

# Vignettes of Violence: Exploring Trauma in Selected Poems of Wilfred Owen

Debayan Banerjee\*

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Gour Banga University (WB)

**Abstract** – War is an inevitable occurrence in human civilization. Poetry is mankind's confidant since its dawn. Epics of all the cultures predominantly praise the war heroes, and regards participation in war and ensuring eventual victory as the sine qua non of manhood. However, cataclysmic consequence of war is a premonition to the entire civilization. War not only imperils physical loss but forges a permanent sore in the psyche of an individual and/or community. World War I (1914-18) heralds a significant turn in the conception regarding war. The whole world gets terrified, experiencing the 'needless butchery' of human life. This concern paves the path of a considerable bulk of anti-war poetry. Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), perhaps the most celebrated poet of this group, exploits his first hand experience of the battle field as a testimony to depict the grotesque reality of war. To him war is analogous to despair and futility. His enterprise is directed not to a particular war but to any war which entices and/or forces young and promising souls to the front with a false assurance of return and redemption. The present paper seeks to re-read some of the often anthologized poems of Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est", "Mental Case", "Insensibility" and "Strange Meeting", conceding his proclaimed attitude to war. The paper also offers symmetrical study between Owen the agonized soldier and Owen the anguished poet, insisting that the man who suffers and the mind which creates are hardly inseparable. Finally it argues that the poems' appeal is conditioned by Owen's experience of the trauma of war, both as a poet and a soldier.

**Key Words:** War, Shell Shock, Trauma, PTSD, Poetry, Wilfred Owen.

-----X-----

## INTRODUCTION

The socio-political scientists provide tentative explanations regarding the causes of the First World War (1914-1918). But indisputably its impact on the field of art and culture is both profound and determining. Culture being the refined expression of civilization, captures man's (changing) perspective on war. The Great War and its consequences are brought and judged under the parameters of humanitarian virtues. For the first time, civilization witnesses an 'industrialized war' which uses machine guns, shells, poisonous gas etc for mass killing. War is labeled as a strategic violence, employed to ensure one's dominance, over the other(s), by the cost of thousand lives. The pro-war sentimentalists, per contra, tend to rivet war with the protection of a nation, safety of a culture and even attribute a broader magnitude to it: welfare of the world. But none can deny the irrevocable loss, unabated pain, excruciating agony and unfathomable horror, attached to it. Vincent Sherry in the "Introduction" of *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War* underscores how and to what extent the British culture is affected by the War, "In Britain, for vivid instance, the Georgian sensibility of the prewar years was not only challenged, it was ultimately transformed

by the dire realities of the martial experience it was called upon to witness" (*The Cambridge Companion* 7). War certainly occupies centre stage of all sorts of creative endeavor. The war signals a transition, a shift from the old values and moralities of life. Literature seeks for realistic presentation. Horrible news from the battle field breeds more acquaintance with the true face war. Introduction of new vocabulary becomes immanent to cope with the changing perception of the war. Politicians and war mongers can no longer hoodwink the common people by delivering news of victory as both victory and defeat are earned by sacrificing of the lives of young and promising soldiers. If the first half of the war-time is influenced by the pro-war nationalist sentiment, the later half is dominated by the anti-war campaign. Poetry, however, is used by the both groups as the most potential medium for asserting their views. But the grim reality of the battle field gradually drives the pro-war sentimentalists by and large in oblivion. Edna Longley, in her article, "The Great War, history, and the English lyric" extensively observes the alluring and magnetic power of poetry to convey a message without the terseness of prose; she notes, "...And, as it proved from Brooke to Owen, poetry's symbolic and mnemonic force reaches where prose cannot touch" (*The Cambridge Companion* 60). However, the connection between the anti-war poetry

and the people's general disregard for war is mutually influential. The poets' popularity and consequent fame therefore, is indebted to the conscious attempt of restoring the values and morality. The poems of Robert Graves, Charles Sorley, Siegfried Sassoon and above all Wilfred Owen not just voice against the stereotyped view of the war but highlight that war is not the exclusive place for the display of valour and courage. They, especially Owen, introduce an alternative view of war by suggesting that killing of an enemy soldier does not make one hero, as the dead soldier too is there to protect his/her mother land. Most of the anti-war poets with their direct experience of the front not just make their poems appealing, but also appalling.

