

The tradition of war poetry

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By comparing and contrasting a selection of war poems consider the ways in which attitudes to war have been explored and expressed. When considering poetry written post 1900 concentrate on a selection of poems by Wilfred Owen.

In order to investigate the development of war poetry, I decided to begin with one of the most famous poets of all time, and examine his thoughts and feelings on how war should be treated. I decided to begin with 'Henry V' by William Shakespeare. This poem is written in the play Henry V, just before the English begin the Battle Of Harfleur against the French. The poem is written in Iambic Pentameter, and is Henry V's speech to inspire his men into action with the sense of legendary heroic status that would be bestowed on them if they triumph. Henry V treats the war as almost like a trivial event that is not worthy of a moment's contemplation, which is emphasized when he says "The game's afoot". Shakespeare puts across this view not because this is what he or his character Henry V thinks, but instead what he wanted the army to believe.

He was trying to boost morale, and did NOT believe that the waste of human life that war produced was an inconsequential matter. This is a dramatic poem, with an implied audience who are given an inflated opinion of their status, which is enhanced because they are ENGLISH. The next poem I feel it is important to investigate is the poem 'Charge Of The Light Brigade' by Alfred Tennyson. I have chosen this poem because it very dramatic in the way it is written and shows the strong feelings of Tennyson, but never strays from the true story, and doesn't embellish the story to make it a more exciting tale. In this poem, Tennyson is hugely critical of those who "

blundered” when the order was given to send the unaware men into almost certain death.

I believe that his poem is trying to warn others that a mistake is easily made, but not easily reversed. The poem really emphasises the fact that it was basically a mass carnage; by the way he keeps repeating “ the six hundred”. Instead of criticism of the act of war, Tennyson chooses to criticise the decisions made during war, and makes his feelings very clear that he believes the English soldiers are innocent bystanders, and all they are guilty off is being honourable citizens who unquestioningly obeyed their orders. This is powerfully expressed in the final stanza, where he says, “ When can their glory fade? “.

I believe Tennyson had a lot of respect for those who died during this charge in the Crimean War. The subsequent poem that I have felt it necessary to mention is ‘ Vitai Lampada’ by Henry Newbolt. This poem has a similar quality to that of ‘ Henry V’ in that he compares the war to a game, and the fact that in both, you have to work as a team. This poem was written to glamorise and exalt the act of war. Henry Newbolt was a very well educated man, and obviously learned the classics and Latin. He writes about the honour and pride that there is to fight for your country, which is shown when he says “ England’s far, and Honour a name”, and he really reinforces a feeling of community about going to war.

The poem shows how sacrifice was expected from all the men, especially the way he compares the fighting and dying in war to playing a cricket match. Henry Newbolt was hugely famous and therefore influential at the time he

wrote it, as well as being hugely patriotic. The next group of poems I have chosen to consider are so-called ‘recruiting poems’. The most famous of these poets, is probably Jessie Pope, who I have compared with Wilfred Owen as you can see below.

These poems were written during the First World War to convince those who didn’t want to go to war that they should. Because of this they had to be hugely inspiring and persuasive. The poems are mainly written for young people, who would be attracted to the war if they felt that it would be glamorous or heroic to do so. The poems were primarily about how ashamed you should be if you didn’t go to war, and how it isn’t much of a thing to request. These poems show yet more reference to the war as a “game”.

This inaccuracy cost the lives of many, which infuriated many of the later poets, including Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, as you will see later. The belief at the start of the war was that it would be short, and many of the recruitment poems play on this. The poets paint a picture of a heroic return for everyone, rather than the return of only a few. This type of poem is believed to be the main fuel behind the recruitment of so many underage boys, many of who didn’t come back. Rupert Brooke is the next poet I have decided to comment on.

His style of poetry is based around the idea of ideals and chivalry. He had almost an obsession with medieval chivalry, especially when related to war. In his poem ‘The Volunteer’, he paints the picture of a man with a very dull and boring life, who he claims will never be happy until he has faced war. He believes that even if he dies, he will still have achieved success. He

continues the theme of England's glory, and refers to past battles, in this case Agincourt, where England has triumphed.

