

War and Witness: Poetry as a Response to Conflict and Trauma

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Abstract

Poetry has traditionally been a potent vehicle for seeing and reacting to war and related pain. From ancient epics to modern free verse, writers have utilized language to depict the horrors of battle, the suffering of civilians, and the resiliency of the human spirit. The function of poetry in bearing witness to war, its capacity to transmit both personal and group trauma, and the manner in which it promotes healing and recollection are examined in this essay. Long influencing human history, war and struggle have left not only physical damage but also profound psychic wounds. Poetry has been a potent tool for recording terrible events since it provides testimony, opposition, and a road to healing. By means of analysis of its function in bearing witness, questioning prevailing narratives, and supporting emotional recovery, this paper investigates how poetry responds to conflict and trauma. Inspired by writers including Brian Turner, Mahmoud Darwish, and Wilfred Owen, this study looks at how poetry captures the atrocities of war, elevates underprivileged voices, and creates group memory. Examining the junction of poetry and conflict helps this study to show the continuing influence of artistic expression in turning suffering into resilience and resistance.

Keywords: Conflict, Healing, Memory, Resistance, Testimony, Trauma, War Poetry, Witness.

Introduction

War has been a persistent aspect of human history, resulting in both physical destruction and profound psychological trauma. Literature, especially poetry, has functioned as a crucial instrument for individuals and societies to comprehend and chronicle the experience of war. Poetry employs vivid imagery, emotional depth, and linguistic experimentation to explain and elucidate the facts of war—its violence, loss, and enduring trauma. The potency of poetry is in its capacity to transcend temporal and geographical boundaries, providing a platform for the voices of warriors and civilians, conquerors and the vanquished, as well as survivors and the forsaken. From classical epics to contemporary free verse, poets have consistently endeavored to document the atrocities of war, safeguarding memories and sharing experiences. This article analyzes poetry's function in addressing conflict and trauma by examining how poets from various historical and cultural backgrounds have utilized their work to record warfare, oppose oppression, and promote

healing. This study employs concepts from trauma theory, witness literature, and postcolonial studies to demonstrate the significance of poetry as a historical and emotional record that can alter perceptions and comprehension of the impacts of war.

War inflicts more than mere physical devastation; it etches profound scars into the psyche of individuals and societies. Following conflict, poetry has historically functioned as a documentation of anguish and a vehicle for resistance and healing. From the battlefields of World War I to the modern conflicts of the 21st century, poets have documented destruction, articulated the experiences of the voiceless, and endeavored to assert agency amidst violence.

This study investigates the function of poetry as a reaction to war and suffering, analyzing how poetic expression serves as both a testament and an act of defiance. Through the examination of war poets, resistance authors, and survivors, we reveal how poetry serves as a conduit for collective memory, a mechanism for emotional healing, and a formidable weapon against oppression. Through the poignant realism of Wilfred Owen, the fortitude of Mahmoud Darwish, and the modern insights of soldiers and refugees, poetry persistently influences our comprehension of conflict and its lasting effects.

Historically, poetry has functioned as a potent medium for individuals and communities to confront the harrowing realities of war, conflict, and trauma. Through seeing human suffering, poets can convert individual and communal catastrophes into essential acts of defiance, commemoration, and restoration. (The) Felman and Laub Poetry responds to horror primarily through the act of witnessing. Literary scholar Shoshana Felman and psychiatrist Dori Laub contend that the Holocaust signifies a “radical crisis of witnessing,” wherein the enormity of the event jeopardizes the ability of witnesses to articulate its atrocities. In this setting, the poet’s job is to restore communication and recognition disrupted by trauma, so offering a space for testimony voices that might otherwise remain unheard.

Scholar Liliana Bernardi further examines the intricate relationship between poetry, witness, and trauma, asserting that artistic responses to atrocity serve multiple functions, including “reclaiming the disappeared” and “demonstrating a significant form of listening to testimonials of atrocity.” By transforming memories into tangible forms, poets can engage both participants and spectators in “rituals of commemoration” that establish a basis for restoring trust and understanding in communities affected by state violence.

