

Explore the portrayal of war in the poetry of wilfred owen

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



In this assignment, I am going to examine Wilfred Owens's portrayal of war within his poetry. To do this I will firstly examine the context of the poems *Mental Cases* and *Dulce Et Decorum Est*. I will also discuss the attitudes towards the myth and reality of war. I will then be exploring the choice of language and structure of the poems. I will conclude this essay with my own thought on the impact that these poems had on me. History has allowed us not to forget the losses we as a national endured.

However, the portrayal of war as seen through the first hand experiences of poets such as Wilfred Owen offers us an insight into the sensory invalidity of war. Owen uses both *Mental Cases* and *Dulce et Decorum Est*, as a verbal pallet in which he paints the colour, sound, smell and distaste of his war. Although we as a generation have never experienced these atrocious; Owen's use of graphic imagery within his poetry allows us the reader to instinctively know that we would not want to experience these first hand realities. Both poems where written by Owen during his military service.

Nevertheless, the contrast between *Mental Cases* and *Dulce et Decorum Est*, allows the reader to gain a intuitive insight into both the physical and emotional casualties that this war produced. Owen wrote *Mental Cases* during his convalescent period at Ripon in May 1918. Originally titled 'The Deranged', Owen exemplifies the more sinister unspoken effects of war. His illustration of the pained psychological damage that was being inflicted to the youth in the name of patriotism conjurors horrific images of youthful innocents being lost forever.

This war was like none other' and Owens use of vivid imagery portrayed back home that there was much more at stake now than the expected psychical deformities caused by war. Battle scars heal in time, however, mental anguish is unpredictable. Whilst again, in his poem *Dulce et decorum est*, Owen uses his own experiences of first hand combat to echo the psychosomatic distress that was so prevalent within the squadrons serving at the front line. Nevertheless, unlike Mental Cases, these soldiers did not have the luxury of time for reflection.

Owens raw descriptions of the lack of basic requirements for human survival validates the mindlessness of this conflict. Additionally Owen use's his shocking depiction of the cruel reality of war, as a form of retaliation towards the establishment that continued to send the youth of our national to certain death under the false notion that 'it is sweet and proper to die for your country. ' Although, immensely popular, the hard-hitting reality poetry of poets such as Owen, and Sasson only started to filter through into mainstream publication during the latter part of the war.

Previously, poets would be seen to reinforce the myths of war, by implanting a false idealization of active service onto the nation. Though their poetry, poets such as Seaman and Pope conveyed the benefits of war, invoking men into their jingoistic duty. Whilst inferring that the nation would shun the cowards, too weak willed to enlist. Pope's utilisation of lines such as, "Who knows it won't be a picnic - not much' in the poem *Who's For The Game*, portrayed HER war.

When the realities were, that these men who had been promised a game of football or rugby were being ravaged by sleep deprivation, assaulted by the surrounding smells of death, and the continuing deafening noises that came from their hell. However, incredibly, while both ardently promoted their ideals of honour and glory, neither were in any danger of being called upon to forefeel their own duty to King and Country. Seaman a member of the Government's Secret Bureau for Propaganda, was 53 years old when war broke out, whereas, children's novelist Jessie Pope was a women.

Neither would ever experience the fear of these men, when they realized that they had sold their souls for just a shilling. Nevertheless, the attitude's that Seaman and Pope echoed were not only confined to them. A good example of the differing opinions of these two generations can be seen by juxtaposing Seaman's poem, Pro Patria with Owens's Dulce et decorum est. Although both poets use the same line from the patriotic ode of Horace's, 1 Seaman appears to uses his in a completely genuine ultranationalistic way, whilst Owen uses his title ironically.

Seaman's choice of alternating between nouns and adjectives within the verse: 'Forth, then, to front... With smiling lips and in your eyes the light,'² to describe the impending dangers was not written as a paradox but as away to inspire enlistment. Pro Patria additionally, contains neither similes, onomatopoeia's or graphic imagery that was preferred by Owen. Although titled 'it is sweet and proper to die for your country,' this is the last image that Owen is intent on portraying.

His graphic visualisation of the psychological effects caused by the continual batter of gunfire and gas attacks was meant as a shock tactic towards Pope and her whimsical adaptation of war. Owens use of bland, emotionless words such as 'haunting, cursed,' within the first verse conveys the images of soldiers being numb and void of any natural feelings. His choice of words conjures the image of the walking dead and men whom have been trapped within a state of purgatory. Additionally, Owens use of metaphor's such as 'Men marched asleep' and 'Drunk with fatigue' reinforces the images of deflated psychological appearances.

Whilst, his use of similes depicts the fact that these once virile men are now a shadow of their former selves 'like old beggars' and 'like hags. ' Owen changes his stance within the second verse allowing him through graphic imagery to transpose the reader into the forefront of the experience of a gas attack. The first cry of 'gas! ' suggests an almost unconscious response yet the second cry of 'GAS! ' is the definite realisation of the impending peril that suddenly filters into their conscious weary minds.

