turmoil First World War changed his life forever. At the war declaration, Owen worked in France as a language tutor. He felt depressed and pressured by seeing war propaganda. The newspapers and churches were urging all fit young men to become soldiers, to go and fight the Germans. (Roberts) Eventually, Owen returned to England and at the age of 22 years old, he joined the British Army with vigour and vitality in October 1915 to show exemplary courage.

Traditional war poetry flourishes rapidly at the outbreak of WWI. The traditional poets worshipped the glorification of war, death, sacrifice for a great cause, love for the nation, duty, freedom and liberty through verses. Among them writes Argha Banerjee in a book entitled *Poetry of the First World War*, 'The patriotic verse of Alfred Austin, William Watson, Rudyard Kipling, Henry Newbolt, and A. E. Houseman served as role models for poetic experiments during the period of the outbreak of the war.' (Banerjee 3) The poets like Rupert Brooke, Julian Grenfell, Charles Hamilton Sorley, and Robert Nicholas produces bombastic poetry. They used old diction and popular rhetoric to convey the theme. However, Wilfred Owen who actively participated and was wounded on the battlefield sees war differently. He witnessed a huge carnation and innumerable war casualties due to the use of modern weapons. He experienced death, agony, pain and shell-shocked a modern term used to describe the mental illness of a soldier. Therefore, his experiences sparked his imagination to capture the brutalities of the war.

Benedikte, the composer of *Owen: Selected Poems* provides Owen's initial reaction to the war as a conventional romantic patriotic poet. Later, he received the Military Cross for gallantry. He has displayed explicit love for the motherland. His deadly war experiences made him a contemplator of the war and its consequence. He was a more promising poet who condemned the war out of national concern. Due to the unprecedented loss of human beings in modern warfare, his earlier views were drastically changed. He could no longer continue the tradition of high valour or romantic death.

His poetry graphically illustrates the horrors of warfare, ruined landscapes, agony, and the unbearable pain brought by the war. His verses stand in stark contrast to the patriotic poems of the war written by earlier poets of Great Britain. Nevertheless, they are addressed to the nation. There is no scope for individual joy and care. England is at the centre. They arouse pity for the war victim. He marvellously incorporated various stances that nationalism has displayed. His poetry explores different aspects of nationalism like bravery, courage, sacrifice, duty, brotherhood, love for the nation, religion, and unity. However, the tone and the form are unconventional.

Research Methodology:

Close textual reading and analysis of the selected poems by Wilfred Owen have been taken into consideration to bring out the theme of nationalism. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the term "nationalism" as loyalty and devotion to a nation that has been kept in mind while analyzing the poems. ("Nationalism") He explored different traits of nationalism to expose the truth. He innovatively addressed national issues like the pathetic conditions of the soldiers, complete breakdown, disability, insensibility, human carnation and longevity of the war. He deliberately describes the new technology which causes massacres. The machine gun, heavy artillery, and its constant bombardment he painted so skillfully through verses. He has penned down infantrymen's dreams, their hallucinations, their continuation of march after several nights without sleep, their losing consciousness from loss of blood, or entering a hypnotic state from fear or excessive guilt. They survived under the perpetual fear of death. It can be argued, Owen's poetry flourished out of national feelings. It revolves around the nation. There is grief, fear, love, hate, anger, frustration everything for the national cause. There is no place for personal loss.

First World War poetry is a quite comprehensive term to study. There were several soldier poets who contributed heavily to the world's largest catastrophe and delineates a variety of themes. For practical purposes, the researcher has chosen to concentrate on the selected war poems by Wilfred Owen.

Owen's poetry comment on life in the trenches as well as on the battlefield. It gives voice to the unsung heroes of the Great War. It invokes loyalty, courage, compassion, humanity, duty, desire, and death to reshape and rebuild the nation. It tells the story of a glorious past. It illustrates something about what we are, and what we want to be, as a nation. (O'prey) Therefore, it has a special significance. For the sake of convenience, the researcher has bound himself only to the single war poet. It does not provide any comparative study of the war poets. The discussion part chiefly focuses on Wilfred Owen's establishment as a national poet of Britain.

Owen's early poem "1914" is a lovely sonnet composed in the manner of your country needs you. It unfolds Owen's romantic approach towards war, embracing the idea of martyrdom, as well as the purification of death. At the outbreak of the war entire nation was charged with the feeling of patriotism. Owen embodied the spirit of Rupert Brooke's *1914 War Sonnets* while composing the poem where dying on the battlefield is supposed to be the most glorious part of life. Dominic Hibberd, critic and Owen's biographer perfectly catches the mood of the period, 'Before experiencing the reality of the war, the early generation believed that they had been born to die in war. (Hibberd 56). In 1914, the expectations were so high, and many other poets wrote about the glorious attempt of fighting and dying in battle so as did Owen.

