CHAPTER II

WILFRED EDWARD SALTER OWEN

(1893-1918)
Wilfred Edward Salter Owen (1893-1918) was born in 1893 in Oswestry in Shropshire. Owen entered Shrewsbury Technical School, after the family moved, as a ‘day boy’ until 1911 when he matriculated at London University. He began as a teacher of English at the Berlitz School in Bordeaux. While he was studying in Bordeaux he visited the War hospital there and saw that operations were being performed without any anaesthetics on the soldiers wounded in the early days of the War. Finally he returned to England in the late summer of 1915, and soon joined the Artist’s Rifles.

Wilfred Owen is best remembered as one of the great First World war Poets; “For many young people”, Dominic Hibberd says, “he is now the archetypal voice of 1914-18, even though ... it is highly misleading to see him as representative, he was a unique and extraordinary figure, unlike any other poet or soldier of his time”.¹ C. Day Lewis, in his introduction on Owen’s War poems, is of the opinion that “Owen’s poems are
the finest written by any English poet of the First World War and probably the greatest poems about War in our literature”.2

During Owens’s life time, however, only four of his poems were published. While the rest of them were published posthumously, and this is the reason Owen’s fame as a poet came long after he was killed.

Although Owen’s life was tragically cut-short at the age of twenty-five years, yet in his brief span of life he experimented with a variety of forms and styles in his poetry. His styles have been characterized by features recognized as Romantic, Decadent, Georgian and Modernist. Apart from all these varied areas of influences on Owen’s personal identity he was also influenced to a large extent by his interactions with other people, from family members to friends and poets, who had died nearly a century before his birth.

Over the years, Owen’s poetry has been evaluated comprehensively and in varied ways. Most of the criticism on Owen focuses on his poetic technique. The critics examine how Owen used form to create a certain effect and how he deviated from the traditional form to create other effects. Owen’s style and technique, over the course of his career as a
poet, kept on changing. This change has been attributed to many factors, which include Tailhade, S. Sassoon and other poets; besides his experience of the Great War.

In this Chapter, on Owen, I therefore intend to discuss the fact that despite the varied forms of influences, Owen’s experience in the First World War played a crucial role in helping him find not only his own poetic voice but also an effective language to convey the horrors of the First World War. His poetry is in fact a realization of the horrible realities of modern warfare - “a sense of alienation, loss and despair”. The most notable aspect of Owen’s poetry is the quality and nature of modern warfare that the readers may easily discern in his poetry.

Owen’s understanding of poets and poetry was based on the styles and conventions of the 19th century British Romantic Poets; especially John Keats and P.B. Shelley. In these two poets Owen found both personal and poetic insight and inspiration. Keats became to Owen a kindred spirit and a kind of personal hero. Shelley on the other hand did not appeal to Owen on a personal level as Keats did. Instead, Owen admired Shelley for his poetic genius. Owen’s admiration for these poets and their contemporaries exist not only in Owen’s own poetry but also many of his letters are the evidence in this
regard. Owen did attempt to become a Romantic poet like his heroes. However, just as Owen reached the climax of his poetic talent, he found himself into the midst of the horrors of the First World War. As a result Owen’s War poems are a collection enriched with the characteristics of loss, despair, alienation and meaninglessness of the contemporary scenario.

It was not until New Year’s Eve 1917, less than a year away from his untimely and tragic death that Wilfred Owen considered himself worthy of being deemed a poet: “I go out of this year a poet my dear Mother, as which I did not enter it”.

It was during Keats’s annus mirabilis, 1818-19, that the poet wrote many of his finest poems. Like Keats, Owen also did the majority of his best work during a similar annus mirabilis in 1917-18. In early 1917, Owen was hospitalized at Craiglockhart Hospital due to shell shock after having fought unrelieved for twelve consecutive days and being “forced to take refuge for several days in a hole with a month-old bits and pieces of another British officer”. It was during his hospitalization that Owen’s poetry changed dramatically and many of his most famous War poems were composed.
Alan Tomlinson says that Owen seems to have also been heavily influenced by P.B. Shelley:

It is true that there are fewer references to Shelley in Owen’s letters than there are to Keats, and that Owen does not write of Shelley in that tone of intimate and exalted affection that he reserves for Keats. “Keats was “the poet”, magically gifted and romantically doomed and his remarks about Keats constantly show how strongly he identified himself with him. In a letter written to his mother on January 26, 1912, however, he calls Shelley “the brightest genius of his time”.

