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Verses and Trenches: Wilfred Owen's Poetics of War

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INTRODUCTION

The end of the 19th century saw the birth of one of the most famous war poets that ever existed: Wilfred Owen. From an early age, Owen showed a strong interest in literature, thanks to the stimulating family context in which he grew up. Although his life was very busy at school and work, this did not prevent him from connecting with many authors who influenced him deeply.

Wilfred, however, was born at a particular moment in history. Despite the apparent calm, underneath there were hidden tensions that would later lead to the First World War. This event led to an important change in his poetic production. Through his new poems, he narrated the horrors, the agony, the anguish, the traumas, and the atrocities that he, like many others, had to endure because of the war. His works gave voice to the desperation of the soldiers who had to fight and try to live through the war.

This work has explored Wilfred's conception of war, giving prominence to the change that he had, from the idealization of the war to its rejection. This change of perspective led Wilfred to distance himself from those who had been his influences until then. Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth, were three important poets who, along with Romantic poetry, had shaped both Owen's thoughts and styles, reflecting a more idealized vision of the war. This new mindset was due, above all, to experiences that touched Wilfred deeply, such as his active participation in the war, the trauma that it entailed, the consequent hospitalization for shell shock and the newfound awareness that the war was neither heroic nor honourable, as many other poets, such as Rupert Brooke, had implied in their poems.

The aim of the thesis is, therefore, to examine how these factors contributed to the change in Wilfred's vision of war, leading to the transformation of his poetic production. To highlight this change of perspective, four of his poems were analyzed, both semantically and stylistically: Anthem for Doomed Youth, Dulce et Decorum Est, Mental Cases and Disabled. There is a theme that is central in these poetic compositions, and it is constantly repeated, the disillusionment. From being a poet who saw the war in an idealistic way, he finds himself immersed in battles that destroyed this romantic illusion.

These poems are not just words written down on paper; they are a reality that can

be felt. This realism will be expressed through the language chosen by the poet, violent, merciless, and meaningful, and through the heavy, harrowing, vivid, but most importantly, realistic imagery.

Thanks to the analysis of these masterpieces, it will be possible to understand the path created by Wilfred that led his poetry to be considered a real instrument of denunciation against the inhumanity and devastation of war. His poetry, in fact, was not only a means to tell his own agony and that of his comrades but became a real act of accusation against all those who continued to see, in war, glory and a strong patriotic duty. Between Owen and the other soldiers, not only a strong solidarity emerges, but also a deep sense of brotherhood, built on the shared experience of fear, desperation and pain. Ultimately, Wilfred was not just a simple narrator, he was a war poet and not only because he had lived and written during the war, but mainly because he managed, through the use of words, to give both meaning and form to pain.

This study will demonstrate that, despite the difficult context and adversities he had to endure, he still managed to find a space to create something meaningful. Notably, his new perspective will lead to the birth of a completely different poetry, both semantically and stylistically. The styles, the themes, the structure, the rhythm, are all elements that will change and that will have, unlike the pre-war poems, a totally negative connotation.

This thesis is divided into three chapters: the first provides the historical context of the First World War, giving particular emphasis on the situation in Great Britain. The second chapter explores Wilfred Owen's life, focusing on his educational and working career, and highlighting his pre-war poetic education. The third chapter explores the factors that changed his vision, leading to the transition from glorification to condemnation of war, with the analysis of four masterpieces.

CHAPTER I. BRITAIN IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

1.1 Britain between deaths and explosions

28 June 1914. On this day, the archduke Francesco Ferdinando was murdered by a Bosnian Serb student in Sarajevo. This caused the beginning of the World War I. Everything happened in a phase in which Austria-Hungary was in crisis and this incident made it feel threatened by Serbia. Supporting the Austro-Hungarian empire there was Germany which had the intention of becoming bigger and bigger through the expansion of its territory to be one of the strongest powers. But while Germany encouraged a war to be capable of asserting its superiority, Britain did not see the assassination with interest because it was dealing with a crisis due to Home Rule¹.

In 1914, however, everything changed, and the crisis spread and damaged not only Austria and Serbia, but also Germany, Russia, Great Britain, and France. To be specific, Austria-Hungary decided to issue an ultimatum to Serbia and within this there were conditions that could not be accepted. For this reason, Vienna had a good justification for declaring war on Serbia. That is why, on the 29th of July 1914, Austria began to bomb Belgrade, and this caused the beginning of what would be one of the worst conflicts in history. In that period Britain was an ally of Russia and France through a deal called the Triple Entente and although it attempted not to get involved in the war, on August 4, after a military training, Britain took the decision to declare war on Germany and, in London, when Big Ben tolled for 11 P.M, voices started singing ‘God Save the King’². The declaration of war had been made for a specific reason that was that the German country yearned for attacking France, but in order to do this the country had to pass through Belgium which was a neutral country and Great Britain, which had to defend Belgium’s neutrality according to the *Treaty of London* of 1839, not wanting this to be endangered and intimidated, at first it asked Germany to respect the country through some sort of ultimatum, but not receiving an answer, it decided to enter this European conflict. This declaration was accepted by most of British society, and this was showed by the fact that

¹ It is a movement which ensure autonomy for Ireland (“Home Rule”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2024)

² Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012, p. 94.

most citizens supported the involvement in the conflict and soon, ready to become soldiers and fight for their country, many men poured in the streets of the nation. Four days after declaring war, Britain helped France to support the German advance, through the sending, across the English Channel, of soldiers directly into the French country. Besides, significant was the BEF³, which was sent in the first weeks of August to help make the left flank of the allied army stronger. However, only on 23 August saw the deployment of the BEF, which was led by commander John French, in the first confrontation between the British and Germans. Despite Germany had a higher number of soldiers than Britain, the BEF was capable to defend itself in the best conceivable way. Nonetheless, the withdrawal of the BEF came soon due to the death of British troops and it withdrew southward from Mons, advancing towards the French border⁴. In fact, the retreat was strategic, conducted to arrange the defenses and delay the arrival of the German troops. Regardless of this powerful alliance, at the beginning of the war, the French and British soldiers were incapable to get the German enemy back. This meant that on 5 September, after a series of battles, the German soldiers managed to advance towards Paris by threatening it but thanks to the French soldiers, who demolished both bridges and railways lines behind them with the intention to delay the German advance⁵ and the help of British troops, the capital was saved. By now the conflict turned into a real war of movement and the battle of Ypres, between October and November, took hold. The British soldiers had to face the trench war and the German heavy artillery but, thanks to the means they had, they succeeded to make lose soldiers to Germany. Talking about the trenches, the life in these was heavy and tough and this is because British soldiers had to deal with mud, mice, diseases, cold, death, so in brief the conditions were inadequate. Unlike to the German trenches, the British ones were cold, wet, and unsuitable for living in decent environments. In all this, the soldiers who died were not buried immediately and therefore they remained close to the living soldiers who were still fighting so the smell in the air was that of decomposition. The soldiers lived in these conditions because Britain had always been convinced, from the beginning of the war, that this conflict would never have lasted this long and that consequently the troops would not have wanted to spend an extended period in the trenches.

³ British Expeditionary Force.

⁴ Martin Gilbert, *The First World War: A Complete History*, (English Edition), New York: Rosetta Books, 2014, p. 65.

⁵ Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars*, cit., p. 120.

With the beginning of the new year, life in the trenches was still complicated and 1915 was marked by increasingly harsh conditions. Bodies of mutilated soldiers, others already in decomposition and with the onset of winter the situation was progressively serious among mud, water and cold. The complexities, between battles and clashes, were more and more due to the fact that communication became more compound because of the lines that were suspended by the cannonades, and everything was so slow that many times, to get a message with new orders on the ground, it took many hours. An example of this was certainly the March 1915 battle of Neuve-Chapelle in which British soldiers decided to attack the German trenches but precisely because of this delay in communications, 12.847 British soldiers died⁶.

