

In memoriam, death
bed and dulce et
decorum est

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In this essay I am comparing and discussing three poems from the Great War, each by a different author. These poems are 'In Memoriam' by F. A. Mackintosh, 'Death Bed' by Siegfried Sassoon and 'Dulce et Decorum est' by Wilfred Owen.

First I shall discuss 'In Memoriam' by F. A. Mackintosh. The title starts by telling you that the memory of someone who has died is probably involved as the word memoriam is usually used in epitaphs. This can be linked to a memorial which is a monument in memoriam of a lot of people which shows that this not about one person.

The first stanza starts by saying 'So you were David's father,', and from this you know this is someone who is talking to the father of someone he knew. Also the use of the word 'were' in the past tense means that David is no longer his son and, at a guess, I'd say David was dead.

The next line says 'And he was your only son,' notice the use of the past tense again in the form of the word of, as this says that he no longer has a son. Also it says his 'only son', which implies a tighter bond between the father and son than there would be in a family with two or sons in it and/or daughters, which means that the grief may be amplified.

The next three lines say:

'And the new-cut peats are rotting,

And the work is left undone,

Because of an old man weeping,'

These lines show that the grief did affect him deeply as he is not earning a living or even keeping warm by keeping the fire going. He is too busy weeping to do anything apart from grieve. This is shown to be the fact by the next three lines:

' Just an old man in pain,

For David, his son David,

That will not come again.'

This proves that his son ' David' is dead and the father will never see him again. In this stanza it seems the theme has already been set, the feeling of death, grief and sadness are that theme.

The next stanza talks about the letters that David wrote to his father and how there was never a mention of the war, just about what his father should be doing on the farm. The stanza last two lines are:

' And the Boches have got his body,

And I was his officer.'

Boche is a degrading slang word used by the British to mean German people during the war. This sort of thing happens whenever a society feels the need to belittle its enemies. This stanza virtually says David is dead, but it also tells us the person writing the poem is David's officer. This means that the officer would feel more upset at David's death than would someone who knew him as a casual friend as he is with his men twenty-four hours a day seven days a week.

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The next stanza says:

' You were only David's father,

But I had fifty sons

When we went up in the evening

Under the arch of the guns,

And we came back at twilight-

O God! I heard them call

To me for help and pity

That I could not help at all.'

In this stanza the officer is comparing himself to David's father, saying that the former was not only David's father, but also a father to all fifty of his men.

He says how he had to go over no mans land under the arch of the guns. And on their way back he had heard their screams and although he was like a father to them all he had to turn away from their screams as he could not help them.

Then for the next two stanzas' he is not talking to the fathers of his dead men but to the dead men themselves in the last two stanzas'.

In the next stanza he starts by saying how he'll never forget his men, perhaps a link to he title, which trusted him. He also says they were:

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' More my sons than you father's,

For they could only see

The little helpless babies

And the young men in their pride

They could not see you dying,

And hold you while you died'

In this section he is not comparing himself the fathers of his men but that he is the father of his men. He says he is because he has seen them in their entirety, not when they were children but when they were weak and dying.

The last stanza says:

' Happy and young and gallant,

They saw their first-born go,

But not the strong limbs broken

And the beautiful men brought low,

The piteous writhing bodies,

They screamed ' Don't leave me, sir',

For they were only your fathers

But I was your officer.'

In this last stanza he is again referring to the fact that is men's fathers only see their sons in their prime and that he, their officer, saw them and held them in their last weak moments. He also no longer compares himself to their fathers but says ' For they were only you fathers, But I was you officer', therefore he implies it takes more to be their officer than to be their father.

Now I shall discuss ' Dulce et Decorum est' by Wilfred Owen. The title is the beginning of a Latin phrase which is ' Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' which means ' It is a sweet and fitting thing to die for ones country'. This is sort of misleading as this gives the feeling, provided one knows what the complete phrase is and means, of someone who thought that the war was a glorious one.