Tomlinson also explores the Shelleyan influence apparent in Owen’s famous War poem “Strange Meeting” Both the title of the poem and its basic plot come from Shelley’s The Revolt of Islam. In Canto Fifth, Stanza xiii of Revolt, Shelley writes:

“And one whose spear had pierced me, leaned beside
With quivering lips and humid eyes; and all Seemed, like some

brothers on a journey wide

Gone forth, whom now strange meeting did befall

In a strange land, round one whom they might call

Their friend, their chief, their father, for assay

Of peril, which had saved them from the thrall,
Of death, now suffering. Thus the vast array
Of those fraternal bonds were reconciled that day”.

Looking only at this stanza from which Owen’s famous title was drawn, numerous comparisons could be made between “The Revolt of Islam” and Owen’s “Strange Meeting”. Owen’s final stanza for example, is a direct reflection of Shelley’s above quoted lines:

“I am the enemy you killed my friend.
I knew in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now…”

(\textit{CP,}ll. 40-44)

In both poems, speaker is accompanied by an enemy soldier whom he now considers an ally or friend. Shelley establishes this relationship through elaborate detail involving fraternal connection; he uses phrases such as “seemed like some brothers” or “fraternal bands were reconciled” to make his point. Owen achieves the same effect with two simple words: “my friend”. “\textit{Strange Meeting}” unlike Shelley’s poem,
“...through me as you jabbed and killed”, in a line that once again reflects “The Revolt of Islam”.

As Owen matured and experienced the horrors of the War, the Romantic influence remained but these elements of Romanticism took on a new meaning. Rather than simply imitating the style, Owen began to use his romantic notions ironically as a means of expressing his disgust and disillusionment with the War.

The next phase in Owen’s poetic development began in September 1913 when he left England for France. This move marked Owen’s final break from his family, and he seems to have relished the freedom. Details of a few of Owen’s new found pleasures, along with some of his mother’s objections to his new life style can be seen in the following lines:

“In France, there was no one to object when he drank wine with meals like a local, or when he attended social events on Sundays in preference to giving to Church. He took up smoking, developing a passion for Egyptian cigarettes. Susan remonstrated from Shrewsbury in vain. Within a week or two of his arrival he exercised his new -
found liberty by agreeing to take part in a music-hall act
despite her horror of Theatres”.

Although Owen’s contact with Monro and Sassoon was concurrent to his military training and war experience, the two poets had an impact on Owen that was above and beyond what he was experiencing in his own life. Both men acted as critics to Owen and played an important role in helping Owen find the poetic voice for which he would be remembered. The most notable quality of modern warfare that are easily discernable in Owen’s war poems are as follows;

1. To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word, not the nearly exact, nor the merely decorative word.

2. To create new rhythms- as the expression of new moods- and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods... In poetry, a new cadence means a new idea.

3. To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject...

4. To present an image (hence the name; Imagist”.

5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.
In essence, Imagism called for the poetic representation of an image or idea through clear, concise, and uncomplicated language.

These features, in conjunction with his terrible and tragic content, make Owen’s poetry heading towards modernism. Following the numerous and varied poetic influences in his lifetime, Owen’s War experience was largely responsible for his movement away from his Romantic roots to modernism.

When Owen was apparently considering enlisting himself in the army as early as November 1914, he wrote more seriously on the notion in a June 1915 letter to his mother. “I told (Harold).... When I return home in Sept. I should try to join the Army. For I noticed in the hotel London an announcement that any gentleman(fit etc,) returning to England from abroad will be given a Commission- in the ‘Artists’ Rifles’. Such officers will be sent to the front in three months”.8

In fact, much of Owen’s motivation for fighting came directly from the propaganda campaign going on in England. . Because of the wide availability of English newspapers in Bordeaux (France) Owen would have been “well aware of the intense
enlistment campaign which was urging upon the young men to perform their duty in what had already been called the Great War”.

