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وتحت شعار
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يومي الاربعاء و الخميس 22-23 /10/ 2025

The Pity of War Poetry in Wilfred Owen's Poetry

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Abstract

Before World War I, being a soldier in Britain was often seen as a last resort—a fate many considered little better than prison, looked down on by both working and middle-class families. This research explores how soldiers fell so far in public regard by the early 20th century, and how that changed when the horrors of the Great War (1914–1918) shattered old illusions.

Amid that tragedy, a powerful voice emerged: Wilfred Owen (1893–1918), a soldier-poet who rejected the myth of "glorious" war. Instead, he wrote with raw honesty about its pity, pain, and the deep anger felt by those on the front lines. Soldiers weren't heroes in his eyes—they were ordinary men deserving of compassion, not scorn.

This study focuses on Owen's moving work, especially two poems that cut through wartime propaganda: *Dulce et Decorum est* and *Insensibility*. We'll explore: How war poetry evolved in the 20th century, challenging ideas like "honor" and exposing the brutal reality of injury and loss. Owen's life and craft—why he became one of the most important voices of World War I. Close readings of his poems, revealing how they humanize soldiers and lay bare the true cost of conflict. Ultimately, Owen's legacy reminds us that behind every war statistic is a person worth remembering—not as a symbol, but as someone who suffered, felt, and deserved our empathy.



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Section One

1.1 Introduction

This section includes a discussion of war poetry. This section also talks about the war poets in the 20th century, their styles and so on. The focus will be showing the real face of war in the 20th century.

1.2 War Poetry

War poetry isn't just *about* war—it's born from the raw, trembling hands of those who lived it. Imagine a soldier scribbling verses in a muddy trench, a nurse tending wounds between stanzas, or a journalist capturing chaos with ink-stained fingers. These aren't distant observers; they're people who *saw* war's truth—the blood, the silence after explosions, the weight of a dead comrade.

For centuries, war stories glorified heroes and epic battles. But something shifted in World War I. Young soldiers like Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Siegfried Sassoon didn't write hymns to glory. They asked: *Why are we here? Who benefits from this pain?* Their poems stripped away the shiny medals to show war as it truly was: exhausting, ugly, and heartbreakingly human. As one scholar put it, they turned poetry into a "sacred text" for a generation that lost its innocence (Longley, 2005).

And it's not just soldiers who speak this language. Think of WH Auden walking through Spain's civil war rubble, Margaret Postgate Cole mourning lost futures in WWI, or a Cambodian survivor whispering verses amid ruins. War poetry lives wherever conflict touches a human heart—even when poets choose *silence* as their loudest protest (Karin, 2015).

Here's what makes it profound: It's not "anti-war" propaganda. It's about the questions that keep us up at night: *What does courage really look like? Can innocence survive hell? How do we stay human when everything screams to become a monster?* Owen once said even Shakespeare felt "vapid" next to Sassoon's war poems—not because of fancy words, but because they dared to speak the unspeakable (Nevin, 2009).

These poems exist because war forces us to confront life's deepest contradictions: duty vs. morality, patriotism vs. conscience, hope vs. despair. Some poets see rebellion as necessary; others beg us to choose peace at all costs. But they all share one thing: They turn statistics into souls.

In the next pages, we'll walk through these themes—the pity, the guilt, the fragile flickers of compassion—that make war poetry not just literature, but a lifeline for humanity.



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1. Honor

Picture this: In 1914, young men marched off to war clutching pocket Bibles and dreams of glory. To them, *honor* wasn't just a word—it was a promise. A shiny medal. A hero's welcome. Early war poets like John McCrae (author of the haunting *In Flanders Fields*) captured that idealism. Their verses sang of noble sacrifice, duty, and flags waving over fields of poppies. For these poets, war was a story where honor *meant* something. But then came the trenches. The mud. The rats. The silence after a shell blast. By 1916, something broke in the souls of those who survived. A new wave of poets emerged—men like Wilfred Owen, who'd seen friends dissolve in gas attacks. To them, *honor* had become a cruel joke. Their poems didn't praise abstract ideals; they showed *exactly* what honor cost: a boy choking on his own blood, a mother's empty chair, the lie that war makes you a hero.

