

Wilfred Owen And A Summary of Strange Meeting

Strange Meeting is a poem about reconciliation. Two soldiers meet up in an imagined Hell, the first having killed the second in battle. Their moving dialogue is one of the most poignant in modern war poetry.

Wilfred Owen fought and died in WW1, being fatally wounded just a week before the war ended in May 1918. By all accounts he wanted to return to the front line, despite suffering from shell shock, to justify his art.

'I know I shall be killed,' he told his brother, *'but it's the only place I can make my protest from.'*

Owen disliked the gentle, sentimental poetry that gave a distorted view of the war. He wrote many poems depicting the horror and helplessness; he wanted to capture the pity in his poetry.

- The majority of the poem is a dialogue between the two soldiers, set in a dream-like environment that is in fact, Hell. Enemies in war, the two become reconciled in the end.

Strange Meeting, the title taken from a poem of Shelley's, called *Revolt of Islam*, is full of metaphor and symbol. Religious allusions play a part too. Owen was very much torn in his faith but couldn't escape a strict religious upbringing. So biblical influences are to the fore in certain parts of the poem.

This letter from Owen to a friend in 1917 shows a little of what the poet was thinking:

'Christ is literally in no man's land. There men often hear his voice: Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for a friend. Is it spoken in English only and French? I do not believe so. Thus you see how pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism.'

Owen's poem contains a message of love and forgiveness. It was written at a time when hate and loathing were at their height, when a war on an unimaginable scale took the lives of millions of young men and women.

Strange Meeting

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
"Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn."
"None," said that other, "save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,

Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
 But mocks the steady running of the hour,
 And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
 For by my glee might many men have laughed,
 And of my weeping something had been left,
 Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
 The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
 Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
 Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
 They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
 None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
 Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
 Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
 To miss the march of this retreating world
 Into vain citadels that are not walled.
 Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
 I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
 Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
 I would have poured my spirit without stint
 But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
 Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

"I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
 I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
 Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
 I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
 Let us sleep now. . . ."

Analysis of Strange Meeting Lines 1 - 22

- The title gives it away - this will be no ordinary meeting - and the opening two words add further uncertainty about the coming encounter, the speaker saying it only *seemed* he came straight from the battle and entered the tunnel that brought him to a curious landscape.
- Note the pararhyme already working its magic with enjambment and alliteration to produce an opening sentence the likes of which was new for the reader in 1920. A sense of hard, grinding history is introduced with images of both granite and the titanic wars (the actual Titanic ship had foundered in 1912).
- So, the speaker is setting the scene. Having been transported, after his own death, to this severe and shocking environment, he also comes across other soldiers who are having difficulty 'sleeping', who are stuck in their minds or are dead.
- As the speaker tries to rouse them, one springs up, a sad and knowing look in his eyes, hands held as if in benediction. Owen's use of internal rhyme and repetition is clear in lines 7 - 10. Note *piteous/eyes* and *distressful/bless* together with *smile, I knew* and *dead smile, I knew*.

By the end of the second stanza the reader is in no doubt of the ghostly, surreal and horrific nature of this environment, which is a post-battle Hell. There are subtle hints that the speaker and the soldier with the dead smile are known to each other.

- The third stanza's opening line has an extra beat (11 syllables) suggesting that the vision of the dead soldier's face is extraordinary given that there is no connection to the real world up above, the battlefield with all its personified sounds.

- Initiating dialogue, the speaker's opening comments are meant to allay fear and make a connection free of animosity and sadness. The use of the word friend immediately flags up the idea that this is a meeting between equals; there is now no enemy.
- The response is direct - at first agreement that mourning for the dead is not needed but then acknowledgement of the many futures lost, the hopelessness of the situation.
- *Note the syntax changing as the dialogue (monologue) develops. Enjambment disappears and punctuation holds sway in terms of syntax, the pace within the iambic pentameter steadied by comma and semi-colon.*
- The dead soldier now comes 'alive' in line 17, the first person pronoun I signalling a more personal approach. This soldier, this German soldier, also had a life full of hope, just as the speaker had. Essentially, these two are the same, young men hunting after the wildest beauty, the essence of life, that which cares not for routine things and feels deeply, even in grief, much more so than in Hell.
- Note the paronyms *hair, hour and here*, soft sounding, almost ephemeral.

