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# Spokesmen for Speechless Sufferers

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An Analysis of Trauma and Division in World War I  
Poetry and Vietnam War Protest Music

By  
Nicole Caldwell

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for Graduation from the  
Western Oregon University Honors Program

Dr. Henry Hughes,  
Thesis Advisor

Dr. Gavin Keulks,  
Honors Program Director

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project analyzes how trauma and social protest have affected the lives and works of World War I poet, Wilfred Owen, and protest songwriter, Pete Seeger. Both were influential in their time, and their compositions powerfully express the themes of trauma caused by the horrors of war, and they demonstrate the social divide arising out of disillusionment. This thesis also includes my own poetry (see appendix). This allows me to better connect with the artists who have come before, and perhaps inspire other writers to come forth and share their experiences.

The project offers close examinations of Owen's poetry and Seeger's Vietnam War era protest songs, concerning both the writers' arguments and connections to their personal and social trauma in the 1910s and 1960s-70s. This thesis reminds readers of the importance of poetry and music in helping people overcome the worst evils and devastations of war and how Owen and Seeger accomplished this not just during their lives but also after their deaths. These artists left a powerful legacy spanning wars and generations, times of hate and times of love.

## INTRODUCTION

Many of the British soldiers that charged into World War I in 1914 were filled with patriotic passion and the righteous goal of fighting for their country, for freedom, and against oppression. Thousands of American youth eagerly joined them in 1917, fueled by encouraging anthems like George M. Cohan's "Over There" and Andrew Carp's "I Have Come to Say - 'Goodbye!'" But this was a war unlike anything the world had seen. In addition to face-to-face combat, battle became a perverse game of attack, hold, retreat, and repeat in which many of the Allies' beloved men slowly rotted in the trenches. It was a miserable existence for which the soldiers could never have emotionally prepared.

Jon Sletvold argues that trauma is better determined by the "individual's ability to cope with the event(s)" (463) than the event alone. The First World War's soldiers' unpreparedness for trench warfare led to far more cases of shell-shock than any war before that time, and civilians at home were equally ill-equipped to deal with their emotionally scarred loved ones. Furthermore, Patricia Sutker's 2002 study about the effects of multiple traumas on war veterans confirms that traumatic events can be conceptualized in terms of doses (26). Thus, enlisted men who had already experienced trauma in their lives would have an "increased vulnerability to psychological consequences" later on (26). These psychological consequences often included depression, anxiety, and frustration. Some soldiers, however, found solace and creative expression in the poetry and music of their time. Renowned soldier-poets during the World War I era include Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), and Rupert Brooke (1887-1915). Owen, in particular, spoke

directly and vividly of the unnecessary loss of youth to war's mindless cruelty. His poetry is shot through with horrible vignettes of men writhing in gas attacks and suffocating in trench tunnels. His poems continue to document and pay tribute to the pain and trauma innumerable soldiers faced during that war.

Anti-war poetry and music waned during World War II, especially in the United States, as the Pearl Harbor bombings brought the American people together in patriotic fervor. Nonetheless, novels such as Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) as well as poems by Randall Jarrell and James Dickey did explore the deadly and absurd realities of World War II. But more emphatic anti-war art resurfaced in the 1960s, during the period of opposition to America's war with Vietnam. Some historians mark 1964 as the beginning of America's major anti-war demonstrations, and by 1967, Gallup Polls showed the majority of citizens were against US involvement in Vietnam (Gillespie). Completely exhausted by the battery of endless wars and seeing countless men returning home haunted by blood and gunfire, by the late 1960s, military morale was at an all-time low in the United States. Many Americans rallied against President Lyndon Johnson's administration. Protest music and poetry of this time was not as concerned with the individual as it was with healing the country's collective trauma. Sletvold quotes Freud's description of cumulative trauma, which explains that "it not infrequently happens that, instead of a single, major trauma, we find a number of partial traumas forming a group of provoking causes." These causes, Sletvold continues, "have only been able to exercise a traumatic effect by summation" (462). In a similar way, protest musicians during the Vietnam War era approached pain as

a national wound they sought to heal as a community. The soldiers became “components of a single story of suffering” (462). Songwriters like Pete Seeger (1919-2014) faced this conflict by calling for widespread peace and unity.

Although the themes in Vietnam War era music and poetry were similar to those from the World War I era, there was more emphasis on political protest and the call for peace. The role of social and political protest during the sixties evolved to embrace larger movements. This led to concerts and events such as Woodstock in the summer of 1969 where artists like Joan Baez, Arlo Guthrie, Richie Havens, and Jimi Hendrix sang for peace and love. Singers and sufferers became public voices for their brethren, both healers and healed. As speakers for all soldiers and those traumatized by war, poets and songwriters found the ability to initiate widespread healing and prevent the same sort of pain from destroying future lives.

Wilfred Owen and Pete Seeger are some of the most well-known and studied wartime writers. They are also some of the most exceptional artists of their genre, at once illuminating readers and listeners to the awful nature of war-related trauma and reminding them of the need for peace. Although they lived decades apart, both shared a mutual frustration with the injustices of war and its destruction of young lives. Some may consider Wilfred Owen and Pete Seeger as completely disparate artists because they wrote about different wars in different countries, half a century apart. Even more importantly, Seeger never served in the armed forces; his firsthand experience with combat trauma was nonexistent, while Owen had intimate knowledge of battle. This study, however, shows the connections in the men’s work – they both described and protested against war, seeking to understand

the trauma and acting as spokesmen for struggling soldiers and civilians of the past, present, and future. For these reasons, it is necessary that their voices be heard and remembered so they may inspire others to seek healing for themselves in generations to come.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Before the First World War, much of the poems and songs about battle were characterized by a pervading sense of romanticism. To fight was a demonstration of nobility and honor. At the start of World War I, this trend continued, urged by patriotic compositions like Francis Scott Key's "The Star-Spangled Banner." The American national anthem, although written for the Battle of Fort McHenry in 1814, surged as a symbol of American freedom and patriotism in the 20th century (Lineberry). Meanwhile, in Europe, the British cherished songs like Ivor Novello's "Keep the Home Fires Burning (Till the Boys Come Home)" (1914) to cheer them while their men were away (Maddocks). Throughout most of World War I, patriotism and support for the war efforts prevailed. The dramatic drop in morale occurred after the beloved troops returned home, battlefield images still flitting before sunken eyes. Suddenly, patriotic odes glorifying the great honor of war fell out of favor. There was a newfound desire for modern poetry with simple, brutally honest verse to replace the now outdated romantic tradition. Soldier poets like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen are renowned for their extremely vivid works describing battlefield conditions and immense suffering in the trenches with direct, biting language, abandoning romanticism for harsh truth.

The first great wave of American literature critical of war may be traced to the Civil War (1861-1865). Some American writers such as Walt Whitman (1819-1892), Stephen Crane (1871-1900), and Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914) did not share this bold national optimism, as shown in Civil War works like Crane's novel *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) and Bierce's story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1890). These literary works offer especially sardonic views of the conflict, illustrating some of the psychological complexities and fear of wartime, demonstrating the writers' ambivalence on the subject.

The United States' entrance into World War I came with a flurry of optimistic patriotism. Most music, poetry, and other forms of media celebrated the entrance into battle as a "noble and heroic pursuit," (Arnold 316) awash in the light of romanticism. However, the nation's morale soon began to falter as their mighty soldiers returned home shell-shocked and haunted. American writer Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), is one of the best chroniclers of World War I. His novels *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *In Our Time* (1924), and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) describe the trials of life during and after war (Putnam). This fiction has been described as "Hemingway's portrait of a generation that has lost its way, restlessly seeking meaning in a post-war world" (Putnam). This was an accurate depiction of the generation of returning soldiers, trapped in a state of traumatized loss and listlessness. Other research has described this sharp turn from support for the war in writing and music after World War I.

In his article about war music, American composers, and the effects of war-related trauma on musical compositions, Ben Arnold explains the dramatic tone

change after the Great War. Instead of nationalistic odes, the desire for peace and anguish over lost lives became popular themes, and songwriters popularized the traditional lament (316). These were some of the first protest works against the violence and psychological trauma of war. Because of this massive downswing in morale, the American government resorted to commissioning composers to write pieces advocating for the war efforts (316). These efforts failed, however, until December of 1941 when a significant rise in patriotism immediately followed the Pearl Harbor bombings, initiating America's entrance into World War II (317).

The movement away from patriotic themes during World War I was not a common trend in songwriting alone, but also in poetry. In England, in particular, soldiers' disillusionment to the atrocities and graphic violence led to a shift away from romantic language, which had begun to seem frivolous and in bad taste. Ted Bogacz's "A Tyranny of Words': Language, Poetry, and Antimodernism in England in the First World War" discusses this transition at length. Bogacz explains that there was then a widespread desire for more modern poetry that could simply portray the rage and melancholy permeating post-war society (644). Many of the soldiers returning home came to resent compositions glorifying war, angry that they served to deceive those at home about the realities of the battlefield. Bogacz includes a direct quote from renowned soldier poet, Wilfred Owen, who claimed, "Above all I am not concerned with Poetry" (644). "Poetry" here refers not the genre as a whole but the concept of "high diction," which is, essentially, the romanticized, elevated language taught in British schools at the time. The idealization of war, and

subsequently, the use of high diction, quickly went out of poetic fashion once the reality became known.

The shift away from romantic language coincided with an increased use of symbolism in poetry, as Ben Arnold describes in “Music, Meaning, and War: The Titles of War Compositions.” His article discusses the importance of composition titles, but he also explains the prevalence of symbolism, which became more commonly used as a poetic device. Left without adequate words to describe their horrific experiences and tumultuous emotions, many soldier-poets turned to symbolism and metaphor to render their trauma more visceral and relatable (Arnold 23). For example, Owen’s poem “Miners” does not actually take place in a mine, but it describes soldiers dying in the tactical tunnels often dug under trenches. He uses miners as a metaphor for soldiers in order to better relate the impressions of helplessness and suffocation. In this article, Arnold emphasizes music’s ability to somehow conceptualize war even without a title or lyrics – “Words are not our only means of expression nor always our best” (23). This is true to a certain extent, but it is arguable that the most important element in post-World War I compositions is language because of the imagery it creates. So much of the beauty in war music and poetry is the ability to express very intense emotions and experiences. This can be done without words, but it is difficult to become a public voice for change without them.

Researchers of Wilfred Owen’s role as a soldier-poet describe how he eventually became one of these voices because of the incredibly graphic and powerfully narrative poems he wrote during his service. In *Owen the Poet*, Dominic

Hibberd explains that “Owen tried to get rid of the Romantic elements in his war poetry and that what remains of them is there only for the purpose of bitter contrast” (56). Owen’s commitment to both types of poetic language at different times depending on the horrific nature of his experiences demonstrates the fascinating thematic transition sweeping the entire globe. Hibberd argues that Owen’s poetic foundation, created by Romantic greats like Shelley and Wordsworth, provided the lens through which he viewed life as a soldier. Having this knowledge, “war seemed an evil opposed to everything literature stood for” (56). Therefore, the soldier-poets used literature to oppose war, and this art form expanded from voicing the soldiers’ individual experiences to all those suffering during wartime. For Owen, this satisfied his desire to “‘plead’ for his voiceless soldiers” (Hibberd 62). He accomplished this through his poetry but also through his communications with family in letters from the front lines.

