
WILFRED OWEN: AN INTRODUCTION

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Wilfred Owen was an English soldier and poet of World War One whose work exercised a major influence on the poetry of the nineteen-thirties.

Born on 18 March 1893 in Shropshire, England, of a middle-class family, he began writing poetry at an early age. By the time he was eighteen, he was earning one pound a month, working with a vicar at Dunsden, Oxfordshire, as his assistant and for a while he seriously thought of going into Holy Orders. This was his first close contact with squalor, sickness and poverty, so typical of that particular area. This experience inspired him with a feeling of compassion which was to characterize some of his best 'war' poems.

In 1912, he went to University College, Reading, but after a short while his bad health necessitated his withdrawal from the cold wintry English climate, so he went to Bordeaux in France to work as tutor in English at the Berlitz School of Languages. In July 1914, he left his post to become private tutor to two boys in a Catholic family in Bordeaux. There he met Laurent Tailhade, French symbolist poet and pacifist, whose non-Christian ethical beliefs broadened Owen's own Anglican ideas. This fact could partly explain why during this time Owen suffered from a lapse in Christian faith — another trait which is evident in some of his poems. Tailhade was probably the only man of letters whose acquaintance Owen made before he met an even more influential poet — Siegfried Sassoon.

A year later, Owen returned to England and enlisted in the infantry. He was sent to France on active service until he was wounded and returned home in the early months of 1917. Between March and June 1917, he was sent to various hospitals. It was while he was at Craiglockart Military Hospital, near Edinburgh, that he met Sassoon, whose bitter anti-war poems were already well-known. Under Sassoon's guidance, Owen's poetic genius developed and improved rapidly. In August 1918, Owen returned to France for active service. Barely a month after he won the Military Cross, he was killed in action by machine-gun fire, on November 4th 1918 while trying to get his men across the Sombre Canal at Ors.

War was by far the greatest influence on his poetry. Instead of destroying his ideas for poetry, it enhanced his vision of life, providing him with a sense of realism and inspiring him with themes which he moulded into some of the best war poetry written in this century. This also explains why his war poetry far surpasses in beauty his earlier poetry.

His early ideas of poetry were influenced by the Romantic school of poet-

ry. Like young men of his own age, he had been taught to appreciate the value of poets such as Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Tennyson. He himself admits a certain affinity with John Keats. For example his phenomenal poetic development, his sense of achievement, his tragically premature death — all these bring to mind the career of Keats whose poetry Owen loved and whose influence is unmistakable in several of the poems written before August 1917. His 'early' themes are typically romantic ones — loneliness, isolation, beauty, love. Most of them are just conventional love lyrics, written in the style of his predecessors. Owen is by no means an 'intellectual poet' and, as his letters reveal, he prefers the emotional to the philosophical aspect of Romantic or Georgian poetry.

By far the most recurrent themes in his early poetry are loneliness and unrequited love. Most of these poems were written while he was at Dunsden and many of them were left unpublished. Even as late as 1916, his poetry betrays an affinity with Georgian poetry as far as structure, theme and diction are concerned. The sonnet "To Eros" written in May 1916 is one example. The theme deals with romanticised disillusionment but there are also hints of spiritual disillusionment and a rejection of Christianity, both of which are brought to the fore later on in his war poetry. The theme of isolation is best illustrated in "The Unreturning" written in July 1914, where imagery is less derivative. Owen, here rejects the conventional idea of heaven. He sees dawn as a hostile menace. The imagery suggests violence. Words such as "crushed" and "hurled" suggest Owen's more mature style. It is evident that Owen is moving further and further away from his previous models carefully choosing a source of imagery and diction that is more personal, less derivative. The word "ghost" evokes a sense of loneliness.

There watched I for the Dead; but no ghost woke.

This is Owen's way of conveying to the reader the idea of death and the irrevocable sense of loss that death brings with it. The same 'ghost' image is taken up in "Shadwell Stair" with the same purpose of evoking a sense of loneliness both in the opening line and in the last one:

I am the ghost of Shadwell Stair
I with another ghost am lain.

Both poems are minor and are certainly not representative of Owen's truly poetic style. It was after he personally experienced what fighting in the trenches really meant, what war was failing to accomplish and that it was eventually destroying everything in its wake that Owen's approach to poetry both in theme and mood changed drastically and incredibly swiftly.

The impact which war first made on Owen was one of embittered rage but its effect on him was not completely negative. War provided him with a sense of realism which had previously been lacking in earlier poems. The atrocities of war, the sheer waste of human lives, the after-effects of war —

both physical and psychological — were some of Owen's favourite themes.