In April of that year, there was a notable and important change in the conflict which became a chemical warfare, and this was seen in the second battle of Ypres, where German soldiers choose to use a new weapon against the enemy, a special one, the chlorine gas. The consequences were unimaginable. This powerful weapon caused soldiers to suffocate, coughing until they died. As a result of this, the British and the French began to produce gas masks so they could defend themselves against these attacks. While trying to resolve the difficulties that the gas brought, they were attacked with a new armament that the Germans created which was the flamethrower, which devastated the British troops, and it was evident that the Germans were having extraordinary success in the war technology. The Germans, however, did not stop and indeed continued to win battles. They even managed to bomb London on May 31st. This event shocked not only the population but also the soldiers who had returned from the front and that until then they had thought that war would always concern distant lands.⁷

In September 1915, Britain was preparing for the Loos Offensive, one of the largest British offensives. For the very first time, British troops moved around 5.000 barrels of chlorine gas to the front, thanks to the British communication trenches that were zig-zag and 3½ miles long⁸. Unfortunately, the plan did not work because the gas did not spread around efficiently, due to the wind that in certain areas carried it away, and in others brought the gas back to the British trenches. Although the British had more soldiers than the enemy, the Germans protected themselves: the credit for this was given to the

⁶ Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars*, cit., p. 138.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁸ Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars*, cit., p. 163.

use of war machines and trenches which had previously been reinforced. The Loos Offensive turned out to be a total tragedy because the gas, that was considered the perfect weapon to prevail over the Germans, has not been functional and efficacious in succeeding above all in decreasing the defense of the opponent, and for this reason the conflict resulted in the deaths of more than 61.000 soldiers⁹.

1915 was a year which stood out because it was marked by painful and countless losses but 1916 was no less because it opened with new clashes, including one of the most disastrous battles on the western front, the battle of the Somme, in which the entire support of France was seen. The main aim was to help France because in that period Verdun was and was continuing to be hit by Germany. The battle began in July, on the first day of the month, and for the first day of the attack alone, there were thirty-one pages explaining what needed to be done and how to prepare. According to this plan, the British troops would be able to succeed in destroying and overcoming the German by launching a massive infantry attack, in an attempt to establish the circumstances where cavalry could advance¹⁰. Unfortunately, the plan, which was one of the best, never managed to be utterly secret and this was seen, in the concrete, in the several signals that the Germans sent, verifying the fact that they knew how they were preparing. Initially, to move forward, the British detonated a series of mines under the German lines¹¹ and when they managed to do so, they began to move with a large load of equipment that included rifles, grenades, and gas masks. The real assault occurred on 1 July, when British soldiers attacked heavily the German trenches without realizing that on the other side, along the river Somme, the Germans constructed a strong resistance and therefore this led to the loss of several British soldiers who died due to the German machine guns. The loss of the battle showed that the British troops were still too attached to traditional strategies, and this was seen in the fact, for instance, that the attacking troops could not assist their wounded comrades but to leave them¹² and this was not acceptable for this type of war. Although the battle was a failure, it was remembered for the bravery, strength and sacrifice those British soldiers put into fighting¹³. The lack of success in this battle and the loss of many lives it entailed, let the

⁹ Ibid., p. 166.

¹⁰ Martin Gilbert, *The First World War*, cit., p. 241.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 241.

¹² Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars*, cit., p. 207.

¹³ Martin Gilbert, *The First World War*, cit., p. 244

population split into two. On the one hand there were people who perceived in the war something patriotic, while on the other hand the feeling was quite different because people were in fact losing confidence towards those who had the command of their own troops¹⁴.

1917 brought great surprises, including the entry of the United States into the conflict: this marked their first participation in a European conflict by their proclaiming war on Germany on April 7 and offering their contribution and support to Great Britain. All this was the consequence of the sinking of three American merchant ships provoked by Germany. 1917 saw a remarkable battle on the horizon, that of Passchendaele. The objective of this battle was to gain tactical territory, to defeat the Germans more easily. However, Britain had many complications because they were fighting in a land, Belgium, which had poor conditions because of the rain which led to the formation of a lot of mire, so many soldiers ended up drowning in the holes created by the bombing. Once again, the battle was a failure for the British, but it made clear that the British would never give up.

In 1918, the war was about to conclude, and the British country had to face a financial hardship. In fact, British-war-related spending had reached 70 percent of the gross national product and only huge loans made this possible¹⁵. 1918 was marked by an offensive, the so-called Spring Offensive, which was conducted on 21 March by Germany. The Germans launched this offensive because, they feared that the new allied forces might bring a change to the war. So, the German soldiers assaulted first. There were two objectives: the necessity to separate the British army from the French one and the intention to trap the enemy army with the English Channel behind them¹⁶. Despite this, the British troops, together with the American soldiers, triumphed over the enemy and this produced the withdrawal of the Germans. The following months saw Germany attempted to negotiate a peace with the allies, but the US president, Woodrow Wilson, was strongly convinced that a peace should not be negotiated with conditions. As a result, Germany dealt with its own decline and the armistice was signed on 11 November 1918 and after five years the war ended.

¹⁴ Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars*, cit., p. 204.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

¹⁶ Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars*, cit., p. 318.

Before the First World War, international trade was dominated by Britain. Notwithstanding this, there was a country on the horizon that was becoming increasingly industrialized, and it was Germany. This country, in fact, was considered a competitor for the simple reason that its profitability had grown to the point that it had managed to surpass Britain. Looking at the technological level, Great Britain saw its success in the employment of new military technologies. One striking example that can be mentioned is the advancement of aviation. In fact, Britain was one of the first countries that, rather than using aircraft for reconnaissance, utilized them to protect themselves from enemy bombs. Besides, during the conflict, tanks developed increasingly, and Britain began to use them to get past the defense of the German trenches. Although Britain was having great success in the technological field, the economic one, however, was characterized by some complications. In that period, Great Britain had to figure out a solution to one of the most serious issues of that time, namely both the scarcity of food and consumer goods. For this reason, rationing policies were introduced which had the intention of reducing or at least containing and moderating the use of foods such as sugar and meat. And while the war continued and for many countries ammunition ran out, Britain managed to produce a considerable quantity of it, and additionally equipment and supplies in general for the front and the country asked for help from its colonies to collect resources and manpower as a means to support the war effort. Through the war, it is particularly important to highlight that Great Britain was also a great and significant ally for France and Russia because it gave a huge help to these two countries by providing them with ammunition and in general war material.

But Great Britain was also made of people, in particular women who, dealt with many difficulties, while simultaneously an improvement in their social position. Women began to fill a crucial role in society, offering great support and service during the First World War. More precisely, their image was used in British propaganda: personifications of Liberty, Victory and Justice, each meant to align these traits with the righteousness of the nation's cause¹⁷. As a result of this, women were asked to get involved in the wartime effort and to safeguard the morale of soldiers. In all this, they were responsible for working at home to help and educate the children and they also had to commit to jobs in which they were not paid. In wartime, they were obviously encouraged to save food. In

¹⁷ Susan R. Grayzel, *Women and The First World War*, London: Routledge, 2023, p. 11.

the images that were used for propaganda, the women had the purpose to encourage the enlistment of new soldiers¹⁸. To do this, various methods were used, one of them was the so-called ‘white feather campaign’, in which women expected to convince men to enlist and to make them feel ashamed of not having done so yet by giving them a white feather as a representation of fearfulness¹⁹. In particular instances, the objective of the propaganda was to make men believe that the fact that they had not yet enlisted meant that they were not worthy of women’s love. Another relevant method of recruiting soldiers was the “separation allowances” which provided help to the families of the soldiers through payments so that the soldiers could go to war without having to worry about their wives and children. One restriction to these checks was that if the wives were unfaithful to their husband or had questionable and inappropriate attitudes compared with those they should hold, they were exempt from receiving these kinds of benefits. But if, on the one hand, there was this limit, on the other hand one positive factor that women had received, thanks to this technique, it was the possibility of being able to control, for the first time, their own money, having the free choice to use it as they wanted without giving an account to anyone. Having said that, however, it was not completely true that they had no one to account for their choices because there was always control of the state to which they were subject. In fact, the government had the assignment of reviewing both the use of this money and the behavior of women. Regardless of this, with the uninterrupted development of the war which brought inflation and the economic crisis to the country, the separation allowances had no extended future and therefore they were no longer appropriate enough to support families. However, while the conflict was going on, women, at a work level, began to work and provide their working capacity in jobs that saw them excluded until that moment, and the reason for this was that the men were no longer present because they were at the front fighting. Thence, women put their efforts and energy into different jobs and, for various reasons, such as an intense sense of duty to their country. Others needed money because they were no longer gaining their husbands’ salary due to the war, and they were the ones who had to support the family. Many women were working in factories and industries, but many more also started working in agriculture and forestry, but beyond everything women started to work in the

