

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES
“The War Poems”

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Note: All page numbers provided throughout this piece are taken from: *Wilfred Owen, The War Poems*. Ed. Jon Stallworthy.

AUTHOR NOTES

A boy, I guessed that the fullest, largest liveable life was that of a Poet. I know it now;... There is one title I prize, one clear call audible, one Sphere where I may influence for Truth, one workshop whence I may send forth Beauty, one mode of living entirely congenial to me...¹

It is easy to fall into the trap of romanticising Wilfred Owen as being a typical member of the English middle class, who, because of his parents' financial misfortune, had to endure childhood/adolescence surrounded by those in the lower classes. Other biographical details, when touched on, rather than being analysed, also add to this romantic image. He was devoted to his mother, and grew up as a devout Anglican who dreamed of becoming a poet. He matriculated and earned a place at the University of London, but could not afford to attend. Such details, when glossed over as they are here, paint a picture of a young, intelligent, sensitive man who fell on hard times. It is easy then to assume that as a consequence, he enlisted in the Great War to try and improve his situation, holding the same naivety regarding the horror of war which was so typical of the millions of young men who heard the call and fought for the honour of the British Empire. His death in this war, like so many others, can be seen as a needless tragedy, but such summative treatment of Owen's upbringing does not allow for an accurate understanding of his poetry. He was more than a romanticised stereotypical poet. He was a war poet.

Being able to understand and contextualise Owen, by closely examining pertinent events which influenced his development as a person, is essential if his poetry is to be read and interpreted accurately. His upbringing did not make Owen a great poet – the complex, extreme experience he had of war did. Before he enlisted, many of his influences filled him with trepidation as much as they inspired him to develop into a poet. He did not doubt himself capable of becoming a poet, but thought it a long road to maturing into one.

... to be able to write as I know how to, study is necessary: a period of study, then of intercourse with kindred spirits, then of isolation. My heart is ready, but my brain unprepared, and my hand untrained. And all, - untested. I quite envisage possibility of non-success.²

Owen's education was important both to his parents and himself. Throughout his adolescence, he was a good student without being brilliant, but what he lacked in natural genius he made up for with hard work. He was an avid reader and particularly enjoyed the work of Keats and Shelley, two Romantic poets whose work sprung from a well of melancholic introspection which saw a pinnacle in English poetry occur some eighty years prior to Owen's birth. His youthful imagination was fired as much by the romantic lives (and deaths) of these poets as by their poetry. In much of Owen's early poetry, which he was composing at the age of seventeen, the influence of these poets can be seen. Owen, true to the approach which he took to all his studies, worked hard to master the poetic forms employed by Keats, Shelley and other more contemporary poets such as Tennyson, Wilde, and Swinburne. As a consequence, unlike his later war poetry, his early poetry does not really have a specific topic. Poetry itself can be argued to be the topic of many of his early works. These poems, such as *On My Songs* and *[O World of many worlds]* are about being a poet, and/or writing poetry.

¹Wilfred Owen, *The War Poems*. Ed Jon Stallworthy.

²Quoted from a letter to his mother, Susan, dated 5th March 1915.

Though unseen Poets, many and many a time,
 Have answered me as if they knew my woe,
 And it might seem have fashioned so their rime
 To be my own soul's cry; easing the flow
 Of my dumb tears with language sweet as sobs,³

Before his war experience, Owen's notion concerning appropriate topics for poetry were idealistic. He writes;

To be a meteor, fast, eccentric, lone,
 Lawless; in passage through all spheres,
 Warning the earth of wider ways unknown
 And rousing men with heavenly fears...

In this same poem, he does place the perceived impact of his future poetry well below that of other poets who tread this same path.

And when in after times those stars return
 And strike once more earth's horizon,
 They gather many satellites astern,
 For they are greater than this system's Sun.⁴

But despite this deprecating comparison, the topic of these poems is no less lofty than that of many of the poets whom he admired. At this early stage in his poetic production, he believed that poetry should be about the philosophical search for the Truth in things. He spent much of his time perfecting his control over the different forms of poetry in the self-aware perception that he had yet to develop into an Artist. He did not just read the work of other poets; he studied and practised using their styles and techniques. In the same way that he had learned music, he worked at becoming a poet and even though he stated in a letter to his mother that he envisaged the "possibility of non-success", the self-belief he had in his dreams to become a poet of renown does not seem to have wavered during his pre-war experiences.

Wilfred Owen was the eldest of four children. He was born in Shropshire on 18 March 1893. His siblings were Harold, Colin, and Mary Millard Owen. His parents were Thomas and Harriet Susan (Shaw) Owen. At the age of four, after the death of his grandfather (who owned the family home) his immediate family was forced to move to less comfortable lodgings in the back streets of Birkenhead. He was educated at the Birkenhead Institute and at Shrewsbury Technical School. Owen was raised as an Anglican of the evangelical school, and in his youth was a devout believer, in part due to the strength of the affection which he held towards his mother.

Shortly after leaving school in 1911, Owen passed the matriculation exam for the University of London, but did not achieve the first-class honours needed for a scholarship. His family could not afford for him to attend university, even though he had gained entry. Consequently, he sought employment and his first job

³ *On My Songs* Wilfred Owen, *The War Poems*. Random House, Australia, 1992. (Page 71.)

⁴ *[O World of many worlds]* Wilfred Owen, *The War Poems*. Random House, Australia, 1992. (Page 73.)