A Post-Structuralist Analysis of Some of Wilfred Owen’s War Poems

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Abstract
This research article makes a Post-Structuralist study of seven of Wilfred Owen's war poems: these are 'Futility', "Dulce et Decorum est", "Disabled", "Exposure", "The Show", and "Mental Cases". Believing in the Post-Structuralist fact that language is not static but perpetually in process, and that the texts are plural, open to number of interpretations, this article makes an analysis of Owen's poems at political, psychological, religious, social, linguistic and syntactic levels. It takes into account Owen's images, metaphors and other literary techniques to prove that there is a range of possibilities of meanings inherent in texts. This study also intends to show that meanings are not fixed or given but are released with the range of possible readings.

Literary theory rejects the classical methods of studying literature as obvious and natural and offers a method of reading which analyses, questions, evaluates, challenges and opens up the text to find out multiplicity of meanings. The theory which is under discussion is Post-Structuralism. The major influence on Post-Structuralism are the works of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, the cultural theorist Michel Foucault and the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in its emergence. Derrida in his essay 'Structure, Sign and Play' discusses the main idea of Post-Structuralism: as '...I wish to mark out and define structure—or rather the structurality of structure—although it has always been involved, has always been neutralized or reduced and this by a process of giving it a center or

referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin' (Derrida 7). Derrida argues that Structuralism has not been able to free itself from this logocentric thinking and that in it meaning is conceived as existing independently of the language in which it is communicated and is thus not subject to the play of language. Whereas the Post-Structuralists emphasize that a literary text is written in language which is seen as a never ending chain of words and hence there are no definite and fixed meanings. In the words of Derrida '...it was probably necessary to begin to think that there was no center, that the center has no natural locus, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions come into play' (Derrida 115). Deconstruction, postponement of meanings, binary opposition, removal of the author, metaphors and ambiguity are some of the key concepts of Post-Structuralism.

On viewing the First World War poet Owen’s poetry in the light of Post-Structuralism, it becomes evident that it does not have just one meaning. His poetry can be interpreted at many levels and multiple meanings can be discovered from it. His poetry is more than mere condemnation of war. “Exposure,” for instance, portrays the boredom and exhaustion of the soldiers lying passively in the trenches in intense cold weather. It also suggests a war between man and Nature. Man has destroyed its beauty in war and hence it is ‘massing in the east her melancholy army’. It is Nature in action against the soldiers in a state of passivity. The poem also questions the powers of God for not saving these soldiers from the ‘invincible spring’ and as a result the soldiers are losing their faith in God ‘for love of God seems dying’. At psychological level, the poem can be read as an account of the soldiers’ fears, doubts, dreams and desires. The images such as ‘brain ache’, ‘wearied’, ‘worried’, ‘curious, nervous’, ‘twitching agonies’ and ‘knive us’ lay bare the tensed state of the soldiers’ mind. At another level the poem can be read as an expressionistic picture of warfield where dawn is portrayed as an enemy attacking the ‘shivering ranks of grey’. At linguistic level the line ‘But nothing happens’ assumes new meanings in the light of its context. The words convey the meanings opposite to what these words actually mean. So much is happening to the soldiers lying passively in the trenches. The images such as ‘brains ache',
'merciless iced east wind’, ‘knive us’ suggest extreme violence that is being exercised on these soldiers. At philosophical level, the poem becomes existential in nature. The word ‘nothing’ suggests nothingness and nada. Owen seems to be questioning the very existence of man if it has to be afflicted with pain, agony and war. At another level the poem can be read as autobiographical poem where Owen is lamenting the insensitivity of the people and his incapacity to shake people out of their complacency and hence ‘nothing happens’. The title of the poem ‘Exposure’ connotes many meanings. It is the physical exposure of the soldiers to the intense cold weather. It is also the soldiers’ exposure to the realities of war and its horrors. The poem can be read as an exposure or eye opener for the non-combatants who were portraying war as romantic and glorious. Still new meaning can be found out. It is the belief in plurality of meaning and the deferment of meaning that opens up new ways of inquiry.

Owen’s other poems also have multiple meanings. ‘The Show,’ for example, can be read as an expressionistic picture of warfield. Like an expressionist painter, Owen paints the picture of the warfield as ‘grey cratered like the moon with hollow woe/ And pitted with great scabs of plague’. It appeared like a living grotesque creature with ‘its beard’ on which ‘there moved thin caterpillars, slowly uncoiled’. At psychological and personal level the poem can be read as Owen’s confession for being a part of the bloody war. He is both a killer and the killed. He is both severed by the war and he severs the feet of many men. Killing others is like feeding on the living. At political level, the poem suggests the idea of the survival of the fittest. It is the modern technological warfare where the weak will be crushed. It is the war for power and it is only through cannibalism that one can survive in war. ‘More abundant spawns/ Ramped on the rest and ate them and were eaten’. The title of the poem connotes many meanings. It means ‘performance… collection of things for the public to look at… a display’ (Longman 1224). The poem is not a colourful display but a grotesque hideous picture of warfield. The title can be read in more than one ways. It is a show of the real horrors and ugliness that Owen is showing to the World. It is also the war which ‘showed me
its feet, the feet of many men/ And the fresh severed head of it, my head'.
It is also Owen’s encounter with the real war.

