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‘Experiential’ versus ‘Creative’ Perceptions of War: A Study of Select War Poets

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Abstract

The article attempts to offer a comparative analysis of two different perspective of the war – one, as reflected in the tragic experiences of the World War in the light of new awakening consciousness of the English poet innovators like Yeats and Eliot; and the other on the lived reality of war as represented by those actually fighting in the fore-front such as Sassoon, Rosenberg and Owen. While ‘the lived reality of war’ as exemplified in the works of poets such as Sassoon and others opens up avenues to explore their works from a psychological perspective; the writings of Eliot and others call attention to the creative poetic dimension. To serve the purpose of the paper, select poems of war poets, Eliot and Yeats have been taken into consideration. In evaluating these works it is found that the writing of the interwar period has great breadth and diversity. They are flooded with new ideas, experiences, images and symbols in such a way that they have physically crossed the barriers of battlefield and have attained a new poetic dimension. The article also explores the new poetic connotations of war - not only as a violation of natural order but also as

new exhibitions of its potential ‘terrible beauty’ as perceived by the visionary W.B Yeats.

Keywords: War, Perspective, Lived reality, Shell shock, Poetic dimension, Psychology

Introduction

“All the great words [...] were cancelled, for her generation: love, joy, happiness, home, [...] all these great, dynamic words were half dead now and dying from day to day”. D.H Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, 1928

War and violence have been politically, tragically and poetically important in the history of England. The wonderful experiences of war are often enjoyed and celebrated with pride and heroism. For the literary artists, the subject is often an epic one. Ever since the beginning, English literature portrays the

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victory in battles, the slashing of enemies and also sacrificing one's life as a matter of glory. The representation of war in poetry and other literary genres is shaped by the attitude of society towards it, and it can also be the other way round. However, with the advent of First World War, there has been a rapid change in the nature of poetic experience and creative impulses marked by the changing perspective of masses. The impact of this war has brought the emotional and intellectual earthquake in the modernist English poetry. The tone of poetry dealing with wars is no longer inspiring and optimistic. Unlike the picture of dedicated and heroic soldiers fighting a war, as reflected by Tennyson in "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (1854), the poems of soldier-poets explicitly present the gloomy and terrifying atmosphere pervading the frontline-world. One of the reasons behind the all-new approach of the contemporary war poetry is the enlarged scale of the impact of war on people. Another reason for the changing attitude, especially in poetry of Eliot and Yeats is the modernist view which ironically subverts past norms and looks objectively at everything including war. Apart from the aforesaid reasons, another strikingly important fact is that the concerned poetry is no longer dealt only by the civilians and intellectuals, but by men who were actually involved in the day-to-day war operations; and who saw the true nature of war in the

course of time through their 'lived experiences'.

The Great War and the Changing Notion of Poetry

The war which was seen as inevitable broke out in August 1914. It began with a sense of enthusiasm among the people and they felt it would be soon over with only a minimal destruction. The English wars which were formerly mainly the affairs of governing class extended its domain to accommodate every class of people. The young men who left their jobs to join the army found a sense of relief from the tension of the preceding years, and also departure from dullness of the industrialized world. This positive attitude towards the war was expressed in much by the early war poets like Rupert Brooke and Julian Grenfell. However, the illusion was soon shattered with the war developing into something very grotesque and bloody never witnessed before. The soldiers eventually began to see the futility of the war as over millions sacrificed their lives on the battlefield. The civilian population was not untouched, the knowledge of the sufferings of their fellow beings left them with a sense of bitterness. These changing views are reflected in the works of the later war poets. Since ages, war has always been seen as 'noble' and 'heroic' in nature. The grandeur portrayed in literature, especially poetry,

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promoted an idealistic vision in the minds of the public. However, the poetic notion of war got shattered with actual horrors dwelt upon by those living in the trenches. Their literary outputs were focused on portrayal of grim reality of war, thus doing away with conventional ideas and beliefs.