Owen’s letters home reflected his desire for understanding of his horrific experiences from those at home who could not see the bloodshed for themselves. C. Day Lewis’s introduction to *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* includes excerpts from letters Owen wrote home. One dated February 4, 1917 read, “the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them the most glorious” (22). Macabre though it may sound, this is Owen’s way of saying that not only did writing poetry help him survive the daily torment of combat, but that the atrocities he witnessed improved the quality of his work. This is not to say that he profited off the lost lives of so many men, only that it allowed him to better document reality and to

permit his readers, most of whom had no experience with war, a clearer understanding. This is further supported by an excerpt Lewis includes from a letter to Owen's brother, Harold, dated September 23: "I deliberately tell you all this to educate you to the actualities of war" (20). Owen felt it his duty to himself and to his comrades in arms to make the horrors of their daily lives known to those far outside the line of fire, beginning with his own family. Hibberd writes that "only as a combatant could [Owen] conscientiously and effectively speak for the men who were suffering from it" (27). In this way his trauma on the battlefield served as a cause for extreme emotional turmoil and a method for mitigating it. Only through his pain and his rage could he help himself and his comrades heal.

The role of emotional healing in the composition of Owen's poetry was crucial because it aided the poet and his readers – soldiers and civilians alike. Owen had a very close relationship with fellow soldier-poet, Siegfried Sassoon, whose popular works include "Dreamers" and "Glory of Women." Like Owen's poems, many of Sassoon's compositions convey a frustration with people who never experienced war for themselves, who C. Day Lewis dubbed "those on the other side of the barbed wire," and their inability to comprehend the gravity of war (Lewis 22). Daniel Hipp's article, "By Degrees Regain[ing] Cool Peaceful Air in Wonder': Wilfred Owen's War Poetry as Psychological Therapy," discusses the relationship between the two poets. Sassoon was actually a key component in Owen's shift away from high diction. Hipp explains, "Owen's daily discussions with Sassoon [...] taught Owen the value of irony and the use of vernacular, rather than ornate, language in his poetry" (28). This helps to make sense of the shift in Owen's writing style to accommodate modern

themes, but, more importantly, it demonstrates the ways in which soldiers aided each other's psychological healing.

Hipp goes on to explain the importance of Owen's public voice in his poetry and, therefore, in his healing. Owen's role in public protest "came as the endpoint of an intense struggle, over his psychological condition and over his processes of composition," demonstrating the necessity of his writing (25). It was crucial to his recovery in allowing him to overcome his own trauma by creating works that others could appreciate and understand. Hipp also argues that it is only because Owen used his public voice to help others that he was able to heal himself. He writes, "To heal, the individual needed to see that his actions could contribute to the health of the social body" (30). His assertion implies that to heal oneself also contributes to the healing of society, and in this way, Owen was doubly successful. Poetry provided a sort of catharsis for him while also helping to bridge the divide between traumatized soldiers and their uncomprehending loved ones.

This idea of community trauma and healing was also especially characteristic of the Vietnam War era. However, surviving works from soldier-poets and protest musicians at that time demonstrate an inversion of the concept Owen embodied of poets healing themselves in order to heal society. Instead, protest works of the sixties emphasized community healing as a way to restore the individual. As Michael Bibby explains in his article, "'Where is Vietnam?' Anti War Poetry and the Canon," the public voices of the Vietnam War differed from the voices of the First World War. Although themes of trauma and social upheaval are present throughout both periods, Vietnam War protest works focused more on entire communities coming

together to overcome suffering and promote peace (163). The transition became necessary because the Vietnam War was an extremely pivotal moment in the history of the United States. Bibby writes that, “indeed, the Vietnam War signifies a trauma in American culture, and like victims of trauma, Americans write and rewrite the war in order to be purged of it” (159). It became especially crucial that returning soldiers write about the war in the forms of songs and poetry because their homecoming was hardly rewarding.

Sources show that an unfortunate product of the war’s unpopularity is that when the soldiers returned home, there were few outlets for their trauma and grief because many were unwilling to talk about Vietnam. Another major difference between the World Wars and Vietnam that became prevalent in war poetry was the unconventionality of Viet Cong tactics. Alongside what Veit Buntz refers to as Vietnam veterans’ “virtually incommunicable experience of death, fear, guilt, and loss” (227), came a newfound terror in the utter unpredictability of guerilla warfare. In his article, “‘Hammered Out of Artillery Shells’: The Discourse of Trauma in Vietnam Veterans’ Poetry,” Buntz describes how Vietnam war poetry transcended its predecessors. He writes that “their works address the otherness of the nightmarish natural surroundings and the sense of a formless guerilla war that refused order and progress” (227). Because of the mental chaos that resulted from constant fear of surprise attacks, many soldiers came home with extreme cases of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Actor Christopher Walken portrays some of the resulting symptoms of PTSD, such as memory loss and inability to communicate with loved ones, in Michael Cimino’s film, *The Deer Hunter* (1979). Poetry became a

popular mode of communication to anyone who would understand this complexity of emotions or at least sought to.

With the shift of focus from individual healing to that of larger communities also came a change in popular media. Many of the World War I and Vietnam War poets expressed the same sentiments in their writing, but the protest music of the 1960s far outshone that of the First World War. Protest music came rapidly to the forefront of popular media and overshadowed literature as the most impactful way to influence and heal large audiences. Pete Seeger, a renowned folk singer, was a major contributor to the Vietnam War protest movement. Some have even claimed that his song “Where Have All the Flowers Gone” was both the most famous lament and “best known song of Vietnam” (Arnold 325). In “The History Boy: Innocence and History in the Life and Music of Pete Seeger,” Fred Brandfon follows Seeger’s early career in protest music. Brandfon draws connections between Seeger and earlier protest musician, Woody Guthrie, known for his popular composition, “This Land is Your Land” (43). Although many consider this to be a patriotic song, the original version includes extra verses protesting the idyllic but unrealistic concept of the American Dream. Guthrie wrote the fourth and sixth verses about aspects of American society that disturbed him:

Was a big high wall that tried to stop me  
 A sign was painted: said Private Property,  
 But on the back side it didn’t say nothing—  
 God blessed America for me.

One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple  
 By the relief office I saw my people—  
 As they stood hungry, I stood there wondering if  
 God blessed America for me. (Jackson 250)

According to Mark Allan Jackson's "Is This Song Your Song Anymore?: Revisioning Woody Guthrie's 'This Land is Your Land,'" "The sentiments expressed here detailing restriction and want differ greatly from the celebratory vision of America" (250). As can be expected, the radical nature of these verses hampered the song's initial popularity. Guthrie later removed these verses, but Seeger remained an adamant supporter of the unredacted version and often sang it publicly (Brandfon 43). This is merely one example of the strong sense of social justice that led Seeger to contribute to the movement against the Vietnam War.

Brandfon also emphasizes Seeger's numerous blacklistings during the 1950s, which were due to the radical nature of his music coupled with his publicized communist beliefs (Brandfon 44). However, this did not affect Seeger's popularity as a protest musician during the Vietnam War era. This is likely because his radicalism was all a part of the zeitgeist; United States citizens were exhausted from war and craved revolution. Examples of this can be found in award-winning films, like Robert Zemeckis's *Forrest Gump*. One scene from the movie shows Forrest, the main character, accidentally participating in a rally in Washington D.C. led by revolutionary political activist and anarchist Abbot (Abbie) Hoffman (1936-1989). Hoffman threw himself into the 1960s counterculture, and the scene depicts him at the podium furiously protesting the war efforts in Vietnam ("Abbot (Abbie)

Hoffman”). A few minutes later, Forrest happens to pass a procession of protesters holding candles and singing Pete Seeger’s “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” This part of Zemeckis’s film captures the popular sentiments about Vietnam in the sixties through first radical then peaceful protests. The inclusion of Seeger’s song in the scene indicates both the popularity of protest music in anti-war culture and the importance the song itself held in the movement.

It was exactly Seeger’s revolutionary fervor that allowed for the voices of Vietnam to be heard on such a large scale. One of his most controversial songs was entitled “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy,” about a troop of soldiers in Louisiana whose captain urges them to cross a river against their better judgement. The captain pushes deep into the river despite the troops’ protests, and he drowns, although his men luckily escape alive. The song was meant to be a metaphorical stab at President Johnson’s inability to remove American troops from the war in Vietnam before the casualties escalated (Brandfon 45). This is only one example of how Seeger used criticism and his public voice as his weapon of choice.

Although he did not serve as a soldier, and thus escaped the horrors and violence, Seeger used his abilities to speak out against the injustices he saw. In this way, he was able to rally Americans against the brutality of war and ensure the soldiers’ battles would be remembered. Robert Cantwell’s biographical article about Seeger, “He Shall Overcome: Pete Seeger,” describes his role as a warrior for social justice. Cantwell writes, “[...] with his banjo on his back like a soldier’s carbine, the solitary Seeger seemed but a foot soldier in a vast invisible banjo army, at once a crusader and apostate” (207). Even though the composer could not directly relate to

a soldier's trauma, he fought to bring an end to their suffering in the best way he could. For this, Seeger and other songwriters of the Vietnam War era were instrumental in promoting the awareness of and the struggle against war trauma.

Although all of the atrocities from the First World War and the war in Vietnam have long passed, their effects on the world and on the soldiers who served still linger. There are those who lost friends and family, and even their sanity to shell-shock. Some have recovered over time but not all. Even so, the need to recognize this trauma, to remember it and use past experiences to make a healthier society, is greater than ever. Trauma will always be a part of life for the soldiers who fight in defense of others as well as for those at home who struggle under their own battles. The anguish in Wilfred Owen's poetry and the revolutionary ardor of Seeger's compositions serve as reminders of the importance of support and togetherness in the face of suffering and social upheaval. It is the task of every person to protect these memories and voices and to contribute their own to the conversation.

### **WORLD WAR I POETRY: THE MAJOR SHIFT**

A great sense of disillusionment characterized the World War I era, initiating a major shift in poetic themes. The movement away from patriotic support for the war is palpable in many musical works as well. "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier," one of the hit songs of 1915, captured many Americans' mounting uncertainty over joining the war effort in Europe ("I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier). Lyricist, Alfred Bryan (1871-1958), and composer Al Piantadosi (1882-1955) illustrate the dramatic shift away from patriotic themes.

Ten million soldiers to war have gone,  
 Who may never return again.  
 Ten million mothers' hearts must break  
 For the ones who died in vain. ("I Didn't Raise My Boy..." 1-4).

