

Poetry

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



Bruce Flohr ENG 104 March 30th War as a Theme in Two Poems from World War I War is as old as mankind, and so is poetry, so it should come as no surprise that war is often used as a theme in poetry. Usually of course poetry was used as a way to make war seem attractive to young men who would fight for their country. But starting in World War I there was a greater movement towards anti-war poetry as the young men who went to war were often more educated and felt very shocked by it. This contrast can be very clearly seen by comparing Wilfred Owens "Dulce et Decorum Est" with Edward Thomass "This is No Petty Case of Right or Wrong," both of which were written during World War I.

The first of these poems, Wilfred Owens "Dulce et Decorum Est," is a big example of anti-war poetry. The main theme in this dark poem is definitely war, and it definitely does not show it in a good light. From the very first lines, which describe a group of soldiers as "bent double, like old beggars under sacks, / knock-kneed, coughing like hags" ("Dulce" 1-2), it is clear that this poem is determined to destroy idealized visions of soldiers as glorious defenders of their country. The poem is filled with disturbing images of war, some of which are very realistic. An attack of poison gas is described with unflinching detail, telling how the soldiers, after "an ecstasy of fumbling / [fit] the clumsy helmets just in time" ("Dulce" 9-10). Owen also describes how the unlucky man who did not make it in time was "guttering, choking, drowning" ("Dulce" 16) and how blood was "gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs" ("Dulce" 22). The point of all this is not to gross out the reader, but to argue that patriots who "tell with such high zest / to children ... / the old Lie" that war is noble ("Dulce" 25-28) should reconsider

their viewpoint.

On the other hand, Edward Thomass " This is No Petty Case of Right or Wrong" takes a much more patriotic view. Although the poet seems to argue against war at first, with the lines " I hate not Germans, nor grow hot / With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers" (3-4), as the poem continues it grows clear that what he is protesting is not necessarily hatred of the enemy or love of ones countrymen, but what he perceives as shallow patriotism. This is clear by the end of line four, quoted above, that it is not just for newspapers, or for show, that the poets narrator loves his country. Indeed, for Thomas, it appears impossible to believe that anyone might feel otherwise. It is " with the best and meanest Englishmen / I am one in crying, God save England," he says (19-20), implying that patriotism is universal. In contrast to Owen, who uses horrific images of wartime, Thomas focuses on the war theme with uplifting, positive images like a phoenix rising from its ashes (18) and the personification of England to argue that, ultimately, " She is all we know and live by, and we trust / She is good and must endure" (23-24).

The contrast between these two poems, both written about the same war, show that simply because two poems share a theme does not mean they are identical. Indeed, the way the poet phrases his or her words and the images and metaphors he or she presents can make for two almost opposite approaches to the theme. Thomas chooses to focus on the uplifting hope of patriotism and love for ones country, and so his poem is a call to arms, an acknowledgment that, while the struggles of war are hard, it is in the end worthwhile and a natural, understandable human action. Owen, on the other

hand, focuses entirely on the bewildering chaos of war itself as experienced by soldiers on the ground. As a result, his poem is dark and unrelenting.

Although the two poems are vastly different, both show one aspect of war, which is, after all, among the most complicated and difficult things to grasp.

Works Cited

Thomas, Edward. "This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong." The First World War Poetry Digital Archive. n. d. Web. 29 Mar. 2014. Owen, Wilfred. "Dulce et Decorum Est." The First World War Poetry Digital Archive. n. d. Web. 29 Mar. 2014.