

An Analysis of Wilfred Owen's War Poetry in the light of Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory

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Abstract: World War I influenced not only the lives of many people and changed their perspectives towards life but also the literary works of the writers and altered the tradition in literature. The Poet of World War I, Wilfred Owen, after participating in the army during the First World War, witnessed the destructive results of the war and produced his poetry regarding the terrible outcomes of war when he was a soldier. The reflection of war in his poetry proves that he was psychologically affected by the war and until his death in the war, in his poetry, he portrayed how soldiers turned out to be hopeless, helpless, exhausted and repressed by the war and why they lost the meaning and joy of life after observing the sufferings of the other soldiers and after undergoing a psychological trauma. In this sense, his own psychological distress can also be recognized in his works, therefore in this article the psychological state of both Owen and the soldiers in his poetry will be analyzed in the light of one of the most significant theorists in the field of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, who introduced new concepts in psychoanalysis and examined the psychological stages in the mind and explained the reasons behind the actions of individuals through stressing the importance of unconscious and repression of feelings.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, Wilfred Owen, War Poetry

Wilfred Owen, one of the most significant war poets, played a very important role in reflecting the negative effects of World War I and shed light on the destructive and atrocious impact of war upon the psychology of soldiers. Since he himself was a soldier during the war, he effectively highlighted the psychological trauma experienced by the soldiers and emphasized the futility of war. Thus, it is apparent that "Owen's poetry covers a greater range of experience [...]" [1]; in other words his own harsh experiences during the war are reflected in his poetry, as a result the sufferings of the soldiers in his poetry can be defined as his own sufferings. Especially, after his death during the war, his poetry gains more significance and appreciation, therefore

"the death of Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) at the hands of German machine-gunners in the final week of the Great War has been lamented as one of the greatest losses in the history of English poetry" [2]. Particularly, the descriptions of the soldiers who lose their lives during the battles turns out to be his own tragic end; his own death, in this regard, underlines the reliability and reality of the painful condition of the soldiers during World War I.

In addition, Owen, in his poetry, did not hesitate to criticize implicitly the members of the government who encouraged the soldiers to join in the army and ignored the needs of those who survived after the war. In this sense, his own psychological suffering can also be observed in his poetry when his poems are analyzed deeply. How the war destroyed his psychology shows that [w]ar is the un-housed Life, as it separates man from his home and family, and erects a wall of mistrust between a man and his native house" [3]; not only for Owen but also for the soldiers in his poetry, war is a destructive event separating young men from their houses and families and also putting a distance between these soldiers and their homelands, since no matter how much they relied on people who encouraged them to go to war, they became disillusioned after seeing the indifference of these people when they returned back to their homes from the war. Especially when Owen's very realistic and sometimes irritating imagery and his pessimistic mood come to the fore, it can clearly be stated that the painful condition of the soldiers in his poetry is a reflection of his own experiences and observations.

Regarding Owen's poetry in terms of psychoanalysis, it is no doubt that one of the most important psychoanalysts, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory can be adapted into Owen's poems. Particularly Freud's interpreting the actions of people according to their repressed feelings and

unconscious, it becomes evident that Owen also produced his poetry under the influence of his repressed emotions and unconscious, as a result, in his poetry, he portrayed his anger and hatred towards those leading the soldiers to become a part of the war without considering their psychological conditions. In this sense, like himself, the soldiers in his poems, under the influence of their unconscious and repressed thoughts and feelings, undergo psychological problems and turn out to be suffocated, exhausted, oppressed and helpless because of the terrible results of war. Therefore, in the light of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Owen's poetry can be analyzed by stressing the impact of psychological state upon the perception towards war.

Considering Freud's theory related to the human psyche, his emphasis on id, ego, superego, the aspects constituting human personality, comes into view. According to his philosophy, the 'id' contains the instincts, repressed emotions, hidden destructive memories and the unconscious part of the mind whereas the 'superego' contains the moral values imposed by society, therefore the function of the superego is to control the id's uncontrollable and repressed desires, fantasies, which can be defined as primitive, irrational and unrealistic. In this sense, another aspect of human psyche appears, which is the ego. It can be described as the reasonable part of the personality functioning as a mediator between the unrealistic id and the real world. By preventing the id from carrying out immoral, wrong and punishable actions, the ego contributes to individuals' remaining moral [4]. According to Freud, when one of these parts does not function properly, people fail to achieve their goals and cannot succeed in life.

In this perspective, when the psyche of a soldier is taken into consideration, it can be deduced that due to his devotion to the 'superego,' he is under the influence of the rules accepted in his society, which force him to join in the army and fight for the sake of nationalism and patriotism. According to the moral values of his society and parents, he feels that it is a duty for him to participate in the war and obey the rules and norms of his society. Moreover, there is another reason of his accepting to become a soldier; his uncontrollable instincts and desires leading him to be a hero, to be regarded as a very

powerful man and to be celebrated as a divine-like being when he returns back to home from the war, in other words he cannot escape from the effects of his 'id.' Thus, it can be observed that his ego fails to mediate between his id and superego.

