

## ENGLISH: *THE WAR POEMS*

### The war is not the only concern in Owen's poetry

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In his anthology, *The War Poems*, Wilfred Owen uses war as a metaphor or medium to express the suffering of society in the World War One period. Specifically, he conveys his disgust for the state of the human condition at this time, where his reference to life in the trenches and “the pity war distils”, have double meanings. The sensory imagery and figurative language employed by Owen both engulf and captivate readers in the horrors of war, and enables various ‘enemies’ to be identified. At the broadest level, Owen identifies how a society bereft of greed and pride is indicative of progression, particularly in the poem “Strange Meeting”. However, he also urges readers against being whimsically swallowed by societal constructs, where the gender imbalance between women and men, denoted in “Insensibility”, apparently leads to the deconstruction of a community. “Futility”, then, serves to illustrate the extent of human corruption, such that the potency of what is real, natural and pure is undermined.

Whilst Owen uses his poetry to condemn previous poets, who falsely exacerbated romantic notions about war, with their “tearful fooling”, he also contends that violence is not the answer to earn mutual respect. In the poem, “Insensibility”, Owen praises “[what] lies calm, in braided hair”, which symbolises his adulation for the harmony, sweetness and calmness exuded by women. He suggests that countries and world leaders should interact peacefully with each other. When this reasoning is applied to our contemporary society, it holds a greater meaning – power should not be abused, and arrogance should be cautioned against. Owen leaves readers to derive the irony from this poem; that is, peace is being attained by the massacre involved in combat. According to Owen, men should then be more like women, as opposed to parading their masculinity “in kilts” to “please the giddy jilts”, as is observed in the poem “Disabled”. Similarly, the power that men desire through the expression of a macho attitude is alluded to in the poem “Strange Meeting”, where “none” wanted to “break ranks” and “vain citadels” were also referred to. Owen suggests that humans have also been corrupted to the extent where they are always “discontent” or greedy. Tying in with the desire for power, World Leaders are specifically characterised and deemed culpable for having these traits. The allegory, “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young” insinuated the perdition or damnation that is inevitable for society, if “Abraham” is not controlled.

Being characterized in a vulnerable and helpless manner, as is symbolised by “Isaac” in “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young”, Owen intends to arouse pity for soldiers. On a bigger scale, these soldiers are representatives of the sacrificial “lambs” in an indoctrinated society, whose roles are synonymous to pawns on a chessboard. Through employing emotive language and graphic imagery in “Dulce Et Decorum Est”, as is observed through the descriptions of soldiers as “guttering, choking and drowning”, readers are left to conceive the gruesome and horrific notion of humans gasping for air. This ‘under-the-sea’ imagery not only renders soldiers as being out of place in the endless expanse of the Ocean, but also suffocated readers and makes them feel uncomfortable. Owen represents the extent to which humans can be psychologically consumed in the poem, “The Dead-Beat”, where a hapless man is unaware of the clouds of dust and “Five-Nines” surrounding him. Instead, he is drowning in his own internal conflicts, thinking about his “wife getting her fun” back home. Owen, then, uses this poem to encourage readers to be compassionate towards the bitter state of the soldiers, as well as suggesting that our minds might be our own enemies. Par rhyme or half-rhyme is used in “Strange Meeting” to a similar effect, where readers are left feeling disconcerted or dissatisfied on reading ‘Hall’ and “hell”, or “moan” and “mourn”, paired consecutively. Full rhyme gives a poem a sense of wholesomeness and completeness, of which Owen's poetry is deliberately devoid. He wants the readers to feel as the soldiers felt, and tap into the elegiac tone or despondent mood of reality in this time, where the truth was subverted, as is symbolised by the use of half-rhyme.

Even though readers are embroiled within the horrors of war through the extensive imagery in his poetry, Owen uses war as a context to protest or remonstrate against the tendency of humans to uncritically accept misconceptions in society. For instance, the poem "Strange Meeting" suggested that war is "the wildest beauty" that is worth "hunting" for. Through the distaste Owen asserts for war, particularly through the regret expressed by the alter-ego in this poem, it can be inferred that one should not simply follow or conform to society. According to Owen, war is not something that should be glorified – a notion that is propagated by myth. Humans are "blind" to the fact that war is a means of a perilous and bloody death, as is observed by the sanguine mood of the civilians who throw "white" flowers on the conscripted soldiers in "The Send-Off". As a result, Owen suggests that it is our parochially-minded and ignorant personality that should be castigated, for we, as a society, are not vigilant or circumspect enough the question the morality and righteousness of the maxim. Holistically, this could also mean that the "toil", pain, self-deprivation and harm endured by people in society, as alluded to in "Futility", for magnanimous concepts, such as loyalty and patriotism, is unwarranted.

Wilfred Owen uses war as a means to elaborate on the dehumanising nature of reality, where power may be abused to the extent where nought is gained. Suffering then becomes an excuse to parade ownership of a community; the desire for power being a superficial and butter truth of human existence.