

The Theme of 'Futility' in War Poetry

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Abstract

This paper discusses the notion of the futility of war and its impact on the psychological state of the soldiers in a representative sample of W.W.I. and W.W.II. poems. Futility expands to refer to the futility of war, the futility of institutions, as well as the futility of human existence. The article analyses several poems by major poets and does not attempt to include all the poems composed on the two great wars due to the fact that being so inclusive is beyond the scope of such a paper or the ambitions of its author.

Introduction

World War I and World War II caused the birth of many war poets who acutely describe the horrors of war and the terrible human loss. War poetry is classified as Modern poetry that is authentic, genuine, revolutionary and free from the tyranny of Tradition. Lesley Jeffries maintains that modern poets were experimenting with “new material” and “new methods of writing” (Jeffries 1993:10). Dennis Brown attributes the subject of experimentation in modern poetry to the “disorientation” caused by the shock of the Great War among other reasons (Brown 1989:11). Indeed, the First World War caused a drastic change in the poetry of the twentieth century. Poets who witnessed this war, like Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, and Wilfred Owen, among others, could not simply write poetry which celebrated nature: the terrible experience of war left its thumbprint on their thinking as well as on their imagination. Many of them suffered from psychological problems during and after the war due to shell shock and/or the horrible scenes of mutilated bodies and human parts scattered on the battlefield. War poetry captures the physical and emotional lineaments of modern war: the pain, weariness, madness, and degradation of human beings under intolerable strain. It attempts to crystallize the moment as it offers images of young soldiers in action. Some poems of this era highlight the case in which a soldier survives war physically but remains obsessed with its bitter horrifying memories which drive him crazy. Samuel Hynes expresses the way the poets were affected by the war. He claims that “[a]ny one who reads war poets will sense at once the note of praise that comes through the violence, anger, and grief” and explains that “men may not perform Great Deeds any longer, but they can be tough, stoical, and humorous under stress, they can be loyal to each other, they can feel pity, and they can perform their meaningless destructive duties faithfully and with skill”. To him, the “myth” of war is “a Myth without the flags and the martial music, but not without

values” (Hynes 1982:23). Hynes suggests that the poets’ reaction against war was manifested in the search for the human element which unites all the soldiers even on hostile fronts, in their response to the meaningless destructive orders they performed, and in the psychological problems which they consequently suffered, either due to shell shock or to the horrible scenes of dead soldiers or even both as mentioned before. In his book *Up The Line to Death*, Brian Gardner explains how “the poets of 1914-18 found the nobility of man in war, even if they did not find much nobility in war itself. They found a brotherhood that transcended the barriers of class, strong at the time; of religion, of race, of every facet of society” (Gardner 1976: xx). So, the poets were looking for the shared thread of humanity that connects humans regardless of their ethnicity, religion, or political orientation, etc.

Michael Schmidt focuses on the “sense of aftermath” and on the effect of modern romanticism. He claims that:

Most of these poets share a strange sense of aftermath: the loosening of the historical ties of commonwealth and the translation of systems of values into systems of utility; the exaltation of expediency over truth; the consequent decay in language, institutions, culture and community, and the effect of this decay on the person. The power which reality has over ideas, the unbendable character of the given, has cured British poetry of utopian dreams. The pull of romanticism is still strong, yet it draws the poet who succumbs to it into the dark, not into the light of the imagined millennium. (Schmidt 1980:7)

Schmidt refers to the breakdown of the system of values, to the loss of faith and morality, to the harsh reality that shatters the fragile world of dreams. He, like Gardner and Hynes, deals with such issues that caused these poets to emphasize the soldiers’ human dimension and the plight of the modern man regardless of class, religion, and race.

Thus, we find that most modern war poetry deals with the brutality and atrocities of war. The poets try to change the favorable attitude of some people towards war by exploring in depth the spiritual hell that war brings into being, and by describing the physical and the emotional pain which humans have to endure during and after the war. The terror, ugliness, and brutality of war became a major theme in the poetry of war poets like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, whose first-hand experience of war made their poems lifelike representations of the ugly face of war, which was looked at romantically by the young who were in search of heroism and glory. The focus of this article is the theme of ‘Futility’ which expands to mean the futility of war, the futility of institutions, as well as the futility of human existence.