Further Analysis Lines 23 - 44

- All the emotion is ineffective now, from laughter to tears, it has died. And with it, the truth which is yet to be told. This is the truth of pity, made up of sorrow and compassion, expressed when others are suffering as they have been doing in untold numbers in the war.

Owen wanted more than anything to have his poetry stand for pity. In the preface to this book he wrote: 'My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity.'

- *Now men will go content...* future generations might learn about peace, or join in this madness of destruction that we started. They'll be more aggressive, stubborn and make hard work of any progress.
- I thought I was brave and wise, going into the unknown, still a master of my own fate, but now history is leaving me behind. How vulnerable the world will be.
- The wheels of the war machine grind to a halt in the blood that's been spilled; I will clean them, purify and heal with water from the deep well. This is an allusion to the bible, John 4, 7-14 or Revelation 7, 17, where water is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The soldier is saying that he will wash the blood clogged wheels with the pure (emotional) truth.
- *I would have poured my spirit...* again, this phrase comes from the bible, and is found in the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel and Acts of the Apostles. Basically, the soldier is giving his life as sacrifice for humanity, hoping that they will see the truth about war. (without stint means without limit). But he does not want to waste it on the wounds or foul business of war.
- War results in psychological illness too, it's not all about blood and gore.
- That devastating line 40. The second soldier reveals to the first the grim news of his killing, but does reciprocate and call him friend (see line 14). There is recognition of the shared expression even as death occurred, which the second soldier tried in vain to avert.
- The first soldier's frown as he bayonets the second soldier is an expression of doubt, self-loathing perhaps, a reluctance to kill.
- The final line has the second soldier suggesting they both sleep now, having been reconciled, having learnt that pity, distilled by the awful suffering of war, is the only way forward for humankind.

What Is the Metre (Meter in American English) and Rhyme Scheme in Strange Meeting

Pararhyme

Strange Meeting is written in heroic couplets and there are a total of 44 lines contained in four stanzas. Note that lines 19-21 form a tercet, ending in three half rhymes: *hair/hour/here*. The last line is much shorter and doesn't rhyme with any other line.

Rhyme

Owen is a master of *pararhyme*, where the stressed vowels differ but the consonants are similar, and uses this technique throughout the poem. So note the end words: *escaped/scooped*, *groined/groaned*, *bestirred/stared* and so on.

The second vowel is usually lower in pitch adding to the oddity of the sounds, bringing dissonance and a sense of failure. So whilst there is common ground between the rhymes there is equally discomfort, the feeling that something isn't quite what it should be.

If Owen had used full rhyme this unease would be missing, so the imperfection perfectly fits the surreal situation of the two men meeting in Hell.

Metrical Analysis

Strange Meeting is written in iambic pentameter, that is, the de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM stress pattern dominates, but there are lines that vary and these are important because they challenge the reader to alter the emphasis on certain words and phrases.

So, here are three examples to illustrate, with lines 7, 27, and 30:

- With **pit** / eous re / **cognit** / ion in / **fixed eyes**,

The first foot is iambic (non stress, stress **ux**), the second foot a pyrrhic (no stress, no stress, **uu**), the third another iamb, the fourth another pyrrhic and the fifth foot a spondee (stress, stress **xx**).

- **Or**, dis / **content**, / **boil blood** / y, **and** / be

The first foot is a trochee (stress, no stress, **xu**), the second is an iamb (no stress, stress **ux**), the third a spondee (stress, stress **xx**), the fourth an iamb (no stress, stress **ux**) and the fifth foot an iamb.

- **Courage** / was **mine**, / and I / had **mys** / tery.

Again, a trochee (inverted iamb) starts the line before the iambic beat takes over the rest.

The iambic pentameter reflects the steady almost conversational natural pace of speech, whilst the variations bring uncertainty, altered beats which echo battle and bring texture and added interest for the reader.

Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting"

A Critical Analysis

"Strange Meeting" was the end result of a metamorphosis undergone by Owen and other World War I soldier-poets. They went through many changes as their exposure to the war and trench life increased. Initially they wrote patriotic verse, designed to help build a united front opposing the aggressions of Germany. This quickly changed as they began to realize the grim realities and arbitrariness of war. As their frustrations grew, they lashed out at those they saw as either profiting from the war or misguidedly supporting it. Their final stage reflects the sadness and waste of any war at any time no matter what side the combatants and populace are on. Owen was no exception; "Strange Meeting" is perhaps his most poignant poem and strongest antiwar work, crowning his short list of achievements.

