

Poetry
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Wilfred Owen

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Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

- Historical and Literary Context
- Wilfred Owen
- "Anthem for the Doomed Youth"
- "Futility"
- "Strange Meeting"
- Analysis
- An Intertextual Reading: Owen and Wordsworth
- Arnold's "Dover Beach"
- "Where ignorant armies clash by night."





Hello, in this lecture, we will look at Wilfred Owen's poems specifically "Strange Meeting." First, we will see the historical and literary context. Wilfred Owen, we are familiar, he is a war poet. So, we will pay attention to the context in which he wrote his poems and his colleagues, soldier poets and others who wrote poems and then we will read the first poem "Anthem for the Doomed Youth" next "Futility." Give our observations and then move onto the third poem "Strange Meeting" and analyse his poem finally offer an intertextual reading between Owen and Wordsworth. Finally, we will recall the line, "Where ignorant armies clash by night" from Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" and connect it with Owen's "Strange Meeting."

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Historical Context

- First World War (1914-1918)
- Duration: 28 July, 1914 - 11 November, 1918
- Deaths: Nine million
- Wounded: 60 million
- Affected by pandemic: 100 million deaths worldwide
- A major cause: Assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophia, Austria
- Parties: France, Russia, and Britain vs Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy




As we observe Owen was a poet who participated in the First World War from 1914 to 1918. This war started on 28th July, 1914 and ended on November 11th, 1918 because of this war 9 million people died it is said. Similarly, some 60 million people were wounded in this war. In addition, because of this war some pandemic occurred and some 100 million deaths occurred worldwide.


A major cause of this World War was the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophia in Austria. Many countries were involved in this war; the major players were France, Russia, Britain on the one hand. Germany, Austria, Hungary and Italy on the other hand. Later on, Italy pulled out of the war for their own reasons.

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Literary Context: War Poets



- Edward **Thomas** (1878-1917):
“As the Team’s Head-Brass”
- Rupert **Brooke** (1887-1915): “The Soldier”
- Charlotte **Mew** (1869-1928): “The Cenotaph”
- Siegfried **Sassoon** (1886-1967): “To Any Dead Officer”
- Isaac **Rosenberg** (1890-1918):
“Break of Day in the Trenches”
- Charles Hamilton **Morley** (1895-1915):
“When You See Millions of Mouthless Dead”



In this war climate many poets wrote poems, some for war, some against war. Initially war was considered to be a glorious effort, endeavour of human kind but then when the soldiers themselves went to the battlefield and started writing poems they began to give a different picture of the war altogether.

Here we have a list of poets who participated in the war and wrote poems. Edward Thomas also was a soldier; he wrote this poem among many others, “As the Team’s Head-Brass.” Similarly, we have Rupert Brooke whose poem “The Soldier” initially glorified the war but then later on Rupert Brooke changed his opinion and started understanding the evil consequences of war. Then we have Charlotte Mew with the poem “The Cenotaph,” Siegfried Sassoon poem, “To any Dead Officer.”

Isaac Rosenberg poem, “Break of Day in the Trenches” and lastly, we have Charles Hamilton Morley’s, “When you see millions of Mouthless Dead.” So, the theme of all these poets is very clear, death and devastation. And they ask questions what is the necessity? Why? why this war? why so many killings, deaths, destructions? that is the cry of this war poets.

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Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

- Joined the Army on October 21, 1915
- Joined Craiglockhart war hospital due to shell-shock
- Met Siegfried Sassoon and mastered the craft of poetry
- Returned to war and got killed on November 4, 1918
- Published four poems in his life time.
- Edmund Blunden and Siegfried Sassoon edited and published Owen's poems posthumously.
- Recognized as a great war poet but ignored by Yeats in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1934)
- Well-known for his experiments with half-rhymes and poems like "Anthem for Doomed Youth," "Futility," "Insensibility," and "**Strange Meeting**"



One of the most famous war poets is Wilfred Owen, born in 1893 and died in 1918 at a very young age. He joined the Army on October 21st 1915 but then returned to hospital because of a shell-shock. There in Scotland that is in the hospital called Craiglockhart war hospital, he met Siegfried Sassoon. He was also a soldier and wounded and he was admitted there. So, he met Sassoon and mastered the craft of poetry. Again, after his recovery, he returned to war and got killed on November 4th, 1918.