Four months after telling his mother that he was considering enlisting himself, Owen joined the Artists’ Rifles, though, as Douglas Kerr points out in his “The disciplines of the Wars”: Army training and the language of Wilfred Owen”, the decision “had not been an enthusiastic one” for Owen as it was not readily understood by or acceptable to his family”:

To his family he had seemed supremely inapt for the army. His family never considered him fit for army because his Bohemian affectations, his vagueness, his disdain for the practical, and disinclination for the athletic. ‘The very idea of him soldiering,’ says Harold Owen, ‘seemed to us all too fascinating to seriously think about’.

Owen expressed his own doubts and feelings of indecision to his mother: “I don’t want the bore of training, I don’t want to wear khaki; nor yet to save my honour before inquisitive grand-children fifty years hence. But I now do most intensely want to fight”. And he fought despite his doubts and his
family’s disbelief. Once enlisted and inspected, Owen began his actual army training on October 25, 1915.

After entering the military life style to which he was unaccustomed, Owen felt isolated and cut off from the world he had known prior to joining the army. Besides the initial shock at his new life style and the rigorous training he was undergoing, Owen must have also felt alienated as a poet. His poetic ambitions stood in sharp contrast to the expectations from him as a soldier in the British Army. As Kerr has rightly pointed out:

“His career had been in his own eyes a series of struggles to free himself from tyrannical authority; this was an essential prelude to poetic success, finding his own voice. But now he had bound himself over to a discipline of absolute obedience, in the most unpoetic and unlovely company, in an institution whose first actions included giving him a number and a uniform. It was a multiple transformation; the poet became a soldier, the expatriate a patriot, the teacher a trainee, the elder a cadet”.

Owen wrote about his feelings, emphasizing the newness and strangeness of the situation in which he found himself:
‘I am an exile here, suddenly cut off both from the present day world and from my own past life. I feel more in a strange land than when arriving at Bordeaux1 it is due to the complete newness of the country, the people, my dress, my duties, the air, food, everything’.

The most notable feature among his list of ‘news’ in regard to his changing poetry is the new dialect he encountered in the military. Along with physical and tactical military training, Owen was also learning a new language- the language of the army- that would later appear in his war poems, giving them an outlook of modernism. Kerr’s remark is very appropriate when he says, “Wilfred Owen’s best known writing deals with the life and death of soldiers; and among the cultural codes that mingle to create his style, the language of the army is obviously prominent”. This new language would have seemed to Owen to be in sharp contrast with his ideal of what language should be:

“He was immersed in and set learn the army’s language in what must have seemed the most blatant discursive clash with what he wanted language to be…” The poetry to which he aspired was romantic self-expression, and the poet for him was a hypersensitive individual prized for his originality, the
celebrant and creator of beauty and pleasure. There had been epical swashbuckling times when military and poetic speech consorted comfortably, but not Wilfred Owen’s idea of poetry and his idea of the army”

Owen also gained new experiences and subject matter to write about. One of Owen’s critics has rightly pointed out, “When the army became available to Owen as a literary subject, it gave his writing a field of material observation and at the same time a new quality of terseness, where before he had tended to luxuriance”.17 Owen’s “S.I.W” is an example of his abbreviated style:

“One dawn, our wire patrol
Carried him. This time, Death had not missed.
We could do nothing but wipe his bleeding cough.
Could it be accident?- Riffles go off...
Not sniped? No.( later they found the English ball)”

(\textit{CP},ll. 25-29 )

Owen here does not use a singular, even once, first person pronoun but rather speaks of himself as part of a group. The last two lines, for example, are a series of questions and
answers, all of which are written as they might have been spoken on the battlefield.

Owen’s language at its best is direct, clear cut and wastes no words in presenting the point. In The poem “Disabled” Owen describes a young soldier who has returned home legless, recalling his glorious days as a footballer before the War:

“He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,
And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,
Legless, sewn short at elbow…”

(CP, ll.1-3)

As the young man thinks back on his youth, Owen describes his body and the injuries it has endured to show how much the boy has been changed by the war:

“And girls glanced lovelier as the air grew dim,-
In the old times, before he threw away his knees.
Now he will never feel again how slim
Girls’ waists are, or how warm their subtle hands;
All of them touch him like some queer disease’.

(CP, ll. 9-13)
The strongest rhyming pair in this stanza, knees/disease, emphasizes the new body part, the knees, while showing that the boy is flawed or diseased now that he no longer has them.

