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War Poetry: Lamenting Through Wilfred Owen

Triasha Mondal

***Abstract:** This study provides a prismatic view of the First World War and the jarring piece of literature salvaged from the time, by the incandescent bard, Wilfred Edward Salter Owen. This study offers a close analysis of three of Owen's poignant poems; Dulce et Decorum Est, Strange Meeting, and Futility—with every aspect of literary technique, it deploys. It will contain annals of close and comprehensive verbatim analysis, which would help understand the aspects of war in its cognitive, affective, existential, and political stridency. This study has put much weight on the unsullied reasons that might have fanned the embers of the Great War, the emotional and moral compulsion of the combatants, and the tumultuous impact on the lives of the common people. Owen; through an impressive panoply of poetry, grieves the sheer wastage of life war brings about in its trail. The smarting lassitude and inanition at the war front and the unremitting helplessness of the people in ruins. He claims, that even though a country wins, it still loses.*

The first chapter offers a close analysis of 'Dulce et Decorum Est', with a background study on Owen. Eventually, unfurling the tropes, techniques, and literary canons it chose to abide, during its creation. Owen uses a plethora of poetic devices some of which are hyperboles, onomatopoeias, irony (as the essential trope), brilliant imagery, and direct address, in the first poem concerned. It later explores the cadence of the poem, the dramatic volta, and the true-to-life ground report of life at the frontiers.
Chapter three commiserates with the letters written by Owen to his mother and his sisters; each with its subtext and relevance in studying the latter poems which are rather cryptic such as 'Strange Meeting.' Each with its apposite dissection, defying the general canons of poetry to instil mayhem and discomposure—a true sense of his work. In Chapter five, thereby employing effective enjambments as a testimonial to the tormented state of mind, mellowed in a subtle momentum of syntax with jarring metrics and intense biblical allusions (King James Version). Convoluted, in its own right—this study provides flowcharts to understand the characters of the poem 'Strange Meeting.' Owen insisted "*poetry is in the pity",* which transpired clearly in Chapter six, with the eluding elegy on 'Futility' and its profound imagery, hopeless hope and complex contemplations transcending onto a philosophical approach and questioning the purpose of creation and our existence. For his faith is now severely misguided.
I felt that the study is particularly important in the present times, where war is imminent and impending, in another part of the world and yet the devastation remains unparalleled to this day. The fruitless colluding births nothing but despair, alienation of the enlisters, and the outstanding plight of the common people, women, and children. It is then, that the veracity and candour of Owen's poetry must be evoked. Men all over the world must be reminded of the old lie "Dulce et Decorum Est,pro-Patria Mori" and that it is not sweet and proper to die for one's country.

Triasha Mondal
War Poetry: Wilfred Owen.
25 July 2022

War Poems Archive: *Lamenting through Wilfred Owen.*

"Show me who makes a profit from the war,
and I'll show you how to stop the war."
-Henry Ford.

The infamous slaughter of the Austrio-Hungarian monarch Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a 19-year-old school student on 28th June 1914, melded with exaggerated concepts of European Expansionism, Serbian Nationalism, the 'blank check assurance' and other discords over alliances [1] ultimately led to The Great War or the First World War. It led us towards an interesting opportunity to discuss the sacrosanct lines by the Roman lyric poet Horace: 'Dulce et Decorum set pro Patria Mori, (Odes III.2.13) {"it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country."} hitherto the war which had been a glorious ode on the martyrs. However, the disembarking of the nations on the vainglorious battlefield changed the scene forever. The mellow ode was then a deceptive, detestable, and scornful "old lie" to which the impotent soldiers were compelled to, for the lack of employment, falsified propaganda of jingoistic nationalism, and vain promises of security of service. The traditional text and the natural sense of the Latin title of Horace may plausibly be credited with the thought that patriotic self- sacrifice gives pleasure to the sacrificing individual. [2]

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Bertolt Brecht, on the other hand, is said to have reacted against the carnage of war in a 1915 essay by accusing Horace of writing "shabby propaganda on demand" for Augustus and of being the emperor's chubby court jester." [3]
Ezra Pound proposed that *dulce et decorum Est* does not belong beside *pro patria mori* i.e., that war has nothing to do with glory, and that the nostalgic reception of Horace may even be implicated in the terrible suffering in the First World War. [3]
Albeit, no one seems to have been affected more than the English poet and soldier **Wilfred Edward Salter Owen MC** *(military cross: third-level military decoration)* for whom the experience has been harrowing, unwarranted, and utterly futile. The leaders who give orders sitting in their ivory towers; were relatively callous to the miserable plight of the soldiers. [4] The poetry of that time evinced the unalloyed feelings of these young men, who seemed to have found a cathartic relief in—straying far off from their anguish; in the dismally rich war poetry. Owen sets forth to write his best-known "Dulce et Decorum Est" in 1917 addressing to his mother, Susan Owen, with the message from the recovery hospital in Craiglockhart, Scotland: "Here is a gas poem done yesterday (which is not private, but not final.)"

I. OWEN I, DULCE ET DECORUM EST

"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."