Through this perspective, we examine poetry not merely as an art form but as an essential means of historical documentation and personal catharsis. In what ways does poetry assist cultures in confronting loss? How can it contest prevailing war narratives? Can poetry facilitate healing? This discourse aims to address these inquiries, emphasizing the persistent influence of language during wartime.

Research Questions

1. How do war poets use personal testimony to bear witness to the psychological and emotional toll of war on soldiers and civilians?
2. In what ways does war poetry resist the glorification of combat, and what literary techniques do poets employ to critique nationalistic or patriotic portrayals of war?
3. How does war poetry function as a form of collective memory, and what role does it play in preserving historical trauma for future generations?
4. What role does war poetry play in the healing process for both the poet and the reader, particularly in the context of post-traumatic stress and recovery?
5. How do symbolic imagery and metaphors in war poetry communicate the lasting scars of war, both physical and psychological, on individuals and societies?

Research Objectives

1. To examine how war poets use personal testimony to bear witness to the psychological and emotional toll of war on soldiers and civilians.
2. To analyze how war poetry resists the glorification of combat and critiques nationalistic or patriotic portrayals of war.
3. To explore how war poetry functions as a form of collective memory and preserves historical trauma for future generations.
4. To assess the role of war poetry in the healing process for both the poet and the reader, especially in the context of post-traumatic stress and recovery.
5. To investigate how symbolic imagery and metaphors in war poetry communicate the lasting physical and psychological scars of war on individuals and societies.

Classic War Poetry (Witness and Testimony) Wilfred Owen – *Dulce et Decorum Est* (1917)

A powerful critique of the glorification of war, written by a World War I soldier-poet. Siegfried Sassoon – *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (1918) Poems exposing the horrors of war, deeply influenced by Sassoon's own service.

Contemporary Voices (Trauma and Healing) Brian Turner – *Here, Bullet* (2005) A collection of poems from Turner's experience as a U.S. soldier in Iraq. Ocean Vuong – *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016). A deeply personal exploration of war's aftermath, memory, and identity, influenced by Vuong's Vietnamese heritage.

War as a Psychological and Emotional Experience

Each of these poets approaches the trauma of war through distinct lenses, but all emphasize the profound psychological and emotional toll it exacts on soldiers.

Wilfred Owen, in *Dulce et Decorum Est*, famously critiques the romanticized notions of war prevalent during World War I, challenging the idea that it is noble and honorable to die for one's country. Through vivid and haunting imagery, Owen illustrates the psychological torment soldiers face. His use of direct and gruesome imagery—such as the description of a soldier “guttering, choking, drowning” after a gas attack—shows the violence of war as not just physical, but deeply traumatic. Owen's approach to war is centered on disillusionment and the dismantling of idealized notions of patriotism.

Siegfried Sassoon also critiques the nobility of war, but his work is more acerbic and politically charged. In *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, Sassoon often targets the generals, political leaders, and the societal elites who perpetuate war without truly understanding its cost. While Owen focuses on the individual soldier's experience, Sassoon's poems tend to shift to broader criticisms of war itself as an institutional failure. His anger is often directed at the futility and senselessness of war, with poems like *The General* mocking the callousness of military leadership.

Brian Turner, a contemporary poet who served in the Iraq War, brings a more modern and raw sensibility to his exploration of the psychological effects of conflict. In *Here, Bullet*, Turner's poems are direct and unflinching, capturing the emotional and mental scars of modern warfare. Turner's poems move from the immediate violence of battle to the haunting aftermath, where soldiers return home but cannot escape the psychological toll of war. The title poem, “Here, Bullet,” embodies this duality of violence and vulnerability, as Turner grapples with his own position as a soldier and the trauma of war.