Owens accentuates this image by the use of the verbs 'fumbling and stumbling,' these are not the descriptions you would normally expect to be associated with highly trained soldiers. Yet, Owens descriptive use of 'green light, green sea' as well as his use of the powerful onomatopoeia 'drowning' conveys the comprehension that these men were not only fighting the enemy but also their own exhaustion, to faultier meant certain death. Owens associates the consuming gas with the supremacy of the sea, as neither is answerable to man.

While both consumes who and what it wants without any conscience. Once again Owen is able to alter the message by structuring a short blank verse with alternative rhyme to add impact. Nevertheless, the first line is almost a reflective thought that Owen is relaying to himself, 'In all my dreams. ' Yet, his choice of adjective 'helpless' and onomatopoeias 'guttering, choking, drowning' cements the sense of an overwhelming fear of the horrendous events replayed in both waking and sleeping moments. Finally it is in the last verse that Owen displays his dis-belief to Pope.

His personification 'smothering dreams' inferences more harshly to the suffering of a choking and suffocating sleeping mind. Together with the use of alliteration 'watch, white, writhing' and the similes 'like a devil's sick of sin' 'Bitter as the cud' Owen is able to illustrate the pain and suffering which is being inflicted. Yet, it's within his dramatically vivid sentences 'of vile, incurable sore on innocent tongues' and 'to children ardent for some desperate glory' which is his most heart rendering and chilling plea to the blind eye of the establishment which allowed the practise of under aged enlistment.

Whilst, in contrast to Dulce Et Decorum Est, Owen use of 'in the meter' within the first line of Mental Cases, 'Who are these? Why' allows Owen to impact the stress of the question. While the remained of the sentence 'sit here in twilight? ' reverts back to blank verse to convey the puzzlement at such a sight. Whilst in Dulce Et Decorum Est, Owen only infers that these men are living in purgatory he actually directs the reader to make an direct association in Mental Cases, by the use of his personification 'purgatorial

shadows. Additionally, Owens use of verbs such as 'sleeping, walk, hell' in conjunction with posing questions ending in assonance 'perished, hellish' allows the reader to linger at the end of these sentences to question 'who are these people that are living as dead?' In his second verse Owen uses a capital D for added stress to emphasize the psychologically damaging sights these men have been subjected to: 'minds the Dead have ravished.

Additionally his use of alliteration: 'memory, murders, multitudinous murders' depicts that these were not the honourable killings of brave men fighting for their country instead the nation has been despatched to inflict, 'carnage incomparable, and human squander.' Finally Owens lack of rhyme within verse three, allows him to impact the reader. His utilization of the personification: 'Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes blood-black' is his reference to the torture never declining. Morning gave them a view of the death around them, and night time more over the top missions.

While Owens ambiguous reference to 'pawing us, snatching after us, hands are plucking,' infers the effects of such repulsive sights, which turned their minds and bodies into a metamorphous of zombiefication. Whilst, Wilfred Owen is the first war poet that I have studied in any depth, I found his poetry left me incredible sad and with a peculiar sense of being guilt ridden. As a school child, I was taught of the horrors of concentration camps, with the lives lost through Germany's propoganda and their nations deaf ears.

Yet, through my research into the lives of Owen and other such poets, I discovered that the social attitudes of the war era were just as calculating in

turning public opinion, towards dictating the fate of these young men. Owens poetry has coloured my life but not in the way of Keats or Wordsworth. His uses of literacy evoked not only my emotional senses but also my cognitive need to know why. I have considered why I, someone who was neither born nor knew anybody that had taken part during this allegedly 'Great War,' would be so inexplicitly saddened by these events.

After some deliberation the answer I came to was because I never cared to ask. Ignorance is no excuse; historians claim that there are lessons to be learnt from history, alas, in all the people I have spoken to regarding the events of the First World War, nobody knew when or why it had started. Ex-servicemen parading on Remembrance Sunday, Poppies and the two-minute silence is associated with just the lives lost during the second world war by the youth of our country.

With World War One, being that thing that happened so long ago, why do we still need to harp on about it. I myself have been guilty of this thought. However, unless we as a Nation remember, that it was for us these men laid down their lives it was a catastrophe waste of lives on their part. If we choose to allow our children not to remember how young men were allowed to become 'cannon fodder' without any recourse. With the safe and secure hierarchy not being made accountable for their military errors.

How do we teach those to show compassion, should the need arise again to command men of a lesser station. The real travesty being that a gifted, and emotive young man should die only a short time before Germany

surrendered. Irony followed Owens even in death, with his parents receiving the fateful telegram that conveyed his death on the same day the bells declared Armistice. Which I consider to be Owens last poignant statement to the establishment in that 'old men that make wars that young men have to fight. '

Bibliography

<http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/LostPoets/Seaman.html>

<http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/LostPoets/Owen2.html>