

Description of War Poetry: Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen as War Poets

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The First World War, which covered the period of four years, that was from 1914 – 1918, produced deep and lasting impression on the 20th century European society because it had completely uprooted all age – old and time – honoured human values. It had brought about such a drastic change in the intellectual and artistic attitude of the people that they liked to express it in their own ways. War as a part of heroic and progressive life began in Victorian age when poet laureate, Tennyson glorified war as a call of nobility. At that time, war had not been taken at such a massive scale, and so the general people didn't realise much its devastating impact on human psyche. There emerged a number of war poets like Rupert Brooke, Edgell Rickword, Julian Grenfell, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen who reacted against war through their poetry. I will take up the poetry of Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen for the critical studies of war poetry since they represent two different attitudes toward the Great war .while Rupert Brooke romanticize the exploits of war as a source of patriotism and nobility, Wilfred Owen reckons war as a series of cruelty on humanity and as a great wastage of youthful energy and positive dreams. The poetry of Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen covers the romantic conception to the realistic, nihilist conception of Great War. My comparative studies will highlight the early phase of war and its changed identity scenario in its later phase.

Rupert Brooke, 'the most beautiful young man in England'¹ according to W.B Yeats, was further appreciated by Winston Churchill posthumously as ' joyous, fearless, versatile, deeply instructed with classic symmetry of mind and body... all that one could wish England's noblest sons to be in days when no sacrifice but the most precious is acceptable, and the most precious is

that which is most freely proffered'.² Before getting himself enlisted at the outbreak of war in August 1914, Brooke toured the United States and Canada to write travel diaries for the Westminster gazette. Between his graduation from Cambridge in 1909 and the start of World War I in 1914, Brooke spent most of his time writing and travelling. The themes of love and nature were highly emphasized in the poetry of this period. He had also been hailed as an important member of the Georgian poets, like D.H Lawrence, John Drinkwater and Walter de la Mare. His early poetry reflected the idealistic preoccupation with rural, youthful countryside life, As soon as the First World War broke out, he joined the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve whose first destination was Antwerp, Belgium. He stayed at Antwerp through the beginning of 1915, but the reserve saw no military action during its entire stay in Belgium. At this point, it is pertinent to mention that Brooke did not have much experience of the war, and that he did not die due to combat. Brooke did not seem to be heroic as an untrained sub – lieutenant at Antwerp in 1914, and on his way to star – crossed campaign in the Dardanelles, he died of septicaemia on 23rd April 1915. Brooke emerged as a powerful war poet with the publication of his five war sonnets which he composed between the Antwerp expedition and his departure for Dardanelles. His group of five war sonnets is titled 'Nineteen fourteen'.

Rupert Brooke's early death and the immediate publication of these war sonnets, he had been hailed as a symbol of the generation of young men who were to be sacrificed in war. As John Johnston comments:

Brooke is deeply entrenched in the
Popular mind as a symbol of the
thousands of young lives that were
to be sacrificed at the altar of
the violent war. In his first war
Sonnet 'peace' the speaker is immensely
grateful for the honourable challenge
provided by the war. This challenge
'is not seen in terms of an outward
wrong to be righted but in terms of

an opportunity for personal moral regeneration'.³

In his first war sonnet, Brooke expresses his thankfulness to God who has given the golden opportunity to English youth to prove their mettle and pride in the war field. Like Tennyson, he criticizes peacetime as curse, and says that all youth would turn an exhausted and old, England would turn into an energetic one by the Great War because now everyone will fight for honour and Pride of his country. He likes to welcome the honourable challenge of war which lifts them from the shameful lethargy of peace. These English soldiers are not afraid of death because death will put an end to all worst human qualities in them:

'Nothing to shake the laughing heart's
long peace there,
But only agony, and that has ending;
And the worst friend and enemy is but
Death.'⁴

The irony of situation lies in the title because Rupert Brooke welcomes war as a means of peace to his restless soul who wants to have glory as a patriot. In his second war sonnet, 'safety' Brooke again welcomes war as a means of safe refuge for his limbs. He makes a series of beautiful pictures of nature which provide temporary happiness and safety, but war gives a permanent kind of safety to his limbs because they are taken by death for a great cause:

War knows no power. Safe Shall be my going
Secretly armed against all death's endeavour;
Safe through all safety's lost; safe where men fall;
And if these poor limbs die, safest of all.⁵

In his third and fourth sonnets, Brooke glorifies death which occurs in the war. The dead soldiers bring honour and fame to their country by giving away their live. The title of both the sonnets is 'The Dead' in which the poet urges people to blow out bugles loud in honour of the rich dead. The dead soldiers are not lonely and poor after their death; in fact, their sacrifice to the motherland has made them rarer than the Gold. The dead is further praised for leaving all the

pleasure and happiness of lives. In short the poet praises the dead soldiers as they have earned immortality in return of everything. He means to say that the dead Soldiers of First World War have left a kind of nobleness and dignity which must be learnt by the new generation as a great lesson of patriotism:

Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;
And nobleness walks in our ways again;
And we have come into our heritage.⁶

Brooke's final war sonnet, 'The Soldier' is perhaps the most famous lyric of the Great War in which he visualizes the positive effect of his own possible death. According to Brooke, the body of an English soldier is richer and more virtuous than any other soldier of any other country, and therefore wherever it may be cremated, it would enrich the foreign earth with rich dust of the body. Even his soul with all good wishes and virtues learnt from English society would cast an English heaven over his own country. This sonnet is highly sentimental, but there is not a single trace of regret and fear in Brooke's anticipation of death in foreign war field.