War did not destroy Owen's idea of Beauty. On the contrary, it altered and widened it immeasurably. But "Beauty" as a theme is not often used in his war poetry. Owen's first-hand experience of war and death, his awareness of the great gap between the soldier risking his life for his country and the civilian safe at home and between the frontline soldier and the "brass-hat" was soon to find expression in some of the best poems he has ever written. The harsh and horrible realities of war are first expressed in such poems as "The Dead-Beat" and "Dulce et Decorum Est". His main aim in writing them was to instill loathing for the atrocities of war, to make people aware of what was really happening. In the latter poem, his attitude is rather negative and cynical but its shockingly realistic details are none the less effective in driving Owen's message home. His vivid portrayal of the physical pain that a gassed man has to endure could only be convincingly conveyed to the public by an eye-witness, namely the poet himself, and in this he definitely succeeded. This poem was written in August 1917 when Owen had been sent home as a casualty.

By this time he had met Sasson whose bitter anti-war ideas were no secret and whom Owen looked up to as his guide and mentor. And this first bitter taste of war in the trenches can adequately and reasonably explain Owen's different approach to poetry writing. There is no doubt that by now Owen had not only found his true poetic inspiration but a poetic style for himself and for future poets.

The imagery of "Dulce et Decorum Est" is just as effective and evocative as its diction. The under water imagery in the second stanza is particularly apt in describing the poor man who does not manage to put on his protective gas mask on time:

Dim through the misty panes and thick green light
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

The image of a man's agony by gas poisoning lingers on in the poet's mind and haunts him even in his dreams:

In all my dreams, before my helpless night,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

The sheer intensity of physical pain the soldier endured is illustrated through images such as "white eyes writhing in his face" and "froth-corrupted lungs". But what is even more striking is Owen's final moralising comment where he deliberately strikes at those people who encourage more young men to go to war, who, above all "tell with such high zest".....

the old Lie: Dulce et Decorum Est Pro Patria mori.

emphasising the word "Lie" by purposely writing it with a capital letter.

"The Dead Beat", another August 1917 poem, deals with a soldier whose mind and will have been broken by war — hence the psychological effects of war on the common soldier. Another important point is that in this poem we see Owen using for the first time a blunt, colloquial style. Like "Dulce", it was written at Craiglockhart Military Hospital after his first spell of soldiers' life in the trenches. The animal imagery used with reference to the injured soldier brings out the cruelty, the callousness, the degradation of human mankind — a theme he was to handle more expertly, more poetically in later poems. The casualty is compared to "a cod, heavy like meat". Even more pathetic is the doctor's reference to him as "scum". Through this line, Owen is striking at the 'brass-hats' and emphasising the cold and callous nature of some human beings with respect to others less fortunate than themselves. The poem owes much to Siegfried Sassoon as far as style is concerned. Owen himself admitted this, but it also marks the beginning of Owen's particular style which he was to experiment with and improve upon it in an incredibly short span of time.

So far, Owen's main aim in writing such poems was to inspire hatred for the atrocities and bestialities which the war brought in its wake by giving us vivid, even graphic descriptions of desolate landscapes and unrecognizable corpses both human and animal. Gradually, however, the protest against war became secondary to his intentions as it gave way to more positive sentiments such as pleading for the unfortunate and inarticulate soldier. In the more mature war poems, he is thus more conscious of the poet's three-fold role as participant, observer and spokesman. Negative emotions such as anger and indignation are eventually set aside for a kind of poetry which is more positive, more universal in its appeal to mankind.

One of the finest examples of Owen's mature poetry is 'Strange Meeting'. Like most of his poems, it is inspired by trench warfare, but unlike other war poems, the action does not take place in an ordinary battlefield but in the poet's own mind. The soldier he meets in the tunnel is neither a friend nor an enemy but an 'alter ego'. In the relative silence of the tunnel, the poet isolates himself from the noise of battle in order to assess the personal, artistic and historical implications of the battle that is going on in the outside world. As in other poems, he stresses the futility of war. He mourns "the undone years". He sees the disintegration of values:

Now men will go content with what we spoiled
Or discontent boil bloody and be spilled.

He foresees the retrogression of humanity: "nations trek from progress" — an accurate prophecy of the social and economic crisis as the immediate after-math of war. He mourns "the truth untold". He regrets the fact that he had no chance to use his courage, ability and wisdom to warn mankind and repair some of the damage the war has left behind. He stresses the sheer waste of human lives — lives that could have been of service to humanity:

For of my glee might many men have laughed,
 And of my weeping something had been left,
 Which must die now.

Imagery plays a crucial role in unravelling Owen's message to posterity. At time it can evoke pain: "groan", "moan", "spilled", "boil bloody". At other times the dominant mood is one of pity and compassion not only for the English soldier but for the universal soldier:

I mean the truth untold,
 The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

A few other images have a definitely Christian flavour:

Lifting distressful hands as if to bless

Some even biblical in origin: The line

I would go up and wash them from sweet wells

reminds us of one of Christ's parables. Perhaps even more obvious is the poignant line:

Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were

an image that successfully conveys the idea of mental torture while reminding us of a similar episode in the Gospel, that of Christ's agony in the garden.

