

Who should feel
guilty?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The notion of guilt is very strong in Owen's poetry. He uses guilt in his poetry so as to highlight the indifference of those back at home as well as the authorities. These should feel guilty for sending their youth to die but they do not feel so. On the other hand, Owen also expresses his own guilt as well as the soldiers' guilt. In doing so Owen means to emphasize on the mental torment that the soldiers suffer from due to this guilt.

In Inspection the theme of indifference is very evident. Here the authorities are aware of the suffering that the soldiers are going through but they claim that ' blood is dirt', meaning the sacrifice is not worth acknowledging. Here the use of blood imagery signifies the sacrifice of the soldiers. At various instances throughout the poem this sacrifice is meant to be eradicated and not known of; the ' stains' are to be washed out and the ' cheeks' to be not so ' red'. The authorities continue to hide the soldiers' sacrifice and their own guilt simultaneously for the sake of national pride, since it was themselves that cause these premature, untimely deaths of these young soldiers. This idea ties in with the ' Ram of Pride' mentioned in The Parable of the Old Man and The Young. The deviation from the original story line in the Bible shows how the authorities would rather kill ' half the seed of Europe, one by one' rather than give up their pride. They will therefore refuse to feel guilty for this reason, despite what they force the soldiers to suffer from during war. This notion of national pride teamed with false patriotism is also significant in other works by Owen. These notions fuel more propaganda and therefore lead to more soldiers being brainwashed into going to war. The propaganda also simultaneously leaves the public in a state of ignorance and thereby indifference towards the actual reality.

The war propaganda based on false patriotism is particularly evident in *Disabled* and *Dulce et Decorum Est*. Owen provides us with clear examples of how the youth were brainwashed into thinking of war as being glorifying. In the latter work the poet harshly criticizes the war poets that promoted 'The old Lie' through their poetry. These too should feel guilty since they had a major part in manipulating the youth of Britain to go die in war. Through his poetry Owen wanted to stray away from the poetry at the time which promoted war and spoke of the truth in his poetry. Propaganda, however was also supplied by the authorities, as is seen in *Disabled*. Owen presents us with a list of false ideals that glorified war such as the 'jeweled kilts /For daggers in plaid socks'. This propaganda is one of the factors that led the youth to recruit. Apart from this Owen also blames the general public to have encouraged them to go to war. He sought to please 'the giddy jilts' however these same who encouraged him now 'touch him like a queer disease'. The absence of guilt is felt strongly here since we also get the notion of betrayal and treachery. This also leads Owen to expand on another reason why the public should feel guilty since there is no affection or type of connection whatsoever between the public and those sent to war. This is seen not only in *Disabled* but also in *The Dead-Beat*, *The Send-Off* and *S. I. W.*

In *Disabled* the lack of connection is clearly seen as already stated between the women and the young men. Whilst the former encourage them to go to war they are repelled by the soldiers when they return back; disfigured. In this work by Owen the lack of affection is also seen where the authorities go through anything and even accept underage recruits to go to war. This also highlights how the authorities do not appreciate the beauty and value of

youth whatsoever. The guilt that should be felt is therefore continued to be emphasized here were the readers realize the great loss of youth. This is also seen, as well as the lack of connection, in *The Send-Off*. Here we have the authorities that are completely abandoning and cutting off any ties they ever had with the soldiers; 'They were not ours'. The pinnacle of where the lack of affection is truly expressed is in *The Dead-Beat*. Here there is no spirit of camaraderie whatsoever. The already worn-out soldier is continued to be beaten around because of the state he is in. Even the soldiers that are against a common enemy have no type of connection between them. Rather they beat the vulnerable, since they are only seen as dead weight and are therefore disposed of. They should feel guilty of how they maltreated one of their own to the extent that we are given the impression that he either was left to die or was killed. The absence of affection is also seen where in both this work by Owen and in *Disabled* the soldiers are 'drafted out with drums and cheers', glad to be rid of, but return back in silence. In *The Send-Off* the lack of affection is seen where the women cheer them off and give them wreaths and spray, unknowingly and ironically foreshadowing their imminent death. Even these should be guilty of celebrating their departure since they are merely celebrating their death. However, these celebrations are fueled by the propaganda to which the public is exposed to.

In *S. I. W.* we also see the guilt supposed to be felt by the general public which set social expectations on the young men to go to war. This too is fueled by the propaganda that not only brainwashed the young men to go to war but also the public to continue to encourage the latter to recruit. 'Death sooner than dishonor, that's the style!' here we see the strongly oppressive

social expectations that put pressure upon the soldier to recruit no matter anything. The public, particularly the families of the relatives should also feel guilty of what they were doing to the youth of Britain. They were aware that they were sending them to war, and that they would probably not return; nonetheless they remained in a state of denial that whoever they sent to war died for the glory of Britain – however this was obviously not the reality. This immense pressure on the soldiers sent to war only led them to feel guilty since they could not stand up to the expectations. This eventually led to them wanting to die. This guilt of the soldiers in war was not only seen in S. I. W. but was portrayed more clearly in Mental Cases.

In Mental Cases we get a clear portrayal of the guilt as it is felt by the soldiers themselves, for two main reasons. We get survivor's guilt and the guilt of killing. The soldiers feel violated by what they have seen, such that 'Memory fingers in their hair of murders'. The fact that they tread on 'lungs that had loved laughter' reminds them of the indignities those dead had to suffer because they killed them. Those body parts and dead corpses were once persons as the living soldiers are however, they suffered a different fate than them. This guilt is continuously accentuated at various instances throughout the poem. The capitalization of 'Dead' signifies that the deaths they witnessed are continuously tormenting them. This idea of eternal torment is seen in the image of both day and night being characterized by thoughts on the dead. The description of the soldiers as 'purgatorial shadows' also presents them as being tainted by sin (purgatorial) and as therefore being constantly tormented by their guilt of killing. This work by Owen also continues to aggravate the guilt supposed to be felt by the

authorities, since the readers are furthermore enraged upon seeing and experiencing through gruesome detail the indignities and atrocities suffered by the soldiers at war; that the authorities sent to be a part of. In *Mental Cases* as well as other poems we see Owen to be feeling guilty as well. This is seen mainly in *Inspection* apart from the latter work itself.

In *Mental Cases* Owen makes use of the first person to show that he too feels guilty of causing the young soldiers 'war and madness'. Here Owen adopts the role of the victimizer where he is constantly tormented by these feelings of guilt. This is seen in how the 'Dead' are seen 'snatching' and 'pawing' at him. These two verbs cause a certain uneasiness within the reader which reflects the anxiety felt by Owen himself upon imagining those dead soldiers blaming him for the indignities they suffered. In *Inspection* the feelings of guilt as being felt by Owen are more vivid to the reader. Whilst in the former work Owen is using the first person 'us' only, in the latter he is fully assuming the role of the officer; the same person who acted completely indifferent towards the sacrifice of the soldiers by claiming 'blood' to be 'dirt'. Owen becomes one with those authorities whom he criticized harshly in other works of his. He therefore takes his responsibility as being a high-ranking officer in war and is guilty of having taken part of the slaughter of 'half the seed of Europe.'

When taking everything into consideration, the reader may appreciate the irony within Owen's poetry and, in the reality of the situation. The authorities have succeeded so greatly in pursuing with their propaganda that those who should feel guilty do not whilst those that do feel guilty, should not actually feel like so. The glory of war has been so embedded into the minds of the

general public that these set social expectations based on war propaganda, which led to the soldiers feeling guilty; after what they do and see on the battlefield.