War Poems

by Wilfred Owen

About the Author

Wilfred Edward Salter Owen was born at Oswestry, an English market town on the Welsh border, on 18 March 1893. Moving to Shrewsbury, his parents sent the maturing boy to Shrewsbury Technical School in 1907, where he read widely in Shakespeare and poets such as Spenser, Pope and Wordsworth, and continued to experiment with his own verse. Having failed to do well in a matriculation examination, Owen secured employment with an Anglican priest in the countryside outside Reading. He was now writing poetry constantly, much of it sentimental and self-pitying. His next significant post was in France as an English teacher at the Berlitz School in Bordeaux. As some of the wounded men from World War I began to return to the town from the front, Owen started to recognise the awfulness of war and by Christmas 1914 he had contemplated enlisting himself, which he did in October 1915.

Off to the Front

Arriving in France at the end of 1916, Owen came to a battle zone where the British Army had suffered its heaviest losses. Early in the new year, he made his way on horseback to the Somme. His experience of 'no man's land'—the area between his own forces and the German enemy—was like being in hell, a wasteland with the combined terrors of poisonous gas and gunshot.

Owen's colonel, noticing the poet's increasing nervousness in the field, sent him to a casualty station to recuperate and, in June 1917, he was declared unfit for service and sent to Craiglockhart Hospital near Edinburgh for a complete rest. While there, Owen was appointed editor of the hospital journal and met a fellow inmate and brother-poet, Siegfried Sassoon.

He finally rejoined his regiment in December 1917, the time when he read the devastating account of conditions in the frontline of action, *Under Fire*, by H Barbusse. This inspired much poetry, which in turn—as Owen's principal subject, the war, came into focus—settled his conviction that poetry was his vocation and the war his particular subject.

He returned to action in France. On 29 September 1918, Owen's unit went to the trenches, and in the following days engaged in fierce battle with the Germans, including hand-to-hand combat. Owen was awarded the Military Cross for bravery and his battalion was relieved on 3 October. Walking among his men, near the front again, Owen was shot and killed on 4 November 1918, just one week before the signing of the Armistice and the end of the hostilities. He was twenty-five years old.

Analysis with a Focus on Close Study of Text

'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young'

Abraham's Sacrifice

In the twenty-second chapter of the first book of the Bible, Genesis, the trial of Abraham's faith is recounted. God commands Abraham to take his only son, Isaac, and sacrifice him as a 'burnt offering' to prove Abraham's love for and obedience to God. In the Authorised (King James) Version of Scripture (published in 1611), which Owen draws upon in this poem, we are told that Abraham 'clave the wood ... And he took the fire ... and a knife' (verses three and six), to prepare the sacrifice. Isaac, unaware of the terrible fate that was awaiting him, asks, 'Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' (verse seven and line six of Owen's poem). Just as Abraham is about to slay his son (verse ten and line nine of Owen's poem), the angel of the Lord intervenes: '**Lay not thy hand upon the lad, / neither do thou anything to him**' (verse 12 and lines 11 and 12 of Owen's poem). Instead, as both the Bible and Owen note, a ram '**caught in a thicket**' is offered instead. Abraham has proved his faith and is highly praised by God: 'in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed: because thou hast obeyed my voice'.

This is one of the most famous stories in the Old Testament. In our age, the Bible is less well known and the language of the Authorised Version hardly known at all. This was not so when Owen wrote this poem. It can be assumed that all his readers immediately recognised not only the familiar story and its teaching, but the phrases from that translation of the Bible which Owen incorporates into his poem. This familiarity made the impact of Owen's poem all the more powerful, because of its concluding two lines—set apart from the

preceding fourteen—which undermine all that has gone before: 'But the old man would not so, but slew his son, / And half the seed of Europe, one by one'.