In about 1916, the realities of trench warfare had begun to filter back into the country. Many soldiers that had fought felt that the lies being perpetrated back at home were unacceptable. Siegfried Sassoon wrote a letter to his commanding officer and the press, where he denounced the war, and criticised the motives behind it, calling it a war of aggression and conquest. He went on to call it “evil and unjust”, and was accordingly sent to Craiglockhart Hospital and treated for shell-shock, thus reducing his letters to the ramblings of a mad man. Here, he met Wilfred Owen, and began to guide and teach him how to write poetry.

Sassoon's poems, such as ‘The Hero’ and ‘Suicide In The Trenches’ are full of anger and hatred towards those who sent him to war where he witnessed such atrocities. Wilfred Owens's ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ and Jessie Pope's ‘Who's for the Game?’ are both effective poems to study when making a comparison between war poems, as there is definite contrast between the two. The primary difference is that Owens's poem is very much anti-war whereas Pope's poem takes a pro-war stance. As the poems are so fundamentally different in their approach to the topic it is not surprising that the rhyming schemes and language employed are also vastly different.

The first poem I studied was ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ by Wilfred Owen. This poem is an Italian sonnet with the rhyme scheme abab cdcd effe gg. This is a traditional format which is not surprising considering that the highly educated and experienced poet Siegfried Sassoon helped Owen develop the

format of his poetry greatly during this period. The images of cattle are a reminder of life in the English countryside and the innocence of a life concerned only with farming and church, as well as the inference to the soldiers being cattle in that they unquestioningly follow orders and have one function only; to fight and be inevitably slaughtered.

On the other hand the references to guns and rifles could not be more far removed and conjure up images of a terrifying experience in the trenches, a life that is far from innocent. The title suggests innocence with the use of the word 'youth' and also suggests an expression of loyalty and support to a cause i. e. them. Also, the word 'Youth' implies the beginning of life, and it is hugely ironic that it is really the end of their lives.

The word 'doomed', however, adds a sinister touch to the sonnet and intrigues the reader to discover the cause of the 'doom' as well as the implication that they have no hope, as death is inevitable. Instantly Owen transforms the soldiers into cattle to great effect. This change makes the men seem weaker and more vulnerable to this inevitable slaughter. The next two lines transport the reader to the battlefield in contrast to the more peaceful country image portrayed in the previous line. These lines also give a sinister feel as with the use of personification the guns and rifles are transformed into monsters. The third line also has a more dramatic effect due to the use of alliteration: 'rifles rapid rattle' which emphasises the harsh and unrelenting sounds of the battlefield.

The following line brings us back to the original theme of home life with a reference to 'orisons'. In the last few lines of the octave yet another

peaceful and homely scene becomes something more sinister and frightening with the transition from mourning choirs to the ‘shrill, demented sounds of the shells’. In the sestet Owen refers to the soldiers as ‘boys’, which implies their youth and innocence and makes the sonnet more moving. Owen emphasises here the fact that those who die in the trenches do not have the dignity of a funeral and merely the memories of those they leave behind. This is a saddening thought as the tone of the poem and title suggests that these boys are dying in there thousands and without proper headstones they are a lost generation.

This sonnet was written towards the end of the First World War by a soldier who had experienced many horrors on the front line. Wilfred Owen captures the reality of the war in this moving sonnet. He writes of the many deaths that occurred during the war that emphasises the reality of the severity of the war. As a soldier Owen would have first hand experience of the front line and as such would not be duped by the media’s portrayal of war as romantic and heroic. As the poem was written towards the end of the First World War any novelty there may have been would have worn off. However in Jessie Pope’s ‘Who’s for the Game?’, the presentation of war is quite different.

She also writes in a more conversational manner, which makes the poem more memorable and persuasive. She compares the war to a ‘game’, implying that there is little danger on the battlefield. She also refers to the war as a sport where a player would return with a minor injury such as a crutch. Within the poem, Pope uses many questions, which involve the reader more and together with the use of everyday language give the poem

a less formal feel. She persuades the men to join the army by making them feel deceitful and cowardly if they were to 'lie low'. She also has a friendly manner in her propaganda poem as she refers to the men as 'lads'.

