

HIGH ZEST
and
THE DOGGEREL MARCH

Wilfred Owen – Genius or Sugar-stick ?

*Some Essential Notes
for Teachers & Pupils*

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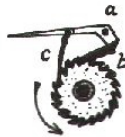
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HIGH ZEST
and THE DOGGEREL MARCH

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Wilfred Owen – What’s new?

There can’t be many poets as squarely identified with ‘war poetry’, or more frequently spotted on the syllabus, as the soldier-poet Wilfred Owen. Why is this? And how important, really, is Owen, or the First World War, to the historical development of poetry in Britain? So much has been written and rewritten about Owen that it’s sometimes difficult to see the pasta for the sauce! I won’t even try to sort that one out here; but the least I can do is offer you a few tasties to chew on, mainly in terms of looking at Owen in a broader context. For a start, even a quick listen to some of Owen’s contemporaries demonstrates just how ‘realistic’ and original Owen was by comparison. E.B. Flenley is fairly typical of what was called the “trade in schoolboy verses” that became widespread in the First World War:

**Mowing, Mowing in the Sunlight
On the windy lawn.
Mowing ‘mid the wind and sunshine
Mowing since the dawn.
Mowing, Mowing.**

This is (not surprisingly) from a poem called “Mowing” (*Fragments by a Schoolboy Now Sleeping in France*, 1920). John Oxenham, a celebrated writer of his time, sold something like 175,000 copies of his book in 1915 with verses like this:

**They died that we might live, -
Hail! - And Farewell!
- All honour give
To those who, nobly striving, nobly fell,
That we might live!**

That extract is taken from a poem called (yes, you guessed it) “Hail! - And Farewell!” Oxenham’s poetry was issued on thousands of cards and posters for schools and Scouts’ clubs to encourage the young to fight. In many ways, that whole ‘Georgian’ period in poetry sounded very much like him. Many Georgian poems had a clanking rhythm, rather like Christmas card

messages. I call it 'The Doggerel March', because it seems to shout: 'STAY IN STEP !!'. It's a rhythm that tells you it's best to stick with the king, the army, the crowd.

Those of you familiar with Owen's poetry will, by now, probably feel safe about saying he *definitely* used a very different language, attitude and tone to the other poets of his time. Yes? Well, not quite. The startling fact is that Owen's 'early' work sounded very similar to those excerpts you've just been reading. Here's an extract from Owen's first published poem, *Song of Songs*, written some time between late June and mid-August 1917:

**Sing me at morn but only with your laugh :
Even as Spring that laugheth into leaf ;
Even as Love that laugheth after Life...**

**Sing me at midnight with your murmurous heart !
Let youth's immortal-moaning chords be heard
Throbbing through you, and sobbing, unsubdued.**

Just try reciting *that* with your mouth full! No, I mean it. Seriously. Try reading it out loud. It's not natural speech at all, is it? Or even close. There's something of the Doggerel March in there too. Compare it with Owen's 'late' poems – poems that are still lyrical in style but which now include snippets of speech and that are (to be blunt) far more direct, easier to say. Now, isn't *that* some sign, an indication, that poetry was reaching a kind of turning point? And what's amazing is that you can actually hear it all happening right there at the tip of Owen's pen in those few brief months of writing. So, is that it then? – the reason why he's famous? Is it because, somehow, the whole mixed-up evolution of the First World War and its poetry can be summed up in one person: Wilfred Owen? Is that what gets him onto all those school syllabuses? Is that why he's 'Great'? Maybe. But watch out. There are dissenting voices...

Will the real Wilfred Owen please stand up ?

It still makes me wince to read W.B. Yeats' reference to Owen as: *"unworthy of the poet's corner of a country newspaper... He is all blood, dirt and sucked sugar-stick."* And Yeats is not alone. Jacques Darras detects in poets like Owen a plea *"not only for sympathy for their plight as warriors, but also... towards the inevitable inadequacies of the poetry itself."* Even Philip Larkin (essentially a Wilfred fan) thought that Owen was "historically predictable", though he also believed that Owen was exceptional in expressing that emergent new mood.

