



# A 'War Poet' or A 'Poet At War': Wilfred Owen and the Pity of War

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## Abstract

This article sets out to examine Wilfred Owen's war poems which showcase his vigorous philosophy on and against war. We contend that instead of considered only as "a war poet", Owen was more "a poet at war", better still, a poet against war. The terms are used in this paper to mean on the one hand that Owen was less a poet who took part in war, and more a poet who wars against war. Put differently, Owen does not just describe what he himself calls "The pity of war" with the gruesome and excruciating experiences of soldiers in combat, but he also uses firsthand experience on the battlefield (having been a soldier himself) to call for an end to war. In the preface to his poems he writes that "The poetry is in the pity". His descriptions of war experiences are so profound that they discourage any possibility of war, thus leaving the human race with one option namely, negotiation and peaceful resolution of conflicts by those he calls "better men" who in the future will profoundly be involved in what he calls "greater wars".

**Keywords:** Owen, war, pity, conflicts, negotiation, philosophy

## 1. Introduction

Between 1950, when the first critical and scholarly article on Wilfred Owen was published (Dennis Welland, 1950), to date (Anderson D. Araujo, 2014), there has been a plethora of critical opinions about Owen's poetic language, his biography, relations with other war poets and women, as well as his idea of war. Early criticism on Wilfred Owen is based on the language, rhythm and meter of his poetry (Welland 1950; Masson 1955, Kerr, 1992). Other critics have examined Owen's poetry by comparing him with other poets (Brophy, 1971; Stallworthy, 1974; Hibberd, 1979; Pittock, 1998; Najarian, 2001). Individual poems have also been examined (Gose, 1961) as well as relations between Owen's poetry and Bible studies (Bartel, 1972). The most recent critical opinion on him is by Dr. Mathew Barry entitled *Wilfred Owen: The Old Lie* (2014) which reveals what he terms the "Dark Secrets of a Doomed Youth" published for *The Mail on Sunday* on 14 November, 2014. Barry ascertains that "In his life Owen was never quite what he seemed, in death he never seemed quite what he had been". His conclusion is an emanation from a study of Owen's life during the First World War drawn especially from the War Office records and the Manchester Regimental Battalion War Diary covering Owen's period of service in France, including Owen's letters. He considers Owen as one who exaggeratedly malingered and who never really fought on the battlefield, projects him as a nauseating homosexual and misogynist who actively participated in the war only in the last days and was missing in action soonest. As he puts it,

*Back on the battlefield, Owen resolved to embrace the opportunity to redeem himself. He acquitted himself bravely, won a Military Cross and a month later died leading his men in one of the last actions of the Great War. It may have been a belated redemption, but in classic tragi-elegiac fashion, it was a fitting finale.*

What Barry insinuates in the quotation above is that Owen never really was a soldier of war given that he did not fight many battles even if he witnessed, first hand, the devastating effects of war. He also ascertains that the only time Owen led a regiment and participated in the war was in the last days of the war and was killed shortly before the armistice.

## 2. Research Questions

A number of research questions can be asked related to the subject in question. Does Owen's rare participation in war mean that he was less a soldier? What was his motive for joining the British army? What is in his poems that reveal the true nature of war? Does Owen's description and sometimes journalistic narrations of specific incidents in the war reveal his hatred for war? Is his non-active participation in combat not a revelation of his penchant for peace and reconciliation? Are his poems clear examples of a poet-soldier for whom war was unnecessary? Is war completely negative by Owen's reading? The answers to these and many other questions will unveil Owen's philosophy of war. The point we are anxious to make here is that even if Owen always feigned an illness to avoid duty, he was a soldier, lived the experiences of a soldier and died as one, courageously or not. Another relevant issue is that feigning an illness and escaping from battle are doubtless indications of Owen's hatred for war as well as his 'soldierlessness', that is, lack

of the courage of a soldier, yet this reveals his spoken and written choice of peace and reconciliation as opposed to war and destruction.

