

Mental Disturbance in Trench Poetry: A study of Selected Poems by Wilfred Owen

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Abstract

A group of poets emerged during the First World War, who adopted trench poetry or poetry of the war to express their own perception of war. Poets such as Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Siegfried Sassoon, and others conveyed their own experiences in the Great War and the suffering of their fellow soldiers. They provided an obvious and true depiction of the severity of war. A large number of soldiers experienced a psychological trauma of war that was known 'shellshock.' Thus trench poetry appeared to introduce the daily life of the soldiers and the violent details they witnessed in the trenches. The present study investigates the mental disturbance in Wilfred Owen's trench poetry. An introduction is provided to introduce the First World War and its impact upon soldiers, society, and poetry. The effect of shellshock on the mentality of the soldiers and its symptoms are also explored. "Mental Cases," "Insensibility," and "Exposure," are poems by Owen selected to examine the mental disorder of the soldiers. The poems handle Owen's own vision towards the worthlessness of war, the psychological effect of warfare on the soldiers and their feelings. The study considers Owen's trench poetry as a device to document the emotional and psychological states of the soldiers, which are a reflection of the atrocity of the real battles that they had experienced. It also explains Owen's message that war is the worst resolution for political troubles and challenges.

Keywords: Shellshock, Mentality, Soldiers, War, Trench.

الاضطراب العقلي في شعر الخندق: دراسة لقصائد مختارة لويلفريد أوين

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المستخلص

ظهرت مجموعة من الشعراء خلال الحرب العالمية الأولى، اعتمدوا شعر الخندق أو شعر الحرب للتعبير عن تصورهم الخاص للحرب. نقل شعراء مثل ويلفريد أوين، وإسحاق روزنبرغ، وسيغفريد ساسون وآخرون تجاربهم الخاصة في الحرب العظمى ومعاناة زملائهم الجنود. لقد قدموا تصويرًا واضحًا وحقيقيًا لقسوة الحرب. تعرض عدد كبير من الجنود لصدمة نفسية بسبب الحرب عرفت باسم "صدمة القذائف". لذلك ظهر شعر الخندق للتعريف بالحياة اليومية للجنود والتفاصيل العنيفة التي شهدوها في الخنادق. تبحث الدراسة الحالية الاضطراب العقلي في شعر الخندق عند ولفريد أوين. تتناول الدراسة مقدمة للتعريف بالحرب العالمية الأولى وتأثيرها على الجنود والمجتمع والشعر. تعالج الدراسة أيضًا تأثير صدمة القذائف على عقلية الجنود وأعراضها. تم اختيار قصائد أوين "الحالات العقلية" و"عدم الشعور" و"التعرض" لدراسة الاضطراب العقلي للجنود. تتناول القصائد رؤية أوين الخاصة تجاه عدم جدوى الحرب، والتأثير النفسي للحرب على الجنود ومشاعرهم وحالتهم النفسية. وتعتبر الدراسة شعر الخندق الذي كتبه أوين

وسيلة لتوثيق الحالات العاطفية والنفسية للجنود، والتي هي انعكاس لفضاعة المعارك الحقيقية التي شهدها. كما أنها تفسر رسالة أوين بأن الحرب هي أسوأ حل للمشاكل والتحديات السياسية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: صدمة القذائف، عقلية، جنود، حرب، صدمة، خندق .

1. Introduction

The First World War (1914-1918) had a profound effect on various aspects of life; politically, socially, economically, spiritually, mentally and literary. The war aroused a genre of poetry called Trench Poetry, which echoed the disillusionment of the young soldiers, who experienced the trauma of combat. Trench poetry opposed the Georgian poets' presentation of war as a heroic and honorable act of defense for one's country. Thousands of young men joined the war believing that it was a glorious event. However, those who survived the war and experienced its horrors, came home with different attitudes towards warfare. Many poets such as Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Isaac Rosenberg, Ivor Gurney, and others, wrote realistic, factual poetry, including astonishing images and language, aiming at showing the shocking nature of the war. Trench poetry tackled mud, trenches, death, and occasionally showed sympathy towards soldiers. This kind of poetry dealt with not only the physical state of the soldiers, but also their state of mind and spirit in the dreadful circumstances that they persisted. Poetry, then, became the means by which they explored the reality of war.