Old Men Rule, Young Men Die

The 'seed of Europe' are, generally, the sons of Abraham but specifically the young men cut down in the carnage of the Great War. The 'old man' is not Abraham, obedient to the Lord who restrained his hand from the murder of his son, but the old men who ruled the nations during the war, sending millions of young men to their deaths. The phrase 'old man', is also of biblical importance and, again, would have been recognised by Owen's contemporaries. It refers to the theological concept, in the New Testament, of the unregenerate human being, one who has not put on the new manhood of salvation through Christ.

Owen's poem, brilliantly appropriating the Bible and its stories and language, confronts a civilisation which affected to take the Bible as its seminal text but, as Owen suggests, failed to heed its teachings. Goaded by pride it would not sacrifice this sinful quantity (which Owen connects to the biblical story by calling the ram, in the original tale, 'the Ram of Pride'), but would sanction the deaths of its sons in order to satisfy that disreputable emotion.

A Parable in Verse

We note that the poem is called a 'parable'. This is also a biblical term and is usually associated with the New Testament teaching of Jesus. It introduces the idea of the scriptural sources and references which Owen uses, but more importantly emphasises that the work will have a confronting and surprising moral teaching, such as we find in Jesus's parables like the story of the Prodigal Son.

Focus question

Why is Owen's use of biblical sources and phrases in this poem so effective for conveying the teaching which it embodies?

'Anthem for Doomed Youth'

An Ironic Title

Wilfred Owen's decisive criticism of the slaughter of a generation of young men in World War I is arrestingly compressed in this sonnet. The title, appearing to promise an 'anthem', is deliberately ironic for an anthem is usually a prolonged song of praise, such as a patriotic writer might have written for a nation's young fighting heroes. It also has religious connotations. An anthem may be part of a service, perhaps of commemoration of the dead, such as occurred in Britain during and after the Great War. Owen, however, in presenting this brief utterance as an 'anthem' emphasises his point that there is nothing to celebrate in his subject.

The adjective 'doomed', in the title, adds to the negative tone of the poem. Everything about that word is disquieting: its gloomy sound as well as its sense of an overwhelming fate that mere humans cannot reverse. That it is 'youth' that is 'doomed' completes the tragic implications of the title. Age is doomed to death by virtue of its years but it is a perversity of circumstances for youth to be so brutally cut short. We can see that the title of this work is very much a part of the meaning of the poem.

The Sonnet Structure

'Anthem for Doomed Youth' is a sonnet, with fourteen lines. While Owen has purposefully overthrown the expectation of an anthem he has very strictly observed the convention of the sonnet in the poem itself. We notice the principal division into octave and sestet and the use of subdivision into quatrains (three four-line sections), which is emphasised by the orderly rhyming pattern, and the concluding couplet. Owen carefully observes the literary tradition of the sonnet here in order, stylistically, to highlight the dissociation of his subject matter from what is normally set forth in an anthem.

An anthem is usually a lengthy musical celebration of a theme. The brevity of the sonnet suggests that there is little to be said about this subject but the compression required by just fourteen lines of poetry gives power to the poem. What needs to be said is emphatic and disturbing. It is the artistic embodiment, in a brief space, of an intensely perceived idea.

A Powerful Opening

Owen begins his sonnet with a devastating line: 'What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?'. A passing-bell is that which tolls—slowly, on a single note—in the parish church in old English custom when one of the community has died. So inhuman, however, is the slaughter of young men in the war that, as Owen envisages the circumstances of their deaths, any idea of their humanity is stripped from them and they 'die as cattle'. The question which forms the opening line is rhetorical, for the dignity of the passing-bell has itself passed away, in the dehumanisation of the unprecedented mass killings of the Great War.

There is no doubt of Owen's passion here, but we notice how he has restrained its subjectivity, and thereby increased its power and universality, by artistic constraints—the rhetorical question, the reference to ancient custom, the simile ('as cattle') and the even iambic rhythm of the line.