### 3. Hypothetical Statements and Methodology

Of all critical opinions about Wilfred Owen as a poet, soldier and person, there is no profound study of Owen's poetry which, approached from its textuality and historical-biographical and moral-philosophical perspectives, reveals him not only as a poet of war, but also and more importantly too, as a poet against war and the horror of it. This study therefore articulates Owen's philosophy of war through an in-depth study of his war poems. We also read through the letters to his mother while at the warfront to unearth his vision of war and mission as a war poet at war against war. We therefore surmise that Owen does not just describe what he himself calls "The pity of war" with the harrowing and excruciating experiences of soldiers in combat, but he also uses this firsthand experience on the battlefield to call for an end to war. His descriptions of war experiences are so profound as to discourage any possibility of encouraging war, thus leaving one with one option, negotiation and peaceful resolution of conflicts by those he calls "better men" ('The Next War' line 12) and what he calls "greater wars" (line 13).<sup>i</sup>

To arrive at a conclusion about Owen's philosophy of war, we shall proceed with a profound analysis of his poems of war in order to exhume what he calls 'The pity of war'. We shall then look at those poems that call for an end to war and the resolution of conflicts through negotiation. Finally we shall state, clearly, what Owen thinks about war.

### 4. The Dehumanisation of War or 'The Pity War Distils'

In the fragment "Cramped in that Funnelled Hole" (109) Wilfred Owen describes war as the "mouths of Hell" (line 5). Tadeusz Slawek in "Dark Pits of War: Wilfred Owen's Poetry and the Hermeneutics of War" opines that War performs the two functions naturally attributed to the mouth, namely that it speaks (produces, shapes, brings to light, forms) and it swallows (devours, digests, grinds and annihilates). In his book, *The Pity of War*, Niall Ferguson argues that the human atrocity known as the Great War was entirely England's fault. According to him, Britain entered into war based on naïve assumptions of German aims and that England's entry into the war transformed a Continental conflict into a world war, which they then badly mishandled, necessitating American involvement. He further contends that the war was not inevitable, but rather the result of the mistaken decisions of individuals who would later claim to have been in the grip of huge impersonal forces (22).

That the war was wicked, horrific and inhuman is memorialized, in part, by some cold historical statistics but also by the poetry of men like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Ferguson asserts that more British soldiers were killed in the first day of the Battle of the Somme than Americans in the Vietnam War and that the total British fatalities in that single battle—some 420,000—exceeds the entire American fatalities for both World Wars. And yet, he concludes that while the war itself was a disastrous folly, the great majority of men who fought it did so with enthusiasm (24). This ties in squarely with Owen's critique against war and war-mongers. Wilfred Owen's poetry is a scathing revelation of the horrors of war with the harrowing experiences of soldiers in the warfront. This is what in the poem "Strange Meeting" he calls "The pity of war, the pity war distilled" (line 25), which pity is the direct consequence of "the truth untold" (line 24) namely that in a war situation, "foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were" (line 39) referring to the physical and mental torture and traumas of soldiers in combat. A number of his poems reveal the horror and dehumanisation caused by war. 'Futility', 'The Dead Beat', 'Dulce et Decorum Est', "Mental Cases" and 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' are just some of the poems that reveal Owen's distrust of war and all traditional ideologies that have kept soldiers fighting. Owen informs that mistrust with a passion of personal engagement, with the direct experience of pain and other sophisticated horrors of warfare which cannot be conveyed by the conventional literary language.

The poem "Futility", as its title clearly indicates, brings out both the notion of the futility of war and questions the *raison d'être* of creation. Arthur E. Lane (1972) asserts that in the poem, there is "a poetic transformation of death... into death as the absurd and ultimate denial of the value of life" (59). The poem describes the death of the soldier while "asleep", the actual fact of his dying, as well as the fact of his death. According to Owen, war violates nature and the natural processes of birth. The soldier in the poem cannot be awoken by the sun, the giver of life, which once awoke him up to go and cultivate unsown fields. The sun "wakes the seeds" as well as "a cold star" yet it cannot wake the soldier in question though he is "full-nerved" that is, robust and muscular. The rhetorical questions of the last stanza point to the futility of existence;

*Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,  
Full-nerved, -still warm, -too hard to stir?  
Was it for this the clay grew tall?  
-O what made fatuous sunbeams toil  
To break earth's sleep at all?*