This divergence of opinion is significant. Owen is not as clear-cut a writer and personality as some of the syllabus poems might suggest. The Owen I have come to know was nicknamed 'Lone Wolf' at home. He was sometimes desperately cruel to his brother. There are signs he might have been a bit of a mummy's boy (of his 673 surviving letters, well over 500 *are* written to his mum...). It's clear, too, that Owen had real trouble with friendship, work and love. *"All women, without exception, annoy me"* he wrote to his ma in February 1914. (Did that include her?) We should also recall that Owen's (probable) homosexuality was far riskier and more problematic in his time than it would be in ours. And yet, his shy manner often made a striking impression, as it did with the poet Siegfried Sassoon.

Owen's attitudes to the Great War, too, were far from straightforward. His early feelings of detachment (*"the guns will effect a little useful weeding"*) gave way to the staggering shock of active service. That shock was expressed in extreme forms of behaviour: for example, in horrific nightmares and his *"later habit of carrying photographs of war casualties for production on appropriate occasions"* (Philip Larkin). It all seems a bit of a mess. But good old Larkin helps us to bring it all together again:

"From being indifferent to the war, and to the troops fighting it, he became deeply concerned. From being an unimpressive and derivative poet, he became an original and unforgettable one. From lacking 'any touch of tenderness' he became the spokesman of a deep and unaffected compassion. From being an unlikeable youth he became a likeable and admirable man."

Wilfred and Siegfried.

But wait a minute. Was it the shock of war, or the ‘literary shock’ of his famous meeting with Sassoon, that really made the difference to Owen’s work? After all, pretty much all of Owen’s major poems were written in the thirteen and a half months following that meeting. It’s perhaps with this in mind that Dominic Hibberd asks us to contrast *Song of Songs* with the first draft of *The Dead-Beat* (written within about six weeks of each other) so that we can detect for ourselves the seismic influence of Sassoon on Owen’s writing. *Song of Songs*, as we’ve heard, sounds like a rip-off from his favourite Romantic and lyrical poets (Owen adored Keats, and carried with him on his last period of active service a copy of Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads*). But this conventional lyrical voice was splintered after he befriended Sassoon at Craiglockhart Hospital – a meeting dramatised so beautifully in Pat Barker’s excellent book, *Regeneration*.

It’s probably fair to say that Sassoon helped Owen, in an extremely short time, to fuse his word-music with a harsh and telling realism. Owen responded with incredible speed. Let me tell you, as a writer, it’s no mean feat to jump into a new style just like that. But Owen’s new voice met a deep need in him. It enabled him to satisfy his love for musicality while at the same time confront his own demons. He began to spin complex, insistent webs of sound in which he trapped the often bleak and appalling experience of trench warfare. He maintained his link with the poets of the past, but now with a vision that was altogether darker. So it happens that Owen’s “Futility” may smack of Tennyson, but it has none of Tennyson’s heroics. And Owen probably based “Strange Meeting” on Shelley’s *The Revolt of Islam*, but in Shelley’s poem the dreamer successfully raises a hand in reconciliation, while in Owen’s “dream” the gesture fails (“*my hands were loath and cold*”) and the only reconciliation lies in death (“*let us sleep now...*”). Owen’s dark and distinctive synthesis of the old and the new was – and still is – compelling. For its time, it was literary dynamite.

Owen's Legacy.

There are still many questions to mull over. For instance, how far does Owen help us to understand his time? I mean, if Owen did weld together the old and the new to create something unique, then how was he representative of the public, “the literature”, or even his fellow soldiers? Was Owen more like a photographic ‘negative’ of his time than a reflection of it? It’s also worth remembering here that Owen was hardly published in his lifetime. His influence came mostly after the event. Which begs some further questions: Did Owen merely *express* an anti-war position – or did he actually help to *define* it? Was he simply ‘pickling’ the pity of war, and addressing it to future readers? By all means decide for yourself. But I would suggest “War Poet” is a label that got stuck onto a relatively small group of First World War poets quite a while after most of them had died – and many of those writers were far from famous in their own time, or typical of it.

