

Birdsong by  
sebastian faulks and  
the poems of wilfred  
owen



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World War One has often been described as the destruction of a generation; indeed for those who lived through the first large-scale war that Europe had ever seen, life would never be the same again. Of the sixty five million men that fought in World War One over thirty seven million died, were captured or went missing before the end of the war, that means that thirty seven million families had to grieve for the sons and brothers they had lost.

However, whatever mental torture the families at home who received the worst kind of news endured the suffering of the soldiers was worse.

During the war, which lasted four years from 1914 to 1918 soldiers witnessed atrocities that they had never before imagined and received injuries so terrible that they were often unable to recover from the physical and mental scarring of what they lived through. Many of these soldiers were only seventeen or eighteen years old when they signed up for war and because there had never before been such a massive war so close to home the soldiers believed the widespread government propaganda that told them war would bring them glory and that they would be loved by the nation.

However, when they got to the front lines these men found they had been lied to. They had to endure weather conditions so harsh that some of them froze to death or died of heat exposure, live in small wet trenches that had been dug into the ground and that would often be held up with the bodies of comrades they had had to watch being shot to pieces on the battle fields.

The men that survived the war were angry and bitter, they felt that they had been raped of their youth and lied to by the government and army officials who had promised them that they would heroes.

This anger is often expressed in war literature written or based around the time of the First World War; it serves as poignant reminder of the tragedy of the war generation and perhaps more importantly tries to encourage governments to never to let what happened to those who fought in World War One happen again. Both Birdsong and the poems of Wilfred Owen are set during the First World War. Birdsong was written by Sebastian Faulks in 1994, almost eighty years after the end of World War One.

Faulks did not live through the war himself and by the time it was written the true horrors of what happened to the young men who were sent to the battlefields without a notion of the reality of war had been revealed. By using the anger and bitterness of those who survived the war as his motivation and incorporating the historical facts of what took place on the battlefield Faulks enables Birdsong to give the reader an complete view of what happened during the World War One and what the soldiers themselves experienced.

However because he did not live through the war himself the novel only gives the reader a fictional account of what happened, although the events he writes about are real Faulks' characters are fictional and subsequently so are their emotions and experiences. Wilfred Owen's poems are written from a somewhat different viewpoint to Birdsong. Although, like Birdsong Owen expresses the anger felt by the soldiers who fought in the war. However, Owen was a soldier during world war one himself, he witnessed the horrors he describes in his poetry and felt the anger and bitterness and fear that act as a theme in so much of his work.

Owen was sent to war in 1917 when he was twenty four years old, as the war progressed he became more and more disillusioned with the officials who had sent him to fight in such hideous conditions with out any warning of what he was going to endure. Owen expressed his feelings towards war in his poetry; he dies in battle just one week before the war ended, in November 1918. He was twenty-five years old. In both Birdsong and the poetry of Wilfred Owen, Human suffering is a major theme. Both writers express the tragedy of what happened to the soldiers by writing about the war from the soldier's perspective.

Birsong begins before the war, in 1910 the central character is a young English man called Stephen and the first part of the book is set in France, where he is visiting a factory owner who lives near the Somme. In the opening of the book Faulks describes the beauty of what Stephen sees: ' Behind the gardens the river Somme broke up into small canals that were the picturesque feature of Saint-Leu. ' Later on the novel shocking and horrific sights are described on the Somme, where Stephen is fighting as a soldier.

' He saw the German wire... Men were running up and down it in turmoil, looking for a way through. They were caught in the coils where they brought down torrents of machine gun fire. Their bodies jerked up and down, twisting and jumping. ' The technique of contrasting the time before the war with the war itself is very powerful, it emphasises the fact that the men fighting were normal and that they had normal lives before the war, it brings home the suffering of the soldiers to the reader because they realise that before they fought the soldiers were just like them.

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It also allows the reader to imagine the mental torture of the soldiers who had to compare the beauty of their lives before to the ugliness of them during battle. Owen uses a similar technique in his poem Disabled in which a young man who has lost both his legs and an arm during battle sits on a wheel chair remembering the time before war and how war has changed his life. ' About this time Town used to swing so gay... And girls danced lovelier as the air grew dim, - in the old times before he threw away his knees'.

Owen here uses a similar technique to that of Faulks in Birdsong.

He gains the sympathy of the reader by writing about something they can relate to, contrasting his words of war, which his readers may not have experienced, with something they know. It reminds the reader that the soldiers were just like them, and that what happened to the soldiers in World War One was as shocking to the soldiers as it is to the readers themselves. The theme of Human suffering is highlighted particularly in these extracts as they reinforce the fact that the soldiers were just ordinary men unprepared by life for what they experienced.

Faulks, in his novel jumps from the time before the war to the war itself. He does not tell of the time in between when Stephen would have signed up for the army and he does write about Stephens end-off or his journey to the front lines. This is effective because the reader is forced to take their minds from a place of relative normality to something so brutally horrific it is probably alien to them. That there is no direct build up to Stephen actually going to war means the reader is as unprepared for what comes next in the novel as the soldiers were for what was to happen to them at war.

In contrast to this is Owen's poem 'The Send Off' in which he writes about the soldiers being sent off to war. In this poem he says that the soldiers were 'grimly-gay' this oxymoron not only highlights the soldiers conflict off emotions when going to war but also suggests that they were happy to be going somewhere so grim, emphasising the fact that the soldiers did not know what they were going to witness.

