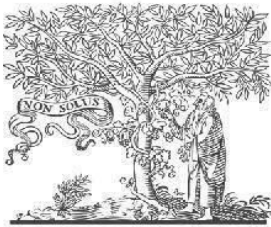


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EXAMINE THE CRITICAL RECEPTION AND RECOGNITION OF OWEN'S POETRY DURING HIS LIFETIME

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the critical reception and recognition of Wilfred Owen's poetry during his lifetime, focusing on the literary and public reactions to his work in the context of World War I. It examines the influence of Owen's war experiences on his poetry, the reception by contemporary critics and the general public, and how his work was perceived by his peers. Through an analysis of contemporary reviews, letters, and Owen's own reflections, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how his poetry was received during his lifetime and the factors that shaped this reception.

KEYWORDS: War poets, Critical reception, Literary recognition, Trench warfare, Anti-war poetry.

I. INTRODUCTION

Wilfred Owen stands as one of the most significant and influential poets to emerge from the horrors of World War I, a conflict that irrevocably transformed the landscape of modern poetry. Born in 1893, Owen's short life was marked by his harrowing experiences as a soldier, which profoundly shaped his poetic voice. His poetry is widely celebrated today for its vivid depictions of the brutal realities of war and its scathing critique of the glorification of conflict. However, during his lifetime, Owen's work did not receive the widespread recognition and critical acclaim it enjoys posthumously. The introduction of this paper delves into the complex and nuanced reception of Owen's poetry during his lifetime, examining how his work was received by contemporary critics, peers, and the general public, and exploring the factors that contributed to its relatively limited recognition before his untimely death in 1918.

Owen's poetic journey began in the early 1910s, a period characterized by his admiration for the Romantic poets, whose influence is evident in his early works. These early poems, although competent, were largely conventional and did not attract significant attention. Owen's poetic transformation occurred after his enlistment in the British Army in 1915, an experience that exposed him to the grim realities of trench warfare. The brutality, futility, and inhumanity of the war became central themes in his poetry, which took on a distinctly critical and somber tone. This shift in his poetic focus coincided with his interactions with other soldier-poets, particularly Siegfried Sassoon, who became a close friend and mentor. Sassoon's influence was instrumental in helping Owen to refine his poetic voice and to channel his outrage and despair into a more poignant and impactful form of expression.

Despite the depth and power of his war poetry, Owen's work did not achieve widespread recognition during his lifetime. Several factors contributed to this lack of immediate acclaim. First, Owen's most significant works were composed during the latter years of the war, a time when public and critical attention was largely focused on the broader political and military developments of the conflict. The public was inundated with war propaganda that often glorified the sacrifices of soldiers and upheld traditional notions of heroism and patriotism. In this context, Owen's anti-war stance and his unflinching portrayal of the horrors of the trenches were at odds with the dominant narratives, making his work less palatable to contemporary audiences.

Additionally, the dissemination of Owen's poetry was limited by the circumstances of the time. His poems were primarily published in small literary journals and magazines, such as *The Hydra*, a publication of the Craiglockhart War Hospital where Owen was treated for shell shock. While these publications were important platforms for emerging voices, they had limited circulation and reach. Consequently, Owen's poetry did not reach a wide audience, and its impact was confined to a relatively small circle of readers. Moreover, the literary landscape of the early 20th century was dominated by established figures who adhered to more traditional forms and themes, further marginalizing Owen's innovative and subversive approach to war poetry.

Owen's poetry was also shaped by his complex relationship with the literary traditions of the time. His early works, influenced by Romanticism, were somewhat conventional in form and content, which may have contributed to their initial lack of distinction. However, as his experiences in the war deepened, Owen began to experiment with language, form, and imagery in ways that set him apart from his contemporaries. His use of half-rhyme, for instance, became a hallmark of his style, adding a dissonant, unsettling quality to his verses that mirrored the chaos and trauma of the battlefield. This departure from conventional poetic forms, while innovative, may have further alienated some critics and readers who were more accustomed to traditional poetic structures.

Despite these challenges, Owen did receive some recognition and support from his peers, particularly from other war poets who shared his experiences and sensibilities. His friendship with Siegfried Sassoon was particularly significant in this regard. Sassoon, already an established poet by the time he met Owen, recognized the younger poet's talent and encouraged him to pursue his unique vision. Sassoon's mentorship not only helped Owen to hone his craft but also provided him with a model of how to navigate the literary world as a poet deeply critical of the war. However, even with the support of figures like Sassoon, Owen's poetry remained on the fringes of the literary mainstream during his lifetime.