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

ammunitions factories. But working in this type of factory was not easy because while they were allowed to earn a much higher wage than normal, they were put in danger due to contact with dangerous chemicals such as the TNT²⁰ chemicals responsible for jaundice, with the ‘canary girls’ identified by their yellow skin²¹. The year 1916 also saw women opening up to new types of industry, going beyond simple factory jobs. They started putting words in black and white, creating books and articles to recount and record what happened during the war, going to write more specifically what happened to them during that period focusing on their necessary contribution. As the war progressed there were new public roles where women could work, as tram drivers, guards or even scavengers. Furthermore, many women became nurses and began to work both in military hospitals and on the front line, experiencing circumstances that were hard to bear and seeing with their own eyes the hopelessness and horrors that the war was bringing. Unfortunately, when the war ended, women returned to their previous jobs, in other words domestic work. Children, husbands, and the homes became their prime concern again because, even though they had played a part in a variety of occupational sectors during those years, women were no longer considered necessary²². When men returned from the conflict, they were replaced by them and did not even obtain unemployment benefits. As regards wages, women have never been able to be paid more than men, this was also since many workers, with the help and support of the unions, opposed equal pay.

The war years were characterized by events that changed people’s lives. Precisely for this reason there were many writings that wrote about war, death, suffering, and losses. Voicing the desperation of all those who died was the poet, Wilfred Owen. The Battle of the Somme was the first one in which he participated as a second lieutenant and, like all the others clashes in which he took part, it influenced not only his thinking but also his poems and it was seen by scholars and critics in two particular masterpieces ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ and ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’.

In the next chapter, Wilfred Owen’s life will be described, highlighting the experiences that shaped him, his characteristics, and what happened that made him one of the most relevant and renowned war poets in English literature.

²⁰ It is the trinitrotoluene which is an explosive chemical compound (“TNT”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2024)

²¹ Susan R. Grayzel, *Women and The First World War*, cit., p. 31.

²² Susan R. Grayzel, *Women and The First World War*, cit., p. 34.

CHAPTER II. WILFRED OWEN: FROM BIRTH TO THE CALL TO ARMS

2.1 The childhood and the education of Wilfred Owen

Wilfred Edward Salter Owen was born in Oswestry on 18 March 1839, more precisely Plas Wilmot, which was the family residence. Wilfred's parents, Tom and Susan Owen, came from two different social backgrounds. The first belonged to the Shaw-Salter family, which was respectable and known for their attachment to religious values²³, while the latter came from a family made of craftsmen and merchants. After spending some time working for the Great Western Railway, Tom chose to leave his land for India to seek economic fortune and came back in England only after becoming seriously sick. From that moment he started living in Shrewsbury, together with his family, working for the British Railways. In 1891 Tom Owen and Susan Shaw got married and soon after they settled down in Plas Wilmot.

The years that the Owen family spent in Plas Wilmot were characterized by economic hardship and by a loss that was complicated to deal with, that of Susan's mother and father, Edward Shaw. For these varied reasons, the Owen family decided to move to Shrewsbury. In this small city, Susan gave birth to Wilfred's younger brother, Harold, but despite this incredible news, financial difficulties once again led the family to move. This time in Birkenhead though. Initially, Tom became a station manager and worked at Woodside station while the family remained in Shrewsbury, later the father managed to find a house in Birkenhead²⁴. As a result of this, they moved to 7 Elm Grove and in this new house Wilfred started learning the alphabet thanks to the help of his mother and in this occasion, he wrote her what his first letter was, which was decorated, on the border, with lots of kisses:

my dear mother

I no that you have got there safely. We are making huts. I have got a lantern, and we are lighting them up to-night.

With love from Wilfred I remain your loving son Wilfred²⁵

²³ Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2002, p. 2.

²⁴ Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen: A Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 13.

²⁵ Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen: A Biography*, cit., p. 14.

After a few months, they moved again, and 14 Willmer Road saw their arrival. Two months later the start of the classes, Wilfred was enrolled at Birkenhead Institute. He appreciated this institute and managed to make some friends, such as Alec Paton. Then precisely in this period, Colin Shaw Owen was born.

In 1902, Wilfred attended the Sunday School at Christ Church²⁶. An admired preacher guided the school, the so-called Canon W.H.F Robson and right here Wilfred developed a strong religious faith thanks to his mother's influence. However, if, on the one hand, Wilfred immediately began to integrate and get involved in the activities that the school offered, on the other hand, Harold's situation was hugely different because he did not feel fully attached to religious life. Religion created a powerful bond between Wilfred and Susan underlined by the fact that his mother preferred him. Nevertheless, in his works he wrote how this deep bond also hid a gloomier side, a part that made him feel suffocated by the presence of his mother.

During those years, the Owen family traveled a lot and among the most impactful towns there was indubitably the holiday spent in the Cheshire Hills, near Broxton, which was a small village²⁷. Broxton was a significant place for Wilfred because according to Harold, he discovered, for the first time, the poetry in an environment full of love and security:

It was in Broxton among the ferns and bracken and the little hills, secure in the safety and understanding love that my mother wrapped about him with such tender ministrations, that the poetry in Wilfred, with gentle pushings, without hurt, began to bud, and not on the battlefields of France.²⁸

Months later, due to numerous reasons, Tom and Susan realized that Willmer Road could no longer be the perfect location to live and raise their children. Consequently, they moved to a greater zone than the last one and to 51 Milton Road. After this move, Tom began to take part in church activities and when he decided to accept the offer to sing in front of a group of sailors in Liverpool²⁹, Wilfred and Susan were not glad about this decision and the fact that he went into this adventure. These choices made by Tom led to a breakdown in the relation he had with his son Wilfred. To aggravate the circumstance was the father's desire to see his son embark on a maritime career and not

²⁶ Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*, cit., p. 18.

²⁷ Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen: A Biography*, cit., p.27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁹ Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen: A Biography*, cit., p. 16.

a literary one. Yet, the two achieved to discover an interest in a common ground, music. Tom's passion for music motivated Wilfred to begin piano lessons with Miss Taylor who decided to continue this path despite the family's inability to pay her³⁰.

Later, unfortunately Susan fell seriously ill, and was no longer fit to take care of her children. Harold, Colin, and Mary became the responsibility of their older brother Wilfred, who began to be seen by them as an authority figure. Therefore, Wilfred had to struggle, having to face his younger brother Harold's dyslexia and learning problems³¹, his little brother Colin's rickets form³² and his sister Mary's mental and physical retardation that led him to complain about her lack of interest³³. These obstacles led to something beautiful in Wilfred's life. In fact, the absence of his mother allowed him to reconstruct his relationship with his father. In the concrete, Tom even took him to Britain to help him with his French studies. In 1904, Wilfred began to attend High School, learning English and French and choosing a path that would allow him to enter university.

In 1907, the Owen family moved one more time, heading towards Shrewsbury. Consequently, this caused a kind of malaise in the future poet who loved his life in Birkenhead so much. The first house was that of Tom's parents, William and Martha Owen, at 2 Hawthorn Villas and the second one was at 1 Cleveland Place³⁴. Due to this abrupt move, Wilfred enrolled himself at Shrewsbury Borough Technical School which also functioned as a Pupil-Teacher Centre, and this enabled the poet to pursue a teaching career. The school was composed of many students from the working class and the school environment was less prestigious than in his old school. Still, he managed to increase his studies in various subjects including French and history. This specific period saw Wilfred's passion for literature intensify, thanks to his English teacher Miss Wright. Therefore, she was crucial for him in his growth as a poet and this led him to read a series of masterpieces of English literature in May 1907 with *The Faerie Queen*, Book I, and Macaulay's "Horatius". Then he read Keat's "Ode" that he quoted in an essay entitled "Autumn", and later he passed on to Shakespeare³⁵ (*Macbeth*, *Richard II*, *Twelfth Night*, *Cymbeline*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *The Taming of the Shrew*,

³⁰ Ibid., p. 30.

