

World War I Poetry

For King and Country?

There are four stages that typifies the progress of WWI poetry:

1. A passive reflection of the prevailing patriotic ideas, (eg Rupert Brooke, John McCrae, Alan Seeger). Idealistic, patriotic and traditional in form, style and sentiment. (Patriot: A person who wants to defend their country from enemies and helps their countries fervently and vigorously)
 - The Soldier: A sonnet, a highly artificial poetic form, more suited for intellectual subject rather than the communication of strong (genuine) feelings. Uses pastoral images to paint a glowing image of a fictional and beloved England at the centre of the Empire- Imperialistic sentiment implied.
 - In Flanders Fields: A perfect example of early patriotic certainty. Rhymes. An elegy which employs emotional blackmail to the living. Highly jingoistic- one's own country is always right and being aggressive to other countries is okay to maximise interest to own country.
 - Rendezvous: The mood is melancholy and fatalistic (sickly-sweet sentimentality). A central message delivered is that Death is kinder than the enemy and should be embraced, not feared. Draws attention to the beauty of natural decay and death to reinforce patriotic certainty.
 - Smile, Smile, Smile: Popular music (as a jingle) to encourage voluntary enlistment in the army. Paints a rosy image of life in the armies and avoids mentioning the horrors of war.
2. The angry prophet protesting the callous complacency of the civilian. Style is colloquial and expressive, though not intellectual. They rejected beautiful poetic clichés and created accurate images of anger, suffering and misery of warfare and trench life. Highlights horror of death and stating that death isn't noble anymore. Referred to “a series of meditations on killing” not empty, idealised visions of patriotic duty.
3. Compassion for those who suffer directly at the hands of war. Owen's poetry typifies the third stage. His poetry is marked with a compassion and pity that is absent in Sassoon's work and which distinguishes him from most of the war poets. It is partly a product of his religious background and training. Owen's sensitivity to the suffering was stronger than his anger at what was happening. According to Silkin, “Owen learned the mode of anger, satire and concision from Sassoon.” Despite the differing emphasis in their work, both Owen and Sassoon shared a genuine horror at the waste of young men's lives that the war resulted in. Both of them responded to perceived civilian indifference or complicity and the incompetence of politicians and the military (“...which (horrors of war) they have not enough imagination to realise”).
4. An active desire for change (a mingling of anger and compassion with extreme intelligence)

My own definition of patriotism: Patriotism is characterised as an intense love of one's country. It drives many people to do questionable things (like starting wars) without thinking about it rationally beforehand. Governments of countries take advantage of the general public's patriotic sentiments and use it as a mechanism of brainwashing and justifying their questionable actions. Escalated enough, patriotism could transcend into a form of nationalism, defined as putting the interests of one's own country in front of all others, even at the expense of other countries' interests. This fact is reflected in the fact that the MAIN (Militarism, Alliances, Imperialism, Nationalism) factors of the start if WWI contains nationalism. As a consequence, poets in the WWI era features it

as a theme in both approving and derogatory views. Patriotism may involve self sacrifice and it blinds people from the flaws of their own countries.

The Soldier by Rupert Brooke

Reflection of "The Soldier": It makes me feel dumbfounded at how naïve the people who never witnessed the horrors of warfares were. The author seems to truly believe in his ideals and isn't just faking his dedication to the war effort to get other people hyped up. The key message delivered by Rupert Brooke is that dying for one's country is the best honour a person could have and that it should be embraced. Uncertainty is presented as a form of stability. Writing techniques used by the author includes lots of merry and rosy imagery of lands administered by the UK (glorifying the war) as well as a personification of England to connect with the patriotic sentiment. A wistful writing tone was used to make the poem more artistic, as the form of the poem (sonnet) is widely associated with artistic people like Shakespeare.

How is patriotism shown in "The Soldier"- "A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware": England is presented as a benevolent, god-like creator, "A body of England's, breathing English air": Explains the idea that everything that's English is the best things in the world. Also hints at sacrifices needed by the country to maximise its interests, "That is forever England": alludes to the author's vision of England taking over Turkey after WWI, theme of colonialism and imperialism portrayed.

Other peoples' ideas on patriotism in "The Soldier": ("Gave once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam") floral/natural setting portrays England as frail and feminine so that it needs to be protected. The willingness to die is glorified. ("Dreams happy as her day") A day in England us as fulfilling and rich as a dream. The title "The Soldier" signifies a resolute and determined attitude to protect one's country (self-sacrifice). The narrator representing the deceased is de-identified.