Owen continues emphatically contrasting the wounds inflicted by war to those caused by sports and games. In doing this, he notes various aspects of the young man’s body: back, thigh, leg, shoulder and coloration and in the process exposes the hollow cynicism of the propaganda that had led him and so many others to join the War:

“Now he is old; his back will never brace;
He’s lost his colour very far from here,
Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,
And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race,
And leap of purple spurted from his thigh”.

(CP, ll. 16-20)

In these lines Owen characterizes the young man as “old”, describing his physical ailments. The man’s back is now weak while once upon a time it had been strong, and his skin pale instead of tan. The ‘leap of purple’ is blood drawn by enemy fire. Owen uses this image to return to the images of the
propaganda campaign which had inspired many young men to join the War:

“One time he liked a blood-smear down his leg,
After the matches, carried shoulder high.
It was after football, when he had drunk a peg,
He thought he’d better join. – He wonders why.
Someone had said he’d look good in kilts,
That’s why; and may be, too, to please his Meg…”

(CP, ll. 21-26)

One of the prominent images of the poem, that of the young man being “carried shoulder high”, is an echo of A. E. Housman’s 1896 poem, “To an Athlete Dying Young”.

“The time you won your town the race
We chaired you through the market-place;
Man and boy stood cheering boy,
And home we brought you shoulder-high”.

(CP, ll. 1-4)

Housman provides a romanticized image of a young English athlete, hoisted high, forever frozen in glory. It is an image that may well have inspired some of the propaganda posters of the
Great War, and it stands in sharp contrast with the other images of war-induced injuries that Owen uses in his poem.

Owen uses his poetry to address the realities of War. In the case of “Disabled”, for example, Owen not only reveals the young soldier’s physical wounds, but also exposes the man’s mental anguish. Owen’s poem speaks out about the terrible horrors he had experienced. This new style of writing, with its coarseness and directness forged by his army experience, breaks with Romantic and Edwardian tradition and makes Owen a modern poet.

In Brooke’s poem paradoxically entitled “Peace” the speaker commemorates the beginning of the War, sees the fight with the Central Powers as a divinely given opportunity to rouse the young men of England from their complacent post-Victorian stupor. “Now God be thanked who has matched us with His hour/ And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping”, he says (CP, ll.16). With a “sharpened power”, a “hand made sure”, and “clear eye”. These young will, the speaker says, “turn to the war “as swimmers into cleanness leaping”. In Brooke the war is figured as invigorating- purifying swim that will give English men’s lives clarity and meaning.
The first poem in which Owen expresses a deeply felt reaction to the war is the sonnet entitled “Happiness”. Here the poet contrasts the innocent happiness of boyhood with the deeper joys and sorrows of experience— in this case the morally dubious experience of the First World War is quite clear:

“But the old happiness is unreturning
Boys have no grief as grievous as youth’s yearning;
Boys have no sadness sadder than our hope.”

(CP, ll.12-15)

Here Owen cites lines dealing with the loss of youthful innocence. He thinks that the days which have gone by can not return the innocent life of the child is away from the cruelty of the world. A child is an angel of his time. The child’s innocence is always unaware of the wrongs and evils of the world. But the stage in which the poet sees himself, is full of sorrows and grieves.

“Exposure”, which is considered to be the first important War poem of Owen, seems to be particularization of the transforming experiences. The first few stanzas of the poem describe the winter “landscape of No Man’s Land and recall the
vivid depiction of the scene in the poet’s letter of January”. In “Exposure” the poet says:

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds
That knive us...
Wearied we keep away because the night is silent...
Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the
Salient...
Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous’
But nothing happens.
Watching we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,
Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.
Northward, incessantly, flickering gunnery rumbles,
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.
What are we doing here.”

(CP, ll. 1-11)

The impressions of agonized minds and bodies portray the terrible effects of winter trench warfare. As J. Loiseau has correctly pointed out “the opening lines echo Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”. “The peculiar blankness of the words, “But nothing happens” suggest a contrast between the range of positive experience that Keats explores in his ode and the essentially negative experience of war, which draws the senses
filled with misery and apprehension”.¹⁹ The feeling of tension, monotony, and defeated expectations is reinforced by the voice of para-rhyme. These lines create a painful discord of the situation. They convey the message of the terrible experiences he was undergoing. The initial lines of the poem depict the numbing wretchedness of a winter night in the trenches.