Analyzing Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est," it is clear that Owen, under the negative influence of World War I, produced the poem in which soldiers are portrayed suffering to a great extent in the battle field "bent double, like old beggars under sacks,/ knock-kneed, coughing like hags [5]." Their painful condition is reflected in such an irritating manner that one can visualize how they are suffocated and oppressed by the cruelty imposed during the battle; because of their suffocation they are depicted having "[...] lost their boots /But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame, all blind;/Drunk with fatigue [...]" [5]. In this manner, it is obvious that they are mechanized and dehumanized due to these atrocious effects of war so that they lose their boots and they turn out to be blind and lame, indifferent even to their own miserable condition under the heavy noise of gas shells. Their helplessness is obvious when the soldier in a vulnerable condition, "guttering, choking, drowning" [5] is described. At the end of the poem, the reference is to "the old lie": *Dulce et decorum est/pro patria mori*" [5]; in other words, it is sweet and proper to die for one's country is an old lie. Therefore, the superego's commands make these soldiers victims of war, as a consequence they have to witness one another's painful conditions, which also destroys their psychology. Thus, it is no doubt that the war poetry of the 20th century has some similar aspects as follows:

All the significant war poetry of this century has a double focus, as it concentrates on that disastrous reality which cannot be dismissed and at the same time discovers that dimension in which war magnifies and dramatizes the fundamental forms of our experience. [6]

By attracting the attention of readers to the terrible effects of war, shedding light on the horrible reality of war and people's interpretation of war, the war poets including Owen, stress that so many young people are the victims of the wrong decisions taken by their nations. According to Owen, these soldiers, before going to war, are deceived by those who claim

that these young men, for the sake of nationalism and patriotism should attend the army and fight for the sake of their nations, however during the war they realize that they will not be protected in such a monstrous environment and most of them will die at a very young age. In other words, these soldiers are deceived by their superego, the 'conscience,' which compels them to fulfil their duties in order to protect their nations as their society has such a kind of expectation. Moreover, they are also deceived by their id, the 'unconscious,' which urges them to satisfy themselves by becoming heroes in the war. In addition, they find it difficult to mediate their id and superego through their ego, the 'conscious'. Similarly, Freud's emphasis on the importance of the connection between the unconscious and conscious can also be observed in the soldier's dilemma in Owen's poem. Since "[i]n all of his formulations Freud assumes the existence of the 'unconscious' and its dynamic influence on the 'conscious'" [7], it is realized that the 'unconscious,' the id has a link with the 'conscious,' the ego, which tries to establish the balance between the unconscious part of the mind, the id and the 'conscience' or the moral values predicted by society, which is the superego.

Considering Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth," similarly, the disastrous result of war is depicted through the reflection of a soldier's death and his funeral. It is expected that after the soldier's death the government would organize a ceremony for his funeral, but there is "no prayers, nor bells;/ nor any voice of mourning [8]" in his funeral. It shows that his heroism is not praised after his death, as a result Owen tries to criticize the indifference of people towards these soldiers who dedicate their love to their countries but who are not appreciated for their glory. Since they are ignored and disrespected despite their bravery, Owen attacks people's lack of concern. Ironically enough, they become soldiers in order to be regarded as heroes by their society, consequently again the soldier's inability to escape from the orders of their id and superego comes to the fore.

Examining Owen's "Strange Meeting," in the same way, the futility of war is emphasized through the reflection of two dead soldiers in the spiritual world, one of whom is killed by the other, so their encounter is called "strange meeting". What is ironic in the

poem is the two enemies' coming together after death. When they encounter, they begin to utter these remarks: "Strange, friend, 'I said, 'Here is no cause to mourn.'/'None,' said the other, 'Save the undone years,/the hopelessness [...]' [9]" It is apparent that their coming together and beginning to talk to each other after their death show the end of their enmity. Moreover, the dominance of hopelessness, the waste of their youth and undone years cause them not to have the chance of enjoying their youth and the pleasures of life. Since they are forced to kill one another in the war as they are the soldiers of the two enemy countries, they are dehumanized as a part of the necessity of their mission. Furthermore, at the end of the poem, one of them says: "I am the enemy you killed, my friend./I knew you in this dark; so you frowned/ yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed [...]' [9]." Therefore, it can clearly be assumed that these two soldier are unaware of the fact that they will become friends in the spiritual world after killing each other. In this view, what makes Owen's war poetry striking is its untraditional way of interpreting the war. On the one hand, "[d]uring 1914-18 in newspapers and magazines, as well as in books, popular poetry was frequently enlisted [...] to present the experience of war as heroic, worthwhile, purposeful" [10], on the other hand the war poets like Owen preferred to reflect the war as a disastrous, futile and meaningless event. He emphasized that because of the meaninglessness and futility of war, many young soldiers died or continued their lives as if they were metaphorically dead. Similarly, in "Strange Meeting," the two soldiers die as a result of the meaninglessness of the conflict between their nations. In fact, they are not enemies, but the enmity between countries makes them enemies without their own will, therefore he calls his murderer as "my friend, [9]" because both are innocent and become the victim of the wrong politics between two nations. Because of their inability to eliminate the effect of their 'id,' they go to war to satisfy their instincts urging them to get the satisfaction of being popular heroes in the public. In addition, due to the force of the public, the super ego, they feel that they have to fight and sacrifice themselves for the sake of their nations.