The Use of Onomatopoeia

To accompany their deaths, the young men have only the percussion of the guns and rifles. Owen closes his first quatrain in noisy onomatopoeia: **'the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle / Can patter out their hasty orisons'**. In particular, we notice the adjectives **'rapid'** and **'hasty'**. The quick firings of the rifles are like hasty prayers, stammered out over the dead. But this brevity, like the brevity of the sonnet itself, indicates how death rites during war have lost both humanity and spirituality. In place of anthems and prayers there is the blunt, disquieting recognition of the futility of the sacrifice, accompanied by the sounds of war, indicating the determination to continue killing.

'Orisons', like **'passing-bells'**, is deliberately archaic. Owen is suggesting that the modern world that was cruelly born in World War I has discarded traditional funeral rites and, thereby, the spiritual value that was once placed on human life. Implicitly, also, he is criticising those churchmen at the time that saw the war as a holy cause. Its reality is far removed from the true teachings of religion.

The negativity of the poem is stressed, in the second quatrain, by the succession of negatives, alliterating: **'No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells; / Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs ...'**. Here, Owen introduces a note of surprise. Informed that there are no orisons or tolling bells, we are startled to learn that, nonetheless, there are choirs to sing the dead to their rest. But the next line explains exactly which **'choirs'** these are, as the octave is brought to a resonant close: **'The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells; / And bugles calling for them from sad shires'**.

Onomatopoeia is present again in **'shrill'** and **'wailing'**. For Owen, traditional observances would be a mockery for nothing can comfort the pain of this sacrifice. And in the reference to English rural life in **'sad shires'**, Owen, like his contemporary poet, AE Housman, thinks of his typical young Englishman as a Shropshire lad, and the traditional, united country life wherein each individual is known as part of the community and his loss grieved. **'Calling'** is precisely the right word here for the bugler's 'last post' is usually interpreted as a strain of farewell. Owen, sadly, hears it as a plaintive and unanswerable call to return.

Bitterness and Poignancy

Echoing the opening line of the poem, the sestet similarly begins with a question which, however, marks a further stage in the progress of the dead youth's fate and a new emphasis in the poetry. Owen now asks who will pray for the souls of these lost ones—**'What candles may be held to speed them all?'**—that is, to wish them **'God-speed'** on their spiritual journey. With an interesting development, the speaker does not suggest that they will be utterly forgotten as they were on the battlefield, but their liturgy will not be a formal rite, with candles. Rather, the signs of a spiritual commemoration of these dead young ones will be seen in the weeping eyes and the pale brows of their friends.

In the place of wreaths, there will be the memories of those left behind. In the meantime, there is at **'each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds'**. This moving image of closure aptly, but quietly, closes the sonnet. It is another English touch, like the conclusion to the octave, that refers not only to drawing blinds at evening but to the old custom of drawing down the blinds in a house of mourning.

The most remarkable feature of this accomplished poem is its combination of bitterness and poignancy—Owen's direct and forceful criticism of the brutality of war, and his **'tenderness'** in contemplating the loved ones of the 'doomed youth' left behind in bereavement and grief. Both emotions could easily have become uncontrolled but Owen's mastery of the sonnet form prevents such a lapse. These two themes precisely complement each other in mood, a balance that is secured by the sonnet's disciplined division into octave and sestet.

F Focus question

How does the particularity of this sonnet enhance its general subject?

'Futility'

The Question of Existence

This restrained, two-stanza poem has its daunting subject introduced in the title: the pointlessness of human sacrifice and, indeed, of life itself. In proposing this idea, Owen challenges the rhetoric of the nobility of war-service, and especially of the ultimate act of giving one's life for one's country. But this poem, especially in its second stanza, raises the even larger question of the futility of all existence.

He opens gently, but dramatically, in an imperative in the present tense—**'Move him into the sun'**—like an officer directing his men as they handle the body of one of their fallen comrades. Owen juxtaposes the tranquillity and beauty of rural England with the hideous battlefields of France: **'Gently its touch awoke him once, / At home, whispering of fields half-sown'**.