Post-Structuralism upholds the idea that meanings are not fixed. They are explored in the process of reading. The poem ‘Mental Cases’ can have many interpretations. It records the physical tortures of the shell shocked soldiers. At another level, the poem makes a psychological study of the neurotic soldiers who are afflicted with nightmares, visions and memories of the past. ‘These are the men whose minds the Dead have ravished / Memory fingers in their hair of murders/ Multitudinous murders they once witnessed’. Guilt at what they have done or seen has damaged their psychic equilibrium. Their guilt and fear cause everything to be tainted the memories of blood and carnage. ‘Sunlight seems a blood smear, night comes blood black’. Everything is seen in terms of blood. ‘Blood becomes a symbol of guilt …..For the blood of these men is on their hands’ (Welland 149). The title of the poem refers to the neurotic soldiers who have lost their balance of mind. The title can also refer to those world leaders and politicians who are involving the youth in this fearful war. These are the mad people, the mental cases who are causing the colossal waste of human lives which can be used for better purposes. The lines ‘snatching after us who smote them, brother/ pawing us who dealt them war and madness’ refer to all those politicians and world leaders who were behind this gory war.

‘Asleep’ too has multiple layers of meanings. It describes how a soldier exhausted falls asleep and in that sleep he is shot dead. Owen is lamenting the purposeless murder of the youth in the poem. He wants the people to think of the misery of these young men who were losing their lives on war fronts. ‘He sleeps. He sleeps less tremulous less cold/ Than we who must awake and waking say Alas’. At another level it suggests a war between Nature and man. Nature in Owen’s poetry is callous, hostile and malign. It is not a victim but an active agent. It has no mercy for the warring soldiers. The winds in the poem have ‘scimitars’ and the ‘hair being one with the grey grass’. The title ‘Asleep’ refers to a sleeping soldier who was killed in his sleep. It is also the sleep of death. It is also the slumber of the power-drunk politicians which is causing huge loss of human lives.
‘Futility’ too can be interpreted in many ways. It shows war as a futile activity which causes the loss of lives of innocent soldiers. At religious level, the poem suggests Owen’s skepticism when the sun as powerful as God cannot restore life to a dead soldier. ‘-O what made fatuous sunbeams toil/ To break earth’s sleep at all?’ At personal level, the poem shows Owen’s disillusionment with the politicians who will not think of the common soldiers and hence his effort to awake people out of their complacency will be futile. The poem can also be read as existential in nature. Owen appears to be questioning this universe and the futility of man’s existence in it. Similarly, ‘Dulce et Decorum est’ too is a strong anti-war poem. Owen mocks the concept of patriotism. He attacked those at home who upheld the continuance of the war, unaware of its realities:

If you could hear, at every jolt the blood
Come gargling from the froth corrupted lungs…...
My friend you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory
The old lie, Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

The poem can also be read as a psychological study of guilt ridden mental condition of a soldier for his inadequacy to help his comrade. ‘In all my dreams, before my helpless sight/ He plunges at me guttering, choking, drowning’. The title of the poem means opposite to what it says. Owen contrasts a sweet title with a bitter poem to assert that it is not sweet and befitting to die for one’s country. "Disabled" too has multiple meanings. At one level it is a monologue of a disabled soldier thinking in a dark room about the reasons for joining the army. These were the women and the myths of war glory which persuaded him to enlist. It can also be studied as the psychological effects of mutilation on the crippled soldiers. The disabled soldier who once had been a healthy athlete is now reduced to a state of helplessness and dependency on others. The poem also suggests the social attitude of the people towards disabled soldiers. ‘Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal’ and that the women’s eyes ‘passed from him to the strong men that were whole’. The poem
again emphasizes the idea of the survival of the fittest. The weak disabled soldier in the present modern world finds himself a misfit.