On March 18, 1893, Wilfred Owen was born in a devoted Christian Evangelical family in Oswestry, England. His juvenile interest both in the religion and the poetry of classical and romantic poets, especially of Shelley and Keats, marked him from the beginning a 'different boy', with high sensibility. His academic failure to get a scholarship and subsequent detestation with the rigidity of Christianity prompted him to migrate to France. At the outbreak of the Great War despite his equivocal response to the war, he decided to enlist himself in the Artist's Rifles. In a letter to Susan Owen, his mother, he wrote, "I adopt the perfect English custom of dealing with an offender: a Frenchman duels with him; an Englishman ignores him" (Bloom 11). After months of military training in Essex, Owen finally, after the Christmas Eve, 1916 joined his Manchester Regiment in France. In the middle of March, Owen fell through a shell-hole into a cellar and was trapped there for three days (Bloom 12). Failed to recover fully, Owen was detected as a patient of neurasthenia or shell-shock and was admitted to the Craiglockhart War Hospital on the outskirts of Edinburgh, Scotland. There under the treatment of Dr. Arthur Brock he attained many therapeutic sessions. The doctor insisted him to edit the hospital journal *Hydra* or precisely to out speak the horror he experienced in the battle ground through the medium he excelled. There his eventual meeting and intimate friendship with another celebrated anti-war poet, Siegfried Sassoon, gave him the impetus he needed most. The following year turned to be *annus mirabilis* of his brief creative career and poems like 'Dulce Et Decorum Est', "Mental Cases", "Sentry", find day light. In autumn, 1918 he joined the troupe, showed extraordinary bravery and get selected for the prestigious Military Cross. On 4<sup>th</sup> November that year, one week before the Armistice he was shot and dead near Ors, northern France.

Though Owen takes up guns, he never compromises with sensibility. He does not let his poetic self and essential humanitarian virtues be molested by his martial association. Rather participation in the war benefits his creative self. The dormant possibility of a poet now finds proper and systematic utterance. His poetry is shaped and sharpened by war- rather by the

trauma of war. Being a soldier he can empathies with the soldiers and his poetry therefore, finds war not an occasion for the display of valour but the site of excruciating pain and irreparable loss. Robert Edward Graalman Jr. finely sums up how the War lands Owen in the midst of sheer crisis and dilemma and how his hitherto 'romantic' conception of war is immediately shattered into pieces, "Immediately, Owen was struck by the difference between the grotesque reality of the war zone and the appallingly inaccurate depictions of the war at home" (*War Poets*141). The spine chilling reality of the battle ground where survival depends on the accuracy of aim and alertness to escape the shell, affects his sensible mind. Few days after his posting in France referring a narrow escape Owen writes to his mother, "[T]hose fifty hours were the agony of my happy life" (Bloom 12). Though Owen takes up gun to protect his 'mother tongue', he is always conscious of the futility of war and regards war as a game of wanton diplomacy in which innocent youths are reduced to the fodder of cannons. This is clear from his latter, composed in 1914: "I am furious with chagrin to think that the Minds which were to have excelled the civilization of ten thousand years, are being annihilated—and bodies, the products of aeons of Natural Selection, melted down to pay for political statues" (Silkin 199). He perceives that soldiers are nothing but circus animals as they are being (de)moralized feed the ego-centric politicians and war mongers. However his temporary 'unfit' state due to shell shock lets him to ponder seriously about the futility of war which in turn returns nothing but pity. The observation of Scranton Roy, here, is worth quoting: "Owen means to malign war, but according to his logic, it is his very experience of war that gives him privileged access...Owen asserts that war's truth is the truth of the soldier's experience, which puts the issue of war beyond debate" (Roy, para 14).