The Sun's Strength and Weakness

Owen's subject is a rural lad who had once had wheat fields to sow. He is attuned to nature and woke with the sun, even in the unnatural environment of war: **'even in France'**. But now the sun's warmth is powerless to rouse him and Owen contrasts the sun's rejuvenating

power with the wintry world of death: 'Until this morning and this snow'. Yet Owen closes the first stanza in speculation that the dead soldier might nonetheless be raised: 'If anything might rouse him now / The kind old sun will know'. That affectionate personification of the sun might seem encouraging, but it can also be read dismissively. It has a childlike, nursery-rhyme quality which suggests that, of course, Owen knows that no rousing will take place even as he would like to believe that it could happen.

The references to the sun in the first stanza introduce the concentration on it in the second. Owen begins by focusing on the soldier's body, but progresses from his death to a questioning of the purpose of the entire universe and the age-old mystery of the beginning of life and the reason for being. Owen takes us back to the original creation of our world: 'Think how it wakes the seeds—woke once the clays of a cold star'. The sun is praised here as the first life-giver and as the perpetual renewer of creation. With this power, surely the sun can breathe new life into the dead: 'Are limbs, so dear achieved, are sides / Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?'.

In anguish, he asks, 'Was it for this the clay grew tall?'. How could it be that human beings, fashioned out of the earth and nourished by the sun, could be destined to be cut down so brutally without any prospect of resurrection? The question is made powerful by Owen's particular adoration of the physical perfection of the young soldier (as in 'limbs, so dear achieved') which makes the futility not only of his death, but also of his life ending in this way, so painful. Yet the poem closes with a questioning of the meaning of all life: '—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil / To break earth's sleep at all?'.

Here, Owen has moved decisively from his earlier affectionate address to the 'kind old sun'. Sunbeams are now 'fatuous', that is, purposeless and idiotic. Thereby, he reduces that earlier warm reference. The passion of his query is emphasised by 'O', as he wonders why the earth, which permits such cruelty to its creatures, was ever brought to life in the first place.

Focus question

How would you describe the tone of this poem?

'Dulce et Decorum Est'

Dying for a Country

This most-quoted of Owen's poems was written during his recuperation at Craiglockhart in October 1917, and recounts the vile experience of gassing suffered by many soldiers in action during the Great War. Its title is ironic, for it is a quotation from the ancient Roman poet, Horace, which in translation declares that it is a sweet and decorous (or noble) deed to die for one's country: *pro patria mori*. For Owen, there is nothing beautiful or dignified about the kinds of death that he had witnessed firsthand on the battlefield. No cause warranted such assaults on the human body and mind, and to interpret them as sweet and decorous was a gross wickedness. Owen dramatically deflates the Roman idea of the heroism of war.

The poem opens in visual vividness with soldiers, usually imagined as the epitome of upright masculinity, portrayed in two similes that completely undermine that fiction: 'Bent double, like old beggars under sacks', 'coughing like hags'. These young warriors are prematurely aged, physically derelict and mentally numb:

> All went lame; all blind;
> Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
> Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped
> behind.

The onomatopoeia of 'hoots' and 'dropped' catches the sounds of those 5.9-calibre shells, even as Owen observes that the soldiers marching in their sleep, as it were, do not hear them. Description modulates to dramatic action in the second stanza, with an outburst of warning and command: 'Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!'.

The Ghastliness of Gas

The soldiers, earlier seen as aged crones, are suddenly boys again as Owen, in combining the two ideas, gives us a grotesque notion of geriatric youth suddenly aged by war. To protect themselves, the soldiers fumble for their gas-masks, but one is too slow. Owen presents his gassing as a nightmare vision enveloped in the sickly colour of the poison gas:

> Dim, through the misty panes and thick green
> light,
> As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
> In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
> He plunges at me, guttering, choking,
> drowning.

That collection of verbs, horrible enough, is then succeeded by more—'smothering', 'writhing', hanging', 'gargling'—as Owen's vocabulary relentlessly catalogues the vileness of the man's suffering. There is not even decorum accorded to the soldier by his comrades, in these dangerous circumstances, as another verb indicates: '... we flung him in'. It is sensational writing, certainly, that makes the flesh creep:

> If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
> Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
> Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
> Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues ...