³¹ Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*, cit., p. 24.

³² It is a condition that causes the subject to have weak bones. ("Rickets", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2024).

³³ Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*, cit., p. 25.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

³⁵ Caterina Roi, *Wilfred Owen: A new war poetry* [master's Thesis, Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia, 2016].

He's not interested and doesn't care, and you go away. Go away—and leave me alone—only leave me alone, I tell you.”⁴⁰

Even though he passed the exam, Wilfred was never satisfied with the result, which did not demonstrate all the effort he put into studying.

2.2 Travels, jobs, and the pre-war path

Important news knocked at his door. In fact, the vicar Herbert Robson proposed him to work at the Vicarage in Dunsden as assistant for the vicar Herbert Wigan⁴¹. Due to this, at the age of eighteen, Wilfred embarked on this new adventure. The vicar Wigan was very uncompromising about his religious beliefs. He controlled and led this Vicarage constituted of immense gardens and lots of rooms and precisely because of the magnificence of this place there was staff who kept the structure in good condition⁴². Unfortunately, Wilfred did not stay long at this place for countless reasons. One of these was the total lack of conversation with Wigan and the fact that he supported Evangelicalism, which was a more severe form of Anglicanism. Therefore, he did not feel he belonged to this type of belief and, even if he was treated well, he saw in this place a limit to what he wanted to become, a poet. What certainly pushed him to leave the Vicarage was the discovery of the intense conditions of poverty that many English citizens experienced.

After abandoning the Vicarage, Wilfred moved to France, specifically to Bordeaux and started working as an English teacher at the Berlitz School⁴³. He worked several hours during the day, and he got to know many people, among them there was the Director Maurice Aumont, who was not in Wilfred's good graces because he had the propensity to exploit teachers. Despite this, he managed to grow both professionally and personally and this was evident in the letters he wrote throughout this period. The following year, he started attending the Protestant Union Chrétienne in Bordeaux⁴⁴,

⁴⁰ Harold Owen, *Journey from Obscurity. Wilfred Owen, 1839-1918 (Memoirs of the Owen family)*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 252.

⁴¹ Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*, cit., p. 62.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.63.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

experiencing a period immersed in culture and society. In Bordeaux, he realized that his mother never spoke to him about sex or intimacy, therefore he always felt anxious towards women.

Everything changed in 1914 when he met Henriette Poitou during a visit to Castelnau-en-Médoc⁴⁵. She was so beautiful that he was immediately attracted to her. Between walks and confidences concerning her desire for freedom, they spent two days together. Initially he felt very insecure and shy in front of the young girl but during one of their usual walks, Henriette grabbed his arm and in a letter he later wrote to Mary he said “I could scarcely have been happier”.⁴⁶ This happiness did not last long because at the end of April, he saw her again and he comprehended that in hindsight she was not as interesting as he had thought.

Before the First World War, Wilfred stayed for a certain period at the Léger villa in Bagnères-de-Bigorre. Charles Léger had a significant career behind him and two passions, acting and art. Meanwhile he was in the villa, the First World War broke out in 1914, and if he initially felt guilty for not being present at the front to fight, he later became convinced that “a live poet was worth more than a dead soldier”.⁴⁷ In September of the same year, due to the German advance on Paris, Wilfred was required to move to Bordeaux and he managed to fill his time in Mérignac thanks to Anne de la Touche. She was a delightful woman who was looking for a tutor for her two nephews, Johnny, and Bobbie. Wilfred helped them with their schoolwork and in exchange he received free board and lodging. In January 1915 the news of the sinking of the battleship *Formidable* and the debate over whether Johnny and Bobby should return to Downside⁴⁸ for their own safety made him reflect both on the sacrifice of the soldiers and led him to think that he was in a privileged position, making him feel guilty as a result. For this reason, in France, he realized he wanted to fight and began preparations for enlistment.

He first met Professor Morley and then Dr Rayner who gave him some advice on working in munitions. On 20 October, he went to the office of the Artists’ Rifles in London for a medical examination and was deemed suitable. He finally signed the oath for the Territorial Force by which he agreed to serve for four years at home and abroad.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 120.

⁴⁶ Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*, cit., p. 121.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 133.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 150.

Thereafter, he pronounced the oath of allegiance to King George V and his successors and had to kiss a worn Bible at the request of Captain Blomfield as a sign of confirmation to the oath⁴⁹. Having done this, on 21 October 1915 Wilfred Owen became a soldier under number 4756 in the 28th London Regiment.

2.3 Wilfred Owen's pre-war inspirations and thoughts

Before the war entered his life, the themes that were present in Wilfred Owen's works were completely different to those post-war. In fact, the first stage of his poetic career was characterized by a strong influence of the famous poets of the so-called "Nineties"⁵⁰. These poets were Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth. "Keats's poetry offered him a world of dreams, seclusion, romance, and escape"⁵¹. For this reason, Keats was a reference point for Owen, a refuge for moments when there was uncertainty and suffering in the air, and one who gave imagination and beauty. It must be said that even though it was not known precisely when Wilfred started writing poetry⁵² since his mother destroyed much of his work, among the manuscripts that survived was found what was supposed to be his earliest poem called "To Poesy" (1909-1910) and Keats was a great source of inspiration for the creation of this work. Therefore, Wilfred began to reproduce his styles by writing sonnets and trying to reflect and understand the technical characteristics of Keats' poem. In "To Poesy", he tried to express both his love for this art form and his desire and wish to be accepted in this poetic world.

A thousand suppliants stand around thy throne,
Stricken with love for thee, O Poesy.
I stand among them, and with them I groan,
And stretch my arms for help. Oh, pity me!
No man (save them thou gav'st the right to ascend
And sit with thee, 'nointing with unction fine,
Calling thyself their servant and their friend)
Has loved thee with a purer love than mine.⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 164.

⁵⁰ Caterina Roi, op., cit., p. 23.

⁵¹ Guy Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014, p. 31.

⁵² Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen: A Biography*, cit., p. 53.

⁵³ To Poesy, *Poetry Digital Archive*, University of Oxford, https://portal.sds.ox.ac.uk/articles/online_resource/64424_To_Poesy/25653783?file=45760242, accessed October 2024.

In this poem, the influence of the Romantic poets, particularly John Keats, Coleridge and Wordsworth, emerges. These authors grasped poetry as a form of revelation of the imagination, through which the poet could express his vision of the world. Owen was inspired by this romantic tradition, and he developed a style that emphasizes truthfulness and the use of the imaginary. The poem is made up of decasyllabic lines and follows an ABAB rhyme scheme. The poem is structured in six stanzas and does not have a regular rhyme scheme. Poetry is the central theme; it is illustrated as a divinity in front of whom the poets bow and dedicate their veneration. Poetry is personified by Wilfred, who gives it a divine connotation, and places himself among the poets who invoke it, using the personal pronoun “I” in the verse “I stand among them, and with them I groan.” This emphasizes his connection to the poetic community, reinforcing the notion that, in the presence of poetry, poets are nothing more than devotees. Nonetheless, as the poem develops, he continues to ask “Poesy” to show him the way to further develop his mastery and awareness of his abilities.

Keats, however, was not the only one who managed to influence Wilfred. The second poet who had an impact on his career was Percy Bysshe Shelley. Wilfred was not immediately interested in the poet. He became one only after reading his works⁵⁴. The romantic poet was known for his desire to change society and to alleviate the suffering present therein. Wilfred himself, in a letter, wrote:

I find that Shelley lived at a cottage within easy cycling distance from here. And I was very surprised (tho’ really I don’t know why) to find that he used to ‘visit the sick in their beds; kept a regular list of the industrious poor whom he assisted to make up their accounts;’ and for a time walked the hospitals in order to be more useful to the poor he visited⁵⁵.

