



EXPOSURE

WILFRED OWEN

Table of Contents

FULL POEM	2
BACKGROUND	3
ABOUT WILFRED OWEN	3
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JANE WEIR'S POPPIES AND WILFRED OWEN	3
OWEN'S LEGACY	4
THE INITIAL 'ROMANTIC' VIEW OF WAR	4
THE BATTLE OF SOMME: A CHANGE OF MOOD	4
HOW OWEN AND SASSOON MET	5
OWEN 'EXPOSES' BRITAIN'S UNREALISTIC ATTITUDES TO WAR	5
THE MOOD ON THE FRONT LINE	6
FOCUS OF EXPOSURE	6
OWEN AND THE POINTLESSNESS OF WAR	6
THEME OF EXPOSURE: FUTLITY	6
OWEN'S LANDSCAPES	7
OWEN'S LANGUAGE	7
STRUCTURE: PARARHyme	7
STRUCTURE: CONTRAST	8
LANGUAGE: TEXTURE	8
LANGUAGE: A TRIBUTE TO JOHN KEATS?	8
BIBLIOGRAPHY	9





FULL POEM

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us...
Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent...
Low drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient...
Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,
But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,
Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.
Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.
What are we doing here?

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow...
We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.
Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey,
But nothing happens.

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.
Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow,
With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew,
We watch them wandering up and down the wind's nonchalance,
But nothing happens.

Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces—
We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed,
Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,
Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses.
—Is it that we are dying?

Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed
With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;
For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;
Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed,—
We turn back to our dying.

Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;
Now ever suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit.
For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;
Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,
For love of God seems dying.





Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us,
Shrivelling many hands, and puckering foreheads crisp.
The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp,
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,
But nothing happens.





BACKGROUND

It is widely agreed that *Exposure* is Wilfred Owen's most polished, impressive poem in terms of poetic technique.

- The twentieth century was the most murderous in history
 - 187 million deaths
- 'The Great War was senseless; senseless in its outbreak, senseless in its prosecution, senseless in the slaughter of what became a lost generation.' – Rupert Brooke.

ABOUT WILFRED OWEN

1. Wilfred Owen was born in 1893, joined the British Army in 1915 and died in battle on November 4th 1918.
 - a. Fought in WWI
 - i. With its uniquely dehumanizing trench warfare
 - ii. And sophisticated propaganda machinery
 1. Eg 'Your country needs you!'
 - a. As carnage at the front increased, a flood of jingoistic propaganda inflamed national hatreds, brazenly presented the soldiers' mission as a necessary patriotic sacrifice for God, King and country
 - i. Or, in some cases, welcomed war as a necessary blood-letting that would 'stiffen' the nation's weakened character
 1. Recruitment advertisement of 1914 also promised that 'the war would be over by Christmas'
2. He originally pursued a career in the Church, but gave up on that when he felt that the Church failed to care for those in its locality.
3. Owen was an avid fan of the poet John Keats (1795–1821) (also died aged 25).
4. Died a week in battle before the Armistice in November 1918 at the age of 25
 - a. Jane Weir admitted her poem *Poppies* was inspired by Wilfred Owen's mother's loss

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JANE WEIR'S *POPPIES* AND WILFRED OWEN

Weir acknowledged that 'A lot of my poems are narrative driven or scenarios'

- in *Poppies* she tells the 'story' of a mother's experience of pain and loss as her son leaves home to go to war.
- She indicated that: 'I was subliminally thinking of Susan Owen [mother of Wilfred]... and families of soldiers killed in any war when I wrote this poem.'
 - Wilfred Owen was killed in battle one week before the Armistice in November 1918 at the age of 25





- This may be the inspiration for the reference to Amistice Sunday in the first line of the first stanza
- Wilfred Owen also claimed the very first poem in the selection 'On my Songs', was, the nineteen-year-old Owen explained to his mother, about his hoped-for 'flight... from overbearing elders' (Letter 172)
 - The speaker is unaware of the deep irony in his sonnet
 - The speaker in Jane Weir's poem says
 - 'After you'd gone I went into your bedroom, released a song bird from its cage. Later a single dove flew from the pear tree,'
 - This may be a reference to Owen's hoped-for 'flight... from overbearing parents'
 - The irony is that this wish comes to fruition through death
 - Weir may also be criticizing the propaganda of the time which, perhaps, took advantage of young men's desire for independence to lure them into the army
- One of Owen's later poems movingly mentions another audacious ambition dating from these early years to earn himself an eventual memorial in Westminster Abbey's Poet's Corner
 - Poppies mentions both 'war memorial' and 'war grave', another possible reference to Owen's mistaken words from his teens
 - Of course, the references may also be generic and therefore referring to all soldiers who lost their lives to war
- This poem attempts on one level to address female experience and is consciously a political act.
 - 'crimped' and 'spasms' subvert the poppy's symbolic representation of peace
 - Syntactical inversion of 'paper red' reduces the poppy to simply a colour
 - Even the paper that it is made of is dismissed, as if worthless, and we are driven to focus on the symbolic meaning of the colour red as representing the bloodshed of the innocent and the naïve, rather than the meaningless material it is made from