Born on March 18, 1893, in a place called Oswestry, on the Welsh border of Shropshire to Thomas Owen and Susan Shaw, he was the oldest of four children. His poetry reflects the sufferings, the sacrifice, and the daily horrors at the frontline, which were not yet made apparent to the British people. This poem comes out at the same time as Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier"-
"if I die, think only this of me;
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England."
which centers around fervent nationalism and deep patriotism expressing a soldier's love for his country. Rightfully so, given the zestful sentiment of the time. Juxtaposed to which, Owen grieves the sheer waste of life that war brings in its trail and all one can salvage from it, is still uncertainty. He vehemently condemns the fanciful proclamations of how the sacrifice of his comrades was intellectualized through strong rationale and powerful poetry; but strove through his work, toward the bitter revelation that war is futile leading to anguish, suffering and meaningless slaughters. He painted a pragmatic image of what the combatants go through at the war front along with a realistic glimpse of the inconsolable parents and consorts, who are devastated at the loss of their young sons.
The poem opens with an exhaustive and unrelenting voyage of the soldiers who "tramp" and "trudge", Owen uses strong words such as "limped on", "marched asleep" to deliver the idea of sore exhaustion when they return from the battlefield even when men had misplaced their boots, and their crippled and tired feet walked barefoot. Metaphors such as "bent-double, like old beggars under sacks" are a firm testimony to their tattered and withered condition for the miserable plight—the men have been going through, while a tremendous gas attack goes on in the backdrop.
In the year 1917, Germany, in their bid to crush the British army, introduced yet another vicious and potentially lethal weapon of attack: the mustard gas. Differentiated from the other shells by their distinctive sallow color. Although not the efficacious killing machine that chlorine gas (first used in 1915) and phosgene (invented by French chemists), mustard gas has stayed within public consciousness as the most horrific weapon of the First World War. Once deployed mustard gas lingers for several days, and anyone coming in contact with it developed blisters and acute nausea. Withal, it caused internal and external bleeding, and the lethally injured took as long as five weeks to perish. [4] The imagery is striking and memorable, "knock-kneed", "coughing like hags" (simile) suggests the grotesque reduction from clean-limbed young men to old beggars and ugly hags. "All went lame, all blind" discusses more generally the pointlessness of it all. The senseless waste of life that war caused. [5]

"Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind." Several speculations have fermented around the exposition of the *bomb* as *tired*- the particular line rendered in the original drafts of the poem was- "of disappointed shells that dropped behind" another version was, "of gas shells dropping softly behind" [6] Perhaps, this abstract personification of the bombs to be disappointed and tired imply the discernment and acknowledging of the futility of The Great War from even the side of the adversary. To a point, where the colluding parties realize the sterility of the war, they have been entrusted to fight.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! —An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was 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.

Suddenly arises an immediate realization of the present, and the peremptory attempt, to wear their clumsy gas masks for the men have realized that they were under a gas bomb attack. With their tired fumbling, the exhausted body of the limping and trudging soldiers are now desperately invigorated to fit the helmets just in time, for they must manage to survive. The helmet is said to be *clumsy,* one can understand from the recurrent figurative use to present something otherwise unlikely-crafts a lucid image of the general milieu; the restlessness of their present state. However, someone has not managed to get their gas mask on time, and so Owen calls him out from under the green sea, from where he saw him drowning and floundering like a fish out of water or a man caught in an arson.

The line break after the fourteenth line only brings this home: there's a pause, and then we find ourselves returning to the word 'drowning', locked in it, fixating on that word- "Before my helpless sight, He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning," describes the impotent state of the tattered old soldier suffocating from gas- which "in all his dreams" (or an oxymoron: in his nightmares) he is haunted by. [5]

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in 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,
Obscene as cancer, 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.

The poem now is specifically addressed to the audience, *"my friend"* suggesting if we too, in some suffocating dream could experience the writhing of the dying the path—a sight the speaker compares to the horror of cancer, and other diseases that ravage even the innocent. [7] The deliberate emphasis, "like a devil's sick of sin" iterates the implication that the level of sin must be truly deplorable. [8] The diabolical and brute visage of the man crumbling from his face hanging as though, in some gibbet. The sin of the war was so great, that even devils are appalled by it. [9] Convicted of the pointlessness of this pain, he finishes the poem with a personal address to the audience and the poets who have been romanticizing and intellectualizing the affliction—perhaps; to his friend Jessie Pope: "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." Jessie Pope was a journalist who published, among others, books such as War Poems and Simple Rhymes for Stirring Times. [10] Glorifying combat, exhorting men to fight, and generally romanticizing war—Pope's poems have been vilified as jingoistic doggerel. Most famously, Owen dedicated this poem to her, though he subsequently erased the dedication. Pope died in Devon. [11]

The complete oeuvre of Owen is worth remembering for the generations to come as an enlivened testimony to the horrors undergone by the combatants on the frontline. Crafted with great incision he puts across such details in heart-rending emotive language which makes him a valued poet even though he may be a young one. Dulce et Decorum Est will remain realistically incandescent in the hearts of people around the world.

II. TROPES AND TECHNIQUES

Owen uses a plethora of poetic devices such as similes, personifications, metaphors, rhymes, hyperboles, onomatopoeias, irony as the essential trope, brilliant imagery, and direct address.

Simile	Metaphor	Personification	Rhymes	Hyperbole	Onomatopoeia	Irony	Image

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, (A)
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.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! —An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was 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.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in 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,
Obscene as cancer, 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.

