



War, Shell-shock and Masculinity in Owen's Selected Poems

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Abstract

As a first hand experienced soldier who diagnosed with shell-shock, Wilfred Owen's poems are authentic texts for studying war poetry. The present study aims to expose the effect of shell-shock on male's sense of manhood. The study traces the origin of shell-shock as a mental disease and its developmental approach from Freud's concept of hysteria to its recent form of post-traumatic stress disorder. Depending on major discourses in field of trauma, this paper examines the causes and symptoms of shell-shock on two of Owen's selected poems; Disabled and Mental Cases. Accordingly, the examined symptoms of the study are compared to established and idealized discourses of masculinity. The study concludes two major issues concerning the impacts of war. First, war is shattering the soldier's psychological state as it leaves him mentally and physical disabled. Secondly, the war, in contrast, inevitably castrates its soldiers physically as well as literally.

Key Words: First World War, shell-shock, manhood, psychology, disability, loss The Poems

Disabled

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.
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.
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.
One time he liked a bloodsmear 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; 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.
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.
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.



To-night 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

Mental Cases

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' tongues wicked?
Stroke on stroke of pain, — but what slow panic,
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?
Ever from their hair and through their hand palms
Misery swelters. Surely we have perished
Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?
— 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.
Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented
Back into their brains, because on their sense
Sunlight seems a bloodsmear; night comes blood-black;
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh
— 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-knots of their scourging;
Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.
And put him into bed? Why don't they come?



Introduction

In the era during and after the World War I, most of the literary writers made noticeable depart from the issues of aestheticism, society and other concerns that were popular before the war and brought in new subject matters to correspond to the present environment. Matthews' points out that the losses of the war were not limited to the huge number of losses of life, but it moved further to take in its account "thousands and thousands who did not die suffered from shell-shock, which haunted them in their post-war lives" (64). Hence, shell-shock became one of the noticeable concerns for many writers to introduce the disasters that the war brought about. The change of form and content in writing was remarkable in the works of those writers who experienced the war at the front. These poets through their familiarity with the scene at the Front line in the war created a contrast between its horrors and another landscape where there was no war (ibid, 72). As it is perceived along with the other social changes, the First World War had a great impact on literary studies and writings.

Wilfred Owen is a well-known British war poet who was only twenty-five years old when he was killed, one week before the Armistice in November 1918. Before the war, he used to compose "mildly sensuous" poems impelled by John Keats; for a while during the war he kept on writing this late-Romantic tradition (William, 249). As a soldier of the Great War, Owen is diagnosed with shell-shock in 1917 that added an authenticity to his poems. He used a realistic technique along with his personal experience and observation in depicting military combats. Owen employed his technique in two of his poems, Disabled and Mental Cases, to portray the intensity of men's bodily and psychologically collapse in the war.

Shell Shock

The significant issues during and for some time after the First World War were considered as "shell shock," "war neurosis," "combat fatigue," and "combat stress" within military contexts (Pease, 17). However, later on, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder was officially identified as a mental



disorder having substantial affinities with the aforementioned issues and considerable common features with other forms of trauma. Trauma is defined by Reyes, Elhai and Ford as an “exposure to catastrophic life events such as combat, sexual assault, and natural disasters” (657). A number of approaches have historically grown up around the relation of trauma to psychoanalytic discourse, individual’s identity development, and performances of well-being.

Allen Beveridge, traces the foundation of trauma and its developmental approach starting from the era before the First World War when Sigmund Freud believed that hysterical indications are connected to ideas and related their symptoms to “past sexual conflicts” (8); meaning a repressed memory of traumatic event; suppressed sexual desire during childhood. In fact Freud’s concepts were neglected by Victorian British psychiatrists but they uncovered them later during the First War World when most of the front soldiers suffered from emotional and psychological warning signs of shell-shock. Several psychoanalysts based their studies on Freud’s ideas; but, later on, they refuted many of them due to the development of their own researches. William Rivers, for instance, attributed his patients’ psychological symptoms to struggle, obligation and fear, that is, “the conflict between a soldier’s desire to be brave and obey orders, and his terror of being injured or killed” (8). Shell-shock was proven to be the outcome of struggles openly initiated by the stress of war rather than the experiences of childhood. Through questioning the established belief which claimed that the British masculinity was resistant, shell-shock proved that male hysteria was a factual condition.

It is emphasised that the major causes of combat’s traumas are those events of “life threat, serious injury, and threat to physical integrity...witnessing and learning about a traumatic event” (Reyes, 658). The traumatizing event is often characterized as containing senses of “intense fear, helplessness or horror” (Burstow, 1296). There are also common sorts of emotional discomforts that accompany the traumatic stressors, according to Reyes, and comprise “emotional loss, horror, and damage to identity in the form of guilt, shame, or lack of autonomy”



(261). However, the impact of trauma might be different, still the merely thought of war can cause trauma by itself, let alone those who are first hand experienter of war.

