

College of Education for Humanities - Department of English 4<sup>th</sup> year – poetry 2<sup>nd</sup> course

Wilfred Owen (1893- 1918): "Strange Meeting"

It seemed that out of the 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;  
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 the 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 has been left,

Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,  
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.  
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 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.  
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 . . ."

### “Strange meeting”

The speaker escapes from battle and proceeds down a long tunnel through ancient granite formations. Along his way he hears the groan of sleepers, either dead or too full of thoughts to get up. As he looks at them one leaps up; the soldier has recognized him and moves his hands as if to bless him. Because of the soldier's "dead smile" the speaker knows that he is in Hell.

On the face of the "vision" the speaker sees a thousand fears, but the blood, guns, or moans of above did not reach into their subterranean retreat. The speaker tells the soldier that there is no reason to mourn, and he replies that there is – it is the "undone years" and "hopelessness". The soldier says his hope is the same as the speaker's; he also tells him he once went hunting for beauty in the world, but that beauty made a mockery of time. He knows the truth of what he did, which is "the pity of war, the pity war distilled", but now he can never share it.

The soldier/vision continues, saying men will go on with what is left to them, or they will die as well. They will not break their ranks even though "nations trek from progress". He used to have courage and wisdom. He would wash the blood from the wheels of chariots. He wanted to pour his spirit out, but not in war.

Finally, he says to the speaker that "I am the enemy you killed, my friend," and that he knew him in the dark. It was yesterday that the speaker "jabbed and killed" him, and now it is time to sleep.

- "Strange Meeting" is one of Wilfred Owen's most famous, and most enigmatic, poems. It was published posthumously in 1919 in Edith Sitwell's anthology *Wheels: an Anthology of Verse* and a year later in Siegfried Sassoon's 1920 collection of Owen's poems. T.S. Eliot referred to "Strange Meeting" as a "technical achievement of great originality" and "one of the most moving pieces of verse inspired by the war." That war, of course, is WWI – the central

element in all poems in Owen's relatively small oeuvre. The poet Ted Hughes noted in his writings on "Strange Meeting": "few poets can ever have written with such urgent, defined, practical purpose."

The poem's description of a soldier's descent into Hell where he meets an enemy soldier he killed lends itself to a critique of war. The dead man talks about the horror of war and the inability for anyone but those involved to grasp the essential truth of the experience. There is more than meets the eye, however, and many critics believe that the man in hell is the soldier's "Other", or his double. A man's encounter with his double is a common trope in Romantic literature; the device was used by Shelley, Dickens, and Yeats, among others. 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'." The dead man is the Other, but he is more than a reflection of the speaker - he is a soldier whose death renders his status as an enemy void. Another critic reads the poem as a dream vision, with the soldier descending into his mind and encountering his poetic self, the poem becoming a mythological and psychological journey. Finally, **Elliot B. Gose, Jr.** writes that "the Other...represents the narrator's unconscious, his primal self from which he has been alienated by war."

**The style of the poem** was influenced by several sources. "Strange Meeting" echoes Dante's pitying recognition of the tortured faces in Hell, the underworld of Landor's *Gebir*, and, of course, Keats and Shelley. Owens was an ardent admirer of both Romantic poets, whose *The Fall of Hyperion* and *The Revolt of Islam*, respectively, were no doubt instructive to Owen as he

composed his own work. *The Fall of Hyperion* features the goddess of memory revealing her dying but immortal face and her blank eyes, allowing the poet to grasp her monumental knowledge of wars and heroes past. The emphasis in Owen's work on truth and dreams also resonates of Keats'.

**The title of the poem**, however, may be taken directly from Shelley's work: "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." In *The Revolt of Islam*, Laon tells his soldiers not to avenge themselves on the enemy who has massacred their camp but to ask them to throw down their arms and embrace their shared humanity. The two sides gather together in the "strange meeting".

Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting" explores an extraordinary meeting between two enemy combatants in the midst of battle. Owen forgoes the familiar poetics of glory and honour associated with war and, instead, constructs a balance of graphic reality with compassion for the entrenched soldier.

In fact, the poetic appeal of the text comes from pity and sympathy for the work's characters rather than an inflated idea of the characters' heroism. Owen accomplishes this appeal through both narrative and device. **First**, the narrative in the poem is built upon shared humanity, especially in the face of death, between the speaker and the stranger, evoking the reader's sympathies for the young men. **Second**, consonance, semantic connotation, onomatopoeia, and tone subtly build an impression of the characters' piteous situation.

The author has left us his own fragmentary but impressive Foreword; this, and his Poems, can speak for him, backed by the authority of his experience as an infantry soldier, and sustained by nobility and originality of style. All that was strongest in Wilfred Owen survives in

his poems; any superficial impressions of his personality, any records of his conversation, behaviour, or appearance, would be irrelevant and unseemly. The curiosity which demands such morsels would be incapable of appreciating the richness of his work.

The discussion of his experiments in assonance and dissonance (of which 'Strange Meeting' is the finest example) may be left to the professional critics of verse, the majority of whom will be more preoccupied with such technical details than with the profound humanity of the self-revelation manifested in such magnificent lines as those at the end of his 'Apologia pro Poemate Meo', and in that other poem which he named 'Greater Love'.