During his war experience and in the hospital, he was writing poems in fact even editing one small magazine from the hospital. Later on, he wrote many poems and sent them to his mentor Sassoon. During his own life time, only four poems were published. After his death Edmund Blunden, another poet and his friend Siegfried Sassoon edited and published Owen's poems posthumously. After the poems were published, Owen was recognised as a great war poet but ignored by Yeats in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. Yeats had his own take on Owen saying that, that was not fit to be good poetry.

However, Owen is well known for his experiments with half rhymes and poems like "Anthem for Doomed Youth," "Futility," "Insensibility" and "Strange Meeting." These titles itself indicate the kind of attitude Owen had for war.

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Anthem for Doomed Youth



What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

— Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle

Can patter out their hasty orisons.

No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells; 5

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—

The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;

And bugles calling for them from sad shires.



Anthem for Doomed Youth - II



What candles may be held to speed them all?

Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes 10

Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.

The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;

Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,

And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds. 5



Let us look at this poem Anthem for Doomed Youth first,

“What passing bells for these who die as cattle?

—Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle

Can patter out their hasty orisons.

No mockeries now for them, no prayers nor bells; 5

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, -

The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;

And bugles calling for them from sad shires”

What candles may be held to speed them all?

Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes 10

Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.

The pallor of girls’ brows shall be their pall;

Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,

And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

This is a sonnet.

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Futility

Move him into the sun—
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

5



Futility



Think how it wakes the seeds—
Woke once the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides 10
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

□ Pointless and meaningless movement of the sun to give life to plants and animals on the earth.



The next one, “Futility” is also a sonnet.

“Move him into the sun-
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow. 5
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.
Think how it wakes the seeds-
Woke once the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved are sides 10
Full- nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil

To break earth's sleep at all?

This poem on Futility, indicates a pointless and meaningless movement of the sun to give life to plants and animals on the earth. A plant grows; a soldier, a human being also grows and then meets death in the war. The poet asks a question was it for this the clay grew tall?

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Observations

- "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and "Futility" are sonnets.
- Anthem is a song in praise of a country.
- Owen's ironic use of "anthem" dying soldiers in the war.
- Nothing can be gained from the war except futility.
- **Hard questions from the poet for all humankind:**
- Why do nations fight with each other killing soldiers and civilians?
- Who are the soldiers who go to war?
- Who are the decision makers?
- What do they care for?
- What is the achievement of humanity?



We have some observations on these two poems and then a list of questions which the poet has raised in his poems. "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and "Futility" are sonnets as we said. Anthem is a song in praise of a country. Owen's ironic use of this term "anthem" to refer to dying soldiers in the war is itself a comment on war.

Nothing can be gained from the war except futility that is the view of the poet. We have some questions here, hard questions, difficult questions from the poet for all humankind. All of us; past, dead people and now and future people who will be coming in the future, our posterity will have to always answer these questions.

Why do nations fight with each other killing soldiers and civilians? Who are the soldiers who go to war? Who are the decision makers? What do they care for? And ultimately what is the achievement of humanity in indulging in this kind of futile war? Poets have always asked this kind of question, disturbing question to the society.

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Strange Meeting – I & II



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**. 5
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**. 10



Strange Meeting - III



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**, 15
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**, 20
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than **here**.



Strange Meeting - III

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. 25

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; 30
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.



Strange Meeting – III & IV

Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells, 35
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. 40
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. . . .” (*Poem left incomplete*) 44



Now, we move onto the next poem, “Strange Meeting.” We will discuss this poem in detail after reading this poem. We have some sections and indicated the sections by one and two. We will see them one after another.