These lines discuss a deep ache for the immensity of lives lost to meaningless violence. The chorus shows a different perspective that is not as often depicted in war poetry: that of the grieving parent. The song's chorus laments,

I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier,  
 I brought him up to be my pride and joy,  
 Who dares to put a musket on his shoulder,  
 To shoot some other mother's darling boy? (7-10)

Some Americans were unmoved by the song's message. Former president, Theodore Roosevelt, scoffed at the lyrics, claiming that the perfect accompanying song would be "I Didn't Raise My Girl to Be A Mother," which, in his opinion, would be equally un-American ("I Didn't Raise My Boy..."). Others, however, like soldier-poet, Wilfred Owen, wrote poems that similarly conveyed the raw pain of not only losing a loved one but losing such innocence and promise. "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier" shares thematic ties with Owen's poem, "Arms and the Boy" (drafted May 1918), which contrasts the cold, hard sharpness of weaponry with the soft innocence of a young soldier:

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade

How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;  
 Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;  
 And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-leads,  
 Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads,  
 Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth  
 Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.  
 There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;  
 And God will grow no talons at his heels,

Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls. (Owen *Collected Poems*)

In letters home to his family and in his poetic works, Wilfred Owen demonstrates an immense frustration with the lives and intellect shattered by the First World War (Owen *Collected Poems* 19). This anger coupled with his descriptions of personal trauma provide the foundation for his poetry. Owen's works are replete with intense, graphic depictions of lost youth and an emphasis on how little glory is really to be found in war.

### **WILFRED OWEN: WARRIOR POET**

Wilfred Owen was born Wilfred Edward Salter Owen in Shropshire, England in 1893 ("Wilfred Owen"). He was the oldest of four children born to Thomas and Susan Owen; although both parents came from formerly affluent

families, Thomas made his living first as a seaman then as a railway station master (“Wilfred Owen”). As the first born, Owen took a lovingly protective stance toward his younger siblings, and he had an especially close relationship with his mother, who he wrote to frequently during his service (“Wilfred Owen”). Owen attended a couple of different schools in his youth but eventually graduated from Shrewsbury Technical School in 1911 (“Wilfred Owen”). At that point, the young poet became an assistant to a Reverend Wigan in Oxfordshire and contemplated pursuing a life as a clergyman (“Wilfred Owen”). Even in the early stages of his poetry writing at the vicarage, Owen’s style and skill with rhythm had already begun to set him apart from other writers. He wrote on the conventional Romantic subjects of the time, but “his keen ear for sound and his instinct for the modulating of rhythm” marked him as a promising artist (“Wilfred Owen”). He returned home from Oxfordshire in 1913 due to a respiratory infection he contracted from living in the dampness of the vicarage (“Wilfred Owen”). Owen was teaching at the Berlitz school of languages when the Great War began; he continued to teach for another year, having moved to France to tutor young boys, unsure of whether or not he wanted to join the fight himself (“Wilfred Owen”).

In “By Degrees Regain[ing] Cool Peaceful Air in Wonder’: Wilfred Owen’s War Poetry as Psychological Therapy,” Daniel Hipp discusses a 1914 letter Wilfred Owen wrote home to his mother. The correspondence demonstrates his awareness of the global sociopolitical impacts of the war, but the teacher was hesitant to involve himself in the conflict (25). He wrote, “The war affects me less than it ought. But I can do no service to anybody by agitating for news or making dole over the

slaughter.... I feel my own life all the more precious and more dear in the presence of this deflowering of Europe” (25-26). His words show his fear of losing his own life when so many other men his age would surely perish. Nonetheless, Owen enlisted in October 1915 (26). The poet was effectively able to distance himself from the war during training, but “the life he was forced to endure in the trenches, beginning in late December 1916, made the reality of suffering central to his experience” (26). On December 31, 1916, Wilfred Owen arrived at the front lines in France to command a platoon of infantrymen in the final days of the Battle of Somme; he fought there until May 1917 (26).

Owen’s first major trauma came as a result of this horrible experience— “days spent in a dugout, far into No Man’s Land, during which he played the role of the passive commander of his men, as all endured some fifty hours of shelling” (26). Three months later, his control over his psychological condition began to crumble as he was met with yet more trauma. During combat, a shell blast launched him across a field, and he fell very near one of his dead comrades (27). The letter he wrote his mother about this deeply terrifying experience read, “My brother officer... lay opposite in a similar hole. But he was covered with earth, and no relief will ever relieve him, nor will his Rest be a 9 days-Rest” (27). His reference to the “9-days rest” signifies the First Nine Days of Av, one of the periods of mourning before the Jewish holiday of Tish’a b’Av commemorating the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem, but this is not clarified (Schmerler). After that, Owen only ever spoke of the soldier with “defensive humor,” avoiding details or discussing the impact of the experience on him (Hipp 27). Whether he would speak about the

ordeal or not, however, his psychological trauma began to manifest in recognizably worrisome ways.

After the shell blast left him in a hole with an unobstructed view of his dead companion, Owen developed a stutter, “displaying his inability to speak fully about the war or anything else” (27). Whether he wanted to speak about his trauma or not, his own mind was making it increasingly difficult. Shell-shock was frighteningly common during World War I, due in part to the extensive amount of time soldiers spent lying in wet, muddy trenches poised for attack. It is surely still worse for those in active combat, racing across grassy fields strewn with dead men and gore while more soldiers continue to fall all around. As a result, in June of 1917, Owen was sent to Craiglockhart, a hospital for shell-shocked soldiers, in Edinburgh (27).

It was there at the hospital in Scotland that Wilfred Owen met fellow soldier-poet, Siegfried Sassoon. The men became fast friends, and Sassoon’s influence on Owen’s poetry could be seen almost immediately. Sassoon instilled in his friend a love of irony and appreciation for vernacular language over the high diction emphasized in school (28). Owen’s style showed a dramatic shift in his time at Craiglockhart, “...changing him from a mediocre imitator of Keats and Decadent poets such as Wilde into the spokesperson for the ‘doomed youth’ of England...” (25). Sassoon’s advice for his friend was, “Sweat your guts out writing poetry” (30). It appears that this is precisely what Wilfred Owen endeavored to do.

His psychological ailments bettered over time as “he became able to confront his condition by means of... self-revelation and self-healing achieved within the poetry which created for Owen a new public voice” (27). By healing himself through

writing, he became a voice of righteous anger and compassion for the shared trauma of his fellow soldiers. Daniel Hipp asserts that the poet's recovery was contingent on him confronting "the conflict between personal safety and his guilt for the suffering of others which lies at the heart of his response to the war" (28). His healing was especially crucial because he had served as an officer. Privates often express psychological trauma bodily, "through paralysis, tremors, or muscular tics," but officers' trauma manifests on a deeper emotional level (28). Writing poetry about the war allowed Owen to face his psychological trauma instead of distancing himself from everything World War I stood to destroy, as he did early on in training.

Owen's ability to recover himself through writing proved to have the additional success of impacting millions of other readers, soldiers and civilians alike. He became a voice of protest against the horrors of combat he and so many other young men faced and perished from at the start of the 20th century. Owen was deemed fit for active duty in Ripon on September 1, 1918. He remained there until he was killed in action mere days before the armistice (27). He was only 25 years old. Hipp declares that "the death of Wilfred Owen... 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" (25). Few would dare to refute this claim, as only a handful of other poets from World War I are so revered and celebrated today as Wilfred Owen for capturing the war with such graphic, mournful descriptions. He wrote for a generation of men plagued with the same guilt and lasting horror he carried, a psychological burden he wanted no man, present or

future, to carry. His voice transcends generations and is still considered to be one of the greatest soldier-poets of World War I.

### **“DULCE ET DECORUM EST”**

Wilfred Owen wrote “Dulce et Decorum Est” (Dulce) at Craiglockhart in 1917 (Hipp 34). It is one of his best-known poems and is often taught in college courses because it so skillfully utilizes extremely visceral imagery and rhetorical irony to convey an honest, unromantic view of war. This particular poem gains extra significance because the thesis is relevant to his other works as well as the ideas shared by millions of his fellow soldiers.

Owen’s title alone sets the ironic tone for the rest of the poem. “Dulce et Decorum Est” is part of a larger Latin phrase: “Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.” The phrase stems from “3.2,” a poem in the *Roman Odes* written by Roman poet, Quintus Horatius Flaccus (Horace) (65-8 B.C.E.), meaning, “it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country” (Olive and Murray-Pollock 1). Ode “3.2” is a patriotic work glorifying military service and hardship for the protection and betterment of one’s country. The poem begins, “Let the boy, toughened by military service, / learn how to make bitterest hardship his friend” (Oliver and Murray-Pollock 5), establishing the tone best encompassed in the line Owen chose for his title centuries later. Because of this, one might assume that Owen’s composition also carries heavy themes of patriotism and encourages participation in World War I. However, it is clear by the second line of the poem that this is not the case at all, and that the title serves, instead, as a bitter contrast to the Owen’s actual message. Juxtaposed with miserable images of British soldiers trudging, slumped and ill, “Dulce et Decorum

Est” becomes a biting mockery of those who would advocate the war efforts despite obvious anguish and trauma. Owen’s seeming adherence to pre-World War I nationalistic sentiments, followed by his clear divergence from it, effectively demonstrates his frustration with all the phrase represents.

The poet’s use of figurative language functions to intensify the urgency and horror of the scene depicted. It also plays a crucial role in ensuring readers get a firm sense of the emotional and physical setting. Owen makes it possible for outsiders to relate to his own trauma by using simile and metaphor, making it accessible to soldiers and civilians alike. Firstly, he uses dialogue to begin the second stanza with, “Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!” (9), which immediately establishes the urgent tone shift with the use of capitalization and exclamation. Then, when one soldier is caught unawares and unable to don his mask in time, the speaker describes him “flound’ring like a man in fire or lime” (12), which are both more visualizable descriptions for civilians than a man dying in a gas attack. Therefore, the simile acts as a bridge, allowing those who have been exempt from active combat to envision the speaker’s horror. In both the first and second stanzas, Owen uses drowning as a metaphor for the man suffocating in the gas. This also makes the speaker’s anguish at the sight more accessible. Most people have some understanding of the concept of drowning, while it is doubtful that they could readily picture gas poisoning. Wilfred Owen’s strategic uses of figurative language, especially the drowning metaphor, allow him to better reach an audience in experienced in combat.

In this work, Owen’s trauma—and that of all soldiers he speaks for—is communicated in part by his use of second person tense. First, the speaker captures

attention with the soldiers' misery and the bitterness of their struggle. Then, he gives the audience an active role by using second-person perspective and addressing them as "My friend" (Dulce 25). This automatically establishes a closeness between Owen and his readers and makes his frustrations theirs. Thus, they automatically take his side in the battle against violence and loss. There is both a tenderness and an urgency in the lines,

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
 The old lie: *Dulce et decorum est*  
*Pro patria mori.* (25-28)

The entire last stanza is an extended call for understanding and action. It is a necessary call for the poet because an incredibly important part of healing trauma is sharing it, subsequently healing others and helping to prevent future pain. Here, though, Owen's ironic use of Horace's line demonstrates his anti-war protest. He is not simply lamenting the lost and broken youth who served in the Great War, he is giving a warning: to serve is to be broken down by horror and death. The poet heals himself through his writing, he heals others in helping them understand, and he informs the next generation of soldiers of the trauma they may face.

