

Wilfred Owen's Poetry: A Response to Trauma

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Abstract

Literary genres right from their origin and development flare up in reaction to either the human amalgamation of assimilation or disassociation. The writers’ inner voice always tries to find a window to express or respond to the system that they want to expose or trim in different genres that suit their inner urge to do so. While the drama enacts indomitable human spirit as well as its frivolities through its dramatic personae, other genres like novel, life narratives and the short story narrate or reflect the same either in reminiscent or omniscient mood. But, poetry as expressed by William Wordsworth, “Poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity”; for Mathew Arnold, poetry means, “a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty”. He means that poetry would follow the principles of poetic truth and poetic beauty; for T. S. Eliot, “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion, it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality”; for Wilfred Owen, poetry is a reaction to the horrors of war particularly First World War. His unique style is that his usage of half rhyme and assonance rather than usage of full rhyme. He also rejected the traditional poetic forms of his predecessors. He penetrates into the mental trauma of the soldiers whose heinous experience of trench life has been delineated shockingly in all his poems. The paper tries to explore Owen’s poetic creative sensibility as well as his response to the conflicts of human mind and trauma that had been felt by the warriors with reference to his representative poems.

Keywords: Amalgamation, Assimilation, Disassociation, Indomitable, Frivolities, Dramatic Personae, Reminiscent, Omniscient, Spontaneous, Powerful, Tranquility, Poetic Beauty, Emotion, Personality, Assonance, Mental Trauma, Heinous, Trench, Creative Sensibility.

Introduction

Poetry as a supreme literary genre of all the genres has been well acknowledged and well acclaimed in the literary world. It touches both heart and mind through passion and reason respectively throughout the ages in a dignified aesthetic sense in the forms of heroic couplet, ballad, epic, lyric, sonnet, ode, elegy, folklore and so on. Poetry to William Wordsworth who said, “Poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” and “recollected in tranquillity”; to Mathew Arnold, poetry means, “a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty”. He means that poetry would follow the principles of poetic truth and poetic beauty; to T. S. Eliot, “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion, it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality”. So, poetry has been a means to

recount history, to express emotion and to bring about change in mind and society. In other words, the poets usually sing in their poems in order to bring about a change in their surroundings or they function as the agents of change.

Before dwelling on the world view of Wilfred Owen, let us review the notion on war poetry. There are two types of war poets-one writes poetry to support war and the other writes against the war. Both have the national mindset by encouraging war and by opposing the war. The first always sing claiming that they propagate the idea of nationalism. In this case, there is self-sacrifice and they also sacrifice the others too. This vision of war poets is to support the war claiming that they are the true nationalists. But the latter write in contrast with that of the first group who always sing to support war. Many poets who lived and served throughout the war had this patriotic fervor of the early years unaffected. But as the carnage went on increasing and there was no hope of its end, other poets arose with the declared intention of blasting this romantic illusion of the glory of war by a frank realistic depiction of the horrors, savagery and futility of war. This realistic attitude to the war was at first cried down as unpatriotic, but it has stood the test of time better than the romantic attitude of the early years. The poets of the 1914-18 war divide themselves into two groups-romantic war poets and realistic war poets.

Romantic idealistic war poets like Rupert Brooke started writing poetry in the Georgian style, finding his inspiration in nature and everyday pleasures. He gave the conflict his enthusiastic support. His desire to serve England and his patriotic fervor inspired him to write a series of battle sonnets. He rose to prominence as the representative of the English people's commitment to their nation. 'The Soldier' is his war sonnet that is the most emblematic. It is resonant with his sense of national pride and his exaltation of the sacrifice of English troops who died fighting for England. He enlisted as a soldier and went to war to defend the hour of his motherland. As a war-poet, he takes an idealistic view of war and speaks of its glory, glamour and heroism, and not its brutality and ghastliness.