As scholar Reisman observes, this split defined WWI poetry:

The early voices dreamed of glory. The later ones wrote with mud-stained hands—exposing how "honor" looked when it was smeared across a corpse.

(Reisman, 2011, p. 47)

McCrae's *In Flanders Fields*—still the most famous war poem ever written—sits right at this turning point. It begins with poppies blooming over graves (a symbol of beauty and remembrance), but ends with a chilling plea: "*Take up our quarrel with the foe.*" Even its hope feels haunted.

Why this matters today:

We still hear that old song of "glory" and "honor" in times of war. But the poets who lived the nightmare taught us: *Real honor isn't in the flag you carry—it's in the truth you refuse to bury.*

2. Injury in the Poetry of World War I

Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg stand among the most emblematic voices to emerge from the chaos and devastation of World War I, offering a piercing window into the brutal realities of trench warfare. These poets didn't romanticize combat; instead, they brought to life the mud, the blood, the fear, and the despair of the front lines. While a common misconception persists that all war poets of the era hailed from aristocratic English officer ranks, historical and literary evidence shows that most soldier-poets were, in fact, from educated but middle-class backgrounds—though there were exceptions, such as Isaac Rosenberg, who came from a more modest, working-class family (Campbell, 2005, p. 163).



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Among these voices, Wilfred Owen holds a particularly profound place. He famously stated: "My subject is War, and the pity of War," encapsulating his approach to poetry as one rooted in moral urgency and emotional intensity. His work not only documents physical suffering but also confronts the spiritual and psychological wounds inflicted by mechanized conflict. The theme of injury—both bodily and emotional—became central in the war poetry of the time, as millions of soldiers were disfigured or left emotionally shattered by their experiences.

In Owen's poem "Disabled" (1917), this focus on injury becomes brutally vivid. The protagonist of the poem, a young soldier, has lost his limbs in the war, and the poem captures the dehumanizing aftermath of his sacrifice. Once celebrated and admired, he now finds himself marginalized, viewed with pity or indifference by the society he fought to protect. The physical loss becomes symbolic of broader alienation. One particularly harrowing line, "leap of purple spurted from his thigh," underscores not only the horror of combat wounds but also the psychological trauma they leave behind (Boris, 1990, p. 82). Through such imagery, Owen compels his readers—especially those untouched by war—to confront the inescapable consequences of violence on the human body and soul.

1.3 War Poets of the 20th Century: Voices of Conflict and Memory

The 20th century witnessed a profound transformation in the way poetry engaged with war, particularly during and after the cataclysmic events of the First World War. Numerous poets took up the pen to reflect on the grim experiences of battle, and among the most remembered are names such as Laurence Binyon, who authored the solemn and reverent "For the Fallen"; Charles Sorley, whose searing line "When you see millions of the mouthless dead" captures the mute horror of mass death; John McCrae, known worldwide for his iconic "In Flanders Fields"; and of course, Wilfred Owen, whose poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" delivers one of the most powerful anti-war messages in the English literary tradition (Hipp, 2002, p. 48).

Critics and scholars widely regard Owen as one of the most significant and enduring war poets, not simply for his vivid portrayals of battlefield conditions, but for his unparalleled ability to convey the psychological torment of soldiers with piercing linguistic elegance. His poetic vision was one of stark black realism, where death, agony, and disillusionment are laid bare with unflinching honesty. Unlike some of his contemporaries who



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leaned heavily on sarcasm or dark humor to critique the absurdity of war, Owen's tone is more solemn, more emotionally resonant. His writing is permeated with irony, but it is a bitter irony born of sorrow, not mockery. His poetry speaks to the futility of armed conflict and the human cost it demands—both in the mud of the trenches and in the hearts of those who survive them. His work stands out for its ability to simultaneously document historical reality and evoke deep compassion for those caught within it (Boris, 1990, p. 203).