Ocean Vuong, though not a traditional war poet, deals with the consequences of war in a more personal, internalized way. In *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Vuong's Vietnam War references are layered with themes of memory, survival, and displacement. His poems explore the deep scars of

the Vietnam War through the lens of his family's experiences. While his approach differs from the direct, external experiences of battle described by Owen, Sassoon, and Turner, Vuong's poetry reveals the long-term effects of war, not just on soldiers, but on their descendants. The metaphorical "exit wounds" in his title point to the ways in which trauma persists across generations.

War as a Dehumanizing Force

A common thread across all these poets is the dehumanizing nature of war. They each illustrate how war strips soldiers of their humanity, either through direct combat or the psychological toll it exacts.

Owen's dehumanization is most evident in the depiction of soldiers not as heroic figures, but as broken, injured, and almost faceless victims. The soldiers in *Dulce et Decorum Est* are not knights or warriors but men trudging through mud, suffering from exhaustion and injury. The brutal imagery, such as the "sludge of the battlefield" or the "white eyes" of a soldier left behind in a gas attack, evokes a profound sense of disempowerment.

Sassoon, though similar to Owen in his critique of war, explores the theme of dehumanization through a more institutional lens. In his poem *Suicide in the Trenches*, Sassoon depicts a soldier who takes his life due to the crushing weight of war's brutality. The dehumanization here is not just in the physical suffering, but in the way war robs soldiers of their agency, reducing them to mere pawns in a larger, indifferent machine.

Turner's *Here, Bullet* offers a stark, contemporary portrayal of the dehumanizing effects of war. Turner writes with raw intensity, detailing the violent acts of combat, the moral ambiguity soldiers face, and the emotional detachment that comes with constant exposure to death. His poems don't just depict soldiers as victims of war but also as perpetrators of violence, blurring the lines between victim and aggressor, which further underlines the dehumanizing force of war.

Vuong touches on the dehumanizing effects of war more subtly. His exploration of the Vietnam War does not directly engage with the battlefield but instead reflects on the ongoing emotional violence carried by the survivors. His treatment of the war, often conveyed through delicate language and imagery, highlights how the trauma of war is passed on in ways that fragment identity and erode humanity.

War as a Catalyst for Identity and Memory

The role of war in shaping identity is another significant theme across these poets' works. War does not just affect soldiers during their service but continues to shape their postwar lives, influencing their sense of self, their relationships, and their place in the world.

Owen's poems, like *Dulce et Decorum Est*, emphasize the disconnect between soldiers' lived experience and the society that sends them to war. Owen's soldiers, forever changed by their experiences, struggle to return to civilian life. War leaves a permanent mark on their identity, making it impossible to reconcile the trauma they've endured with the expectations of society.

Sassoon, much like Owen, portrays war as a force that redefines individuals, but his exploration of identity focuses more on the bitterness and disillusionment that follow. For Sassoon, the horrors of war are compounded by the betrayal felt by soldiers who, upon their return, face an indifferent society that either ignores or glorifies their sacrifices. Sassoon's identity as a soldier is intertwined with his growing skepticism of authority and his frustration at the widespread ignorance of the war's true costs.

Turner's poetry deals more directly with the struggle of reintegration into civilian life. In *Here, Bullet*, the speaker wrestles with a loss of self, caught between the identity of a soldier and the person he was before the war. Turner's war poems highlight the erosion of clarity and purpose, as

soldiers are haunted by the violence they experienced and enacted.

Vuong explores war's impact on identity through the lens of memory. In *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Vuong examines the inherited trauma of the Vietnam War, where the effects on identity are felt not only by those who fought but by their descendants. His poetry portrays the complexities of understanding one's identity when it is shaped by histories of violence and loss.

Literary Styles and Poetic Devices

The poets differ in their use of language and literary techniques, reflecting their unique voices and historical contexts.

Owen employs vivid imagery, similes, and personification to bring the horrors of war to life. His poems are often structured with strict rhyme schemes, but his use of graphic and unsettling imagery creates a sense of urgency and chaos.