Paradoxically enough Owen began writing poetry in the tradition of the romantics with **Keats and Shelley** as his models. Equipped with a Romantic sensibility, Owen might have written better **poetry** but circumstances ordained otherwise. The war provided Owen with subject matter, which turned the romantic elegiac strain of his early poems into the deep feelings of sorrow and compassion, which characterize his later poems.

The idea of the futility of the soldiers' sacrifice is the theme of strange meeting. In fact, it is a poem of visionary dream. The poet soldier imagines that he has escaped from battle and gone to the other regions. As he keeps watching the corpses, one springs up with piteous recognition in fixed eyes'. The other man in its cadaverous look, who is in fact the enemy soldier, relates the horrors and frustrations accompanying war. He is sad that he has been snatched away by death even before he could pass on to humanity the knowledge he acquired – the truth untold – the bitter experience on the battle field – the pity war distilled. He further voices against the abstract and unworthy glorification of war. An enemy in life

becomes a friendly companion in the land of the dead, finally when disclosing his identity he bids friend to join.

Strange Meeting is the most emphatic of Owen's imaginative statements of war experience. Striking in its crispness and brevity it is his best poem that has won for him a 'passport to immortality'. War is organized brutality. Because of war, men retreat from their material progress and civilization. The poem no doubt highlights the horrors of war. It is also to ascertain eternal truths of love, amity and good will. Nevertheless, his decisions collapse because of the sudden termination of life. The poem strange meeting is an imaginative recreation of a supposed happening after death or even a process in the imagination of a living man after death. It is a vivid experience.

In Strange Meeting, the dead man, however, is displeased with the cause of his death. Sacrificing life for the sake of others is a noble act; but the glorification of war is both abstract and unworthy.

The theme of universal goodwill, which Owen has been persistently advocating, seems reserved for the world of death where enemies become friends and engage in a discussion of their problems with an open mind. The poem underlines the theme of 'insensibility' also. The soldiers have grown insensible to pain and horror. It is paradoxical that the sense of goodwill does not exist where it is most needed and exists where it is not needed!

The death of a young soldier in the battlefield is nothing but a total waste of his undeveloped possibilities and talents through which he could serve humanity had he not joined the warfront to kill others and to be killed untimely by others. In the poem, the 'other' mourns because of the waste of his years:

"Courage was mine, and I had mystery,
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery
To miss the march of this retreating world

Into vain citadels that are not walled”.

Perhaps he would have been able to undo the destruction brought about by the war, wash the blood-clogged wheels of the chariots with truth drawn from the unpolluted spring-well of our heart which is finest and deepest in the human spirit. The ‘other’ soldiers, Owen’s mirrored self who takes part in war kills and become killed – underlines the fact that while participating in a war, every young soldier sacrifices the possibilities of a noble achievement for pursuing a vain, inhuman, disastrous end.

With a frank realism, free from the violent bitterness of so much of Sassoon’s **poetry**, Owen set out to present the whole reality of war – the boredom, the hopelessness, the futility, the horror, occasionally the courage and self – sacrifice, but, above all, the pity of it. In addition, never has the pity of war been more deeply felt or more powerfully shown in any other poem than Strange Meeting. His is the satire of war in Strange Meeting and is sharp, yet he never loses his artistic poise, and his most bitter work has a true dignity.

To sum up, Owen's "Strange Meeting" shows stagnation of the glory of the country. This emphasizes the theme of futility of war and the degradation of war. The theme of universal suffering is also brought up as the poem also shows a psychological struggle occurring within soldiers as they fight. The word "frowned" as the soldier "jabbed and killed" suggests a reluctance in fighting as it hints that the fighting is against the soldier's will and he thinks that it is wrong to kill. The theme is once again surfaced as the vision says "let us sleep now". This statement is ironic as there is no real rest for those who are still fighting in the war but only for those who are already dead. The hell above still exists on the battlefield and the "Hell" that they are in can offer them eternal sleep. In conclusion, the poem shows a supernatural, dream-like meeting between two soldiers who were enemies in the hellish war above but now are friends in "Hell". Their conversation shows the futility of war and the broken dreams and unfulfilled desires due to war. The hopelessness of war is further shown as soldiers die with unresolved conflicts in life. War too brings suffering to all due to the bloodshed and the widespread devastation and destruction

Wilfred Owen: "Strange Meeting"

By: Intisar Rashid Khaleel

Summary

The speaker escapes from battle and proceeds down a long tunnel through ancient granite formations. Along his way he hears the groan of sleepers, either dead or too full of thoughts to get up. As he looks at them one leaps up; the soldier has recognized him and moves his hands as if to bless him. Because of the soldier's "dead smile" the speaker knows that he is in Hell.