Rudyard Kipling, another major literary figure affected deeply by the Great War, represents a different, though equally powerful, facet of wartime literature. Known as a prolific writer of both verse and prose in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Kipling brought with him a commanding literary presence. But the war struck a personal and tragic chord when his only son, John, was killed in action in 1915. This loss devastated Kipling and marked a turning point in his relationship to war. He began to write poetry that reflected a much more somber and regretful tone—far removed from his earlier imperialistic zeal. Literary critic Harold Bloom noted that Kipling embodied a rare form of genius, one that transcended conventional intelligence and spoke with profound emotional depth (Bloom, 2002, p. 158). Another figure intertwined with this literary moment is Robert Graves, one of the towering poetic voices of 20th-century England. Graves not only fought in the war but maintained personal friendships with key poets of the era, including Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. Though he wrote numerous war poems during and after his service, Graves was often self-critical, later choosing to discard or disavow much of his war poetry because he felt it failed to meet his literary standards. Still, his legacy as a war poet remains significant.

Even individuals outside the literary profession contributed poignant voices to the war poetry canon. Herbert Asquith Junior, the son of the British Prime Minister, served as an artillery officer and produced emotionally charged lyrical poetry commemorating the fallen. His perspective offered a glimpse into the intersection of military service, political lineage, and literary expression (Das, 2007, p. 517).

In sum, the war poets of the 20th century—whether professional authors, reluctant soldiers, or grieving parents—produced a body of literature that not only documented the horrors of war but shaped how generations would



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remember it. Their words endure not merely as historical artifacts but as moral testimonies to the enduring cost of human conflict.

Section Two

2.1 Introduction

This section provides a comprehensive overview of the life and literary contributions of the English war poet Wilfred Owen, placing special emphasis on the personal, historical, and artistic contexts that shaped his poetic vision. It also explores the distinctive literary techniques and stylistic strategies that Owen employed in his war poetry, particularly his use of sonic devices, realistic imagery, and thematic complexity. By situating Owen within the broader framework of early 20th-century war literature, this section aims to highlight his enduring legacy as a powerful and compassionate voice amid the brutality of the First World War.

2.2 Wilfred Owen's Life and Literary Achievements

Wilfred Owen, one of the most haunting and influential voices to emerge from the First World War, was born on March 18, 1893, in Oswestry, Shropshire, England, and met his untimely death on November 4, 1918, in France, only one week before the armistice that ended the war. He is remembered not only for the poignancy of his poetic content—rich with sorrow, empathy, and anger—but also for his experimental use of poetic form, particularly his innovative application of assonance and pararhyme, techniques that would influence generations of poets after him, particularly during the interwar period and beyond (Hibberd, 1990, p. 130).

Owen's formal education began at the Birkenhead Institute, after which he pursued further studies at the University of London. In 1913, after experiencing a period of illness, he relocated to France, where he worked as a private tutor near Bordeaux. During this time, he actively pursued his interest in poetry, compiling a volume tentatively titled "Minor Poems in Minor Keys by a Minor". Although the manuscript was never published, it reflects Owen's early immersion in poetic composition. These juvenilia were notably influenced by John Keats, one of Owen's literary idols, and demonstrated a deep appreciation for poetry as a carefully crafted art form, though still under development (Fussell, 2000, p. 250).

According to Caesar (1993, pp. 77–78), Wilfred Owen distinguished himself not only as a poet but also as a soldier. He became a central figure in the tradition of war poetry by refusing to glorify the violence of war, opting



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instead to depict its most brutal and dehumanizing aspects. His poetry, particularly that produced after his personal experiences in the trenches, challenged the prevailing patriotic sentiment and rhetoric surrounding the war. Unlike earlier poets such as Rupert Brooke, whose verse tended to romanticize the notion of honorable sacrifice, Owen's work was shaped by stark realism and a profound sense of moral outrage. His close friendship and literary mentorship with Siegfried Sassoon had a tremendous impact on the thematic and stylistic evolution of his poetry. Sassoon's own anti-war stance and raw poetic language emboldened Owen to abandon romanticized illusions and adopt a tone of somber defiance and emotional authenticity.