The Experiential Voices from the Trenches

The accounts of historians on the number of deaths and injuries can be substantiated with the poetry of war poets to arrive at a conclusion that the war is inhuman and horrific. Wilfred Owen(18 March 1893 - 4 November 1918), who is often considered to be the best among the war poets, was aware of his responsibility as a poet to present before the world the truth and make people see its ugliness. His idea of poetry was not an expression with verbal beauty as that of Romantics but rather depiction of 'the pity of war'. As Owen states:

“Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The poetry is in the pity.”(Owen, “Preface”line 4-6)

Owen saw war as a symbol of the universal agony of human life, with violence and evil being its inevitable constituents. He was enlisted in the Artists Rifles on 21 October

1915 and died while serving in the army. As a soldier in the fore- front, he makes it clear that only through one’s personal experience the violent and true images of war could be constructed in poetry.His descriptions of the battles and its impact on soldiers are so profound that it would discourage any further involvement in the war.

In the poem “Strange Meeting” he calls “The pity of war, the pity war distilled”(Owen, line25). Here, the pity emerges from the “the truth untold” particularly that in a war situation. Though he knows the truth of war and that the humans will die fighting the war, yet he cannot tell the comrades as he is already dead. The conversation between the two enemy soldiers in “Strange Meeting” takes place in hell. By setting his poem in imaginary hell, the poet attempts to break the barrier between the two enemies without necessarily invoking any anger, but pity for both of them. The poet’s use of images like “dull tunnel”, “sullen hall” for depiction of hell in the first stanza itself sets a sombre tone for the poem. The entire poem draws the readers towards a feeling of pity for the soldiers who lie helpless in hell without being victorious in the war. The poet juxtaposes the violent images of war with the peaceful atmosphere which the soldiers would have if there had been no war. The soldier is regretful as he “went hunting wild/ after the wildest beauty in the

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world”(Owen, 17-18)and even though he had “courage” and “wisdom”, yet he lost everything with his death in the war. Owen portrays war as a cruel thing which restricts man’s reasoning, and control over their own lives. A sense of regret and pity runs throughout the narrative as the soldiers are condemned to hell for their participation in the war. If this poem reveals Owen’s pity for the dead, in another poem “Disabled” he pities the living who are alive with the understanding of guilt and evil. The condition of the crippled soldier in “Disabled” represents all soldiers who are lonely and equally isolated from the society. His condition as he sits “in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark”, “legless” and “dressed in a ghastly suit of grey” brings out the miseries of the injured soldiers. The man who was once full of hope now lies without any future prospect. He is looked down upon by people only as an object of pity.

In the poem “Futility”, the speaker wants a dead body to be moved into the sun. He hopes that the warmth of the sun would arouse him as it “awoke him once, / At home” (Owen, 2-3) but he realizes that nature cannot defeat death. His perspective shifts to a greater concern of life. By leaving the dead man unnamed, the poet denotes the fate of every soldier. It is not clear who the enemy is. The mention of the word “snow” suggests that he died because of the cold condition. This is not

uncommon on the war front. The soldiers have to face the bullets of the enemies and along with them, also the harsh natural conditions. Nature is equally an enemy to them. Though the scenario is that of the battlefield, yet it talks about human life in general. The sun is seen as a powerful element here; it had “Woke once the clays of a cold star” (Owen, 9) but now it has failed to revive a human life. “Futility” is a philosophical musing on the part of the poet. He does not directly deal with the horrors of the war, but nevertheless, conveys the predicament of a soldier.

The other war poets like Sassoon and Rosenberg are also no exception. They too saw war through the same plane as Owen. Isaac Rosenberg(25 November 1890 - 1 April 1918)gives an anti- war stance as he says, “I never joined the army from patriotic reasons. Nothing can justify war” (Letter to Edward Marsh).He served in the army from 1916 to 1919. Rosenberg’s experience at the trenches forced him to see the limitation of human beings in the course of ongoing war. He brings the image of a rat in his poem “Break of Day in the Trenches” with a hint of irony. As it can “cross the sleeping green between” (Rosenberg, line 12), Rosenberg points out that the rat is more “cosmopolitan” than a soldier. It can move to and fro the boundary between England and Germany. The futility of war, a recurrent theme of war poets, is dealt in this poem too. He shows the

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pathetic position of humans in the sense that he may be killed at any time, whereas the rat has a longer life expectancy. Man's position is found to be inferior even to the rat. The allusion to the idea of red poppies and their drooping and withering out in "No Man's Land" is reflective of soldiers dying in gun shots. Juxtaposing the images of poppy and rat with the soldiers, Rosenberg shows the degraded condition of soldiers in the trenches. For instance, "a queer sardonic rat" is used to refer both to the animal and soldiers in the poem. However, despite his personal involvement in the war, Rosenberg does not claim any subjective authenticity over his verse. As evident from his poems, Rosenberg does not force any particular meaning on the readers; the image of red poppy "just a little white with the dust" (Rosenberg, 26) as given the last line is quite ambiguous in meaning. Like Owen, even if he felt that the poetry was in pity, critics are of the opinion that he was more interested in teasing or playing with words rather than provocatively outbursting his emotions. Furthermore, Rosenberg is considered to be adept at vividly conveying the physical pain more than any other soldier poets, for which many see him as a visual poet. As Jon Silk in observes in his work *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War*, that Rosenberg's strength as a poet "arises partly from the ability to particularize the powerful physical horror" (Silkin, p. 275).