“It seemed that out of the 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.

Section three,

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 the other, save the undone years.

15

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."

20

Section three continuous,

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. 25

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; 30

Wisdom was mine and I had mastery;

To miss the march of this retreating world

Into vain citadels that are not walled.

Section three and four;

Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,

I would go up and wash them from sweet wells, 35

Even with truths that die 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 had 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....” 44

The poem is left incomplete by the poet; these forty-four lines are very powerful lines in this poem “Strange Meeting” discussing the impact of war on the soldier and the society.

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- ### Thematic Contrast
- War and Peace
 - Hell and Heaven
 - Death and Life
 - Fear and Hope
 - Discontentment and Contentment
 - Cowardice and Courage
 - Ignorance and Wisdom
 - Enemy and Friend
 - Separation and Meeting
- ❑ **Discrimination** on grounds of 'nationality' is meaningless. Enemies and friends are the same human beings with similar emotions longing for love and life.



Let us look into the thematic contrast presented in this poem between war and peace on the one hand and then, we look at this hell and heaven, we saw this in the poem; death and life is very prominent in this poem; Fear and hope discontentment and contentment, cowardice and courage, ignorance and wisdom, enemy and friend, separation and meeting. These are the contrast that we find in this poem. All of them point to the thematic crux. Discrimination on grounds of nationality is meaningless. Enemies and friends are the same human beings with similar emotions longing for love and life. Young people sent to war to fight for the nation and then they find they have similar minds, similar thoughts, similar feelings; why do they kill each other?

This emotion of futility- who will tell the world? That is why the pity of war, the untold truth Owen and many other poets wanted to share with the world but then, whatever experiences human beings have shared, we seem to be not learning from history. It is often said, we do not learn from history. We continue to make the same mistakes again and again; these are costly we know, still we do not seem to be bothering about the kind of destructions we bring upon ourselves.

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Questions for Discussion

1. What does the title reveal?
2. How does the poem begin?
3. Which is the venue?
4. Who are the participants?
4. How does the speaker know where he is?
5. Why are they here at all?
6. Why does the speaker talk about the pity of war?
7. What are human beings doing with themselves?
8. What does the speaker want to tell the world?
9. How does the poem end?
10. How does the poem expose the limitations of the binaries of war and peace, enemy and friend, etc.?



We have a number of questions further for discussion with regard to this particular poem, “Strange Meeting.” What does the title reveal? strange meeting; How does the poem begin? - scooped; which is the venue? Where do they meet? - In the tunnel. Who are the participants? They are two soldiers. How does the speaker know where he is? He understands that he is in hell by realising that he is meeting a dead soldier. Why are they here at all? They do not understand why they are here; it is beyond their control because of the war situation they are in this tunnel. Why does the speaker talk about the pity of war? This kind of ground reality, decision makers may not know. That is why the poet’s particularly, Wilfred Owen is talking about the pity of war.

What are humans doing with themselves is a big question? They are interacting these two soldiers, they are interacting, talking about the hope, the fear, the courage, the ignorance, they all had. How does the poem end? Let us sleep now. It is all useless; it is all meaningless that is how, the soldiers feel about the war.

How does the poem expose the limitations of the binaries of war and peace, enemy and friend? That is the question we are raising to reveal that ultimately these binaries do not matter. This kind of discrimination on grounds of nationality, race, gender, so many other categories do not matter; we are all human beings. We want to live, we are born in this world, we want to live, we want to love, we want to enjoy life but our systems do not understand the ground realities.

