

Focusing on the Theme and Mood: Comparison between the poems “Futility” and “Break of Day in the Trenches”

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Abstract

This paper focuses mainly on War poetry which is a literary genre that originated during First World War when hundreds and hundreds of soldiers and also civilians caught up in conflict and started to write poetry as an attempt to express extreme emotion at the very edge of experience. In a war, soldiers are considered as tools and not human beings and also considered as puppets in the hands of few powerful men. War poetry as a modern genre broke all allusions and illusions. At the beginning of the First World War, the characteristic response was to serve in the war as a matter of duty. Poetry was written in order to express a sense of honour and to celebrate glories of war and Tennyson and Rupert Brooke glorified war. . Both the poems that the paper focuses talks about war but the poem “Futility” talks more about the trauma and futility of a war and in the poem “Break of Day in the Trenches”, the poet talks war in sceptical and more humorous way.

Keywords: War Poetry, Trauma, Opium, Poppies, Darkness, Death.

Introduction

Wilfred Owen [1] was one of them who wrote from his own personal experience, from the trauma he experienced as he was present there in the war. He depicts the mental and physical trauma of every soldier in his poems through his own understanding (ontological understanding). Another war poet Isaac Rosenberg [10] was a Jew, and he faced very much trouble, was poor and struggled a lot for earning and living. He joined army not because of nationalism and patriarchy but for his earnings. According to him, nothing can justify war and it is upon us, so let us join and finish it. Man creates problems, so we need to solve ourselves. Though he was ignored because of his poverty and less education but it did not suppress him to write war poems. Both the poets have a common thought, that is, they did not join war for patriotism but had to join as there was no other option and also for their earning and living. “Futility” and “Break of Day in the Trenches” are the two war poems written by two famous War poets Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg. When we compare both the poems, Owen’s poem has a terrible pessimism which haunts him [13] and in Rosenberg’s poem there is some optimism in it. In the poem Futility, there is a presence of a dead body of

his fellow soldier who died during the war [8] and Rosenberg's poem is more positive, less sad and it has a kind of humour in it because of the presence of little creature, a little rat and that is why, this poem is very touching and somewhere it is "little happy".

Main Objective of the Study

In the poem "Futility", the line "Move him into the sun... whispering of field half-sown"- talks about his friend's dead body that shows a futile attempt [8], if the sun could revive the death but war has shown that death is inevitable and sometimes it is injustice, that such young people who has not even step out in the world properly and knew life properly died at a very young age and that feeling is expressed when he is talking about field, the field half-sown is almost like a human life [2] which is compared to a field which is taken away like a field half-sown. Sun is giver of life and the poet wants the Sun to gently touch the body of the dead as he thinks that the sun will wake him up. He realizes that, when it comes to death nature is not with us. The sun gives us life but when we die or kill ourselves, nature is totally different and here we can see the kind of modern tone comes in the poem. In the other poem "Break of Day in the Trenches", the line- "The darkness crumbles away....old druid Time as ever" [11], here the poet is talking about darkness which very fragile and it crumbles and it indicates a kind of breakability in the concept of war [6]. Even the human body crumbles. He is talking about morning and we can see darkness is fading away and instead of fading away he describes it as crumbling. The sun has risen and we are talking about time and here the time is very old, wise like a priest (priest in the ancient Celtic religion), the "druids" were not only priests but also judges, advisors, medical man and they were also wise poets and that is why they compared time as druid because time knows everything. In the poem Futility, the line "If anything might rouse him now, the kind of old sun will know"- the line indicates that something is universal in human history and is about the birth of the planet and connection of human life to nature and the nature is aware of everything whether it is birth or death. The sun is oldest element and because of it the plant became alive, became green. In the other poem too, nature has a deep contrast with the terrible things happening in war. Again, in the poem Futility, "seeds" is compared to a body that is when we sow a seed, we need sun, water and without the sun it will not grow and so poet thinks that if sun helps the seeds to grow, then the sun will also help the dead to revive. Even a seed looks like dead, if it does not get proper nourishment. In the poem, "clay of a cold Star" indicates the birth of this planet, how the sunlight brought life to this green planet. In the poem Futility, the body is compared to "clay"-it comes from the bible. Adam was created from lump of clay and Biblical reference comes here, so it is connected to the body as being made up of clay ("grow tall") there is total futility of the clay growing tall, total futility of the beautiful human body growing up through care, nourishment with the touch of the sun, with love of nature. It is growing but suddenly he is dead, it becomes fruitless, pointless, the life becomes pointless and here in the poem, "Break of Day in the Trenches"- the body is also important, it is inflicting pain, through bringing in death that a war can happen [7]. A war defines brutality, harming and torturing each other [3]. So the human body is important and the poet is trying to see the body through

