

Echoes of War: Exploring War poets and their Continued Resonance

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| Article Detail: | Abstract |
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| <p>Received: 05 Jan 2024; Received in revised form: 10 Feb 2024; Accepted: 20 Feb 2024; Available online: 28 Feb 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)</p> <p>Keywords – War Poetry, Modern Warfare, Classic War Poets, Relevance in Post-WW I Context, Peace and Consequences of Conflict</p> | <p><i>War poetry offers a very deep and personal perspective on the cruelty and destruction of war. Despite technological advancements in modern warfare since the World Wars, the fundamental miseries of armed conflict still exist. This essay examines the relevance of classic war poets like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Rupert Brooke in the modern context post WW I. Their evocative and authentic portrayal of life and death in the trenches and battlefields of WW I emphasize the necessity of peace and offer long lasting insights into the real consequences of conflict. Even though the vivid experiences of these poets were chronicled decades ago, their writings are still very relevant even today.</i></p> |

INTRODUCTION

Although poems about battle trace back far older, war poetry became a separate literary form in England during the First World War (Das, 2013). Classic war poets like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, and Isaac Rosenberg wrote about their experiences fighting in the trenches, expressing anger at the pointlessness of war, conveying traumatic events, and criticizing inept leadership (Stallworthy, 2008). Their poetry revealed the harsh truths of contemporary warfare, refuting romanticized depictions of battle and illustrating how technology had rendered warfare more lethal and impersonal (Hipp, 2010).

Despite the First World War ending more than a century ago, the problems these poems tackle are still brutally pertinent today. Soldiers continue to

experience pain, hopelessness, and disillusionment as long as wars are fought. In addition, a fresh generation of war poets has surfaced to capture the realities of the most recent battles in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other places (Amin, 2012). In order to show how the viewpoints of poets from the First World War still have resonance with readers today, this essay will examine a few selected poems. A summary of current war poetry and its ties to anti-war sentiments articulated decades prior will also be included.

THE HORRORS OF GAS WARFARE: "DULCE ET DECORUM EST"

The famous poem by Wilfred Owen describes an attack with mustard gas in World War I. Owen decries the savagery of contemporary warfare with striking imagery and the juxtaposition of Latin text. "Bent

double, like old beggars under sacks" is how "Dulce et Decorum Est" begins (Owen, 1917/2021, line 1). This metaphor illustrates the miserable state in which the soldiers find themselves, battered by battle and burdened by their equipment. Lines 12-14 of Owen's description describe a soldier who drowns in the "thick green light" of the poison gas because he was unable to put on his gas mask in time.

While chemical weapons have been outlawed, Owen's anti-war message still rings true. Modern conflicts from Vietnam to Syria have featured extensive civilian casualties, demonstrating how technological progress has failed to mitigate war's inhumanity (Beaumont, 2013). Just as Owen condemned euphemistic Latin rhetoric that glorified World War I, his poem calls on us to see through patriotic justifications for modern wars as well. "Dulce et Decorum Est" remains widely taught and continues to inspire anti-war sentiment nearly a century after its publication (Das, 2013).

THE TRAGIC TOLL OF COMBAT: "SUICIDE IN THE TRENCHES"

Siegfried Sassoon similarly employed irony in his condemnation of World War I. However, while Owen focused on the horrors of gas attacks, Sassoon targeted the damage to soldiers' mental health. In "Suicide in the Trenches," he describes a young soldier, wounded in battle, killing himself after returning to the front (Sassoon, 1918/2021). Sassoon contrasts the "smiling" face of the boy who "took the King's shilling" to join up with his grievous condition after months of combat (lines 3-4). The poem closes by repeating the phrase "and he put a bullet through his brain," a shocking image that underscores the tragedy of the soldier's fate (line 18).

Sadly, parallels can be drawn to modern veterans' mental health struggles and high suicide rates (Barrera et al., 2021). Troops today face extended deployments that contribute greatly to conditions like PTSD. By zeroing in on psychological trauma, "Suicide in the Trenches" remains painfully relevant. Sassoon's powerful theme demonstrates that while strategies and technologies evolve, war's damage to young lives persists.

THE HUMAN COST: "THE SOLDIER"

Where Owen and Sassoon leveled bitter critiques, Rupert Brooke struck a more Romantic tone in his sonnet "The Soldier" (Brooke, 1915/1918). Nevertheless, his poem similarly highlights war's human toll. Brooke envisions his own death in combat through soaring language and imagery of sacrifice. He pictures his grave "some corner of a foreign field" where he has "fallen" in battle (lines 1-3). While Brooke's ode glorifies this imagined battlefield death, treating it as a noble act for England, he also focuses on its most basic elements: a young man cut down prematurely (Das, 2013).

Despite its patriotic sentiments, "The Soldier" recognizes those who suffer loss in war, both soldiers and civilians. Far from home, Brooke's speaker becomes just another headstone where he falls. This anonymity represents the way individual lives are lost amidst the chaos of war. In the modern age of technological warfare, where drones often replace ground troops, it can be easy to forget that war has a deep human cost. Brooke's focus on the young deceased soldier serves as an important reminder of this fact.

THE FUTILITY OF WAR

Many war poets also focused on the immense waste of life caused by World War I, communicating powerful anti-war messages that questioned the validity of sacrificing masses of young men for victory. In poems like 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' and 'Dulce et Decorum Est', Owen laments the extinguished potential of each fallen soldier, who will only receive hasty, impersonal burial rituals rather than meaningful goodbyes. Similarly, Sassoon's Suicide in the Trenches suggests that many soldiers lost their lives not for any worthy cause but due to poor and incompetent military leadership. Both poets force readers to confront the tragic futility of the deaths of so many youths for minimal gains in a pointless war. Though referring to World War I specifically, their sentiment that war brings only pointless death and waste remains painfully relevant. It serves as an important reminder in any age of pro-war rhetoric that exalts self-sacrifice for the nation.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, leading war poets from World War I like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Rupert Brooke remain highly relevant today. Despite radical shifts in the methods, strategies, and technologies of war over the past century, their poems explore fundamental and unchanged realities. Owen exposed war's capacity to dehumanize, Sassoon its shattering psychological impact, and Brooke its tragic and overlooked individual toll. Their poetic themes carry renewed weight amidst the brutality of contemporary conflicts across the globe. More than 100 years after their initial publication, the lasting power and insight of these war poets continues to inspire anti-war sentiment and remembrance of those who have lost their lives in armed conflict.

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