Owen's most famous and widely studied poems include "Dulce et Decorum Est," "Insensibility," "Anthem for Doomed Youth," "Futility," "Spring Offensive," and "Strange Meeting." These works, most of which were published posthumously, reveal Owen's unwavering commitment to exposing the psychological and physical torments endured by soldiers. The posthumous publications include *Poems* (1920), *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (1931), *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* (1963), and the highly acclaimed *The Complete Poems and Fragments* (1983), the latter of which contains the deeply symbolic poem "Soldier's Dream", a work that reflects Owen's own disillusionment and philosophical opposition to war.

The most comprehensive academic collection of Owen's writings remains *The Complete Poems and Fragments* (1994), edited by Jon Stallworthy. This two-volume scholarly edition assembles not only Owen's final poetic canon but also previously unpublished materials, drafts, and fragments, offering deep insight into the evolution of his poetic thought. Despite the popularity of a select few of his poems, a large portion of Owen's oeuvre remains less accessible to the general public, confined to specialized academic editions.

A significant contribution to the preservation and study of Owen's legacy was made in 1975, when Mrs. Harold Owen, the widow of Owen's younger brother, donated an invaluable archive of the poet's personal materials to the English Faculty Library at the University of Oxford. This archive includes original manuscripts, personal letters, and photographs, as well as Owen's private library and nearly a complete set of *The Hydra*, the literary magazine produced at Craiglockhart War Hospital, where Owen had been treated for shell shock. This collection is open to scholars and the general public upon request and stands as a testament to the enduring importance of Owen's work in both literary and historical contexts.



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Tragically, Owen was killed in action at the age of 25, just days before peace was declared. His death robbed the literary world of a burgeoning poetic genius, yet his words continue to resonate across time. His work remains one of the most poignant artistic testaments to the horrors of mechanized warfare and the emotional toll exacted on an entire generation of young men.

2.3 Wilfred Owen's Poetic Style and Techniques

Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) is universally acknowledged as one of the most powerful poetic voices to emerge from the devastation of the First World War. His literary legacy is deeply rooted in his lived experience as a soldier and the brutal realities he encountered on the battlefield. Through poems such as "*Anthem for Doomed Youth*", "*Dulce et Decorum Est*", and "*Strange Meeting*", Owen offered readers vivid, harrowing, and emotionally charged portrayals of war's psychological and physical trauma (Fussell, 2000, p. 23). These works, written during the final years of his short life, have secured Owen a lasting place in the canon of English literature.

Born in **Oswestry** on the border of England and Wales, Owen spent his early years in **Birkenhead** and later in **Shrewsbury**. Though he died young and virtually unknown—with only four of his poems published during his lifetime—his commitment to the art of poetry was evident from an early age. Between **1913 and 1915**, while teaching English in **Bordeaux** and **Bagnères-de-Bigorre**, France, he began to refine his poetic craft, experimenting with complex rhyme schemes and sonic devices that would later become hallmarks of his mature work. However, it was not until the summer of **1917**, in the aftermath of his traumatic war service and while recovering from shell shock, that Owen discovered his true poetic voice—a voice marked by sincerity, compassion, and defiance (Graves, 1929, p. 110).

Owen's entry into military service in **1915** thrust him directly into the nightmare of trench warfare. His exposure to combat in places like **Serre** and **St. Quentin** left him mentally scarred and physically exhausted, ultimately resulting in his diagnosis of **shell shock**. During his recuperation at **Craiglockhart War Hospital** in **Edinburgh**, he encountered **Siegfried Sassoon**, a fellow soldier-poet whose bold and realistic approach to war poetry profoundly influenced Owen's development. Sassoon's mentorship encouraged Owen to explore the psychological depths of war in his own writing, guiding him away from conventional poetic forms and toward a more authentic representation of soldiers' experiences

(Reisman, 2011, p. 64).



