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The impact of the First World War on the poetry of Wilfred Owen

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Abstract: *In 1914 the First World War broke out on a largely innocent world, a world that still associated warfare with glorious cavalry charges and the noble pursuit of heroic ideals. This was the world's first experience of modern mechanized warfare. As the months and years passed, each bringing increasing slaughter and misery, the soldiers became increasingly disillusioned. Many of the strongest protests made against the war were made through the medium of poetry by young men horrified by what they saw. They not only wrote about the physical pain of wounds and deaths, but also the mental pain that were consequences of war. One of these poets was Wilfred Owen. In his poetry we find the feelings of futility, horror, and dehumanization that he encountered in war.*

World War I broke out on a largely innocent world, a world that still associated warfare with glorious cavalry charges and noble pursuit of heroic ideals. People were wholly unprepared for the horrors of modern trench warfare, and the Great War wiped out virtually a whole generation of young men and shattered so many illusions and ideals. [1] No other war challenged existing conventions, morals, and ideals in the same way as World War I did. World War I saw the mechanization of weapons (heavy artillery, tanks), the use of poison gas, the long stalemate on the Western Front, and trench warfare, all of which resulted in the massive loss of human life. [2]

The four-year struggle (from 1914 to 1918) shook the world and seemed to mark the end of a whole phase of European civilization. [3] The horrors of the First World War marked the end of a phase of Western European liberal culture. Deep psychological wounds were caused in the minds of the survivors and a physical and metaphysical

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wasteland was created across Europe. This desolation was increasingly reflected in the poetry of these years. It became difficult to continue to believe in the heroic liberal values expressed in Brooke's "The Soldier". There is a clear sense that the previous century and its values are, in fact, a 'corpse outleant', to use Hardy's phrase. [4]

A handful of poets participated in the war, fought in the war, and some like Wilfred Owen, died in the war. The poetry of these "war poets", as they are later termed, shows a first-hand account of the brutality and the devastation of war in a world which still believed that war was heroic and proud. [5] They were most gifted to express the experience of those traumatic years and they wrote mainly in response to personal experiences. They "were involved on the front, however romantically they may have felt about the war when they first joined up, soon realized its full horror, and this realization affected both their imaginations and their poetic techniques. They had to find a way of expressing the terrible truths they had experienced, and even when they did not express them directly, the underlying knowledge affected the way they wrote." [6]

> The experience of the front line war poets was more overwhelming, more prolonged and more intense than for any previous generation of soldiers. … Men found themselves to be driven cogs in vast, insensitive, impersonal machines, stripped of will, morality, and dignity. They were victims of the grossest abuses by the countries which they served and so often loved. … most of the poets showed no grasp of power politics, the relentless pressure of arms industry economics and propaganda, no understanding of causes or cures for the war. They spoke simply as human beings caught up in bewildering and shocking events. As human beings they recorded their experiences and moral responses. They spoke of the problems of modern warfare conducted by "advanced" and "civilized" nations. [7]

Owen was not prepared to meet the condition in the trenches in France: muddy, cold, wet, rat-infested troughs stretching across the ugly landscape of the Western Front. The constant shelling and use of gas, the filth and squalor, men lying blown to pieces - all of these horrendous sights met Owen during the worst winter of the war.[8] Like most of his contemporaries in France, he rapidly became first disillusioned, then appalled at the horrors of war, and a patriotism which he perceived to be founded on false values. Brought up and practising as a devout Christian, he, like many of his generation, lost

his faith in the mud of Flanders.[9] While he was suffering from 'neurasthenia' or 'shell-shock', characterized by confusion, shaking, memory loss and horrendous nightmares, he was sent to Craiglockhaut War Hospital, near Edinburgh, and he met Captain Siegfried Sassoon, a famous war poet who was staying at the same hospital. This meeting seems to have been the real start of Owen's career as a mature and genuine poet. Being influenced by Sassoon, Owen resolved " to speak out against the war, in harsh, clear and unpleasant words, unsoftened by any poetic or patriotic euphemisms." [10] Owen had written verse before the war with Gray, Keats or Tennyson for models; but it was his admiring friendship for Mr. Sassoon that made him a war-poet. [11] His poetry underwent stylistic changes as he toughened and tightened his language under the pressure of traumatic front-line experience of war. "…his poetry has universality as it attempts to confront the reader about the experience of war. He is outraged by the senseless loss of life as well as the dehumanizing effects of war." [12]

After Wilfred Own was killed on 4 November, "among his papers a draft Preface was found for a future volume of poems. The most famous part of it is the following:

> 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, honour, 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 … all a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful.