In the last two stanzas of the same poem the descriptive focus shifts. Overwhelmed by the tedium and misery, the soldier falls into a trancelike state; they dream first of spring, then of the warmth and peace of home:

“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,--

... To-night, His frost will fasten on his mud and us,

Shrivel­ing many hands, puckering foreheads crisp,

The burying- party, picks and showels in their

Shaking grasp,
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,  

But nothing happens.”

(CP, ll. 28-41)

These lines bring the physical ordeal in relation to the soldiers’ sufferings which is futile and meaningless. The theme of this poem develops in terms of a paradox. The poet is not only an observer of the situation but he seeks some meaning for his own and others’ sufferings. These lines of the poem are also an effort to reconcile the disparity between the unredeemed evil of war and the positives inherent in the religion.

Owen’s process of poetic development is an instinctive adjustment rather than a conscious effort. His outlook has been changed by the overwhelming experience of the Great War. And his search for his new comprehension came from the inward need to say the thing he had to say most exactly and finally. As in “Dulce et Decorum Est”:

“If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,

Bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,-

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”

(CP, ll. 17-28)

These lines are about the vivid description of physical and psychological sufferings caused by the war. The emphasis is on the shocking realistic details of the war. Here we are invited to share the poet’s experience in watching the agonies of a gassed and dying soldier. It exclusively focuses on the individual agony simultaneously insisting on the impossibility of the spectators conceiving it.

The other poem of this period “The Dead Beat”, depicts a soldier whose ideology and expectation have been shattered by the War. He dies unwounded, unmarked– a victim, apparently suspected of forces more sinister than shells or bullets. This poem seems to be in affinities with Sassoon’s “Lamentations”, and “Suicide in the Trenches” both of which portray the effects of utter personal demoralization:
"We sent him down at last, out of the way.
Unwounded;--- stout lad, too, before that strafe.
Malingering? Stretcher- bearers winked, “Not half!”
Next day I heard the Doc.’s well-whisked laugh:
“That scum you sent last night soon died. Hooray.”

(CP, ll. 16-20)

The speaker is astonished on the predicament of the soldier who was hale and hearty while going on the trench. But soon his death is reported. Its an ironical situation portraying the utter moral demoralization. Owen, here, shows his ironical attitude, uncompromising realism and his compassionate fellow-feelings with the sufferings of the soldiers.

Much more in Owen’s natural poetic vein than “The Dead Beat” is “Anthem for Doomed Youth”. The grave elegiac tone of this sonnet differs from the open discords of “Exposure”. Careful modulation of music of the poem embodies a deeper and more subtle sense of disharmony:

“What passing- bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons."
No mockeries for them from prayers or bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,-
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires...

(CP, ll. 1-8)

These lines contain many images related to death and mourning etc. The speaker uses ‘simile’ to describe the soldiers dying in the battle as ‘cattle’. Owen here balances the consolatory rituals of Christian burial against the degradation of those “who die as cattle”. Bells, orisons, prayers, choirs, candles – constitute a visible and audible commemoration of death. What Owen tries here to suggest is that Christianity is no longer equal to the universal principles which it invokes because it had betrayed itself by failing to condemn the evils of War. The imagery in these lines indicate, “how far Owen had progressed beyond the slack and superficial art of the Georgians”. 20

Another poem “Asleep” has very close thematic relationship with “Anthem for Doomed Youth”. Both poems are elegiac in their tone and approach. In the second part of “Asleep” Owen depicts a vague but comfortable hereafter which embodies both the truth of the Christian promise and
conventionalization in religious art and poetry. In this poem he contrasts hereafter with the physical actuality:

“Whether his deeper sleep lie shaded by the shaking
Of great wings, and the thoughts that hung the stars,
High-pillowed on calm pillows of God’s making
Above these clouds, these rains, these sleets of lead,
And these winds’ scimitars;
Or whether yet his thin and sodden head
Confuses more and more with the low mould,
His hair being one with the grey grass
And finished fields of autumns that are old...”

(CP, ll.10-18)

There is a conflict in these lines which leave the poet- cold, weary and mindful of his own pain. Here the heavens are “High pillowed in calm pillows of God’s making”. However, it clearly favours the force of an experienced reality. Owen contrives at once to underpin metaphysical speculation with inescapable physical fact:

He sleeps. He sleeps less tremulous, less cold,
Than we who must awake, and waking, say Alas!”