The speaker questions whether the body grows at one time and up to a certain point only to become lifeless, cold, useless and inactive. If this is so, then why does the sun foolishly waste its beams to wake the earth, instead of leaving it in perpetual sleep and night? The questions express the desperation of the poet, which according to Lane (59) comes close to madness in the childlike simplicity of the appeal "Think how it wakes the seeds,-" (line 8). In other words, the inability of the sun to wake the soldier, give him life and make him strong puts to question the very essence of creation

and life. This is conveyed by the hope the speaker initially places on the sun as a life-giving force by personifying it as "The kind old sun..." (Line 7) The imagery regarding the sun contrasts its vitality and warmth with its ultimate inability to wake a dead one. If the sun, biblically, animated a fully-formed man (the Biblical "clay" of Adam), how comes that it cannot do anything for the soldier. This loss of one precious life makes the speaker bitterly wonder why "the fatuous sunbeams toil / To break earth's sleep at all". (Line 13) Death has made a mockery of creation. Gertrude M. White (1972) writes that "in violating their own human nature, in reversing by violence the natural order, men alienate themselves from Nature herself." What this means is that war is not the natural order of things. By engaging in war, man reverses Nature (as in the Garden of Eden before the Original Sin) itself. War dehumanises and makes man less than clay and the inertness of the soldier is synonymous with man's inability to survive in a war situation.

Like "Futility", "Anthem for Doomed Youth", "Dulce et Decorum Est", "Mental Cases" and "The Dead Beat" are also scathing revelations of the horror of war. The imageries used by the poet reveal the consequences of war as well as the physical and mental devastation on the soldiers in particular and on society as a whole. The diction portrays the helplessness and hopelessness of the soldiers at war. It also conveys in vivid terms the fact that war reverses all moral and civilized values thus transforming the soldiers into mean elements of nature. The description of the soldier in "The Dead-Beat", for instance, is a tacit pathetic portrayal of the psychological effects of war on soldiers and their bestial transformation. The soldier is said to have "dropped, more sullenly than wearily" (line 1). In this sudden drunken collapse out of exhaustion, he is compared to "a cod" and to "meat", his vision is blurred and he seems to have lost all his senses given that he "Didn't appear to know a war was on," (line 5). "Cod" and "meat" are indicative of his helplessness, yet in his desperate situation he threatens to kill his enemies. He is mentally deranged, a situation stressed by the fact that he feels his hands are tied when in fact nobody is holding him. "The pity of it" is that no one takes the absolutely exhausted soldier seriously. The other soldiers, certainly also mentally affected by the war, think he is "malingering". They have lost all human values of mercy, pity, peace and love. They accuse him of thinking of his uncles back home and "his brave young wife" whom they say is "getting her fun/ In some new home, improved materially" (lines 12-13). The inhuman treatment given the soldier by his colleagues is further exacerbated by the announcement of his death. A drunken military doctor jubilantly announces his death in these words- "That scum you sent last night soon died. Hooray" (line 19). The worthless persons in the poem are more the other soldiers and the doctor than the wounded and exhausted soldier. The poem denotes the inhumanity of soldiers in the warfront, the absence of sympathy, the casual and callous treatment soldiers give to a suffering colleague and the complete and total reversal of values in a warfront.

The same thematic punch line is more vividly expressed in "Anthem for Doomed Youth", "Mental Cases" and in "Dulce et Decorum Est". In the last poem Owen ignores and strongly opposes the popular song that it was sweet and fitting to die for one's fatherland or country. His force of argument comes from the effects of the argument of force on the battlefield, having witnessed the pains, woes, worries, blues and pathetic death of soldiers in combat. The poem narrates a particular gas bombing experience where soldiers "bent double, like old beggars under sacks", "knock-kneed", "coughing like hags", pass through "sludge" "trudge", "march asleep", having "lost their boots", "limped on, blood-shod", "lame", "blind", "Drunk with fatigue", and "death" are gassed with "Five-Nines" (a kind of gas shell, 5.9 calibre explosive shells). The above diction reveals the physical and mental state of the soldiers. They are not only completely exhausted but they are equally helpless and senseless. They are in a very pathetic physical state that in itself speaks of the terrible mental experiences they have witnessed in combat. Araujo (2014) writes that Owen's poem is one of the most scathing indictments of the war. This is true given that the poem's title is an ironic portrayal of the pity of war and the pity war distils as well as the distrusts of that traditional ideology that has kept soldiers fighting.

