

Humanitarianism and War with Special Reference to Wilfred Owen's *Strange Meeting*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to figure out the poem Strange Meeting by Wilfred Owen from a humanitarian context. Wilfred Owen is one of the leading poets, who is best known for writing war poems during World War I. Strange Meeting is one of his most famous war poems, which deals with senseless destruction of war and humanity. As change in every individual can be a social change, prioritising humanity in war can create tremendous changes in society.

Prioritising a humanitarian approach considers that war can produce destruction, death, and hopelessness, whereas humanity fills the world with peace. Death and destruction in battle are not supposed to be glorified as human beings are considered valuable when they are human. Wilfred Owen is not sentimentalizing heroism in war. Instead, he makes us visualise the war as horrifying, unreasonable, and dehumanising and introduces us to the insinuating realities of war, interests, the power of ideological manipulation, and other important psychological aspects.

This paper also identifies ways to find humanitarianism in war by exposing the recent suffering people have experienced in the name of war. Analysing the poetry of war poets allows the reader to focus on another side of war from a humanitarian perspective.

Keywords: War Poetry, Humanitarianism, War Trauma, Literary Analysis, Wilfred Owen.

Introduction

Since ancient times, society has said that it is noble to fight and die for a country. Humans fighting for a human with a human is truly pathetic. Historians believe the first war in recorded history took place in Mesopotamia in 2,700 B.C. between the forces of Sumer and Elam. (Mark) [1]

Although it has been 5000 years, since the people have crossed and faced so many disadvantages in war, people are still neglecting the futility of patriotic ideology and glorifying war. The glorification of war limits peace worldwide. It happens through movies, and somewhere it becomes fantasy, particularly in video games that impart violence in civilians' minds. When people find pleasure in killing humans in the context of war, even in video games, it pollutes the healthy mind, which needs humanity more than anything else. World War 1 affected the entire world for decades. It has shaken the world in every field, including social, economic, and cultural, including literature. The impact it created is reflected in the pens of writers. Their written thoughts shifted from romantic to pathetic.

Edmund Blunden, Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, Ivor Gurney, David Jones, Francis Ledwidge, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Siegfried Sassoon are called war poets of the world war (IWM) [2]. They attempted to portray the common experiences and sufferings caused by war. Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), who died in war at the age of 25, is the best known of the war poets.

His poems mainly focus on bleak realism, his energy and indignation, his compassion, and his high technical skills. He indicated that youngsters should stop glorifying the war because the youth are enlisted for the battlefield at a young age as they do not know the patriotic ideology. Waging war is against nature itself. It affects the life cycle of birth and death. As his poems are filled with horror, despair, loss of innocence, sacrifice, and futility related to war, his soldiers went through the trauma of seeing their friends and comrades die in emotionless battle at the hands of a seemingly heartless enemy. *Strange Meeting* can be addressed from a humanitarian perspective.

About Owen's post-war audience, the writer Geoff Dyer said,

"To a nation stunned by grief, the prophetic lag of posthumous publication made it seem that Owen was speaking from the other side of the grave. Memorials were one sign of the shadow cast by the dead over England in the twenties; another was a surge of interest in spiritualism. Owen was the medium through whom the missing spoke." (qtd.in poets. org) [3]

Thesis Structure

This research fills this gap by drawing on the humanitarian perspective of war instead of glorifying it. Although earlier studies on *Strange Meeting* focus on the Marxist perspective, this paper focuses on the human perspective. It analyses Wilfred Owen's war poetry to further illustrate its themes and demonstrate the horrors of war. The first chapter deals with the internal and external agonies of war. The second chapter focuses on the psychoanalytical approach to war which includes Freud's theory. Chapter three sheds light on Wilfred Owen's *Strange Meeting* from the humanitarian perspective which includes mental trauma, loss of innocence, sustainable threat, and horror. The fourth chapter focuses on the never-ending humanitarian crisis the world faces due to armed conflicts. This study concludes that even in recent years, humans have faced mental and physical damage through war. The poem *Strange Meeting* can perfectly fit into the concept of considering the reality of war and the lack of humanitarianism in war.

Mental and Physical Agony in World War 1

The human impact of World War was extensive. Almost 12 million people were killed and 20 million were severely wounded. Injuries on the battlefield often extend beyond the purely physical. Not every hospital or doctor focuses on soldiers' mental health. The range of treatments was ineffective and dangerous. Great War veterans were men who endured agony from 'shell shock' – a form of nervous breakdown that severely affected one's ability to move and function. The consequence of this kind of treatment on soldiers was that they were turned into shaking, twitching, convulsing wrecks, unable to carry out basic movements like walking in a straight line. Preliminary diagnoses and attitudes toward shell shock were largely merciless. Victims of shell shock had simply been unequipped for war, and their minds had imploded in the heat of combat. Fortunately, these attitudes changed over time, as doctors came to realise that any soldier could suffer a nervous breakdown under the right conditions. Another less successful method was the 'Turvey treatment,' used before 1914 to cure alcoholics and drug addicts. Treatments involved the use of electric shock therapy, physical discipline, depressive medication, or forcing soldiers to confront their paranoia, such as locking claustrophobics in small rooms. These kinds of treatment during World War 1 are explained clearly by J. Llewellyn et al. (Alpha History) [4].

