Exploration of the Theme of War in Wilfred Owen's and Tony Harrison's Poems: Comparative Analysis

The theme of war is a very broad theme, as it can be covered in many ways. Many authors explore the theme of war as they want to show the futility of war. In both Wilfred Owen and Tony Harrison's work, the theme of war is explored, but with different approaches. Disabled explores the life of a soldier with by focusing on how he has been neglected by society due to his disability after the war. In the poem, the tragic events of the soldier are explored with mention to his mental state, showing that all of his sadness comes from other people treating him badly due to his disability. The Bright Lights of Sarajevo explores the life of the people living in the remains of the bombed city. The focus is on showing the strength of the human spirit by describing a relationship blossoming during the war. Through the majority of the poem, Tony Harrison constantly reminds the reader of the tragedy, while bringing up the romantic relationship throughout to emphasise on the strength of the human spirit. Though the approaches of the two texts are different, the readers are still able to explore the theme of war from the two poems, as both poems have explored the lives of the people during the war in depth.

In Disabled, the poem is written in third person, from the perspective of a disabled soldier who lost his limbs in war. The poem constantly reminds the reader of the life of the disabled soldier before the war and uses juxtaposition to contrast the before and after the experience, providing a better view of how war has ruined the soldier’s life. By writing the poem in this point of view, it allows the readers to understand his life and mental state after he lost his limbs, further emphasising the point that war is futile and pointless.

Wilfred Owen starts the poem off by creating a picture of the disabled soldier sitting in a park to show the soldier’s mood. ‘He sat in a wheelchair, waiting for dark’ shows that he has nothing to do other than sitting in a wheelchair, waiting for the time to pass by. This suggests that nothing and no one is there for him. ‘Saddening like a hymn’ suggests that he is drowning in his dark thoughts. This implies that no one is there to distract him from his dark thoughts or to help him and be with him to pass time. Describing the disabled soldiers clothing as ‘grey’ shows that his mood is just like his clothing, dark and hopeless. This suggests that it is due to his disability, his mind is starting to break, and that he thinks he’s a failure. The colour also shows that his blood is poured out of him, from red to grey, showing his severe injury. This is very effective as it gives an impression to the reader that the war has severely affected the soldiers' normal life.

In the second stanza, Wilfred Owen uses flashbacks to contrast the past and current reality to examine the disabled soldiers' mental state. ‘About this time the town used to swing so gay’ shows that the town used to be fun and that he had good times and no responsibilities before the war. ‘In the old times, before he threw away his knees’ shows that whatever fun things that used to happen before the war, it isn’t happening anymore due to his disability. ‘Touch him like queer disease’ further emphasize this point as this suggests that women thinks he’s disgusting because he is disabled. The juxtaposition between the past and current suggests that he has yet to accept the reality that he is disabled, and that the psychological damage he suffered from the war is still fresh and is still affecting him.

In the third stanza, Wilfred Owen restates the fact that the soldier's life was ruined due to becoming disabled in the war. ‘Lost his colour’ shows that he had lost his purpose in life and ‘veins went dry’ implies that along with the war, his soul and life has been poured away. This reiterates the fact that war is futile and the fact that the soldiers perfectly good life were destroyed by the war. This is important as this evokes the reader to rethink about the purpose of war, and further exploring the theme.

In the fourth stanza, Wilfred Owen uses flashback for a second time to show the disabled soldiers regret to joining the war. ‘He wonders why’ shows that even himself had no idea to why he even decided to join the war. ‘He thought he’d better join’ shows that because of someone telling him to join the army, he did. This implies that the people back in the day had no reason to join the war as they just believed they should. This creates an image of people dying not for glory, but as something they had to do, basically for nothing. ‘To please his Meg’ further emphasises the point as since this is the reason that he joined the war, there is no positive outcome as the seventh stanza shows that women like men who are whole.

Wilfred Owen continues through from the fourth stanza’s flashback, showing the soldiers’ ignorance about war and the reason that he joined in the first place. ‘And no fears’ shows that the soldier had no idea that the war could hurt him in any way, and was very brave and not afraid to join the war. ‘He thought of jewelled hilts’ shows that the propaganda has persuaded him to join because he thought the soldiers in the posters looked awesome. This implies that if he knew more about war, he probably wouldn’t have joined, showing that war is almost like a cult, forcing people to believe in what the army tells you.

In the sixth stanza, Wilfred Owen shows the people's reaction of him returning from war, almost to foreshadow the hardships coming. ‘Not as crowds’ shows this very well, as this suggests that most of the people are disgusted by him being disabled. This foreshadows the hardships coming for the disabled soldiers and gives an impression to the reader that his life is already ruined, further proving how pointless war is.