Futility in War Poetry

Siegfried Sassoon was so excited about the war that he enlisted in its first day. Later, however, he lost his faith in it and became one of those poets who protested against war and stressed its sense of futility. In the first stanza of his poem “The Troops”, Sassoon describes how the soldiers who are doomed to die, as the dark imagery of the poem suggests, try hard to cling to life but in vain. They are “disconsolate men” with “dulled, sunken faces” that look at the sky “haggard and hopeless”. They are marching in the gloom tired and hopeless since they “who have beaten down/The stale despair of night, must now renew/Their desolation in the truce of dawn”. There is no room for peace since the soldiers’ actions are “[m]urdering the livid hours that grope for peace.” These soldiers feel the futility of their attempt to cling to life, and yet they feel a stronger futility: the futility of hoping that the sky, and God for that matter, might do anything to end their misery. Hence, they look at the sky “haggard and hopeless”. The poet protests against the inaction of those who are in charge and against God whose indifference to these actions indicates that He condones or does not care about the life of these soldiers. The protest is felt in the use of the word “murder”. This whole issue, to Sassoon, is like a conspiracy to murder peace and all the attempts to even “grope” for it. In the second stanza, Sassoon describes the narrow escape these soldiers make through the claws of death. They “cling to life with stubborn hands” and manage to “grin through storms of death and find a gap/In the clawed, cruel tangles of his defence”. The soldiers take a journey into a hellish atmosphere. In the following lines, Sassoon describes this journey from safety to extreme danger:

They march from safety, and the bird-sung joy
Of grass-green thickets, to the land where all
Is ruin, and nothing blossoms but the sky
That hastens over them where they endure
Sad, smoking, flat horizons, reeking woods,
And foundered trench-lines volleying doom for doom.
(L. 12-17 in Sitwell: 1961: 99)

Their journey is more or less a journey into the heart of darkness, a journey into a wasteland where everything is ruined; there are no grass-green thickets where birds would sing with joy; rather, the only thing that “blossoms” is the sky, with its terrible rain of shells, bombs, rockets, etc. The situation of these soldiers, who already have to grapple with death in foundered trench-lines “volleying doom for doom” is aggravating beyond conception. Death is shelled over and over again from one trench into another, and this minimizes the chances of

survival and makes death inevitable, and hence the use of the word “doom” in “volleying doom for doom”.

In the last stanza, Sassoon celebrates his brave companions whose souls “Flock silently away” as they die in large numbers. He says that the bravery of these “eyeless dead” soldiers shames the “wild beast of battle on the ridge” and that “Death will stand grieving in that field of war/Since your [the soldiers’] unvanquished hardihood is spent.” Like the many legions and battalions that were killed before them, the soldiers feel that they are doomed to die. Their only consolation is to make a good fight and to be strong opponents who “have challenged death and dared him face to face”, and thus make death marvel at their bravery and stand in grief for them when they die. Sassoon marvels at the idea that death will grieve for his brave dead companions and stand in admiration for their heroic actions which “shamed the beast of battle” for being worthy opponents.

Sassoon moves on to explicitly describe this war as a journey into “hell” which scars the soldiers:

And through some mooned Valhalla there will pass
Battalions and battalions, scarred from hell;
The unreturning army that was youth;
The legions who have suffered and are dust. (ll. 23-26 in Sitwell
1961:100)

Here, he laments the death of young soldiers who go to the battlefield never to come back while simultaneously asserting that their souls will be in some sort of heaven, a “mooned Valhalla”. The use of words like “battalions” and “legions” emphasizes the vast numbers of soldiers who were killed in action. All of these soldiers were “scarred from hell”; this brings into mind yet another poem by Sassoon which deals exactly with this point. In his poem “They”, Sassoon writes in his ironic style about a bishop who addresses a group of soldiers who were in battle, and this bishop sees the war as a holy one fought “in a just cause” against those who are “Anti-Christ”.