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After returning to the front in 1918, Owen participated in a number of significant battles, including the breaching of the **Hindenburg Line** at **Joncourt**, for which he was awarded the **Military Cross**. His final months were marked by a remarkable creative outpouring. Virtually all of the poetry for which he is now remembered was composed in the thirteen months between **August 1917 and September 1918**. Owen viewed his poetry as a moral obligation—a means of giving voice to the silent suffering of soldiers. In his own words, he wished to expose the “**pity of war**,” a phrase that has come to define his work. His letters to family during this time were filled with the same raw energy, compassion, and disillusionment that characterized his verse. Tragically, he was killed in action on **November 4, 1918**, just one week before the armistice (Caesar, 1993, p. 253).

Despite his premature death, Owen’s posthumous fame grew steadily throughout the 20th century. Thanks to the efforts of editors and literary figures such as **Edmund Blunden**, who published an influential edition of Owen’s poems in 1931, as well as the biographical and critical work of **C. Day Lewis, Jon Stallworthy, Dominic Hibberd**, and others, Owen came to be regarded as the defining voice of the Great War. His impact was further immortalized in **Benjamin Britten’s War Requiem** (1961), which included settings of several of Owen’s poems, bringing his work to audiences in new and powerful ways (Graves, 1929, p. 99).

One of Owen’s most remarkable talents lay in his ability to translate the complexity and horror of war into poetry that was emotionally accessible to all readers, even those with no prior experience of combat. His imagery, often visceral and unsettling, forced readers to confront the brutal realities faced by soldiers. While some critics have accused his poetry of overdramatizing the horror of war, such intensity was part of his deliberate attempt to provoke reflection and empathy. Owen’s use of the **present tense** and **direct address** gives his poems immediacy and urgency, as if the events are unfolding before the reader’s eyes. These stylistic choices lend his poetry a compelling momentum that amplifies the emotional impact (Hibberd, 1995, p. 142).

Owen was particularly noted for his use of **half-rhyme** or **pararhyme**, a technique in which consonants at the ends of words match while vowels do not. This subtle dissonance creates a jarring, unsettling rhythm that mirrors the emotional fragmentation and incompleteness of war. This unique rhyme scheme gives his poems a haunting, almost discordant sound, effectively reinforcing their somber tone. For example, in “*Anthem for Doomed Youth*”,



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the use of the half-rhyme in “guns ... orisons” serves to juxtapose the machinery of death with the spiritual absence left in its wake. Similarly, the visual rhyme “all ... pall” emphasizes the bleak finality of death and the absence of glory or heroism in actual combat (Owen, 1984, p. 75).

Owen also made powerful use of **assonance**, **consonance**, and carefully crafted sound patterns to create tone and atmosphere. In many of his poems, the speaker's voice seems almost whispered, lending an eerie quietness that can be more emotionally jarring than explicit images of gore. This quietness often replaces physical horror with psychological torment, drawing the reader into the inner suffering of soldiers. His poems often do not dwell on gory detail, but instead evoke the unbearable weight of trauma, grief, and alienation.

He skillfully employed traditional poetic forms such as the **sonnet**, yet subverted them with modern content. Owen often paired the elegance of form with the brutality of subject matter, thereby heightening the sense of irony and tragedy. He was also fond of using **ironic titles**, most famously in "*Dulce et Decorum Est*", where the glorified Latin phrase “*It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country*” is starkly contrasted against the horrific realities described in the poem—gassed soldiers, twisted limbs, and suffocating deaths (Fussell, 2000, p. 169).

