Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting"

A Critical Analysis

“Strange Meeting” was the end result of a metamorphosis undergone by Owen and other World War I soldier-poets. They went through many changes as their exposure to the war and trench life increased. Initially they wrote patriotic verse, designed to help build a united front opposing the aggressions of Germany. This quickly changed as they began to realize the grim realities and arbitrariness of war. As their frustrations grew, they lashed out at those they saw as either profiting from the war or misguidedly supporting it. Their final stage reflects the sadness and waste of any war at any time no matter what side the combatants and populace are on. Owen was no exception; “Strange Meeting” is perhaps his most poignant poem and strongest antiwar work, crowning his short list of achievements.

Paradoxically enough Owen began writing poetry in the tradition of the romantics with Keats and Shelley as his models. Equipped with a Romantic sensibility, Owen might have written better poetry but circumstances ordained otherwise. The war provided Owen with subject matter, which turned the romantic elegiac strain of his early poems into the deep feelings of sorrow and compassion, which characterize his later poems.

The idea of the futility of the soldiers’ sacrifice is the theme of strange meeting. In fact, it is a poem of visionary dream. The poet soldier imagines that he has escaped from battle and gone to the other regions. As he keeps watching the corpses, one springs up with piteous recognition in fixed eyes’. The other man in its cadaverous look, who is in fact the enemy soldier, relates the horrors and frustrations accompanying war. He is sad that he has been snatched away by death even before he could pass on to humanity the knowledge he acquired – the truth untold – the bitter experience on the battle field – the pity war distilled. He further voices against the abstract and unworthy glorification of war. An enemy in life
becomes a friendly companion in the land of the dead, finally when disclosing his identity he bids friend to join.

Strange Meeting is the most emphatic of Owen’s imaginative statements of war experience. Striking in its crispness and brevity it is his best poem that has won for him a ‘passport to immortality’. War is organized brutality. Because of war, men retreat from their material progress and civilization. The poem no doubt highlights the horrors of war. It is also to ascertain eternal truths of love, amity and good will. Nevertheless, his decisions collapse because of the sudden termination of life. The poem strange meeting is an imaginative recreation of a supposed happening after death or even a process in the imagination of a living man after death. It is a livid experience.

In Strange Meeting, the dead man, however, is displeased with the cause of his death. Sacrificing life for the sake of others is a noble act; but the glorification of war is both abstract and unworthy.

The theme of universal goodwill, which Owen has been persistently advocating, seems reserved for the world of death where enemies become friends and engage in a discussion of their problems with an open mind. The poem underlines the theme of ‘insensibility’ also. The soldiers have grown insensible to pain and horror. It is paradoxical that the sense of goodwill does not exist where it is most needed and exists where it is not needed!

The death of a young soldier in the battlefield is nothing but a total waste of his undeveloped possibilities and talents through which he could serve humanity had he not joined the warfront to kill others and to be killed untimely by others. In the poem, the ‘other’ mourns because of the waste of his years:

“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”.

Perhaps he would have been able to undo the destruction brought about by the war, wash the blood-clogged wheels of the chariots with truth drawn from the unpolluted spring-well of our heart which is finest and deepest in the human spirit. The ‘other’ soldiers, Owen’s mirrored self who takes part in war kills and become killed – underlines the fact that while participating in a war, every young soldier sacrifices the possibilities of a noble achievement for pursuing a vain, inhuman, disastrous end.

With a frank realism, free from the violent bitterness of so much of Sassoon’s poetry, Owen set out to present the whole reality of war – the boredom, the hopelessness, the futility, the horror, occasionally the courage and self – sacrifice, but, above all, the pity of it. In addition, never has the pity of war been more deeply felt or more powerfully shown in any other poem than Strange Meeting. His is the satire of war in Strange Meeting and is sharp, yet he never loses his artistic poise, and his most bitter work has a true dignity.

To sum up, Owen's "Strange Meeting" shows stagnation of the glory of the country. This emphasizes the theme of futility of war and the degradation of war. The theme of universal suffering is also brought up as the poem also shows a psychological struggle occurring within soldiers as they fight. The word "frowned" as the soldier "jabbed and killed" suggests a reluctance in fighting as it hints that the fighting is against the soldier's will and he thinks that it is wrong to kill. The theme is once again surfaced as the vision says "let us sleep now". This statement is ironic as there is no real rest for those who are still fighting in the war but only for those who are already dead. The hell above still exists on the battlefield and the "Hell" that they are in can offer them eternal sleep. In conclusion, the poem shows a supernatural, dream-like meeting between two soldiers who were enemies in the hellish war above but now are friends in "Hell". Their conversation shows the futility of war and the broken dreams and unfulfilled desires due to war. The hopelessness of war is further shown as soldiers die with unresolved conflicts in life. War too brings suffering to all due to the bloodshed and the widespread devastation and destruction.