Theme of sacrifice: "The Soldier" portrays dying in combat as an honour and it suggests to the audience that all soldiers killed in battle would remain immortal in everyone's hearts and minds. It depicts that the land that the deceased were buried in would become enriched by their bodies' existence. A supernatural idea of a joyful afterlife (similar to Valhalla in Norse theology) for warriors who were killed in battle was hinted. The tone of the writing is warm, passionate and slow, like an anthem glorifying the soldiers killed in action.

Propaganda (biased or misleading information to promote a political cause) in "The Soldier": A promise of redemption is made if someone participates in the Great War, similar to the promise made to the Crusaders centuries before WWI (Killing infidels (people of different religions) would bring pardon to all prior sins and wrongdoings). Modern interpretations would classify the afterlife depicted in "The Soldier" as being an outrageous illusion (lie) because of its exaggerated flamboyancy. It is worth noting that Rupert Brooke didn't appear to be associated with the British government, he truly believed his ideals regarding war.

In Flanders Fields- John McCrae

Reflection of "In Flanders Fields": "In Flanders Fields" makes me feel bad for the deceased in WWI, who sought so vigorously that their names be remembered and become immortal, however some of their names had drifted into the oblivion. The key message of John McCrae is that we should honour and remember the dead for all eternity in order to pay off our debt to them, because they fought in defence of their country's peace. Writing techniques include gentle and natural

imagery to comfort and a more menacing tone in the last stanza, to condemn people who don't remember the fallen. AA BB CC rhyming form used.

Quotes: "Scarce heard amid the guns below" - Life is intertwined with nature, "We are the Dead" - the soldiers killed in action were given a voice by the poet, "...though poppies grow" - repetition of the symbol of poppies (Poppies were a symbol of death in war before WWI. McCrae's poem helped to popularise the poppy as a sign of remembrance), "If ye break faith with us..." - a curse was casted on people who don't remember the fallen.

How is patriotism shown in "In Flanders Fields": ("We are the dead...") The fallen soldiers were given a voice by the poet (similar to "The Soldier") to strike the audience's reflex of surprise, as the fact of dead people speaking is a supernatural and spooky one indeed. The dead are also implied to be narrating in an exclusive afterlife for those who were slain in battle ("We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset [a metaphor for end of life ie death] glow,"). Patriotism shown to be paying off, as the soldiers loved their country, and now their country loves them back by rendering their names immortal ("Loved and were loved...")

Theme of self sacrifice: The poet used the metaphor of passing on the torch (of victory) with dying strength, which is an action performed by dying heroes in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, to show how much the soldiers had sacrificed for the ordinary person: "To you from failing hands we throw...The torch; be yours...to hold". Heroism is depicted indirectly through observations of nature from the deceased's perspective: "The larks, still bravely singing, fly"

Element of propaganda: A slogan directs a call to action to the audience was used ("Take up our quarrel with the foe"), which is the kind of message the war office was spreading to get naïve young men to enlist voluntarily.

Poem Table ("The Soldier")

Natural and Pastoral Imagery: "Gave, once, her flowers to love", "In that rich dust a richer dust concealed;", "Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.", "...there's some corner of a foreign field"

Patriotism and English Superiority: Patriotism is mentioned multiple times by the poet. On a more minuscule scale, the dead body of the narrator would be laid forever in a "foreign field" and therefore claims (colonises) that piece of land for England for all eternity. The corpse is later said to be "A body of England's, breathing English air", implying everything about England is undisputedly good and superior. On a bigger scale, the narrator is helping the beloved motherland to spread the "English heaven" to others who aren't lucky enough to be already under the influence of England. England is portrayed as a kind of creator deity "A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware"

Poetic Techniques: Lots of natural imagery (discussed above), evocation of the supernatural (a dead person breathing and speaking), slow, steady and calming rhythm, promises of atonement for soldiers killed in action.

Definition of imperialism (a key theme in "The Soldier"): A policy of extending a country's power and influence through colonisation, use of military forces or other means.

Rendezvous- Alan Seeger

Reflection of “Rendezvous”: It makes me feel spooked out by the fact that the narrator has a sickly and unhealthy obsession with Death, which could be a literary device the author uses to draw the audience's attention to the key message that Death isn't something to be feared and that it should be embraced enthusiastically. Other writing techniques used by the poet include overly sentimental language that depicts warfare and Death in an arguably twisted way as well as a benevolent personification of Death as a caring, guiding parent-like figure.