In his book, the *Poetry of Shell Shock*, Daniel Hipp recounts words of a WWI war veteran, Maurice Bowra: "Whatever you hear about the war, remember it was far, far worse... Nobody who wasn't there can ever say what it was like" (Hipp 9). The verbatim is enough to create the impression of undeniable horror and unavoidable threat that companies the soldiers out in the front. This persistence pressure eventually breaks their nerves and relegates their life. The trauma of war makes their life miserable. They suffer from war neurosis. Fiona Reid, in this context argues that the link between "war and mental breakdown is far older" (Reid 2). However, the buzz word 'trauma' did not come into existence at that time. It becomes eventually popular and/or useful to understand psychological torment of the combatants engaged in the Vietnam War (1955-1975). Gradually the term includes in its paradigm the Holocaust survivors, the (post) colonial natives, and migratory/exilic individual and/or community. The victims of WWI are called patients of 'shell shock', a phrase though

not coined but undoubtedly popularized by Charles Myers. Shell shock primarily denotes physical wound caused by shells. Military psychiatry at that period was reluctant to acknowledge the psychological wound inevitably associated to it. May be the preconceived notion regarding war as a site of glory, glamour and sacrifice, restricted them from diving deep into the mental state of the patients. Being shell shocked, therefore, often was seen as an act of cowardice. When Tracey Loughran remarks, "the experience of shell shock in the First World War" comes influential to the treatment of similar cases in the wars, one easily can hail the very term as forefather of the concept(s) like war trauma and PTSD (Loughran 5). Despite some prominent contextual and therapeutic difference between shell shock and trauma, *au fond*, their interest is to diagnose and heal the mental suffering and stress of the patients. However, Daniel Roberts claims that uniqueness of PTSD lies in its admission of 'aggression' and 'guilt' (Roberts 3). In one of his research based article on Owen and war poetry Hipp contends that shell shock as well as the trauma of war heavily affected Owen's nerves and he displayed signs of anxiety disorders like nightmares, stammering and low confidence. He also argues that Owen's psychological break down worked on two levels: first as a soldier and second as an officer (Hipp, 2002: 5). Notwithstanding a third factor, sensibility of a poet, must not be ignored. Hipp observes elsewhere, "[N]o two cases of shell shock were identical" and the degree of the effect depends not just on the magnanimity of the event but equally on the subject's response to it (Hipp, 2005: 16). The comparable superiority in the regiment makes Owen passively responsible for the death of his fellow soldiers, a guilt his sensible mind cannot withstand. Despite Owen's his avowed anti romantic attitude to war, let him not to forget the smiling faces suddenly turned into corpse and cannot forgive himself thereof. Hipp in his book discusses the recuperative power of poetry to bring the tormented poet-soldier(s) or vice versa, back to their original self: "...poetry enabled the men to bring themselves back from psychological breakdown to a state of stability..." (Hipp, 2005: 9). Poetry, here, functions as not only a vehicle of expression but an opportunity to revisit the past, with a liability to capture and articulate the truth. Owen once said, "[T]he true poets must be truthful" (Stallworthy 535). Owen's therapeutic session with Dr. Brock, enabled him to remember the past, to re-experience the horror and pain of the trench life, and to express them through poetry. Though that style violated traditional treatment of shell shock patients, definitely anticipated the methodology of treating PTSD patients. Owen's poetry, ergo, may be read as revelation of a patient and realization of a poet. This observation, however, must not relegate his poems as mumbling of a patient struggling to recover from the trauma of war. Saying this, Owen's development as a poet after his six months staying at the Craiglockhart War Hospital which again occasioned his meeting with Sassoon, can hardly be overlooked.