The bishop talks about the soldiers’ comrades who “have challenged death and dared him face to face.” The bishop tells them that when their comrades come back from their holy war “they will not be the same”, and the soldiers’ reply reflects what Sassoon means by “scarred from hell”, and one feels shocked after hearing the bishop’s reply for what the soldiers had to say:

“We’re none of us the same!” the boys reply.
“For George lost both his legs; and Bill’s stone blind;
Poor Jim’s shot through the lungs and like to die;
And Bert’s gone syphilitic; you’ll not find
A chap who’s served that hasn’t found some change”

And the bishop said: "The ways of God are strange!"
(L. 7-12 in Sanders 1970:237)

War leaves an indelible mark on every soldier who engages in battle. The soldiers' losses are stronger than the bishop's rhetoric. As in his poem "the troops", Sassoon in "They" makes an ironic protest against misleading the youth into fighting in war by calling it 'holy'. One gets shocked to hear the bishop's reply after all the soldiers have said, and one feels the futile attempt to change the official policy regarding war which utilizes everything, even religion, to serve its purposes.

Wilfred Owen's "Futility" is another poem that deals with the theme of futility. In this poem, the soldiers try in vain to make the sun resurrect their newly dead friend whose body is still warm. The sun's power to bring to life the clays of a cold star or a plant from a dead cold seed, is contrasted here with its inability to bring back to life a body that is still warm. The poem begins a dynamic scene in which the soldiers are carrying their body of their dead friend. They want to "[m]ove him into the sun" and the following lines are dedicated to show how the sun gently awoke this soldier, who is now dead, back at home whispering to him about the fields which he has to sow. The sun has been awakening this soldier everyday "Until this morning and this snow" (l.5 in Sanders 1970:287). Accordingly, the persona asks his fellow soldiers to move the dead body of their friend into the sun; for "If anything might rouse him now/The kind old sun will know". So, this soldier believes that nature, represented by the sun, is the one that can help his dead friend. Do the soldiers think that god is indifferent or will not help their friend, but nature will? Or are they starting to believe only in what they can see? C.B. Cox and A.E. Dyson believe that the soldiers are merely contemplating rather than acting; they are not moving the dead body; they are just wondering about the meaning and value of the individual even after his death as well as the futility of our existence. The sun in Cox and Dyson's reading of the poem is a symbol of life, and the unsown fields stand for the rich promises of life has for the young men. However, the young men know with a bitter certainty that these unsown fields will never be sown (Cox 1979:54).

In the second part of the poem, the persona evokes the sun's power to give life only to wonder with resigned fatalism why such a power is futile when it comes to a man's dead body:

Think how it wakes the seeds, —
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
Full-nerved—still warm— too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
—O what made the fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all? (ll. 8-14 in Cox 1979:52)

This section in the poem expresses with a sense of sad despair the futility of the soldiers' attempt. Yes, the sun is able to revive and resurrect cold dead seeds, and yes it can wake the clays of a dead cold star, but sadly, it can not resurrect a dead body, though its limbs and sides be "Full-nerved" and "still warm".

Cox and Dyson claim that this poem is about "premature". They state that:

'Futility' is not only a social protest but a religious questioning. It faces the mystery of life in sentiments that would remain profoundly true for the bereaved, even if war itself could by some miracle be abolished. The 'futility' of the title does not refer simply to human follies; it refers beyond these, also, to the human condition itself. It is one side of the tragic vision of man — the perception that if man is the jest and the riddle of the world, this is only because he is first and chiefly its glory. (Cox 1979:56)