A. Analysis

Given the backdrop of the intense anarchic animus of 'The Great War,' the opening lines have a characteristic weight—figurative and otherwise. A sort of sensory-perceptual appeal is begotten from "bent-double, like…under sacks," "limped on, bloodshed" contents our senses of sight. The primary appeal of the poem is identified as the futile weariness and the waste of life through strong images satisfying both the visual and kinaesthetic appeal. The almost static heaviness and the numbing exhaustion recurs in nearly every para. Until, there is an olfactory appeal in the second stanza "Gas, Gas! Quick, boys!" "As under a green sea, I saw him drowning" carries with it strong visual and the impotence of the tactile appeal.

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The next two lines contain all of these previous appeals to sensory perception[1] thereby enhancing, the image of the man guttering, choking, drowning. Because the appeals are so intrinsically woven, it is possible to identify the primary appeal which is the visual appeal. {"his hanging face", "innocent tongues" (effacing through a cusp of olfactory and gustatory delight)} The secondary being the olfactory appeal.

As the poem progresses the auditory and visual appeals become increasingly important,[2] "if you could hear, of every jolt", "you would not tell, with such high zest", "someone still yelling out" etc. Owen offers a significant tactile appeal in a line break after the second stanza— "he plunges at me" which when concocted work towards birthing the poem as a dynamic entity bearing these sufferings, in a much more 'breathing and alive' sense, to the audience.

B. Rhetoric and Prosody

It is a metrically complex meditation on the casualties of war. Interspersed with cutting imagery such as "blood-shod" soldiers marching bootless through mud and haunting images of mortality, "Dulce Et Decorum Est" diminishes the sweetness of sacrifice. Through unconventional construction, variations in meter, and harsh enjambment, "Dulce Et Decorum Est" is a biting criticism of the war's lauded poets. [12]

1) *Alliteration:* Alliteration is the use of the same consonant sounds in the same line such as the sound of /s/ in "But someone still was yelling out and stumbling" and the/w/ sound in "And watch the white eyes writhing in his face.
2) *Simile:* Simile is a figure of speech used to compare something with something else to describe an object or a person. Owen has used many self-explanatory similes in this poem such as," Bent double, like old beggars under sacks", "Knock-kneed, coughing like hags", "like a man in fire or lime" and "like a devil's sick of sin."
3) Metaphor: There is only one metaphor used in this poem. It is used in line seven of the poem, "Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots." It presents the physical state of the men.
4) *Onomatopoeia:* It refers to the words which imitate the natural sounds of things. Owen has used the words "hoot", "knock" and "gargling" in the poem to imitate sounds.
5) *Consonance:* Consonance is the repetition of consonant sounds in the same line such as the /r/ sound in "Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs."
6) *Synecdoche:* It is a figure of speech in which a part is made to represent the whole. For example, the word "sight" in the second stanza represents the speaker.
7) *Imagery:* Imagery is used to make the readers perceive things with their five senses. Owen has successfully used a lot of imageries to create a horrific picture of war, and pain, and the following phrases show the effective use of imagery as he says, "old beggars under sacks", "had lost their boots", "His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin" and "white eyes."
8) *Assonance:* Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in the same line such as the/o/ sound in "Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues." [13]

A rather elegiac Petrarchan sonnet, Owen consistently breaks the patterns of cadence and metric content to emphasize the disruptive nature, and the true-to-life chaos that he brings to life. The poem is divided into four stanzas of varying lengths. **Stanza one** is largely written using regular iambic pentameter, However, the opening spondees in lines 1, 2, 6(" 'blood-shod', 'all blind") and 5 arrest our attention. The fagging progress of the men through the 'sludge' is conveyed by Owen's use of caesura in the middle of lines 5-7. Then, for much of line 8, Owen reverses the meter to trochaic, subtly fie-ing at the intermittent shelling ongoing in the backdrop. In **stanza two** the pentameter is disrupted by longer 11-syllable lines (l.9,11,14). The additional beat gives the sense of being out of time. The pace and punctuation also change to reflect the panic of the men, particularly with the double spondees and emphatic punctuation of line 9. [14] In the short **third stanza**, the regularity is overturned by the extra syllables—as if the horrific sight is too overwhelming to be constrained by a regular poetic form. [14]. Lines 17-27 present a dramatic **volta** as Owen turns to his readers. In this stanza he seems to break the canons and conventions of rhyme and meter; he deliberately limns a disrupted picture; the words seem to be in the mayhem of their own—not adhering to any rules for Owen did not seek for beauty. The structure is violently irregular: the first stanza contains 8 lines, the second contains 6 lines, the third stanza has 2 lines and the final stanza is 12 lines long ending in an anticlimactic climax; an irony. Iambic pentameter is the breathing metronome of "Dulce et Decorum Est."

