

STRANGE MEETING
BY
WILFRED OWEN

A Critical Appreciation

POET'S INTRODUCTION

- ◉ Wilfred Owen is called a soldier poet who was born on March 18, 1893 and participated in the First World War, being fatally wounded just a week before the war ended in Nov 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's strength of commitment and purpose as a writer: In his preface Owen said the poetry in his book would express "the pity of War," rather than the "glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power," which war had acquired in the popular mind.

MAIN POINTS

- ◉ The speaker escapes from battle
- ◉ A long tunnel through ancient granite formations
- ◉ The groans of sleepers, either dead or absorbed in thoughts.
- ◉ One soldier recognizes him and moves his hands as if to bless him.
- ◉ By the soldier's "dead smile" the speaker knows that he is in Hell.
- ◉ Conversation between Speaker and Soldier

MAIN POINTS (CONT)

- ◉ The speaker tells the soldier that there is no reason to mourn
- ◉ The soldier regrets the "undone years" and the "hopelessness"
- ◉ The soldier identifies with the speaker
- ◉ The same hope and the same adventure in pursuit of beauty
- ◉ The discovery of the truth of "the pity of war, the pity war distilled"
- ◉ The frustration at not being able to share
- ◉ As a result, men will continue to destroy and be destroyed

MAIN POINTS (CONT)

- ◉ 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"
- ◉ He knew him in the dark. It was yesterday that the speaker "jabbed and killed" him, and now it is time to sleep.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

- ◉ First 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: a "technical achievement of great originality" and "one of the most moving pieces of verse inspired by the war."
- ◉ Ted Hughes: "few poets can ever have written with such urgent, defined, practical purpose"
- ◉ Known for pararrhyme in which the words have similar consonants before and after unlike vowels - escaped and scooped, groaned and grained, hair and hour.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

- ◉ The poem exposes the hollowness and glorification of war.
- ◉ The man in hell is the soldier's "Other", or his double.
- ◉ 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.
- ◉ The poem as a dream vision - the poet meeting his poetic self, the poem becoming a mythological and psychological journey.
- ◉ Elliot B. Gose, Jr. writes that "the Other represents the narrator's unconscious, his primal self from which he has been alienated by war."

MAJOR IDEAS

The Horrors of War

- ⦿ war as horrifying, wasteful, and dehumanizing
- ⦿ it erodes the natural solidarity between human beings
- ⦿ it robs the soldiers who fight of their capacity to speak truth to power—to resist the wars in which they give their lives/
- ⦿ the trauma of war lingers even after the battle is over.
- ⦿ a cruel irony revealed only at the end of the poem, he was killed by the poem's speaker—the very person to whom he addresses his long meditation on the futility of war.

MAJOR IDEAS

Reconciliation and Solidarity

- ◉ Violence as a *choice*—something that people *decide* to engage in—rather than something innate to human beings.
- ◉ Shared humanity: the same hopes and dreams: "Whatever hope is yours, / Was my life also," the enemy soldier proclaims.
- ◉ Shared Death: a sort of antidote to the horrors of war.
- ◉ The dynamics of a better world: people will know the "truth untold" about war—that it's horrifying and not glorious—and they will work to avoid it. Indeed, he imagines himself repairing the damage caused by war, washing away the "blood" that "clogged ... chariot-wheels."

MAJOR IDEAS

- They are only enemies because their countries have decided to fight each other. Once all that is stripped away, they are friends again, as they were at first, before the war. Friendship, not violence and enmity, is the natural relationship between human beings.
- In fantasizing about a better world, a world in which the two soldiers are friends instead of enemies, the soldier demonstrates just how unnecessarily brutal and horrifying *this* world actually is.