Harold Bloom notes that the first draft of "Dulce et Decorum Est" was composed in October, 1917 at Craiglockhart Hospital (Bloom 14). Owen borrows the title from Horace's *The Odes* to satire the blind patriotic sentiment and glory falsely attached to war. The English translation of the words goes on, "It is sweet and honourable to die for one's country." Owen by depicting the horrible experience of (chlorine) gas attack questions the jingoistic sentimentalists where then glory of war really lies. The poem presents the soldiers as "old beggars under sacks" and who are "coughing like hags..." (Kendall 154). The poet-persona's trauma as a witness to that pathetic sight becomes clear: "In all my dreams before my helpless sight,/ He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning" (Kendall 154). This realistic picture shatters all the perceived romanticized notion of war, as neither victory nor defeat can recompense the pain and agony of the soldiers or soothe the wailing of their family and friends. The last stanza is formed like a message. The use of words like "White eyes writhing in his face", "forth-corrupted lungs", "incurable sores" (Kendall 154) jointly create the image of terror and torture, the soldiers inevitably become victim of. The poem ends with the poet's earnest plea not to hide the grey face of war as the black face of death is not different from it.

Written in the similar vein, "Mental Cases" is composed in the summer of 1917. John Silkin opines that the poem falls to the second category of Owen's poems as here the poet fuses anger with satire and irony not only to decipher the miserable condition of the soldiers but also to critique the civilians who have least understanding of the war heroes (Silkin 206). As the title suggests, the poem considers the psychic state of the soldiers who live in the 'purgatorial shadows/ Drooping tongues from jaws...' (Kendall 170) This is one of Owen's most disturbing war poems. It distinctly captures aftermath of shell shock. The poem gains additional importance as Owen here informs how memory of the war has maimed them as they can visualize "Multitudinous murders they once witnessed" (Kendall 170) and were responsible for. Sounds of machine guns and scent of gunpowder always question their heroism. "Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented" (Kendall 170). Their realization of the war as "madness" comes much after the damages have been done.

Written probably between October 1917-March 1918, "Insensibility" is Owen's retort to Wordsworth famous poem "Character of the Happy Warrior" (1806), composed in the context of the Battle of Trafalgar. Owen's poem presents six different types of persons who maybe (definitely they are not) are happy by sacrificing their sensibility. The opening stanza presents the 'dedicated' soldiers who "makes their feet/ Sore on the alleys cobbled with their brothers" (Kendall 155). Owen suggests that despite their selfless sacrifice, the soldiers are brutally ignored and immediately forgotten. In the context of war poetry the



word “imagination” is substitute for hope. The soldiers’ losing of imagination reiterates their morbidity. Certainly “Their eyes are rid/ Of the hurt of the colour of blood forever” (Kendall 155). By capturing these different types of insensibility Owen actually attempts to inform the trauma of war. He portrays not only horror, but injustice done to the soldiers. He questions the necessity of war in general. The poem ends with the ambiguous question whether the civilians would share “The eternal reciprocity of tears” (Kendall 155).

Though scholars sometimes consider “Strange Meeting” as Owen’s swan song, definitely it was composed in the early days of 1918. Sassoon approves the poem as Owen’s “passport to immortality, and his elegy to the unknown warriors of all nations” (Bloom 22). This universal appeal beyond its thematic design, unveils the innate conflict in the poet’s mind. That Owen was torn between his duty and devotion is evident in the poem. The soldiers in the poem (one dead, another alive or believes he is alive), consequently loses their individual identity, become same and similar. When one utters, “Whatever hope is yours/ Was my life also” (Kendall 168) - the interpretation, comprehending the inevitable occurrence of war, can unscrupulously deny the distinction between the speaker and addressee. Mohammad Riaz Mahmud sums up the poem as an sensible poetic account capturing two indelible realities of war: ‘futility’ and ‘suffering’. He also refers the situation as “a vision, a nightmare” (Mohammad 28). Obviously the opening of the poem “Down some profound dull tunnel” (Kendall 168), connotes the inward journey of the poet-persona i.e. the living soldier. The journey, however, is not horizontal, but vertical-slanting downwards. Suddenly, the poet-persona meets the opposition soldier, he had killed. He realizes, “I knew we stood in Hell” (Kendall 168). Nevertheless, this ‘hell’ is constructed by his guilt-ridden psyche which now desperately seeks retribution. Instead the dead soldier educates him about untold truth of war: “The pity of war, the pity war distilled” (Kendall 168). This suggests that the knowledge regarding the truth of war can only be obtained in after life. The truth however is inherent in the trauma of war. A soldier gains it by cost of poise and sensibility. This poem can be treated as Owen’s representative poem as here the poet Owen transfixes his reader by recollecting a realization the soldier Owen had once shared.