Shelley, who always fought for the poor and the sick, led Wilfred to view and regard the church with profound detachment. But thanks to this, he developed a sensitivity that was then present in his future works, especially those that mentioned the war. He later showed this same sensitivity in a poem he wrote after an accident, which occurred when he was still in Dunsden, that involved the carter John Allen and his family and saw the death of his wife and one of his daughters⁵⁶. The poem Wilfred wrote was titled “Deep under turfy grass and heavy clay”:

Deep under turfy grass and heavy clay

⁵⁴ John Purkis, *A Preface to Wilfred Owen*, Boston, Addison-Wesley Longman Ltd, 1999, p. 98.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁵⁶ Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*, cit., p. 91.

They laid her bruised body, and the child
Poor victims of a swift mischance were they,
Adown Death's trapdoor suddenly beguiled.
I, weeping not, as others, but heart-wild,
Affirmed to Heaven that even Love's fierce flame
Must fail beneath the chill of this cold shame.

So I rebelled, scorning and mocking such
As had the ignorant callousness to wed
On altar steps long frozen by the touch
Of stretcher after stretcher of our dead.
Love's blindness is too terrible, I said;
I will go counsel men, and show what bin
The harvest of their homes is gathered in.⁵⁷

In this poem, Wilfred deals with the theme of death, and expresses his perplexity towards religious celebrations and the traditional sense of community. In this one, the difference between weddings and funerals celebrated in the church and the brutality of loss is highlighted. “Deep under turfy grass and heavy clay” is the opening verse with which Wilfred conveys unexpected anger and goes against the traditional religiosity of these occasions. The poem offers the image of a wedding that is celebrated on the altar of the church and with this, Wilfred tries to underline how religiosity is hypocritical because it celebrates events of joy and happiness in the same place where the dead are mourned. And if, on the one hand, Shelley taught Wilfred to fight for those in need, on the other hand, there was another poet who had a profound impact on his poetic training, namely Wordsworth. “Love of nature, belief in the imagination, and sympathy with suffering were characteristics which the would-be poet would have to encourage in himself.”⁵⁸, Wilfred was a Wordsworthian, a position he never completely relinquished⁵⁹. Owen strongly believed that nature was both a moral and spiritual guide and Wilfred acknowledged all this by stating that he, motivated by nature, introduced into literature ‘a new sympathy with man especially the poor’⁶⁰. The poet saw nature as something that could enrich the soul, especially in those places to which he felt particularly attached, such as Cheshire. This love for nature was further fueled by the presence of Wordsworth, using poetry, but not only. Through his teachings, Owen learned to perceive nature to

⁵⁷ Deep under turfy grass and heavy clay, *Oxford World War I Poetry Project*, World War I Literature, Oxford World War I poetry, <https://oxford.omeka.net/s/ww1lit/item/90125#?c=&m=&s=&cv=>, accessed October 2024.

⁵⁸ Dominic Hibberd, *Owen the Poet*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986, p. 2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

purify thought and to interpret those negative and painful experiences differently.

Wordsworth himself wrote in Book I of *The Prelude*:

The elements of feeling and of thought,
And sanctifying, by such discipline,
Both pain and fear, until we recognise
A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.⁶¹

In the next chapter, the change that the First World War brought to Wilfred Owen's poetics will be explored through the analysis of four masterpieces: "Anthem for Doomed Youth", "Dulce et Decorum Est", "Mental Cases" and "Disabled".

⁶¹ Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*, cit., p. 40.

CHAPTER III. HOW WAR CHANGED OWEN'S POEMS:

BLAST, TRAUMA, PAIN

3.1 Owen's vision of war: from glorification to condemnation

Wilfred Owen had always considered the war as an opportunity for glory, idealizing it, highlighting the heroism and sense of patriotism that had pushed the soldiers to go to war in 1914. Yet, with his enlistment, he became a witness to the brutality and cruelty that many soldiers suffered, and he thus realized that there was nothing noble about the war. Wilfred was not immediately conscious of the atrocity of battles, but he gradually became aware of them and started to convey this harshness in his poems. In 1915, when he was in Bordeaux, Wilfred encountered the poems of one of the most famous poets of that period, Rupert Brooke⁶². He was known as the one who not only exalted the sacrifice that led men to die in battle, but also emphasized war as something positive, honorable, with the purpose of idealizing it. An example of this was certainly seen in Brooke's poem entitled "The Soldier" where, already in the first line, the poet focuses on how dying in war was considered a heroic and patriotic death:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam;
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.⁶³

Wilfred distinguished himself from many other poets who used poetry as a means of communicating a sentimental and idealized vision of sacrifice in war. Among these, there was McCrae with *In Flanders Fields*⁶⁴:

If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields⁶⁵.

⁶² D. S. R. Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1969, p. 18.

⁶³ Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/13076/the-soldier>, accessed 27 February 2025.

⁶⁴ D. S. R. Welland, *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study*, cit., p. 22.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

In this stanza, it is possible to see the poet's attempt to idealize the battle, passing it off as a heroic act, and that romantic nuance that managed to avoid revealing the real brutality behind it. Therefore, with his enlistment in 1915, and his entry into the war in 1917, Wilfred's vision of war underwent an important evolution, moving from glorification to condemnation. The war, in fact, was no longer considered a heroic act but was seen more as a deception that guided soldiers to be exploited and die even at an early age. In short, Wilfred was the perfect antithesis of all the other poets who continued, until their deaths, like Brooke, to idealize something that had nothing right about it.

This change in Wilfred's outlook began in 1917, when he found himself admitted to Craiglockhart Hospital due to a wound he received during a battle. At Craiglockhart, Wilfred went through a complicated period because he was diagnosed with neurasthenia⁶⁶. Later, it was recognized that Wilfred was suffering from a form of shellshock caused by a series of traumas he had experienced during wartime. Today, this condition is called post-traumatic stress disorder⁶⁷. The trauma that the poet suffered was so oppressive in his life that it led him to destroy the idealization and glorification of war that he had previously. Despite the various therapies to which he was subjected, Wilfred was unable to heal on a psychological level and, for this reason, he decided to give voice to his suffering and trauma and did so through the writing of his poems, namely "Anthem for Doomed Youth", "Dulce et Decorum Est", "Mental Cases" and "Disabled".

3.2 Horrors, diseases, despair: Owen's new poetics

Among the various poems written during his time at Craiglockhart, one cannot fail to mention "Anthem for Doomed Youth" (1917), a poetic tribute for the soldiers who died in war⁶⁸. This is one of the many poems by Owen in which he lays bare his thoughts and describes in complete freedom and with the utmost truth all the horrors that the war has

⁶⁶ It is a syndrome characterized by physical and mental fatigue, with depression. ("Neurasthenia", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2025).

⁶⁷ It is an emotional condition that follows a traumatic event. The symptom is the reexperience of the trauma through memories or flashback. ("Post-traumatic stress disorder", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2025).

⁶⁸ Turan Özgür Güngör. "World War I and its Reflections in Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen's Poems", *Isarc International Science and Art Research*, 2024, pp. 298-309, p. 306.

caused, expressing his repudiation of it. The poem is composed of 14 lines, divided into an octave and a sestina. The first stanza opens like this:

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.⁶⁹

“What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?” is the ironic question with which Wilfred begins the poem. In it, Owen compares soldiers and livestock to offer an image of how these men were transformed into animals for slaughter and therefore dehumanized⁷⁰. He tries to bring awareness, in the minds of those who read, of how many deaths the war has brought. The answer to the question can be found in line 2. Here, the poet makes it known that the only sound that the soldiers hear, is that of the weapons, personifying them, making them evil, angry, and monstrous. Contrary to what one might think, there are no prayers or funeral bells, but only these gunshots. In line 5, through the phrase “No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells”, Wilfred highlights the total lack of funeral rites for these deceased soldiers since it is impossible to commemorate all the victims and because religion is inadequate in the face of war and its cruelty⁷¹. Only in the last line of this stanza, Wilfred gives a commemoration that might be more appropriate to the sacrifice the soldiers gave. This celebration is made of military trumpets, “bugles”, and “sad shires”. The trumpets, which were once used to signal the farewell or retreat of the soldiers, now sound like a call to which no one will return⁷².

What candles may be held to speed them all ?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds.
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.⁷³

⁶⁹ Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47393/anthem-for-doomed-youth>, accessed 27 February 2025.