The pathetic and drastic situation of the soldiers is further compounded by the pandemonium provoked by the "Gas! Gas!" incident. The soldiers are taken unawares by gas from the enemy. In a desperate attempt to put on their gas masks, one of them is caught in "the misty panes and thick green light". This is the incident and experience that increases the pathos of the poem. The soldier in question, who is a microcosm of the macrocosm, a replica of all other soldiers, goes through untold pain and torture. The soldier in question "was yelling out and stumbling/ And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime..." He is "guttering, choking, drowning". Flung into a wagon to a safe harbour his "white eyes" were "writhing in his face". His face is described as "hanging" and compared to that of "a devil's sick of sin". At every "jolt" of the wagon, his blood comes "gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, / Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud / Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues".

Even a cursory reading of the poem makes it obvious that an indignant Owen strongly disagrees with Horace and vigorously challenges that misguided notion of personal and imperial glory or the ethos of martyrdom that Horace later came to be associated with, namely that it was sweet and fitting to die for one's country. The diction and imagery convey the terrifying, inhumane and horrific nature of war as well as the desperation of the soldiers. The word "blood-shod" is an indication that the soldiers have been on their feet for days without any rest. "Guttering", "choking", and "drowning" are words that indicate that the troops are suffering, in extreme pain and misery. The words are examples of cacophony, with harsh and discordant sounds mimetic of the harshness and horror of war. The imagery is graphic and nauseating. "If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood/ Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs/ Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud,"(21-23) captures the brutality with which many men are killed during the war. When the gas bomb is dropped, the compelling lines "someone still was yelling out and stumbling/ And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.../ He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning."(11-12, 16) indicate that men drowned helplessly in the toxic gasses. The graphic images are very disturbing but play a very effective role in the development of the poem. The

poem pictures the heartless and horrifying effects of war, thereby completely dispelling Horace's praise to soldiers in combat.

In "Mental Cases" and "Anthem for Doomed Youth", the imagery is not only graphic and nauseating but it is also chilling and undoubtedly repellent. "Mental Cases" describes war-torn men suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, otherwise known as shell shock. Owen based the poem on his experience at Craiglockhart Military Hospital, near Edinburgh, where he was invalided in the summer of 1917, suffering from shell shock. The images speak volumes of the senselessness of war. The physical and mental symptoms the shell shocked soldiers in the poem exhibit after their participation in war is accentuated: they "sit" and "rock", their teeth bared (4) with tongues hanging out whilst their 'jaws...slob their relish' (3) their hands absently 'plucking' and 'snatching' (25, 27). They are "purgatorial shadows" (2). Owen captures the damage done to the minds of those he calls "these things". This is because they have been rendered inhuman. They have lost every sense of being. According to Jim Clark (2014) their memories are filled with people they have witnessed killed or people they killed themselves. It gives some visuals such as "Treading blood from lungs that had once loved laughter" (14) and "Batter of guns, shatter of flying muscles" (16), with "eyeballs" that "shrink tormented / Back into their brains" (19-20). For these men, "Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes blood-black; / Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh" (21-22). These are powerful mental images of chaos and suffering, of dehumanised individuals, senseless and useless. All we can have for them is pity as they have become crazy and therefore abnormal. This is also very poignant in "Disabled", another anti-war poem of Owen. It is a poem with moving and powerful images that invoke familiar disability tropes of asexuality, helplessness and hopelessness. The maimed soldier in this poem is an emblematic figure, a monument to Owen's hatred of war. Owen impresses upon the reader the soldier's isolation, desolation and loneliness. He has no-one with him, he has no prospects, he will never be a husband or father, the only gaze he will attract will be one of pity or embarrassment having lost all his legs and arms in battle. Sitting "in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark," shivering, "legless" and dressed "in his ghastly suit of grey," "sewn short at elbow", (1-3) the maimed soldier's situation is pathetic and sorrowful. It is a microcosmic portrayal of what all other disabled soldiers encounter at the macrocosmic level. The sense of loss and despair which the poem expresses is further exacerbated and rendered tragically appalling by the fact that before the soldier received his injuries, his life had been full of excitement, promise, and hope:

*About this time Town used to swing so gay  
When glow-lamps budded in the light blue trees  
And girls glanced lovelier as the air grew dim,  
In the old times, before he threw away his knees.*

(lines 7-10)

"Gay", "glow-lamps", "light blue trees" the loveliness of the glances of girls are all metaphors of his exciting and fulfilling life before "he threw away his knees". In his disabled situation, enforced celibacy will now be the soldier's lot, and if anyone does look at him at all, it will only be as an object of pity. This impression is reinforced in the final lines of the poem given that all the things that made his life fulfilling and enjoyable are irretrievably lost. By pathetically depicting the impoverished situation of the disabled soldier, Owen is bringing to the limelight the truth untold, the truth that war is not good, that it dehumanises and therefore must be stopped or better still, not started at all because it is abominable and abnormal.