[1] Oral Interpretation by Timothy Gura, Benjamin Powell
[2] Oral Interpretation by Timothy Gura., et all, EbooK, Second Paragraph

This forward, halting pattern is accentuated by frequent punctuation, slowing the pace of a reader's voice to a sort of in and out cesura. For instance, the patterning of the line "Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge," is a fairly regular iambic line (10). The meter creates a lull and expectedness which will be destroyed upon the entry into the second stanza with the arrival of the gas. The last line of the first stanza is only nine syllables, followed by an eleven-syllable line in the second stanza: The prolonging of the final syllable of the iamb creates tension between the first and second stanzas creating an enjambment. The word "gas" receives emphasis where it normally wouldn't because it fills a place in the line preceding it. [15] [Poetry Web,2015]
The earliest dated record of this poem is October 8, 1917. It was written in the romantic ballad form of poetry. Owen emphasizes the disturbing disposition of the poem, through its unsynchronized and irregular cadence. It indeed is a visceral poem, transcending intellect and morals—it traverses to the crux of our heart.
o-worship as he mentioned to his mother, "not worthy to light his [Sassoon's] pipe."

III. LETTERS TO SUSAN OWEN

A. "I have suffered seventh hell. I have not been at the front; I have been in front of it."

Owen's letters to his mother are a steadfast panoply, of the gruesome life the combatants were inured to, at the war front. Owen's tenacious persistence of the ghastliness, of what his sight allowed him, was made vivid, through such testimonies. He avowed, in action, amid the virulent environment—of how the pointless war has reduced his life into sheer insignificance, alloyed his peace of mind. He writes in a series of letters to his mother and his younger sisters keeping them privy of his health, expressing recurrently his disappointment to have been living through "seventh hell", of high explosives dropping, machine guns spluttered, and several sporadic occasions of amity with the German troops.
He also comes to meet, (hundred+ years more today) Sassoon at the Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh; where their great literary friendship was born. Owen held him in high esteem; a kind of her
However, the deposition we get from the war front is excruciatingly profound:

B. "I am chiefly annoyed by our own machine guns from behind. The seeng-seeng-seeng of the bullets reminded me of Mary's canary. On the whole, I can support the canary better."

⇨ Owen speaks of Mary Millard Owen. W. Owen himself was not particularly fond, rather exasperated with the strife; as he could realize early on, that the soldiers who were compelled to tremendous respect for the monarch, fatiguing burden of unemployability falsified propaganda of nationalism, had nothing to elicit out from the war. And thus, considered the warriors scapegoats for political agenda. Engulfed in a vortex of cruel lust for power causing such an indispensable waste of a life. Therefore, emanates such great vexation at the sound of their own armament, and the comparison of the bullet sounds with his sister's canary; the mellow sound of which, once soothed him.

C. "In spite of this, one lad was blown down and, I am afraid, blinded. This was my own casualty"

⇨ A horrifying picture of when they had to rest several days in a hole, too small for his body, with a corpse of his friend huddled in a similar hole, opposite to him, intimidated and traumatized him. He describes—

"For twelve days I did not wash my face, nor take off my boots, nor sleep a deep sleep. For twelve days we lay in holes, where at any moment a shell might put us out. I think the worst incident was one wet night when we lay up against a railway embankment. A big shell lit on the top of the bank, just 2 yards from my head. Before I awoke, I was blown in the air right away from the bank! I passed most of the following days in a railway Cutting, in a hole just big enough to lie in, and covered with corrugated iron. My brother officer of B Coy., 2/Lt. Gaukroger[3] lay opposite in a similar hole. But he was covered with earth, and no relief will ever relieve him, nor will his Rest be a 9 days' Rest. I think that the terribly long time we stayed unrelieved was unavoidable, yet it makes us feel bitterly towards those in England who might relieve us, and will not."

[In these letters, he expresses his bitterness not at the adversary, but the people back in England; the reluctance of the Church; who he thinks— "might relieve us, and will not"]

[3] Hubert Gaukroger—Second Lieutenant (1885-1917)

D. "*Those fifty hours were the agony of my happy life. Every ten minutes on Sunday afternoon, seemed an hour"*

⇨ The severity of being in a battlefield; is when one seemingly enters the infinite cycle of time. The infinite cycle of birth and death.

IV. OWEN II: STRANGE MEETING

"I shall be better able to cry my outcry; playing my part"

The poem 'Strange Meeting' was published posthumously in 1919 in Edith Sitwell's Wheels: An Anthology of Verse—the title was borrowed from a line in P.B Shelley's poem, "Revolt of Islam." [4]. Considered one of the best-known works of the rather dismally realistic genre of war poetry. T.S Eliot referred to this poem as the most moving pieces of verse, inspired by war. Acutely against the cause of war due to its irrefutable waste of resources, talent, and soul; Owen was one such combatant who considered being on the war front, experience the war, allowed him the incision with which he composed such stirring poetry. The sole purpose of it was to ferment a kind of 'enlightenment' in the minds of the British people and to bring out the deception of a falsified or jingoistic nationalism. Next to each selected poem, Owen wrote a brief description of the poem and he also wrote a rough draft—a brief but eloquent preface; in which he expresses his belief in the cathartic function of poetry. [4]. The poet Ted Hughes noted in his writings on writing on "Strange Meeting": "few poets can ever have written with such urgent, defined, practical purpose." The critic Dominic Hibbard notes the poem does not "[present] war as a merely internal, psychological conflict – but neither is it concerned with the immediate divisions suggested by 'German' and 'conscript' [initially what the dead man calls himself] or 'British' and 'volunteer'. [17] The poem's meaning is rather prevaricated—the poem's interpretation is subjective and unclear.

