

"fellowships untold": the role of wilfred owen's poetry in understanding comrades...

[Profession](#), [Poet](#)



In his recent study of the relationship between poetry and warfare, *The Poetry of War*, James Anderson Winn writes of the war poet's ability to "convey, often in the same line or stanza, both the intensity of love between men of arms and the powers of forces that constrain the expression of that love; cultural taboos, personal embarrassment and the looming presence of death". This analysis certainly holds true for the poetry of Wilfred Owen, a soldier whose writing details the uniquely harrowing experiences of front-line troops living and dying together in intense physical proximity. Accordingly, poems such as "Spring Offensive", "Apologia pro Poemate Meo", and "Strange Meeting" use stark realism and powerfully emotive imagery to explore the male bonds forged during combat. His depiction of male intimacy in the trenches has led some scholars to explore whether Owen's work simply reflects an extension of late-Victorian values of honour and nobility, or whether the portrayal of comradeship and fellowship in his writing points towards something more subversive and unique. Therefore, it is also useful to consider Owen's own sexuality when studying the way in which his writing combines front-line homoeroticism and depictions of the grisly realities of trench warfare. As direct witnesses to human loss and destruction on an unprecedented scale, the soldiers of World War One were united in an alienating knowledge of the senseless horrors of warfare. Indeed, much of Owen's poetry addresses his comrades' moral detachment from the rest of society, and, in particular, the older generation who encouraged young men to fight in the name of "glory" and "honour". In his 1917 poem, "The Kind Ghosts", Owen sneers at the self-satisfied ignorance of those back at home, suggesting that the young men on the front-line have been abandoned by an

obtuse attitude of complacency. Adopting stark crimson imagery, the poem chastises the perceived attitude of indifference and neglect towards his fellow soldiers through the figure of a woman living in comfortable opulence, " Not marvelling why her roses never fall/ Nor what red mouths were torn to make their blooms". A similar depiction of the psychological isolation felt by his fellow " outsiders" can be identified in the final stanza of " Spring Offensive", where Owen questions the stance of silence adopted by the survivors of a military battle: " But what say such as from existence' brink Ventured but drave too swift to sink. The few who rushed in the body to enter hell... Why speak they not of comrades that went under?" [138-46]By speaking for those either unwilling or unable to speak for themselves, Owen demonstrates the strong ties connecting men in battle, thus exuding a poignant sense of loyalty and duty towards the soldiers beside whom he fought. This display of allegiance and understanding recalls the words of fellow-poet Siegfried Sassoon, who expressed how the brutal conditions of warfare led to an unyielding affinity felt between men on the front-line: " The man who really endured the war at its worst was everlastingly differentiated from everyone except his fellow soldiers". As the voice of broken comrades, Owen feels the need to testify on their behalf and awaken the " Nation at Home" to the futile and destructive nature of the war. As such, Owen's desperation to rejoin his comrades in battle following his treatment for shell-shock - despite the knowledge that he will almost certainly die - is a testament to the strength of the bonds formed during warfare. The affecting faithfulness displayed towards fallen troops consequently illustrates how Owen uses poetry as an expression of devotion to his comrades, and as a

means of honouring fellow soldiers through written verse. In this way, it is possible to claim that the sense of fellowship and comradeship evident in Owen's poetry serves to humanise the unfamiliar, hostile brutality of war, infusing into the carnage typically "British" values of loyalty, honour and community. This sense of moral elevation is strikingly demonstrated in "Strange Meeting", a surrealistic poem that depicts a confrontation between two dead soldiers – the English narrator and a German enemy whom he "jabbed and killed" in battle. Rather than engaging with the dominant discourse of hostility and fear of "the other" evident in much pro-war propaganda, Owen details the striking similarities between the two men ("Whatever hope is yours,/ Was my life also"), and acknowledges the grim reality of "the truth untold", a phrase laden with betrayal and regret at the pity of war. The poem replaces the destructiveness and brutality of battle with an act of reconciliation, culminating in the two soldiers joining each other in an eternal comradeship: "Let us sleep now...". It is significant that Owen adapts a line of "Strange Meeting" from Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" ("Even with truths that lie too deep for taint"), as both lines are implicit of a highly symbolic process of restoration and moral rebirth. Thus, through the act of comradeship in Owen's poetry it is possible to identify a certain wholesomeness and unity in the face of vast human destruction. The dignified solidarity between the two soldiers also recalls the poignant symbolism of the 1914 "Christmas truce", which saw several British and German troops temporarily cease hostilities to exchange gifts and play football in no man's land during the festive period. Consequently, one can interpret Owen's touching portrayal of male comradeship as a form of