And I still haven’t finished answering my opening query: why our constant spotlight on the First World War generally, and Owen in particular? Well, first of all, the Great War spilled the apple cart of British colonial thought and literature. The human and economic losses were so vast, and the subsequent shifts in attitude so profound, that they simply could not be absorbed into the old ways of thinking. Not only that. Because art and poetry on the European Continent had already ‘modernised’ to a large degree *before* the War, the First World War signalled a key cultural moment in Britain. After the War, nothing could be the same – in literature, as well as in everyday life. Not only had the old certainties of Empire been severely dented, but also the old certainties of poetic form and style. The Doggerel March had tripped itself up. ‘Modernism’ could finally gallop into Britain on war’s back.

Another thing. Owen abhorred war, but he was also drawn to its intensity. He hated the loss of life, yet he tried to make something of harsh beauty from it. Which is fascinating, because that’s exactly the kind of thing a ‘Romantic’ poet does. And Owen was steeped in the Romantic tradition. According to Dominic Hibberd, it was this Romantic thread in Owen that allowed his imagination and obsession to rework the terrible realities of the

War so effectively. My point, then, is this: maybe Owen's poetry took such deep root in our literature precisely because it *wasn't* altogether new. In other words, he was *sort* of Modern – but not TOO Modern.

I know, I should explain further what I mean by that. Well, Owen and Sassoon certainly didn't *sound* traditional, because of their realism, natural speech, colloquialisms, etc. – but they still had a confidence and certainty about what they were saying. Yes, it may be a *different* certainty to what went before – based on compassion and anger rather than national pride – but it's a certainty nonetheless. In this sense, weren't they still a little bit 'traditional', a touch 'Georgian'? And we've already seen how Owen built on ways of writing and thinking that were there in earlier poetic culture. Perhaps, then, that's one of the reasons for his spectacular success. He is, at one and the same time, both revolutionary and familiar. He meets the need for change as well as the desire for continuity. It's easy to see how these qualities, in the aftermath of two World Wars, could have strong and broad appeal.

This leads us to an interesting theory. During and after Owen, British poetry was moving towards something far more questioning, experimental and radical. This is often called 'Modernism'*. My arguments suggest that Owen wasn't himself a 'Modernist', quite. He was more a part, perhaps, of an initial set of adjustments *towards* Modernism. So, Owen doesn't shake off readers the way some full-bloodied Modernist poets do. He doesn't need loads of footnotes. He's rich and fresh and yet (it often seems) 'clear-cut'. He often appeals directly to your emotions – and he always appeals directly to your ear. All of this helps to explain his glue-like presence on the syllabus. Owen becomes a perfect choice for anyone seeking an accessible, and yet 'modern', historical poet.

**Footnote: 'Modernists' like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot are far more concerned about ambivalences, experiments and irrationalities – about different (and sometimes conflicting) points of view. Their 'truths' are supple, subtle and a bit slippery – truths that have to be winkled out. No 'Doggerel March' for them!*

For many reasons, then, Owen's poetic 'position' and achievements (or his character and attitude towards war) can't be summed up in a simple crib-note. This is nowhere better revealed than in Owen's letters. Shortly before his death he wrote to his mother:

"I lost all my earthly faculties and fought like an angel... My nerves are in perfect order."

Eh? What? Where's all the disgust, rage and compassion of the later poems? What's happened to the venom that drove him to scold the patriotic poet Jessie Pope, accusing her of 'high zest'? The Wilfred we meet in the letters and in the poems don't always concur. Once again, we're left with a few half-answers and more questions. Sorry – but that's what poets do. Maybe I should give the last (and famous) word to Owen himself:

This book is not about heroes. English Poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, dominion or power...