At the end of the poem, Wilfred Owen restates that all hope is lost for the disabled soldier. ‘Tonight he noticed how the womens eyes / Passed from him to the strong men that were whole’ shows that women ignore him due to his disability. ‘Why don’t they come’ suggests that the days of glory that people would do things for him are over. This forces the soldier to face the reality that he is disabled again and that all hope is lost for his future. ‘And put him into bed’ shows that the soldier is questioning why no one cares about him. This suggests that the soldier is waiting to die and it restates that he has no hope in life anymore.

The Bright Lights of Sarajevo is a poem written to show the readers how hope still persists within the harsh living conditions in the city of Sarajevo after the war. Similar to Disabled, this poem is written in third person. But unlike Disabled, this poem does not focus on one person’s life and instead describes the life of young people and their relationships to further emphasises the point that hope exists. This allows for a more broad image of the strength of the human spirit to be delivered to the reader, further emphasising the optimism of the people in terrible living conditions.

In the first stanza, Tony Harrison establishes the people’s harsh living conditions by describing how desperate they are for resources. ‘To get the refills they wheel home in prams’ show that they take fuel home in prams. Since prams are usually used to carry children, and yet they are

using it to transport fuel, it suggests that the resources and fuel are almost or even more important than children. ‘Precious meagre grams’ shows that the small ration of food is extremely important for the citizens. This further emphasises the poor living conditions and it evokes the reader to feel pity for the citizens.

Similar to Disabled, where Wilfred Owen showed the soldier’s life after his disability, Tony Harrison also uses a dark and depressing tone to show that harsh living conditions of the citizens living in Sarajevo. ‘Often dodging snipers on the way’ shows that it was very dangerous to live in the city of Sarajevo. ‘people walking streets serb shells destroyed’ shows that the city is destroyed by the missiles and it isn't safe to live in. This suggests that the people of Sarajevo had to endure the terrible and dangerous living conditions on a daily basis. This creates an image of the broken city in the reader's mind causing them to feel sad and pity.

Then, Tony Harrison shows the destruction war has caused on Sarajevo. ‘No torches to guide them’ shows that the city has no light because the war has destroyed all means of illumination in the city. ‘Then match or lighter to a cigarette’ shows that for the citizens to see, they need to use a match or a lighter. This evokes the reader to think about the destruction caused by war, and creates an image of the citizens having a hard time to illuminate things, causing the reader to further focus on the theme of war.

Towards the end of the stanza, Tony Harrison introduces the romantic relationship between young people. ‘Girl’s dark shape is fancied by a boy’s’ shows the start of a relationship. The juxtaposition between the relationship and the harsh living conditions further emphasise how strong the human spirit is. This gives an impression that even in this chaotic world, a relationship can still go on, showing that there is still hope.

In the second stanza, Tony Harrison shows devastation on the city by describing a bread shop. ‘Serb mortars massacred’ shows that the bombshells and explosions have killed lots of people. ‘Shredded bread’ shows that not only were people killed but even the bread shops were also exploded into bits. These chunks of bread also signify human flesh that is blown up to bits. This shows that the explosives were very strong and destructive, emphasising that the city has been trashed. The images of the trashed city created contrasts with the end of the last stanza, where a relationship is starting, thus allowing for a more detailed image to be portrayed in the reader’s mind.

Tony Harrison also uses powerful language to describe the devastation in the city of Sarajevo. ‘Fragments’ and ‘splintered’ shows that the destruction and devastation have caused the streets broken and blown up to a point where it's fragmented. ‘Splashed on the pavement by Serb mortar shells’ creates an image of the citizens being blown up by the shells and the pavement being blown to shreds. By creating these images, it allows for the reader to feel like they are actually there, experiencing the devastation, and this evokes the reader to think that war is futile.

Unlike Disabled, where Wilfred Owen ends on a dark thought, in the last stanza, Tony Harrison ends off the poem with some hope, as a relationship is blossoming. ‘Until the curfew, and he holds her hand” shows that even during the war, loving relationships can still happen. By ending the poem with a hopeful tone, the author emphasises that even during a darkest and most horrible times, hope is always there and should be kept. This creates an image for the reader that even if the city of Sarajevo is destroyed, the people there still have hope and will to

live on.

Both Disabled and The Bright Lights of Sarajevo have explored the theme of war in depth. Though their approaches were different, both poems were excellent at describing the aftermath of war. I personally believe that The Bright Lights of Sarajevo has explored the theme of war better as it describes the horrors and the dangers while still encouraging the people to have hope to live on, showing the strength of the human spirit, not giving up hope even during a crisis. I personally also agree with Tony Harrison, as hope always exists no matter the situation and we should always keep that in mind.