Cox and Dyson highlight the futility of the human condition in this universe regardless of when or where or how the human dies. The reference to the sun's generative power that fails to resurrect a dead body makes the human condition the center of interest in this poem. The religious questions in the poem strengthen this claim for they question the reasons for our existence and our role in and relationship with the universe. The scope of these questions goes beyond the mere lamentation of a dead soldier who, like Sassoon's soldier in "A Working Party", is not given a name to make him stand for each and every soldier who is killed in war. Consequently, the experience of loss is universalized for one imagines this soldier to be a potential dear relative or any human who is caught up in a frustrating chaotic universe. The last three lines in the poem conclude the theme of futility and give a sample of the existential questions about our condition in this world. Consider these questions: "Was it for this the clay grew tall? Oh, what made the fatuous sunbeams toil/To break earth's sleep at all?" Clearly these questions refer to the meaninglessness of human existence and the insignificance of human life. C.W. Gillam, in his book *Modern Poems Understood*, states that "the sight of the dead soldier makes the writer wonder why creation ever happened if it was to end only in such futility." (Gillam 1965:158). The persona wonders if we were created for this, and if this is the case, then our existence seems meaningless. The "Oh" indicates the bitterness and sourness of this discovery. This final question reveals a sad anger and a protest against the wisdom of creating people only to have them die like this.

Another poet who deals with the theme of the futility of war is Edward Thomas. Thomas was born in London in 1878, and was killed in action in 1917. He was best known for his prose work, but due to the encouragement of Robert Frost he started composing poetry. In his poetry, Thomas expressed "tensions related to aspects of his marriage, his poverty, and the War". He strikes us mostly as a "wanderer, closely in touch with the landscapes he traverses,

yet repeatedly a stranger, and a little uneasy because of it. Restlessness and fear underlie many poems, especially where the images of night and forest recur" (Hunter 1968:68).

In his poem "As the Team's Head-Brass", Thomas expresses mixed feelings about the futility of war, his sense of duty towards his country, and his feelings of estrangement. The poem's setting reveals a farmer who is ploughing a field of charlock, two lovers going into a wood, and our persona like a wanderer sitting "among the boughs of a fallen elm/That strewed the angle of the fallow". The "fallen elm" stands for the poet's sense of his own wrecked life in which vision is 'strewed' so that one's vision becomes blurred, and this idea can also be found in line (34) in which he says, "If we could see all all might seem good." The farmer starts a conversation with the persona asking him about the weather and the war.

In the second stanza, a "blizzard felled the elm whose crest/I [the persona] sat in by a woodpecker's round hole". The farmer converses intermittently with our persona at intervals which last about ten minutes each. This shows the problem of communication between the humans especially at that time. The farmer asks, and our persona replies:

'Have you been out?' 'No.' 'And don't want to,
perhaps?'
'If I could only come back again, I should.
I could spare an arm. I shouldn't want to lose
A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so,
I should want nothing more... Have many gone
From here?' 'Yes.' 'Many lost?' 'Yes, a good few.
Only two teams work on the farm this year.
One of my mates is dead. The second day
In France they killed him. It was back in March,
The very night of the blizzard too. Now if
He had stayed here we should have moved the tree.'
'And I should not have sat here. Everything
Would have been different. For it would have been
Another world.' 'Ay, and a better, though
If I could see all all might seem good.' (ll.19-34 in Hunter 1968:79-80)

This dialogue exposes the persona's mixed feelings about his sense of duty, the futility of war, and fear of death. He is willing to go to war if he could come back alive without losing a leg, but it seems okay for him to lose an arm; he is sure, however, that he will be 'scarred from hell', because he can not enter war's dead zone and escape its deadly claws unscathed. This idea is similar to the one discussed in Sassoon's two poems "The Troops" and "They". Again like the previously discussed poets, Thomas laments the loss of those who die in battle. The death of the farmer's mate is a bad omen for Thomas especially since this dead soldier perished on "The very night of the blizzard too." Notice the use of the word "too" which implies that death will nail Thomas, too. The farmer's innocent expression of the humans'

lack of clear vision in “If I could see all all might seem good” probably indicates that what might seem to us as evil or unjustified must in the total plan of nature (or God) be right and good. This idea echoes that of Sassoon's bishop in "They" who said, “The ways of God are strange!” (L.12).

This conversation, as can be inferred from the short answers and the unsaid interrupted statements, reveals the problem of communication the human has, Thomas concludes his poem with the lovers coming out of the woods, and the horses ploughing the field, and “for the last time/I [the persona] watched the clods crumble and topple over/After the ploughshare and stumbling team.” The words “for the last time” betray the persona’s restlessness and inner fright of death which devours everything.