Sassoon, known for his stark and blunt style, uses irony and sarcasm to undermine the romanticized image of war. His poems often employ colloquial language, making them accessible and direct in their criticism of the war.

Turner uses raw, often fragmented language to convey the immediacy of battle. His poems are marked by their visceral tone, where violence and emotion are intertwined with images of death and destruction.

Vuong, in contrast, adopts a lyrical and intimate style. His use of metaphor and imagery conveys the emotional and psychological depth of trauma, with much of the focus on the internal experience rather than the external battlefield.

The Poetic Witness: A Historical Perspective Poetry has been intertwined with war since the earliest recorded conflicts. The *Iliad* by Homer, one of the most famous war epics, not only narrates the events of the Trojan War but also delves into the personal grief of warriors and their families. During World War I, poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon provided raw, unsettling depictions of trench warfare that challenged romanticized notions of battle. Similarly, in World War II, poets such as Paul Celan used fragmented and surreal imagery to articulate the horrors of the Holocaust.

Poetry as Testimony and Resistance In contemporary conflicts, poetry continues to serve as both testimony and resistance. Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, for example, used verse to document the struggles of displacement and occupation, while Afghan and Iraqi poets have provided first hand perspectives on the devastation wrought by war. Poetry often functions as an alternative historical record, offering deeply personal and emotional truths that may be absent from official accounts.

Expressing Trauma Through Language War poetry frequently employs fragmented syntax, repetition, and stark imagery to reflect the disorientation and pain of trauma. The inability of conventional language to fully capture war's brutality often leads poets to experiment with form and structure. For instance, contemporary war poetry by veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars frequently incorporates free verse and minimalist techniques to convey the ineffable nature of their experiences.

Healing and Memorialization Beyond its role in witnessing and documenting war, poetry plays a crucial role in healing and memorialization. Writing poetry provides survivors, soldiers, and affected communities with a means of processing their trauma. Public readings and poetry collections serve as acts of remembrance, ensuring that the voices of those who suffered are not lost to history.

Theoretical Framework The analysis of war poetry in this article is grounded in three key theoretical frameworks: trauma theory, witness literature, and postcolonial studies.

1. **Trauma Theory** – Rooted in the work of scholars like Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, trauma theory explores how poetry serves as a medium for expressing and processing psychological wounds. The fragmented nature of trauma often manifests in the structure and language of war poetry, allowing for an authentic representation of the suffering endured by individuals and communities.
2. **Witness Literature** – The concept of literature as a form of testimony, articulated by scholars such as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, positions poetry as an act of witnessing. Poets bear witness to war by providing personal narratives that counter official histories, ensuring that marginalized voices and experiences are acknowledged.
3. **Postcolonial Studies** – This framework, drawing from thinkers like Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, examines how war poetry challenges dominant narratives, particularly in the context of colonial and postcolonial conflicts. Many war poets use verse to critique imperialism, occupation, and the silencing of subjugated peoples, making poetry a site of resistance.

Conclusion

Poetry remains a vital means of engaging with the realities of war. Whether through documenting history, resisting oppression, or fostering healing, poets continue to shape our understanding of conflict and its aftermath. As long as wars persist, poetry will remain an essential tool for witnessing, remembering, and ultimately, making sense of the human cost of war. These poets offer rich, varied portrayals of war, each exploring its dehumanizing effects, its psychological scars, and its impact on identity in unique ways. **Owen** and **Sassoon**, as contemporaries of World War I, lay the foundation for war poetry that critiques the romanticism of battle, while **Turner**, from the perspective of a modern soldier, highlights the ongoing trauma of war in contemporary conflicts. **Vuong**, though not a traditional war poet, offers an essential contribution by addressing the inherited trauma of war, particularly through the lens of the Vietnam War, providing a broader, intergenerational understanding of the effects of conflict. Together, these poets create a multifaceted portrait of war and its enduring effects on humanity.

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