The importance of his contribution to the literature of the War cannot be decided by those who both admired him as a poet and valued him as a friend. His conclusions about War are so entirely in accordance with my own that I cannot attempt to judge his work with any critical detachment. I can only affirm that he was a man of absolute integrity of mind. He never wrote his poems (as so many war-poets did) to make the effect of a personal gesture. He pitied others; he did not pity himself. In the last year of his life he attained a clear vision of what he needed to say, and these poems survive him as his true and splendid testament.

A month before his death he wrote to his mother: "My nerves are in perfect order. I came out again in order to help these boys; directly, by leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly, by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can." Let his own words be his epitaph:—

"Courage was mine, and I had mystery;

Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery."

## A poem in a line:

I mean the truth untold, / The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

### Enemy soldier in "Strange Meeting"

In a preface to his posthumous collection, Owen said his poems were about the pity of war, not the "glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power" that war poems traditionally addressed. "Strange Meeting" contains this phrase in the context of a subterranean meeting of a soldier and the enemy he killed. The enemy soldier ruminates on how the truth of war - the *pity* of it - is quelled when the soldiers die. Those back at home, those who started the war, do not know what it is truly like to wait in the trenches, dodge bullets and poison gas attacks, watch their friends die in front of them, and lose their reason and will to endure. Owen felt it was his mission to use his poetry to distill the truth of the war, and his poems stand as beautiful and brilliantly bitter expositions on the horrors of the battlefield and the complexity of the return to the home front.

Red lips are not so red / As the stained stones kissed by the English dead. / Kindness of wood  
and wooer / Seems shame to their love pure.

## *Wilfred Owen: Themes in relation with "strange meeting"*

### **The loss of innocence**

Owen, a young soldier himself, was very aware of the naïveté evinced by many of the soldiers who enlisted. They were not prepared for what they would experience and hardly knew how to grapple with the carnage and absurdity of war. These boys were turned into men far earlier than they should have been. Several of Owen's poems allude to the loss of innocence that is a concomitant of war. The soldiers enlist for superficial reasons and dream only of glory; they fret about their lack of appeal to women once they've returned home missing a limb; they marvel over the sleekness of weapons and do not fathom their destructive power. Owen captures this tragedy of war - the march of old men sending young men off to kill and die.

### **Brotherhood and friendship**

Several of Owen's poems depict the deep bonds of friendship and understanding that develop between soldiers. Shorn of their familial connections, these young men have only each other to rely on. This brotherly love is even more powerful than erotic love, Owen suggests. Roses and red lips and soft voices are no match for the coarse sounds and images of war, for those sounds are more authentic, constituting the brutal context in which soldiers develop camaraderie. Friendship is one of the few things these soldiers have to live for, and Owen ably conveys its significance.

### **The horrors of war**

Owen does not shy away from depicting the horrors of war. He makes his reader confront the atrocities on the battlefield and the indignities of life back home. He presents readers with soldiers who have lost their limbs and been victims of poison gas; young men mourning their dead comrades; ghastly battlefield dreamscapes; a cacophony of sounds terrifying in their unceasing monotony; and Nature's wrath. He shows how the war affects the young men who fight both physically and psychologically. The men who survive become inured to brutality. There is little to no glory and heroism, just scared or desensitized young men fighting for a cause they do not quite understand.

### **Disillusionment with religion**

Owen was certainly a Christian, but he expressed profound disillusionment with organized religion in his letters and poems. He disliked the close connection between church and state and how the church was complicit in stoking the fires of war. He saw the rituals of the church as being cold comfort to the boys on the battlefield or the people who loved them back at home. Churches and statues of saints lost their potency amidst the incomprehensible atrocities of war. Owen was not advocating atheism at all, but he knew that faith had to be more personal and authentic than that dictated by the church fathers who were also involved in war machinations.



## **Nature**

Nature is a strong theme in several of Owen's poems. Nature can be peaceful, calm, and supportive, comforting the men as they rest and revive. The sun, as a symbol of Nature herself, is viewed as a life-giving force that sustains men. However, Owen is convinced that war is a violation of Nature in its fury, carnage, and disruption of the innate cycle of life and death. Thus, when fighting breaks out, Nature also reflects the turmoil. In "Spring Offensive", most memorably, when the fighting begins, "the whole sky burned / With fury against them". Nature can no longer save the men.

## **The irrationality of war**

Throughout Owen's poems the theme of the irrationality of the war is woven. The soldiers do not seem to know what they are fighting for, possessing no lofty goals and expressing no sentiment regarding why they are there. The rulers of Europe, as evinced by Abram in "Parable of the Old Man and the Young", seem concerned with their nation's pride above all else. The battles depicted in the poems are unconnected to each other, existing in a vacuum with seemingly no larger purpose. The horrors of war are not explained away or justified by a noble cause. Owen's view that the war is absurd and incomprehensible is quite manifest.

## **Emotion and feeling**

No doubt drawing from personal experience, Owen is very sympathetic to the ways in which soldiers attempted to make sense of their peculiar and terrible situation on the front and back at home. He understands that many want to deaden and dull themselves to their thoughts and feelings in order to stave off the anguish over what they have done and seen. They are drained of vitality, able to laugh in the face of death. Owen wrestles with his thoughts on this, for while he understands this psychological response, he does not necessarily think excising all emotion is good, for it severs one's connection to humanity. A man must still be part of the fabric of life, no matter how difficult it may be.