(CP, ll. 19-21)
In spite of the fact that the poem ends on a note of pessimism, Owen does not completely reject the Christian attitude. The lines indicate emotional gradation and the irony of the condition of the war. These lines convey the message that the state of the dead needs less pity than that of the living. Owen leaves us with the impression that death is the poet’s enemy against whom the poet has to wage war ‘for life’.

The idea behind all this attitude of Owen towards War is the meaninglessness and confusion of war which intruded into his poetry. Owen’s para-rhymes express the noise of this confusion.

In “The last Laugh” Owen’s modes of presenting the confusion and horrors of War could be witnessed as in the following:

“O Jesus Christ! I ‘m hit’, he said; and died.

Whether he vainly cursed, or prayed indeed,

The Bullets chirped- in vain! vain! vain!

Machine gun chuckled,--Tut-Tut Tut-Tut!

And the big Gun guffawed.

another sighed,‘O Mother, mother! Dad!

Then smiled, at nothing, childlike, being dead…”

(CP, ll. 1-7)
Owen’s mode of presenting the confusion and the horrors of War is just as the cry of “Jesus Christ”. The soldiers love for his parents is turned into the final moments of his life: “O Mother, --Mother, --Dad! the soldier calls out as he is wounded”. The smile of the child is turned into the look of mortality.

In “Inspection” an officer inspecting a soldier who has come back from the front discovers a “spot” on the enlisted man’s uniform and reprimands him for being “dirt on parade” when the soldier explains that the spot is blood, an officer curtly replies, “well, blood is dirt”.

The speaker in the poem “Futility” indicates the remembrance of how the “kind old sun” always “wakes the seeds” and how it “woke once the clays of a cold star, “Earth, he laments the “futility” of the “famous” sunbeams” trying to stir the “clay” of a soldier’s corpse that lies before him. All these references and words are implying the chaos and blood dirt on the war front.

Owen’s poems such as “The Parable of the Old Man” and “Disabled” lash out against what he may have considered the senseless death of so many soldiers. Others such as “The Last Laugh” and “The Sentry”, describe in detail the trauma and
horrors of the trenches and the war front. Some, which are arguably the greatest, do both. Owen in many of his war poems prefers common language to his poetic approach.

In “The Letter”, a poem in which a soldier is writing home to his wife while simultaneously talking to his companions:

“I’m in the pink at present, dear.

I think the war will end this year

We don’t see much of the square-headed ‘Uns.

We’re out of harm’s way, not bad fed.

I’m longing for a taste of your old buns.

(Say, Jimmie, spare’s a bite of bread.)”

(CP, ll. 3-8)

In these lines Owen experiments with meter and rhyme to achieve the particular effect, including a strong visual image. In addition to this, these lines also illustrate the alienation, loss and despair. The man in the poem is alone, seemingly deserted by the rest of the world.

The following lines of “Dulce Et Decorum Est” speak volumes about the war. From the doldrums of marching across a barren battlefield to the soaring panic of a gas attack. Owen presence details of emotions, sights, and sounds experienced
by the soldiers on the front lines in an honest and clear-cut manner. The opening lines of the poem depict the scene:

“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 tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.”

(CP, ll. 1-8)

The poet describes the exhaustion that the men felt, words like “trudge”, ‘drunk”, and “fatigue” add to the feeling. Many of the men who have no shoes, yet they march on toward “distant rest”, though it remains unclear whether that rest is death or the premise of home. All are “lame”, “blind”, and “deaf”. Owen exposes that these men are no longer gloriously marching off into the battle as they were so often portrayed, but rather they are unwillingly hobbling slowly through the mud. The tone of the stanza is that of monotony and exhaustion.
Then, startlingly, the next stanza begins with panic, emphasizing the chaos of the front, in contrast to the image of an organized precision being presented back home:

“Gas! Gas! Quick, boys- An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone was still yelling out and stumbling
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime...
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.”

(CP, ll. 9-16)

Perkins aptly describes the technique of this section of the poem when he says that the “the effect of reality is achieved primarily through the action itself, the shock and horror of the gas attack.” The effect is sustained through observed detail (“Bent double”, “Knock kneed”, “Many had lost their boots”). In these words Owen accurately corresponds to the sensation and horrors of the war. The repetition of the word ‘drowning” reflect the terrible effects gas had on the body and further heightens the terror of the situation and the helplessness all the men must have felt. The echo in the opening lines of
“Strange Meeting” is also noteworthy in regard to the ugliness of War:

“It seemed that out of the battle I escaped
Down some profound long tunnel, long since
Scooped
Through granites which Titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned
.... But mocks the mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something has been left
Which must die now, I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity of war distilled....”