## CONCLUSION:

The singular bond that ties all the poems discussed earlier is Owen’s attitude to war. In the preface of his posthumously published *Poems* (1920), he pledges that his aim is to capture not the glory of war but the unmentioned or desperately over looked ‘pity’ inherent in it. Pity form the core of his poetry (Mohammad 28). The word in addition to its etymological meaning as ‘compassion’ (from old French *pīte*) purveys a sense of regret and condolence. Owen shifts his attention from

the physical reality of the battlefield to the tormented and agitated psyche of a soldier. The mind becomes the metaphorical battle ground where the soldiers, irrespective of their national identity, fight a lone battle between expectation and reality, between survival and killing, and between ethics and sacrifice. Death of the compatriots appeals him along with the death of the enemy soldiers he is responsible for. The soldiers, to his view, are destined to perpetual physical and mental suffering. The direct experience of the front enables him to depict the true picture of war. The poems, thereby, despite their essential imaginative quality, are firmly based on his personal experience. Through the reliable vehicle of poetry, Owen re-turns to his combat experience and discovers only horror which again precipitates nothing but pity for the fellow suffering soldiers.

## WORKS CITED

- Bloom, Harold (2002). ed. *Poets of World War I: Wilfred Owen and Issac Rosenberg*. Chelsea House Publishers.
- Fussell, Paul (2013). *The Great War and Modern Memory*. OUP.
- Graalman, Robert Edward J. (2012). “Wilfred Owen.” *Critical Survey of Poetry: War Poets*, edited by Rosemary M. Canfield Reisman, Salem Press, pp. 138-146.
- Hipp, Daniel (2005). *The Poetry of Shell Shock: Wartime Trauma and Healing in Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney, and Siegfried Sassoon*. McFarland and Company.
- "By Degrees Regaining Cool Peaceful Air in Wonder": Wilfred Owen's War Poetry as Psychological Therapy." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 35, no.1, pp. 25-49.
- JSTORE, [www.jstore.org/stable/1315317](http://www.jstore.org/stable/1315317).
- Kendall, Tim (2013). *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology*. OUP.
- Longley, Edna (2005). “The Great War, history, and the English lyric.” *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, edited by Vincent Sherry, Cambridge University Poems, 2005, pp. 57-84.
- Loughran, Tracey : “Shell Shock, Trauma and the First World War: The Making of a Diagnosis and Its Histories.” *Oxford University Press*, vol. 67, no.1, pp. 94-119.
- JSTORE, [www.jstore.org/stable/24631881](http://www.jstore.org/stable/24631881).

Mahmud, Mohammad Riaz : "The impact of the First World War on the poetry of Wilfred Owen."  
*IIUC STUDIES*, vol. 4, pp. 25-40.

Owen, Wilfred (1983). "Preface." *Complete Poems and Fragments*, edited by Jon Stall worthy, OUP, 1983.

Reid, Fiona (2012). *Broken Men; Shell Shock, Treatment and Recovery in Britain 1914-1930*. Bloomsbury.

Roberts, Daniel : "Shellshock' and 'PTSD': Two Different Conditions, Two Different ways of Understanding and Handling War Trauma." *Essex Student Research Online*, vol.9, pp. 1-9.

Scranton, Roy : "The Trauma Hero: From Wilfred Owen to "Redeployment" and "American Sniper." Los Angeles Review of Books.

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/trauma-hero-wilfred-owen-redeployment-american-sniper/#!>

Sherry, Vincent (2005). "Introduction." *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, edited by Vincent Sherry, Cambridge University Poems, pp. 1-11.

Silkin, Jon (1998). *Out of battle; The Poetry of the Great War*. Macmillan Press Ltd.

---

#### **Corresponding Author**

**Debayan Banerjee\***

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Gour Banga University (WB)

E-Mail – [deneree89@gmail.com](mailto:deneree89@gmail.com)