Other people's ideas: The poet presents an eerie predetermined obligation to die- a scheduled occurrence that isn't so unfortunate. Makes the reader feel patriotic- a soldier must make a rendezvous with Death (it is considered inviting) for their country. The narrator was certain of Death (their own and others) and life (spring). There's no point in fighting or resisting the inevitability of Death. Seeger encourages his audiences to accept the life and joys offered in the afterlife (no unwelcome rendezvous).

Counterattack- Siegfried Sassoon

Reflection of “Counterattack”: The poem made me feel very much disturbed from the carnage of WWI. Absolutely putrid decay is everywhere. The key message was clearly delivered by the poet, which would be that war is good for nothing and that it's a shame that so many young men keep dying unnecessarily in the war due to poor leadership by their officers. Writing techniques used include highly visual imagery of death, destruction and decay. Dehumanised and de-identified characters win sympathy for the soldiers from the reader.

Other people's ideas: The poem elicits feelings of disgust. Pessimistic view of the war- portrays the true image and experiences of the trenches. We see the lengths that soldiers had to go to in becoming heroes. There's absolutely no glory or honour in war. Death is no longer noble or beautified. No exact rhyme scheme signified the unpredictability of Death. A key message would be that there's no peace in Death, only acceptance. Human bodies (parts) were treated like objects. Pathetic fallacy shown in the idea of life through nature.

Analysis Activities:

Quote Analysis: “The place is rotten with the dead” The graphic images of horror, casualties and atrocities of warfare is used by the poet skilfully to disturb the audience and to get the, to pay attention. “Sprawled and grovelled along the saps” draws the feeling of everything being split apart and not working out the way it's supposed to work out. “Mute in the clamour of shells” implies that the soldiers are reduced to be less than human and that they have become de-identified and dehumanised.

Graphic and shocking images: The very graphic, shocking, horrible and disturbing images of fragmented body parts etc discussed above shocks the readers and sends a “what the hell is going on in the war” message to the reader. This makes the reader to reflect upon their prior, naïve, uneducated ideas about warfare. Sassoon makes the reader ponder on his own first-hand experience on the horrors of modern warfare.

Rhymes and rhythms: No specific rhyme scheme was present in “Counterattack” to evoke a feeling of confusion, discord and disruption about war. The pace (rhythm) of the poem speeds up and slows down in different parts of the poem to further extend the idea that warfare and Death are all shocking, horrible and unpredictable.

Comparison with Stage 1 Patriotic Poems: Poems in stage 1 characterised by their intense theme of patriotism usually paints a bright, rosy and happy picture of life after death. "Counterattack" doesn't endorse these messages and says that there's nothing glorious about being killed in battle. Death was shown to be an absolutely putrid thing, not something to be embraced enthusiastically.

Background knowledge on Siegfried Sassoon: A great deal of satire was written about the officers and the generals who did not have an idea of what they were doing, and led soldiers on in battle.

Sonnets- Writing Conventions

A poem with 14 lines (each about 10 syllables in length for Iambic pentameter; tetrameter (8 syllable); hexameter (12 syllable)). There are three quatrains and followed by a rhyming couplet. For Iambic pentameter metre, the first syllable is not stressed however the second syllable is stressed. The rhyming scheme is (ab ab cdcd efef gg)

Make your own sonnet (draw on ideas of patriotism, use beautiful, comforting or reassuring and the correct rhyme scheme):

Misplaced

I am lost in the mess that is my life,
Choices everywhere, decision to make.
Confused, bamboozled like wildlife
Filled with lots of emotions to fake.

In the midst of this hubbub the best is seen,
Nucleus to my identity, my country.
A land full of delights, full of green,
Luxuriant with flowers, bushes and tree.

When I'm bewildered, scared it guides me,
With the tenderness of a shepherd, my country.
When one's mortal dust returns to the mead,
He accepts, absorbs me into the same entity as he.

My identity, shall be engraved for all eternity,
In this land of felicity, my country.

Dulce et Decorum Est- Wilfred Owen

6 Annotations of "Dulce et Decorum Est": The poem starts out on a negative note with hints of misogyny and contempt for old people to draw attention and parallels to how ridiculous these hates are and how much they share in common (in terms of pointlessness) with warfare. The old lie that dying for one's own country is sweet and just is capitalised (ie Lie not lie) to make it seem like a tangible entity one could direct all their hatred towards. The gas attack had dehumanised the characters to make them seem like a bunch of scrambling wild animals driven by their primeval instinct- to survive. A recurring theme of dreams and sleep was used, as sleep is euphemistic for Death, which gives the feeling that the soldiers may as well be dead. Onomatopoeias used when the narrator's fellow soldier died gruesomely in the gas attack also dehumanises the group- they're

rendered wordless, unlike real humans, who are capable of artistic and expressive speech etc. A cold, solemn rational reflection that debunks the “old lie” at the end was issued to the readers with an intended effect to get them to feel empathy.