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall, —
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

In this poem the speaker finds himself in a place away from the battlefield, in an obsidian dark and dull place, below the ground level. The subterranean land however, has been carved out, due to some 'titan war' cutting through the granite walls; sometime in the past. It was then when he heard groaning sounds from men; mid-slumber, who seemed disturbed even in their sleep. The speaker was baffled because the man seemingly could not 'bestirred' or resuscitated back to consciousness—or presumably, to life. As he attempted to stir them up to check any whit of life, one sprang up as though struck by a chord of familiarity and fixed his beady eyes at the poet. It was through his unsettling grin that he realized, that he stood in the abode of the dead. A strange paradox where one escapes a hellish experience to find oneself in hell.

With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
"Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn."
"None," said that other, "save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

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Construing correctly that he was in presence of a "vision" already deprived of life, someone who has trod upon the vicinity of the dead—the place however, was guarded from the guillotine and gunshots, ceaselessly going on at the upper ground. Detecting the 'vision' to have remained in ecstatic distraught—the speaker; addressing him as "Strange friend" succours that there is no cause to mourn or lament; for they have transcended to a safer and inert place, away from the doomed and hollow battle. The other man in response to the speaker retorts—there indeed is nothing more to mourn for their very lives have decayed and ceased. The whimsicality of using humour as a secondary trope Owen deftly reveals how life's greatest loss, is life itself. The 'Strange friend' proceeds that once they shared same hopes and aspirations but now, they suffer hopelessness. He adds that, he went ferreting around for an ever-eluding beauty which one cannot find in the visage of an alluring maiden. But that, which outcasts death and defies time. But the ultimate truth of the eternal beauty sought by man to render purpose to his life. He bemoans how the devastation caused by the death of a man in such a futile pursuit also causes a waste of emotions—joy and laughter that could have been shared with the world, extraordinary talent that could have produced more such emotive poetry. But all of it has gone in vain as they are all dying and dead now—the truth untold—of how the product of war is the unaltered pity.

Critics feel that the other person, Owen partakes a congenial repartee with, is Owen himself.

Perhaps, the 'vision' is an alter ego—a vision of oneself.

Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels[4] that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were."

Finally, the speaker is hopeful that if the nation is content, they will remain engaged in hopeful remembrance of the martyrs or if they are displeased by their heroic legacy, their creation will continue the war forward—cunning as a tigress, blood boiled; the bloodshed shall continue. Nonetheless, no ranks will be broken, i.e., no one will digress and disobey the higher powers, the generals and the nation will continue to trek **from** progress. The preposition is very notable here because it reiterates the truth, that nothing productive ever comes out of this strife. The idea of villainizing of the war is substantiated, thorough this proposition. He stresses, that had he been alive he could have been able to bring about a change. He asserts, that with suitable opportunity he would have missed the march. He would have broken the rank. Defied the vain process and inspired his comrades to do the same.

And when the two worlds reach an extremity of war, then the speaker pledges that he would go up to them and wash the excess blood from the chariot wheels—that is through breaking the myth and making the men understand that nothing good ever comes out of war. "Truths that lie too deep for taint" the eternal truth will remain unfaltered and untainted yet sometimes elusive. He laments that his life has been frittered in futility in the quagmire of the gory battle; but for perhaps a nobler purpose. "*But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.*

Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were." He reinforces the idea that war wounds men who are unarmed or absent in the battlefield, scarring their minds and souls for life. Their heart bleeds even though they have not been wounded physically. [4]

"I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you 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. . .."

[4] Fortresses

The poem comes to an unceremonious—rather an abrupt ending, for the poet subliminally wants us to traverse back to the very beginning of the poem, where he saw a person, 'a vision' who stood up and fixed his eyes with piteous recognition at the sight of the speaker. Now, he reckons that the chord of familiarity might be strung for they have already met—the day before. The first soldier's frown as he bayonets the second soldier is an expression of doubt, self-loathing perhaps, a reluctance to kill. [18]
Gradually unravelling "*I am the enemy, you killed, my friend" Oxymoronically*, two contrasting ideas of enemy and friend is now used in the same line, addressed to the same person. The speaker could identify him from the battlefield the day before, when with his bayonet, he jabbed and killed him—he had the same frown on his face, that he bears today as well. The speaker, then for some time, rummaged through his limbs for some fragile defence but found himself internally reluctant to have done something further; thereby succumbing to mental and physical weariness and resigning to his fate. This leads us to the ultimate revelation that, (given the canons and conventions there ought to to be) there wasn't any bitterness between the speaker and his adversary. No whit of enmity or vengeance. But the common penitence of an irrevocable waste! Ultimately, removed from all strife and hostility, they presumed that they could now have an unfazed and a long awaited-placid slumber; and that they could have to long-anticipated rest—mutually sympathizing with the unrelenting exhaustion, psychological discomfort and the incontestable futility of having done, what they did, for so long.