Such abnormality is further reiterated in "Anthem for Doomed Youth". The doomed youth can be compared to the shell shock soldiers in "Mental Cases". The difference is that while those in the latter poem are dead-alive, those in the former are dead even in their death. What this means is that "these who die as cattle" (1) do not have the possibility of any decent burial. What announces their death is "the monstrous anger of the guns" (2) and the "stuttering rifles' rapid rattle" (3). Rivers (2009) holds that:

*The measured, elegiac tone of 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' seems; initially, to distinguish the poem from Owen's more sardonic pieces; a perfect illustration of his statement found in the draft Preface of his unpublished verses that: "The poetry is in the pity. (409).*

The poetry is in fact in the pity. The rapidity with which soldiers are killed is heightened by frightful images of gunshots. The soldiers are likened to "cattle", an indication of their status as animals. "Monstrous anger of the guns", "stuttering rifles' rapid rattle" are mimetic of the uncountable number of bullets coming out of guns personified as "monstrous" and which indicate mass and uncontrolled killing. In the war front, the "orison" of the soldiers is "hasty" because they are not given any burial at all. The values are devalued. The soldiers are buried without the ringing of neither church bells nor prayers or mourning. These are replaced by "the choirs,-/ The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;" (6, 7). The poet has replaced the normal religious rituals with new metaphoric symbolic materials for the funeral programme. There is no need for candles. The candles are replaced by the glimmering tears in the eyes of beloveds. Their glimmering tears become the candles for the funeral services. The flowers come from the tenderness of patient minds. These metaphorical symbolic materials like the sad voice, the mourning, the pale expressions, patient minds and brightness of the eyes will no longer come to use, because they had been used to conduct the funeral of the soldier the very day he had decided to leave normal life and chosen to live in the battlefield and die. When the poet remembers today, he feels that the shining in the eyes or sad girls who said goodbye to the foolish soldiers was the

funeral candle for them that very day. Their death was a foregone conclusion, nothing shocking; that is why the people are patient. What is left now is for the guns and bombs to perform (or celebrate) the funeral of the soldiers who die as cattle.

From the above discussion of representative poems by Owen, it is clear that his philosophy of war is based on the dehumanisation of war and its physical and psychological effects on the soldiers and their families. The breath-taking and hair-stretching experiences of the soldiers, to wit, the way they are killed, in fact, slaughtered as well as their stupidity, so to say, of accepting to fight in the first place, is intentionally and overtly unleashed by the poet to prove that war is not to be encouraged for whatever reasons. It is in this perspective that he seeks alternative ways of solving conflicts that might lead to open and deadly confrontations in which individuals and nations as a whole loose.

### 5. The Pity is in the Letters

Wilfred Owen's letters, like his war poems, perhaps even more than his poems, reveal the pity of war. The letters describe in greater detail and in a prosaic language the suffering, misery, torture, desperation, helplessness and the hopelessness of soldiers in the war front. They are not only his personal experiences but they also narrate the experiences of other soldiers as well as describe their purgatorial countenances and conditions at the warfront. The pity of the war is, indeed, also in the letters. Owen wrote several letters to different people and family. In this section we pore over a few letters to his mother, Susan Owen, to his brother, Harold and general letters to the whole family among others.

It was customary for soldiers to write back home from the warfront. Given that most of the letters were censored, many of the soldiers did not have the truth revealed to their families. The expository directness of Owen's letters and the description and narration of the pathetic situations in the warfront brought out in the letters indicate that had they not been censored, I imagine, even if I cannot lay claim to that, the stories embedded in them would have been even more pathetic. The letters are sometimes shocking, at others educative but for the most part scathing revelations of what goes on in the warfront.

