
War Poetry Within The Late 18th Early 19th Century

Poetry within the late 18th early 19th century often portrayed numerous positive attitudes towards ideologies such as, militarism and its perspectives of glorified war and death within war, as well as it being considered a heroic adventure. By adoring the concept of war being a valiant experience, poetry of the time, alongside other media such as war-propaganda, would often inspire young people to sign up for the war, encouraging them that they too can honourably serve for their country in this new, exciting experience. Nevertheless, there were still numerous poets, such as Wilfred Owen, who would reject these ideologies, instead depicting the harsh realities and the realistic horrors that came upon with war. Owen rejects these dominant ideologies through his writing, displaying his negative attitudes towards the perspectives via jarring imagery, symbolism, and personification.

Born in Shropshire England, Wilfred Owen, a 25-year-old second-lieutenant and poet, survived 3 long years of fighting bullets and bombs until November 4, 1918, when he was killed leading his platoon across the Sambre and Oise Canal in France. Through his experiences within the war, Owen rejected the accumulated dominant ideologies, such as militarism, and its perspectives of wars glorification and the adoration of war being an honourable and heroic experience. While the rejected ideology is evident in each of his poems, 'The Last Laugh' and 'Mental Cases' truly capture the negative attitude Owen has towards these mislead beliefs about war.

Mental Cases clearly refutes the concepts of war being an honourable and heroic experience as well as its glorification by portraying the grotesque carnage of battle and how it has affected the survivors. The poem is about war survivors and the hardships that they had to go through simply because they survived, proving that it isn't honourable nor heroic, instead resulting in either a cruel, bloody death, or surviving but suffering of severe post-traumatic stress disorder. This can be justified by the language features used within mental cases, which reflects the purposefully repulsive, sombre mood of the poem, physically shocking the audience with jarring imagery. Through his work Owen portrays the harsh realities of war, rather than spreading society's ignorant delusions that war was an honourable and heroic adventure.

Owen uses surreal symbolism within his work as well as imagery in order to negatively depict his opposition to war being considered a glorified heroic and honourable experience. Owen first uses imagery to compare the harsh living conditions of the survivors to that of hell and purgatory, rather than what would be expected of a heroic adventure. "Why sit they here in twilight, wherefore rock they The purgatorial shadows" (1.2). Using the same quote, this use of imagery can also be used to infer that the purgatorial shadows are symbolic of the soldiers. By comparing the soldiers to "purgatorial shadows" it reflects their emptiness and lack of emotion, as brought upon by the war. They seem to be considered as less than human with effective verbs describing their animalistic behaviour, for example, 'drooping' and 'baring'. Owen uses the term "shadows", to show that they have lost their soul and personalities. The imagery used here shows the incredible pain and suffering of the soldiers that survived the war.

Nature is also used as a powerful but negative symbol within this poem. Owen uses the sun to portray the grim realisation that even after they have stopped fighting, a soldiers war will never

end. He uses the sun within this poem to describe that dawn and daylight bring nothing but pain during and post war. "dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh" (3.4). Personification is also used within Owens poem in order to represent that that men are haunted by the figures of their path. "Misery swelters" (1.8) through their bodies and "Memory", almost lover-like, "fingers" hair but only to remind them of murder. (2.2) By using the phrase 'the Dead have ravished' Owen suggests that the soldiers minds are overpowered with thoughts of the dead. That their minds are being toying with and their memories are haunted by with the faces of the dead and wars experiences, a clear contrast to the belief that war was heroic and honourable. "Always they must see these things and hear them" (2.6) Through his grotesque depictions, Owen not once mentions the possibility of living through these hardships as heroic nor honourable, but instead allowing the audience to infer that war is not, nor ever will be, a glorified heroic nor honourable adventure.

Similar to 'Mental Cases', 'The Last Laugh' rejects the ideology of militarism through his negative attitude towards glorified death within war, and the idea that war was valiant adventure. Throughout this poem, Owen recounts the death of three soldiers and how they respond to each of their deaths in different ways. The language used in this poem is blunt and to the point, and reflects the emotional state of each man as they die. The structure of the poem is very straightforward, each of five lines in the stanzas have a repeating pattern, starting with the soldiers dying words, followed by a response from the weapons that killed them. As the first of the soldiers dies, his final breath is used on the exclamation of the lords name "O! Jesus Christ!" (1.1). While it is unsure whether or not the 'soldier' is crying out a final prayer or has been pushed to extremes, this line was quite controversial during the time it was written, clearly supporting Owens beliefs that war was not an honourable and heroic experience. The second of the three soldiers is believed to be of a younger age, as his final breath is used for the longing of his parents, specifically his mother emphasising the young man's vulnerability "O Mother – Mother – Dad!" (2.1). The third and final soldier while sticking with a similar pattern of keeping his phrase short, cries out in an intimate gesture to his loved one. "My Love" (3.1) Owens use of personification creates another repetitious bombardment of lines within his poem. After the first man's death Owens writes for the weapons to have "Chirped" (1.3), "Chuckled" (1.4), and "Guffawed" (1.5). While it appears that Owen was just giving life to these non-livings things, it can be inferred that Owen gave these specific descriptions in order for the weaponry to be mocking the falling soldiers. As the guns appear to laugh clearly unaffected by the death of the soldier, it is clear to see that the death isn't glorified, but instead mocked. Due to this, the tone of the poem is clearly cynical, as Owen shows how each of the weapons of war show no respect for the human sacrifices. This mockery is then seen again in the second stanza, as the soldier falls the second lot of weaponry appears to not even bother to laugh, conveying an apathetic lack of compassion for the soldier. "The lofty Shrapnel-cloud Leisurely gestured,—Fool!" (2.3) for the death of the final soldier, Owen makes the mockery more apparent, "Hoot and Groan" (3.4) "Hissed" (3.5). This choice of words appears as if the third soldier is being booed for a bad performance, once again making a mockery of the fallen soldiers. Throughout the poem it is clear to see that the fallen men didn't die heroically nor with honour, however were mocked for their attempts. This also supports Owens disbelief of deaths glorification, as there was no glory depicted at all. Each of the deaths were to the point, and the names of the soldiers weren't given, again representing their un-importance. These poems validate his negative attitudes and beliefs to the war. It is clear to see the un-importance of the soldiers in each of the poems as no names nor were details given. While Mental Cases was more grotesque and depicted the war so inhumanly, The Last Laugh was more blunt and to the point, making a mockery out of those who had fallen.

Throughout history, the ideologies and beliefs of war have encouraged many to view it as an honourable, heroic act of duty to fight for one's country. Through personal experiences of war, poets such as Wilfred Owen have been led to dismiss these accumulated dominant ideologies about war. While the rejected ideology of militarism and its perspectives on glorified war, its adoration to one's death, and the belief that it was a heroic and honourable experience, are evident in each of his poems, 'The Last Laugh' and 'Mental Cases' truly depict and capture the negative attitude Owen has towards these perspectives. Through the use of numerous language features and poetic devices such as powerful symbolism, grim imagery, and grotesque personification, Owen's poetry depicts the mockery of a soldier's death, and the horror that is surviving the war.