Masculinity

As this study focuses on the impact of shell-shock on the male's sense of masculinity, it is crucial to briefly take into account some of the literatures concerning these concepts. According to traditional gender role, men are thought "to be strong (physically powerful and emotionally stoic)" (Tyson, 87), and it is not proper for them to show any sign of weakness like showing fear, pain or crying which signifies unmanliness demonstrating them overpowered by their emotions. Furthermore, a man's failure in any sphere of life suggests his failure in his manhood. Ickes shows that men should have a 'ranking domain' features that presents an "assertiveness, aggressiveness, dominance orientation, being forceful, controlling, power oriented, independent, and directive" (76). Fox and Pease emphasize that the idea of comparing men to the idealized form of masculinity is even more stressed "in relation to men in the military" (20). Accordingly, the masculinity of men and boys is evaluated by their ability to correspond to this ideal perception of manhood. Therefore, this study will use the above mentioned forms of masculinity to examine the two selected poems, 'Mental Cases' and 'Disabled', the meanness of war in the devastating physical and mental conditions of handicapped soldiers which results in their literal emasculation.

Analysis

"Mental Cases" is inspired by Owen's own experiences at Craiglockhart hospital when he was being treated due to the offensive effects of shell-shock. "Disabled" is the reflection of the life of a young soldier comparing his glorious condition before enlisting and joining the army during the war with his present miserable post-war condition at hospital. Owen uses imagery, emotive language and contrast to create the theme of the impact of the horror of war on soldiers' mental health. The hellish,



heart-rending illustration of a group of isolated soldiers signifies their miserable mental and physical conditions after the war.

In both poems and from the early terms of the titles, the poet refers to the current conditions of war victims. In “Mental Cases” it can be suggested that the word ‘cases’ refers to an issue that needs to be studied as a mental case denoting a medical situation. Even the word ‘case’ might denote container which can connote emptiness, accordingly to the absence of the soldiers minds. The title of the other poem, “Disabled”, asserts that the person has already lost something which rendered him disabled. It is an image of inability of the victim to obliterate his very basic needs without the help of others. Mental and physical disabilities are the issues that the poet introduces. Thus, in both poems, the titles refer to incapability and strictness, and in both cases, the images of the portrayed soldiers are out of the scope of idealized form of manhood; being (Tyson asserts) physically and mentally healthy and powerful are important aspects for masculine males (86).

He opens the poem, “Mental Cases”, with a series of rhetorical questions about the identity of individuals around him in the hospital. Instead of the word people, men or soldiers, Owen uses third person words like ‘these’ and ‘they’ which can be considered as referring to otherness; it is not him but other people. The plural pronouns also suggest the multiplicity of these mentally and physically injured soldiers in this mental hospital who suffer from melancholia and other distressing conditions. In the same manner, he opens the poem “Disabled” with the word ‘He’; to denote someone without name; someone is no longer his own personhood, rather he became just ‘He’. The lack of references in the opening of the two selected poems implicates the fact that the severity of their condition made them lose their own selves. It also indicates otherness and loss of identity which is among the features of shell-shock. Consequently, it can be said that when the person has lost his identity and is no longer himself, then he is no longer a masculine man as he doesn’t conform to the features of ideal masculinity, asserted earlier in this paper.



Since shell-shock leaves its victims hopeless and disempowered, Owen creates these images in “Mental Cases” through introducing some words such as “Misery swelters” (8) ‘chasms’ in their face which can be considered as a denotation to their emptiness, lack of hope and death, “Those are men whose minds the Dead have ravished” (10). The only thing they can look and aim at is death, no more hope for optimistic future with their insanity. In the line “Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander” (13) the word ‘sloughs’, denotes extreme feeling of sadness and hopelessness, associates with ‘these helpless’ creates the portrayal of their weakness and desperateness. These features are emphasised through another lines “Therefore still there eyeballs shrink tormented / back into their brains, because on their sense” (19-20). Their physical appearances convey their strange tortures and feeble minds. Therefore, when they are lying back in the hospital powerless and incompetent, they might be no longer able to perform their role as men in society and family any more. In “Disabled” the poet uses emotive language and contrast to illustrate how desperate he is now, “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,” (16-18). The disabled soldier used to be handsome, young and colourful but now he has lost his youth and become dried, colourless, empty of energy, weak and helpless: What is noteworthy here is the word ‘Poured’ which implies that he is partly responsible for his loss, because of his naivety, since he poured his colour out of his vein along with half of his life. The term ‘old’ can also signify his faintness as he is no longer a powerful person. This sense is enforced by the line “Now, he will spend a few sick years in Institutes” (39). Here he employs ‘sick years’ to add to the whole idea of the profundity of their complaint that reduces their lives and renders them broken, weak, and depressed. Two essential and established marks for ones masculinity among various cultures are autonomy and independence. When a person does not have control over himself physically and mentally, he cannot be considered as having masculinity. In “Disabled” the images of disability are repeated throughout the poem. For instance, it is shown through “wheeled chair”



(1), depicting the deprivation of the young man. Owen used wheeled instead of wheel to convey that he has lost his legs and relies on others to wheel him. His trauma is not only because of witnessing his comrades death, it is also due to his bodily injuries which are considered as a direct urges for combatant's shell-shock. The term 'mothered' also represents him as a child depending on others not only physically but emotionally as well. In these lines "And do what things the rules consider wise / And take whatever pity they may dole" (40-41) Owen employs emotive expressions to show that he (the disabled soldier) doesn't have a control over himself, he is going to do what the rules (others) ask him to do, and take whatever they will give him; relying on others. In the poem "Mental Cases" the soldiers' incapacity is shown through the whole implication of the poem; their mental diseases and their dwelling in hospital. They are always in a waiting stage. Altogether, it means that trauma has deprived him (the soldier) from being an active man and playing the role of a strong, positive and independent person.