**Above all, this book is not concerned with Poetry.
The subject of it is War, and the pity of War.
The Poetry is in the pity.
Yet these elegies are not to this generation...**

**They may be to the next.
All the poet can do today is to warn.**

Preface, "Poems by Wilfred Owen": G. Walter (ed), Everyman's Edition, 1997.

OWEN'S BIOGRAPHY

- 1893: Born: 18 March, Wilfred Edward Salter Owen (Oswestry, Shropshire) son of Tom & Susan.
- 1900: 11 June, Wilfred starts school in Birkenhead Institute.
- 1906: Tom appointed Assistant Superintendent (Western Region railways) - move to Shrewsbury.
- 1911: Reads Sidney Colvin's *Keats*. Visits British Museum to view Keats manuscripts. October: unpaid lay assistant to the Rev. Herbert Wigan at Dunsden, near Reading.
- 1913: September, travels to Bordeaux (France) to teach English at the Berlitz school.
- 1914: 31 July, tutor to Mme. Léger in the High Pyrenees. 4 August, war declared in Britain. 3 September - French government moves to Bordeaux. 17 September, Wilfred returns to Bordeaux with the Léger family. Becomes freelance teacher of English.
- 1915: September, returns to London; October, Joins up in the Artists' Rifles.
- 1917:** 1-2 January, joins 2nd Manchesters on the Somme near Beaumont Hamel.
- 9-16 January, **Owen's first action** - with his men, he holds a flooded dug-out in No-Man's Land for fifty hours under heavy bombardment; Owen sees a sentry blinded.
- 20 January, returns to the Front Line, platoon exposed in severe frost.
- 14-15 March, suffers concussion; 2 May, evacuated with shell-shock.
- 26 June, arrives at **Craiglockhart** War Hospital, near Edinburgh.
- 17 July, writes first contribution for *The Hydra* magazine and becomes editor. Circa 17 August, introduces himself to Sassoon.
- 25 September, begins to give lessons in English Literature at Tynecastle School.
- 13 October, introduced by Sassoon to Robert Graves, who is shown draft of "Disabled".
- 24 November, returns to 5th Manchesters at Scarborough for light duties.
- 4 December, promoted to Lieutenant; Christmas, Sassoon posted back to the French Front.
- 1918:** 12 March, Owen reports to Northern Command Depot, Ripon.
- 5 June, rejoins 5th Manchesters in Scarborough; 13 July, Sassoon wounded & sent home.
- 31 August, Owen reports to base camp, Étaples.
- 29 Sept - 3 October, Owen involved in successful assault on enemy. Awarded the MC.
- 4 November, killed early in the morning on the banks of the Oise-Sambre canal.
- 11 November, news of Owen's death reaches family home in Shrewsbury; Armistice signed.

First World War Poetry – some useful books

1. **David Roberts, “Minds at War” and “Out in the Dark”**
(Saxon, London, 1996, 1998 respectively). *Thorough, varied, theme-based, up-to-date. The first text is especially useful and thought-provoking.*
2. **Jon Stallworthy, “The Oxford Book of War Poetry”**
(OUP: 1984, 1988). *The classic war anthology – hard to beat.*
3. **Christopher Martin, “War Poems”**
(Unwin Hyman, London, 1990). *Good overview of I WW; questions & exercises.*
4. **Erich Remarque, “All Quiet on the Western Front”** (Heinemann).
Classic first-hand account in powerful prose by a German soldier; helped to define the anti-war position of the 1920s.
5. **Vera M. Brittain, “Verses of a V.A.D.”** (Erskine MacDonald, London, 1918).
Important perspective from a woman writer. Available from the Imperial War Museum.

WILFRED OWEN – Poems and related texts

The classic editions of Owen are by **C. Day Lewis, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, Jon Stallworthy, Dominic Hibberd** and **Jon Silkin** – note the number of poets in the list!