On 5 April 1915, Dean Inge of St. Paul's read,

'The soldier' from the pulpit of the great cathedral asserting that young Brooke would 'take rank with our great poets'⁷

Wilfred Owen, the celebrated poet of trench and gas warfare, wrote some of the best British poetry on World War I from August 1917 to September 1918. During his lifetime, only five poems were published, - three in the Nation and two in Hydra , a journal which he edited in 1917 when he was a patient at CraigLockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh. Owen had the first – hand experience of the horrors of trench and gas warfare because he fought bravely in the First World War, and he died also at the warfront. Owen had been commissioned in Manchester regiment on October 22 and sailed to France on active service, attached to Lancashire Fusiliers. After experiencing the horrors and brutality of war at different fronts and hospitals, he was finally posted to Northern cavalry Barracks, Scarborough. On August 1918, he returned to

France for active Service and in October he awarded Military cross. On November 4, 1918, he was killed in action, trying to get his men across the Sambre Canal.

Owen used to write war poetry as a therapy to his mind and body because, after writing his horrible war experience, he released his mind from the burden of all his painful memories. From a very early age, Owen was very much influenced by his religious mother, Susan Owen, and therefore during his pre-war years, he reflected his Evangelical faith by attending prayer meetings and Bible classes assiduously. Thus at a very young age, Wilfred had deeply internalized that 'passive endurance' which might be the effective remedy to deal with sadness, sufferings and any form of temptation. It was perception of this deep awareness that forced Owen to criticize the ongoing violent war and those who supported it. In a letter written to Osbert Sitwell in July 1918, Owen describes his task as an officer, the Biblical imagery being explicit:

For 14 hours yesterday I was at work
-teaching Christ to lift his cross
by numbers , and how to adjust his
crown; and not to imagine his thirst
till after the last halt; I attended
his supper to see that there were
no complaints; and inspected his feet
to see that they should be
worthy of the hails. I see to it
that he is dumb and stands to
attention before his accusers. With
a piece of silver I buy him everyday,
and with maps I make him familiar
with the topography of Golgotha ;⁸

Owen's letters and poems, composed during the war, were certainly not the same as it was just prior to the war, since his earlier faith in Christian values of humanity and the pity were unsettled by the violence of the war. The reputation and identity of Owen as a war poet depends

largely upon such of his poems, 'Dulce et Decorum Est', 'Strange Meeting', 'Futility' and 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'.

Owen's famous war poem 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' is a negative commentary on the poem, composed by Roman poet, Horace who glorifies war - with the Latin phrase ; 'Dulce et Decorum est/pro Patria mori' which says that 'to die for one's country is sweet and fitting. Owen contradicts the views of Horace by proving that war may be anything but not heroic and sweet. This poem may be labelled as an antipatriotic poem because the poet depicts in gruesome words his own tormented dreams, the major symptom of his shell shock and also the painful death of the gassed soldiers. In a very pathetic but surrealistic tone, Owen cries out: 'Gas! Gas! Quick boys! An ecstasy of fumbling', to make the readers aware of the truth of war, he describes vividly the failing of a soldier in fitting on his gas mask in time. Owen gives an antithetical picture of war as a matter of reply to those who themselves shielded from the experience of war, propagate the 'old Lie' of war. The innocent, youthful soldiers joined the war by responding the 'old Lie' of Horace but they experienced quite a different experience of this pompous declaration:

'Dulce et Decorum Est' describes the
horrors of a gas attack while commenting
Ironically on the limits of patriotism.
Owen came to see it instead as a duty
To warn of the horrors of war and to ask
Why political rulers allowed such mass
destruction to continue for so long. He
also questioned the necessity of war,
stressed the common humanity of both
sides in the war, and linked the futility
of the deaths of the individual soldiers
to the cosmic indifference of a world
From which God was conspicuously absent.⁹

Owen has used vivid, visual imagery 'old beggars under sacks' to hurl the pain on the readers' face and to challenge the authenticity of the Latin phrase, glorifying war and patriotism.

