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ABSTRACT

Wilfred Owen's "Dulce Et Decorum Est" has been the subject of contradictory debates since its composition. A great deal of critics have approached its content and form, yet one still wonders why a poet who voluntarily participated in war should have written such a poem that creates discouragement in the youth of the society. Performance studies seem to be a source of help in understanding the cause and intention of such a poet.

Keywords: War Poetry; Wilfred Owen; Dulce Et Decorum Est; Performance Studies

1. INTRODUCTION

Since Owen was among the Georgians, mostly he is compared and contrasted with them. Hibberd (1979) is one of the critics that compares Owen with other Georgians, believing that he gradually separated himself from them and was far above them though in his early poems he was under their influence. There were other critics who dealt with the function of poetry. Heather (2006) discusses how war poets were contingent in their own history. According to him, the poets should be dealt with in respect to the duties they assign for their own nation. Still, there are some critics who have attempted to separate war poets from the others. Campbell (1999) includes Owen in war poets and talks of a dominant ideology in the writings of these poets. Even there are some critics who emphasize Keats's influence on Owen. Milne (1934) is the first and the most outstanding one in this respect. However, none of these studies have pointed out to the real causes of the kind of contradiction observed in Owen's participation in war and his anti-war poetry. As such, through the basics of performance studies, this study tries to hint the possible causes of Owen's contradictions.

2. DISCUSSION

Undoubtedly, Owen has depicted a very nasty and miserable situation of soldiers in the First World War. Such a poet is felt to be one who hates war and is in complete opposition to it, one who is an anti-war propagandist, or a performer of anti-war fighters. While it becomes clear that this poet voluntarily participated in war and was a real combatant, a great ambiguity is raised in his performances. As such, it is felt that the whole described situations and performances are problematic. Else, he should be considered as one who wants to oppose the stereotypes of war poetry, especially epic poetry. But can he be considered a radical opposite performer of war? He actually embraces war by participating in it. The significant point is that he writes the poem during the war and not after the passage of years after the war, to say that he might have gone through a process of change concerning his attitudes toward the war after a while.

Performance studies emphasize the role of desire in individuals' interactions and performances. Based on Freud's Oedipal construction of desire, Deleuze and Guattari consider desire as a "productive force that flows through our bodies and our minds, as well as flowing between our interactions with others' bodies and minds" (Woodhouse, 2012, 144). In this sense, desire might be viewed negatively, too, since it is an unfulfilled lack in its subjects. Owen, along with other soldiers, had the productive force flowing through his body and mind by participating in the war in order to gain glory, to be glorified as well as immortalized like epic heroes. Touch of emotion was great in the soldiers of the First World War as well as the soldiers depicted in the poem. They were emotionally engaged in the search of

their desire, in search of fulfilling their desires. Since desire is a freeing and productive force within man, they freed themselves from a lot of bondages, and chose the battlefield; they chose to live in a miserable and nasty situation, where the possibility of action, performance and heroism was great. As a matter of fact, they produced soldiers out of their own ordinary life. It is desire that turns these soldiers into subjects, the repressed subjects of their state.

However, in times, desire takes another turn and threatens the control of the state and society. In fact, "linear constructions of time and space are one of many ideological structures of repression that function to interrupt the free-flow of desire" (Woodhouse, 2012, 144). Since there is a crisis produced by the break of its free-flow, desire is re-routed. Now in this miserable condition, the free-flow of desire in soldiers is interrupted; therefore, war is no more a means of glorification; it becomes a means of creating death-in-life condition for the soldiers. Unfulfilled desire leads them to frustration, maladjustment, depression and conflict. According to Kilgard, When we consider live people as constitutive elements of performance, we must acknowledge the complexity of resonances evoked (including interpersonal relationships, identity categories, and life experiences) [quoted by Woodhouse, 2012, 141]. As such, every man's performances are revealed through the layered and complex interplay of his/her experiences, intentions, and feelings in relationship to macro social forces. What is seen in Owen and the soldiers of his poem is to reveal a layered accounting of survival, of pleasure, of grief, of disaster, of persistence in the battlefield, and of agony of death crystalized in the personal helpless sight of the gas-hit soldier. All these emotions are made visible through the physical movements of the soldiers' bodies, manifesting the social and political constructs affecting their lives. In fact, their aspirations have been repressed because socio-institutional structures have influenced and inhibited their mobility. Therefore, Owen feels his own right to depict this condition.