In "*The Last Laugh*", Owen uses **assonance**, **consonance**, and **pararhyme**, yet introduces a rare full rhyme, such as “**moaned ... groaned,**” to emphasize the inescapable and mocking triumph of weapons over human life. This contrast between structured and disjointed sound patterns conveys a sense of unpredictability—reflecting the randomness of death in warfare and undermining any perceived order or justice in battle.

Ultimately, Owen's poetry remains a profound and lasting indictment of war. It explores themes such as the senseless loss of young lives, the dehumanizing effects of violence, the abandonment of religious faith in the face of suffering, and the enduring psychological scars borne by survivors. His technical mastery—through the use of pararhyme, symbolic imagery, subdued tone, and ironic contrasts—ensures that his poems resonate as both literary achievements and moral statements. Poems like "*Anthem for Doomed Youth*," "*Dulce et Decorum Est*," and "*Strange Meeting*" continue to offer readers a poignant lens through which to understand the futility and devastation of modern warfare (Reisman, 2011, p. 52).



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Section Three

3. Introduction

This section addresses the central theme of *the pity of war* in Wilfred Owen's selected poems, specifically “Dulce et Decorum Est” and “Insensibility.” Through these works, Owen challenges the glorified image of war perpetuated by state propaganda and patriotic literature. His poetry serves as a counter-narrative to the romanticized portrayals of warfare that were commonly circulated during World War I, offering instead a grim, realistic depiction of the physical and emotional suffering endured by soldiers. Owen’s verse reveals that war is not noble nor heroic but rather an inhumane ordeal that renders its participants not as valiant figures, but as broken men worthy of pity.

3.1 The Pity of War in *Dulce et Decorum Est*

Wilfred Owen’s poetic philosophy is grounded in the belief that war, particularly modern mechanized warfare, is not a subject for glorification. In contrast to patriotic myths that present war as a noble endeavor, Owen exposes it as a source of extreme physical suffering, psychological trauma, and moral disillusionment. In his poem *Dulce et Decorum Est*, Owen dismantles the traditional narrative of heroism by presenting soldiers as victims of brutal conditions, not as champions of glory.

Owen’s language and imagery are stark, visceral, and deliberately jarring. The poem opens with a depiction of soldiers who are physically and emotionally depleted:

“Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind” (ll. 1–8).

Here, Owen utilizes similes that compare soldiers to “beggars” and “hags,” images typically associated with poverty and old age. This linguistic choice subverts the expected image of soldiers as young, vigorous, and patriotic. Instead, they are portrayed as prematurely aged and deteriorated by the relentless hardship of trench warfare. Their exhaustion is so severe that they



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appear to be sleepwalking, deaf, and blind, trudging not toward victory but toward a vague and uncertain “distant rest.”

Critic Ronald Bartel highlights Owen’s protest against the romanticized ideals of “love, beauty, and sacrifice” in war, suggesting that such civil ideals are grotesquely mocked by the brutal reality of the battlefield. The irony lies in the contrast between the supposed nobility of military service and the dehumanizing effect it has on those who endure it.

The tone of *Dulce et Decorum Est* intensifies in its second half, particularly with the graphic portrayal of a gas attack:

“In all my dreams before my helpless sight,

He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning” (l. 15–16).

This personal, dreamlike recollection introduces a psychological dimension to the trauma of war. The image of a soldier dying from gas exposure becomes a recurring nightmare for the speaker, underlining the long-term psychological scars inflicted by such violence.

In the final stanza, Owen directly addresses the reader—whom he identifies as a misguided patriot, perhaps symbolized by poets like Jessie Pope—to challenge the age-old adage: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (“It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country”):

“My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*

Pro patria mori” (ll. 25–28).

Owen’s use of “My friend” adds a tone of bitter sarcasm, calling into question the sincerity of those who propagate the myth of noble death. His critique is both moral and rhetorical. He deconstructs the state-sponsored deception that lures young men into sacrificing their lives for a cause they barely understand. His allusion to Jessie Pope’s recruitment poem “Who’s for the Game?” underscores his frustration with popular literature that romanticized war.