The ploughed field is a symbol of hope. It is an image of life-through-death. The woodpecker’s round hole symbolizes the female womb as C. G. Jung, in his book *Four Archetypes*, indicates (Jung 1972:16). Hence, the setting suggests spiritual transformation (Death and rebirth). Thomas looks at this place as if it is an enchanted place which offers so many possibilities of love, fertility, and rebirth. On the other hand, the negative context of war and death suggests the fatal attraction of war as embodied in the references to the fallen elm, the blizzard, the dead soldier who was sitting in the same spot Thomas is sitting and who died the night of the blizzard “too”. Thus, futility lies in the fact that war, like fate, is inescapable and claims the lives of so many who die meaninglessly – a matter which we can not comprehend because we can not “see all”. It is worth mentioning that Thomas himself could not escape war, and his fears were materialized for he died in action in 1917 in the same war he talks about in this poem.

The theme of futility was popular among the war poets probably because living in war conditions leads one to a kind of despair that renders everything around futile. Edwin Muir is another poet who addressed this theme in his poetry. Muir, a Scottish poet, lived in poverty and taught himself literature and politics while working in different jobs. Muir was interested by the passage of time, by the influence of ancient myths on modern culture, and by the problematics of identity and change (Abrams 1979:2243). Muir had a rather nightmarish vision of reality, and he wrote about the confusion and anxiety of the modern world. Muir associates divine law with rural life and human law with industrial society. To him, the world is a labyrinth (Mellown 1979:15). This view reminds one of Existentialism in which man is viewed as a rat in a maze without exit. It also suggests the insignificance of human life and. Like the previous poets, Muir was concerned with the situation of Man in this world. In his poem “The Usurpers”, he addresses the plight of modern man. From the beginning of the poem we are shocked with the painful truth of the futility of our existence:

There is no answer. We do here what we will
And there is no answer. This is our liberty
No one has known before, nor could have borne,
For it is rooted in this deepening silence
That is our work and has become our kingdom.
If there were an answer, how could we be free? (ll.1-6 in Sanders
1970:259)

Muir directly states that there is no answer to our hopeless situation. In this line “there is no answer”, which is repeated twice directly in the first stanza and a third time in the conditional phrase “if there were an answer”, lies the stark bitter truth of the futility of both our existence and of our search for answers which will help us solve the riddle of our lives. The line implies the impossibility of reaching an answer.

This view of life is so similar to the one we find in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. *Macbeth* utters the following lines after hearing of Lady *Macbeth*'s death:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(*Macbeth* Act V, Scene V, ll.23-27 in Keams 1987:182)

This reading of the poem is in agreement with Rosenthal's. In his book *The Modern Poets*, he claims that “‘The Usurpers’ stares into the blank face of a world ‘liberated’ from every old concern and value and finds no answer but ‘black in its blackness’” (Rosenthal 1960:139).

The question of freedom in the poem means that since we have freedom to “do here what we will” and there is no controlling force which guides us when we ask for guidance and punishes us for transgressions, then there is no answer. Consequently, life is absurd and meaningless and it is but vain to try to make sense out of nonsense.

In the poem, Muir refers the “ancestral voices” and the “old garrulous ghosts” which “are not missed that once were such proud masters”. This means that people live, die, and become forgotten no matter what their social rank was. Time and death level and swallow everything into their darkness. Since this is the case, Muir states that “In this air/Our thoughts are our deeds; we dare do all we think,/Since there is no one to check us here or elsewhere.”(l.11-13) These lines take us back to the idea of the absence of a controlling force which monitors our moves and rewards or punishes us whether “here” on this planet or “elsewhere” in heaven or in hell; the absence of this force turns our thoughts to deeds as there is nothing to fear, and “no one to check us”.