Poetry to the modern poets particularly war poets or anti-war poets like W. H. Auden and Wilfred Owen, is a reaction to the horrors of war particularly First World War. The surprising thing is that what Owen had a fascination towards war and its advertisement by his country and later on what he had witnessed as a soldier was against to his passion and felt deeply disappointed and deceived. Owen suffered through a series of traumatic events such as falling into a shell-hole. He was blown into the air by a trench mortar. He was disabled on an embankment beside the remains of another officer. Then he was being diagnosed with shell shock and post-traumatic stress disorder. The same experience had been reflected in his poetry. To project the same path in his creativity, he had to adopt a unique style in composing his poems. So, he has used a unique style in his poetic craftsmanship like half rhyme and assonance rather than usage of full rhyme. The other uniqueness of Owen, he rejected the traditional poetic forms of his predecessors. He delves and penetrates into the trauma of the soldiers whose heinous experience of trench life has been delineated shockingly in all his poems. His poetic creative sensibility as well as his response to the conflicts of human mind and trauma that had been felt by the warriors is recurring uncommon theme in all his poems. Owen as a brilliant poet initiated anti-war writing amidst a country being in the war propaganda. He flashes and draws attention to the harsh realities of war, rather than spreading societal issues. Unlike his predecessors, he focused on unexpressed truth of warfare and the sufferings of the valiants.

In due course, Owen was stimulated by Siegfried Sassoon to write about the horrors of war. Haunted by his own memories, he dedicated his writing on the pure physical, moral and psychological horrors of war. He did not commemorate the subject but he tried to educate and warn those that were filled with propaganda beliefs. He bravely defied the socio-cultural context he was

brought up in and stood in contrast to the public perception of what war was in order to stop the travail of future soldiers.

Owen finds a contrast in what has been happening in the war and witnessed the same in the war that paves way to lent out his emotions in one of his poems in which he tries to seek a change societal views on war. In his poem, 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', seriously deliberates the death of a young soldier. It contrasts a normal funeral to the send-off that people who died fighting receive. He showcases his disdain for the treatment of soldiers immensely through the title. The word 'Anthem' suggests a celebratory song. It is intensely used in relation to the words 'Doomed Youth' in contrast. It is evident that Owen ironically brings out the deaths of many youths and their trauma in his commemoration through his poetic craftsmanship.

As the reader goes through the poem, war scene appears and slowly takes the reader to the end as indicated in the line, 'And each slow dusk, a drawing down of blinds', indicating the end of the life of the soldier rather death of the soldier and his last heartbeats. In his poems usually, Owen constructs images of religion and contrasts them with descriptions of war and death. Juxtaposing the tolling of bells with gunshots and death, he has effectively placed the reader in the warfare. His charge is that soldiers did not receive a proper and respectful burial. He was wholly unsatisfied with how the deaths of young soldiers were celebrated in public, rather than mourned. The trauma felt by the wounded soldiers in the First World War was the subject matter for many poets particularly Wilfred Owen and et al. At the time of passive response of the people on the effects of the war, it was the war poets like Owen who awaken the people to respond to the trauma of the young soldiers through poetry.

Wilfred Owen discards the usual romantic notions about war and strikes a new realistic notion in his war poetry. Unlike Rupert Brooke, he does not find in soldiers' exploits "a sense of new crusades and modern knightliness." He expresses in his poems the dreadful experience he underwent as a soldier. He presents the cruelty and inhumanity of a soldier's doing, the reality and futility of war and the reckless wastage of nobility, youth and heroism. He looks upon war as a meaningless dance of death and an agency of great suffering to mankind. He regards it as the cruel business of the arm-chair politicians who exploit the blooming youth in the name of patriotism.

What distinguishes Owen's war poetry is not the description of the horrors of war, but the exploration of the pity of war. As he says, in the preface to his Poems (1920), "Above all, I am not concerned with poetry. My subject is war and the pity of war. The poetry is in the pity."