This is not actually so as he turns that phrase around by saying it is a lie and says:

' My friend, 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 first stanza describes the soldiers' actions and their condition. To do this he uses similes and metaphors. For example, ' Drunk with fatigue' and ' Bent double, like beggars under sacks'. The first is a metaphor and the second is a simile. The stanza is basically a description and when the stanza is read it

goes along in a slow steady rhythm so that when you read the last two lines of the stanza:

' Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots

Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.'

you don't realize that something serious has just happened. Then the first part of the first line of the 2nd stanza goes to speech and the urgency picks up, (probably because the rhythm of the poem speeds up), and then you realize the importance of the previous two lines. He then describes an ' ecstasy of fumbling' as the soldiers fitted their gas helmets just in time. And then he starts the main point of the poem, the man who ' plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.' From this point, the man who was killed by the gas attack, Owen moves to his ' moral' of the story, the old lie, and displays his anti-war feelings to the full.

Now I will move on to ' The Death Bed' by Siegfried Sassoon.

In the first stanza you see , already, the evidence of the fact that Sassoon uses metaphors and similes a lot in this poem. There are five metaphors and two similes alone in the first stanza and those are entwined as it is. This makes for interesting pictures upon the canvas that is your imagination when you read this poem. In this fist stanza you know someone is dying from the lines:

' Silence and safety; and his mortal shore

Lipped by the inward, moonless waves of death.'

Also you can see from these lines, the beginning of Sassoon's theme of water.

When the next stanza begins you get the feeling of a time lapse as someone is suddenly holding water to his mouth. The stanza then says he can feel his wound throbbing and then the water theme takes over,

' Water-calm, sliding green above the weir.

Water- a sky-lit alley for his boat.'

and then he sleeps.

In the next stanza more time has past and wind is in the ward, blowing at the curtain. Then he says that he can only see blots of colour in his ' drowning eyes'.

More time passes and he hears rain and music. The last line of this says ' Gently and slowly washing life away' which can be linked with the last line of the 1st stanza.

Then it says that his pain leapt like a beast and when he woke he shuddered because the evil thing had passed. In the penultimate stanza it suddenly changes to speech and the person speaking tells everyone to ' light many candles' and ' you may save him yet'. In the last line of this stanza his anti war feeling are shown quite plainly: ' how should he die when cruel old campaigners win safe through'.

In the last stanza the personification of death in the form of a direct sentence that you could not argue with is shown. ' But Death replied ' I choose him'. So he went'

On the last line Sassoon reminds us the war was still going on by saying ' Then, far away, the thudding of the guns.'

Now I come to the comparison of the three poems. One of the most obvious comparisons is the fact that in both F. A. mackintosh and Owen's poems they both use realistic views whereas Sassoon uses more abstract thoughts and he also uses far far more metaphors in his, and he even uses the personification of death. Even though both Owen and F. A. Mackintosh use realistic style Owen uses more graphic details whereas F. A. Mackintosh uses the thoughts of a man for his soldiers. One difference between all the three poems is the prominent emotion in each.

Owen's is full of hate for the war, F. A. Mackintosh's is full of grief for the loss of his men and in Sassoon's there is no way I can really pin a main feeling on it except the feeling of waste that the war produced which is apparent in each. Although I say this about Sassoon's poem the feeling of hate is made available for seeing in the lines ' He's young; he hated War; how should he die when cruel old campaigners win safe through? ', and in this you also see the grief and loss for this man as he was young.

They also all have main themes. In Owen's there is the theme of death and pain as there is in Sassoon's although both are different in that Owens is more graphic in this respect. As for F. A. Mackintosh the theme is one of

comparison between the officer and the fathers of his men, so much so in fact that the poem is almost a simile in itself.

In conclusion I would say that each of the poems contains the feeling of terrible loss of life in the war and that fundamental feeling links all of the three poems. This means that for all the differences in style all the writers are trying to get the same message across. All three poets I would say were anti-war, although in F. A. Mackintosh's poem he does not directly show as the other two authors do.