⁷⁰ Turan Özgür Güngör. “World War I and its Reflections in Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen’s Poems”, cit., p. 307.

⁷¹ Id., p. 308.

⁷² James F. McIlroy, *Wilfred Owen’s Poetry: A Study Guide*, London: Heinemann Educational, 1974, p. 42.

⁷³ Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47393/anthem-for-doomed-youth>, accessed 27 February 2025.

In this last stanza, Wilfred gives emphasis to how the farewell to the soldiers fallen in battle will not take place through funeral ceremonies but will be in the hearts and above all in the faces of the people dear to them, who loved them and who will cherish their memory forever. Furthermore, through the sentence in line 12 “The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall”, Owen represents mourning with the pallor of the girls' brows and contrasts it with the phrase in the next line “Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds”, where the flowers are the symbol of lasting memory⁷⁴.

Analyzing this poem more profoundly, one immediately notices that the poet's intention was to communicate not only his rage towards war but also his yearning for peace⁷⁵. To express all this, Owen thoughtfully selects several stylistic function words with regard to their phonological role⁷⁶. In this type of words, there is the presence of short vowels and, as the poem opens, the rhythm goes rapidly. As previously written, this choice is not casual but rather wants to catapult the reader into the heart of the battle. An example is in line 3, “Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle”, which almost makes us hear the rattling of the rifles. Another one is in line 7, “The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells”, which makes us hear the noise of the bullets exploding in the sky. As the poem progresses, Wilfred begins to use double and long vowels that produce a slower rhythm to convey the suffering for the dead soldiers. These words are “all”, “pall”, “minds”, “blinds”, “brows” and “flowers”.

To emphasize the atmosphere, repetitions of letters are used, such as the “t” and the “r”, repeated in lines 3 and 4, the first, in words like “stuttering”, “rattle”, “patter out”, and the second in “rifles”, “rapid” and “rattle”⁷⁷. Among the many rhetorical figures present in the text, one cannot fail to refer to the simile. In line 1, “What passing-bells for these who die as cattle”, the author offers us the image of those who die as cattle, and this takes us to a slaughterhouse where the cattle are slaughtered. War, therefore, is like a slaughterhouse, and here the soldiers are killed. Another rhetorical figure used is the metaphor in line 2 with “Only the monstrous anger of the guns”. The weapons, in this instance, are compared to a vicious devil and their sound resembles the demon's roar like

⁷⁴ James F. McIlroy, *Wilfred Owen's Poetry: A Study Guide*, cit., p. 42.

⁷⁵ Guo Hang. “A Simple Analysis of Artistic Conception in ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’”, *Sino-US English Teaching*, 2007, vol. 4, no. 4, pp. 59-63, p. 60.

⁷⁶ Id., p. 60.

⁷⁷ Id., p. 61.

with fatigue”⁸⁵. For Wilfred, it is important to give this image of the soldiers because it is needed to attain his goal, rhetoric. Wilfred’s soldiers, old, dull, and sad, with signs of war on their faces, were completely different compared to the soldiers present in the posters used during propaganda who were robust, massive, well-groomed, euphoric to fight for their country. In line 1 and 2, Wilfred describes them as “old beggars” and “hags”. The poet, through his words, gives an image that highlights the barbaric state in which the soldiers found themselves, leading them to be dehumanized⁸⁶. In line 6, through the term “blood-shod”, Wilfred desires to suggest a bloody, pitiless image, which refers to the soldiers' feet that are covered in blood and this part of the body can be seen thanks to the previous line “Many had lost their boots”.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling.
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light.
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.⁸⁷

In this second stanza, line 9 opens with a screaming, panic-filled sentence “Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!”. This is followed by an expression “ecstasy of fumbling”. By “ecstasy”, Wilfred is not referring to happiness but uses this term ironically with the aim of describing the panic and desperation of the soldiers as they find themselves in a life-or-death situation⁸⁸. While the term “fumbling” describes that chaotic movement of soldiers trying to wear masks in a moment characterized by fear⁸⁹. This anguish and frenzy diminish, leading to an apparent calm with “just in time” which is in line 10. There is, therefore, a moment of pause in which there is the opportunity to take a breath. This is a moment that does not last long because the threat is still with them and the action is not over. In line 11, it turns out that the gas managed to attack a soldier, causing his painful death and Wilfred likens the man’s contortions to those of “a man in fire”⁹⁰. This stanza is significant because in the final line, Wilfred no longer speaks in the plural but

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Id., p. 6.

⁸⁷ Wilfred Owen, *The War Poems of Wilfred Owen*, cit., p. 29.

⁸⁸ Stephen Benz, “The Poet as Rhetor: A Reading of Wilfred Owen’s ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’”, cit., p. 8.

⁸⁹ Id., p. 9.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

speaks for himself and, for the first time, he uses the subject “I” in “I saw him drowning” which is a statement of direct observation⁹¹.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight.
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.⁹²

The third stanza is very crucial because through lines 15 and 16, Wilfred calls attention to the psychological trauma he has suffered. The brutality of what happened never stops haunting the poet's thoughts because even in his dreams, “In all my dreams” in line 15, he will forever relive the scene of the soldier who died from the gas. This same soldier then launches himself at him “guttering, choking, drowning”.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory.
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.⁹³

In this last section, the focus is on the audience and the second person “you” is used. Three conditional assumptions are written: if you could pace, line 17, watch, line 19, and if you could hear, line 21⁹⁴. The speaker knows that the public will never be able to do as he did with the other soldiers and if initially the soldiers were unable to pace, watch and hear, now it is the public who find themselves in the same situation⁹⁵. Wilfred's aim is to free the audience from the state of ignorance in which they are immersed through a detailed description of the consequences that the gas brought to him and his companions. The poet writes about the now dead soldier, with his face destroyed and unrecognizable, with “white eyes writhing” and “hanging face” and Wilfred compares this same face to that of the devil. Besides, the soldier's mouth is full of blood that “gargles from his froth-corrupted lungs”. Finally, the poem ends with a harsh criticism aimed at all those who continue to glorify and honor the war and makes a statement against the Latin expression

⁹¹ Id., p. 10.

⁹² Wilfred Owen, *The War Poems of Wilfred Owen*, cit., p. 29.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Stephen Benz, “The Poet as Rhetor: A Reading of Wilfred Owen's ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’”, cit., p. 11.

⁹⁵ Id., p. 11.

"Dulce et decorum Est / Pro patria mori", calling it "The old lie"⁹⁶. Owen's goal is to go against the romantic vision of war presented and carried forward by those who were lucky enough not to see the horrors on the battlefields.

Stylistically, scrolling through the poem's lines, it is possible to observe Wilfred's precise use of punctuation, such as semi-colons, commas and dashes. These have the function of slowing down the reader as if the events were happening in slow motion.⁹⁷ As for the rhyme, it has a main role in this type of poem because it follows an irregular pattern and has no precision to portray the chaos and cruelty of war. Among the rhetorical figures there is the onomatopoeia, as in line 22, with "Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs", where the word "gargling" gives the image of the noise of the blood in the lungs of the dying soldier. Repetition is also used. In lines 14 and 16, the word "drowning" is repeated with the purpose of suggesting that the action of lowering the soldiers into the mud must repeat over and over, with no variation⁹⁸. Finally, the alliteration, used by Owen to create rhythm, is very evident in the composition and helps to reinforce the meaning in the numerous lines. A clear example is the one in line 1, "Bent double, like old beggars under sacks", and 2, "Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge", where the alliteration of the letter "b" and "d" manage to communicate both the fatigue and the heaviness of the soldiers who are now exhausted.

Another relevant poem that Wilfred wrote was "Mental Cases". Written in 1918, "Mental Cases" is one of his poignant poems. This work focuses on the psychological and physical trauma that soldiers had to face after the First World War. Through these 3 stanzas, Wilfred describes the horrors of war that the soldiers faced and saw and how these atrocities continued to haunt them and their lives. The poem opens like this:

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,
Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,
Baring teeth that leer like skulls' teeth wicked?
Stroke on stroke of pain, — but what slow panic,
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?
Ever from their hair and through their hands' palms
Misery swelters. Surely we have perished
Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Id., p. 13.