The contrast with the sentiments expressed in Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" is very marked. When Owen says he is 'not concerned with Poetry', he means the kind of poetry associated with Brooke."[13]

> Owen's poetic antecedents and personal tastes were of the nineteenth century; he was in no sense a conscious innovator of the kind of T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound or even the Imagists; he was a 'bookish boy' rather than a literary intellectual, he was probably unaware of any crisis in poetry, quite possibly he had read neither the Jacobeans nor the metaphysicals. Simply, the war, a devastating non-literary event, forced him, as a poet and an honest man, to find another way of speaking. …The great compulsion in Owen's work, was to communicate reality, to convey the truth of modern warfare to those not directly engaged in it. For this was the first modern war, in respect of destructive

> power; at the same time it was (for the British people at least) the last of the old wars in which the civilian population were at a safe distance from the destruction. …the writers in the trenches felt it a duty, not simply to write poems or prose, but to write about the trenches. … If Brooke has played the war poet for those who are fascinated by the 'idea' of poetry (or indeed of war), Wilfred Owen is the war poet for those who desire the reality. [14]

Owen conveyed a realistic ideal, wrought with bitterness and irony. "While many of his colleagues were writing poetry filled with sarcasm and cynicism at the injustices of war, Owen wrote in a more permanent, meaningful way, depicting the futility of the fighting, the terrible conditions the soldiers had to contend with in the trenches, in a powerful, sometimes understated but always compassionate and disturbing fashion." [15]

Sickened by the cruelty and waste of war, Owen wrote some of the most powerful antiwar poems 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. All of his great war poems on which his reputation rests were written in the very short space between August 1917 and September 1918.

> Wilfred Owen wrote to tell the truth: the honest, vivid, horrific truth about modern warfare. … Owen wrote about the pity of war; however, the pity was not his pity - he did not write to console himself or to express his own emotions. …, he wrote of an universal pity, one that he felt the world should have felt about war.…As Owen saw it, the pity of war is the dehumanisation of man by war, the annihilation of human potentiality in war, and the futility of war. This is evident in his poems. [16]

Owen's "Strange Meeting" displays an idea of the futility of war and the suffering caused by it. The situation of the story the poem tells is a vision, a nightmare. The fact that the rhymes do not exactly match is an expression of this situation's mysteriousness; it mystifies the poem's atmosphere. The motif of darkness belongs into this context, too: 'dull'; 'sullen'; 'dark'. In darkness one has to look for a hold - the near end rhyme illustrates this lack of a perfect view over the situation. Yet, the rhyme also indicates another point: harmony is disturbed, the order of life is confused. It is confused by the 'battle', the 'titanic wars' and the thumping guns. Similar to the destruction of the world, the rhymes are damaged. Even if this

destructive power of war can neither be heard nor seen in the underworld, there is no peace or rest in that 'sullen hall': the sleep of hell's inhabitants is so full of suffering that they have to moan. In the face of this restlessness, a strict rhyme would be inappropriate because of the harmony that is implied by the identity of sounds. Owen has deliberately used the near end rhymes (half-rhymes: almost invariably fall from a vowel of high pitch to one of low) to indicate the lack of fulfillment in the lives of the young soldiers due to war. The effect is one of frustration and sadness, as though the ideal of completeness, which can still be perceived in the rhyme, is being destroyed as we read the poem. And this is a unique technique developed by Owen as an impact of war. The near end rhymes (half-rhymes), Wilfred Owen makes use of in his poem "Strange Meeting", produce a particular atmosphere: they express the mysteriousness of a nightmare situation. They are an expression of the disharmony of war and the restlessness of the torments of hell. The darkening of the vowels in the following rhyming couplets expresses pessimism, frustration, disappointment, hopelessness and death: escaped -scooped (1-2), groined - groaned (3-4), grained - ground (11-12), moan - morn (l3-14), years - yours (15-16), wild - world (17-18), tigress - progress (28-29), mystery - mastery (30-31), world - walled (32-33), wheels - wells (34-35), friend – frowned (40-41), killed - cold (42-43).