The First World War witnessed a novel sort of battle recognized as Trench Warfare that led to the recession of the combat and prolonged it, since both the Allies and Central Powers had strong defense and seemed unconquerable. This status resulted in an unprecedented massacre for the sake of nothingness. The horrible conditions of the trenches and the barrenness of the battle inspired many trench poets during the war. (Ferguson, 1998) Trench poetry portrays the physical and emotional features of the Great War; the suffering, fatigue, insanity, and deterioration of mankind under unendurable tension. This poetry portrays the state of the surviving soldiers, who preoccupied with the harsh petrifying memories of the war, which make them mad. Trench poetry, then, is "authentic, genuine, revolutionary and free from the tyranny of tradition" (Baker, 1993, 125) The trench poets experimented with original ideas or content and novel approaches of writing. (Jeffries, 1993, 10)

1.1. The Mentality of the Soldier

A great number of soldiers shared in the First World War. Many of them had a patriotic sense to defend and glorify their country; others didn't had many choices and thought that fighting was the best option; some were influenced and deceived by the war publicity. Abundant of them received little education or they were illiterate, they came from poor families. These soldiers were put in the

trenches, where they had been eating, drinking, sitting, sleeping and doing all the activities in the same hole for long days. They lived in a persistent terror, tension and anxiety that led to mental disturbance and nervous collapse. Most of the soldiers were unable to sleep, lying in their dark holes waiting for the unknown. They suffered from shellshock. The young soldiers, who were educated enough tried to write down their feelings of scare in a new form of verse to face the hard times of their present and to stop other young men from joining the hell of the war. (Jeffries, 15)

The First World War is recognized by the growing of shellshock disorder. The most notable symptoms of this illness were "tics, convulsions, muscle spasms, paralyses, shakes, and problems in memory," in addition to nightmares. In Britain, 80,000 soldiers suffered from shellshock during the war and "around 200,000 veterans receiving pensions for war-related nervous disorders following the war." (Eghigian,2024) The expression shell-shock was coined by the soldiers themselves, who believed that the outcome of the shock of bombing was the main reason behind such mental disorder. Experiencing shell-shock was frequently related to moral shortcomings and vulnerabilities of some soldiers, who were accused of being "cowardice." (Butterworth, 2018)

For Charles Myers, a British psychologist, who was appointed to treat the increasing cases of shellshock among the British soldiers during the war, this new disease was exclusively affecting people who had been directly exposed to fight. This is because of "the primitive instinct of self-preservation is more prominent in warfare than in civil life as the brutality of the Great War forced soldiers to confront the reality of seemingly inescapable death." (Tisdall, 1919, 56) Modern studies observe that shellshock was the product of the emotional turmoil that was enforced on the soldiers in the trench war. Soldiers who had such mental disease could not resist the shock and nervousness. (Halls, 2023) These soldiers were either accused of malingering and punished or sent to the hospital (Garton, 1916) when they were in duty. Electroshock therapy was used to treat the patients, however, the rate of healing was very weak. (Butterworth) Such disease had negative effects on the military performance of the British troops.

2. Wilfred Owen: A Trench Poet

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) was the prominent poet of the Great War and also served as a soldier in the combat. Hence, the core of his poetry was the panic of the trench war. He experienced critical concussion and trench fever in 1917 during the fighting on the Somme. As a result, he was sent to a shellshock center and after few months he stayed at Craiglockart War Hospital near Edinburgh for recovery, where he met Siegfried Sassoon who examined his poems and encouraged him to improve his poetry. After recovery, he was sent

back to France where he gained the Military Cross. After a while, he was killed on the Sombre Canal on a week before the Armistice. (Stallworthy, 1974,5)

Owen's poems reflect a profound sense of empathy and gloomy realism. He is also defined as the master of metrical diversity. His poetry displays the terrors of trenches and gas combat during the Great War. Owen stated that "I'm not concerned with poetry. My subject is war and the pity of war. The Poetry is in the pity." (Owen, 1963,31). Owen did not focus on the beauty, romanticism, idealism of poetry and its traditional form. He rather employed his poems to fight the war and its brutal reality and to reveal his opposition to the war. As a soldier who had experienced the war first hand, Owen delineated his own visions and views against war, its grimness and barbarities. He drew his innovative motivation from a sympathetic association with soldiers in the battlefield and in the hospital. Commenting on his decision to go back to the frontline of France, Owen wrote to his mother "I shall be better able to cry my outcry, playing my part." (Letter to Susan Owen,1918) Through his poetry, Owen expressed his outrage about the war and he had a good role to warn his generation and to show his contemporaries the futility of war.