Our futile and meaningless existence, according to Muir, is also expressed in the following lines:

All round us stretches nothing; we move through nothing
Nothing but nothing world without end. We are
Self-guided, self-impelled and self-sustained,
Archer and bow and burning arrow sped
On its wild flight through nothing to tumble down
At last on nothing, our home and cure for all. (ll.14-19 in Sander
1970:259)

These lines surely focus on the idea that we are on our own in this universe, we are driven and guided by our instincts like animals, and that there is no end for this world, no hereafter, and that everything we do is like the burning arrow which speeds through nothingness and finally tumbles down on nothing. For Muir, the word “nothingness” stands for all what our ancestors did, all that we do and will do, and all what the future generations will do.

The remaining section of the poem (ll.20-49) deals with the relationship between light and darkness, and, consequently, the relationship between dreams and daydreams. Muir writes in this section about the ghosts which trouble us in our sleep and which “[l]ong since were bred in that pale territory”, probably the territory of our unconscious. These ghosts come to our imagination from the dark recesses of our unconscious. Some times these ghosts or fancies come to us in day light making us imagine, as Muir puts it, that “the trees look unfamiliar”, “the mountains judge us”, “brooks tell tales about us”, “the rocks looked strangely on us”, “the waves were angry with us”, and that we “Heard dark runes murmuring in the Autumn wind”. However, Muir concludes his poem with the assertion that “[t]hese are imaginations. We are free” which assures us that we are free and that these are games played by our unconscious on us. The assertion, as far as I am concerned, only adds doubt to the idea of freedom since it suggests that we are safe in our ignorance so we better just live the lie of being free. In effect, Muir seems to believe that our existence is futile, and everything we do to change it is futile.

In his poem “Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries”, A.E. Housman addresses the idea of the absence of God, or the absence of someone to “check us here or elsewhere” as Muir puts it. Notice this line: “What God abandoned, these soldiers defended” (l. 7 in Abrams 1979:1915). It is clear from this line that God created the world and abandoned it thus leaving people to destroy each other in wars. The poem is dedicated to the soldiers who fought bravely “when heaven was falling” and died protecting earth’s foundations by holding with their shoulders the sky. These strong images indicate the apocalyptic destructive aspect of war in which the world seems about to collapse and everything will fall into pieces, and yet

God is not doing anything to stop all this destruction as if He abandoned the world and made it the soldiers responsibility to protect it.

Like Muir, Philip Larkin deals with the nothingness which colors everything we do. Philip Larkin (1922-1985) is a British poet whose poems reflect his anxiety about death. In his poem “Ambulances”, Larkin depicts the ambulances as coffins. He does not consider the possibility that the patient might live. In the first stanza, he describes the ambulances as being “closed like confessionals”. This similarity associates death with the ambulance and connotes perhaps the spiritual death of the confessionals. Larkin then describes the ambulance as it cruises through the streets as “[t]hey come to rest at every kerb”, how people look at it, and how the ambulance gives back “none of the glances” which people make. The use of the word “glances” indicates the speed with which the ambulance carries one to his death which Larkin believes to be the only outcome of getting in the ambulance.

In the second stanza, Larkin claims that the children who are sitting on the “steps or roads” and the “women coming from the shops” see the “wild white face that overtops/Red stretcher-blankets momentarily/As it is carried in and stowed”. Larkin’s use of the word “stowed” indicates that the sick man who is carried into the ambulance is considered like cargo. Like Owen in his poem “Futility”, Larkin refers to the human condition, to the tragic vision of man who is caught in the chaos of time and is “not waving but drowning” to use Stevie Smith's title.

In the next stanza, Larkin deals with the theme of futility of our existence morbidly. Larkin writes:

And sense the solving emptiness
That lies just under all we do,
And for a second get it whole,
So permanent and blank and true. (L. 13-18 in Thwaite 1983:73)

In these lines, Larkin writes about the moment of truth or epiphany when all the masks fall and the moment of discovery or enlightenment happens. The realization of life’s true value is the discovery. This “emptiness” that “lies just under all we do” is exactly in agreement with what Muir in “The Usurpers” states, “All round us stretches nothing; we move through nothing,/Nothing but nothing world without end” (ll. 14-15). This morbid truth of the nothingness we live in becomes apparent, “permanent”, “blank”, and “true” to the observers of the ambulance; after they realize this truth, the ambulance retreats as its “fastened doors recede”. These observers “whisper at their own distress” the words “poor soul”. The words “own distress” mark the common destiny which links us together.