The War poems by Wilfred Owen particularly Strange Meeting, Futility, Spring Offensive, Dulce et Decorum est, Anthem for Doomed Youth, Insensibility, Arms and the Boy, The Dead-Beat, Soldier's Dream reflect the Owen's response to war and the trauma felt by the soldiers. In "Strange Meeting", Owen presents a pretty bleak view of human society, which seems unwilling to stop fighting. Yet the poem also presents that violence as a choice rather than something innate to human beings. The two soldiers at the heart of the poem might very well have been friends in different circumstances. They even share the same hopes and dreams: "...Whatever hope is yours, Was my life also..." (Poems, 1920). Thus, the enemy soldier proclaims. By illustrating their shared humanity, the poem suggests that war creates a division that human being does not need to exist. The heart touching voice from the enemy soldier is that the enemy soldier forgives the other soldier saying "both can rest now" (Poems, 1920) achieving some sort of peace hoping that reconciliation and solidarity might be a sort of solution to the horrors and the trauma of war. In a lengthy discourse, the enemy soldier argues that trauma of the war and violence is unnecessary or even unnatural for humanity. He says that the people can move towards a peaceful world or they can "trek from progress" (Poems, 1920). He means that they can either forward or they can retreat backwards or downwards into violence. Otherwise, it's unwise to imagine a better world.

Owen vividly mirrors the trauma caused by war in the words such as “blood” that “clogged ... chariot-wheels”. The enemy soldier doesn’t show a lot of optimism that it will actually come to pass. Instead, he argues that people take violence as a cause for further violence, a sequence with no obvious exit. He presents this as a betrayal of the underlying possibility for solidarity and reconciliation between the people who fight each other.

The poem stages this disloyalty in its final lines, where the enemy soldier reveals who killed him. The enemy soldier announces, “I am the enemy you killed, my friend.” The line is paradoxical. One might wonder how the soldiers can be both enemies and friends. But the enemy soldier’s inference is clear. They are only enemies because their countries have decided to fight each other. Once all that is stripped away, they are friends again when there is no war. Friendship, not violence and enmity, is the natural relationship between human beings.

In ‘Dulce et Decorum est’, Owen describes the story of an English soldier whose squadron was attacked by the enemy. The soldier watches a fellow soldier’s death violently. It also shows how the soldier is endlessly haunted by the death and bombarded by nightmares. Towards the end of the poem, the soldier questions how his country can support and promote such despair and anguish.

Owen portrays his belief that his country should stop endorsing war. He was of the opinion that no one should ever have to undergo the horrors he had witnessed. He promotes this idea through the last stanza of his poem. To place the reader into a context of war, he uses intense imagery as in the line, “Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues” and also incorporates the use of similes, “as under a green sea I saw him drowning”. He has effectively created a feeling of discomfort and angst by incorporating techniques such as simile, metaphor.

Owen sets the scene and describes the soldiers as being “bent double, like old beggars under sacks”. This line depicts the dissatisfaction Owen had with war. He does this by combining elements of poetry in a frightening manner, such as “Gas! GAS! Quick boys!” The uniqueness of Owen is that he puts emphasis on particular lines pertaining to the nightmares of the soldier as in-

*“In all my dreams, before me helpless sight
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning”.*

Owen adds authority by using Latin phrase “Dulcet et decorum est. pro patria mori” the phrase is from the Roman poet Horace means “it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country to show that society continues to preserve the idea that war is honourable. As a soldier-poet, he had the authority to comment on the atrocities of war. He was able to speak what was not to be spoken and voiced the thoughts of fallen soldier. His establishment of anti-war ideas allowed society to break free from the constraints of propaganda. He tried to make to realise that war was not glorious, honourable nor adventurous. Regardless of the fact that world-wide change did not come about immediately. He was able to set precedent for other authors. He lit a fire in the depths of passionate hearts and inspired other anti-war poets. He uses alliteration and vivid aesthetics as shown in the lines “rifles’ rapid rattle” and “demented choirs of wailing shells” to give the reader insight into the chaos and trauma of war.

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