The main themes that are investigated in Owen's poetry are that of trauma, devastation and the effect of war on the psyche and mentality of the individuals. His poems explore the psychological scars caused by combat and their traumatic effects upon the soldiers.

3. Mental Cases: Trauma of War

Owen's "Mental Cases" is based on his experience in Craiglockhart military hospital, where soldiers were received to be treated from shellshock. In this poem, Owen displays the condition of the soldiers, who suffer shellshock. Their minds are haunted by the horrors of war, its shadows, memories, disappointments, anxieties that disturb their psyche, which result in personal turmoil and identity crisis:

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?

Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,

Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,

Baring teeth that leer like skulls' tongues wicked?

Stroke on stroke of pain,—but what slow panic,

Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?

Ever from their hair and through their hand palms

Misery swelters. Surely we have perished

Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish? (Owen, 1920, 8, ll.1-9)

Owen, here, sympathizes with the deplorable condition of the soldiers in the hospital. The question "Who are these?" produces a sense of enigma and displacement. The poet is inquiring about the identity of the persons before him, which indicates a detachment between the previous selves and their present state. The image of the "twilight" suggests a borderline between past and present, day and night, life and death. It expresses the mental case of the soldiers, who are caught in their stressful experiences. They are "purgatorial shadows," a religious reference to the struggle of these men to get redemption from sins they have committed in their previous life. However, they cannot flee their plight. Their inner torment is revealed on their external appearance, which reflects a state of sorrow. They look untidy and unstable and their tongues taste the mud of the trenches. These men live in an earthly hell, their bodies and mentalities are "perished."

The soldiers are suffering psychologically more than physically. Their minds are occupied with the memories of the people they have killed. Hence, a sense of guilt and grief dominate their psyches:

These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.

Memory fingers in their hair of murders,

Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.

Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,

Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.

Always they must see these things and hear them,

Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,

Carnage incomparable and human squander

Rucked too thick for these men's extrication. (ll.10-18)

These men are tormented by the horrible scenes of the battlefield. Such severe scenes are engraved in their memories. The memory is personified to have "fingers," illustrating an inevitable grip on the soldiers. The poet, here, is not talking about a personal sin, but a collective panic of violence they have experienced. The men live in a nightmare of violence. The reminiscence of

massive destructive scenes of fierceness and death create a perpetual hellish nightmare that they cannot escape. Owen, here, conjures the minute physical destruction that have been produced by the brutal war, which leads to the veteran soldiers psychological breakdown.

The veteran soldiers are trapped in a state of suffering and agony. Thus:

[...] still their eyeballs shrink tormented

Back into their brains, because on their sense

Sunlight seems a bloodsmear; night comes blood-black;

Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh (ll. 19-21)

These lines depict the miserable conditions of the shellshock soldiers. They are unable to see and feel the beauty of the "sunlight," the serenity of "night," and the renewal of "dawn." They are plagued by visions of blood, fear, and darkness. In this sense, their souls and brains are still bleeding and it is hard to be recovered.

In "Mental Cases," Owen conveys the harsh reality of war and defies the politicians and the general public who glorify it:

Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,

Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.

—Thus their hands are plucking at each other;

Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;

Snatching after us who smote them, brother,

Pawing us who dealt them war and madness. (ll.22-27)

In the lines above, Owen defines war as an "awful falseness" that leads to nothingness but death and madness. The use of the pronoun "us" is an invitation to the reader to realize the futility of war and to change his/ her perception of it. For Owen, War is a source of dehumanization, havoc, and it produces physical and psychological chaos.