OWEN'S LEGACY

Owen was one of the first of the century's writer's to testify to the magnitude of this 'murderous' reality and to use imaginative writing as a form of warning, prophecy and elegy

- Owen said his publication...
 - '... is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with poetry. My subject is War, and the Pity of War.'
 - In his youth, Owen was a neo-Romantic but his war poetry illustrates the unlearning process he had to go through as a result of his experiences of war

THE INITIAL 'ROMANTIC' VIEW OF WAR





At the outbreak of war, the mainstream of English poetry was greatly influenced by Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop,

- he published Sir Edward Marsh's anthologies, *Georgian Poetry*.
 - The circle of Georgian poets included...
 - Rupert Brooke,
 - John Drinkwater and Lascelles Abercrombie,
 - and Sassoon,
 - Edmund Blunden and Isaac Rosenberg were also intimates.
 - Georgian poetry was largely pastoral and romantic,
 - and could therefore be used to convey the optimistic and chivalrous feelings of the first heady months of the war.

THE BATTLE OF SOMME: A CHANGE OF MOOD

The optimistic and chivalrous mood did not survive long.

- Within six months, the war had settled into the near-stalemate of trench warfare on the Western Front,
 - and at Ypres in April 1915, the Germans used poison gas for the first time.
 - Any remaining niceties of poetry were shattered by the guns which opened the Battle of the Somme on 1st July 1916.
 - Kitchener's New Armies, together with the remains of the Old Contemptibles and more recent volunteers were committed to 'The Big Push'.
 - On the first day alone there were nearly 60,000 casualties, one-third of them fatal.
 - Romantic and pastoral verse could not convey the horror of this battle which lasted four months.
 - In August, Sassoon was invalided home with trench fever, and found his voice in the bitter poems 'They' and 'Blighters'.
 - Sassoon never lost the anger to be found in these poems and from 1916 to 1927 his scathing poetry stung the conscience of his readers.

HOW OWEN AND SASSOON MET

While convalescing, Sassoon came to the reasonable conclusion that the continuation of the war was not for liberty but for commercial and territorial aggrandisement.

- With the encouragement of like-minded people, including Bertrand Russell, he prepared a statement setting out his views, which he sent to his Colonel.
 - It was subsequently read out in the House of Commons and reprinted in *The Times*.
 - In a manner worthy of 1984 or the Soviet Union at its nastiest, it was decided that Sassoon was indeed the 'Mad Jack' of his regimental nickname, and he was sent to Craiglockhart Psychiatric Hospital in Edinburgh.





- There, he met the shell-shocked Wilfred Owen.
 - o Sassoon's sympathy and encouragement enabled Owen to give expression to his poetic concern – the pity of war.
 - Sassoon and Owen are the two giants of the English poets of the First World War.
 - Sassoon's poetry expressed the fierce anger of the poet, as a fighting man.
 - o It was unfamiliar and unpopular at the time because war poetry had rarely been written by an active participant.
 - Owen, on the other hand, moved beyond the anger to a deep compassion, which the public was more ready to receive after the war, when Owen's poetry was published posthumously.

OWEN 'EXPOSES' BRITAIN'S UNREALISTIC ATTITUDES TO WAR

He was a revolutionary war poet.

- Before Owen, war poetry focused largely on patriotic verse which praised brave soldiers and glorified battle
 - o (such as Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*).
 - In 1914, public attitudes to war were unrealistic:
 - Britain hadn't experienced a major war for over a hundred years, and war was considered...
 - o brave,
 - o honourable
 - o and exciting.
 - Owen was keen to dispel this myth, and 'expose' the reality.
 - The poets themselves – those who survived –
 - o Such as W. B. Yeats found that the 'land fit for heroes' lived only in the rhetoric of politicians and the previous romantic tone and Ballad forms were no longer fashionable in expressing the deep emotion and revulsion of war

THE MOOD ON THE FRONT LINE

In contrast to the heroic rhetoric of the politicians, the popular song of the front-line soldiers combined fatalistic lament and grimly knowing pragmatism

- 'we're here because we're here / because we're here, because we're here'





FOCUS OF *EXPOSURE*

Exposure focuses on Owen's experiences in trench warfare.

- In a November 1917 letter to his mother, Owen wrote:
 - "The marvel is that we did not all die of cold. As a matter of fact, only one of my party actually froze to death before he could be got back, but I am not able to tell how many may have ended in hospital."
 - The poem describes the way a group of soldiers suffered in harsh weather conditions, dreaming or, perhaps, hallucinating of home and questioning why they were offering themselves up for such a terrible experience.
-

OWEN AND THE POINTLESSNESS OF WAR

Owen did not believe, like many war poets before him, of the...

- "glory,
 - honour,
 - might,
 - majesty,
 - dominion,
 - or power,"
 - of war.
 - He believed that war was pointless,
 - and this is the recurring theme throughout his poetry:
 - the futility of war.
 - As we have already seen, Ted Hughes echoes the work of Owen in his own WW1 poem *Bayonet Charge*.
-

THEME OF *EXPOSURE*: FUTILITY

In *Exposure*, the theme of the futility, the pointlessness of war is paramount.