She pressurises the men into joining the forces with her assumption that they'll 'come on alright'. She makes the country more appealing and dependable upon their support when she gives it a female gender. This capitalises on the sexist attitude of the era where men were expected to take care of and protect their women. This poem is a recruiting poem with the aim of encouraging men to volunteer to join the forces. It was written at the beginning of the First World War and therefore the true disastrous effects of the war had not been experienced.

Those left behind, women, children and exempt men, were often unaware of the true horror of the war and instead were seduced by a romantic ideal. In conclusion, Owens's poem is an excellent example of poetry portraying the realism of war whereas Pope's poem is an excellent example of the unfortunate attitude cultivated on the home front. The contrast between the two allows the reader to see the reality of the First World War from two immensely different perspectives. The comparison of the poems by Wilfred Owen and Jessie Pope are very important, because Owens next poem, 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' is hugely critical of Jessie Pope's poems in particular. 'Dulce Et Decorum Est, Pro Patria Mori' was first said by Horace, and means 'How sweet and honourable it is to die for your country'.

This is, again an ironic title, as it is almost the exact opposite of Owens beliefs about war. In this poem he attacks the ignorant with searing anger,

and makes a public statement of rejection. Owen begins his horrifying account of war with a description with hidden meanings. The first line, although simple, has many meanings to it, for example they are bent double out of such immense fatigue that they cannot even stand up straight like the normal image of a soldier. The word 'beggar' conjures up an image of a hunched up and dishevelled person, the very opposite of the image of what a soldier should be.

It also implies an insufficiency of mobility. The remainder of the first two lines go on to emphasize the weakness of the men. The use of 'cursed' shows us that the attitude of the men is angry and annoyed and is transferred to the description of a movement. The way the verb is used at the end elongates the sentence to add a delay to demonstrate the lengthy amount of time between each step. The delay of action is emphasized with the delay in the sentence.

The poem is set just outside the battlefield, on the soldiers' way back to their 'distant rest'. The fact that they had turned their backs shows their disregard for the danger. They were obviously disengaged from their surroundings, as it says they 'marched asleep'. The shock of the next line is 'Gas! Gas! '.

This is not a spoken warning, but instinct. The 'ecstasy of fumbling' highlights the urgent need to fit the helmet quickly. Personifying the helmet as 'clumsy' shows the awkward reaction of the men, but it is transferred to the helmet. This is a very dramatic recreation as each time it is read it still creates the same emotions of fear and panic.

The placement of the 'But' shocks us, and the moment's relief we may have felt for the helmets being fitted is removed. The man is enveloped in a substance that can and will kill him. The 'misty panes' are created by the smother that the gas has caused and rendered the atmosphere impermeable. The use of 'drowning' is true not only because that is the effect that gas has, but also because of the way the gas travels, i. e. in waves.

The next two lines are evidence that the panicked event is over. The conclusion is that he is haunted by it. His 'helpless sight' is not, in fact, his sight at all, but more the fact that he was rendered helpless in the gas attack. 'Plunge' implies that the man is still falling and the images in this passage are created by the description of sound.

This passage is on its own to show how Owen is affected, and the fact that to him the gas attack is unending and inescapable. The next line begins with the conjecture that 'if' you could have my horrific experience and be plagued about it for all your life, you would not feel the same way. Here he is speaking directly to Jessie Pope about her tales of war. The fact that the body was 'flung' was not cruel, but necessary because they had to make a quick exit, and his 'white eyes writhing' show that he was still alive. The agony he is feeling is shown in his eyes and his face, which has stretched and contorted. He next uses a simile of how it is like awful, incurable diseases.

The use of 'My friend' is ironic and sarcastic as well as the fact that he is so affected by what he's seen, anyone can be his friend. The word 'Children' is

hugely plaguing in the way it is used here because children are so innocent and vulnerable, with childlike desires. The fact that the statement is called an ‘old lie’ shows that it has always been a lie. The war poems I have compared show both similarities and differences. Although, up until the First World War, the poets and events had changed, the image was almost always that war was a game. However, the First World War changed this, and people became startlingly aware that war was a horrific experience.

Sentimentality was destroyed by reality. At this time, the poetry changed to dark and haunting poems of the atrocities of war. The message that poets had tried to send had changed. As Wilfred Owen said “All a poet can do is warn”.