In 1914, even before he was enlisted, Owen visited a hospital in Bordeaux, France, at which casualties had just arrived from the front. Lewis (1963) records that in that hospital Owen "witnessed operations being performed without anaesthetics" (20). On September 23, he wrote to his brother Harold:

*One poor devil had his shin-bone crushed by a gun-carriage wheel, and the doctor had to twist it about and push it like a piston to get out the pus. Another had a hole right through the knee....another had a head into which a ball had entered and come out again... (20)*

The extract above is a shocking revelation of the treatment of soldiers. Owen's tone is ruthless and his observation is sharp. According to Lewis, this is a kind of premonition of "the unrelenting factual truthfulness" (20) found in Owen's war poems. It is this truthfulness that informs the pity of war and the need to avoid wars and conflicts. Owen here shows a great interest in other people's plight and his talent for sketching this plight is formidable. This talent reaches its apex when he joins the Manchester Regiment on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1916. At the Etaples transit camp on his way to the front on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1917 Owen, according to Robert Wohl "was introduced almost immediately to the worst the war had to offer" (102). He wrote to his mother describing the state of the soldiers.

*On all the officers' faces there is a harassed look that I have never seen before, and which in England never will be seen...out of jails. The men are just...expressionless lumps. (21)*

His letters read like a catalogue of horrors. The "harassed look" of the soldiers and their "expressionless" countenance are external manifestations of their internal dynamics. They have been utterly transformed by the horrors of war to the extent that they seem not to be aware of where they are and what is happening around them. The "look" of the soldiers cannot be compared to anything else in the streets of England but implicitly can be found on the faces of hardened criminals in jail awaiting execution. What this means is that the soldiers are programmed for death.

Lewis contends that the warfront comprised "a desolate landscape of trenches, craters, barbed wire, ruined buildings, splintered trees, mud, the corpses of animals and men" (22). It is this ubiquitous landscape that Owen describes in a letter back home on 4<sup>th</sup> February, 1917.

*"... We were marooned on a frozen desert. There is not a sign of life on the horizon and a thousand signs of death. Not a blade of grass, not an insect; once or twice a day the shadow of a big hawk, scenting carrion. I suppose I can endure cold, and fatigue, and the face-to-face death, as well as another; but extra for me there is the universal pervasion of Ugliness. Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language and nothing but foul, even from one's own mouth (for all are devil-ridden), everything unnatural, broken, blasted, the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable (sic) bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth..."(22)*

According to Owen, this is the epitome of despair, an omnipresent ghastliness that sapped not only his own spirit but that of other soldiers. The landscape surpasses all the imagined horrors of Dante's *Inferno*. The absence of a "sign of

life”, “blade of grass” “insect” contrasted with the presence of “a thousand signs of death”, “the shadow of a big hawk”, the “vile voices”, the “unburial bodies” and other powerfully pathetic images speak of the battlefield as hell and the soldiers as its inhabitants. This experience is what Owen reveals in the fragment ‘Cramped in that Funnelled Hole’. He describes the nightmare predicament of lying exposed on a blasted landscape. He describes a deserted battlefield where the jagged edges of shell-craters appear as wicked teeth, the mud in the bottom as phlegm caught in the throat. His letter of February 1917 captures, as possibly no other fragment of war experience has done, the trauma of isolation in a man-made desert.

The few letters cited above are sterling revelations of the horror of war and combat. Wilfred Owen arrives at the conclusion that all the carnage caused by soldiers fighting is unnecessary. The exposure of the execrable situation of soldiers on the battlefield is intended to raise awareness on the need for peaceful resolution of conflicts. This explains why he bore a grudge against Ruskin for warning “us so feebly against war” and in one of his last letters to his family on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1917 while in hospital as a victim of neurasthenia, he preaches “Passivity at any price!”, and takes Christ as an example. He writes:

*Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed,  
but do not kill...Christ is literally in no man's land. There men often hear his voice. Greater  
love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life—for a friend (22)*

Aside from any ideological motive, Owen calls upon the witnesses of such gruesome and pathetic experiences on the battlefield to condemn utterly the belligerence that brought about war. In seeking the truth, he exposes the bitter reality of violence in order to call for nonviolence as Christ did.