Besides, performances are not analyzed in abstract forms. As Chung-Constant (2012) states, "performances are the daily rituals, procedures, and customs people engage in to [re]define and maintain cultural and social identities" (168). Exploration of social and cultural activities is important in performance studies. Performance studies are illuminating devices to reveal social and cultural aspects of subjects. Actually, performances are shaped and performed within the thick of a certain kind of culture. As such, they are the composite of a series of behaviors that are given shape, are valued and presented by a particular culture at a specific moment in time. According to performance studies scholars, no aspect of human expression is descended from above, and is fixed for eternity. They believe that all and various features of a culture's life are contingent; that is, they are shaped and reshaped in particular social and historical circumstances. The same point is true in Owen's poem and is emphasized. So far heroic aspects were regarded as the fixed identities for soldiers, especially in war poetry. Now the reality of the soldiers of the First World War is constituted by the way they perform. They do not fit any more into the restrictive modes pervasive in epic poetry. Performance studies are concerned with the function of performances; therefore, they try to explain what any given performance does and how it is doing it. As such, the circumstances creating a performance, the way they are structured and its effects on the society become significant. In dealing with Owen's poem, one understands that the soldiers' behavior, their acts (if they can be called acts), and their movements are revealing the fact that they are not mere objects in abstract forms, but they are connected with the group or individuals that exhibit them. Mostly soldiers show up themselves as the brave, honest, up right, untiring, powerful and strong men of the world. Now in this specific situation, Owen's soldiers' performances are in complete contrast to the previous fixed identities. In previous circumstances, soldiers were psychologically satisfied with their identities because they had specific roles and functions to perform and their communities prepared them for these performances. Also, they were given the opportunity to participate in important decision makings. In short, they were not treated as slaves. While, in the certain circumstance and historic situation of World War I, soldiers are psychologically dissatisfied because they have been treated as slaves. Therefore, they are depicted as if they are living in a state of death-in-life situation in this poem. Owen starts depicting them with physical weakness as they are 'bent double', 'knock kneed', limping on, 'blood-shod', . . . , but it is not the whole. Then he goes to their mental state to suggest that they are psychologically weak, even dead. Of course the use of figurative language and the imagery employed in the poem is very significant in revealing the performances of these soldiers. All these performances have their own function and effects on the society. These performances are here to suggest that injustice is pervasive in the world, and that this pervasive injustice has resulted in crime. It is worth mentioning once again that these soldiers' performances should be compared with those of others' proclaimed in Owen's contemporary war poetry and the previous ones, especially Homer's and other epic poets.

To touch upon the function of the poet, it should be reminded that “Any human expression is touched and tainted by the writer’s own hand.” LaRoca (2013) believes that Plato “feared the mortifying effects a writer might have on a reader’s sense of the ideal”. He goes on saying that “poets . . . are suspected of creating work that is far from the real, and accused of fabricating deception” (1). When reading “Dulce Et Decorum Est”, Plato and his views are reminded to the reader as the soldiers’ performances and Owen’s are revealed in a way as if he is amongst those poets who should be banished not only from Plato’s republic but also from the society he lives in. In this regard, it is felt that these performances are as much in contrast with the norms demanded by the society that he should not be banished but suppressed and denied. However, since the age has been corrupted and is in disturbance by the demands of tyrant rulers, especially, the German ruler who has ignited the World War, it seems that there is no sense of ideal in most of communities. Even, the sense of ideality propagandized by communities seems to be cruelty and tyranny. As such, banishment, suppression and denial become meaningless in such an age. In such circumstances, performance studies are very helpful in understanding the performance of the poet. According to performance studies scholars, performances are learnt, practiced, repeated, and presented and revised over time. Undoubtedly, Owen has gone through this profound process and has been versed in performing his duty both as a poet and as a soldier. Now he is revising his performance over time; that is, after spending some time in the battlefield, he understands and feels what war is and tries to be realistic rather than a propagandist of war. Butchart (2013) believes that “Documentary is a performance of memory. It is an enterprise of surveying, teaching, leaving traces, of making records, and thereby not forgetting” (1). This sense of documentary is observed in Owen himself and his poem. One feels that the war has provided this sense of performance for him over time. Through this process he has surveyed, taught, left traces, made records of the situation and thereby he has not forgotten the whole situation. Now the whole situation is documented in the performance of the gas-hit soldier, the kind of performance that he has no control in denying and avoiding it. As such, Plato’s republic and his ideal world become meaningless here. What is significant is the real nasty situation of the battlefield, where individuals’ performances are actual passivity.

3. CONCLUSION

The emphasis performance studies put on everyday practices and behaviors helps everybody understand the seemingly contradictions in individuals. Like all other participants in the war, Owen had the desire to play his role for his community as a soldier, and like most of them, after a while, his notions about war and the circumstances creating and prolonging it went through a process of change because man is always in transition, in practicing and revising his own learnings and responses to his surroundings. As such, his desire for glorification and heroism led him to the battlefield, but the prevailing culture of war altered all his behavior and a new kind of performance appeared in him.

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