Likewise, when the effect of id or 'unconscious' is taken into consideration, Freud's interpretation again comes into view. "For Freud, psychoanalysis

was concerned with the theoretical and empirical exploration of the unconscious a special object of the new science defined by theory [...] [11]. When the depth of the 'unconscious' is explored, it is clear that the individual wants to satisfy his instincts unconsciously. Adapting this theory into Owen's poetry, it is undeniable that most of the soldiers depicted are eager to join in the army not only to fulfil what the superego urges them to do but also to fulfil their desires, their unconscious, their id, which lead them to enjoy the satisfaction of becoming heroes. In this sense, according to Freud, "each of us is dominated by an unconscious that we can never know or control" [12]. Thus, it is seen that the soldiers cannot control their unconscious and under its influence they want to become soldiers without questioning its destructive effects.

Analyzing Owen's "Futility," once more, under the influence of the war, the poet touches the meaninglessness of war by depicting a dead soldier who cannot open his eyes and see the sun after being killed, consequently he is described along these lines:

Move him into the sun-
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown.
Always it awoke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow. [13]

In these lines, one can observe that the sun can wake the soldier up before his death, but after his death even the source of light and power, cannot awake him. Even if the sun has the power to wake "the seeds", "the clays of a cold star [13]", it is helpless in front of death. Thus, this soldier can be regarded as a young man who joins in the army by considering what his conscience, his superego, commands him to do, but he is destroyed by his superego as he dies in the poem.

Furthermore, analyzing Owen's "Disabled," similarly, it is obvious that in the poem one can observe Owen's own sufferings during the war through the description of a disabled soldier who returns back to his homeland after the war and who cannot find what he really expects. He is depicted "in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,/[...], legless, sewn short at elbow" [14]; in other words he is unable to

move, take an action and participate in life itself due to his disability to walk, in this respect "voices of boys [...], voices of play and pleasure [...] [14]" make him feel painful, depressed and frustrated, because he is unable to enjoy the pleasures of life as he turns out to be a disabled man after the war.

Moreover, in this poem, he also complains about the impossibility to have a love affair with any young women, so he thinks that "[h]e will never feel again how slim/Girls' waists are or how warm their subtle hands," since he will not be able to attract their attention and they will "touch him like some queer disease [14]" with pity and fear. His inability to draw women's attention leads him to suffer from depression and hopelessness, as a result of which he feels that his existence does not make any sense and life has no meaning after all. Even if his 'id' forces him to attract the attention of women, to enjoy that satisfaction, to have love affairs, he is unable to fulfil the desires of the 'id' due to his disabled status. Furthermore, he remembers the days when he used to be active in the physical sense and when he is celebrated like a hero while playing football "[a]fter the matches, carried shoulder-high [14]." Although he used to have a blood-smear down his leg after being injured during the match, he used to like that smear [14], which proves his success and power, but even though he sacrificed himself for the sake of his nation, after the war the public does not praise, appreciate and glorify him despite his heroic actions. In other words, he is deceived by his superego, which "arises from an external source" [15]. In this context, the superego can be defined as the part under the influence and control of the public opinion, the social and moral norms of society leading the soldier to assume that he will be rewarded and congratulated by his society if he becomes a soldier.

Before joining in the war, he dreams that he will become a hero, who will have "jewelled hilts/For daggers in paid socks; of smart salutes;/and care of arms, [14]" consequently he feels that he has been deceived by his nation and by his 'superego' and encouraged to participate in the war as if he would be celebrated due to his glories and victories, but when he recognized that people are indifferent to him and to his sufferings after the war, he feels disillusioned. What makes him so upset is some people's cheering him home "but not as crowds

cheer goal” as well as just a man’s thanking him. At the hospital where he stays, he becomes more disappointed and helpless when “the women’s eyes/ Passed from him to the strong men that were whole [14],” on the other hand he is waiting for help to be carried to his bed from his wheeled chair, however even the nurses ignore him and are not concerned about his pain and sorrow.

To conclude, it is apparent that Owen's psychological suffering during World War I has an influence on his war poetry. The soldiers in his poetry, like the poet himself, suffer from the destructive effects of war; some of them die and the others who survive can be described as metaphorically dead individuals. When Freud's psychoanalysis is adapted into Owen's poetry, it is observed that under the influence of their id, which urges them to go after the pleasure of becoming heroes in the war, these soldiers do not hesitate to join in the army. Moreover, under the influence of their superego, which forces them to fight for the sake of their countries in order to fulfil the duty their communities ask them to perform, they are also eager to become soldiers, however since they cannot establish the balance between their id and superego through their ego, they fail to achieve their goals. Since they repress their feelings so much after witnessing death and the atrocious impact of war, they cannot eliminate their psychological sufferings. Either they die or they lose their ambition together with the meaning of life, as a result like Owen himself, they cannot achieve happiness or peace and turn out to be disillusioned and psychologically depressed because of their repressed feelings.

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