⁹⁷ William Kevin Penny. "A Tragic Harp: Ritual, Irony and Myth in the War Poetry of Wilfred Owen". *Language and Literature*, 2011, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 151-167, p. 165.

⁹⁸ Odoemenam, T. C., & Nwagwu, C. C. "'DULCE ET DECORUM EST': A Stylistic Examination of the Language of Wilfred Owen", cit., p. 3.

⁹⁹ Wilfred Owen, *The Collected Poems*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1967, p. 69.

The first stanza is composed of 9 lines and Wilfred immediately delves into the description of the veteran soldiers, writing about how they were wretched, sinister, and cadaverous. This section opens with a series of questions asked by Wilfred to emphasize the conditions in which the soldiers found themselves. In lines 1 and 2, the poet writes “twilight” and “purgatorial shadows”, and these terms describe the veterans as if they were trapped in an in-between state, between life and death, between day and night, where they are neither alive nor dead but stuck living with their psychological torment¹⁰⁰. This first stanza ends with the word “hellish” through which the poet, the observer, wonders if he too is not in this same hell.

— These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.
Always they must see these things and hear them,
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
Carnage incomparable, and human squander
Rucked too thick for these men’s extrication.¹⁰¹

In the second stanza, there is an explanation as to why these veteran soldiers are immersed in their torment. In line 10, “These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished”, the verb “ravished” suggests how their mind has been abused by the various deaths that occurred during the war. Here, there is the memory of those who died, and this is relevant because it creates a bridge between past and present, bringing the veterans to be in two dimensions, losing their identity when they find themselves sensorially divided between the past and the present¹⁰². “Multitudinous murders”, “wading sloughs of flesh”, “treading blood from lungs”, evoke and remember the massacre that occurred. They are coarse, rough images, so deep that they break not only the physical but also the mental identity of the soldiers¹⁰³.

Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented
Back into their brains, because on their sense
Sunlight seems a blood-smear; night comes blood-black;
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh.

¹⁰⁰ Ali Güneş, “Wilfred Owen Re-Visited: A Psychoanalytic Reading of War, Memory, and Crisis of Identity in Wilfred Owen’s Poem ‘Mental Cases’”, *Journal of History, Culture and Art Research*, vol. 6, No. 3, 2017, pp. 166-178, p. 171.

¹⁰¹ Wilfred Owen, *The Collected Poems*, cit., p. 69.

¹⁰² Ali Güneş, “Wilfred Owen Re-Visited: A Psychoanalytic Reading of War, Memory, and Crisis of Identity in Wilfred Owen’s Poem ‘Mental Cases’”, cit., p. 172.

¹⁰³ Id., p. 173.

— Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,
Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.
— Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;
Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.¹⁰⁴

The last stanza of 10 lines concludes the poem with the effects that war and trauma have brought on the sensorial perception of the veterans. In the first and second line, Wilfred talks about their eyes “shrink tormented / Back into the brains” that cannot bear what they see. Their faces are characterized by false expressions, they are like a mask of “hilarious, hideous”. The smiles are not real, pure, sincere, therefore being described as “set-smiling corpses”. Finally, the verse ends with lines 26 and 27 “Snatching after us who smoke them, brother, /Pawing us who dealt them war and madness” through which Wilfred attempt to criticize the slogans used during that period by calling them false, highlighting how the war would never have led to victory and conquest but only to death¹⁰⁵. Additionally, Wilfred conveys the idea of brotherhood represented when the soldiers cling to each other¹⁰⁶.

If the reader delves deeper into the analysis of the poem, among the rhetorical figures it is possible to find a metaphor in line 2, “purgatorial shadows”, refers to soldiers engaged in the process of atoning sins committed in the past that still torment them¹⁰⁷. This is also manifested in their physiques, marked by suffering. Anaphora is also present. In line 5, “stroke on stroke of pain” there is this repetition that allows to highlight the abundance of emotional wounds that have turned the soldiers into “corpses”. Finally, personification is used to represent the action of “their hands”, line 25, which are described through ““plucking”, “picking”, “snatching” and “pawing”, all terms present from line 25 to line 28. This is to communicate the dehumanization of soldiers caused by war.

“Dulce et Decorum Est” and “Mental Cases” are not the only poems Owen wrote after realizing the harsh realities of war. He also wrote, among many others, “Disabled”

¹⁰⁴ Wilfred Owen, *The Collected Poems*, cit., p. 69.

¹⁰⁵ Ali Güneş, “Wilfred Own Re-Visited: A Psychoanalytic Reading of War, Memory, and Crisis of Identity in Wilfred Owen’s Poem ‘Mental Cases’”, cit., p. 174.

¹⁰⁶ Id., p. 174.

¹⁰⁷ Ali Güneş, “Wilfred Own Re-Visited: A psychoanalytic Reading of War, Memory, and Crisis of Identity in Wilfred Owen’s Poem ‘Mental Cases’”, cit., p. 171.

while he was a Craiglockhart Hospital in 1917. “Disabled” is a sort of manifesto that condemns and completely opposes the idealization of war.

He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,
And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,
Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park
Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,
Voices of play and pleasure after day,
Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.¹⁰⁸

The first stanza is made up of 6 lines and introduces the person who is the subject of the work, namely the mutilated war veteran who sits in a wheelchair after losing his legs and an arm. The veteran is described as “legless” and “waiting for dark” and this last sentence could be perceived as awaiting death.¹⁰⁹ At line 2, Wilfred writes that the veteran is dressed in a “ghastly suit of grey” which alludes to death and ghostliness, and it implies the spectral aspect of his life, a shadow of who he once was.¹¹⁰ Then, in lines 4 and 5, the poet gives us a new image, children, who are playing in the park, having fun and their voices are heard by the soldier. There is a sort of contrast between the world of these children and the world of the veteran who waits for the dark¹¹¹.

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.
Now he will never feel again how slim
Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands,
All of them touch him like some queer disease.¹¹²

In this second stanza, the focus is on the veteran's past. In line 7, the phrase “Town used to swing so gay” offers a positive and happy image of what his life was before his disability. This joy, however, soon disappears because Wilfred makes us remember, in line 10 through “In the old times, before he threw away his knees”, that this happiness was in the past¹¹³. Moreover, in this part of the poem, there is something deeper: a real exclusion from society, represented by the fact that those who once doted on him now

¹⁰⁸ Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57285/disabled>, accessed 28 February 2025.

¹⁰⁹ K. D. Laird, “A Critical Analysis of Wilfred Owen’s ‘Disabled’”, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 25, No. 1, 2005, <https://dsq-sds.org/index.php/dsq/article/view/530/707>, accessed 28 February 2025.

¹¹⁰ James F McIlroy, *Wilfred Owen’s Poetry: A Study Guide*, cit., p. 79.

¹¹¹ Id., p. 79.

¹¹² Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57285/disabled>, accessed 28 February 2025.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 79.

keep their distance, afraid that his disability could spread¹¹⁴. In fact, now the girls will touch him “like some queer disease”.

There was an artist silly for his face,
For it was younger than his youth, last year.
Now, he is old; his back will never brace;
He's lost his colour very far from here,
Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,
And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race
And leap of purple spurted from his thigh.¹¹⁵

In this third verse, there is the return to what the veteran's life was before the accident, when he was still beautiful, young, alive, so much that an artist was “silly for his face”. But now it was just “old” and “he’s lost his colour”.

One time he liked a blood-smear down his leg,
After the matches carried shoulder-high.
It was after football, when he'd drunk a peg,
He thought he'd better join. He wonders why.
Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts.
That's why; and maybe, too, to please his Meg,
Aye, that was it, to please the giddy jilts,
He asked to join. He didn't have to beg;
Smiling they wrote his lie: aged nineteen years.
Germans he scarcely thought of, all their guilt,
And Austria's, did not move him. And no fears
Of Fear came yet. He thought of jewelled hilts
For daggers in plaid socks; of smart salutes;
And care of arms; and leave; and pay arrears;
Esprit de corps; and hints for young recruits.
And soon, he was drafted out with drums and cheers.¹¹⁶

This stanza consists of 17 lines in which the distinct reasons, which pushed the soldier to enlist, are put on paper. Among the various motivations, there is the approval from society but also the desire to demonstrate that he is adult, mature, strong and a man. In him, there is the belief that, in front of women, thanks to his enlistment, he can become or be defined as a hero and that, for this reason, he can be seen as a “god in kilts”. All this highlights how he was manipulated by society, focusing on the unrealistic expectations it offered¹¹⁷. Through lines 30-36, Wilfred also wants to make it clear that at the end of

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 80.