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Poetic Devices

- Imagery:** Titanic war; granite; dark tunnel
Alliteration: granites, groined (3), sprang up, and stared (6)
Transferred Epithet: distressful hands (8)
Assonance: The pity of war, the pity war distilled. (25)
Alliteration/Repetition: swift with swiftness (28)
Parallelism:
 Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
 Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery: (30-31)
Alliteration: miss the march (33)
Alliteration: spirit without stint (37)
Paradox: I am the enemy you killed, my friend. (40)
Assonance: loath and cold (43) [suggesting “woe”]



We must remember that, among all the war poets, Wilfred Owen has a high place and one of the reasons is he has employed many of the poetic devices in his poems. We can see a number of poetic devices in this poem by Wilfred Owen, who is actually known for many of the poetic devices that he used in his poems. Precisely because of these poetic devices, Wilfred Owen is more well known than other war poets. First, we see imagery with reference to Titanic war, granite, dark tunnel in the opening lines. Similarly, we see alliteration in granites, groined, sprang up and stared, we also see transferred epithet in distressful hands.

Some of these adjectives used by Owen are very powerful, they are really trending. We see assonance in ‘the pity of war,’ ‘the pity war distilled.’ Alliteration with repetition we see in ‘swift with swiftness.’ Parallelism we notice in ‘courage was mine and I had mystery; wisdom was mine and I had mastery.’ Almost syntactical parallelism we can see here.

Next, we have alliteration in ‘miss the march,’ ‘spirit without stint.’ Then, we see the paradox of life in this line, ‘I am the enemy you killed, my friend’ who will kill the friend? but here friends are killing each other and then we have Assonance in ‘loath and cold,’ perhaps this “woe” suggesting the woe of mankind, the suffering of mankind.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

Rhyme: Owen is reputed for his **pararhymes**.

➤ groined-groaned, bestirred-stared, eyes-bless (3-8)

Rhythm: iambic pentameter

And by | his smile, | I knew | that sullen hall,—

By his | dead smile | I knew | we stood | in Hell. (9-10)

Caesura, Enjambment, and End-stopped Lines:

"I am | the enemy | you killed, | my friend."

I knew | you in | this dark: | for so | you frowned ➔

Yester | day through | me as | you jabbed | and killed. (40-41)

Variation: Lines 28 and 29 have an extra syllable each.

Repetition: knew; wound; pity; smile;



We have rhyme, rhythm and meter in this poem. Rhyme is specifically pararhyme in the case of Owen because he is known for it. Here are some famous examples; groined-groaned, bestirred-stared, eyes-bless. The rhythm of this poem comes from the iambic pentameter that the poet has used; example we have in two lines; “And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall, by his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.” Except for this dead smile which is a case of spondee we have mostly iambs. Then we have caesura, enjambment and end stopped-lines in the following example;

“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.”

We have variations in line length, in lines 28 and 29 which have an extra syllable. We also have some key words being repeated; knew, wound, pity, smile. Who will understand the wounds of these poets? who will understand the wounds of these soldiers-civilians? who will pity them? The poet can only smile and probably this is a kind of knowledge, wisdom that the poet wants to share with the rest of humanity.

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Overall Impression

- This is a **strange poem** about two **strange soldiers** in a **strange place** about the **strange life** we live.
- We think wars are fought to protect people and property. But the poem reveals the pity/ horror of war.
- The interaction between the speaker and the dead soldier creates the **strange** feeling of how cruel we are to each other without understanding that we all have similar feelings of living and enjoying life.
- The speaker urges people to remove differences and reconcile themselves to a life of peace and harmony in which truth, beauty and happiness could prevail and sustain humanity.
- Owen's discordant words, images, rhymes, rhythms, images, lines, etc., depict the disastrous war mongers.



To give an overall impression, we can pay attention to these points listed here. This is a strange poem, about two strange soldiers, in a strange place, about the strange life we live. It appears that life is common but only when we come across certain incidents as we notice in this poem between the two soldiers meeting in the tunnel and that too after the death, we can understand.