He describes his own trauma in great detail in the third stanza. The speaker explains that his dreams are still disturbed by the phantasm of the dying man and his own inability to save him. He says regretfully, "In all my dreams before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning" (15-16).

Nightmares are a notable symptom of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which plagued an extraordinary number of soldiers after World War I. Therefore, Owen's addition of this detail further confirms that this experience and ones like it traumatized soldiers and continued to haunt them, sometimes for the rest of their lives. The lamentation functions as a way for the poet to honor his fallen comrades while also communicating his frustration. For such an otherwise incommunicable experience, poetry becomes a necessity.

Another pervading theme in soldier-poets' works is the men's dramatic appearance of aging under the weight and trauma of war. Owen's depictions of the trudging soldiers render them practically disabled, "Bent double, like old beggars under sacks / Knock-kneed [and] coughing like hags" (1-2). Throughout the course of their inane slog, which could also be metaphorically representative of their entire service, "All went lame; all blind; / Drunk with fatigue" (6-7). These are no longer the strapping boys sent to defend Great Britain with honor and bravery. They are broken down, aching and crumbling where they stand. This, too, is its own sort of trauma. The fatigue may ebb if the soldiers return home, but, doubtless, they will always bear the burden of that existence. On England's soldier poets, Frances Cutler Wentworth argues, "It is not simply that each poet gives us a different vision, but that each poet gives us the changing vision of youth grown suddenly old" (86). Furthermore, Owen makes the fact of their untimely aging all the crueler for its prevention of the men hearing the gas cans drop around them. The aching, bent-back misery only paves the way for further trauma.

Not only is war the bringer of untimely frailty, but also of sickness and death. Owen continues to combine startling graphic imagery with figurative language when the speaker describes the fate of his dying comrade. He says the blood flowing from the man's mouth is "Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud / Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues" (23-24). The simile works to better connect the audience to the speaker's experience through the abstraction of evil and corruption. Many people understand as little about cancer as they do about the effects of war, while both cause unceasing, devastating destruction. Therefore, Owen's strategy communicates in a relatable way the bitterness of losing youth and innocence to a diabolical yet untouchable force. Only the frightening, graphic nature of his imagery could accurately convey his protest against the enemy: the needless defilement of an entire generation of young men through senseless violence and trauma.

Greater even than the need to prevent the unnecessary slaughter of youth is the longing for understanding. Owen's use of second-person perspective and intricately woven images of trauma beg readers to see the soldiers' horrible experiences as their own. For soldier poets, the inclusion of these themes was crucial for their own healing. Furthermore, they were able to aid in each other's recovery by demanding that their lost comrades be remembered, that their misery count for something more than cannon fodder. This relationship between the soldiers of Owen's poetry and "those on the other side of the barbed wire" (22) is key. It is a prevalent element in many of his poems, including this one. However, his composition "Miners" works within this relationship more directly, especially concerning his frustration with the inevitable ignorance of those left at home.

## **“MINERS”**

Owen wrote his metaphor-heavy poem, “Miners,” in January of 1918, less than a year before his death on November 4. The work describes soldiers languishing in underground tunnels the poet refers to as mines, establishing his extended metaphor that begins with his title. The men are not truly trapped in a mine but are immersed in the daily dangers of trench warfare. To launch surprise attacks, and sometimes to avoid them, soldiers often dug narrow underground passageways connected to their trenches. Professional miners were frequently charged with digging these tunnels, which were then filled with explosives and detonated beneath enemy encampments (Jackson 2011). Excavations as recently as 2011 in La Boisselle, France have retrieved the bodies of soldiers entombed in their tunnel chambers (Jackson 2011). Another famous incident occurred at the Battle of Messines in 1917. BBC News’s Peter Jackson explains, “455 tons of explosive placed in 21 tunnels that had taken more than a year to prepare created a huge explosion that killed an estimated 10,000 Germans” (2011). Owen’s “Miners” gives unique insight to these subterranean tragedies.

Although real miners were often sent to the front lines to dig strategic tunnels, Wilfred Owen’s “Miners” refers instead to the miserable soldiers wasted by this brand of warfare. The secondary purpose for the metaphoric title is explaining and exploring the poet’s frustration with those left at home. This important divide is caused by ignorance on the part of civilians who cannot relate to soldiers’ traumatic experiences and may take their efforts for granted. The duties of both miners and soldiers share in that the men must toil in extremely dangerous conditions to

provide comfort to others. Thus, “Miners” becomes a reminder of the injustice in men losing their lives to provide luxuries to those who would too frequently forget their valiance.

Owen’s intentional diction when describing the accursed trench tunnel creates an infernal setting that is both desolate and inescapable. The speaker recalls,

I thought of all that worked dark pits  
 Of war, and died  
 Digging the rock where Death reposes  
 Peace lies indeed: (21-24)

“All,” refers to the soldiers and miners hired to dig the tunnel systems, those “dark pits / Of war” (21-22). The use of the word “pits” to replace “tunnels,” furthermore, better conveys the sense of depth, darkness, and torment. While tunnels often have exits, pits are most often inescapable. Owen’s explanation of the space as “the rock where Death reposes” give the lines a hellish quality, especially because “Death” is capitalized. It gives the impression that Death is a sentient force who reigns supreme in this underground realm with the soldiers at its mercy. The “Peace [that] lies indeed” (24) could signify the peace that may come to the men in death. However, it more likely connects to the following stanza concerning the peace and comfort felt by those who are spared the traumatic experience of war.

While Owen’s entire poem works as an extended metaphor, he also utilizes personification to better communicate his themes. The initial example lies in the

first two stanzas of the poem that begin by personifying the speaker's coal and hearth:

There was a whispering in my hearth,  
A sigh of the coal,  
Grown wistful of a former earth  
It might recall. (1-4)

These lines are reminiscent of Owen's description of war's needless destruction of youth. His use of personification in the "whispering" of the hearth and "sigh of the coal" gives new life to these things. He presents the hearth and dying fire as nostalgic beings longing for a return to purer days before men painfully perished in the coal's former resting place. The fire and hearth appear wiser for knowing this "former earth" and appreciating the value in it that others may not realize, just as not all people realized the value of the youth wasted in trenches and the tunnels beneath them. Owen's metaphor demonstrates that coal and soldiers are both valuable commodities often taken for granted by the people who need them most. Thus, the beginning of the poem sets a tone of yearning for the time before the doomed young soldiers were made to suffer underground, buried beneath their comrades' boot soles.

The personification of "Comforted years" later in the poem coupled with the related imagery is one of the best illustrations of the frustration the speaker feels about the gap in understanding between soldiers and civilians. Nearing the poem's conclusion, the speaker says,

Comforted years will sit soft-chaired,  
 In rooms of amber,  
 The years will stretch their hands, well-cheered  
 By our life's ember; (25-28)

The personification of “Comforted years,” represents those left at home leading comfortable lives thanks to the soldiers’ sacrifice: their “life’s ember.” That the years are sitting “soft-chaired” and “stretch[ing] their hands, well-cheered” bites cruelly because that luxury poses such a profound contrast to life in the trenches. Furthermore, it argues civilians’ ignorance to their benefactors’ losses. There is no resounding appreciation or understanding of all that must be sacrificed for their warmth and comfort. Additionally, Owen’s use of personification in “Comforted years” instead of explicitly saying “people” or “civilians” de-personifies them. They cease to be individuals and loved ones, becoming only a vague and formless source of resentment for the speaker. These lines introduce darker tones to “Miners” because in the end, the warmth and comfort of this scene are overshadowed by the speaker’s anger, trauma, and remorse for the dead.

The depictions of trauma in “Miners” are not as obvious as in some of Owen’s other poems, like “Dulce.” The emphasis in this particular work shines more on the gap in understanding, but that underlying trauma is still present in the speaker’s descriptions of the soldiers in the tunnels. Trauma’s subtler presence in this poem coupled with the use of coal as a metaphor for the suffering soldiers shows the speaker’s need to be separated from the dying men. The poem continues,

But the coals were murmuring of their mine,  
 And moans down there  
 Of boys that slept wry sleep, and men  
 Writhing for air. (13-16)

The repeated personification of the coal brings attention back to the soldiers. Firstly, the coal and soldiers relate in that they are a valuable but expendable resource. The coal also serves as a witness to the men's suffering, as does the poem's speaker, which demonstrates the crippling guilt he feels being powerless to his comrades' torment. This, of course, assumes that the speaker is also a soldier because only another soldier could accurately speak of combat trauma. The coal, functioning as a metaphor for the soldiers, is haunted by memories of the men's anguish and carries that knowledge with it into the fire. Because Owen uses third-person perspective to describe the "moans down there" echoing from "boys that slept wry sleep, and men / Writhing for air" (15-16), the speaker becomes separated from his companions. It is possible that watching his men die necessitates that the speaker creates this distance because of his guilt at surviving after watching so many of his fellow soldiers slowly suffocate. Thus, trauma also comes to the witnesses of such immense suffering because of the emotional burden they carry long after the agony has subsided.

The following stanza connects back to Owen's main argument surrounding most people's ignorance of soldiers' experiences. The speaker enters the trench tunnels, officially marking himself as a fellow soldier and witness to the darkness and misery. He recounts,

I saw white bones in the cinder-shard,  
Bones without number.  
For many hearts with coal are charred,  
And few remember. (17-20)

Clearly enough, the bones here are meant to represent the speaker's fallen comrades. The bones do not only signify those dead and gone in this particular poetic moment but all soldiers crushed and buried in tunnel collapses that have yet to be unearthed even today. The next lines, "For many hearts with coal are charred, / And few remember" (17-20) refer back to the central themes of this poem: that few will remember the dead. The speaker insinuates that the only ones who will remember the fallen are their fellow soldiers. These lines measure the heavy extent of the trauma. Few will remember the fallen men, but the speaker will forever be haunted by the sight. Thus, these lines serve as a reminder of all that is sacrificed to preserve the freedom and safety of others.

The poem's finale is a powerful expression of Owen's thesis: that the soldiers' sacrifice is a heart-wrenching loss that is too often forgotten. The poet creates an intense contrast between images of comfortable sleep and the men's dying anguish, protesting ignorance to this tragedy. The full final stanza reads,

The centuries will burn rich loads  
With which we groaned,  
Whose warmth shall lull their dreaming lids,  
While songs are crooned;

But they will not dream of us poor lads

Lost in the ground. (29-34)

Once again, the people receiving warmth and comfort go unnamed and are instead represented by “the centuries” and previously by “comforted years.” They cease to be people with thoughts and emotions, becoming unstoppable and indifferent forces of time. This unstoppable also highlights their eternity; this is not simply a current frustration but a timeless struggle that will always exist. The poet communicates that unless the gap in understanding can somehow be bridged, soldiers will continue to die nameless and forgotten. Time will pass until only few remember their fight, but the trauma for those who remain will last forever.