In short, "Mental Cases" presents the symptoms of shellshock that affect the young soldiers, who have experienced death, blood, as well as awful violence and wander among the corpses of both their comrades and enemies.

4. Insensibility: Soldiers, Gaps for Filling

Odes are used by romantic poets such as Blake and Keats to commend someone or something, while Owen employs the ode poetic form to criticize and condemn the war. In his ode "Insensibility," Owen alludes to the opening lines of Wordsworth's poem "Character of the Happy Worrier,"

Who is the happy worrier? Who is he

That everyman in arms should wish to be (Wordsworth, 1984, ll.1-2)

Owen ridicules Wordsworth's emotionalism and idealization of war by resonating the phrase "Happy are these who lose imagination" (Owen, "Insensibility," III, l.19) to assert that there is no possibility for happiness in war. As an anti-war poet, Owen rejects "making dole over the slaughter" (Bloom, 2002, 11) of men at war. His objection to the glorification of war is depicted through his presentation of the soldiers as paralyzed men and insensitive just to maintain their lives, "Happy are men who yet before they are killed/ Can let their veins run cold." (ll.1-2) It was a psychological condition embraced by the soldiers to overcome the enemy. They freeze their emotions in order not to feel the pain of war. Manifesting sentiments means fragility, and such feeling has no place in the trenches. Ceasing feeling endorse their power to persist battling "And some cease feeling /Even themselves or for themselves," (ll.12-13) They became careless about themselves and about their life or death. War is the most truthful state in a soldier's life. There is no place for imagination neither for feelings. Such state is a reflection of the insensibility of war.

In "Insensibility," Owen presents the deteriorative state of the soldiers in the battlefield and how they have lost their sense of identity and motive, "The front line withers/ But they are troops who fade, not flowers." (ll. 6-7). The poet juxtaposes the decay of the flower to that of the soldiers. Though they share the transience of life, yet, there is a great difference between them. Flowers symbolize beauty, blooming and rejuvenation while the soldiers represent struggle, mortality and tragic fate. This comparison arouses the readers' sympathy with the miserable situation of the young men whose lives, mentalities, dreams and hopes are wasted by the war. In this poem, Owen condemns the poets who romanticize the war by considering it as an act of heroism:

For poets' tearful fooling:

Men, gaps for filling:

Losses, who might have fought

Longer; but no one bothers. (ll.8-11)

Such poets deceive people since they do not convey the ruthless reality of war. Their words and emotions about the war are artificial and they lack authenticity. Their poetry fails to reflect the real brutal experiences of the soldiers. Moreover, the soldiers are defined as "gaps for filling," they have been dehumanized and treated as replaceable objects to fill the places of the dead soldiers, a reference to the large number of the soldiers' lost lives. However, no one pays attention to such losses neither the politicians nor the soldiers themselves. The focus is on the whole result of the war rather than on the individual tragedies.

Notions of numbness, indifference, and the insanity of war are presented through a psychological description of the soldiers' state: And some cease feeling

Even themselves or for themselves.

Dullness best solves

The tease and doubt of shelling,

And Chance's strange arithmetic

Comes simpler than the reckoning of their shilling.

They keep no check on armies' decimation. (ll. 12-18)

The trauma of war is confronted with a deep emotional numbness by the soldiers. They adopt dullness as a survival technique to cope with the harsh times in the trenches. Such psychological state provides them with comfort from the ceaseless bombing. The decrease in feeling gives them a sense of protection. Additionally, dullness can be seen as one of the dreadful consequences of war. However, the soldiers stay defenseless in the midst of an overwhelming war for they have been turned into passive spectators rather than active contributors. The emotional numbness and insensitivity result in a disturbing means of existence, since the soldiers "Now long since ironed,/ Can laugh among the dying, unconcerned." (ll.29-30)

In the last part of "Insensibility," Owen rejects the state of numbness, which leads to a stage of humiliation and turns to be a curse rather than a blessing:

But cursed are dullards whom no cannon stuns,

That they should be as stones.

Wretched are they, and mean

With paucity that never was simplicity.

By choice they made themselves immune

To pity and whatever moans in man
 Before the last sea and the hapless stars;
 Whatever mourns when many leave these shores;
 Whatever shares
 (50-59) The eternal reciprocity of tears.

