

Context: Wilfred Owen and 'Futility'

Wilfred Owen (1893–1918)

Wilfred Owen – along with his friend and mentor, Siegfried Sassoon – is now thought of as the poet who exposed the brutalities of trench warfare and the senseless waste of life caused by World War One. Owen spent only four months fighting and only five weeks in the front line, but the shock of the horrors of war was so great that he decided it was his task to expose the 'Pity of War', to represent in poetry the experiences of the men in his care.

He was drafted to France in 1917, in what was the worst winter of the war. After spending January to April in the trenches, he was sent to Edinburgh's Craiglockhart War Hospital for the shell-shocked where he met Siegfried Sassoon, a poet he admired, who encouraged and influenced him. Both poets were persuaded to return to the Front. In a letter to his mother Owen wrote: 'I came out again in order to help these boys; directly, by leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly, by watching their suffering that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can.' Owen was killed on 4 November 1918 trying to get his men across the Sambre Canal. The news reached his parents seven days later, on Armistice Day.

Despite his views on the senseless waste of war, Wilfred Owen was awarded the Military Cross in recognition of his courage and leadership during the breaking of the Hindenburg Line in October 1918.

World War One (1914–1918)

Wilfred Owen was particularly keen to make the public aware of the dreadful conditions in the trenches, where more than 200,000 men lost their lives in the Somme offensive. Amid the stink of the waterlogged trenches, men had to contend with lice, rats and disease, not to mention the trauma of watching their friends die and being constantly under attack themselves. Siegfried Sassoon had published a denunciation of the war which claimed it was 'deliberately prolonged by those who had the power to end it'. This 'Soldier's Declaration', published in *The Times* on 31 July 1917, is available at greatwar.nl/sassoon/sassoondeclaration.html – it was as a result of this (to avoid a Court Martial) that he was sent to the same hospital in Edinburgh that Owen was in. There he soon persuaded Owen of his view that the British government was deliberately prolonging the war, that the originally defensive motive for war had become an opportunistic one that ignored early possibilities for peace. Nonetheless, both men felt they had no option but to return for the sake of all their fellow sufferers.

Owen's poetry

In 1913 Wilfred Owen became a private tutor in France, a position he held until he enlisted in 1915. During this time he became acquainted with a French poet, Laurent Tailhade, who encouraged him in his poetic endeavours, just as Sassoon was to do later. Despite admiring other poets, Owen developed his own style, using pararhyme, alliteration and assonance in particular. This later influenced a new generation of poets, such as W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender.

In an introduction to Owen's posthumously published collection of poems, Sassoon called Owen a 'man of absolute integrity of mind' and wrote that 'In the last year of his life he attained a clear vision of what he needed to say, and these poems survive as his true and splendid testament'.

Apart from technical skill, his poems are characterised by bleak, unflinching realism, imbued with compassion for the soldiers. Dylan Thomas called him a 'poet of all times, all places and all wars' because of the way his poems exposed 'the foolishness, unnaturalness, horror, inhumanity and insupportability of war'.

'Futility'

'Futility' is one of only five poems to have been published in Owen's lifetime. It was probably written in Ripon, England in May 1918 and it appeared in June 1918 in the magazine *The Nation*. Owen gave categories to some of his poems: 'Futility' comes under the heading 'Grief'. Four manuscript versions of the poem (one with the title 'Move him into the sun' and another 'Frustration') are available at [The First World War Poetry Digital Archive](#).

Bibliography

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