Through meeting and talking with the stranger, Owen cements his own anguish and loneliness. It is a quiet point in the war where "... no guns thumped ...". With bodies of the dead all around him, Owen prods and tries to find one other soul alive. He finds the stranger who was breathing and had life, but he was hardly alive. The dead solder rises; his 'dead smile' tells the poet that both men are in hell: " I knew we stood in Hell ". He too, like Owen, was full of dread and sorrow and hopelessness. The main body of the poem deals with this man's thoughts on life and what they have stumbled across; about each other. The speech of the dead man begins with an obscure section about beauty and truth.

The poet demonstrates conception of Germans that show he did not view these people merely as enemies of war.

> The waste of war afflicted him even more than its horrors; it moved him less to indignation than to pity. The subject of his poems, he wrote, " is War, and the pity of War. The poetry is in the pity." His compassion extended to the foe. [17]

"Strange Meeting" gives a strong image of Owen's thoughts on war, enemies, and mankind. Owen places the characters of "Strange Meeting" in Hell after they have died. Not only had they both died, they had also shared their moment of killing. They had been enemies of war, and because of this they had both killed each other and met again in Hell.

> Death has made them allies, and before they sleep for ever they can talk, agree on the horrors of war, and mourn the potential that has died with them. … Paradoxically, this Hell is in fact a place of peace and reconciliation, where dead enemies become brothers in their loathing of war. Far from being at the beginning of an eternity of everlasting torment, the two soldiers are freed from all pain and horror. The real Hell is the war which they have left behind. [18]

The two characters in the poem are the narrator, who seems to be Owen, and a 'strange friend', who seems to be a past enemy and a German soldier.

> The stranger recognizes in the soldier the same restless passion that was in himself. Before he died, the stranger was full of life, and looked around him for the same signs of life – "Whatever hope is yours, / Was my life also; I went hunting wild / After the wildest beauty in the world". … The stranger expresses his bitterness: "I would have poured my spirit without stint / But not through wounds; not on the cess of war", for he knew life was to be lived, enjoyed and experienced; but by fighting he had lost the chance to do so. War had annihilated his human potentiality. [19]

In the poem, Owen writes,

> 'Strange friend,' I said, 'here is no cause to mourn.'
> 'None,' said the other, "save the undone years,
> The hopelessness."

Owen illustrates in these lines that the two men no longer have any reason to be enemies. Moreover, the only reason to be unhappy is that others on earth do not recognize this. These two soldiers seem to discover that the effects of war on earth throughout time are hopelessness and futility. Men will continue to kill each other in war.

> Owen also touches on the pity of the futility of war in "Strange Meeting", as the stranger talks about the "...undone years, / The hopelessness" that he now mourns, referring to the years past, the experiences he has had; all

> thrown away in the course of war. War is futile, for although much has been spoiled in the quest for victory, there will always be those dissatisfied with the result, and thus once again blood will be spilt, for nothing. This bitter cycle shows how meaningless war is. [20]

The German soldier's realizations about war are found in his long monologue that also shows how Owen feels about war. The dead soldier says later on:

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

Through the dead enemy soldier's words, Owen displays the truth that humans must see past hatred and conflict. They must see war for what it truly is, a pity. Instead of fighting wars of hatred, humans must have pity for each other and seek greater love. The two dead soldiers in Owen's poem recognize that they must see beyond their position as enemies in war. They are no longer enemies. They have found reconciliation with each other, and have uncovered a greater love for each other. Owen, much like Rosenberg, sees war as a futile endeavor that causes far too much suffering. His point is emphasized in the last lines of his poem:

> I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
> I knew you in this dark; for you so frowned
> Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
> I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
> Let us sleep now…

In these lines of the poem, the paradoxes of 'enemy' and 'friend', seeing in the dark, and bayoneting with a frown sum up the dilemma of a soldier-poet. As a poet, he must make peace; as a soldier, he must make war. He had 'escaped' into the tunnel but there can be further escape, only the 'encumbered' and dream-ridden sleep to which his mirror image (the dead soldier) invites him.