Only a few hospitals and doctors practiced psychotherapy and counselling, which was far more successful because it was much slower and more involved; it was only used on a select few. With this kind of horrible treatment for their bodies and less focus on their mental health, soldiers on the war field face many struggles internally and externally to survive, but the war gives them nothing but despair, loss of innocence, and loss of humanity.

A Psychoanalytical Approach to War Poetry

Psychoanalytic theory is the theory of the innate structure of the human soul and the dynamics of personality development relating to the practice of psychoanalysis, a method of research and treatment of mental disorders. The founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, discussed these two factors from a humanitarian perspective.

“It is to be hoped that these two factors, cultural attitudes and a legitimate fear of the outcome of future wars, will hopefully stop war in the near future. Though he was vague about the means of achieving this, he insisted that

“Everything that promotes civilization can also be used against war” (Che Wenbo) [5].

This theory is extensively related to Wilfred Owen’s *Strange Meeting*.

Strange Meeting in Humanitarian Perspective

Owen wrote “Strange Meeting” sometime during 1918 while serving on the Western Front and published it in 1919 after his death. The speaker in this poem is a soldier who has descended to hell. There, he meets a soldier from an opposing army. This enemy reveals at the end of the poem that the speaker killed him. The poem is deeply pessimistic, reflecting on the shared humanity of these two men and the broader horrors of war. The meeting between strangers in hell reveals the strange and dangerous side of war. Although the poem suggests that human beings will not stop fighting anytime soon, it also calls for such violence to be replaced by reconciliation and solidarity.

In the beginning of the poem, the poet feels like he has escaped from the battlefield and is passing through a dull tunnel that might have been scooped during the Titanic wars. The mention of titanic wars can be interpreted as war playing its role for a longer period. These wars are large-scale and result in heavy casualties. In mythology, we can find the presence of war. The term “Titanic Wars” refers to the Titanomachy, a series of battles in Greek mythology. This shows that the world has encountered many wars from mythology to reality. This also means that there are more changes in the nature of the world.

Owen begins his poem (Owen) [6]

It seemed that out of battle I escaped/

Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped Through granites which titanic wars had groined (lines 1-3).

The next thing the poet says is that the sleepers in that place are moaning and suffering, though it feels like this place is better than a battlefield. One of them springs up and stares at the poet with piteous recognition. He blesses the speaker and gives them a lifeless smile. The poet then realises that they are in hell.

With piteous recognition in fixed eyes, Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.

And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall, By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell (lines 7-10).

The poet’s mental trauma during the war sets his mind that although he fights for the nation and tries to save many, he is destined to be in hell. There is no humanity in him while killing his enemies. He prioritises the national and pathological ideology of war over humanity.

The man’s piteous recognition shows that he pities the poet for having the same consequences as the man is undergoing in hell.

The poet then notices that this hell is better than the battlefield. They do not find any blood or guns. He addresses the man as “strange friend.” This shows that a man needs a companion, even in hell. Humanity is present within them forever. Wars force people to suppress their emotions, and violence emerges. He tells the man that there is no reason to mourn as they are in a better place compared to the battlefield.

The man’s reply addresses the loss of innocence and the strange side of wars and their participants, as follows:

“None,” said that other, “save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also (lines 15-17)

His thoughts express the loss of youth. He worries that he did not utilise his life properly as a human. The poet now understands his hopelessness. They have not enjoyed their lives, and it is impossible to return to their lives to experience the beauty of it. This kind of sadness is much richer than the sadness in hell. He tells the poet that if he had not died, his happiness might have made many other people happy too. The war has changed the youngsters’ lives completely. Though he is sad, his humanity wants to tell the truth about the negative impact of the war.

I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity of war distilled.
Now, men will be content with what we spoilt.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with the swiftness of a tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress (lines 24-29).

He shares the untold truth of the horror of war, which boils down to its horrifying essence. People will celebrate the things that the soldiers spoilt. They used to focus on victory rather than the mental and physical damage the war caused to the individual and society.

They forget to notice the absence of humaneness in war.

If they are unhappy about the loss of human life or destruction, they will get so angry that they will keep fighting and killing each other. Neglecting humanity leads to an unethical and dehumanising approach to each other. People will be as fast as tigers to kill each other, and they will not disagree with their governments and their futile ideology of war. The man tells the poet that he is full of courage and mystery. He was wise and experienced. He does not want to watch the world move backward.

Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,

I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for the taint.