On the face of the "vision" the speaker sees a thousand fears, but the blood, guns, or moans of above did not reach into their subterranean retreat. The speaker tells the soldier that there is no reason to mourn, and he replies that there is – it is the "undone years" and "hopelessness". The soldier says his hope is the same as the speaker's; he also tells him he once went hunting for beauty in the world, but that beauty made a mockery of time. He knows the truth of what he did, which is "the pity of war, the pity war distilled", but now he can never share it.

The soldier/vision continues, saying men will go on with what is left to them, or they will die as well. They will not break their ranks even though "nations trek from progress". He used to have courage and wisdom. He would wash the blood from the wheels of chariots. He wanted to pour his spirit out, but not in war.

Finally, he says to the speaker that "I am the enemy you killed, my friend," and that he knew him in the dark. It was yesterday that the speaker "jabbed and killed" him, and now it is time to sleep.

Analysis

"Strange Meeting" is one of Wilfred Owen's most famous, and most enigmatic, poems. It was published posthumously in 1919 in Edith Sitwell's anthology *Wheels: an Anthology of Verse* and a year later in Siegfried Sassoon's 1920 collection of Owen's poems. T.S. Eliot referred to "Strange Meeting" as a "technical achievement of great originality" and "one of the most moving pieces of verse inspired by the war." That war, of course, is WWI – the central element in all poems in Owen's relatively small oeuvre. The poet Ted Hughes noted in his writings on "Strange Meeting": "few poets can ever have written with such urgent, defined, practical purpose".

The poem is renowned for its technical innovation, particularly the pararhyme, so named by Edmund Bluson in regard to Owen's use of assonant endings. A pararhyme is a slant or partial rhyme in which the words have similar consonants before and after unlike vowels – escaped and scooped, groaned and grained, hair and hour. Almost all of the end lines in this

poem are pararhyme; the last line is a notable exception. Critics have noted how this rhyme scheme adds to the melancholy, subterranean, and bleak atmosphere of the poem.

The poem's description of a soldier's descent into Hell where he meets an enemy soldier he killed lends itself to a critique of war. The dead man talks about the horror of war and the inability for anyone but those involved to grasp the essential truth of the experience. There is more than meets the eye, however, and many critics believe that the man in hell is the soldier's "Other", or his double. A man's encounter with his double is a common trope in Romantic literature; the device was used by Shelley, Dickens, and Yeats, among others. The critic Dominic Hibbard notes the poem does not "[present] war as a merely internal, psychological conflict – but neither is it concerned with the immediate divisions suggested by 'German' and 'conscript' [initially what the dead man calls himself] or 'British' and 'volunteer'." The dead man is the Other, but he is more than a reflection of the speaker - he is a soldier whose death renders his status as an enemy void. Another critic reads the poem as a dream vision, with the soldier descending into his mind and encountering his poetic self, the poem becoming a mythological and psychological journey. Finally, Elliot B. Gose, Jr. writes that "the Other...represents the narrator's unconscious, his primal self from which he has been alienated by war".

The style of the poem was influenced by several sources. "Strange Meeting" echoes Dante's pitying recognition of the tortured faces in Hell, the underworld of Landor's Gebir, and, of course, Keats and Shelley. Owens was an ardent admirer of both Romantic poets, whose *The Fall of Hyperion* and *The Revolt of Islam*, respectively, were no doubt instructive to Owen as he composed his own work. *The Fall of Hyperion* features the goddess of memory revealing her dying but immortal face and her blank eyes, allowing the poet to grasp her monumental knowledge of wars and heroes past. The emphasis in Owen's work on truth and dreams also resonates of Keats.'

The title of the poem, however, may be taken directly from Shelley's work: "And one whose spear had pierced me, leaned beside, / With quivering lips and humid eyes; - and all / Seemed like some brothers on a journey wide / Gone forth, whom now strange meeting did befall / In a strange land." In *The Revolt of Islam*, Laon tells his soldiers not to avenge themselves on the enemy who has massacred their camp but to ask them to throw down their arms and embrace their shared humanity. The two sides gather together in the "strange meeting."