These soldiers, in both poems, are no longer healthy people; since they are living with the images of death and those people they were forced to kill. They cannot be in peace anymore since the images of those dead people haunt them even in their sleep, making them unable to escape or find a way out of all this mess. Depending on Freud's explanation of traumatic repetition in combat veterans, Caruth argues that it is the enforced and unavoidable "traumatic repetition, rather than the meaningful distortions of neurosis, that defines the shape of individual lives" (60). Therefore, it is the impact of the external trauma that has gone deep inside and created its own world, thus "the painful repetition of the flashback can only be understood as the absolute inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasurable event that has not been given psychic meaning in any way" (Ibid, 60). Hence, re-experiencing the trauma make them relive the emotional sufferings they had from the first exposure and leave them unwholesome fragile emotionally and mentally.

In "Mental Cases" the traumatized are overwhelmed by the flesh, blood, and "human squander" (17) in the form of flashback, and nightmares.



Owen as an experienced victim portrays creatively the traumatized soldiers' reliving of their overwhelming experiences through the word 'always', referring to its repetitive nature. Moreover, the obligatory term 'must' refers to its compulsoriness; out of the person's will "always they must see these things and hear them / Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles" (15-16). They always live with the sound of the battle which repeats itself over and over again in their minds. In "Disabled" the victim lives with the image of blood and fear in what he calls "the hot race" (19). Every mark or injury on his body makes him relive the moments of the disaster and renders him more isolated. The entire thought of the constant repetition of the trauma connotes to the severity of their insanity that deprive them from being complete human beings and above all men.

Owen employs juxtaposition to show the destructive reality of the war when compares the young soldier's life now to the time before enlisting in the army. Musil states that the dramatic impression of most of Owen's poems is based on the 'juxtaposition' of broadcasted and public statements or 'abstractions' about war with the real and physical experience of it (52). Thus Owen creates it not only to clarify the impact of war on the life but also to criticize the society and the culture that considered and encouraged men's participation in war as a masculine deed. In "Mental Cases", for instance the line "Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter" (14) means the lungs that are used to be useful as full of laughter, happiness and energy by the time they became gurgling blood. There is also the contrast between the persons' lives before the war as a real person with name and identity and their lives now where they are only waiting 'shadows' with no names more than 'these' murderer, 'wicked', 'tormented' 'hilarious', 'hideous', and mad.

"Disabled" is based on contrast between the now and earlier life of the soldier; by using the phrase 'used to' mourning his vanished liveliness and virility in the past. He remembers how he used to be a sport person. Owen contrasts the image of sport with that of war in order to illustrate how devastating the loss of masculinity is. When he joined the army, the vivacious young football player, "he was drafted out with drums and



cheers” (35); however, later on, it seems that there are “Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal” ((36). The contrast also created by using words like ‘never’ to denote finality and the impossibility of reviving the past, as he can no longer “feel again how slim / Girls’ waists are” (11-12). It implies that he cannot perform his function as a man anymore adding to it the very charming manner lines, “To-night he noticed how the women’s eyes / Passed from him to the strong men that were whole” (42-43). It shows that he is no longer the strong athlete who used to be praised by all, particularly by women who show no interest in him at the moment. These lines emphasize his disillusionment with his physical and mental condition as a result of his loss of virility and attractions. They indicate that there is no place for an emasculated man in this world, so he prefers death on life.

Conclusion

The impact of First World War was extremely profound on all aspects of life in British society. In the field of literature lots of the modernist writers made great shifts in their subject matters. As a tormented witness who experienced the misery and plague of war, Wilfred Owen succeeds in illustrating the despondent condition of physically and mentally traumatized soldiers who are isolated, frustrated, and alienated from the world. Generally speaking, since trauma renders its victim powerless, hopeless, dependent, and unable to perform his role properly, it leaves the man empty of any sense of masculinity. Hence, this issue creates an irony depicted in Owen’s poems. Joining the army and participating in the military training, the soldier is supposed to conform to particular masculine features or as Higate terms they adjust the steadiness of identity and “make a man” (452). Yet, what will change in those veterans after participating in the war is not only destructive to their physical conditions, but also devastating to their psychological states. These disabled people have become deprived of virility and masculinity as a result of the shell-shock which renders the victims passive, alienated subjects who lack the physical and mental masculine abilities. As an



inevitable impact of war, shell-shock functions as a castrator obliterating the victim's masculinity in both actual and literal ways.

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