The Psychological Impact of War and Poetry

The experiences of young soldiers at the battlefields filled their minds with nightmares which had a long-lasting effect on their consciousness. They were aware of the physical dangers and in course of time those experiences left them with bitter memories and nightmares. The explosions left their ears ringing even after the war got over and they survived through it. The psychological effects of the war were far worse than the deadly fate they encountered with. One of the psychological traumas that the soldiers suffered from was 'shell shock'. Michael Duffy describes it as a condition where "the intensity of the essentially artillery battles fought along the war fronts often caused neurotic cracks to appear in otherwise mentally stable soldiers." The war poets could articulate the sufferings gone through by the soldiers in their poetry. The psychological trauma found manifested in various ways in the works of these poets.

Sassoon and Owen themselves suffered from the disorder and had to go for treatment. Sassoon joined the army on 4 August 1914 and served till 1919. Sassoon's poem "The Rank Stench of Those Bodies Haunts Me Still" is exemplary of the psychological trauma

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experienced by the soldiers. In the mentioned poem he says:

“The rank stench of those bodies haunts me

And I remember things I’d best forget”(Sassoon, 1-2)

These lines show that Siegfried Sassoon (8 September 1886 - 1 September 1967) was haunted by the memories of the war. Throughout the poem he describes the battle and its disgusting smell and sight which are still clear in his mind. The poem presents a vivid picture of the conditions undergone by the soldiers during the First World War. The battlefields are seen as “fields of death” where their bodies lie motionless. The soldiers scream and men begin to “blunder down the trench” as the bombs and shells are constantly being fired upon them. Sassoon through his personal experience speaks for all the soldiers who suffered from shell shock in the trench.

There is also Freud’s idea about the uncanny and this involves grotesque images. We can see how the war poems present disturbing visuals of soldiers slaughtered. Freud also opines that the uncanny emerges from the blurring of the distinction between imagination and reality. The imaginary ceases to be one and, it seems to take shape into reality. In the poems of Sassoon, we find such magnified images used to recollect the war front

scenario. He draws from them epic texts of imaginary battles. For instance, in the poem “Counter-Attack” (1918) we find the dead soldiers with “green clumsy legs”, “trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud”, “naked sodden buttocks.” Freud states in his essay titled “Uncanny” (1919) that, “the over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with material reality” is a feature of the uncanny and, this is also seen as a symptom of neurosis and war neuroses in particular (Freud, p.15).

The above sections draw insight into the soldiers’ point of view of the battlefield and also the psychological impact of the war on the soldier poets. Through their personal experiences they gave a universal meaning to the issue of war which they faced in the most deteriorating manner. Here, one should try to see if the writing of poetry served any purpose for them and many questions can be raised in this regard. Are the poems therapeutic at times? Are they a means to express their bereavement and frustration? However, such questions are outside the ambit of this study and can be explored in further research on the subject. The next section of my paper attempts to look at the creative perspective of the intellects towards the prospect of war.

War Poetry and the Artistic Expression

W. B. Yeats (13 June 1865 – 28 January 1939), one of the most prolific

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modern poets was in sharp contrast with the ideas and beliefs held by the war poets. In the poem, "On Being Asked for a War Poem", he ponders upon the idea that whether a poet should write poetry on politics and war. According to Yeats, it is "better that in times like this/ A poet's mouth be silent." Furthermore, in his collection *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935*, he did not include any of the war poets. Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg and others found no place in the book. Yeats had a reason for his distaste towards the poetry written during the period of war. He makes the following statement:

"In poems that had for a time considerable fame, written in the first person, they made that suffering their own. I have rejected these poems for the same reason that made Arnold withdraw his 'Empedocles on Etna' from circulation; passive suffering is not a theme for poetry" (Yeats, "Introduction" p. 34)