- This is an odd poem in that it is a war poem where there is no battle taking place.
 - The title *Exposure* is perhaps misleading, causing readers to assume, maybe, that the soldiers are exposed to the enemy soldiers.
 - In fact, the poem is very much devoid of action.
 - *Exposure* focuses on soldiers who were exposed to harsh weather conditions during their days and nights of waiting in the trenches.
 - Other Owen poems, such as *Spring Offensive* and *Futility* also explore nature as enemy.
 - It is one of Owen's recurring themes.
 - In this case, the soldiers are...





- o abandoned by society
- o forgotten
- o wasting away,
- o dying a slow death
- they are unable to even serve their purpose of fighting and they face a slow and needless death which emphasizes Owen's general view of war: it is pointless

OWEN'S LANDSCAPES

The landscapes described in Owen's poems and letters, invariably unlocalised in place or time, recreate the phenomenon of war as literal and metaphorical no man's land:

- 'It's like the eternal place of gnashing of teeth; the Slough of Despond could not be contained in one of its crater-holes; the fire of Sodom and Gomorrah could not light a candle to it – to find the way to Babylon the Fallen... No Man's Land under snow is like the face of the moon, chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode of madness (Letter 481)'

OWEN'S LANGUAGE

Owen believed that the many available traditions of poetic language had been rendered impotent by the war or cheapened by their use in popular patriotic poetry

- On occasion, he even expressed a distrust in all forms of heightened poetry
 - o Owen can be found to align himself with what he felt to be a more democratic form of poetic language and even to have experimented with ways of suppressing his own voice entirely by adopting a more colloquial register
 - Like Wordsworth, he wanted to promote the language of common humanity

Owen uses language, structure and form to help the reader empathise with what it is like to wait long days and long nights for action which never appears, only to be slowly killed by the harsh weather conditions. Throughout, we need to look for the poet's deliberate technique usage which makes us feel like the soldiers felt. Not only are the soldiers helpless, but their suffering is pointless and futile. With this in mind, the title could actually refer to the exposure of the truth, for the British public, of the reality of war.

STRUCTURE: PARARHyme





Pararhyme arises when two end-of-line words are identical in consonant sounds both before and after different vowel sounds:

- 'knife us / nervous', 'faces / fusses', 'silent / salient'
 - o The constant use of this device creates a permanent nervous edginess: its usage recalls the pleasures of closure inhering in full rhyme, even while such fulfilment of pararhyme

This is a parahrhymed poem

- Perhaps the imperfection in the rhyme scheme represents Owen's belief in suppressing the heightened style of patriotic poetry, in order to promote the language of common humanity
 - o The imperfection in the rhyme scheme keeps the poem common, rather than heightened, yet maintains the plays rhythmical qualities that he establishes through careful use of language, such as alliteration
 - 'Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.
Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow,
With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew,
We watch them wandering up and down the wind's nonchalance,
But nothing happens.'

STRUCTURE: CONTRAST

Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces—
We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed,
Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,
Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses.
—Is it that we are dying?

Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed
With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;
For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;
Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed,—
We turn back to our dying.

- The contrasting richness in stanzas five and six illustrates a form of other-worldly hallucination in which the soldiers recall images of home, but those images have become nightmarishly corrupted in their sense of being alienated
 - o Home's 'shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed'

LANGUAGE: TEXTURE

This poem features textured language:

- 'merciless iced east winds that knife us...'
- 'streak the silence'





- 'rain soaks'
- 'Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces—'
 - o The use of alliteration, sibilance and fricatives not only intensify the soldiers' sense of isolation but also maintains the atmosphere of death's close proximity

LANGUAGE: A TRIBUTE TO JOHN KEATS?

The poem's use of heavy...

- Alliteration
- Assonance
- Patterned musicality
- Rich vocabulary ('snow-dazed... sun-dozed'; 'glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed / With crusted dark-red jewels')
 - o ... indicates a writer who owes an immense technical debt to Keats' odes.
 - The poem could almost be regarded as a disguised tribute to Keats
 - Its treatment of the soldiers' hallucination has a precedent in the mood of painful 'drowsy numbness' in Ode to a Nightingale
 - The very first line of Exposure – 'Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knive us...' - suggests a near-parodic rewriting of the opening of Ode to a Nightingale – 'My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains'
 - There is also a contrast between Keats' 'full-throated' nightingale and Owen's 'fussing blackbird'
 - o The above examples could be read as parodies of Romantic reverie as well as examples of the change in public mood, which renders Keats' fundamental ideal invalid.

Bibliography

Owen, Wilfred (2013-10-29T22:58:59). The Poems of Wilfred Owen (Wordsworth Poetry Library) (Kindle Locations 48-49). Wordsworth Editions Ltd. Kindle Edition.'

Owen, Wilfred (2013-10-29T22:58:59). The Poems of Wilfred Owen (Wordsworth Poetry Library) (Kindle Locations 79-88). Wordsworth Editions Ltd. Kindle Edition.

.

