

Thematic and Stylistic Perspectives of Wilfred Owen's Major War Poems: A Critical Analysis

Dr.Mohammad Shaukat Ansari, Associate Professor of English, M.L.S.M. College, (L.N. Mithila University), Darbhanga, Bihar.

Article Received: 12/01/2022,

Article Accepted: 25/02/2023,

Published Online: 27/02/2023,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2023.5.02.85

Abstract

The poetry that came out of direct experiences of the First World War is an unfailing source of keen interest, personal perception, creative understanding and ornamented technique. It is also a source of straightforward information about morale boosting, relationships, events and reactions. The war poetry flourished in two phases; first poets like Rupert Brooke who did not personally witness the horror of war and called for patriotism and nobility of supreme sacrifice; second, those poets who like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon had actually been to the war front and had seen immense human suffering and massive depravity. The recognition of Wilfred Owen's poetry as an essential voice of 1914 – 1918 is one significant aspect among many that avidly reflect modern attitudes as storehouse to humanity and warfare. In his poetry, Owen exposes the actuality of war in sharp contrast to the self-coined fabricated image of glory of propaganda and military officials. The major themes in Owen's poetry, delineated on broader spectrum, are pity, tragic death, horrors, violence, destruction, devastation, despair, plight, upheaval, duplicate glory in fighting and protest against war.

Owen's dashing ability to pen such memorable, gem like and poignant poetry with thought-captivating perception of war and with an intellectual depth, as a matter of fact, goes beyond the boundaries of simple versions of sympathy.

The paper aims to offer impetus to critical explorations of Owens's autobiographical gamut in his poetry in the special light of his experiences of short life, his canons of attitudes to noble causes, his vivid narrations of what he witnessed and felt during war and his exposure of humanity of mechanized warfare on broader scale. The paper tends to posit further that Owen's depiction in poetry is a trove of autobiography and universality both, and this ventilates his extraordinary approach. The attempt here is to discern and examine the penetrating and thought-provoking themes of Owen's known poems and to connect them with the poet's profoundly connoting experiences and implied meanings.

Keywords: autobiography, battlefield, experiences, horror, humanity, mechanized, personal conflict, perception, pity, poetry, theme, universality, warfare, war, Wilfred Owen

Introduction

Wilfred Edward Salter Owen, (18 March 1893 – 4 November 1918) is a prolific English poet and valiant soldier. He is one of the leading and illustrious poets of the First World War. He is the war poet for those who earnestly desire the reality. He is a gifted artist for those who nourish a fine feeling for words and a sudden rhythmic sense. He is regarded by many as the greatest poet of the First World War.¹ The striking fact associated with his brief career as a poet is “the astonishing speed of his development....from his apprentice works to his last poems.”²

Owen wrote vivid and terrifying poems about modern warfare, horrible and bloody pictures, depiction of graphic scenes with honest emotions and by placing them within framework of enumerating insightful perspective. And, in doing so, young Owen helped to advance poetry into the Modernist era. The major themes in Owen’s poetry of war that explicitly govern his poems are based on the subject of war itself, pity, tragic death, horrors and protest against war. The poet expresses a distinguished outlook in using his poetry as a testimony, and his captivating narration seeks to transmit the real pictures of war evilness, and warn people implicitly and sometimes explicitly, against war. His war poetry on the horrors of trenches and gas warfare was heavily influenced by his mentor Siegfried Sassoon, and stood in stark contrast both to the public perception of war at the time and to the confidently patriotic verse written by earlier war poets such as Rupert Brooke. Among his best-known works – most of which were published posthumously – are *Dulce et Decorum est*, *Insensibility*, *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, *Futility*, *Spring Offensive* and *Strange Meeting*.

Publication of Owen’s poems

Wilfred Owen, who created some of the best British poetry on World War I, composed nearly all of his poems in slightly over a year, from August 1917 to September 1918. In November 1918 he was killed in action at the age of 25. Only five poems were published in his lifetime—three in the *Nation* and two that appeared anonymously in the *Hydra*, a journal he edited in 1917 when he was a patient at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh. Shortly after his death, seven more of his poems appeared in the 1919 volume of Edith Sitwell's annual anthology, *Wheels*: a volume dedicated to his memory, and in 1919 and 1920 seven other poems figured in periodicals. Almost all of Owen’s poems, therefore, surfaced posthumously: importantly in the bestselling collection *Poems* (1920), edited by Siegfried Sassoon with the assistance of Edith Sitwell, contains twenty three poems; *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (1931), edited by Edmund Blunden, adds nineteen poems to this number; and *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* (1963), edited by a brilliant critic, Cecil Day Lewis, consists of eighty poems, adding some juvenilia, minor poems, and fragments but omitting a few of the poems from Blunden’s edition.

Owen’s war service

On 21 October 1915, Owen enlisted in the Artists Rifles Officers' Training Corps. For the next seven months, he was trained at Hare Hall Camp in Essex.³ On 04 June 1916, he was

commissioned as a second lieutenant (on probation) in the Manchester Regiment. Initially Owen held his troops in contempt for their loutish behaviour, and in a letter to his mother termed his company as 'expressionless lumps'. However, his imaginative existence was to be changed dramatically by a series of traumatic experiences. He fell into a shell hole and suffered concussion; he was blown up by a trench mortar and spent several days unconscious on an embankment lying amongst the remains of one of his fellow officers. Soon afterward, he was diagnosed as suffering from neurasthenia or shell-shock and sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh for full treatment. It was while recuperating at Craiglockhart that he met fellow poet Siegfried Sassoon, a great encounter that was to influence and transform Owen's life tremendously.