For Yeats, tragedy in poetry was born only out of a poet's mental struggle with himself which was however not the case with war poets. Their suffering was enforced by physical circumstances. The war poets, according to Yeats, were too preoccupied with the realities of war, which made them unable to turn their poetry into an aesthetic pleasure. He did not consider physical presence as necessary to show the pity of

war. Here I bring Yeats' poem "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" which is a manifestation of his theory. The poem is a dedication to Lady Gregory's son Robert Gregory who was killed in the war. The airman is an aristocrat who is above earthly concerns. As he says:

"Nor law, nor duty bade me fight
Nor public men, nor cheering
crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds"
(Yeats, 9-12)

Instead of 'passive suffering' as Yeats had associated with the war poets, the airman in his poem is successfully artistic and aristocrat in death. Bearton points out that the poem restores the values the War "had apparently negated- individual heroism, the sense of tragedy, the prophetic capabilities of art"(The Great War in Irish Poetry). Yeats, however, is a 'poet of symbolic war'. We find an ample number of images drawn from the war in his works- both real and legendary. In the poem "The Second Coming"(1919), Yeats "predicts the chaos, violence, and anxiety of the twentieth century" in the most abstract way. Through phrases like "anarchy", "blood- dimmed tide" and "innocence is drowned", Yeats brings in the situation pertaining during the post war period. The image of falcon "turning and turning in the widening gyre" shows the movement of a society towards

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chaos and instability. Through the use of symbolic battle of Armageddon, Yeats brings a comparison between the mythical battle which was prophesied to destroy the forces of evil, and the First World War, which was similarly said to be a “war to end all wars.” “The second coming” is referred to Christ’s return to the earth for its purification but according to Yeats, it has not yet occurred. He says:

“The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out

When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi

Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert.” (Yeats, Stanza II, 11-13)

He uses the battle as a metaphor to highlight the instability and loss of a ‘centre’ in the society after the war.

Modernist Attitude towards the War

In later works of Yeats such as the referred poem, we can see a typical modernist attitude towards the war. He shared some major concerns (isolation, return to the past) of the modernist writers like Eliot, Lawrence and Joyce. Modernism is characterized by the acknowledgement of creative possibilities and rejection of prevailing social conventions arising from the wide-scale changes in European society. The devastating effects of war on the

civilians are shown in modern poetry through the use of complex symbols and imagery, and devices like irony, juxtaposition, fragmentation etc. New avenues opened up in arts and literature, and intellects liked to look towards issues like war and social conditions of man from an entirely different angle. Writers attempted to focus on the ‘subjectivity of reality’ and their works call for various interpretations.

While discussing the modernist’s attitude towards the post war society, Eliot’s name is of utmost importance. He sought to express the fragile position of man in a world dominated by shattered beliefs and norms. T. S. Eliot (26 September 1888 – 4 January 1965) saw that the British society had changed for worse after the Great War and conveys this idea in most of his poem. *The Waste Land* (1922) is regarded to be one of the poems which most appropriately deals with the aftermath of the war. It expresses a mood of disillusionment prevalent during the period. The fragmentary structure of the poem and lack of a single narration is a kind of resemblance to the nature of the society devoid of any organised system and an Almighty. The present world is a barren landscape and there is no sign of growth. This is clearly expressed in the following lines:

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“What are the roots that clutch, what
branches grow

Out of this stony rubbish? Son of
man,

You cannot say, or guess, for you
know only

A heap of broken images” (Eliot,
19-22)

The poem presents the contemporary civilization as a ‘waste land’, and the people in midst of disillusionment and weariness as the title itself suggests. Eliot draws various images from nature, myth and religion to show a contrasting picture between the spiritual barrenness of twentieth century and the richness of life in earlier times. The war and its impact are referred throughout the poem. For instance, he states:

“Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter
dawn,

A crowd flowed over London
Bridge, so many,

I had not thought death had undone
so many.” (Eliot, 60-63)

The image of a crowd, where “each man fixed his eyes before his feet” recall the faceless soldiers clustered in the trenches. Moreover, it also cites out the life of people without any individual identity in a mechanized world. Taking into

consideration yet another work of Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915), we find the images of war in apparently vague manner, nevertheless which also projects the post war society. The image of a patient “etherized upon a table” in the opening stanza may allude to the wounded soldiers healed by the surgeons. During the war, one would usually find ‘half-deserted streets’ as the people stayed indoors for the fear of firings.