Owen's another poem "Dulce et Decorum Est", which attempts to tell civilians what the front was really like, is actually more concerned with the poet's own tormented dreams, the major symptom of his shell shock, than with the death of the gassed soldier. As the dream is too immediate, the poem becomes inarticulate. The poem opens with the honest description of exhausted soldiers in the trenches and then comes the description of a gas attack: "Gas! Gas! Quick boys! An ecstasy of fumbling". Ecstasy can produce fumbling, but this is not the ecstasy that accompanies the knowledge of the possibility of escape rather

the fevered sense of the terrified fumbling itself. One soldier fails to fit on his gas-mask in time. Being haunted by the agony of the soldier, the poet reproduces the situation through the words so vividly that the readers feel like experiencing a real life situation. Here the graphic description of the battlefield and the explosive use of direct speech are the results of Sassoon's influence upon him.

In "Dulce Et Decorum Est", the title itself is taken from a Roman poem composed by Horace, who was very patriotic, which contrasts with Owen's negative views towards the war. [21] The poem conveys the horror and futility of dying for a state. Owen reacts to a horrible war and to the Lie being told about war. [22] He attacks the old lie and the perceptions of war at home, and shows the indignity and horror of the war. He does this by strongly persuading the reader that war is not romantically heroic, but pointless. [23]

> Wilfred Owen reacts to the war by turning conventional poetic technique into something that appears to be normal on the surface but in reality is tainted and corrupted. Owen's break from the conventional poetic form serves to symbolize the breakdown of society's value system - a system that had been trusted for many years. Owen also breaks from the pretty language prevalent in the poetry of his day to show his society the awful images of real and not romantically heroic war. [24]

In this antipatriotic poem Owen highlights that it was not an honor to die for one's country, but rather a pitiful waste of young lives. [25] Here he angrily responds to those who, themselves shielded from the experience of war, propagate the 'old Lie' that, in the words of the Latin poet Horace, it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country. "Owen juxtaposes the idea of war as devastating and the idea of war as heroic to illustrate the poem's ultimate irony – "Dulce Et Decorum Est, Pro Patria Mori". … The men who enlist are 'innocent' (line 24), they are 'children' (line 26) who have learned that war is full of 'high zest' (line 25) and this makes them "ardent for some desperate glory" (line 26). The innocents are willing to believe the Lie but they will, of course, learn differently once they experience the war first hand. By the end of the poem, the reader can fully appreciate the irony between the truth of what happens in the trenches and the Lie being told at home. " [26]

> His message is clear - war is not fun and games with glory awarded to the victors at the end, it is vile by causing man to kill its own kind. He warns readers not to make light of

> such a topic in his last words of the poem: "My friend, you would not tell with such high zest / To children ardent for some desperate glory, / The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori". There is no honour and glory in dying for your country at all; rather, it destroys the great human potentiality, which Owen emphasizes with his use of the word children. Children are often regarded as the future, and as such, to encourage war is to participate in the destruction of nature, and the future. In making sure the next generation is not so ready in believing the lies of glory in war, Owen is trying to prevent the annihilation of human potentiality. [27]

He has used vivid imagery primarily to remove any romantic or patriotic idea that it is sweet to die for one's country. Owen hurls the pain into the readers' face. Picturing "old beggars under sacks", tells us these men are battle weary, but also gives us a hint that they are scared of what is ahead for them. Using graphic terms such as 'blood-shod', Owen is not merely telling us of the hell of war, he is showing us.