the eyes of the little rat. In the poem, the poet talks about a beautiful poppy plant which he plugs and puts behind his ears as if things are normal and suddenly a rat jumps on his hand that was hiding behind the plant. That is the moment of love and a moment of question because there is a big gap between the life of a soldier and the life of the innocent little rat. The lives are different as the soldiers are seen fighting in the war whereas, the little rat is unaware of the world politics. The rat is compared to “queer sardonic rat” as the little mouse spreads happiness and laughter in such a serious field as the rat jumps on his hand. The little rat is unaware of the war and it is mocking the war as pointless, as the poet said in the earlier poem the poet says the war as pointless and in this poem, the world is useless according to this rat. The rat is also compared to “droll” as the rat has brought a little amusement in the terrible life of a soldier. He came as an entertainer. The rat is totally unaware of politics and it is free as well neutral. The rat can move to any side which pleases him. The rat is not forced unlike the soldiers who are forced to enter a system. Again, in the poem “Futility” the line “limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides..., too hard to stir”- states that every creature in the world is created out of care. Life is achieved with a lot of care. If we consider the life cycle of a man, how the seed in the womb of the mother grows for nine months and comes out and then it is nourished and nurtured by the parents for days and this is how limbs have grown. If the person dies in war, the effort behind the creation will go futile. The limbs, the nerves are still there and the body is still warm. It is hard to believe that talking to someone for some time and the next moment he is dead, this is the traumatic experience a soldier goes through. The body is also described as “clay grown tall” as the human body is achieved with lot of care, nourishment with the touch of sun, love of nature and if he dies suddenly, it will all be pointless. The poet realizes that the Sun has taken so much effort to create life on earth then, what is the point to wake them up if it is so fatal and if the life is so pointless. This realization of the futility of life is one of the modern thoughts in war poetry. In the other poem “Break of the Day in the Trenches”, “Limbs” of the soldiers talks about futility again, about the “clay” grown so beautifully like a sculpture. They are the young people, so green and they did not even step out in the world properly. They have strong eyes and limbs, they are still full of pride and their bodies are athletic like, almost like the sculpture of Michelangelo. But in the war front, the life is pointless. The rat is smiling mischievously as for the rat the whole affair is foolish and when he looks at the limbs of the soldier, the rat thinks that he has more chance to live as compared to the soldier. “Whims”- are compared to the power of the leaders who decides war. The war is like whim to murder each other as war does not have any noble cause or aim. The war poetry reflects modern thoughts, the reality [4] and it tries to break the ideological barrier. The dead bodies of the soldiers are hiding in the bowels of trenches which are sprawled over the fields of France. The soldier is trying to see through the eyes of the rat and we see that heaven is peaceful and we are hurling “iron” and “flame”- guns across the heaven. We see a “quaver” of fear in the eyes of a soldier. Therefore, we see a metaphorical turn and philosophical mood in the end of the poem-“Poppies” are compared to the blood in the veins of a human being as poppies are red and silky and the poet is talking about the blood running through the veins in the body as blood is life. Poppies have roots in the veins

of blood, the liquid of life. The colour of the blood and poppies are same. But, we have second layer or thought about the poppies- as second thought or layer comes in modern poetry or war poetry [4] there is a mention about poppy. Poppies are flowers that produce opium and opium makes us dream beautifully and gives a kind of escape from reality. Poppies in the human beings are dropping means poppies are dying. Human beings are dying so poppies are dying. In the end, the poet says that, the soldiers are also touched by dust created by the war as the soldiers goes through a lot of trauma. But he thinks that he is safe as he is not thinking about death but he is tired and touched by the dust and still alive. When we compare both the poems, they have a common mood and theme in the poems that is war but the poets describes and depicts “war” in their own writing style by using images, symbols, metaphors and the poems can also have different tone[5].

Conclusion

Therefore, in both the poems, the touch of modern thought is there. Owen’s poem has terrible pessimism [9] which haunts him as the poet depicts about the realization of the futility of a war and the futility of a soldier [12] but in Rosenberg’s poem, there is some optimism as there we can see the fun created by the presence of a rat and he realizes that he can still live and enjoy by looking at the rat. The poet tries to see the world through the eyes of the rat. Rosenberg personally was a strong and a tough man because of his background. Owen uses parhymes, images to justify the traumatic experience of war in the poem and Rosenberg depicts by using philosophical and metaphorical elements in the poem.

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