The broader critical reception of Owen's work was also influenced by the evolving perceptions of World War I and its aftermath. As the war dragged on and the scale of its devastation became increasingly apparent, public sentiment began to shift. The initial enthusiasm and patriotic fervor gave way to disillusionment and a more critical appraisal of the conflict. In this changing context, Owen's poetry, which had initially been out of step with

public sentiment, began to resonate more with readers who were grappling with the war's profound impact. However, this shift in perception occurred gradually and did not fully materialize until after Owen's death.

Wilfred Owen's death in 1918, just one week before the Armistice, marked a tragic end to a life and career that had only begun to reach its full potential. The posthumous publication of his poetry, most notably in the 1920 collection edited by Sassoon, played a crucial role in bringing his work to a wider audience and solidifying his reputation as one of the foremost war poets of his generation. The critical recognition that had eluded Owen during his lifetime began to emerge in the years following the war, as readers and critics alike came to appreciate the depth, honesty, and emotional power of his poetry. His works, which had once been seen as too bleak and unpatriotic, were now celebrated for their unflinching portrayal of the realities of war and their profound humanism.

In retrospect, the limited recognition and reception of Wilfred Owen's poetry during his lifetime can be attributed to a combination of factors, including the constraints of the literary marketplace, the dominance of more traditional poetic forms, and the broader cultural and political context of World War I. Despite these obstacles, Owen's poetry has endured and continues to be celebrated for its artistic merit and its powerful critique of war. His work, once marginalized, has become central to the canon of war literature, and his influence can be seen in the works of subsequent generations of poets and writers who have grappled with the themes of conflict, trauma, and the human condition. This paper seeks to explore the intricacies of Owen's reception during his lifetime, shedding light on the complexities of his poetic legacy and the factors that shaped his initial critical reception.

II. EARLY CAREER AND INITIAL REACTIONS

1. **Romantic Influences:** Wilfred Owen's early poetry was heavily influenced by the Romantic poets, particularly John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley. His initial works reflected a fascination with nature, beauty, and the idealism characteristic of Romanticism.
2. **Conventional Style:** These early poems, composed before Owen's experiences in World War I, adhered to traditional forms and structures. They lacked the innovative language and themes that would later define his war poetry.
3. **Limited Critical Attention:** Owen's early works did not attract significant critical attention. They were seen as competent but conventional, lacking the distinct voice that would later emerge in his war poetry.
4. **Marginalized in Literary Circles:** During this period, Owen remained on the fringes of the literary community, without a strong presence in mainstream publications or literary discussions.
5. **Search for Identity:** Owen's early career was marked by a search for his own poetic identity. It was only after his experiences in the trenches of World War I that he began

to develop the distinctive voice that would define his later works and earn him posthumous acclaim.

III. PEER REACTIONS AND INFLUENCES

- **Siegfried Sassoon's Mentorship:** Owen's most significant influence and supporter was Siegfried Sassoon, a fellow soldier-poet whom Owen met while recovering at Craiglockhart War Hospital. Sassoon recognized Owen's talent and encouraged him to develop his unique voice, providing both mentorship and friendship.
- **Literary Encouragement:** Sassoon's guidance was instrumental in helping Owen refine his poetry, pushing him to express the brutal realities of war with greater intensity and honesty. This mentorship led to some of Owen's most powerful works, including "Dulce et Decorum Est" and "Anthem for Doomed Youth."
- **Mutual Respect:** Owen and Sassoon shared a deep mutual respect for each other's work. Sassoon admired Owen's ability to convey the horrors of war with raw emotional power, while Owen was inspired by Sassoon's bold anti-war stance and willingness to challenge the romanticized view of war.
- **Small Literary Circles:** Owen's poetry was primarily shared within small literary circles, including publications like *The Hydra*, a magazine produced at Craiglockhart. These limited outlets meant that his work was known mainly among fellow soldiers and a few literary figures.
- **Posthumous Influence:** While Owen's work was not widely recognized during his lifetime, his peers' support, especially Sassoon's, laid the groundwork for the posthumous recognition of his poetry as some of the most poignant and impactful works of World War I.

IV. CONCLUSION

The critical reception and recognition of Wilfred Owen's poetry during his lifetime were limited by a combination of factors, including the prevailing attitudes towards war poetry and the immediate impact of his work. While Owen's poetry did not achieve widespread acclaim during his lifetime, its significance and influence became more apparent in the years following his death. This paper underscores the importance of understanding the historical context of Owen's reception and the ways in which his poetry has been re-evaluated and celebrated in subsequent years.

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