The vivid and grotesque imagery used to describe the soldier’s death—“gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs”—leaves a lasting impression of war’s inhumanity. This line, steeped in sensory horror, reinforces Owen’s belief that the true experience of war must be acknowledged, not disguised beneath patriotic rhetoric.

Ultimately, Owen’s *Dulce et Decorum Est* functions as a powerful piece of protest literature. It aligns with the broader tradition of anti-war poetry by



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offering a scathing critique of the ideological machinery that glorifies combat. Through his stark realism and impassioned language, Owen honors the suffering of soldiers not with empty praise, but with a truthful portrayal that demands empathy and moral reckoning.

3.2 The Pity of War in *Insensibility*

Wilfred Owen's poem *Insensibility* presents a profound critique of war, exposing the psychological toll it inflicts on soldiers who must harden themselves to survive. The poem encapsulates Owen's broader poetic mission — to convey “the pity of war” — by portraying soldiers who emotionally detach from their surroundings as a necessary defense mechanism. Through its structure, tone, and content, the poem offers a devastating commentary on the dehumanizing effects of World War I.

The title *Insensibility* itself is deeply ironic, suggesting both the emotional numbness of soldiers and the moral blindness of the society that glorifies war. It reflects a dual-layered meaning: first, the soldiers' deliberate repression of emotion to endure the trauma of combat; and second, the societal apathy toward the psychological destruction war inflicts upon its participants.

The poem is structured as a kind of ode, a form traditionally used to praise or elevate. However, Owen subverts this convention, using the ode ironically to underscore the grotesque transformation of human sensibility in war. Rather than celebrating heroism, the poem dwells on the necessity of emotional anesthesia. The repeated use of the phrase “**Happy are these...**” at the beginning of several stanzas establishes a tone of bitter sarcasm. Owen ironically proclaims happiness not in joy or peace but in the capacity to feel nothing — to become emotionally and spiritually inert:

“Happy are men who yet before they are killed,
Can let their veins run cold.
Whom no compassion fleers
Or makes their feet

Sore on the alleys cobbled with their brothers.”

These lines suggest that in order to survive, soldiers must suppress compassion and dull their senses. The metaphor of “letting their veins run cold” emphasizes the need to reject empathy and human warmth. This process of emotional detachment is likened to a kind of cauterization — a brutal but necessary deadening of sensitivity in order to endure the horrors of war.



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Owen's use of clinical, detached language further reinforces the theme of psychological numbness. The description of soldiers as possessing “lashless eyes” and “blunt” responses evokes imagery of physical and emotional mutilation. These men have become immune to suffering, even incapable of distinguishing peace from despair:

“Alive, he is not vital overmuch;

Dying, not mortal overmuch;

Nor sad, nor proud,

Nor curious at all.

He cannot tell

Old men’s placidity from his.”

The soldier's inability to recognize the difference between his own desensitized state and the calm of old age signifies a complete erosion of emotional nuance. This is not a natural serenity, but rather a traumatic flattening of all feeling.

Owen also indicts the civilian population — the home front — for their own insensibility. He suggests that those far from the battlefield cannot comprehend the soldier’s suffering and are themselves emotionally disengaged. The line “*Happy is the soldier’s home, with not a notion / How somewhere, every dawn, some men attack*” exposes the tragic disconnect between the battlefield and the domestic sphere. This divide fosters misunderstanding, and perhaps even indifference, towards the true cost of war.

The poet's diction is rich in celestial and elemental imagery — “the last sea,” “hapless stars,” and “eternal reciprocity of tears” — which elevate the soldier’s suffering to a universal level. These images represent the spiritual and emotional desolation experienced by combatants. The reference to “*eternal reciprocity of tears*” points to the timeless nature of grief, as well as the shared mourning between the living and the dead. Yet, within this reciprocity, the soldier is alienated; he cannot participate in this mutual expression of sorrow because his emotional faculties have been extinguished. Ultimately, *Insensibility* stands as a powerful rejection of the Romantic glorification of war. It may be read as a direct counter to the idealism found in traditional war poetry. Rather than celebrating valor or sacrifice, Owen presents a grim truth: to survive war, a soldier must become less than human. Emotional suppression becomes a kind of armor, and *insensibility* is both a psychological condition and a moral indictment.