Most critics agree that "Strange Meeting" is one of Owen's best poems thematically; it is described by Siegfried Sassoon as Owen's "passport to immortality and his elegy to the unknown soldier of all nations". Technically, it also has its merits. It is a superb example of the use of pararhyme, also known as half-rhyme or vowel dissonance. He is not an innovator in this particular field. In English poetry, three other poets had, before Owen, used pararhyme to some effect, namely Gerard Manley Hopkins, Henry Vaughan and Emily Dickinson. However, there is no proof that Owen was familiar with their texts. In Welsh poetry we find internal and end rhymes, alliteration and assonance used as early as the fourteenth century. This probably explains why more than once Owen had been hailed as a Welsh poet by the Welsh. Owen's most probable source, however, was French poetry. During his time as tutor in Bordeaux, he must have read Jules Romains' poems, possibly at the instigation of his poet friend Tailhade, who had a voracious interest in contemporary French poetry. Romains is today better known as novelist than poet but his poems, published before the First World War, must have reached Owen's attention.

Owen's experiment with pararyhme seems to have begun as early as 1914

but he handles it rather clumsily and it is not until three more years have elapsed that Owen uses it again, this time with more subtlety and success in "Exposure". Unlike the previous poem, Owen uses pararhyme not only at the end of a line but even within the same line such as "flakes" and "flock". By 1918, the year in which he wrote "Strange Meeting", he seems to have mastered the art of using pararhyme couplets all throughout and most effectively too. The constant jarring and discordant sounds of line-ending words such as "escaped/scooped" "moan/mourn" "groaned/groined" "hall/hell" are in keeping with the dominant note of hopelessness, melancholy and frustration so typical of this poem's theme and mood.

In his early experiments with pararhyme he evidently found it hard to master the art but gradually he improved it and in a surprisingly short time he taught himself to use it to his own advantage, to drive the message home more convincingly than if he had used, for instance, blank verse. Reviewing "Strange Meeting" in 1921 John Middleton Murray best describes the impact pararhyme has on the reader:

I believe that the reader who comes fresh to this poem does not immediately observe the assonant endings ... The reader looks again and discovers the technical secret ... These assonant endings are indeed the discovery of a genius ... You cannot imagine them used for any other purpose save Owen's or by any other hand save his. They are the very modulation of his voice; you are in the presence of that rare achievement, a true poetic style.

Owen's participation in the war was also partly responsible for a spiritual crisis which he, at times, hinted at in poems such as "Mental Cases" and "At a Calvary Near the Ancre". In one of his letters he described himself as "a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience", adding in the same letter that "pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism". This particular sense of guilt is illustrated in poems such as "Inspection" and "Mental Cases" where blood is the symbol of universal guilt. Occasionally he goes a step further and attacks Christianity directly, showing the inadequacy and remoteness of the Church in the face of evil such as war. The poem "Le Christianisme" betrays Owen's "very seared conscience", his sense of uneasiness over religious beliefs. In earlier poems such as "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and "Greater Love", Owen implied doubts concerning Christianity but in this poem, written in September 1918 and in "At a Calvary Near the Ancre" written in the same year, his doubts have settled into convictions. In the latter poem he accuses the clergy of betraying Christ:

In this war He too lost a limb.
But his disciples hide apart;
And now the Soldiers bear with Him.

He even strikes at journalists and politicians who fostered hatred and encouraged young men to go to war, thereby opposing the spirit of the martyred

Christ. To him, such people are "scribes" who "shove" and "brawl allegiance to the state" while the soldier is the modern figure of the crucified Christ:

But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life; they do not hate.

In these lines Owen is indebted to the Gospel where Christ teaches: "Greater love hath no man than, that a man lay down his life for a friend"; but Owen is also aware that the soldier who makes this great sacrifice may also be disobeying the fifth commandment: "Thou shalt not kill". Hence the dichotomy in Owen's soul so aptly illustrated in "Strange Meeting":

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 ...

This, therefore, is the image which Owen leaves to future generations that of a soldier-poet whose main concern is not, in Owen's own words "with Poetry":

My subject is War, and the pity of War
The Poetry is in the pity.

In writing war poetry he is confined to a historical and bitter reality well-known to himself as soldier and thus he can take no imaginative liberties with contemporary events. His theme is thus the reality of war and his immediate concern is to communicate that brutal reality to the millions at home who cannot visualize, hence appreciate, the magnitude of the experiences and sacrifices of the common soldier. His poetry is also concerned with portraying the prolonged prosecution of a war which has become particularly senseless to those who are fighting it. To make us aware of the soldiers' predicament, the poet occasionally gives us accounts of the nauseating experiences they had to endure, expressed in crude details of death and decomposition but the overall picture is one of pity and sympathy rather than hatred. Unlike other war poets, he does not confine himself to accidental, casual or personal experiences. Owen surpasses them by giving us as complete a picture of war as possible by depicting not only the physical background of war and its devastating effects on the poor soldier but by adding to it a sense of loss, the pathos of human suffering and above all a keen perception of tragic intensity, thus lending to it a touch of universality. In short, Owen's war poetry transcends the traditional role played by the 'poetry of protest' for it is above it as much as it is part of it.

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