V. 'STRANGE MEETING', TROPES AND TECHNIQUES.

Owen masters in pararhyme (his unsynchronized use of ***mystery; tigress; spilled, progress etc)***
He wasn't regaled with the idea of a docile momentum and harmonious friction; in his rather tumultuous and distressed compendium of artistry. The auditory dissonance emphatically stands out in 'Strange Meeting,' adding to its unsettling and eerie appeal. If Owen had used full rhyme this unease would be missing, so the imperfection perfectly fits the surreal situation of the two men meeting in Hell. Strange Meeting is written in heroic couplets and there are a total of 44 lines contained in four stanzas. Note that lines 19-21 form a tercet, ending in three half-rhymes: *hair/hour/here.* The last line is much shorter and doesn't rhyme with any other line. [18]

It is quite scrupulously crafted with Iambic pentameter such as presented in an illustration:

- With **pit /** eous re /cog**nit /** ion in / **fixed eyes,**

The first foot is iambic (unstressed, stressed), the second foot a pyrrhic (unstressed, unstressed), the third another iamb, the fourth a pyrrhic and the fifth foot a spondee (stressed, stressed).

- ***Or****, dis / con****tent****, / ****boil blood /*** *y,* ***and /*** *be*

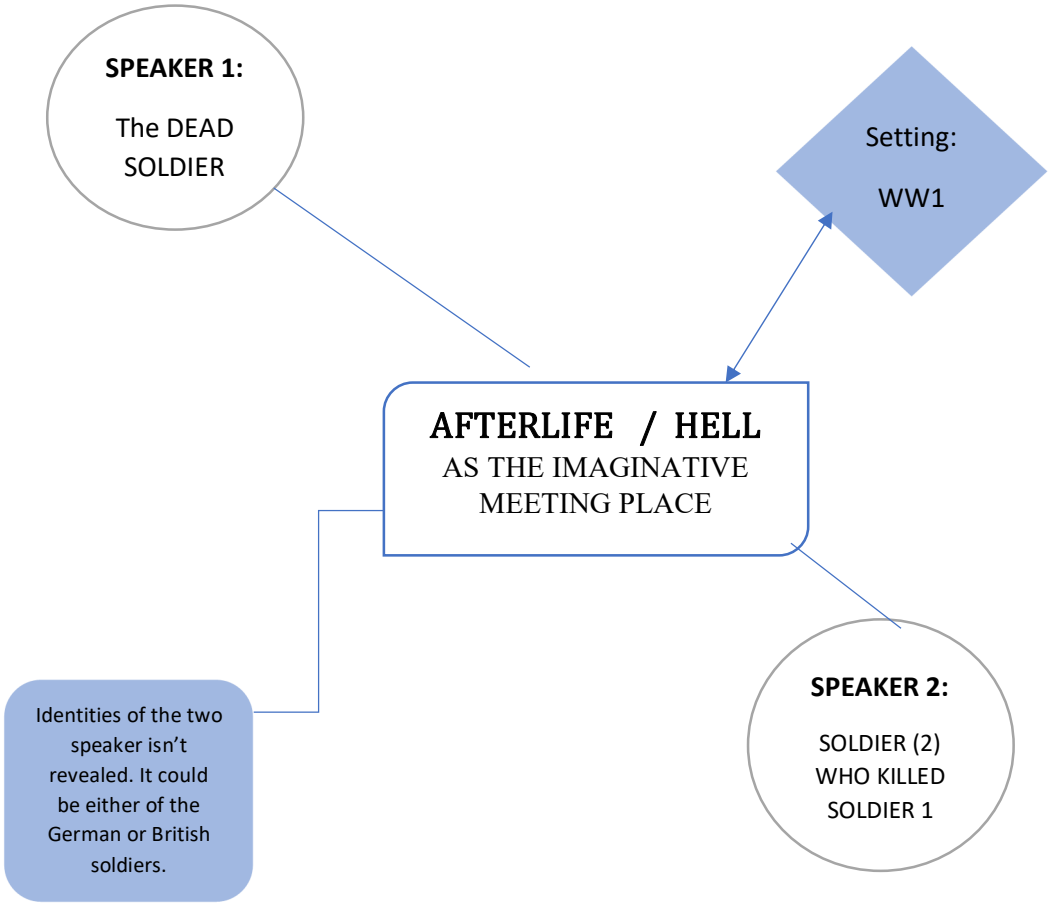
The first foot is a trochee (stress, no stress), the second is an iamb (no stress, stress), the third a spondee (stress, stress), the fourth is an iamb (no stress, stress) and so is the fifth foot.

- **Cour**age / was **mine**, / and **I /** had **mys /** te**ry**.

Starting with a trochee (the inverse of iamb) it is gradually seized by the iamb (unstressed, stressed)—the altered beats which echo battle and bring texture and added interest for the reader. [18]

THEME: 'Strange Meeting' whirls around the tenacious and dogged persistence of life after death—an uncanny encounter from the past. A furtive and nihilistic hope for the future and mankind. The ravaged devastation that is prefixed by the strife, the horrors of war, the waste of a life, of resources, of deft abilities and astral flair, the eyewitnesses of discomfort underwent by the combatants are constantly spotlighted in this poem. However, Andrew Spacey (2020) writes about how it was more a 'reconciliation' where two soldiers meet unprecedentedly in the doorway of an (imagined?) hell. The first having killed the second in the battle. Owen broke with tradition, using pararhyme, enjambment and subtle syntax to cause unease within the form of the heroic couplet. In doing so, he helped bring the cruel war to the forefront, the poetry in the theme of pity within war. Owen wanted more than anything to have his poetry stand for pity. In the preface to this book, he wrote: *'My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity.*' [19]
Metrically, 'Strange Meeting' appears to be written in Iambic Pentameter; de-DUM, de-DUM, de-DUM, de-DUM, de-DUM. It creates a realistic vivacity amid the rather dolorous and piteous content of the poem.
Biblical Allusion, the poet makes an allusion to the bible (King James Version). There are phrases and wording which echo King James Version. In line 8, the lifting of hands is a biblical allusion where religion would raise their hands in order to bless individuals and congregants. The act of going to hell is an allusion to the apostle's creed. It is possible that Owen, in his formative years, would recite the creed. [20]

FIG 1: Understanding the Voices in 'Strange Meeting.'