> "Dulce Et Decorum Est", describes the horrors of a gas attack while commenting ironically on the limits of patriotism. Owen came to see it instead as a duty to warn of the horrors of war and to ask why political rulers allowed such mass destruction to continue for so long. He also questioned the necessity of war, stressed the common humanity of both sides in the war, and linked the futility of the deaths of the individual soldiers to the cosmic indifference of a world from which God was conspicuously absent. The following lines from the poem entitled "Futility" underline this stance:
>
> Was it for this the clay grew tall?
>
> O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
>
> To break earth's sleep at all.
>
> This plays ironically on the link between the clays of the earth and the biblical meaning of clay (human body). The introduction of religious connotations here reinforces the poem's sense of spiritual emptiness. [28]

In "Futility" Owen questions the pointlessness of war and religion. [29] The poem portrays the pity of war in a calm and questioning way. The death of the soldier in this poem is just a starting point for Owen's universal questioning of the pointlessness of war and humanity in general.

> In “Futility”, the speaker of the poem orders his friend to be laid out in the sun, in a last attempt to restore life to the dead body. As the sun shines to no avail, the speaker questions the reasoning of this earth. The sun, a symbol of life-giving, now fails to awaken his friend, as it has done so many times in this man's life. The speaker bitterly asks why the sun bothers to break the darkness of night at all, when it cannot bring life to a body that is still warm, a body which once contained a life brought into this world with much love and attention. "Was it for this the clay grew tall?", the speaker questions the fate of his friend, whose life has been wasted through war. The poem airs the speaker's unspoken thoughts: what a futile war is this that claims the lives of those who should have days in front of them, not behind. [30]

Either the sun is not kind and, though able to quicken, mocks the soldier, knowing him to be already dead; or, although the sun is kind, its power is, ironically, unavailing. Here the benign power of the sun suffers ironic depreciation because it cannot restore to life the life it has helped to form - a life killed by that of another similarly quickened by the sun, and the cosmic power lacks as much particularized capacity as God today is seen to. This contrast, between the killing of one man and the immense power of the sun to originate all life, is conveyed in the movement of the lines:

> Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
> Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
> Full-nerved – still warm – too hard to stir?

If, in any sense, man is nature's highest achievement, the destruction of a man through war is a bitter reality. Man kills one of his slowly evolved species whom the sun, with all its power, cannot revive. In such a case, the ‘toil’ of the sunbeams is turned into a mockery, as is everything else associated with the quickening of the cold clay. Owen in this condensed poem does not use visual images of horror as he is known for. He conjures feelings within the reader that often are more horrific. Owen was convinced that many of the people who remained in England, who hadn't experienced the warfare of WWI didn't understand how the soldiers were suffering, and so couldn't express true sympathy for the soldiers. He also believed that pity was the first step towards love and peace. So by writing “Futility” he would have aimed to portray the worthlessness of war, the useless loss of human life, and to arouse pity and grief in those who read it.

"Anthem for Doomed Youth" concentrates mainly on the horror of war, and especially the death of young men on the front line. Here Owen is able to effectively convey his outrage at the tragic loss of life of the young men who will not be accorded the dignity of a funeral whilst their loved ones continue to mourn their futile deaths. The poem is a testimony to "the horror and futility of war".[31]

> The opening of "Anthem for Doomed Youth" seems obvious in its intention: the poet protests at the discrepancy between the suffering of the Nation Overseas and the smugness of the Nation at Home.[32]

In this poem Owen contrasts the dignity of a funeral with the barbarity of the battlefront. 'Anthem' refers to a hymn of praise, devotion or patriotism and Owen uses the title ironically to challenge what acknowledgement or reverence is accorded to the young soldiers. The rhetorical questions are used in the poem to highlight the indignity of the deaths. The personification and alliteration of weaponry further emphasizes the cruelty of their deaths: "the monstrous anger of the guns ... the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle". Owen sustains the contrast by referring to "hasty orisons" and choirs. Yet these choirs are not the solemn voices associated with the singing of hymns rather they are personified to be "The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells". [33]