Memory is a crucial aspect of Owen’s work. He remembers those who have perished to provide warmth and security to so many others. It is impossible to fully comprehend something like war when one has not lived it firsthand. Therefore, it is the duty of those left behind, who never had to experience the fear and the cold of the front lines, to remember those who did. Their forgotten trauma is not worth a fire in the hearth. Frances Cutler Wentworth begins his history and analysis of England’s soldier poets with this vital question: “What have they to tell us, these poets who have been in hell?” (85). In the course of my research the answer has become clear; they tell an ageless story of anguish and trauma and of the brotherhood forged by war. We must listen.

### “APOLOGIA PRO POEMATE MEO”

Owen’s “Apologia Pro Poemate Meo” (“Apologia”) is a study in morbid juxtaposition. As in his other works, Owen’s battle scenery is vivid to the point of colorful grotesqueness, but the battlefield images in “Apologia” are paired with moments of intense joy and fraternity, highlighting these necessary extremes. The poem is a veritable patchwork quilt of the sights, sensations, and emotions that were World War I. As in “Dulce” and “Miners,” outsiders to these experiences are simultaneously included and excluded from the speaker’s world. The soldier presents them with a strange cacophony of love and pain, and hands them what they need to know of the lives of men at war. But without having known battle firsthand, a reader could never begin to comprehend the full complexity. Owen also explores more natural oppositions throughout the work, including those of Heaven and Hell, joy and terror, and of life and death. Altogether, “Apologia” describes the grand contradiction of what it is to be a World War I soldier, a brother in adversity, and a man struggling to survive.

It is thought that the poem’s Latin title, meaning “Apology for My Poem,” may be a reference to Cardinal Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (“Apology for His Life”) (Greenblatt 2035). However, Owen’s poem expresses less remorse than Newman’s work and instead adopts the philosophy expressed in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry*, a work that reads more like a vindication of poetry than a list of rules and judgements of the artform. Owen even alludes to Shelley’s philosophy in “Apologia” when the speaker says, “I, too, have dropped off Fear [...] / And witnessed exultation” (9-13). Shelley discusses exultation as part of the necessary

contradiction of poetry. He argues: “Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted. [...] It exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror”

(Greenblatt 2035). This was undoubtedly part of Owen’s philosophy when writing “Apologia.” The speaker describes experiencing such beauty and fraternity, not in spite of his trauma and that of his brothers but because of it. The lens of battle does not make all things appear darker and more desolate. The moments of hard-won happiness become brighter and more crucial by comparison, but so, too, do they begin to blur the moments of horror.

To the speaker, war is the great intensifier of both strife and happiness. It brings laughter when laughter seems impossible. But when life turns to death so suddenly and so constantly, trauma manifests in strange ways. Owen lends description to this inexplicable joy.

War brought more glory to their eyes than blood,  
And gave their laughs more glee than shakes a child.

Merry it was to laugh there—

Where death becomes absurd and life absurder.

For power was on us as we slashed bones bare

Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder. (3-8)

Whether mad excitement resulting from trauma or true happiness made manic by imminent death, this is a different description of life at war than Owen wrote about in “Miners” and “Dulce.” Owen unapologetically describes the soldiers’ numbness

toward brutal, remorseless killing. This makes more apparent the brightness of the happiness that courses alongside their inevitable horror. As Shelley said, the poem exalts the beauty in this numbing joy. This brings attention to the wrongness of it because the laughter is not an indication of true happiness but a symptom of the life and trauma of a soldier. When one is forced to adapt to a life of indiscriminately killing the enemy, and when life and death blur together such that neither seems to hold much weight, the emotional ramifications are too much for any man to bear sanely. The laughter Owen describes, therefore, is an unconscious reaction to the soldiers' shock and stress, a necessary, but corrupted lightness in the darkness of inhumanity.

Tadeusz Slawek explains his perception of the laughter motif prevalent in both this and Owen's other poems in his article, "Dark Pits of War': Wilfred Owen's Poetry and the Hermeneutics of War." Slawek explains that, "it is smiling as the substitution of a myth that enables man to put up with what Owen himself calls 'superhuman inhumanities'" (11). In other words, smiling and laughter become a vital coping mechanism. It is exactly these moments of mad glee, however, that are most indicative of the speaker's trauma because they demonstrate the strange natural reaction resulting from the soldiers' struggles to locate themselves as humans in this land of unbridled inhumanity. And through his poetry, Owen, too, can place himself as soldier, brother, and man fighting for survival. He stitches together wild and inevitable juxtapositions of pain and happiness, life and death, and the way they blur together in a state of living where one turns to the other in a

matter of moments. In the midst of these blurred contradictions, Owen's speaker explains his lack of fear:

I, too, have dropped off Fear—

Behind the barrage, dead as my platoon,

And sailed my spirit surging light and clear

Past the entanglement where hopes lay strewn (Apologia 9-12).

His dead platoon and the necessary steeling of emotion has forced him to leave his fear behind before charging into battle. The speaker conveys the idea that there is no room for fear in combat, but the lightness and clarity he experiences is due to an unconscious emotional reaction to his trauma and not true happiness. This is further illustrated by the immediate juxtaposition of the lines, "And sailed my spirit surging light and clear" and "Past the entanglement where hopes lay strewn." This clarity is unnatural in the bleak setting.

Additionally, "Fear" in this third stanza and "Joy" in the sixth stanza are the only capitalized words in the poem that are neither typical proper nouns nor begin a line. This, again, supports the theme of contradiction. Both of these words are also connected to Owen's descriptions of brotherhood. He writes that he, too, has abandoned Fear, implying that this is not only his experience but that of his fellow soldiers as well. Thus, here, as in his other poems, Owen acts as spokesman for himself and his brothers in arms. In writing about the incredible loss of emotional capacity at the hands of scarring inhumanity, the poet provides some small amount of healing for himself and others. He uses his poetry to accomplish the same goal

represented by the laughter motif: that of shaping the soldiers' painful void of emotion into something they can understand and reshape into hope.

Owen's capitalization of "Joy" functions both as the counterpart to "Fear" and further emphasizes the role of battle in strengthening their fellowships. He writes that their relationships are built on something much harder than the soft ephemerality of Joy. His speaker explains,

I have made fellowships—

Untold of happy lovers in old song.

For love is not the binding of fair lips

With the soft silk of eyes that look and long,

By Joy, whose ribbon slips,—

But wound with war's hard wire whose stakes are strong;

Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;

Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong. (17-24)

Joy, like fear, reads as something that is not quite weakness, but is still sloughed off in favor of stronger resolve. The speaker abandons Fear to cope with battle atrocities, and he loves his friends with the fidelity of shared trauma instead of Joy, which is described as a slippery thing, too often sliding through his fingers. Battlefield fellowships are welded irrevocably by the strains and trials of war, nothing so simple and insubstantial as ribbons and medals. The romantic notions of honor and nobility are dashed by the reality of the speaker's brotherhood, hard won and deeply embedded by bloodshed. These two stanzas mark another change in a

theme well-known to Owen's readers: the stark divide between soldiers and the world outside of war.

Ultimately, the separation of the brotherhood of soldiers from the outsiders is one of the most crucial elements of the poem. In a 1918 letter to his mother, the last one he would ever write her, Owen said, "you could not be visited by a band of friends half so fine as surround me here" (Simcox). Each man is his brother's comfort—the little he can be—and provides healing for the trauma they all face together. With this in mind, it becomes clear that one of Owen's primary audiences is fellow soldiers: the only people who could possibly share a complete understanding of this trauma. The speaker salutes this brotherhood in the lines,

I have perceived much beauty

In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight;

Heard music in the silentness of duty;

Found peace where shell-storms spouted reddest spate. (25-28)

"Apologia" continues to juxtapose beauty in wavering bravery, music in silence, and peace in chaos. In this stanza Owen maintains that the hardy, close-knit relationships between soldiers are forged by these extreme contradictions. What beauty there is only exists because their struggle is so immense. They experience all trauma together and are therefore forever bound.

The protest elements in "Apologia" appear in the last two stanzas of the poem. There is a shift in the penultimate stanza in perspective and audience. The speaker strays from his own traumatic experiences to address the audience directly

as “you,” but it is clear that this message is meant for those for whom the soldiers fought. Once again, Owen’s poem serves to both illuminate the unique conditions of war as well as widen the divide between soldiers and civilians. The speaker reminds his readers,

Nevertheless, except you share

With them in hell the sorrowful dark of hell,

Whose world is but the trembling of a flare,

And heaven but as the highway for a shell,

You shall not hear their mirth:

You shall not come to think them well content

By any jest of mine. These men are worth

Your tears: You are not worth their merriment. (29-36)

These stanzas are the speaker’s protest against war and the trauma of needless violence. He says that only those who have experienced the same hellish, high-intensity world of constant battle can truly understand their complexity of emotions. He reminds those who do not share this lifelong burden that they should not take his words to mean that men in active battle are happy to make the best of a dire situation. They are survivors making unfathomable sacrifices for the supposed good of mankind, and no man walks away unscarred. The speaker believes these men should be mourned and that the little happiness they manage to scavenge from the dirt, blood, and rot is theirs alone. It mirrors Owen’s use of the Latin lines, “*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*,” satirically expressing the writer’s disgust with

glorifying war. The speaker in "Apologia" ends with the message that the modicum of joy and clarity soldiers find in each other does not make their sacrifice any less agonizing.

At first read, Wilfred Owen's poetry may seem an overly graphic emotional description of life at war, when, in truth, it is far more complex. Owen's poetry is a resource to help heal his trauma and that of others lost and struggling in their own minds. In his time, it connected a band of brothers knit tightly by their shared experiences, and it still serves to unify brothers and sisters in arms who have known the extreme contradictions of brothers lost and enemies gained, of joy and suffering, life and death. His words help those who cannot understand this trauma visualize the experiences, but they are also a constant reminder of the existing divide between soldiers and civilians. In poem after poem he reaffirms the idea that the sacrifices made are too great and the lives lost too many. He is an integral part of a time-honored tradition of people who would use their art to heal themselves as well as create long-lasting change.

World War I poetry is one of the most expressive remaining resources depicting the crushing disillusionment and suffering experienced by soldiers at that time. What began as the response to a patriotic movement that suddenly and painfully lost its luster now forms a tribute to the lives and sacrifices of early 20th century soldiers and a protest to their trauma. The life of glory young men had been promised was dashed by poison gas and the piercing rattle of machine gun fire, creating an era characterized by a great loss of innocence. Perhaps even more than photography, poetry offers a collection of images and emotions that detail the

events of the First World War. It is many voices, not Owen's alone, but those of Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Rupert Brooke, and others, giving a face to a trauma so unique it is unfathomable by those who could not see it firsthand. It is a protest of the needless and excessive violence of combat and the slow, quiet rot of life in the trenches. It has paved the way for later artistic forms of protest and trauma healing. As time has changed the concept of modern warfare and humans have found new and shocking ways to ruin each other, so has literature changed the methods of coping with the mental and emotional ramifications. The Great War was only the beginning.