While living at Craiglockhart, Owen made friends in Edinburgh's artistic and literary circles, and did some teaching at the Tyne castle High School, in a poor area of the city. In November he was discharged from Craiglockhart, judged fit for light regimental duties. He spent a contented and fruitful winter in Scarborough, North Yorkshire, and in March 1918 he was posted to the Northern Command Depot at Ripon. While in Ripon he composed or revised a number of poems, including *Futility* and *Strange Meeting*.

Owen returned in July 1918, to active service in France, although he might have stayed on home-duty indefinitely. His decision to return was probably the result of Sassoon's being sent back to England, after being shot in the head in an apparent 'friendly fire' incident, and put on sick-leave for the remaining duration of the war. Owen saw it as his duty to augment his voice to that of Sassoon that the horrific realities of the war might continue to be told.

At the very end of August 1918, Owen returned to the front line – perhaps imitating Sassoon's example. On 01 October 1918, he led units of the Second Manchesters to storm a number of enemy strong fronts near the village of Joncourt. For his courage, gallantry, devotion to duty and leadership in the Joncourt action, he was awarded the Military Cross, an honour he had always sought in order to justify himself as a war poet, but the award was not gazetted until 15 February 1919.⁴

Influences on Owen's poetry

Owen had been writing poetry for some years before the war, himself dating his poetic flag off to a stay at Broxton by the Hill when he was ten years old. The Romantic poets Keats and Shelley and also the ideals of French Revolution considerably influenced much of his early writing and poetry. His great friend, the poet Siegfried Sassoon, later had a profound effect on his poetic voice, and his most famous poems such as *Dulceet Decorum est* and *Anthem for Doomed Youth* establish direct results of Sassoon's influence.

There were many other influences on Owen's poetry, including his mother. His letters to her provide an insight into his life at the front, and underscore the development of his philosophy regarding the war. Graphic details of the horror he witnessed were never spared. His experiences with religion also cast worth-mentioning imprints upon his poetry, notably in poems such as

Anthem for Doomed Youth, in which the ceremony of a funeral is re-enacted not in a church, but on the battlefield itself, and At a Calvary near the Ancre, which supplies his critical viewson the Crucifixion of Christ. His experiences in war led him further to challenge his religious beliefs, claiming in his poem Exposure that ‘love of God seems dying’.

Also, his piercing life experiences, their backgrounds, his family, his military service, altogether on broader canvas, casted invigorating imprints on his compositions. The cultured environment in his home had a strong impact on the growth and development of his writings. Seemingly the tour in trenches during his military activities produced the emotional and spiritual aspects in him that are fit to ruminate here as well.

During his military service he was writing letters to his family, showing his childish feelings to his mother, and the sense of responsibility towards his sister and younger brothers as if he was their father (Lewis 13).⁵ Owen's sense of responsibility for his younger members of the family and for his widowed mother embodied his feeling as a soldier and poet towards his men and towards all soldiers on the front. During working in Dunsden for a little wage, he was conducting several tours among the rural slums there and was reared hard against some facts of life: misery, ailment, and poverty. This experience must have rung the bells in his mind, and seemingly left a pragmatic impression which obliged him to look at the real world. Thus, the massive power of furious pity in his war poems has not only originated from the front, but also from the sense of social responsibility towards the painful life conditions connected with Dunsden's people.

Owen's death

On November 1917, Owen was discharged from Craiglockhart, posted to northern Cavalry Barracks, Scarborough. On August 1918, he returned to France for active service. Owen was killed in action on 4th November 1918 during the crossing of the Sambre–Oise Canal, exactly one week before the signing of the Armistice which ended the war, and was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant the day after his death. His mother received the telegram informing her of his death on Armistice Day, as the church bells in Shrewsbury were ringing out in celebration.

Review of Literature

The First World War poets produced a fair number of fine personal lyrics recording their real war experiences. Despite their individual and poetic differences, they had many things in common. First, before the beginning of war, most of them shared the same primary feeling of patriotism, which prompted them to quit schools or colleges and enlist for front deployment. Second, while on the front, they tried to justify and rationalize their patriotism. Third, disillusioned by the atrocities and horrors of war, they protested against its inevitable continuity and hostility; they also attacked the army leaders and politicians for perpetuating the misery of people, especially young men who had to fight. Although their poetry documents personal experiences in trenches and training camps, it also manifests the agonies of a whole generation.