How did “Dulce et Decorum Est” painted a graphic and unheroic picture of trench warfare: “Dulce et Decorum Est” was very graphic in describing the horrors and gruesomeness of trench warfare. The mental states the soldiers were in was demoralised and sleepy, worn out by the pointless and meaningless fighting: “Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through the sludge.” Trench warfare is a very stagnant and stale form of warfare and it's taking toll on the soldiers' morale, rendering them into walking dead people: “Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots”. The gas attack had made a fellow soldier's face “...like a devil's sick of sin”, heavily disfigured.

The soldier's body isn't honoured like a hero's body deserves to be honoured and was dumped unceremoniously into a wagon, to be buried in a mass grave: “Behind the wagon that we flung'(throw casually) him in...”. A sterile, rational warning was issued to the audience to never put faith or participate in blind patriotism/nationalism: “My friend, you would not tell with such high zest...The old Lie...”

Contrast with stage 1 (patriotic) poems: “Dulce et Decorum est” and “Anthem for Doomed Youth” both reveals horrifying imageries that deters anyone endorsing warfare for glory's sake, as there's no glory to war. Patriotic poems of stage 1 tells the reader that dying for one's country is great and one shouldn't be afraid of dying in battle, as there would be a sweet afterlife for people slain in battle to enjoy for all eternity. Owen's poems, which falls in the Compassionate Stage (Stage 3), states that one should never be fooled by fervent patriotism, one should remain rational about all affairs and one should offer compassion to people killed in battle.

How are Owen's poems good reenactments of the drama, pity and horrors of war: Owen's poems are great replications of the disturbing nature of warfare. Its depictions of a gas attack, everyday realities and horrors the soldiers must tough out, was grotesquely graphical and the morbid juxtaposition of having a proper funeral and having a militaristic funeral (ie bullets, shells, slow and painful death) in “Anthem for Doomed Youth” was also very disturbing. Owen's attempts to evoke sympathy for the soldiers from the readers. Dramatic elements were more used in “Dulce et Decorum Est” to trigger emotional confusion at the onset of the gas attack than in “Anthem for Doomed Youth”.

Disabled- Wilfred Owen

The poem is a juxtaposition of remembrance (past) and realisation. There is a broken rhyme pattern to each stanza- this halting, awkward line emphasises the soldier's utter desolateness and his broken will to live his life. Harsh words are used subtly to emphasise meaning- “ghastly suit of grey” and “throwing” away his knees. Each stanza commences in the present and finishes in the past.

“He sat in a wheeled chair” (helpless dependency of the veteran on people around him. “Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn” The veteran would never experiences the pleasures of life again. “...queer disease” pity for his strange abnormality. “Now he will never feel again how slim Girls' waists are” regrets of the man's sex life. “Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts.” Vanity, he wants to appear manly to the ladies and be proud of himself. The analogy between war and playing sport. His face has become withered with experience and sorrow. “Now, he is old; his back will never brace;” his youth is draining away at a very fast rate. Literal and figurative support. “Germans he scarcely thought of” His motives in joining the war are questioned. He had never been patriotic

enough to care about the invading Germans or Austrians (young and naïve). "...he was drafted out with drums and cheers." Celebration of valour. "Thanked him; and then inquired about his soul" his accomplishments in the war were forgotten- fame and glory were denied to him. People no longer praised him as a hero. The solemn (aged) man pitied him for his loss. "Tonight he noticed how the women's eyes Passed from him to the strong men that were whole." His plans and motivations for joining the war (appeal to the women) lead to his plan's undoing. "Why don't they come?" More helpless dependency on other people who don't necessarily care about him.

Does this soldier feel alive or have any desire to live?: The soldier doesn't have any desires to live any longer because he found out how people just don't care about him, a very nasty fact revealed all too suddenly to him. The masses only admired him when he appears to be a hero embarking on an epic quest, but they ignored him when he comes back heavily maimed. He realised his naïvety (of believing war to be a game and that it's worth it to risk his own life in order to attract the opposite sex) only when it's too late. His motives betrayed him and backfired.