Owen realizes the effect of shellshock on soldiers and how it affects their sense of self, in a letter sent to Sassoon, Owen describes his feelings about a battle "I cannot say I suffered anything; having let my brain grow dull...My senses are charred." (qtd. in Stallworthy,p.4) Hence, through a personal experience, Owen emphasizes how sentimental and psychological misery eliminates the ability for pity and sympathy for all soldiers. For Owen, the ability to feel and sympathize gives a dignified life and supports the purity of an individual's spirit, while indifference provides a degraded life.

5. Exposure

In "Exposure," Owen depicts how the soldiers are left insecure to encounter both the combat and the bad conditions of winter. In this respect, they are under the attack of two forces, the military force of their enemy and the force of nature. Such physical circumstances that the soldiers face in the trenches have a great effect upon their inner worlds. In this poem, Owen displays both the physical and the psychological suffering of the soldiers in the war. The "brain ache" that the soldiers have experienced is both mental and physical, internal and external:

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us...
 Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent...
 Low drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient...
 Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,
 But nothing happens. (ll.1-5)

The depth of their pain is shown through the words "merciless," "iced winds," "knife," "wearied," "worried," and "nervous." It is obvious that the soldiers suffer from insomnia and anxiety intensified by trauma because of the harsh circumstances in the trenches. The silent night causes disturbance, which leads to a state of anticipation. Owen, then, presents the mental states of the soldiers in terms of the brutality of reality. The phrase "nothing happens" is repeated four times in the poem to assert the absurdity and futility of war. The poem reveals a passive anguish.

The rhetorical question "What are we doing here?" (l.10) in freezing conditions implies a moment of realization. It seems that the soldiers' ached brains are frozen and they are unable to think correctly to get rid of their miserable present. It reflects the soldiers' state of confusion. They are trapped in the snowstorm, a matter that leads to their physical and psychological numbness. However, the answer to this question is presented in the sixth stanza:

Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed

With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;

For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;

Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed,—

We turn back to our dying. (ll.21-25)

The word "ghost" suggests death and the soldiers' preoccupation with depression, helplessness, doom and loss. The lines above evoke a wearisome and long journey towards their houses. The soldiers have lost their sense of belonging, since their houses are inhabited by mice and crickets. They are alienated not only from themselves, but also from their own homes. This may explain why they are suffering in the freezing environment. Such state of isolation and estrangement results in a thorough submission to their fate and trauma.

Conclusion

Trench poetry conveys the reality of war and attacks the old beliefs that romanticize and glorify the war. Hence, the trench poets can be defined as modern poets, who are characterized by their creativity and originality. The First World War made a radical shift in modern poetry and supplied the trench poets, including Owen, with new material and new way of writing. In his poems, Owen presents the soldier as a victim rather than a hero. He is a man of flesh and blood, who is a subject to mental disturbance because of the dreadful experiences that he has faced in war.

The devastating experiences and memories of war lead to psychological disorder and crisis that profoundly influence the soldiers' daily life and identity. In "Mental Cases," for example, Owen portrays the case of veteran soldiers who survive war physically, but stay obsessed with its painful nightmarish memories that drive them mad. They undergo a sense of guilt and frustration when they recall the hardships of war and the death of soldiers and civilians.

The degrading consequences of war are depicted in Owen's "Insensibility." The absence of sympathy and the numbness of feelings turn to be armors used by soldiers to protect themselves. They become indifferent, cold and unaware of the

death of their fellows. The soldiers' suffering of alienation, identity crisis and their ached brains due to the brutality of war are revealed in Owen's "Exposure."

In short, Owen explores the emotional and mental disturbance of the soldiers by describing the turmoil of the physical world, which has a deep effect on their psyche. The battles of the soldiers expand far beyond the material realm. They are battles within themselves and their inner world. Owen documents the atrocious moments in the war zone and the soldiers' feelings of distress and depression. In addition to his fabulous handling of poetic form, mastery of language and his distinctive employment of structure and techniques, Owen aims at conveying a message to the next generations that such war produces physical and psychological destruction and it should not be permitted to occur again. War is a bad solution for problems, it brings bloodshed and agony.

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