Owen's next most popular war poem is 'strange Meeting' which portrays the futility of war through his own dream vision. He depicts himself escaping from the battle field through a tunnel when he comes across a number of soldiers, appeared to be lost in thought. To relax himself, Owen probed one of them who sprang upon his feet with pity and distress in his eyes. The narrator of this poem is a German soldier who laments for his 'undone years'. At the same time, he also wants to reveal the ugly fact of war, which was 'the pity of war, the pity of war distilled'. The German soldier had high ideals of a beautiful and happy world for all, but these ideals were smashed by the meaningless war which were waged by the vain people to satisfy their ego. Owen wrote this poem as a preacher of world peace and universal brotherhood by giving a warning against the bloody Second World War. In this connection we may cite this comment:

Wilfred Owen wrote to tell the truth: the honest, vivid, horrific truth about modern warfare... Owen wrote about the pity of war; however, the pity was not his pity – he did not write to console himself or to express his own emotions ... he wrote of an universal pity, one that he felt the world should have felt about war... As Owen saw it, the pity of war is the dehumanisation of man by war, the annihilation of human potentiality in war, and the futility of war. This is evident in his poems. ¹⁰

The colloquial style and unrhymed decasyllabic lines of the poem impart a realistic touch because the death of a soldier by stabbing puts before the public the pointlessness of war and humanity in general.

In his elegiac war poem, the mind of the poet questions the creations of life on this earth and its nourishing by sunlight when the youthful body has to perish brutally in man - made war. The occasion of the poem is the death of a soldier who is lying in the snow in France. Owen urges his companion soldiers to move the body in the sun for warming up because in the snowy field there is possibility of his reviving up. The irony of the situation lies in the fact that the sun suffers from its own depreciation because it cannot restore to life it has helped to form. The bitter reality of war is exposed thorough the destruction of nature's highest creation, man:

Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear – achieved, are sides,
Full – nerved – still warm – too hard to stir? ¹²

Either the sun is not kind and though able to quicken, mocks the soldier, knowing him to be already dead. We may cite the sentiments of Owen through these lines:

'was it for this the clay grew tall?' the
Speaker questions the fate of his friend, whose
life has been wasted through war. The poem airs
the speaker's unspoken thoughts: what a futile
war is this that claims the lives of those who
Should have days in front of them, not behind'. ¹²

Anthem for 'Doomed Youth' tells once again the premature Death of young soldiers in war and their casual, neglected funeral. The main subject of the poem is the funeral of the dead soldier who lived like cattle in the trenches and even after their brutal death, they are not accorded a dignified funeral. Owen asks a number of questions related to the ritual and rites of a dignified funeral, and all these rhetorical questions highlight the indignity of the deaths:

The opening of 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'
Seems obvious in its intention: the poet
Protests at the discrepancy between the
suffering of the Nation overseas and the
smugness of the Nation at Home.' ¹³

Through his anti – war poetry, Owen raises his voice of protest against the brutality of war, and at the same time, tries to shatter the myth that war is the call of nobility and heroism.

After the sudden death of Owen with a stray bullet, a draft preface was found for a future volume of poems in which he confesses:

Above all I am not concerned with
Poetry. My subject is war and the pity
of war. The poetry is in the pity... all
a poet can do today is warn. That is
why the true Poets must be truthful. ¹⁴

Owen's 'not concerned with poetry' indicates his indifference to the kind of poetry, written by Brooke:

... the writers in the trenches felt it a duty,
not simply to write poems or
prose, but to write about the trenches
... if Brooke has played the war poet
far those who are fascinated by the
idea of poetry (or indeed of war) Wilfred
Owen is the war poet for those who desire
The reality. ¹⁵

War and death are the themes of both poets but they are written from different perspectives. Rupert Brooke glorifies death in war as a supreme sacrifice whereas Owen gives horrible and ironical description of death in war as 'pity of war, pity distilled in war' which must be checked with the message of universal brotherhood. Rupert Brooke's poem 'soldier' full of patriotism may be read as an antithetical poem, 'Dulce Et Decorum est' an anti-war poem by Owen. Brooke's romantic myth of war, propagating the nobility of sacrifice, ironically eulogised the soldier – poet, giving birth to the new concept of the war poet. We may cite these observations in this regard:

The elevation of Rupert Brooke to the

status of national war poet was both an Innovation and a continuation of a process of national self – representation. The crisis of the First World War demanded new ways of defining and communicating national identity and purpose. Brooke’s sacrificial militarism and aesthetic nationalism formed one response to this demand...¹⁶

However, with the onset of First World War, the violent reality of the trenches replaced the romantic notions of war as Honour and Glory. The evolution of war poetry from Rupert Brooke to Wilfred Owen points out that Great War poetry also had to take the full shock of the new in the context of the first modern technological warfare. Conformism and dichotomy are the twin fold features of such a poetic evolution, which may be seen in Owen’s contribution to the Romantic idea of beauty and permanence, as well as his departure from it. Nature in Rupert Brooke’s war sonnet is the source of glory and honour to Soldiers whereas Nature in many of Owen’s poems is a hostile force. Owen’s poetry is replete with anger, satire or irony, directed against the continuation of war, and directed also at the civilian who seems to have little understanding of war horrors. Brooke was a writer of pleasant, light, sonorous verse; had he lived longer and had he participated in the Great War as actively as Owen, he might have changed his attitude and poetic style to war, very much like Owen.

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