A good number of Owen's war poems were written between 1917 and 1918, and this very fact perhaps made several critics describe Owen as an enigma. During Owen's life, only four of his poems were published, while his celebrity was posthumous. The authenticity, grandeur and literary elegance in the language and technique of his poems, the blending of harsh realism with a sensation, and the portrayal of pernicious horrors, proved that Owen is categorically a versatile poet and his poetry is mature as well. It was not a gradual development that made his work mature, but a kind of revolution in mind that enabled him to recognize his subject clearly and keenly: 'war and the pity of war'. This subject inspired Owen to write his poems that contributed to a radical change of citizens' attitudes towards the war: not to think of war as anything but evil (Lewis 11-12).⁶The poetry of war, in fact, was "influential in shaping popular cultural perceptions of the war".⁷

Biographical research in poetry composed in and around the years of the First World War reveals that hundreds of British men (both civilians and combatants) and women wrote thousands of poems encompassing a wide range of themes. From psychologically complex elegiac renderings and articulation of diverse forms of work experience on the one hand, to the chronicling of trench and combat experience on the other, these poems provide an absorbing literary and socio-political study of the times of war.⁸ However, Owen's experiences, observations, feelings, notions, mottos, patriotic messages in his poems turn prominent in better view of the specific fact that he faithfully recorded them in altogether six capacities – as a human being, as a soldier, as a witness of war, as a biblical scholar, as a creator of structural poetic uniqueness and as a poet.

According to Kendall⁹, Owen used the poetry as a way of therapy. Psychologically, he aimed to forget the painful memories on which the poems themselves revolve. Through recurrent writing of the same memories he wanted to keep himself away from unholy motivations and to free his mind from the worst record ever. Owen's war poetry resides 'in the pity', he referred to pity, for friend and foe alike, at a point where the real experience should have overcome any other kind of literary celebration, such as glories, heroism, and patriotism. He reinforced this vision in that the best war poetry is a combination of bitterness and nostalgia as it was seen arising out of the grand disillusion of the First World War.

This paper aims to explore the brilliant synthesis of subjectivity and universality in Wilfred Owen's major war poems. It also intends to examine his war poems in the thematic and artistic perspectives, and the findings of this paper will be a sort of rich contribution towards understanding Owen, his dominating themes and fascinating techniques.

Discussion and Analysis

A.Owen's poems: a critical overview

Poems (1920), edited by Sassoon, established Owen as a war poet before public interest in the war had diminished in the 1920s. The Poems of Wilfred Owen (1931), edited by Blunden (a poet, author, critic and Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford), aroused much more

critical attention, especially that of W.H. Auden and the poets in his circle, Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, Christopher Isherwood, and Louis MacNeice. Blunden thought that Auden and his group were influenced primarily by three poets: G.M. Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, and Wilfred Owen. The Auden group saw in Owen's poetry the incisiveness of political protest against injustice, but their interest in Owen was less in the content of his poems than in his artistry and technique. Though they were moved by the human experience described in Owen's best poems and understood clearly his revulsion toward war, they were appalled by the sheer waste of a great poet dying just as he had begun to realize fully his potential. Dylan Thomas, who, like Owen, possessed a brilliant metaphorical imagination, pride in Welsh ancestry, and an ability to dramatize in poetry his psychic experience, saw in Owen "a poet of all times, all places, and all wars. There is only one war, that of men against men."¹⁰

The war had induced a mood of depression as well as revulsion of feeling against European civilization. In this dark atmosphere, Eliot's satirical poems *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), Hopkins' *Poems* (1918) and Owen's *Poems* (1920) appeared with great messages. These three were much more than mere pointers; they embodied the spirit of modernist poetry.

Cecil Day Lewis, in the introduction to *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* (1963), judiciously praised Owen's poems for "the originality and force of their language, the passionate nature of the indignation and pity they express, their blending of harsh realism with a sensuousness unatrophied by the horrors from which they flowered." Day Lewis's view that Owen's poems were "certainly the finest written by any English poet of the First War" is incontestable. With general agreement, critics like J. Middleton Murry, Bonamy Dobree, Hoxie Fairchild, Ifor Evans, Kenneth Muir, and T.S. Eliot, for example—have written of his work for six decades. The best of Owen's 1917-1918 poems are great by all warranted standards. Day Lewis's conclusion that they also are "probably the greatest poems about the war in our literature"¹¹ may, if anything, be too tentative. His work will remain central in any discussion of war poetry.

B. Owen's poems and the context of First World War

When the First World War broke out, Owen was living in a rural society. At the beginning, he opposed the war in terms of a naïve, violent and deadly serious manner. He had been barely influenced by the war and his firm belief was that the war is a severe annoyance of the private life. But after the first witness of a real case of injured soldier in Bordeaux Hospital, he in a ruthless and sharpness tone recounted the actualities of war. Then he was enlisted in the military service, and appointed to the artist's rifle. He indulged in a tough and tedious life while he was obtaining his training. The military expressions impacted his language in terms of sharpness and toughness which mostly featured his writings (Kerr 289-290).¹²

The First World War brought to public notice many poets, particularly among men in the armed forces, while it provided a new source of inspiration for writers of established reputation.

Not a few of the younger poets were killed or died in struggle, and “it is impossible to estimate the loss sustained by English poetry in their deaths.”¹³

As a significant argument, it is in the fitness of things to place and probe Owen’s writings (poems and letters) firmly in the context of his war service. In several of his most effective war poems, Owen suggests that the experience of war for him was surrealistic, as when the infantrymen dream, hallucinate, begin freezing to death, continue to march after several nights without sleep, lose consciousness from loss of blood, or enter a hypnotic state from fear or excessive guilt. The resulting disconnected sensory perceptions and the speaker’s confusion about his identity suggest that not only the speaker, but the whole humanity, has lost its moorings. The horror of war, then, becomes more universal, the tragedy more overwhelming, and the pity evoked more profound, because there is no rational explanation to account for the cataclysm.