redemption and moral sustenance, thereby reflecting the contemporary Christian principles of honour, nobility and dedication . However, some have cited the themes addressed in Owen's war poetry as an example of how male comradeship failed to function as the dominant culture intended. Rather than serving as a testament to British values, for example, his accounts of the hellish realities of warfare may imply a damaging relationship between male friendship in the trenches and psychological distress. Indeed, when tracking Owen's writing during the course of his lifetime, it is evident that a stark contrast exists between the pre-war Christian traditionalist and the embittered, questioning individual of 1917. The literary critic Adrian Caesar has developed the issue of Owen's growing disillusionment further by highlighting an unsettling sense of misogyny in a selection of his poems. For example, the violent condemnation of women in "Le Christianisme" starkly illustrates his resentment of wives and mothers back at home and their apparent endorsement of warfare - " One Virgin still immaculate/ Smiles on for war to flatter her./ She's halo'd with an old tin hat, / But a piece of hell will batter her". In any case, it is evident that Owen values the love of fellow soldiers over the conventional, domesticated love shared between a husband and wife. In the poem, " Apologia pro Poemate Meo", he asserts the superiority of male intimacy and comradeship: " For love is not the binding of fair lips With the soft silk of eyes that look and long, By Joy, whose ribbon slips, - But wound with war's hard wire whose stakes are strong; Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips; Knit in the welding of the rifle-throng". [19-25]It is clear that Owen's fellow comrades, as opposed to women, serve as his inspiration and are the driving force behind

much of his poetry. A similar faith in the uncompromising love between soldiers is present in his famed poem, "Disabled", which details a young man's isolation from society following a war injury which has left him "legless" and disfigured. Contrasting sharply with the ignorance and fickleness of the "giddy jilts", who express revulsion and "touch him like some queer disease", only his fellow warriors can appreciate the man's honour and sacrifice. In an affront to the chivalric rhetoric of the age, therefore, Owen is associating the male body with protest and vulnerability. This has led some readers of Owen to claim that the emotional bonds formed between men in the trenches served as a rejection of hegemonic ideals of the time, thus bringing to the fore a previously unexplored dimension to male intimacy during trench warfare. It is this apparent departure from late-Victorian principles of chivalry and masculinity that brings into question the significance of Owen's homosexuality in understanding the themes of his work. Indeed, Niall Ferguson's claim that a "remarkably high proportion" of the British officer class were homosexuals ensures that the subject of front-line homoeroticism cannot be neglected in a discussion of male friendship and comradeship in the trenches. While, on the surface, the strong comradeship evident in his written verse could be construed as a conventional display of soldierly duty and solidarity, Owen's deep love for his fellow comrades often borders on the erotic, a feature of his poetry that largely manifests itself through his apparent fixation with the male body. For example, in "Futility", one of the few poems published during Owen's lifetime, he uses the tragedy of a soldier's death on the battlefield to reflect on the young man's attractive vitality: "Are limbs so dear achieved, are

sides/ Full-nerved, - still warm - too hard to stir?" Much of Owen's war poetry expresses a homoerotic solidarity between soldiers at times of great stress and lingers on such details as " the hands of boys" and " their eyes", thus merging images of horrific violence with something beautiful and untainted. Through the imagery adopted in his poems, Owen invites the reader to become a voyeur of sorts and share his respect of the vulnerable beauty of his fellow soldiers. It is this effective fusion of the representative and the erotic that sheds light on the intense attachment formed amongst soldiers in the trenches and thus demonstrates the complexities of male comradeship during the Great War. In conclusion, it is clear that powerful, distinctive bonds developed between soldiers during the intensely stressful and haunting experiences of trench warfare during World War One. The poetry of Wilfred Owen reflects this intimate sense of emotional fellowship by combining the harrowingly macabre with the beautifully erotic. Furthermore, Owen uses his poetry as a means of speaking on behalf of comrades whose voices have been silenced, either through death or through psychological trauma. Despite not necessarily functioning in the way that the dominant British culture demanded, the comradeship formed during the horror of trench warfare prompted the elevation and strengthening of male intimacy, with the love between soldiers serving as an impetus for a vast and affecting collection of wartime poetry.