1. **Wilfred Owen, “Poems”** (Chatto & Windus, 1920).
Introduction by Siegfried Sassoon. Reprinted by the Imperial War Museum (1990).
2. **Jon Stallworthy (ed), “Wilfred Owen: the Complete Poems and Fragments”**
(Chatto & Windus, the Hogarth Press and OUP; 1983). In two volumes.
New material, key definitive reference text. Volume II has scripted copies of drafts.
3. **George Walter, “Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen”** (Everyman’s Edition, 1997).
Under-rated book: Walter uses the original drafts of Owen’s poetry, so you can compare them against subsequent versions revised by editors such as Blunden.
4. **Dominic Hibberd, “Wilfred Owen: War Poems & Others”** (Chatto, 1973).
Anything by Hibberd is probably useful.
5. **John Bell (ed), “Wilfred Owen, Selected Letters”** (OUP, 1985).
Invaluable resource for context and development of Owen’s thoughts.
6. **Philip Larkin, “Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces, 1955-1982”** (Faber, 1983).
Larkin offers us brevity and – as ever – eloquence. Excellent, but not easy to find.

Stop Press: Hibberd’s “Wilfred Owen – a New Biography” (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2002) is good, particularly if you want psychological detail and bang up-to-date scholarship.

SOUND EFFECTS : Something useful to try out on Owen's poems...

How did Owen use sound to pattern his poems? This activity helps you to find out.

Recommended Owen poems to use in this exercise:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| • The Send-Off | Written: April/May 1918 in Ripon |
| • Inspection | Written: Aug 1917 at Craiglockhart |
| • Dulce et Decorum Est | Written: Oct 1917 at Craiglockhart |
| • Anthem for Doomed Youth | Written: Sept/Oct 1917, Craiglockhart |
| • Disabled | Written: Oct 1917 at Craiglockhart |
| • Strange Meeting | Written: Jan/March 1918, in Scarborough? |

1. Choose **three** poems from the above. You **must** include “Strange Meeting”.
2. Choose **three** ‘sound effects’ from the list below (“Full Rhyme” should be one of them). Look for these effects in your 3 poems. Underline the appropriate words with a coloured pencil – use a different colour for each sound effect.

(Important: If you look around, you'll probably find alternative definitions to the ones I give below. If mine are difficult for you to understand, by all means talk them through with your teacher – or else look for new definitions yourself, in a library.)

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| FULL RHYME | Identical sound in the last stressed vowel onwards
(eg brown , gown ; hit ; pit ; serene , been). |
| HALF RHYME | Words end with the same consonants, but not vowel
(eg hell , sail ; zinc , bank). |
| PARA-RHYME | Words begin AND end with the same consonant sounds
(eg world / walled). |
| ASSONANCE | Same stressed vowel: eg “ H ow the D oberman is l ow”. |
| ALLITERATION | The same consonant running across words (especially at the beginning) eg ‘ f lashing f light’ or ‘ r agged g irls g row g roggy’. |

Ideas for DISCUSSION

1. Compare the patterns of colour for each poem. What can you say about them? What are the main similarities and differences between poems?
2. Which sound effect(s) dominate the poems you chose? Are some effects used more systematically than others?
3. Which sound effect(s) give a sense of sadness, incompleteness, “failure”? Why do you think Owen uses this? (Discuss this with your teacher if you get stuck.)
4. Note the dates of composition of the poems. Does *Strange Meeting* (a later poem) use its sound effects differently to the earlier poems?

Mario Petrucci is a qualified teacher and Arvon tutor who has secured many commissions with radio and the BBC. He works widely in schools in a freelance capacity as well as through the Poetry Society/DfEE project *Poetryclass*. He is currently a Fellow of the Royal Literary Fund at Oxford Brookes University.

Mario was the Imperial War Museum's first poet in residence and is now the Museum's official Literacy Consultant. He regularly runs sixth-form and INSET courses on the theme of war, and he has written and taught widely on the subject.

His award-winning collection, *Shrapnel and Sheets*, is available from Headland (or via mmpetrucci@hotmail.com). *Heavy Water* recently won the Daily Telegraph / Arvon International Poetry Competition and will be published in 2004 by Enitharmon. Further information on Mario and free samples of educational resources can be downloaded from his web site:

<http://www.mariopetrucci.com>



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