One of Owen’s most moving poems, *Dulce et Decorum est*, which had its origins in Owen’s experiences of January 1917, describes explicitly the horror of the gas attack and the death of a wounded man who has been flung into a wagon. The horror intensifies, becoming a waking nightmare experienced by the exhausted viewer, who stares hypnotically at his comrade in the wagon ahead of him as he must continue to march.

The nightmare ingredient reaches its apogee in *The Show*. As the speaker gazes upon a desolate, war-ravaged landscape, it changes gradually to the magnified portion of a dead soldier’s face, infested by thousands of caterpillars. The barbed wire of no-man’s-land becomes the scraggly beard on the face; the shell holes become pockmarked skin. Only at the end does the poet’s personal conflict become clear. Owen identifies himself as the severed head of a caterpillar and the many legs, still moving blindly, as the men of his command from whom he has been separated. The putrefying face, the sickening voraciousness of the caterpillars, and the utter desolation of the ruined landscape become symbolic of the lost hopes for humanity that “reveals the intensity of the experience and its effect on the poet.”¹⁴

Strange Meeting, another great poem with a dreamlike frame, differs from those just described in its meditative tone and its less-concentrated use of figurative language. Two figures - the poet and the man he killed - gradually recognize each other and their similarity when they meet in the shadows of hell. In the background one becomes aware of multitudes of huddled sleepers, slightly moaning in their ‘encumbered’ sleep—all men killed in ‘titanic wars’. Because the second man speaks almost exclusively of death’s thwarting of his purpose and ambition as a poet, he probably represents Owen’s alter ego. Both figure is differentiated by earthly association, and the ‘strange friend’ may also represent an Everyman figure, suggesting the universality of the tragedy of war. The last line in the poem extends “the Pity of war” to a universal pity for all those who have been diminished through the ages by art which might have been created and was not.

Sassoon called *Strange Meeting* Owen's masterpiece, the finest elegy by a soldier who fought in World War I and the most intensely tragic poem of the time.¹⁵ T.S. Eliot, who praised it as "one of the most moving pieces of verse inspired by the war," recognized that its emotional power lies in Owen's "technical achievement of great originality."¹⁶ In *Strange Meeting*, one of the most moving and memorable poems of war, Owen sustains the dreamlike quality by a complex musical pattern, which unifies the poem and leads to an overwhelming sense of war's waste and a sense of pity that such conditions should continue to exist.

Although Owen does not use the dream frame in *Futility*, this poem, in line with *Strange Meeting*, is also a profound meditation on the horrifying significance of war. As in one of the most carefully revised poems, *Exposure*, the elemental structure of the universe seems out of joint. *Exposure* proves to be an unusual Great War poem by any standards since its detail "insinuates that the soldier's real enemy is not physical warfare – which has receded into distance, far away, 'like a dull rumour of some other war' – but the persistent assault waged against them by the natural elements"¹⁷ Unlike the speaker in *Exposure*, however, this one does not doubt that spring will come to warm the frozen battlefield, but he wonders why it should. Even the vital force of the universe—the sun's energy—no longer nurtures life.

C. Thematic and artistic perceptions of Owen's major war poems: a critical review

Owen's war poetry which widely attributed to the actualities of the trench life, in large, formed the 'modern memory' of the war. The vivid images of darkness, guns, mud, rain, gas, bullets, shells, barbed wire, rats, lice, cold, and trenches enriched the modern war poetry. *Dulce et Decorum est*, is one of Owen's major poems. It was published posthumously in 1920. The title is an ironic allusion to a line taken from a Latin poem for the Roman poet Horace, "*Dulce et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori*", which means it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country. Owen wrote the poem as a response to the patriotic poetess Jessie Pope whose recruiting poems encouraged many young men to fight in the futile war. Ironically, Owen referred to Jessie Pope in line 25 using the term 'My Friend', but how come to be a friend while her poetic works performed as an enemy toward the humankind. The poem is known as 'a gas poem' in which Owen employed both senses of experience and language in their extreme limits. Although the phrase 'gas poem' does not fully convey the aspects of poetic and thematic issues, the desperate moments during and after the gas attack weep through the whole lines of the poem. Bloom thinks that, "Owen's goal from such title is to attack the concept that sacrifice is sacred, and to destroy the glamorized decency of the war" (Bloom 15)¹⁸. In *Dulce et Decorum est*, Owen in a scenic way, infers the details of the instant and direct effects of a gas attack. Moving from the bloodied feet to the bloodied mouth of the soldier, he discussed different main points in the subject of war: night march, a gas attack, and traumatic neurosis. The soldiers were fatigued and exhausted by the battle, so they withdrew from the front lines to the back lines of the battle to have a short break and to rearrange their selves before going back to the battle field. They were extremely tired to the limit that they did not feel the falling down of the bombs, and did not hear the

explosion sound of the gas projectiles dropped behind them. They tried to put gas masks on quickly, but one soldier had no enough energy and was late to put the mask on in time. Owen kept a helpless and powerless observe from behind the saving panels of the mask to the situation in which the man had no ability to breathe in a sea of gas. What is a value of a life restricted in a trivial and cheap-price mask panels? Those panels represent the distance between life and death. However, the brutal vision of a soldier agony of dying through the gas haunted the poet in all his dreams.