The idea of war, which calls for the sacrifice of children and the blood of soldiers, is implied by the word alone. The poem's opening line, "War broke," establishes the tenseness and tension of the gulf. Owen welcomes the war in a cheerful mood and affixes the basic element of nationalism which is the sacrifice for the nation.

Owen compares war with winter to highlight a deeper sense of the war in the octet. He states the war arrives as winter all over Europe and brings a bleak future. Germany is described as a 'tornado.' It means a violent storm with a very strong wind that blows in a circle. Directly he points out that Germany is at the centre of the crisis. Winter is the harbinger of pain, agony, and unhappiness, as the war. War brings not only physical destruction but also

mental as it is described in the seventh line / Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin /. (7) There is no scope for the incarnation of new thoughts, new theories, or new ideas. Death and devastation surpass humanity. The octet ends with another season, autumn, which represents humanity. Its tone is highly indicative and instructive.

However, the sestet introduces the remaining seasons, the spring and the summer. It throws light on the past and glorifies the Greek civilization.

For after Spring had bloomed in early Greece,
 And Summer blazed her glory out with Rome,
 An Autumn softly fell, a harvest home,
 A slow grand age, and rich with all increase.
 But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need
 Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed. (Owen "1914" 9-14)

After the glorification of the Roman Empire, Owen ultimately suggests that both the seasons, spring and summer are ended now. The civilizations emerged and flourished but now at the outbreak of war shine almost disappeared and it is endangered. The final couplet creates positive energy and claims the need for a new spring which can be obtained by sowing seeds of blood and sacrifice. He stresses the idea of rebirth. While looking at the overall sonnet, its subject matter, its theme etc., is a fine mingling of seasons with war and empire and nations' fate. It not only creates a sense of nationalism but also appeals to people to get reunited for the recreation of the nation.

Owen's "Dulce Et Decorum Est," is another widely acclaimed and most anthologized poem of the first World War. Originally the title has been taken from Horace's Ode 3.2. It is a Latin phrase, that means "It is sweet and meet to die for one's country. The title precisely conveys the theme of patriotism, sacrifice, and exemplary courage for one's country. Yet, the poem is not composed in a traditional or Romantic manner. Owen depicts the loss of innocent soldiers due to the gas attack and shook the glamorized world of civilians like Jessie Pope who promoted war through poetry. He condemns the war and criticizes war mongers who deliberately prolonged the war.

"Dulce Et Decorum Est," opens with an image of a broken, devastated, and dejected soldier who looks like an old beggar. The soldiers are described as 'Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, coughing like hags.' (1-2) They are exhausted and are in search of rest. Though they are lame, blind, disabled, and deaf, they continued their march towards their

destination. The second stanza describes a deadly gas attack where the first exclamation appeared to convey the central idea of the poem:

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! —An ecstasy of fumbling
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime. —
 Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

(Owen "Dulce et Decorum Est" 9-15)

Owen vividly describes a group of soldiers who were marching. The adjectives like fumbling, stumbling, and drowning, add meaning to its context and makes the poem visual. It seems like everything is happening in front of the readers' eyes. The words guttering, choking, drowning, writhing, hanging, and gargling allow Owen to highlight the gap between the reality and fantasy of war. Propagandists often turn back from the reality of war. They use high-pitched phrases to lure the youth of the nation to join the army. Therefore, Owen directly attacks these figures and appeals to them not to tell such lies with a high zest.

An 'anthem' is like a song or hymn, usually composed to praise the nation or it is sung by a choir during a church service. Yet, Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth" can be read as a great treatise on war sacrifice. It depicts not only the war casualties but also piles of dead soldiers. The title suggests that Owen composes an anthem for the doomed youth of the nation. On the one hand, he talks about soldiers, their duty, and honour for the nation but at the same time, he disapproves of the view presented by the war generals to expose the bitter truth of warfare. Owen argues ringing of church bells, prayers, and choirs are inadequate tributes to the realities of war and shows concern over growing nationalism in England. The poem starts with the rhetoric of what passing-bells for those who die as cattle. And put a question on butchery brought by modern mechanized warfare.