> The young male populations have so much patriotic love, and are so eager to serve, but this love turns sour. They spend time rotting in the wastes of the trenches, only to be mown down in the blink of an eye by a machine-gun nest. Not only are their lives wasted, going without the holy rite of funeral, but the lives of their loved ones at home are also ruined. [34]

"The main subject of the poem is of a funeral. The poem asks if there will be a funeral at all. What passing bells will ring for the dead? No, just machine gun and rifle fire. What funeral pall will there be? Just the pallor of girlfriends and wives. But they are not even there, they are still at home, waiting... worrying. It is saying that all of these boys are dying and not even getting a decent funeral, the holy rite of the dead." [35] Here "the pallor of girls' brows" commemorates dead soldiers and the sorrowing patient minds of the women in mourning are no different from the sorrowful religious consolation. It offers the consolation that the dead will be remembered by their families The consolatory and decorous ceremonies of religious and institutional mourning contrast with the brutal nature of their deaths. He also

concentrates on the immediate sound effects of the poem. The result is lines, which reproduce the sounds of war.

> What passing-bells for those who die as cattle?
> Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
> Only the shuttering rifles' rapid rattle
> Can patter out their hasty orisions. [36]

In "Anthem for Doomed Youth" the imagery of music and funeral rites is skillfully handled, moving from the sounds of the European battlefield to the bugles in the English shires and finally to the simple customs of a household in mourning.

In "Spring Offensive", the beauty of spring is contrasted with the horror and ugliness of war. Here nature is hostile to warring man. Nature's hostility to man varies with man's destructiveness. At first nature is beneficent, as long as the soldiers permit her to offer her gifts. Then the soldiers ignore the warnings — in 'the imminent line' and 'fearfully flashed'— and in doing so reject the beneficent aspects of nature. "But clutched to them like sorrowing hands" implies in a peaceful tone that nature is trying to stop the soldiers from going to the battlefield. Later on, the repetition of 'no' reinforces the ironic silence prior to the battle, which relies on surprise: "No alarms / Of bugles, no high flags, no clamorous haste". Similar to "Futility", the sun is personified highlighting that warfare is contrary to nature.

> O larger shone that smile against the sun,—
> Mightier than his whose bounty these have spurned.

In the above line the soldiers are about to reject the huge sun with all its benefices. They may appear 'mightier' than the sun only in the sense that the sun's power in the poem is restricted to helping creation, which they can destroy. Because of ignoring nature's warning, all nature is in arms against them:

> And instantly the whole sky burned
> With fury against them; earth set sudden cups
> In thousands for their blood; …

The rhythm changes to a rapid pace as the violence of the battle is presented. It highlights the unnaturalness of warfare by showing nature at first hostile and then damaged and brutalised by warfare "chasmed and steepened sheer to infinite space". The horror of the carnage is demonstrated with the use of imagery associated with the rite of communion. Further the guilt of survival is shown with the allusions to

hell. "The poem illustrates the physical horrors of the men experienced in war as they 'plunged and fell away past the world verge.' Owen suggests that god and nature had set a trap, for just as the soldiers had turned their back on nature and religion so too had God and nature rejected the soldiers." [37] God in his mercy may catch some of them as they fall, but the hostility of nature confirms the guilt, which is compounded into the survivors' silence: "Why speak not they of comrades that went under?"

> "Spring Offensive" is a vivid account of what warfare is like. The soldiers spurn safety and the peace and love of nature to destroy it all instead. They negate nature, remove themselves from the nurture of nature, alienate themselves from what gave them life in the first place; and thus, they reject all characteristics of humanity, to kill, maim and destroy. This is the dehumanization of man, in the violation of nature. To Owen, this is part of the pity of war – that mankind could turn its back on all its values to become base creatures. It is only with their deaths that these men are forgiven, and are reunited with their creator, whose creation they tried to destroy "...plunged and fell away past this world's verge, / Some say God caught them even before they fell." But for those who commit such a crime yet survive, they are "The few who rushed in the body to enter hell, / And there out-fiending all its fiends and flames"; those who never regain the humanity they lost, for they have been to hell and back, and are no longer as human as others. [38]