### 6. The Next War: Negotiation and Resolution of Conflicts

Owen’s conclusion of his poem entitled “The Next War” is a summation of the fallacy of combat. This is expressed in the consciousness of a soldier who knows that, someday, wars and other conflicts provoked by egoistic nationalistic tendencies in the name of patriotism will eventually be replaced by “better men” (12) who will fight “greater wars” (13) and each of the “proud fighter(s)” will “brag” knowing that “He wars on Death-for lives; not men-for flags” (14). He writes:

*Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!  
We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.  
No soldier's paid to kick against His powers.  
We laughed, -knowing that better men would come,  
And greater wars: when each proud fighter brags  
He wars on Death, for lives; not men, for flags. (9-14)*

The quotation above expresses Owen’s strong believe in reconciliation and negotiations by future leaders whose interest will be in the amicable resolution of conflicts. “Greater wars” refers to the different meetings that will be held in order to avert any possibility of war. The “proud fighter” refers to the negotiators who will stage a more civilized war against war considered here as “death” in order to save lives and not in vain patriotic protection and defence of “flags” or nations. The fundamental question is why or what men are really fighting for. Are “flags” worth the sacrifice of lives? The answers to these questions do not only lie in the devastating effects of war on the soldiers that the poet earlier enounces in the poem, but also on the denunciation of war-mongers and the destructive nature of war as in “Strange Meeting”. The speaker, in “Strange Meeting”, having escaped from battle enters an underground passage, a “profound dull tunnel” where he finds many depressed soldiers, some sleeping or too deep “in thought or death” to notice his presence there. The soldiers are exhausted and have gone through traumatising experiences. In that “sullen” tunnel, described by Owen as “Hell”, the speaker meets a “strange friend” on whose “face was grained” “a thousand pains” (11). Both men speak of “the pity of war”, “the hopelessness”, “the undone years” and how war mocks time by retarding progress and destroying everything. The two enemy friends acknowledge the fact that although warmongers are conscious of the devastating effects of war especially the fact that “Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were” (39) “None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.”(29) The foreheads of men that bleed are a metaphor for the psychological pain and various forms of mental torture. Men who are not physically harmed are mentally tortured.

The strange meeting of the two soldiers and their pathetic conversation is symbolic of the negotiation and reconciliation that should normally prevail between and among nations. It is Owen’s way of pressing for dialogue in matters of conflict because in a war situation, no one wins, everyone loses. The last verse line “Let us sleep now...” (44) is highly symbolic, pregnant with meaning and indeed carries the message of the poem, namely that peaceful negotiation, dialogue and reconciliation among enemies or conflicting parties will spare the world of the horror of war. This last verse line may suggest a work unfinished but at least the important message is clear namely that mankind must seek reconciliation and "the truth untold" embrace pity and the greater love. The two soldiers symbolise warring nations on the negotiation table.

## 7. Conclusion

We set out in this study to show that Wilfred Owen is a war poet, no doubt, but that he is more a poet at war with war and warmongers. Through his poetry and letters Owen does two things. First, he penetratingly reveals the dehumanisation of war by showing both the mental or psychological and physically deforming effects of war on the individual as well as to the society as a whole. Secondly, Owen proposes solutions for humanity as a whole to shun war and resort to peaceful resolution of conflicts. Owen's poetic voice is one of protest. Ted Hughes (2002) asserts that through his poetry Owen:

“Wanted to oppose the propagandists in England with a propaganda of a finally more powerful kind. He set himself to present the sufferings of the front line, with the youth and millions of deaths and smashed hopes of his whole generation behind him, as vividly and frighteningly as possible, not because they were piteous—in spite of all his misleading talk about “pity”—but because it was wrong, and the crime of fools who could not see because they would not feel. (4)

What they did not feel and, therefore, could not understand the profundity and vastness of its moral-psychological and corporal-physical devastation was war. They thus became Owen's enemy, the real enemy, that “Public Monster of Warmongering Insensibility at home” (5) to quote Hughes. Owen's poems are sharper weapons. They are at once vivid and sorrowful; the words are terrible and terrifying, with merciless photographs of the trenches and suffering of soldiers. Few poets could ever have written with such urgent, defined, practical purpose. And it is this attitude of managing a vital persuasion which perhaps explains his extraordinary detachment from the agony, his objectivity. Owen is not only saying that war is horrible, he is also saying that it is encouraged by man. His fundamental and well-defined suggestion is that war is what man has made of man and what is created by man can only be destroyed by man through a certain consciousness of its devastation thus the need for peaceful resolution of conflicts through negotiation. His larger aim was to acquaint his readers with pity, that emotion which he rightly thought could halt the dehumanizing process of modern warfare. That is Owen's philosophy—the practicality of which is urgent and now.

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#### Note

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<sup>i</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from the poems are taken from *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* edited with an Introduction and Notes by C. Day Lewis and with a Memoir by Edmund Blunden, New York: Chatto and Windus Ltd, 1963.