(CP, ll. 1-6, 24-29)

The poet here beautifully elaborates the horror of War. This harrowing and prophetic poem is also remarkable technically for its use of assonance, or para-rhyme to increase the effect of half-reality, half dream that pervades through it. Owen used assonance in a number of other poems but nowhere more tellingly like this. “Strange Meeting” is his final word on the social responsibilities of the “true poet”; but even in his statement, where the “truth untold” is seen as the pity—“the
pity of war distilled”. This poem indicates the highest poetic imagination.

Though Owen’s speakers often use images of inundation and water, the “swim” they take through the war is anything but purifying. Soldier’s desire for clarity and invigoration are met only with insanity and exhaustion. Instead of gaining a ‘sharpened power’, they become “drunk with fatigue” as they march through “sludge” (Dulce Et Decorum Est”). Instead of gaining a “hand made sure”, their hands grow “Reckless with ague” under the “torture of lying machinally shelled” (“S.I.W.”) instead of gaining a “clear eye”, their “eyeballs shrink tormented/Back into their brains, because on their sense/sunlight seems a blood-smear” (“Mental Case”).

The poems “The Show”, “Arms and the Boy”, and “Insensibility” illustrate Owen’s unusually wide range of visualization as well as the unity of imaginative perception behind it. Owen’s poems are photographic presentation of the War. “The Show” presents a terrible panorama of the battlefields. We can see below a landscape like an evil dream, a scene of sadness, desolation and horror:
“My soul looked down from a vague height with Death,

As unremembering how I rose or why,

And saw a sad land, weak with sweats of dearth,

Gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,

And pitted with great pocks and scabs of plagues.”

(CP, ll. 4-8)

When Owen writes of the physical effects of the war on human beings, much of his imagery deals with the parts of the body. These lines show that men have become loathsome caterpillars, writhing and dying amid the scabrous landscape. Certainly Owens’s war poems feature most of the traits like; masculinity, sparseness, anti-individualism, impersonality and so on. However, the subject matter- the horrors of the First World War – is what characterizes Owen’s style and is undoubtedly the driving force behind his emergence as a strong and original war poet. Owen’s war experiences freed him from the strictures of the derivative Romanticism that had influenced his earliest poetic efforts and gave him a subject to write about:

“In order to write about this new reality, the most successful war poets became ‘modernists’ in spite of themselves: their new diction increasingly drew near to the concrete imagery of
Pound and Eliot; they forsook the pre-war romanticized notion of the poet as a bard.”22 Above all, they recognized, in Owen’s words, that a poet ‘must be truthful. It was a quest for truth that prompted some of Owen’s greatest work.

Like Sassoon, Owen also wrote in reaction to the view of the war which was being propagandized throughout England. Newspapers accounts of the War euphemistically handled the ever-rising casualty of human lives and did little reporting on the realities of the war. According to Bogacz:

“[T]he European war became an occasion of a crusade that saw the mobilization of an extraordinary language filled with abstract euphemistic spiritualized words and phrases under which were buried the realities of modern mechanized warfare. Articles and editorials with titles like ‘renewal of youth’, ‘Glorious Baptism of Fire’, ‘war and Sacrifice’,.....For those who employed such language there were no maimed or shell-shocked soldiers, only ‘broken’ heroes”.23 As the war dragged on, such archaic and euphemistic language seemed to many veterans of the trenches increasingly incongruous and even absurd: it added fuel to the growing rupture between those who fought on the Western Front and civilians in England. Such language inspired not only contempt but also anger on
the part of many returning soldiers; for it seemed to them that it deceived those at home about the nature of modern warfare.