Owen apparently wanted from the poem *Dulce et Decorum est* to sternly warn the public of the lie and negate the perception that it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country for the cause of war only, since Owen himself was wholly convinced that it was a lie. The initial fourteen lines describe the set of circumstances and the situation in which the soldier found himself trapped. The other fourteen lines display the effects of what happened and Owen's serious thoughts and his echoes on them. However, the last four lines warn the reader to avoid similar suffering and misery in the future. With awareness or familiarity gained from the sad experience of that soldier who died in a gas attack, Owen sends a message to the whole world in that it is a must that 'not [to] tell' lies to children 'ardent' for glory. Owen did not save any effort in portraying the terror of the gas attack. In a genius dramatic outlook, he employed his harsh commentating knowledge flavored with both tones and cadences in using a reportage, direct description, and documentary portrayal by which he made the distance between the miserable scene of the gas attack and the reach of reader's imagination so close.

It is hereby worthy to underline that Owen uses special techniques of sound representations in this poem *Dulce et Decorum est*. He moves from visual impressions to visceral processes in the description of the gas attack. He fluctuates from sounds produced between the body and the world-fumbling, stumbling, floundering, drowning-to the sounds within the body itself: guttering, choking, writhing, gargling (Kendall 84). Also, he uses the aesthetics of contradictions in the 8 line: 'Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.' He describes the 'dropping' of the deadly 'gas-shells' in a confused perspective when he says that the shells were dropped 'softly'. How come fatal bombs dropped in a soft scene! At the same time he says that the shells were dropped 'behind'. The panoramic scene here is so confused to have a deadly bombs dropped softly and behind. By these contradictions of expressions, Owen apparently wants to emphasize the horror experienced by the soldiers and the readers alike. At the time the life of the soldiers was controlled by the death in the front lines, it was also dominated by death from behind.

One of the most perfectly structured of Owen's poems is *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, that stupendously incorporates the theme of horror of war, and that convinced Sassoon in October 1917 that Owen was not only a 'promising minor poet' but a poet with 'classic and imaginative serenity' who possessed 'impressive affinities with Keats.' The poem's success lies in the stark

contrast between the furious, explosive reality of the battle and the calm holiness of the church ritual.

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

— Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle

Can patter out their hasty orisons. (ll 1- 4)

As a poem that turns upon the theme of the massively dehumanizing temptations of war, *Insensibility* can firmly stand as an eloquent coda for the whole of Owen's work. In this poem, the poet brilliantly enacts the sensation of depersonalized, almost posthumous calm that both protects and reduces the humanity of the soldier. This is a poem made up of little snapshots instances flowed from Owen's point of view, and opening the idea that soldiers are better off with as little emotion as possible.

But they are troops who fade, not flowers,

For poets' tearful fooling:

Men, gaps for filling:

Losses, who might have fought

Longer; but no one bothers. (ll 7-11)

In the poem *Futility*, Owen observes a strange phenomenon of symptoms of what the eyes and ears had witnessed. Owen wrote this poem in May 1918 during the war. It appeared in *The Nation* during 1918, and it was published posthumously in 1920. The setting of this poem is a trench in the cold winter of 1916-1917 in which Owen and his soldiers suffered from the continuous gunfire of the enemy and from the severe cold weather as well. Kendall believes that the poem does not match Owen as realistic or satirical personality although they apparently represent the formal and thematic broad characteristics of his works. At the very moment of the poem's creation, Owen turns his attention to a corpse, a body whose anonymity takes shape, and none of its details are obtained, and he offers it what little he can: the attention, solace, and compassion (Kendall 499).¹⁹ The poem is a piece of anti-war, pro-country, and public propaganda through which Owen wants to produce a sentimental effect in a nostalgic induction to home. It is noticeable that the shadow John Keats has loomed over this poem as similar as of much Owen's trench poetry. The life of sensation rather than thoughts has dominated over the poem implicitly. So the poem's form denies any thoughts of militarism or celebration of battle. The varied rhyme and half rhymes ('sun', 'once', 'half sown', 'France', 'snow', 'now', 'know') and to home traveling rhythm ('think how it wakes the seeds-/ woke once the clays of a cold star') themselves completely abolish the existence of the identity of militarism in the poem and support the romantic outlook of the poem. Even nationalism here is subjected to the nostalgia for English fields. The poem is anti- militaristic in the rhythms of its individualized elegiac voice,

specified with a quiet and contemplative balance. The titular theme applies not only to war but also to human institutions including religion and human existence itself.

Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides

Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir? (ll 10-11)

‘Mourning at death’ and ‘futility’ have been interchangeably expressed in the poem. On the one side, the poem speaks directly to humanity and puts the agony of the individual soldier in a universal frame. Owen strongly tends to write powerful and moving poetry about the truth of war by expressing the sorrow and sadness for this man's death. On one side, the theme of ‘mourning at death’ primarily dominates the first section of the poem in which Owen laments the death of a young farmer whose life was finished pointlessly in the war. The death of that soldier represents the death of all soldiers in the war and it is recognition that the death of this anonymous warrior is a title of the fate of many unknown warriors. The name of the soldier is not known to stand for the many other soldiers who died in the First World War. Owen evokes a sense that this soldier's death stands for the death of thousands of others and that the speaker's authenticable personal witnessing of this death can stand as a wider argument about the futility of war. On the other side, the unnecessary and pointless death of the soldier refers to the theme of futility. The title of the poem itself epitomizes the aspect of futility as a result of war. Futility is an extremely moving poem because it moves from mourning a dead soldier to the futility of human life, and it focuses on a futile death and recites the commemoration or mourning. It is wholly characteristic of Owen that it consolidates on the fate of one private soldier, the eponymous soldier who was struggling to live. Focusing is not only on the soldier pathetic reaction, but also on the haunting dreams of Owen. The explicit reflection of the grief, and the lament of the dead in the poem made critics consider it an elegiac voice. The soldiers tried in vain to do what they could to revive their dead friend. Nature was the first thing that came to Owen's mind at that moment. He meditated that the sun can help their dead friend but unfortunately, the contemplation in nature's power was futile. A questioning about the meaning and value of the individual even after his death as well as the futility of human existence emerges. The limited capacity and trivial position in front of a nation submitted to war, describe in a sense of sad despair the futility of the soldiers' attempt to rescue their friend.

The poem *Strange Meeting* is also a model of a major poetic work by Owen that illustrates the theme of war and its aftermath. It was written at some point of the first half of 1918, and published in 1919, the direct year after Owen's death. It is argued that the poem is the most renowned work, and it alongside other poems played a significant role in widening Owen's poetic fame. The poem itself is a debate; different opinions by some critics are expressed about it. Osbert Sitwell claimed that the poem is a “great poem as exists in our tongue” (Kerr 174)20. John Middleton Murry, a renowned scholar introduced the poem in terms of aesthetic and spiritual mode as ‘a true poetic style’, ‘discovery of a genius’, and ‘imaginative sublimation’. This introduction reflects the fact that the poem is a unique complete masterpiece produced by a

mature talented poet who facilitated the way beyond superficial realism. The general distinguished atmosphere of this poem, according to Murray, was the main factor behind the celebrity of Owen (Kerr 175-176).²¹ Siegfried Sassoon described the poem as Owen's "passport to immortality, and his elegy to the unknown warriors of all nations" (Bloom 22)²². The poem was coined to show a critical sensation about the war. Owen used perfect expressions and techniques to convey the sardonic vision of 'Foolishness of War'. He wanted to draw attention to 'Foolishness of War' as a theme dominating the whole poem. Although he tried to avoid the realistic description of the horrors of war and going this time towards an imaginative projection of emotion, realism in this context was seen as a political connotation to protest against war. Edmund Blunden felt that there was a need to insist that the poem had its roots firmly planted in realism: it was peculiarly a poem of the Western Front," he said, "a dream only a stage further on than the actuality of the tunneled dug-outs. The debate about the nature of Owen's [realistic poetic] achievement [...] continued, on the grounds of this poem, trailing its difficult questions about the political meaning of a poet's 'acquiescence' or 'protest', questions which were themselves bound up with the nation's and Europe's struggles to understand the Great War (Kerr 177).²³

The poem was seen as an incomplete work; and it was believed that the poetic rather than the editorial reason was behind this assumption. In the last line: 'Let us sleep now. . . .', the poem seemed unfinished. Some critics see that Owen left the end unfinished to give an indication of future conflicts between nations. As if Owen was saying that war is not a restriction to a specific generation rather than another; he was sadly prophesying future conflicts. Douglas Kerr explains in this respect: This unfinished poem, the most remote and intimate, tranquil and dynamic, of all Owen's imaginative statements of war experience, ... demanded a special place in the foreground, and again this seemed to have to do with its prophetic content, and with its status as somehow Owen's last testament. The opening of the poem is dramatically magnificent. It is, like *Futility*, directly speaks to humanity and puts the agony of the individual soldier in a global and worldwide context. It does not only tackle the truth of war, but it is also one of the first anti-war propaganda of the 20th Century. Owen employed his persuasive abilities to speak and write about millions of soldiers with whom he lived the same war experience. His rhetorical protest was powerful because it was sprung out from the actualities of his own war experiences. He saw the war as a pathetic crime against nature, humanity, and against humankind existence itself, therefore, in his perspective, no war can be justified. He completely got rid of the personal restrictions and presented his technique in graphic imagination to convey the universal truths about war. Owen also gave a voice that futility of war is a form of the blind hatred of humanity. In a sense of escape, he dreamt of being underworld, protected from the horrible experience of war, but finally realized that he encounters a subterranean suffering and the escape is a mere illusion. Despite the fact that escape from suffering was an impossible demand, Owen still had a hope in forgetfulness of that suffering as the one and only therapy from the painful actuality.

This poem can be analyzed on two scales: the psychological and the physical. It can be seen as a sense of unconsciousness and as a poignant dream in which the poet found himself conducting a dialogue underground with a dead soldier. The traditional place of the dead (dug out), the physical distortion of bodies accompanied with guilt seen on their faces, and many other piteous images, as results of wars, reflect the feelings of despair that dominated all over the poem.