We think wars are fought to protect people and property but the poem reveals the pity or horror of war. The interaction between the speaker and the dead soldier creates a strange feeling of how cruel we are to each other without understanding that we all have similar feelings of living and enjoying life. That is what all great literary text tries to convey to the world. All of us are similar, we have similar feelings, we want to live, we want to enjoy life. The speaker urges people to remove differences and reconcile themselves to a life of peace and harmony in which truth, beauty and happiness could prevail and sustain humanity.

If we do not pay attention to this kind of harmony in the world, peace in the world, this is the kind of destruction we will face. We know still, we seem to heading towards more and more of catastrophic situations. Owen's discordant words, images, rhymes, rhythms, lines, etc depict the disastrous war mongers and the devastating consequences.

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An Intertextual Reading
Owen's "Strange Meeting"

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. (39)

Wordsworth's "Ode on Intimations of Immortality"

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears. (208)



An Intertextual reading, we are offering here by bringing two poems or some extracts from two poems together. One from Owen's "Strange Meeting" another from Wordsworth's "Ode on Intimations of Immortality" We have underlined those lines where we have this kind of intertextuality or influence or some traces.

First let us see Owen's poem;

"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."

These are the lines from "Strange Meeting." we have underlined the third line from top: "Even with truths that lie too deep for taint." This expression truths that lie too deep for taint has the trace of Wordsworth's poem "Ode on Intimations of Immortality." We have quoted four lines from Wordsworth let us see them:

"Thanks to the human heart by which we live,

Thanks to its tenderness, its joys and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.”

Actually, these are contrasting poems one is a war poem, another is a romantic poem. One talks about hopelessness another talks about all kinds of hope. How are these two related? that is where we see, even in the worst of situations like Owen’s phases we find some element of hope. Hope is the heart of poetry. Owen wrote this poem with that hope to tell the untold truth so that human kind may survive. These ‘thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears,’ the structural similarity; truths and thoughts can be inter-changed. What is the truth about? That is the thoughts that we have. What are the thoughts that we have? the truths about life.

They are too deep in our heart and mind; they are always there; they will well up; they will come out to protect humanity but we have to listen. We have to understand, we have to act to protect ourselves. So, we have brought these two extracts together, to show, how certain words and lines can evoke certain resemblances between poems, finally touching upon the common humanity that lies in all of us.

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Summary

- Historical and Literary Context
- Wilfred Owen
- “Anthem for the Doomed Youth”
- “Futility”
- “Strange Meeting”
- Analysis
- An Intertextual Reading: Owen and Wordsworth
- Arnold’s “Dover Beach”
“Where ignorant armies clash by night”



We have a summary of the discussions so far. We refer to the historical and literary context in which Wilfred Owen wrote his poems. We refer to the First World War and then World War

poets and then we read “Anthem for the Doomed Youth,” “Futility” and then “Strange Meeting.” Specifically, we focussed on “Strange Meeting” with reference to the poetic devices and gave one overall impression of this poem.

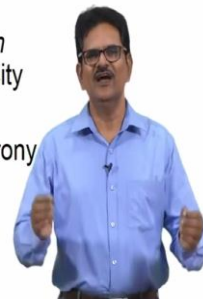
Then, focusing on one particular line we gave an intertextual reading between Owen and Wordsworth pointing out the common humanity that lies in all of us which can hopefully protect all of us. We also wanted to refer to another poem, Arnold’s “Dover Beach” which ends with this line “where ignorant armies clash by night.” We have to recall that Arnold was remembering Sophocles. This is the history of mankind. These kinds of wars have always been fought for no reason.

Maybe some apparent reasons are there but ignorance is the cause according to Arnold and probably that is what Owen also tries to tell us. We are ignorant of what we are doing and the consequences, only some soldiers, some people are affected whereas others are not that much affected. Why is this? Why is this kind of division? Why is this kind of indifference? That is the kind of question that Owen asks and many other poets, not only war poets, many other poets have asked about our society, our humanity.

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We have some interesting references here. Those of you who are interested may read more about Owen and his poems from some of these references. Thank you.