VI. 'FUTILITY', WILFRED OWEN.

Move him into the sun—
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

A short ***elegy***,[5] 'Futility' is different from Owen's other poems in its very distinct appeal to pose an eternally persisting; philosophical question and can be considered prismatic—in the sense that its interpretation lay ever cryptic and is, therefore, remarkable in all its ambiguity. The short poem is visceral rather than emotive as the emotions are all over the place, in the impotent desperation—of the soldiers "in their attempt to keep their comrade from dying." (J. Brierley,2013) A remarkably somber poem set in the backdrop of the Great War where the poet had had to hide in a hole for days—and very close to him lay the deceased corpse of his friend, thereby traumatizing him for life.

[5] Lament for the dead.

Dr. Lakshmi S. pleaded that the poet encountered death in all its gruesome details, in such an event. (2022) The poem starts with *In Medias Res*[6] and a scene of conundrum and restlessness—where perplexed soldiers hurry to teleport his (almost) perished comrade to the sun, in the fragile hope that it had the power to instill life back to him. The poet and his fellow combatants are baffled as nothing seems to resuscitate his friend back to consciousness, not even the old sun, which never failed in its attempt to revive him to life after a tired slumber back in England. The man seemingly was a farmer; scrupulous and wary of his daily chore at the field having an endearing acquaintance with the Sun. The light of the dawn of a new day, shone upon him, instantly instilling in him, vitality and vigor to carry on with his daily chores. He then gazes at his fields which are 'half-sown' and remains engaged in completing the undone work of his daily forte. This seemed to have sufficed for enough evidence, to avow the Sun's power, in its enormous capability in never having failed to awaken the young man until yesterday—when the situations proved otherwise.

Think how it wakes the seeds—
Woke once the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

The poet then turns to exemplify on the glory and the might of the Sun; which from the creation of the cosmos, has made life sustainable on the 'cold star' i.e., our planet—which was but a giant cloud of dust and gas. Not only this, but the sun has aided in the seeds to germinate and bloom into plants and trees that satisfies the respiratory organs without which man wouldn't have long survived. Thus, offering the Sun the glory as that of God, which has the divine capability to instil life back on earth. We can notice, Owen actively engaging in Pathetic Fallacy, in the entirety of the poem—attributing human characteristics to the natural phenomena. Therefore, he says, in hopeful conviction, that when the sun could thaw the dampness and the dullness of the ancient cold-star and engender life—of all forms, to grow on its surface—then the elementary function to infuse life back to a mortal did seem, suitably effortless.

The poem, then exhibits a drastic shift in tone and pursuit; from an implicit dying of soldiers to a larger philosophical question and complex contemplations about life. At this point, the poem takes an existential approach questioning the meaning of life. Owen avails a biblical allusion: **Genesis 2:7** "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul".

Therefore, he asks in quite a frustrated and exasperated fashion, that the creation that had been enwrought so painstakingly—ultimately to be all killed at the hands of the very men who prided themselves for bearing the crown in the evolutionary process. The poet raises the question of futility, directing it to the people, the authorities, who make wars happen. The succinct and jarring piece of literature makes every reader dwell on the idea that it puts forward. In this poem, "Owen seems to tell us how the calamitous action of human being; has even upset the elemental structure of the universe, and even the vital life-giving force—the suns energy, is unable to nurture life or enervate the dying/dead. What more unfortunate cam happen to the world?" (Dr. Lakshmi S., 2022)

VII. 'FUTILITY' TROPES AND TECHNIQUES.

1) *Forms:* The poem is divided into two seven-line stanzas, with a remarkable shift in perspective. The implicit 'dying' of the soldiers transmutes into a larger perspective questioning the futility of life. This philosophical approach and complex contemplations questioning the existence of mankind suitably turns the poem into an Existentialist one, thinks J. Brierley. (2013). The poem can be looked at in two ways, in terms of structure: the sonnet and the elegy. The elegiac poems; lamenting for the dead—tend to Hexameter, as its natural meter. However, the sonnet is inherently written in Iambic pentameter and is generally used to convey romantic ideals and patriotic tributes; but Owen has used the sonnet in a rather deeper and fuller way making an excursus; a digression, to enquire if the astronomical truth, the human desperation for life, is all a tragic farce. A worldly deception. A remarkable reflection, it embarks on a quest to find the real purpose of existence; to not waver between such questions, but through them, to arrive at some sort of a realization at the end.