Many of Owen’s most famous war poems speak directly about the nature of the War in an effort to reveal the truth of what was happening to the civilian population of England. Paul Fusel asserts that Owen “had been a strikingly optimistic, cheerful young man, skilled in looking on the bright side and clever at rationalizing minor setbacks...with his first experiences in the trenches in the middle of January, 1917, everything changed”.24

With his war poems, Owen was able to break with the traditions that had limited his poetry for so long. In doing so, he was not only able to speak truthfully in his poems, but also found a new poetic voice that belonged to him alone. His initial attempts at poetry consisted of mimicking both the style and content of the Romantics. He then dabbled in Decadence. According to Perkins, “England ... had a strong, rebellious avant-garde in the 1890s, and then next generation of English poets, whom we may loosely call Georgians, reacted against this and returned to more traditional modes”.25
However, Owen had already learned from Sassoon that graphic and shocking imagery could be acceptable content for poetry. Owen seemed to have found his own poetic voice. His experiences in the war gave him the subject matter he needed in order to break from the traditions that had bound him. By the time Owen wrote his poems, he had already rejected the mode of poetry that was being practiced in England during the early years of the War. While some of his early Romantic characteristics linger on his later works, such as the use of nature imagery and keen recollection of visual and auditory details. Owen’s War poems are new and different from the poetry that preceded them. He wrote about terrible and shocking topics. He spared no detail when he described the horrors he had witnessed and the realities of trench warfare. Every line he wrote stood out, every emotion was intense, and nearly every aspect of every poem drew attention to itself. In the words of J. Middleton Murry, in Owen’s poems, “there is horror at its extreme point, but horror without hysteria, horror that has been so overcome that it can be communicated direct from the imagination to the imagination. Hence there is calm”.26
Owen’s poems are not disharmonious, and they continue to this day to be recognized for their poetic merit. Owen enabled people on the home front to experience the war. He showed them through images, sounds and the direct expression of emotion a side of the war that they had not seen before. Because of these qualities, the terseness, the directness, and the brutal honesty, Owen’s poems, like those of many of his contemporaries’ war poets; belong to the early Modernist mode. In just a handful of poems, he captured the images and horrors of the Great War for all times and generations to come.

The present study is not and at simply to establish Owen’s merit as a poet- his talent is undeniable. Instead here the concern is Owen’s poetic development and transformation to show that he and his war poems fall into the truer form of literature. Though his earlier poems were inspired by Keats and other Romantics, his later war poems changed as Owen experienced the Great War. Tailhade and the Decadents introduced him to poetry filled with dark, sensual imagery during his stay in France. Subsequently he was dragged into the world of the army in 1914, where he encountered a new aspect before shipping out to the trenches in France. After this event and his full involvement with the war Owen’s poetry
became truly realistic in its approach and theme. He presented the war subject to the world in a shocking, harsh, terse, and truthful manner. Owen spoke out against the propaganda. He broke himself from the tradition of poetry that insisted upon ‘beautiful and agreeable’ subject matter. Most importantly, however, Owen found his own poetic subject in the process.

Owen’s poetry as well as the diversity of his poetic influences, seems to have been inevitability for the young poet. His own personality and character were just as varied. Hibberd, in the introduction to Owen’s biography, provides a colourful description of Owen, the man the poet, “He lived his life to full: everything interested him, and he was never bored. He had a wicked sense of humour, an ironic eye for social pretension and an ear for comic voices. He loved words and language; even if he had written no poems he would deserve to be remembered as one of the finest letter writers of his century”...27 He knew that his capacity for pleasure made him vulnerable to pain, and he experienced both, making poetry out of them with enormous skill and language. The endearing, sometimes pretentious young versifier, self-absorbed, class conscious and pedantic, grew into a fiercely compassionate,
deeply impressive man. His achievement intensifies to the enduring strength of poetry and of human spirit.

Wilfred Owen as, son, brother, soldier, friend, and specially as a poet—contributed significantly to English Poetry. His War poems not only spoke to the populace of his own generation about the horrible realities of the First World War, but have remained as a record for all future generations. In Owen’s poems, the tragedies, the horrors, and, sometimes, the hopes of the Great War live on. Had Owen survived the war, it is unclear where his path would have led him to. Some critics have argued that, in Owen’s case, the subject matter made the poet. Sadly, Owen never had the chance to prove otherwise. What poetry did he write, however, continues to draw attention and acclaim for both its skillful artistic features and its dramatic presentation of First World War.
References


10. *Ibid*, p. 341


15. *Ibid*

16. *Ibid*

17. *Ibid*, p. 290


19. *Ibid*

20. *Ibid*, p. 177


23. *Ibid*


27. *Ibid*, p. 28-40