### **VIETNAM WAR PROTEST MUSIC: SONGS TO UNITE A NATION**

Although protest music existed during World War I, because the war began with such patriotic vigor, the music did not become popular until the fighting ended. Although some hit songs like Alfred Bryan's "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier" aroused interest in protest, most music at the time was intended to unite the nation against a common enemy. Meanwhile, the poetry of the time filled in the gaps, allowing the soldiers to voice their horror and disillusionment. The poetry and songs of protest were somewhat dampened following the attack on Pearl Harbor during World War II. Countless Americans once again formed a united front against a widely recognized evil, and calls to end the violence were overshadowed by a national desire for revenge. It was not until the United States entered the war in Vietnam and felt the tides shift dramatically against them that protest poetry and music rose in relevance once more.

Despite the visible differences in the written wartime artifacts from World War I and the Vietnam War, they share a fundamental purpose: healing those affected. The Vietnam War was one of many firsts for American soldiers. They witnessed an entirely new kind of warfare that made it extremely difficult to distinguish between Vietnamese civilians and the enemy, between an innocent rustle on the jungle floor and crouched assassins. This left returning soldiers with a trauma unlike any other and baffled many American citizens back home. In "'Where is Vietnam?' Antiwar Poetry and the Canon," Michael Bibby explains the resulting necessity of writing as healing.

Vietnam is the war we lost, the war that introduced 'post-traumatic stress' into our national lexicon. Indeed, the Vietnam War signifies a trauma in American culture, and like victims of trauma, Americans write and rewrite the war in order to be purged of it. Through our obsessive rewritings, Rick Berg has argued, we desperately seek to "win the lost war, to conquer and possess it..." (159)

In this way, the writings of World War I and Vietnam are very similar. Both wars introduced new horrors, first trench then guerilla warfare, that brought about new psychological traumas for American soldiers. The appreciation and following of protest art in both war eras throughout the 20th century demonstrate the necessity of writing to heal trauma.

Prominent Vietnam War poets like Marvin Bell (1937-present) and Yusef Komunyakaa (1947-present) followed the lead of their predecessors. They use the

poetic artform to describe both the catastrophic violence they experienced in the lethal jungles of southeast Asia and the soul-wracking guilt of surviving a war so many others did not. Like Owen, the Vietnam “veteran-poets create[ed] a discourse of trauma that communicates their virtually incommunicable experience of death, fear, guilt, and loss” (Buntz 227). Because the warfare of the Viet Cong was so shocking and unpredictable, the works of soldier poets from the Vietnam War “address the otherness of the nightmarish natural surroundings and the sense of a formless guerilla war that refused order and progress” (Buntz 227). As it did for Owen and the other World War I poets, the artform provided an outlet for a trauma transcending verbal description. Still, the era is more remembered for the surge in protest music gaining popularity back in the States.

The divide between soldiers and civilians with whom Owen expressed such frustration began to narrow as those on the home front took a stand against the war that they could now witness on their home televisions. The difference between poetry and music in this generation was the ever-growing popularity of the latter. This made it a more effective tool for reaching broader audiences at that time. Protest music proved a unique case because it gave voice to emotions and trauma shared by both civilians in the States and soldiers hunkered in Vietnamese jungles. David King Dunaway says of protest music, “The song, that most populist of art forms, has traditionally been a vehicle used by those who do not leave a printed record. This is particularly true for protest songs, which have given voice to sentiments which have no other outlet” (272). As the soldier poets have demonstrated, there are multiple methods for healing oneself of combat trauma and

communicating the extreme emotions surrounding this turmoil. However, protest music proved itself to be the most powerful way to unite a nation in pursuit of peace.

Many of the protest songs of the Vietnam War era were thematically connected by a yearning to end the violence now all too visible to the Americans left at home. Other songs were driven by powerful anger against the fruitless loss of life and innocence. American composer, Lou Harrison, explained his inspiration, claiming, “there are some times when one wants to stand and scream aloud—‘This is not right’... or ‘This is all wrong’ and personal frustration led me to express my rage in music” (Arnold 319). His explanation illustrates that some artists wrote for themselves, for the release of so much building anger and despair, but they also wrote to share these sentiments with others in the best way they could.

The voices of the Vietnam War differed from those of World War I in that their focus shifted away from the individual. Wilfred Owen’s poetry demonstrates an emphasis on brotherhood and the inextricable bonds forged between soldiers in the wake of blood and battle. However, the perspectives in his poems often stem from a specific speaker, whereas protest music often comes from a community perspective. There is less focus on the individual’s experience and more direction toward a group healing and overcoming trauma together (Bibby 163). This illustrates a fascinating continuum from trauma poetry to protest music throughout the twentieth century where descriptions of individual suffering eventually led to an emphasis on mass protest.

During the Vietnam War era, soldiers' trauma was no longer theirs to bear in solitude but one shared with deep sincerity by millions of their fellow Americans. Widespread rage against the agony and suffering resulting from combat united countless American citizens in artistic expressions of protest. There will always be an indescribable uniqueness in the suffering of soldiers in combat, but, for the first time, the people they left behind at home were raging with them, and they began to sing.

### **PETE SEEGER: CRUSADER AND APOSTATE**

Pete Seeger, born in New York in 1919 to a family of artists and scholars, has come to be one of the best-known songwriters who spoke out against the Vietnam War (Gottschalk 12). Seeger discovered his love for the banjo, his chosen weapon for musical revolution, at the young age of sixteen. It later became a sort of symbol for Seeger and the "rural working class and the nobility of folk culture" (Gottschalk 12). He brought his music to the public stage first with the *Almanac Singers* from 1941 to 1942 and then with *The Weavers* from 1947 to 1952 (Gottschalk 13). Seeger and his banjo became an integral part of the folk revival brought about by the younger generations' frustration with the narrow-minded commercialism driving the rest of the world after World War II (Gottschalk 13). The folk revival was influenced by a newfound interest and respect for history and simplicity as "urban youngsters began to examine the rural ways of their forbearers" (Gottschalk 13). Seeger made his voice known as a crucial player in the revival of folk music but gained importance and renown once he joined the rising wave of protest musicians during the Vietnam War.

For his time, Seeger was considered a radical. He made no efforts to hide his communist beliefs and was blacklisted multiple times for his membership in the communist party and for the controversial anti-war themes expressed in his music (Brandfon 44). He was a firm believer that the idyllic American Dream was severely flawed, and he supported fellow folk singer, Woody Guthrie's original, unredacted version of his famous song, "This Land is Your Land" (Brandfon 43). During the war in Vietnam, Seeger became a crusader for ending the fighting. Some of his most famous protest songs include, "Turn! Turn! Turn!," "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy," and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone," which is still considered "perhaps the best-known song of Vietnam" (Arnold 325). The song even appears in Robert Zemeckis's beloved 1994 film, *Forrest Gump*, in which a line of protesters passes Forrest, played by Tom Hanks, singing the song as he walks through Washington D.C. following his tour in Vietnam. This scene exemplifies not only the importance of the song to the war protest movement but the lasting effects of Seeger's work. Thus, the man with a blackened reputation became a national hero. Despite never experiencing combat for himself, Pete Seeger was a healer, a leader, and a unifier of American civilians and soldiers in their struggle against meaningless human slaughter.

### **"WAIST DEEP IN THE BIG MUDDY"**

"Waist Deep in the Big Muddy" (1969) is an example of the political themes imbued in some of Seeger's best work. Not only is it an obvious protest against the fighting in Vietnam, but it directly criticizes President Johnson's inability to remove American troops from Vietnam before the tragedy and losses became incalculable (Brandfon 45). The song tells a story from the point of view of a soldier whose

platoon is attempting to cross a river nicknamed the 'Big Muddy' during a training session in Louisiana. The journey across becomes treacherous and the sergeant repeatedly questions the captain's orders to cross. The captain, in this case, represents President Johnson, who ignored failing odds and death tolls in Vietnam, telling his men to press on, even when they are painfully unprepared for the consequences. The president is never named in the song; he is only referred to as "the big fool" in each verse, but the message was clear enough to be widely accepted in the Vietnam War era.

The protest themes in this song take multiple forms. The first is represented by the sergeant very clearly protesting the platoon's venture into the river. In both the second and third verses, the sergeant tries to reason with the captain, recognizing how perilous the journey across the river will be for the soldiers. Each time, the captain exhorts the sergeant to press on regardless of the danger. The second verse reads,

The Sergeant said, "Sir, are you sure

This is the best way back to the base?"

"Sergeant, go on! I forded this river

'Bout a mile above this place

It'll be a little soggy but just keep slogging

We'll soon be on dry ground."

We were—waist deep in the Big Muddy

And the big fool said to push on (Seeger lines 9-16)

Considering the symbolic connection to President Johnson's insistence on maintaining American forces in Vietnam, the sergeant questioning whether the dangerous trudge through the river is the best way back to base can be seen as Seeger questioning if war was the best way to reach peace in Vietnam. The captain assures his men that because he forded another location along the river, he can be certain, without knowing the depths at this specific point, that they will be able to cross safely. He reassures them that with a little determination, the trial will soon be over. His attitude demonstrates Seeger's overarching protest of President Johnson's arrogance in refusing to remove American troops from Vietnam. The officer's confidence in the river's depths based on his experience with a similar location is symbolic of American optimism following the victory in World War II. Invigorated by the success of the Second World War, the president was confident that the Vietnam War could also be won if only the men would persevere. The song's lyrics demonstrate Seeger's assertion that Johnson's ignorance and underestimation of Vietnamese guerilla warfare caused unnecessary tragedy. Still waist deep in the Big Muddy, there remained time to send the soldiers home before the death toll rose too high, but "the big fool said to push on."

Seeger ridicules the captain throughout the song, constantly referring to him as "the big fool." This presents another protest characteristic of Seeger's music in which the common man questions the precedents and decisions made by those in power. That the captain's arrogance and self-assuredness is based solely on his success in a similar part of the river is a clear criticism of Johnson's decision to keep American troops in Vietnam despite the mounting tide of lost lives and the

unpredictability of Viet Cong warfare. The captain's death in the song, then, reads as a saving grace.

All at once, the moon clouded over  
We heard a gurgling cry  
A few seconds later, the captain's helmet  
Was all that floated by  
The Sergeant said, "Turn around men!  
I'm in charge from now on."  
And we just made it out of the Big Muddy  
With the captain dead and gone (25-32)

The captain, having forged too deeply in the river, suffered an untimely death just in time for the platoon to make it out safely. The sergeant, who functioned as the voice of reason and Seeger's voice of protest, is finally able to lead the men away from danger. The death of the captain in "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy" suggests that new leadership is necessary to save the remaining troops in Southeast Asia.