The Bitter End

No-one could deny its accuracy as those who were gassed and did not die suffered the after-effects for years. Owen is successful in his purpose to shock those at home out of propaganda-induced complacency. And in his mastery, Owen has not yet exhausted his linguistic armoury. For the poem concludes magnificently, in justifying its title in his mock-intimate and mock-affectionate address to **'my friend'**. This is really a bitter challenge to a corrupted civilisation:

> **you would not tell with such high zest**
> **To children ardent for some desperate glory,**
> **The old Lie: Dulce et Decorum est**
> **Pro patria mori.**

The rhyme of **'glory'** and **'mori'** is an ironic agreement in sound which exposes the falsity of the propaganda which could identify death by poison gas with nobility, and which subsequently erected monuments to **'our glorious dead'**. Owen shows that glory had nothing to do with it.

Focus question

How do the details of the poem reveal the irony of its title?

'Disabled'

A Biography in Verse

The title of the poem, which Owen wrote in the hospital at Craiglockhart where he would have seen such men as the soldier who is portrayed here, is an ironic understatement, mimicking the official description of such a wounded man—a double amputee. Certainly he is disabled, physically, but his condition is more seriously emotional and spiritual, beyond bodily disability. That 'he' is unnamed adds to the sense of the virtual loss of his life and identity because of his terrible injuries.

Yet the poem presents a kind of biography of the man, or at least the type of man he had been: young, handsome and fit, with a life of social occasions and an accomplished sportsman. Perhaps his numerous attributes, idealising him, suggest that 'he' is a composite figure, representing idealised young British manhood in general, so many of whom were either killed or shockingly maimed during the Great War. The series of stanzas provide visual images of the aspects of that life from which he is now utterly separated. There is the 'Town' (any town, again making the impression general), to which he resorted **'when glow-lamps budded in the light blue trees'**. There was the **'artist silly for his face'**, possibly suggesting that his attractiveness was noted by men as well as women, and the girls who **'glanced'** at him at dances but now, as nurses, **'touch him like some queer disease'**.

The End of the 'Adventure'

The longest stanza implicitly juxtaposes his sporting career, when **'a blood-smear down his leg'** was cherished as the sign of a hard-fought match and the dreadful bloodshed of serious injury to his legs in battle. The comparison of warfare to sport was popular in the propaganda of the time, encouraging young men to see soldiering in such active, team-focused terms. The idea of enlisting and going to battle as a kind of light-hearted adventure—**'someone had said he'd look a god in kilts'**—captures the spirit of the times but, in this context, is also tragically ironic. There is nothing godlike about his appearance now and the kilts, of course, bring the focus again to his legs. Like many others, he lied about his age to join, the army being happy to be complicit in the deceit: **'smiling they wrote his lie: aged nineteen years'**.

That he knew nothing of the politics of the war or nurtured any hatred of the enemy adds to the sense of futility of the enterprise—a recurring theme in Owen's presentation of it. The lad was a romantic and dreams of the positive aspects of army life and is sent out in celebration: **'with drums and cheers'**. Grim reality has now succeeded such carefree romanticism.

In the shortest stanza, other familiar themes of Owen's poetry are touched on: the contrast of the terrible return, after the joyous departure, and the poor consolation of earnest gratitude (never have italics been used to such effect in poetry: '*Thanked* him') and the irrelevant, insensitive inquiry **'about his soul'** while his once-beautiful body and all his hopes for life in this world are in ruins.

The poem closes, after a stark survey of the future before him, with the sense of mental derangement captured in the repeated phrase as the soldier, now utterly dependant, yearns for bed, which may symbolise death: **'How cold and late it is! Why don't they come / And put him into bed? Why don't they come?'**.

Focus question

How does Owen's writing in this poem manage both to convey the situation of the disabled soldier and the anger and pity it should stir in us, without making the mistake, which lesser poets could make, of telling us what to think and feel?