The Post-Structuralists believe that we tend to think and express our thoughts in terms of oppositions. Something is black but not white, masculine and therefore not feminine. Language works through these binary oppositions. This characteristic is an essential feature of Owen's poetry. Owen uses this binary opposition to attack the readers' minds and to intensify the impression of one image by placing it with the contrasting one. Often Owen contrasts the serene and tranquil atmosphere with the violent war attacks to stress the vileness of the war. This opposition is found in many of Owen's poems such as "Exposure" which contrasts the passivity of the soldiers with the violent movement of the snow storm, the poignant dawn and the grassier ditches with blossoms and blackbird, the oppressive silence of the soldiers and the jingling crickets. "The Show" also contrasts the hideous sight of war where soldiers like caterpillars 'ramped on the rest and ate' and the beauty of the green fields and the little hills in the background. The man's youth, energy, virility and strenuous activity in "Disabled" are contrasted with inactivity and immobility which he has acquired from the war. The 'light blue trees' in the poem represent a carefree past when 'town used to swing so gay', while 'his ghastly suit of grey' illustrates a joyless present. Other poems also juxtapose binary oppositions to tell the horrific realities of war. The binary oppositions that are found are dream/reality, bitter/sweet, lie/truth in "Dulce et Decorum est", normal/ abnormal, guilt/ innocence, dawn/ dusk in "Mental Cases", warm/ cold, dead/ alive, kind/ unkind in "Futility". Owen evokes the sight of complete disaster through the device of the binary oppositions. To Derrida these are not simple oppositions, they are also hierarchies. It means that these oppositions contain one term viewed as positive or superior and one term our culture views as negative. One term is culturally preferable. These hierarchies are of particular interest for the Post-Structuralists as it is language in which all the hierarchies are expressed. The Post-Structuralists seek to erase the dividing line between oppositions. This too can be applied on Owen's poetry. "Mental Cases," for example, makes the binary oppositions of normal and abnormal. The term 'normal' is culturally preferable and hence positive and the term 'abnormal' is
viewed as negative. But the boundary line between the oppositions is erased when one notices that the normal are the insensitive and heartless politicians whereas the abnormal have greater sympathy and pity for humanity. The normal appear mad who are prolonging war for their ulterior motives.

"Post-Structuralists break with formalists too, over an issue they have debated structuralists on. The issue involves metaphor" (Miller 205). Metaphors in poetry are very important and metaphors in Owen's poetry accurately correspond to his war experiences. Some of Owen's metaphors and similes are personal and some are Romantic. On deconstructing Owen's metaphors, one notices that his personal metaphors are unpleasant and grotesque as they are based on his war experiences. The similes and metaphors such as 'bent double like old beggars under sacks', 'his hanging face like a devil is sick of sin', 'obscene as cancer, bitter as cud' in "Dulce et Decorum est" show his anger and disgust at war. The soldiers are deliberately compared with beggars to suggest their pathetic conditions on the war fronts. The impression created by these similes is of the diminutive position of the soldiers. Some other metaphors and similes such as 'death fell with me like a deepening moan', 'gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe/ And pitted with great pocks and scabs of plague' in "The Show", 'sunlight seems a blood-smear, night comes blood afresh/ Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh' in "Mental Cases", 'the clays of a cold star/ Are limbs', in "Futility" are also very strong. Owen's personal metaphors are driven from war field. These compare war and soldiers with animals, diseases, death, weird colours and sounds, broken and destroyed parts of body to depict Owen's strong condemnation of war. Owen not only used personal metaphors, he also made use of romantic metaphors. He was under the strong influence of the Romantics. It is clearly manifested in his use of the images and metaphors inspired by Nature. The natural phenomena such as trees, autumn, rain, flowers and sea are evoked for comparison. Owen often blends romantic with grotesque such as 'and floundering like a man in fire and lime', 'as under a green sea, I saw him drowning' in "Dulce et Decorum est", 'voices of boys sang saddening like a hymn' in "Disabled". Owen's metaphors are not mere ornaments added to what he wants to say but are inseparable feature
of his poetry. His metaphors are highly suggestive and evoke multiple meanings.

In the Post-Structuralist view there is no single meaning in literary works. This insistence on the plurality of meanings in a text is the logical consequence of the absence of any authorial intention in literature. In the words of Roland Barthes, 'the author when believed in is always conceived of as the past of his own book, book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and after. The author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his works as a father to his child...Once the author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing....it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author' (Barthes 122). Viewing Owen's poetry in the light of Poststructuralism, one notices that as a free reader one can find out multiple meanings in Owen's poetry. His poetry can be read at political, social, psychological, religious, linguistic and syntactic levels. As a free reader, I find Owen's poetry still very relevant almost after nearly hundred years since his poetry was written. His poetry has assumed new connotations in the context of modern war of terrorism. I read it today as condemnation against violence and terrorism of the present world.