This song also sharply marks the thematic shift between World War I poetry and Vietnam War protest music. Aside from the transition from emphasis on the individual experience to greater focus on community protest and healing, the role of trauma has also changed. The expression of traumatic experiences through intense imagery and description, while present in the poetry of the Vietnam era, is far less so in the protest songs of the period. It could be argued that watching one's captain drown with his feet stuck in quicksand would be an incredibly traumatic experience.

However, that is not the primary message of the song. Seeger chose, instead, to focus on the injustice of the captain foolishly leading his men into a river of unknown depth. The song's imaginary soldiers might be traumatized by the image of their captain's empty helmet bobbing down the Big Muddy. However, Seeger's emphasis in this song is centered around the national trauma resulting from reckless decisions made by authority figures in wartime. "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy" evokes emotions of indignation at an ignorant leader ignoring the better judgement of his men and causing unnecessary casualties.

The thematic shift in the song also illustrates a change in society during the Vietnam War. Seeger wrote the song not to help civilians understand the traumatic suffering of American soldiers in Vietnam but to protest the loss of youth and innocence. However, it should be said that the protest movement and Seeger's role in it still brought soldiers' trauma to light, but it became a shared pain. Although they could not experience it for themselves, those who never participated in combat were able to see it from the hard-won comfort of their homes, and they were horrified. "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy" is a metaphor for a nation's rage against needless suffering at the hands of what they thought to be an arrogant and ignorant leader.

### **"TURN! TURN! TURN!"**

Seeger's earlier composition, "Turn! Turn! Turn!" (1962) makes a more peaceful protest against American participation in the Vietnam War. While "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy" inspires frustration with President Johnson, cast as the foolish captain, "Turn! Turn! Turn!" explores the necessary juxtaposition of

opposing forces in the world, like creation and destruction, love and hate. Seeger gleaned the vast majority of the song's lyrics word-for-word from verses 1-8 of the third chapter of the Book of Ecclesiastes, known also as, "A Time for Everything." Some common biblical readings interpret the verses to mean that God has created these natural contrasts and given each their own time; peace, war, and everything in between are all a part of God's plan. Verse 11 continues, "God has made everything appropriate to its time, but has put the timeless into their hearts so they cannot find out, from beginning to end, the work which God has done" ("Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3"). The heading for this chapter even reads, "No one can determine the right time to act" ("Ecclesiastes"), which all serves to indicate that an integral part of the message in these verses is the futility of human action in the face of a divine plan.

The adaptations Seeger made to the verses in "Turn! Turn! Turn!" do not change the meaning of the individual lines. However, the lines Seeger added, in a time where much of the zeitgeist was characterized by protest against violence and hatred, make the biblical verses suit his message that in the inevitability of natural contradictions, there are still choices to be made between war and peace. "Turn! Turn! Turn!" begins, "To everything (turn, turn turn) / There is a season (turn, turn, turn) / And a time to every purpose under heaven" (Seeger lines 1-3). This establishes an accepting tone that expresses both the transitory nature of life and that there is a necessity and purpose for all things. This contrasts with the tone of protest in "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy," in which Seeger also makes concrete connections to the Vietnam War. "Turn! Turn! Turn!," in contrast, is more subtle in conveying its message.

Seeger's song reminds listeners of time's constant and inevitable passing and the ebb and flow of good and evil. The first three lines repeat throughout the song like a chorus, but most of the lyrics consist of contrasts that are all presented as necessary oppositions in life. This is indicated by each verse being preceded by the assertion made in the first three lines. Seeger sings these juxtapositions, beginning simply with contrasts that one would not necessarily relate to war or strife.

A time to be born, a time to die

A time to plant, a time to reap

A time to kill, a time to heal

A time to laugh, a time to weep (4-7)

Despite the contrastive nature of these pairings, there is still an element of peace. None of the pairs imply anger or ill will, only the constant rise and fall that is human life. The next few lines begin to show the elements of protest and communal healing that Seeger and other protest musicians often expressed in their music. He writes that there is "A time to build up, a time to break down / A time to dance, a time to mourn / A time to cast away stones, a time to gather stones together" (11-13). The building up and breaking down could refer to many things, but with the additions of dancing and mourning and casting away and bringing together, the theme of community begins to take shape. The lyrics express that there is a time to suffer alone just as there is a time to heal in the company of others.

Seeger begins to enlighten listeners on this theme of togetherness in the final two sets of necessary oppositions. This is where the song's relevance to the Vietnam

War and its protest elements appear most clearly. Following the repetition of those first three lines, the song goes, “A time of love, a time of hate / A time of war, a time of peace / A time you may embrace, a time you may refrain from embracing” (17-19). Seeger’s placement of the lines, “A time of love, a time of hate” and “A time of war, a time of peace,” one after the other strongly suggests that the two pairs are related. Although the connections are not quite parallel, it is clear that the times of love and peace coincide. Love represents the emotion driving peace. Following that line of reasoning, hate must be the emotion driving war. Nonetheless, “Turn! Turn! Turn!” maintains that there is a time for both war and peace, and, therefore, both are necessary, perhaps complementary. There would be no one without the other.

The philosophy behind the polarities is ancient. The Daoist concept of yinyang, reaching as far back as 500 B.C.E, describes it in part as, “a process of harmonization ensuring a constant, dynamic balance of all things.” As the *Zhuangzi* (*Chuang-tzu*) claims, “*Yin* in its highest form is freezing while *yang* in its highest form is boiling” (Wang). Daoists believe that it is the harmony created by the two opposites that maintains balance in the universe. In the Western tradition, Greek philosopher, Heraclitus (c. 500 B.C.E.) proposed the Unity of Opposites: “As the same thing in us are living and dead, waking and sleeping, young and old. For these things having changed around are those, and those in turn having changed around are these” (Graham). Heraclitus believed that these opposites are two halves of one virtue that change around each other (Graham). In other words, the tension between them creates the harmony of life. Seeger’s use of these opposites, then, suggests that perhaps humans must experience war and suffering to know the true

joy of peace. “Turn! Turn! Turn!” proposes that the time for war has passed, and it is now time for change.

The final set of contrastive pairs also makes up the final four lines of the song, in which Seeger’s message of protest against the war efforts in Vietnam becomes unmistakable. The first two lines following the three-line chorus are new, but the final two lines are more familiar. The lyrics read,

A time to gain, a time to lose

A time to rend, a time to sew

A time for love, a time for hate

A time for peace, I swear it’s not too late (Seeger 23-26).

The pairing of gaining and loss aligns closely with the previous contrasts between “A time to build up, a time to break down” and “A time to cast away stones, a time to gather stones together.” Additionally, “A time to rend, a time to sew” can be compared to the destruction and reconstruction aspect in “A time to kill, a time to heal.” Seeger repeats the line from the last group of pairings, “A time for love, a time for hate,” which emphasizes the importance of this juxtaposition to the overall message of the song. Placing this line at the end of the song and, once again, directly before a near repeat of “A time for war, a time for peace,” reestablishes Seeger’s stance that the concepts are inherently linked. However, the deviation of the last line from its previous counterpart is the clearest indication of the songwriter’s protest against war. The word is not even included this time; in its stead is the speaker’s plea for an alternative. It now carries the message that the time for peace

can be *now*, if only people would turn their backs on war and hate, that it is not too late for healing, laughter, dancing, and reparation.

That last line, “A time for peace, I swear it’s not too late,” is the only line in which we hear directly from the perspective of the speaker. This has the effect of putting a voice to the yearning for peace. It is no longer a general acknowledgement of the unstoppable, contradictory nature of life, it is an individual pleading for an end to bloodshed and lost innocence and trauma. Seeger’s adaptation to the ending specifically targets religious audiences who know the original verses and would claim the extreme violence and bloodshed in Vietnam to be a part of God’s great plan for man. Chapter three of Ecclesiastes reassures followers that they need not question the way of things because seasons change naturally, and peace will eventually return. In this way, the title, “Turn! Turn! Turn!” refers to the turning of the world and changing of the seasons and, more importantly, a call for listeners to act in protest, figuratively turning their backs on war and human devastation. The contradictions in the song may be inevitable and naturally occurring, but choice can still influence the transition between the two. Seeger acts as the catalyst for this change, reminding listeners that the time for war is ending, and the season has come to make a choice for peace.

### **“WHERE HAVE ALL THE FLOWERS GONE?”**

“Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” (1955) is one of Seeger’s better-known creations as well as one of the most famous protest songs of the Vietnam War. It combines the explicit war elements of “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy” with the peaceful urging protest of “Turn! Turn! Turn!” Written in 1955, long before the

Vietnam War began, the sentiments resonated heavily with the protest movements of the 1960s, and the song soon became a sort of anthem for anti-war advocates. Seeger wrote the first three verses of the five-verse song with each verse picking up where the other left off. The final two verses were added by Joe Hickerson in the early 1960s to make the song cyclical (Helfert).

The concept for the song came from three simple lines Seeger had written in his pocket notebook over a year before the song itself was composed. Seeger had jotted down, "Where are the flowers, the girls have plucked them. Where are the girls, they've all taken husbands. Where are the men, they're all in the army" (Helfert). This transition from one subject to another, from the flowers to the girls to the men becoming soldiers, follows the same path in "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" However, the elements of protest are made stronger by the additional lines in each verse. In some ways, this song mirrors "Turn! Turn! Turn!" in its emphasis on the transitory but repetitive nature of human existence. What rises must fall, what is planted must be harvested, and so on. When it comes to war and peace, however, these patterns may exist, but they need not prevail. Both songs share the message that in the midst of all this inevitability, there are choices everyone must make between peace and war.

The opening lines of the song set a tone of tainted innocence. It is the introduction to a prevailing theme throughout Seeger's masterpiece: the pattern of ruination by human ignorance and the possibility of healing through change. It begins with the title question.

Where have all the flowers gone?

Long time passing

Where have all the flowers gone?

Long time ago

Where have all the flowers gone?

Young girls picked them, every one

When will they ever learn?

When will they ever learn? (Seeger lines 1-8)

The simple innocence of young girls picking flowers is compromised by the fact that they have somehow picked *every* flower and, therefore, destroyed the beauty of nature. Humans are wholly responsible for the destruction and now lack the goodness and purity of nature. These lines also mark the inevitability of the loss of the girls' own innocence. They are too eager to pick the flowers just as they are too eager to grow into women and find husbands. Seeger ends the first verse and every one after that with the same repeated line: "When will they ever learn?" On the surface, this carries the gentle message of "Oh, well. Children will be children." Throughout the song, however, this line becomes more and more imbued with frustration at an endless pattern of reckless choices that steadily increase in severity.

The next verse builds on the cycle that Joe Hickerson intensified. It goes,

Where have all the young girls gone?

Long time passing

Where have all the young girls gone?

Long time ago

Where have all the young girls gone?

Gone to young men, every one

When will they ever learn?