Owen further emphasises the fact that the soldiers were unaware of what they were going to when in the same poem he writes, 'So secretly like wrongs hushed up they went' This simile compares the soldiers to the wrongs of war hushed up by the authorities. Owen appears to be suggesting that although what the soldiers did at war was wrong the soldiers didn't know what it was they were going to do. Owen is also commenting on the fact that the soldiers were not told the truth about war before they left to fight. The effect of this is similar to that of the contrasting technique used in Birdsong.

Again the reader is made aware of the fact that the soldiers did not know what war would be like and that they were unprepared for what they would have to do and see. The mental suffering of the men that fought during the war is further emphasised by both Faulks and Owen in their writing when they describe the atrocious injuries the soldiers had to witness their comrades receiving. In Birdsong Faulks uses many graphic descriptions of what Stephen witnessed on the battlefield to try and make the reader appreciate how war mentally affected the soldiers.

There was a man beside him missing part of his face... his nose dangled and Stephen could see his teeth through the missing cheek. ' ' They had blown

Byrnes head, bit by bit, off his body so that only a hole remained between his shoulders. ' These descriptions are effective because they are so hideous and graphic that the reader is both shocked and sickened by what they are forced to imagine. The mental suffering of the soldiers is emphasised because the reader knows their own shock and disgust can only be partial to that of the soldiers who actually witnessed such scenes.

The men who died in such hideous ways or received such extensive injuries as those described above obviously suffered severe physical pain; for most readers this would probably be difficult to imagine but the suggestion of such pain would clearly arouse sympathy in many readers In his poetry Owen also describes the graphic injuries of the soldiers, in some ways his descriptions are more evocative than those described in Birdsong because Owen himself would actually have witnessed the sights described and reality is often more disturbing than fiction, especially when such raw emotion is involved.

In Owens poem ' Dulce et Decorum Est. ' he describes a man who has breathed in mustard gas, this was a yellow gas that blistered skin, blinded and choked the soldiers. It was let off to stop the enemy progressing closer to your front line of trenches. ' Watch the white eyes writing in his face, his hanging face, like devil's sick of sin. '... hear at every jolt the blood come gargling from his froth corrupted lungs'.

In this description Owen reveals that the war has become tiring, he is telling the reader he has had more than he can bear this is revealed in the line ' like devil's sick of sin' he is saying the soldiers face is like that of a devil who has had enough of the sin. The line could also suggest that the war has too much

sin for even a devil, considering that to any Christian the devil is the most evil being in the universe the terror and evil that war created and the pain it caused to Owen and indeed all to the soldiers experienced it is emphasised in this line.

It was not only the injuries and deaths of the soldier's comrades that caused them mental anguish, the deaths of their enemies, particularly of those they had to kill themselves caused many of the soldiers to suffer severe guilt and to torture themselves inwardly because they began to see themselves as murderers. Perhaps because they had to witness so much death and destruction to their own friends on a daily basis many of the soldiers could not bear the thought that they were doing the same to another man, who had as little choice about fighting as they themselves had.

In Faulks' novel Birdsong, he describes Stephens reaction to the Germans he sees after the battle of the Somme. ' He was surrounded by Germans... all around him were the people who had killed his friends... in their pitted skin and white eyes he saw men like himself... Stephen tried to hate them now as he had hated them before. ' In this extract Stephen sees the Germans as men like himself for the first time, Faulks has used a powerful technique that encourages the reader to question their own values, to ask themselves how anybody could kill someone who is just like them.

It emphasises the inner turmoil Stephen and indeed all would have faced at some point during the war. In ' Strange Meeting' Owen writes of a Soldier who dies and meets a man he has killed in battle. He like Faulks seems to reinforce the message that the soldiers were all alike. ' Whatever hope is



yours, was my life also' This line suggests that the two men had the same hopes and dreams and that there really was no difference in them. This points to the conflict of duty the soldiers must have felt within themselves when killing - duty to their country or to their morals.

The poem ' Strange Meeting' ends with the line ' let us sleep now'. The fact that the word us is used suggests that the soldiers were together despite being enemies and reinforces the fact that all the soldiers whatever their side, experienced the same thing In addition to the mental anguish soldiers endured at war and the physical pain caused by injuries in battle the soldiers also suffered terribly at the hands of the elements.

In Birdsong Faulk's writes about Stephen's thirst after the battle of the Somme: Close to collapse, he staggered downhill to the drink he had craved since noon... he dropped his head beneath the sluggish flow and felt it rush into the pores of his skin. He opened his mouth like a fish. ' In this extract Stephen has just finished fighting, thirst is something that most people have experienced considering that Stephen would have been fighting in a battle on a hot day and that he would have been close to passing out through thirst this extract is made very powerful.

Owen too writes about physical suffering through the elements in his poem ' Exposure'. He writes about the winter as in contrast to Faulks' description of the suffering overheating could cause. ' Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us. ' The imagery of winds kniving is powerful because the soldiers had the threat of actual knives harming them and so the simile Owen uses suggests that the exposure the harsh weather

conditions that the soldiers had to endure was almost as bad as the pain they were threatened with through weapons.

Ultimately the writing of both Sebastian Faulks and Wilfred Owen gives similar messages both represent human suffering in similar ways. They both portray the extensive human suffering in a highly emotive way and both write about similar situations; this is not surprising even considering the difference in the time the two works were written as both men were writing about the same period of time and both have similar perspectives on war. The work of the two writers clearly represents the suffering of the soldiers and serves to act as a reminder of the wages of war to future generations.