I would have poured my spirit without stint

However, not through wounds or the cess of war. The foreheads of men bled where there were no wounds (lines 34- 39).

He imagines that he will repair the damage caused by the war. He would clean the armed forces and their vehicle wheels, which were full of blood, with truth. He mentions that people have to know the inhuman activities behind the war instead of glorifying and fighting continuously. They take violence for further violence. The physical wounds of soldiers who go to war can be cured after some time. However, their foreheads bleed without any wounds, which means they are experiencing mental trauma that cannot be cured, even after years have passed.

It is visible through these painful lines that every man on the battlefield is born with humanity, like common people. For the sake of the nation, they bury their morality and innocence, and are forced to choose violence with certain rules and regulations. These kinds of unethical factors, which have been praised and glorified since ancient days, cause internal and external damage in the world. Although it is a fictional poem about two soldiers meeting in Hell, we can feel how pathetic it is to kill humanity

when they are killing their enemies and regretting their loss of humanity even after death.

The final stanza of the poem has an impact on every reader.

“I am the enemy you killed, my friend.

I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned

Yesterday, you jabbed and killed me.

I parried, but my hands were loath and cold. Let us sleep now . . .” (lines 40-44).

The man reveals to the poet that he was killed by the poet on the battlefield.

Although the beginning of the poem makes us feel that the poet has a companion in hell, the end of the poem changes the context. They are now both enemies and friends. These soldiers were fighting and killing each other because the two nations decided to fight each other. These people do not have any personal vengeance. The man explains to the poet that his face was full of violence and anger when he killed him. They do not have any purpose to kill each other. They did it for their nation, which continues to be at war. Now, these soldiers are in a better place than the battlefield, where they can be friends instead of enemies. They will peacefully rest together in hell. This poem clearly explains that it disintegrates the natural and humanitarian activities between human beings, turning people who might be friends into mortal enemies.

The line “I am the enemy you killed, my friend” appears on the memorial sculpture to Owen, erected by the Wilfred Owen Association (Wilfred Owen Memorials) [7].

Never-Ending Humanitarian Crisis

As we have gone through the mental and physical agony of WW1 with special reference to the poem, *Strange Meeting*, it is also crucial to know about the never-ending humanitarian crisis the war causes society, growing day by day. Wars in the 21st century can be the best reference for analysing humanitarian crises.

The deterioration of global security since 2022 has brought remarkable destruction and human suffering. Among the leitmotifs of ongoing armed conflicts, as highlighted in the 2024 edition of the IISS Armed Conflict Survey, are the acute conditions encountered by civilians in war and conflict-affected situations such as Gaza, Haiti, Myanmar, the Sahel,

Sudan, and Yemen. As conflicts become more protracted and violent, more civilians are affected by humanitarian crises, and the number of forcibly displaced people grows (Petrini) [8].

Wars conducted in ancient days were a way of showing strength to others. However, the changing world, even in the 21st century, is making their own country weaker than ever. People are suffering and longing for food, peace, and education. The war has been washing away people, irrespective of their age, gender, and place. Modern weapons invented for war normalise violence. It causes death as quickly as possible.

Humanitarian conditions in Gaza remain horrific two years after the start of a war that has decimated lives, homes, and livelihoods. A lack of access to food, shelter, water, and medicine has taken an unfathomable toll on entire communities (WFP) [9].

The new insight of this paper is to realise the intolerable impact of the war which has been a structure without humanity. It is crucial to know the value of human life instead of fighting for political or geographical causes. As literature is a mirror of human life, the literary piece *Strange Meeting* clearly shows the emotional and social connections among people during war.

Conclusion

We face many physical and mental difficulties during war. At the same time, we never think about giving up war and having peace in the world. We are getting information about wars happening all around the world within a second. The world is becoming digitalised, and we are seeking modernity in every aspect. Even though humans have reached almost a quarter of the 21st century, there has been no change in killing and dying in war. Moreover, we have recently witnessed the war between Russia and Ukraine.

According to U.S. officials, the total number of Ukrainian and Russian troops killed or wounded since the war in Ukraine began 18 months ago is nearing 500,000, a staggering toll as Russia assaults its next-door neighbour and tries to seize more territory. (Cooper et al) [10].

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The war poets experienced mental trauma and physical damage in the natural world. They tried to reach the common people to tell them about the futility and ideology of war through their writing. However, not everyone in society has the chance to know about their sufferings. They wanted to stop the youngsters from fighting for the nation and have a normal and peaceful life without making it complicated. Common people enlist themselves in the army to earn a livelihood without knowing the purpose of life and humanity. The poem *Strange Meeting* attempts to change the ideology of war and address war from a humanitarian perspective. It is suggested that the war poets and their writings can be a better example of the mental trauma and societal chaos the war caused. War poetry provides an exact understanding of the problem, leading us to seek solutions for the same situations. *Strange Meeting* can be a better reference for addressing the cruel side of war.

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