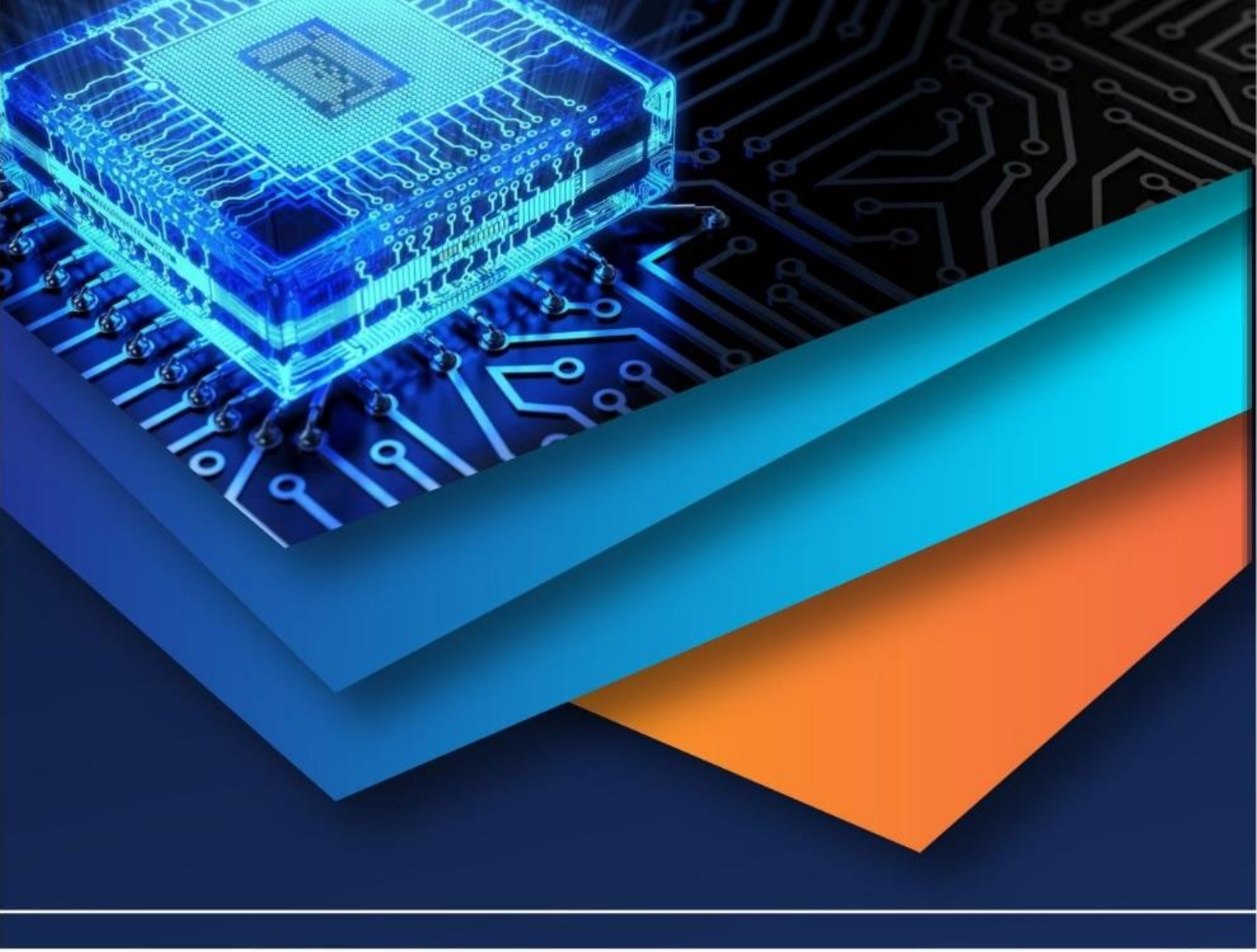
[6] Latin: "In the midst of things"; Literary Terminology.

2) *Language:* The poet doesn't embellish itself in an extravagant or idealized language, like the contemporary poems of its time—but the language remains rather subtle, effective and poignant. The poem is more visceral than emotive; for the emotions are all over the place. The Mood of the poem remains somber and dolorous. And a muffled effort to seek answers which now appears to be unendurable.
3) *Imagery:* The sun is presented as the central image and this image could rightly be identified as the central trope. The articulation of 'cold-star' Oxymoron[7] can be noticed. In the first stanza, the sun is portrayed to have a life-giving power perhaps that of God himself and is therefore personified into a dynamic entity—whose touch will provide solace to the soldier. In the second stanza, the Sun is asserted to be fatuous or silly, as the speaker sets foot with reality; reckoning that it may not have the powers, it is professed to have. However, the 'cold star' can be looked at, from two perspectives—that the poet alludes to the torrid star that has now turned cold and unkind unable to revive life back to man. On the other hand, it may also refer to the Earth in its primitive and primordial forms without the light of the Sun.
4) *Metrics And Prosody:* Owen masters in pararhyme; and a large panoply of his poems have found itself unrestrained by any strict canonical syntax or metrics. "*Move him into the sun—Gently its touch awoke him once"* the syllabic structure is in disharmony. The sonnet form is crafted with Iambic (disyllabic) Pentameter. It doesn't exhibit properties of the elegiac meter or Hexameter; therefore, there is no regular meter in this poem. France-once/star-stir are half rhymes sounding syllables with different syllabic structure. Snow-know/tall-all are the only instances of full rhymes. J. Brierley insists, that through this Owen shows how life lacks formal structure and that it is pointless to strive for final order in life.

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[7] Linguistic phrase that contradicts itself.



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