Owen voices his despair and regret at the unavoidable loss of humanity. He has first-hand knowledge of war, the ability to tell the facts of war, and the courage to express his protest against the war. Thus he could have stepped aside and avoided the march that led humanity into her own destruction: "Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn." / "None", said the 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. Owen expects a post-war period with the world changed for the worse by war. He expresses his fear that "Men will go content with what we spoiled," that they will accept the shattered world as the norm. The alternative will be 'discontent' and further regression into "this retreating world" - a frightening (and accurate) prediction of events:

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. (Strange Meeting, ll 22-27)

The poem expresses most profoundly the idea of the 'greater love' which is the "truth that lies too deep for taint". Love is essential to purify the world cleanly with truth. Owen makes an attempt to convey the message of human brotherhood to us. He suggests that had he not been killed, he is probably foreseeing his death and the impossibility of carrying out his mission; he would have spent all his energy to cleanse the world from the blood of war, yet not through wounds and war but with the sweet water of his poetry, that is teaching humanity the lesson of the greater love. To quote:

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 thecess of war. (Strange Meeting, ll 33-37)

Another implicit theme is the need for reconciliation in the world. He uses his poetry as a manner of his philosophical manifestation about the pity of war and ‘the truth untold’ (line 24) to clarify how much the world is in need for reconciliation. ‘Hunting wild after the wildest beauty in the world’ (line 17) is another theme which Owen investigates. In the manner of Keats, he searches for beauty in a land in which there is no beauty. Due to the horrors of war, the beauty was replaced by the ugliness. His search for beauty and truth was inspired by his reading of Keats.

In order to stop this surge of catastrophic events, Owen refers to the power of poetry and suggests ways in which poetry and pity can restore the human spirit. The poet has the courage and wisdom to halt ‘the trek from progress’ (line 28). When this futile murdering and destruction can go no further and the nations retreat into ‘vain citadels that are not walled’ (line 33); when ‘much blood had clogged their chariot wheels’ (line 34), the poet will ‘wash them from sweet wells’ and reveal ‘truths that lie too deep for taint’ (line 36). In order to achieve this, Owen, the poet, the strange friend, the Christ figure- ‘would have poured my spirit without stint’ (line 37).

Once again we can see in the poem *Insensibility* that Owen tries to convey the readers about the soldiers, on whose face there was no expression, what made those soldiers expressionless? It is an unimaginative state of the battle-hardened soldier, and this underlies the poet’s autobiographical expression as a soldier himself. To quote the lines:

We wise, who with a thought besmirch
Blood over all our soul,
How should we see our task
But through his blunt and lashless eyes? (Insensibility, ll.39-42)

Owen attempts to say that at least poets and officers understanding the look on soldiers’ faces which was more terrible than terror, it was like a dead rabbit which does not have any facial expression. The soldiers did not know that why they were fighting? They were simply walking in the no man’s land and killed by the Germans. Owen worried about the loss of sense of the soldiers who were seeing dead bodies and dying soldiers all the times and blood everywhere which made them away from humanity. Their faces were seemed like their wound does not ache because they were continuously seeing all things red. These lines show that whatever condition of the soldiers were there was due to war, Owen felt pity for them and felt their pain, and expressed their situation as well as his own feelings, thus his lines gives a clear autobiographic touch.

The *Show* is a poem which was set upon a battlefield during an assault between British and German troops, in November 1917, it starts with a quote by Yeats. To quote the lines:

My soul looked down from a vague height with Death
As unremembering how I rose or why,

And saw a sad land, weak with sweats of dearth,
Gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,
And fitted with great pocks and scabs of plaques (The Show, ll.1-5)

This poem portrays the poet's intense feeling on personal mapping in coming out through his heart which he feels during the war. He says to the readers that his soul is knowing that because of the war the soil of the land will become barren and no field will be able to give support to plants to grow and survive thus there will be famine and ultimately people will die because of hunger and disease.

Religious sensibility in Owens's poems

Various autobiographical and allied circumstances tailored Owen's religious sensibility during the early years of his life and how in later years it paved the way for enduring impact on his life and poetry. In his celebrated war poems, *At a Calvary near the Ancre* and *Le Christianisme* Owen, for example, registers his first direct experience of the First World War. The sight of a wayside Calvary – a recurrent sight in France – inspired Owen to rework in his mind the various events “that ultimately led to the Crucifixion of Christ and relate it to the ongoing violent war.”²⁴In the poem *At the Calvary near the Ancre*, the poet writes his own experiences, he describes about the cavalry which has been damaged by artillery fire of the priests ignoring the sufferings of the young soldiers and supporting for the war, this act of religious leaders is like a word of devil because devils always create hates between humans but Jesus Christ whose teaching was to love the fellow men as well to the enemies also, this teaching of Jesus Christ have been forgotten by priests and they started supporting to the beast i.e. Satan. Owen uses the image of a crucified Christ which had lost its limb by the bombardment as a metaphor for the soldiers who have lost their legs, hands or lives, those men were sacrificing their lives for the sake of the country and Jesus has sacrificed his life for the sake of humanity, but no priests were bothered about the lost limb of the crucified Christ's wooden image it is like as if they are not loving him who have lost his life for the sake of humanity like that no country leaders were worried about the soldiers, who were sacrificing their lives for the sake of a country, the leaders only loved the land but not the sacrificing soldiers.