'...Be familiar with the elements of ambiguity and word play which are so characteristic of Derrida's own writing....Ambiguity of this kind and degree demonstrates very forcibly that words are not determined on a one-to-one basis by the idea or thing which they supposedly represent' (Jefferson 17). The element of ambiguity is very much found in Owen's poetry. It can be noticed in his use of a highly compressed language, compound words, punctuation and capitalization. He clusters adjectives and nouns to give it a greater force and that also makes the language vague:

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning,
In all my dreams before my helpless sight.
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning. (*Dulce et Decorum est*)

Adjectives and nouns quickly follow each other to convey the immediacy of the situation, to show a succession of sights, sounds, events and nervous process succeeding one another. This kind of compressed language which has actually been the language of the Romantic suitable for describing the peacetime activities of men, is transformed into more dynamic and expressive language to record the gruesome incidents of the war. The syntax in Owen’s poetry also makes it vague. Owen connects words not according to the rules of grammar but according to the states of mind. In his compound words, he joins an adjective with a noun, noun with a noun or an adjective with another adjective to make language ambiguous, obscure, dense and twisted to reflect the turbulent and tormented war experiences. The compound words such as ‘smothering-dream’, ‘froth-corruped’, ‘knock-knead’ in "Dulce et Decorum est", ‘snow-dazed’, ‘sun-dozed’, ‘dark-red’, ‘half-known’ in "Exposure" and ‘shoulder-high’, ‘shell-holes’ in "Disabled" serve to give intensity, obscurity and brevity to language. The language acquires an additional force and emphasis through compound words. Owen also makes his language pregnant with meanings and ambiguity through the device of capitalization. The use of the device of capitalization is in the poems such as ‘my soul looked down from a vague height with Death’ in "The Show", ‘the old Lie, Dulce et decorum est’ in "Dulce et Decorum est", ‘than we who must awake, and waking, say Alas!’ in "Asleep”, ‘these are men whose minds the Dead have ravished’ in "Mental Cases", ‘some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal’ in "Disabled". The question arises: why does Owen use capital letters for common nouns? In fact, this device is used to transform the common words into words of immense importance. Hence the words ‘lie’, ‘goal’, ‘death’, ‘dead’, ‘alas’ assume new meanings. What further makes Owen’s poetry ambiguous is his device of raising questions. He involves his readers and leaves his poems open ended. The questions such as ‘why don’t they come?’ in "Disabled", ‘who are these? ‘why sit they here in twilight?’ in "Mental Cases", ‘who knows?, who hopes? who troubles?’ in "Asleep" are significant. The readers are left free to think and find out answers. Another thing that makes the readers think is the presence of a
exploring voice in his poems. This speaking voice is either of a visitor in hell such as in "Mental Cases" who is looking at the mad soldiers, or of a soldier in "Dulce et Decorum est" who is instructing not to tell lies to the children about war, or of an objective observer in "Asleep" lamenting upon the death of a young soldier, or of a dead soldier in "The Show" witnessing a sight of fight in warfield. Owen's use of punctuation is also significant to mention so far as the element of ambiguity is concerned. The extensive use of dashes and continuation marks lend new meanings to the poems. For example, the use of dash in "Dulce et Decorum est" 'gas! Gas! Quick boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling' indicates nervousness of the soldiers who are attacked by the poisonous gas. It also suggests the chaotic movement of the soldiers who are groping for their helmets and staggering and running to save their lives. It captures the real horror of the sudden gas attack. The function of dashes is different in "Futility". The line that starts from a dash '—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil/ To break earth's sleep at all?' suggests a shift in the poem from pity to anger and fury, from faith to disillusionment, from life to death and from certainty to uncertainty. Similarly the use of continuation marks such as 'But someone still was yelling out and stumbling/ And floundering like a man in fire or lime ....' in "Dulce et Decorum est" and 'our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us...' in "Exposure" serve many functions. These marks indicate the continuity of the pain of the soldiers. The pain is unending and will remain for long. The marks also suggest that something which is being described is so hideous and grotesque that it should better be imagined than to be described. Hence the poems become more expressive and open to the readers to read and find out new meanings.

Post-Structuralism’s work on language has challenged the whole concept of realism, Roland Barthes has specifically proclaimed the death of the author, and Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser and Jacques Derrida have all from various positions questioned the humanist assumption that subjectivity, the individual mind or inner being, is the source of meaning and of action. In this context the notion of 'a text which tells a ...truth, as perceived by an individual subject (the author), whose insights are the source of the text's single and authoritative meaning, is not only untenable but literally unthinkable, because the framework which supported it, a
framework of assumptions and discourses, ways of thinking and talking, no longer stands' (Belsey 3). In other words texts are plural. There is nothing outside the text. The outside history and outside discourse are inadequate for the guarantee of meaning. Meaning is 'eternally inscribed in the discourse of the text itself' \(^9\). Hence the interpretation of Owen's poems is not single but multiple.
Works Cited