'Mental Cases'

A Poem to be Spoken

All poetry should be read aloud, but this is one of those poems which *demands* to be read aloud. We need to savour the sounds of the words as we speak them and hear them for its full effect to be gauged. From the opening lines, words such as **'drooping'**, **'slob'**, **'leer'**,

'gouged' and 'swelters' convey the tone which, in turn, conveys the sense of this bitter indictment of the cruelty of war in terms of the psychological damage it does to its veterans. Owen is describing mental illness, but he does do in vividly visual and aural terms: 'sloughs of flesh', 'treading blood from lungs' and in the onomatopoeia of 'batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles'. The dreadful verbs continue to the end:

> Picking at the rope-knots of their scourging;
> Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
> Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.

It is a sadly ironic close, as the speaker notes that these wretched men, driven mad by war, reach out desperately for contact and affection to the fellow soldiers—'brother'—whose complicity in warfare has reduced them to this deranged condition.

Confronting Society's Beliefs

Indeed, the poem's original title was 'The Deranged'. 'Mental Cases' is more scientific and, thereby, dehumanising. It suggests how the men would be classified, officially, which introduces the idea of their dehumanisation as well as officialdom's way of coping with their tragedy. We should remember too, that in those days mental illness (from whatever cause) was to a degree regarded as shameful and unmentionable. For Owen's contemporaries, to find this material openly presented—and in poetry, what is more—and at a time when it was usual to celebrate the sacrifices of war rather than to acknowledge its tragic victims, this poem would have been especially confronting.

The opening image recalls both the Authorised (King James) Version of the Bible which, as we noted in 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young', was a particularly potent text for Owen to use, for the initial questions here recall the Book of Revelation (7, 13ff), with bitter irony: 'What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they?'.

Those arrayed in white in the Bible are the redeemed, but these are like figures from Dante's Book of Purgatory, a dim world of suffering souls. Owen had been reading Dante and an earlier fragment of the poem was called 'Purgatorial Passions'.

A Surrealistic Horror

The derangement of madness—particularly the phenomenon of an ironically over-pitched hilarity in the midst of terrible suffering—is captured in Owen's surreal image of the men's heads wearing 'hilarious, hideous, / Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses'. So compromised have their lives been, physically and mentally, by war that they are to all intents and purposes dead, yet laughing in the midst of that horror.

The second stanza opens out from this present, particular focus, to a broader representation of the battlefield and its connection with Owen's general theme, throughout his poetry, of the horrific experience of that supposedly glorious enterprise: 'Carnage incomparable, and human squander / Rucked too thick for these men's extrication'.

F Focus question

How do the nouns of the poem contribute to its power and meaning?

Key Issues

- **Think about how specific visual and aural effects are crucial for conveying Owen's general ideas.** Focus closely on the language of the poetry and how it works, visually and aurally. Owen does not merely tell us what happened but shows us and makes us hear the horror. How do these effects shape our response?
- **Consider the powerful negativity of Owen's representation in relation to your response to the poetry.** Do you find it overpowering, overstated or always appropriate to what is being said? You are not required to endorse or praise everything you read. You may find this poetry—or some of it—unappealing. If so, argue your case.
- **Look at how the poetry is organised and disciplined.** Owen is writing about terrible events, in the midst of them and from personal experience. Such a situation poses challenges and dangers for any writer, but especially for a poet. Think about what these might be and how Owen deals with them and how you respond to his management of the material.
- **Consider the various forms of language-use in Owen's poems.** We could probably recognise a poem as having been written by Owen, even if we were unaware of its author. Why and how? What distinctive characteristics of imagery and language-use are found in his work? Do not concentrate on themes but on the use of language: the vocabulary, imagery, rhythm, dramatic setting, characterisation and so on.
- **Think about the extent to which this poetry is of its time and confined to its historical period and subject.** How does Owen's poetry speak to you today, nearly a century after it was written and why might it be important that it should?