Conclusion

Based on the elaboration and deliberation in the paper that carefully lay down judgments in relation to Owen's thematic projections and perceptions, it is now plausible that through his poetry, Owen has given a strong voice to protest against war that desolated the life of people over a long time. He inserted the techniques of irony, rhetorical questions, sarcasm, and sometimes the direct denunciation to reveal his rejection of war, in particular, the war he witnessed: the First World War. Apparently, his first-hand experience in the trenches as a soldier had a critical role in developing his poetic talent. In terms of thematic perspectives, to quote B. Prasad: “The poetry of the First World War is primarily a record of the experience of war in conventionally heroic terms till the event itself transformed this traditional response. Even then,

poetry remained essentially unchanged but the ‘pity of war ...as distinguished from the heroism, gave poetry its modern subject.’²⁵

In addition to those horrific events that Owen encountered in the front with his men, his pre-war circumstances that were characterized by utmost despair and black vision of the life during his work in Dunsden, established what is known as revolution in his mind which motivated him to write in such painful method. His poetic writing depicted the real painful side of life.

The best expression of realism in modern English poetry is to be seen in the war poets like Owen who have vividly and realistically given vent to the horror contours of war in a language that sometimes shocks poetic sensibility.

Owen accused the politicians who were, in his opinion, the reason of the bloody armed struggles in the world. He conveyed an exceptional definitive message to those who thought that the war is merely a title of heroics and glory. He made them see the other evil side of the war. At the same time, he warned them against contributing in the emergence of wars by one way or another. He bore his responsibility toward this case and overtly announced that it is not a kind of pride to die for the country. He hoped that the war will stop in the future but he died before. Although his poems contain some wild and sharp words, they still provide wonderful artistic masterpieces that tell the whole world: the armed conflicts will never solve any political issue whatever it is; on the contrary, they will bring only destruction and human tragedy instead.

In final estimation, Owen was audaciously talented in composing his war poems, for he advanced unique artistic methods that his poems were characterized by. For instance, the poet inductively expresses a distinguished outlook in using his poetry as a testimony. Owen’s exposure of the inhumanity of confronted mechanized warfare is the overall main subject of his poetry, as is evident in his own remarks in a volume, “above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is ‘War’, and “the Pity of War.” By ‘pity’, Owen tangibly means not compassion but rather the pity which is invoked in the reading and comprehending of the tragedy elements in poetry. In other words, his poetry speaks to the emotions and it is founded on heart-rending experiences – not all of which he hated. Also, a notable finding through discussion, carried forward in this paper reveals that the rhetoric elucidation of Owen’s feelings, emotions and experiences should be evaluated in line with both personal and universal parameters, and this kind of evaluation, it is envisioned, will tailor a meaningful synthesis in the domain of further research.

References

BBC - Poetry Season - Poets - Wilfred Owen. Bbc.co.uk. Retrieved 23 March 2019.

Knowles, Owen. The Poems of Wilfred Owen. London: Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2002, p.7.

History of Wilfred Owen in Dunsden Researched. henleystandard.co.uk.

- The London Gazette (Supplement). 14 February 1919. p. 2378.
- Lewis C. Day, editor. The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen. New York: New Directions, 1995.
- Lewis C. Day, editor. The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen. New York: New Directions, 1995.
- Poplawski, Paul. English Literature in Context. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p.562.
- Banerjee, Argha. Preface. Poetry of the First World War. New Delhi: Atlantic Publications, 2011.
- Kendall, Tim. The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry, ebook. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Kerr, Douglas. 'Strange Meeting Again'. Connotations, Vol.3 No.2 93/94. University of Hong Kong.
- Goodman, W.R. Quintessence of Literary Essays. New Delhi: Doaba House, 2015, p.251.
- Guest, Phillip. Wilfred Owen. Havertown: Pen and Sword Books, 2013, p. 6.
- Tiwari, R.D. A Compendious History of English Literature. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 2012, p. 681.
- Knowles, Owen. The Poems of Wilfred Owen. London: Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2002, p.15.
- Bloom, Harold & John McRae. The Routledge History of Literature in English: Britain and Ireland, ebook. 2nd edition. Routledge.
- Kendall, Tim. The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry, ebook. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Kerr, Douglas. 'Strange Meeting Again'. Connotations, Vol.3 No.2 93/94. University of Hong Kong.
- Kerr, Douglas. 'Strange Meeting Again'. Connotations, Vol.3 No.2 93/94. University of Hong Kong.
- Bloom, Harold & John McRae. The Routledge History of Literature in English: Britain and Ireland, ebook. 2nd edition. Routledge.
- Kerr, Douglas. 'Strange Meeting Again'. Connotations, Vol.3 No.2 93/94. University of Hong Kong.
- McPhail, Helen. 1993. Wilfred Owen and Soldier. Hampshire: Gliddon Books, p.28.
- Prasad, B. A Background of the Study of English Literature. New Delhi: Trinity Press, 2011, reprint, p. 83.