¹¹⁵ Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57285/disabled>, accessed 28 February 2025.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ K. D. Laird, “A Critical Analysis of Wilfred Owen’s ‘Disabled’”, <https://dsq-sds.org/index.php/dsq/article/view/530/707>, accessed 28 February 2025.

days, the veteran did not go to war to defend his homeland or to honor the war but for the benefits of joining the military¹¹⁸.

Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal.
Only a solemn man who brought him fruits
Thanked him; and then inquired about his soul.¹¹⁹

If in the previous lines the soldiers viewed the war with superficiality, in these, however, Wilfred writes about their return and how that feeling of joy and enthusiasm has disappeared over time¹²⁰. The soldier is now greeted upon his return with compassion derived from the fact that he is in a wheelchair. He is not seen as a hero but only as an object of charity¹²¹.

Now, he will spend a few sick years in institutes,
And do what things the rules consider wise,
And take whatever pity they may dole.
Tonight he noticed how the women's eyes
Passed from him to the strong men that were whole.
How cold and late it is! Why don't they come
And put him into bed? Why don't they come?¹²²

The last lines end with a sort of resignation. The veteran, in fact, has now understood and accepted the value that society has decided to give him. He agreed to “Spend a few sick years in institutes / And take whatever pity they may dole”. The veteran is now disabled. He has accepted it and is ready to be a simple object of pity and to receive the compassion of those who, however, can walk¹²³. The poem ends with a plea: “How cold and late it is! Why don't they come / And put him into bed? Why don't they come?”. The young man now depends on others and can no longer do without them.

From a stylistic perspective, Owen has once again demonstrated the wisdom with which he has chosen his words. The aim was to communicate, in a direct and strong way, the pain that was affecting the veteran. Regarding the rhyme, it is not regular because it has the function of making people understand how difficult it is, for the soldier, to accept the new state he finds himself in¹²⁴. But the poet does not stop here, because as the reading

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57285/disabled>, accessed 28 February 2025.

¹²⁰ James F McIlroy, *Wilfred Owen's Poetry: A Study Guide*, cit., p. 82.

¹²¹ K. D. Laird, “A Critical Analysis of Wilfred Owen's ‘Disabled’”, <https://dsq-sds.org/index.php/dsq/article/view/530/707>, accessed 28 February 2025.

¹²² Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57285/disabled>, accessed 28 February 2025.

¹²³ K. D. Laird, “A Critical Analysis of Wilfred Owen's ‘Disabled’”, <https://dsq-sds.org/index.php/dsq/article/view/530/707>, accessed 28 February 2025.

¹²⁴ “Disabled by Wilfred Owen”, *PoemAnalysis*, <https://poemanalysis.com/wilfred-owen/disabled/>, accessed 4 April 2025.

continues, a tone full of sarcasm is used when he begins to describe the attitude that the soldier had before his enlistment, which changes completely when he becomes aware of what war really is. For example, in line 25, “Someone had said he’d look a god in kilts”, Owen utilizes sarcasm to make fun of the soldier who enlists for the sole purpose of being seen as a hero¹²⁵.

¹²⁵ James F McIlroy, *Wilfred Owen's Poetry: A Study Guide*, cit., p. 80.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, the aim is to investigate how the war led to a radical change in Wilfred Owen's vision of it, taking a path that began with its glorification and ended with its total condemnation. To understand this passage, a detailed study was conducted on his experience in the trenches and the traumas, both physical and psychological, that the war brought to Wilfred's life. Particularly, there were many reasons that revolutionized his poetry, including participating in the front lines of the various battles and witnessing, with his own eyes, the death of his comrades. One cannot fail to mention one of the factors that most influenced the change in his perspective: his hospitalization for shell shock. In some way, Wilfred managed to recover and what helped him the most was poetry. Through it, he expressed not only his own pain, but also the anguish experienced by his companions in battle. While it was a complicated period for Owen, it also marked a turning point that created many masterpieces that established Wilfred as a celebrated and recognized figure to this day.

To explore how the war impacted his poetic production, a comparison was made between the poems that contained pre-war themes, such as nature, love, ideal beauty and generally everything that revolved around romantic poetry, and the poetic compositions written in wartime, which are *Dulce et Decorum Est*, *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, *Mental Cases* and *Disabled*. As a result, it was noticed how the experiences he had lived, the horrors and atrocities he had witnessed, and the desperation he had felt largely influenced his perspective on the war, making him become a symbol of denunciation against the cruelties of the war.

Through this approach, the style shifted from idealized to brutal, the vocabulary, transitioned from poetic to violent, the rhythm, developed from harmonious to irregular, the tone, transformed from celebratory to accusatory, the atmosphere, moved from hopeful to oppressive and the meaning, changed from patriotic to condemning. Ultimately, all these aspects were shaped by the new awareness.

This paper highlights how Owen's poems are not only written words that bear witness to the atrocities of war but are a real reminder to always remember the effects and implications of war, becoming, over the years, a means to educate future generations. Wilfred was not only a man, a soldier, a son or a friend, he was also a poet, an artist, who

managed, with his carefully chosen words, to describe and convey the pain of the soldiers fallen in battle and to portray it with such realism to make the reader feel that same pain.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the poetic production of one of the most celebrated and renowned English war poets, Wilfred Owen. The thesis begins with an in-depth introduction to the historical context in which he lived, namely the First World War, but considering only the role that Great Britain played. It is followed by an analysis of the several stages of his life, giving relevance not only to his school career but also to his working career, concluding with his enlistment. This work focuses on Owen's various firsthand experiences and the factors that influenced his way of writing. Subsequently, it explores the different authors of romantic literature, Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth who shaped the first part of his poetic life characterized by themes that aimed at the idealization of nature, also seen as a source of inspiration, the search for beauty in pain and the belief that poetry could change man. Specifically, this knowledge represented an important turning point in Owen's career. The poet, in fact, gave birth to two poetic compositions: the first, "Deep Under Turfy Grass and Heavy Clay", thanks to the appreciation of Shelley; the second, "To Poesy", thanks to John Keats.

The aim of this thesis is to understand why, in Wilfred Owen's life, there was a shift in vision that started from the glorification of war and ended with its actual condemnation. Wilfred, infatti, aveva della Guerra una visione molto precisa di essa tanto da considerarla come un gesto nobile, enfatizzandone sia il sacrificio onorevole che la gloria. Despite this, everything changes. It is therefore essential to examine all the circumstances that contributed to this change, including the multiple traumas, both physical and psychological, that he suffered because of the war. Undoubtedly, a key moment was the hospitalization, at Craiglockhart War Hospital, that Wilfred had due to shell-shock. To better understand this evolution of thought, I carried out an analysis of four of his poems, "Anthem for Doomed Youth", "Dulce et Decorum Est", "Mental Cases" and "Disabled".

The transition that occurred in his poetics was highlighted not only by the themes and contents that emerged, which were macabre, hard, distressing, raw and merciless, but above all by the subjects: veterans and soldiers were the protagonists of his new poems, affected not only by mental but also physical disorders, such as alienation, disorientation, psychosis, deformities, depression and disability. In addition to this, even the language,

tone and rhythm underwent a radical change, completely opposite to that of the pre-war period.

The results of this meticulous analysis confirm the impact that the war had not only on his life but also on his poetics, leading Owen to be not only one of the most admired war poets in English literature but also the one who managed to put on paper, with a strong realism, the suffering, pain and cruelty that millions of soldiers had to endure owing to the war.

Future research could focus on comparing Wilfred Owen's war poetry with that of many other authors, such as Rupert Brooke, who wrote about war by idealizing it, or even Siegfried Sassoon, who, although having the same vision of war as Owen, expressed himself in an entirely different way compared to him, focusing on sarcasm and satire.