Although "Miners" initially is about the deaths of miners, it discusses the deaths of soldiers. Both are presented as groups who are victims of society's indifference. The first two verses animate the coal—in the first it is said to whisper and sigh, and this anthropomorphism is strengthened in the second, where the coal is said to originate from ferns and forest. Although 'smothered ferns' is an analogue for the suffocated miners, "men / Writhing for air", there is sensuous indication that his feelings fix also upon the plant life, "the low, sly lives" which are given a place in the community of creatures. 'Sly' suggests some active sense in which the plants are at least able to struggle for life, whereas 'wry' suggests a situation in which the miners can do nothing, a situation ultimately made by other men. The brutality and harshness of the world of the speaker is conveyed with the alliteration of 's' in "show steam–phantoms simmer". The personification of coal relates the suffering of the miners with the

alliterative "wry sleep" and "…men/ writhing for air". Probably because of insensitivity or ignorance, people do not associate the burning of the coal with the sacrifice of the miners who hack it out of the earth:

> And I saw white bones in the cinder-shard.
> Bones without number;
> For many hearts with coal are charred
> And few remember.

Their victimhood is captured in the metaphor of the cinders being their bones. The miners' dark pits become fused with the soldiers' saps and trenches: "I thought of some who worked dark pits / Of war, and died ....". The miners are bound by their need for hire as much as the soldiers are compelled to fight. Trench warfare is linked to mining. Death and peace are personified ironically contrasting with the dead soldiers. The transition to "rooms of amber" sets the scene of complacency of those who will quickly forget that they are "…well-cheered / By our lives' ember." The poem concludes with the adamant and poignant tone. Here the pitch of the pararhymes rises and falls as the sense moves from grief to happiness and back to grief again:

> The centuries will burn rich loads
> With which we groaned,
> Whose warmth shall lull their dreaming lids,
> While songs are crooned;
> But they will not dream of us poor lads
> Left in the ground.

Like the other war poets, Owen's goal was to write the truth and not to romanticize or dramatize the poetry. He succeeded in portraying the reality of the war – the boredom, the helplessness,, the horror and above all, the futility of it – without losing his artistic poise, or allowing bitterness to creep into his work. 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 graphically describes the suffering and anguish of soldiers in battle. Owen offers the reader so much more than the insight into the horrors of war by showing the pity. His poetry is memorable for its passionate denunciation of war using powerful language.

He is determined that his poetry shall plead for those who suffer and are inarticulate—to those who are ignorant of, or apathetic to, this suffering. “Anthem for Doomed Youth” makes this plea by comparing the soldiers' peremptory treatment with that which cattle receive prior to their slaughter. In “Anthem for Doomed Youth”, “Miners” and “Strange Meeting” originating impulse is compassion or pity. In “Strange Meeting” he sums up his thought on utter loss and waste of war. The ease with which the coalmine in “Miners” is magnified to become an image of war, or with which the cavern in “Strange Meeting” is described as like and yet utterly unlike a wartime dugout, shows how Owen’s imagination could, without straining, invest actuality with mythical significance.

Nature in many of Owen’s poems is a hostile force, as in deathly snow of “Exposure” or the ‘winds’ scimitars’ in “Asleep”, but this hostility is a response to war. In “Spring Offensive”, where his understanding of this problem is most fully set out, nature tries to prevent men from going into an attack, launches a violent onslaught against them when they ignore the appeal, and becomes peaceful again as soon as the attack is over.

In Sassoon-like poems “Dulce et Decorum Est” and “Spring Offensive”, which recreate horror, Owen protests against war, in which anger, satire, or irony is especially directed against its continuation; and thus, directed also at the civilian who seems to have little understanding of war’s horrors. In his poems anger is present with compassion. The anger does not lose sight of the suffering, and the compassion is forced into acting on behalf of the sufferer because of the presence of the anger. Nevertheless, his complex consciousness was an advance on Sassoon's and permitted a more flexible understanding of war.

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