

WWI Poetry

Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting"

- Aircraft and air warfare
- The submarine
- The tank
- Poison gas
- Machine gun
- Artillery and high explosives
- Electronic communications (field telephones)

- During the war the term “soldier-poet” was familiar.
- In the television series *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989) Lord Flashheart complains, “I’m sick of this damn war- the blood, the noise, the endless poetry.”
- Newspapers regularly printed new poems and volumes of verse also did well.

Trench Warfare

- The middle part of the war, 1916 and 1917, was dominated by continued trench warfare in both the east and the west. Soldiers fought from dug-in positions, striking at each other with machine guns, heavy artillery, and chemical weapons. Though soldiers died by the millions in brutal conditions, neither side had any substantive success or gained any advantage.
- Threat of illness from decomposing bodies and diseases bred in mud.

Themes of WW1 Poetry

- Patriotism
- Heroism
- War and Nature
- Visions and Dreams

Major WWI Poets

- *Rupert Brooke.*



• *Wilfred Owen.*



• ***Siegfried Sassoon.***



Wilfred Owen

- Wilfred Owen was 21 when the war broke out. Although he had failed to win a scholarship to university, he was very intelligent and cultured.
- Owen was not horrified or elated by the outbreak of war, although during 1914, he became more aware of the human sacrifice involved and was filled with confusion.

- In the second week of January, one of the worst in memory, he led his platoon into the Battle of the Somme.

In the middle of March, Owen **fell through a shell-hole into a cellar and was trapped in the dark for three days.**

He was eventually diagnosed as having neurasthenia (shell shock) and was invalided back to England.

- **Owen's most famous poems were written from this time until he left the hospital.**
- Owen relived his most traumatic memories every night through the form of **obsessive nightmares**. Under Sassoon's direction, he began to write about these memories in poetry.
- His poems recreated the miserable conditions and constant stress with which the soldiers lived – the mud, rats, barbed wire, lice, fleas, corpses, blood and constant shelling. He also gave graphic descriptions of the effects of poison gas.

- Wilfred Owen returned to the front in 1918 and was awarded the military cross for bravery for capturing a German machine gun. He never received it as he was killed early on the morning of 4th November 1918, seven days before the armistice.

“Strange Meeting” 1918.

My Subject is War, and the Pity of War. The Poetry is in the Pity

- Inspired by Shelley and Sassoon.
- Soldier in World War I.
- Runs into spirit of dead soldier
- Characterized by iambic pentameter throughout most of poem
- Imperfect(para) rhyme scheme emphasizes ugliness of war
- Liberal use of enjambment shows endless hopelessness

- Reference to each other as “friend,” even though once enemies
- Increased use of end-stopped lines at end signals conclusion
- Constant tone of peaceful hopelessness
- Use of oxymorons and paradoxes to show senselessness of war

- It seemed that out of battle I escaped
- Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
- Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
- Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.

- Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
- 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.

- With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
- Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
- And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
- “Strange friend,” I said, “here is no cause to mourn.”
- “None,” said that other, “save the undone years,
- The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,

- Was my life also; I went hunting wild
- After the wildest beauty in the world,
- Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
- But mocks the steady running of the hour,
- And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
- For by my glee might many men have laughed,
- And of my weeping something had been left,

- Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
- The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
- Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
- Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
- They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
- None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.

- Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
- Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
- To miss the march of this retreating world
- Into vain citadels that are not walled.
- 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 taint.
- I would have poured my spirit without stint
- But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
- Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

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

Poem Summary

- The speaker escapes from battle and proceeds down a long tunnel through ancient granite formations. Along his way he hears the groan of sleepers, either dead or too full of thoughts to get up. As he looks at them one leaps up; the soldier has recognized him and moves his hands as if to bless him. Because of the soldier's "dead smile" the speaker knows that he is in Hell.

- On the face of the "vision" the speaker sees a thousand fears, but the blood, guns, or moans of above did not reach into their subterranean retreat. The speaker tells the soldier that there is no reason to mourn, and he replies that there is – it is the "undone years" and "hopelessness". The soldier says his hope is the same as the speaker's; he also tells him he once went hunting for beauty in the world, but that beauty made a mockery of time. He knows the truth of what he did, which is "the pity of war, the pity war distilled", but now he can never share it.

- The soldier/vision continues, saying men will go on with what is left to them, or they will die as well. They will not break their ranks even though "nations trek from progress". He used to have courage and wisdom. He would wash the blood from the wheels of chariots. He wanted to pour his spirit out, but not in war.
- Finally, he says to the speaker that "I am the enemy you killed, my friend," and that he knew him in the dark. It was yesterday that the speaker "jabbed and killed" him, and now it is time to sleep.

Figurative Language---**Metaphors**

- **‘beauty.... mocks the steady running of the hour’**
1.20 - The mocking nature of beauty is a personification closely linked with the metaphor of time running out. This image comes from an hour-glass where sand runs through a waisted flask to mark the passage of time.

- **‘much blood has clogged the chariot wheels’** l.33 - This is figurative only in part. The ‘chariot wheels’ suggest an ancient war but also represent the machinery which drives forward any and every war. The desire to ‘wash them from sweet wells’ l.35 is a picture of how the soldier longs to cleanse and purify the bloodshed in so many battles.
- **‘Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were’** l.39 - This is a metaphor for psychological suffering.

- **‘I would have poured out my spirit without stint’** l.37 - This shows the willingness of the soldier to make sacrifices for truth. The idea is that the soldier would sacrifice his ‘spirit’ l.37 in the cause of freedom, rather than blood. This echoes Owen’s personification of war l.25 which results in the distilling of pity. The literal product of the distillation process is pure spirit. Owen gives us a picture of war being reduced to pity. The man wants to pour out this pity without holding anything back. The biblical sources of this metaphor would have been very familiar to Owen with his strong Bible-based upbringing.

Personification

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- **'That sullen hall'** of l.10: Hell takes on a human mood
- **'No guns...do**
- **wn the flues made moan'** l.13: reminds us of the angry guns of Anthem for Doomed Youth
- **'The pity war distilled'** l.25: suggests that war is the distiller who creates the spirit or essence of pity. Something which is distilled is said to be purified; it is reduced to its essence.
- **'Vain citadels'** l.33: the wall-less fortresses of the future reflect the vanity of humanity (or it could be that they have been constructed 'in vain' as they will not hold back the forces of destruction).
- The personification of places, weapons and the war itself makes the 'strange' friend's message stronger.

Oxymoron

- Owen uses oxymorons in the 'dead smile' l.10 of the 'Strange friend' l.14 as he brings together those who have been on separate sides of the chasm of war.

Symbolism

- **Hell:** It is ironic that this is where Owen arrives when he escapes the war, thereby conveying his fears for the future of humanity
- **Blood and water:** Blood l.12,34 symbolises the agony and loss of life due to war and water the means of healing
- **Guns** symbolise the destructiveness of war
- **Friendship and beauty** stand for what Owen sees as the counterbalance to war with its hatefulness and ugliness
- **Pity** is a major theme but also symbolic of all that Owen seeks to write about in his poetry.