In the remainder of the poem, Larkin describes how in this “deadened air may go the sudden shut of loss/Round something nearly at an end”, and how “the unique random

blend/Of families and fashions there at last begin to loosen”. The fact that we share the same morbid destiny, as Larkin suggests, makes the people feel a sense of loss at the death of this stranger as if he is related to them since the “unique random blend of families and fashions” begins to loosen and fade away leaving only the threat of a similar fate as it “Brings closer what is left to come,/And dulls to distance all we are”. Anthony Thwaite and John Mole have a similar reading of the poem. They state:

The unusual notion on which this poem is based is that ambulances are seen as messengers of death, not of mercy: they are reminders of ‘what is left to come’, ‘the solving emptiness/That lies just under all we do.’ There is something sinister about them in their self-contained separateness, and they are described as if they were self-willed agents. The victim or patient is ‘stowed’ like a piece of cargo, or a corpse, as if life vanished; the air itself is ‘deadened’ or numbed, as if the ambulance were a coffin. (Thwaite 1983:86)

Larkin deprives the sick stranger from receiving these feelings of pity which the onlookers feel for him; the sick stranger is now “Far From the exchange of love” as he lies “Unreachable inside a room/The traffic parts to let go by”. Like Sassoon’s soldier in “A Working Party” the sick stranger is not given a name, which makes him stand for each and every human whether male or female, young or old, who is caught in a similar condition, and this makes the issue of loss of a dear one more universal, for one imagines this stranger to be a potential dear relative. Thus, futility in this poem is treated in almost the same way Muir and Owen dealt with it in their poems “The Usurpers” and “Futility”. These three poems concentrate on the human bond which links us together, and on the pitiful state the modern man has reached as he lives in and lives for nothing.

W.B. Yeats is another poet who expressed the theme of futility in some of his poems. Yeats utilized a system of symbols from the Irish Literature, was concerned with the liberation of Ireland, and loaded his poetry with images of revolution. In his short poem “The Great Day”, Yeats expresses the futility of war and how it backfires. In his four-line-poem, Yeats writes:

Hurrah for revolution and more canon-shot!
A beggar upon horseback lashes a beggar on foot.
Hurrah for revolution and cannon come again!
The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on. (Sanders 1970:150)

M.L. Rosenthal, in his book *The Modern Poets* states that this poem “speaks to our world of one of its greatest fears- the ultimate futility of political action” (Rosenthal 1960:29). This poem, says Rosenthal, reveals how Yeats’ questions that “callous demagoguery” which “battens on man’s dearest hopes and ideals”. What Rosenthal says is quite valid for wars and

rebellions happen again and again; “A beggar upon horseback lashes a beggar on foot”, but though places and faces may change, the effect remains the same: “The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on.” Notice the use of the word “lash” which indicates the harsh, cruel, and inhuman treatment of people (especially commoners), who are treated in this same harsh manner even though leaders change, and this is the political futility which consumes people's dreams and aspirations.

A good example of this political futility is the French Revolution whose leaders managed to dethrone and kill Louis The Sixteenth and his family. The revolution, however, backfired since many people were falsely accused of high treason and killed. In effect the revolution leaders became tyrants and proved to be worse than their predecessors. In other words, the leaders change and the subjects remain the ones who suffer. Yeats’ two-line-poem “Parnell” has the same theme of political futility. This poem is shorter than the previous one, but it is not less important. Yeats writes:

Parnell came down the road, he said to a cheering man:
‘Ireland shall get her freedom and you still break stone.’ (Sanders
1970:150)

This short poem expresses the state of the ordinary man who remains the slave of his circumstances regardless of the political changes that happen around him. This again shows Yeats’ deeply rooted distrust in the political system which serves only its leaders’ own best interests. The worker, in the poem, is still breaking stone, even when Ireland is about to gain its freedom. Apparently, the plain man’s concerns do not go beyond his daily work, and that the only group who benefit from a rebellion is the one that leads it.