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
 — Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
 Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
 Can patter out their hasty orisons.
 No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
 Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
 The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
 And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

(Owen "Anthem for Doomed Youth" 1-8)

The words like guns and rifles are enough to show the massacre taking place on the battlefield. The soldiers have raised these weapons to protect the motherland. The octet throws light on Owen's mood, and anger to show the pathetic conditions of soldiers who have sacrificed for a great cause. Besides, he comments on the present situation against ceremonial sounds which are passing-bells which are almost denied for soldiers' funerals. The idyllic peace of the village is disturbed by the sounds of mockeries. The villagers listen to bugles which are blown up to awaken the youth of the nation. Owen never thought to blow Tennysonian bugle in his verse. Yet, as it is mentioned by James D. Brophy, in a research paper entitled, *The War Poetry of Wilfred Owen and Osbert Sitwell: An Instructive Contrast* argues, his "Anthem" did make its transition to a tender concluding sestet with "bugles calling...from sad shires." And most of his poems tend to support indirectly a qualified sense of heroism. (Brophy 25). Owen reproduces destruction in front of the reader's eye to comment on the wastefulness of war, especially unstoppable war casualties and broken young soldiers. It is an elegy written in memory of dead soldiers. He didn't attempt to glorify the war or paint these men as heroic or noble. Yet, managed to provide voices to the soldiers of the great war.

Owen's "A Terre," is a powerful satire on war and soldiers. The title "A Terre" is in French; literally, it means 'The Earth'. The poem has the subtitle 'Being the philosophy of many Soldiers.' It is enough to convey the patriotic feeling of every soldier for their beloved motherland. Partly, it throws light on the life of a dying soldier in the name of the country's honour. The poem begins with an orderly tone, 'Sit on the bed; I'm blind, and three parts shell'. (1) It seems that an officer who is wounded, blind and whose limbs are almost shattered is dying and discloses love for the nation. He showed heroic feelings as he experienced during the battle. Owen conveys the philosophy of every soldier in a bitter tone.

Soon an elderly officer lost in the past and reminisces the glorious past, the medals he has received for bravery, the glorious ribbons, an identity disc and many more things he possesses, cherishes happily. Abruptly, turns toward the current situation and puts a question the validity of his belongings as he is blind and tormented. However, the third stanza represents collective notions of patriotic feelings and the purpose of a soldier's life where Owen binds the theme.

A short life and a merry one, my buck!
 We used to say we'd hate to live dead-old,—

Yet now ... I'd willingly be puffy, bald,
 And patriotic. Buffers catch from boys
 At least the jokes hurled at them. I suppose
 Little I'd ever teach a son, but hitting,
 Shooting, war, hunting, all the arts of hurting.
 Well, that's what I learnt,—that, and making money.

(Owen "A Terre" 11-18)

Owen picks out an argument over the short but merry life. Besides, he looks back to when there was time as a young man, he used to hate the idea of old age and dying. The feeling of nationalism was at its peak as he was ready to be blown on the battlefield. It is a kind of nationalistic patriotism reflected in his mind. Apart from this, he confesses he would have taught his child the art of hitting, shooting, and hurting in the war. He is ready to hand over the skills he has acquired during service; except money-making which he does not learn.

Finally, Owen accepts the truth and the value of a soldier's life. Death is the goal and solution from all clutches of life. On the behalf of other soldiers, he deliberately expresses a wish to be a part of "A Terre" that is the earth.

'I shall be one with nature, herb, and stone,'
 Shelley would tell me. Shelley would be stunned:
 The dullest Tommy hugs that fancy now.

"Pushing up daisies," is their creed, you know. ("A Terre" 36-39)

In this way, death for the soldier becomes a Shelleyan absorption into nature. Very soon, he will be enriching the soil with his body. His body will turn into food for plants. It draws attention to the subtitle 'being a philosophy of the soldier'. The soldiers have profound faith and adorable love for the motherland. Even though death provides them with an opportunity to serve and grow like a herb with the help of the sun.

Conclusion: In this way, Owen brought horror to the canvas of the war shockingly and realistically. While doing so he manipulated the notions set by previous poets and presented the controversial public perception of war and the fidelity of dying on the battlefield. He set out to present the reality of the war boredom, hopelessness, futility, horror, and occasionally courage and sacrifice. Rarely did he speak of individual courage. He sows the seeds of humanity using figurative language and tonality. His point of view on the atrocities of war is very expressive since his poems are recounts his own experiences at war. He preciously uses poetic techniques like irony, rhetorical questions, sarcasm, and sometimes direct

denunciation to reveal his rejection of war. His first-hand experience in the trenches as a soldier had a critical role in developing his poetic talent.

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