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3.3 Discussion

Upon reviewing the selected poems and relevant literary analysis, it becomes evident that Wilfred Owen's poetry serves as a powerful medium to convey the traumatic realities of warfare. Most notably, Owen famously declared that "the poetry is in the pity," reflecting his belief that war poetry should reveal the deep suffering caused by conflict. In *Dulce et Decorum Est*, Owen focuses on a specific moment of death amid the chaos of war, portraying the soldiers as disoriented, exhausted, and psychologically detached. Their confusion about their location, purpose, and the duration of their suffering emphasizes the senselessness of their plight.

Written while Owen was serving on the front lines during World War I, *Dulce et Decorum Est* offers a graphic, visceral depiction of trench warfare. Unlike abstract condemnations of war, this poem delivers a harrowing eyewitness account of a gas attack and its aftermath. Through vivid and brutal imagery, Owen dismantles the glorified narrative of patriotic sacrifice. His use of language immerses the reader in the sensory horror of battle, thereby fostering empathy for the soldiers' ordeal and challenging romanticized conceptions of military heroism.

Owen composed this poem to unmask the harsh conditions faced by soldiers and to expose the falsehoods embedded in state propaganda. He believed that young men were being manipulated into enlisting, misled by the notion that dying for one's country was noble and honorable. The poem underscores the disjunction between the propagandist slogan "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" and the grotesque suffering endured by those on the battlefield. The central tension lies in this contrast: between the glorified image of war and its grim, dehumanizing reality.

Similarly, *Insensibility* further explores the psychological consequences of war. Written during the same conflict, this poem addresses the emotional detachment experienced by soldiers who become desensitized to violence and death. The title itself conveys a loss of feeling—both physical and moral—that results from prolonged exposure to extreme trauma. Owen does not merely depict the battlefield as a site of physical destruction; he also portrays it as a place where the human psyche is irreparably damaged. In this poem, Owen suggests that emotional numbness becomes a necessary survival mechanism, yet this same numbness represents a tragic erosion of humanity.



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Both poems, therefore, reflect Owen's overarching aim: to depict war not as a path to glory but as a destructive force that leaves its participants physically shattered and emotionally broken.

Section Four

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research underscores how Wilfred Owen's firsthand experiences as a soldier on the Western Front profoundly shaped his poetic vision. His works stand as a searing indictment of war's brutal realities, emphasizing not heroism but the "pity of war." Rather than providing comfort or nationalistic fervor, Owen's poetry serves as a stark warning to future generations against the romanticization of combat.

Owen's poems, particularly *Dulce et Decorum Est* and *Insensibility*, confront the reader with the physical horrors and psychological devastation of modern warfare. Through his poignant imagery and disillusioned tone, Owen conveys the emotional numbness and moral confusion that war imposes on soldiers. The chivalric ideals of honor and sacrifice are replaced by images of gas attacks, mutilation, and despair.

In *Insensibility*, Owen expresses the internal deadening of soldiers who have lost the capacity to feel. The human cost of war, in his view, is not only measured in lives lost but also in the erosion of empathy and morality among the living. In *Dulce et Decorum Est*, the poet vehemently refutes the old lie that it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country. His critique is not merely personal but universal, aimed at dismantling the enduring myths of war.

Ultimately, Owen's poetry declares that war is no longer a source of heroism, but a domain of suffering, where soldiers are forgotten and left to die in foreign lands. The final tragic irony is that these men, far from achieving glory, encounter only "insensibility" and eternal suffering—perhaps even a reunion with their enemies, not in valor, but in Hell. Through this poetic legacy, Owen compels modern readers to reassess the ethics, consequences, and human costs of war.



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