In effect, political futility makes any mission to change the status-quo in a country futile for each revolution will backfire and the layman will be the victim of this change. Consider for example the general theme of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* which deals with this issue; in the story, the animals dethrone man and kick him out of the farm, and the pigs become the leaders who enslave the other animals and treat them worse than Man treated them. Eventually, the pigs start wearing men’s clothes and walking on two legs. Isn’t this what Yeats is trying to say? The layman is like Hugo’s animals only suffers from political changes without gaining any real benefits, whereas, the leaders reap the harvest of revolutions.

W.H. Auden also discusses the political futility in some of his poems. For example, in his six-line-poem “Epitaph on a Tyrant” Auden writes:

Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after,
And the poetry he invented was easy to understand;
He knew human folly like the back of his hand,
And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;

When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,
And when he cried the little children died in the streets. (Mendelson
1979:80)

In the last two lines of the poem, one can sense a spirit of protest against and criticism of the futility of the political system. If the senators, who are supposed to represent the people are hypocrites and puppets moved according to the will of the leader, then the political system becomes futile. Thus, the “respectable” senators burst with laughter when this tyrant laughed for either they feared him or were thirsty for his gifts. At the same time, when the tyrant did horrible things that led to the murder of children in the streets “when he cried the little children died in the streets”. The cry could be a shout for his soldiers to attack and kill people and innocent children or it could mean that when the tyrant was upset he would take it out on the innocent people and children. The cynically-called “respectable” senators have a passive attitude; they only stood, watched, and perhaps condoned such actions. Like Yeats, Auden expresses in his poem his distrust of the political system which serves only its leaders’ own best interests and condones their inhuman actions.

Conclusion

From the discussions of the selected poems in this article, one can see how these poets touch upon the same theme of futility each in his own way. Most of them lament the tragic condition of the modern man. Some of these poets also deal with the futility of religion by questioning the wisdom of our creation and of our creator who is seen as dead or indifferent to the human plight. Moreover, some of them deal with futility in the political sphere; they protest against the use of the political system for personal ends especially to suit the personal needs of leaders. They are different poets, but they are united in their shared sense of the futility of the world we live in, and their shared sense of the emptiness of our existence. The First World War had a drastic effect on the poetry of many poets of the twentieth century. Poets like Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, and Wilfred Owen, as well as many other poets, gave us their pure firsthand experience of war and described the fatal effects whether physical or mental upon those who participate in war. Many of these poets suffered from psychological problems during and after the war due to shell shock and/or the horrible scenes of mutilated bodies and scattered human parts on the battlefield. Some of these poets address the existential questions regarding man’s role in this world and his relation with his creator, a relation that usually intensifies the tragic dimension of the characters in the target poems. A person who reads war poetry can understand why the poets strongly expressed their refusal of war. The poets criticized the blundering stupidity of their governments whose mission was

to keep sending soldiers to battle to be massacred like cattle, and they were also against those who condoned the atrocious massacres that were committed during the World Wars. The poems express a sense of outrage at the horrors of war, and express feelings of pity for the soldiers, mostly young, who are killed in battle. All of these poets try to crystallize the moment and to put an end to war's insanity which claims everything even the basic human emotions. Some of the poets try to emphasize our shared humanity regardless of nationality. In addition most of the poets in question lament the tragic condition of modern man and expressed the futility of religion by questioning the wisdom of our creation and of God who is seen as dead or simply indifferent to the human plight; they protest against the futile existence and the nothingness which wraps and colors everything in their lives. Furthermore, some of them expressed in their poetry the political futility of the system which is used by the authoritative body of the society to serve its personal ends. All the poets discussed in this article suffer from a shared sense of the futility of the world we live in and a shared sense of emptiness. In short, war poets tried to capture the physical and emotional lineaments of modern war, thereby revealing the pain, weariness, madness, and degradation of human beings under intolerable strain. This kind of poetry gives us images of young soldiers in action who suffer from the terror, ugliness, and brutality of war.

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