In “The Hollow Men” (from the collection *Poems: 1909–1925*), Eliot portrays the state of the population in the post-war years. The first four lines themselves state the lifeless existence of men. He says:

“We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!”
(Eliot, 1-4)

Men have thus become like scarecrows or living corpses and, they cannot move out from the impact the war has caused. People can no longer think on their own as they are fed with some absurd ideas (“Headpiece filled with straw”). During the war and even after the war, the common mass has no alternative than to listen to the people in power. Their voice is “dried”, ‘quiet and meaningless’ for they are not heard or rather because they do not matter. The war

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has left them with only a mere existence. This is the general condition of men as they have witnessed hell and, therefore, their soul is dead.

The poem brings in all the major issues of the post-war period - the banality and absurdity of society, religion, men, and even life itself. Even an individual's self-worth has been compromised. Throughout the poem, Eliot tries to portray them by using stark imageries and symbolism. We are left to wonder which has been worse for humanity- the years during the war or after the war. On one hand, there are war poets with their horrible experiences in war, and on the other hand, Eliot is presenting the mind of men as detached from any physical reality. Eliot says in the poem, "This is the way the world ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper." Here he is not talking about the physical devastation caused by the war. For Eliot, the civilization did not collapse with people screaming and dying. This breakdown is because of the living beings who have lost their sanity.

In poems like *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and *Four Quartets* (1943), Eliot has tried to look at the remedies for the crisis of the modern age. In *Ash Wednesday*, we find the poet seeking the path of the spiritual. He says: "Because I do not hope to turn/ Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope". He is making the point that he does not want to turn towards the life of the

hollow men. The nihilism of the previous poems is no longer present here because now, he offers to the Almighty his "dead bones" and all his other weaknesses. The tone of the poem is still that of sadness, but there is hope for those who seek the divine path. The post-war period was difficult for the mass as they did not know where to find the meaning of life. Religion had failed to impress upon them, for prayers could not help them come out of the limbo state they were at. The speaker of the poem knows that the decision to turn towards faith is trying, and he can only hope not to turn back to the earlier state. He also sees the vain pursual of materiality that holds no good in them. Eliot also presents several voices to show the diverse directions that have opened up for these "lost souls". He also portrays a changing self who is struggling to find the way to salvation. However, another voice warns the pilgrim that there is a limitation in the path to piety:

"Because I know that time is always
time

And place is always and only place

And what is actual is actual only for
one time

And only for one place

I rejoice that things are as they are
and

I renounce the blessed face" (Eliot,
17-22)

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The poet is suggesting that there is still uncertainty towards this divine aspiration. The lines reflect the dilemma of the masses because they also seem to enjoy life with all its material glory.

Thus, going through some of the works by these intellectual poets we find their preoccupation with the situation of a world which has witnessed the war and its influence on the mass. Their works are reflections of a world of lost faith- shaken by anxiety, frustrations and fears, which were aggravated by the Great War. The concept of Modernism in English poetry is inextricably interwoven with the vast dimensions of War that remains an integral part of English history in its own enlightening and refreshing way.

Conclusion

We have seen how both the group of poets conveyed their impressions upon the war in their own style. Their different positions during the war gave distinct shapes to their poetry and we cannot negate the influence of any of these poets. Carl Krockel in his work, *War Trauma and Modernism* (2011) points out the concerns of the modernists in relation to the soldier poets. He says:

“These writers were not threatened by shellfire, but by a society fixated upon war. They were helpless to participate in events which were

remote from them, but so was the soldier helpless while caught up in these events. They could not represent war realistically because they had not witnessed it, but realism is an inadequate technique for representing what is too extreme and immense to be grasped by an individual subject. Their lack of physical injury was a consequence of their distance from the violence, but this condition mirrors that of the traumatised soldier, who could not locate his wounds externally and was victim to an injury inside his mind” (Krockel, “Introduction”, page 9).

Thus, the two approaches towards the war are found as complementing each other. The war did not limit itself to affecting those who saw and experienced it. It changed the structure of the society and indirectly also influenced the lives of the new generation. Literature moved away from dealing in met narrative and saw the possibilities of conflicting tendencies that can exist together. Thus, the paper has attempted to show how the frightening expressions of war have given a new scope to English poetry. The experiences can also be related to the formation of probable surviving strategies for the days to come.

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