When will they ever learn? (8-15)

This verse obviously shares certain lines with the previous one: “Long time passing,” “Long time ago,” and the repeated “When will they ever learn?” Unlike the last verse, though, the girls’ decision to take husbands has higher stakes than picking flowers. The lifelong consequences for taking a husband too young are far greater than those of depriving the world of some flowers, which also sends a feminist message. Just as the girls eradicate all of the flowers in their enthusiasm, so, too, do they sometimes take husbands early, either due to excitement at the prospect of growing up and starting a family or the pressure of societal expectations. Seeger’s use of this example conveys that women rushing into marriage may be making an impulsive and ultimately destructive decision. Still, the tone continues to darken in the third verse where Seeger’s emphasis on protest becomes more apparent.

Seeger picks up from the young men as he did with the young girls in the second verse. Most of the words remain the same, except, of course, “Where have all the young girls gone?” is replaced by “Where have all the young men gone?” The sixth line of the song also changes, this time from “Gone to young men, every one” to “Gone for soldiers, every one” (16-23). Seeger’s protest, “When will they ever learn?” is repeated in this verse. This clearly suggests terrible consequences for many of the young men joining the armed forces. In this case, though, the “they” in

the last line is ambiguous. It could be referring to the young men all making an unwise collective decision to join the war efforts, but it is more likely directed toward the orchestrators of the draft.

On September 16, 1940, the United States' Selective Training and Service Act required that all men between the ages of 21 and 45 register for the World War II draft. Those selected were required to serve at least one term ("Research Starters: The Draft and World War II"). By the end of the war, over 10 million young men were inducted into the military as a result of the draft ("Research Starters"). There were some deferments granted to college students during the Vietnam War, but President Johnson maintained the Selective Training and Service Act, and over 2.2 million men were drafted ("The Military Draft During the Vietnam War"). Meanwhile, dissent grew as the American presence in Vietnam continued, and the military draft became a primary target of protest. Widespread unrest also stemmed from the inequity in the individuals drafted. In his book, *Working-Class War*, Christian Appy declares, "most of the Americans who fought in Vietnam were powerless, working-class teenagers sent to fight an undeclared war by presidents for whom they were not even eligible to vote" ("The Military Draft"). All things considered—especially considering Seeger's punch at political authority in "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy"—it seems likely that the government mandated draft is the targets of the songwriter's protest, not the young men themselves.

The song's subtle shift also brings more attention to the theme of protest. Remembering that this is the final verse Seeger himself wrote, this verse marks the choice of greatest severity: risking the lives of so many young American men. All

three verses also connect through the powerlessness of the featured subjects. The flowers have no choice in whether or not they are plucked by the young girls. Similarly, the young girls experience extreme societal pressure to get married and start families at young ages, which revokes some of their control over such a critical decision. Finally, the wartime drafts put young men entirely at the mercy of the United States' government. Whether they joined the army or not was entirely based on a lottery system where the prize for having the right numbers called was often trauma or death. As the severity of the consequences increases in each verse, so does the culpability of those in power. Seeger uses the last few lines to protest against war itself and the immense threat it poses to life and peace as well as the individuals who, with all knowledge of this, would place American troops at the front lines against their will.

The final two verses later added by Joe Hickerson bring the song full circle. The only changing lines in this verse follow Seeger's method of transition, moving from "Where have all the young men gone? [...] Gone for soldiers every one" (Seeger 17-22) to "Where have all the soldiers gone? [...] Gone to graveyards every one" (25-30). The song ends:

Where have all the graveyards gone  
 Long time passing  
 Where have all the graveyards gone  
 Long time ago  
 Where have all the graveyards gone?  
 Gone to flowers, every one

When will we ever learn?

When will we ever learn? (33-40)

This ending is significant because Hickerson's efforts to make the song cyclical reflect Seeger's emphasis on the cycles of life and inevitable nature of time passing in "Turn! Turn! Turn!" Both songs also offer the blended expressions of protest, frustration, and a plea for change. The perspective change in the last two lines deviates from all of the preceding verses; "When will they ever learn?" has become "When will we ever learn?" This has the effect of placing heavy responsibility for the death and destruction described throughout the song on the listeners themselves. Hickerson and Seeger have given their followers a culpability they will doubtless feel uncomfortable carrying—perhaps that will inspire them to action. As in the line, "A time for peace, I swear it's not too late," "When will we ever learn?" serves as a reminder that each individual can make a change for love and peace in wartime. Seeger and Hickerson are saying to their fellow Americans, "We did this. All of us. Now, how are we going to learn from it?"

With Seeger's protest songs, as with Owen's poetry during WWI, there are two primary audiences. Much of Owen's poetry emphasizes the inevitable divide separating soldiers from civilians formed by the latter's inability to understand the violence and trauma the former experienced. Seeger's protest music, however, narrows the gap between these two groups because although the American soldiers' grief and frustration may not have been completely understood, civilians left at home began to take some of the burden. The focus in the 1960s was no longer on individual suffering but community trauma. Multiple factors such as the

broadcasting of battlefield combat on American television and the new and shocking unpredictability of guerilla warfare brought the front lines home and made the war that much more real.

Seeger did not write "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" for the Vietnam War protests. He wrote it long before it was popularized for the protest efforts, two years after American involvement in the Korean War ended. Although the United States did not technically lose the Korean War, many viewed it as a failed endeavor. The Armistice in 1953 planted seeds of doubt and disenchantment. From these seeds, ambivalence toward war began to grow, opening the door to Seeger's music. The protest elements in "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" perfectly captured a generation's ever-growing frustration with violence and destruction and their desire for peace. Protest songwriters like Seeger gave a voice to this generation of American people, a collective voice that rallied to end war and trauma and bring about a new age built on life and happiness instead of a growing death toll.

### **CONCLUSION**

It seems insane now to imagine all of the men in Europe and America buzzing with patriotic energy, excited by the opportunity to serve their country in the Great War. How changed those same men must have seemed upon arriving home: at once relieved and deeply haunted. . Owen's use of Horace's "dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" was, indeed, ironic. Part of the value of Owen's poetry is that the soldiers he wrote about could at once represent anyone and everyone who has ever slept in a damp, miserable trench or trudged across a battlefield littered with broken bodies. These men, however, only make up one group of people helped by

the soldier-poet's writing. The other audience, those "on the other side of the barbed wire," are gifted with a greater understanding of battle trauma than they could gain by talking to their loved ones, many of whom found the task of putting their experiences into words insurmountable. Owen was killed in action just before the armistice in 1918, making his protest against the violent waste of youth and promise that much more poignant. The world lost an exceptional mind that day, but his legacy lives on in his poetry. Owen's intense, detailed descriptions of destruction and trauma are a gift that we all must protect so that it may heal the soldiers of today and tomorrow.

Although decades and multiple wars separated Wilfred Owen from Pete Seeger, they were essentially fighting for the same things. In Owen's poetry as well as Seeger's protest songs, the desire to end war and its massive waste of youth and promise rings powerfully. Of course, saying the world must put an end to war and violence is a bit like saying it must solve the problem of hatred altogether. This is why it is so effective for Owen and Seeger to address their readers and listeners directly. It lays culpability on every person who does not yet understand this trauma, and it urges us to do what is in our power to bring about peace and acceptance. It has been asserted that healing the individual can help to heal the community. Even though they could never have known each other, the two writers fought the same great battle to mend and prevent brokenness and trauma caused by war. We have seen new wars and new pain since Vietnam, but the words of Wilfred Owen and Pete Seeger will always be relevant because in one way or another we are all victims of war. There are many differences between these men, not only in the

style and genre of their writing. Unlike Owen, Seeger was never a soldier. Still, he is one of the best-known protest songwriters of the Vietnam War. This study has shown that regardless of the disparate lives they led, Owen and Seeger shared the common goal of revealing to others the horrors and trauma of war and bringing the need for change to light. They speak for speechless sufferers, reminding all who will listen that in every season, there is a time for peace. I swear it's not too late.

**APPENDIX: WAR POEMS BY THE AUTHOR****American History**

In high school  
we spent two weeks  
learning about World War I,  
about mud and damp trenches,  
the stench of wet rot,  
and aching exhaustion.  
*A life you'll never have to know,*  
teacher said.

We learned about a soldier  
and his friend confined between rifles  
leaned back to back  
against crumbling dirt walls  
waiting, waiting, waiting  
for an attack from the enemy trench  
lying dormant across a field  
already littered with broken pieces  
of mothers' sons  
until one of the pair peeked  
his little eyes over the brittle grass  
straight into the wide open mouth  
of a German boy's barrel,  
and he crumbled into the muck,  
new hole in his skull  
leaking red  
down his nose.

And I,  
who have never had a comrade's blood  
freckled across my face like cursed stars  
on a frigid, sleepless night,  
grieved uncomprehendingly  
for someone I'll never know,  
glassy-eyed,  
bleeding into the mud.

## **Battle of Mons, 1914**

*from the British Defensive*

Our field marshal slammed down his fist,  
*Protect the bridge at all costs!*  
 So we fired as they came  
 row on row, crumbling like toy soldiers,  
 blood spattered rust  
 on painted grey-blue coats.

Synchronous footfalls, thick-soled thunder  
 drowning hoarse shouts of  
*Rapid fire! Blow them down, boys!*  
 They fell, ten, fifty, two-hundred  
 spiked helmets piercing packed earth.

Comrades flailed, filling with lead,  
 still the men marched, backs straight,  
 jaws locked into a ripping spray.  
 From across the river, their eyes like black marbles  
 pinched between thin white fingers  
 of Munich schoolboys crouched on cobblestones,  
 hard and glassy.  
 They marched stiffly in rhythm

with our raging machine guns,  
 the sound of bodies pounding the riverbank  
 a chilling drum beat as voices soared,

*Alle Leut' alle Leut', geh'n jetzt nach Haus.*  
*Everyone, everyone is going home.*

**Saigon, 1969**

Filthy rivers run through broken  
pavement, trailing mud and refuse.  
Potholes fill with rain  
and snowy ash, floating fugitives  
of the city's war wounds.

Saigon aches, its own people  
hiding in discarded bullet  
casings and scattered rubble.  
It rages like the child  
with dirty tear-tracked cheeks,

screeching as its mother  
wraps slim legs around  
the American soldier,  
seeking solace  
in all things broken.  
He fingers the prostitute's  
black hair, like fine silk,  
her dark eyes half-lidded  
with opium sleep.

He thumbs the place  
on her forehead where he's left  
bullets in her people,  
  
and feels nothing.

**Coming Home**

*Winner of the Peter Sears Undergraduate Poetry Prize, 2019*

They shipped us home,  
never telling us enemies would follow,  
crouching in fever dream jungles, watching  
our gun boat slide by,

or that there's no waking from scanned riverbanks,  
shifting eyes and hidden barrels, that in all the waters  
of the world, we'll see heads of unlucky brothers,  
bobbing obscenely

in the ripples we cast, graying skin stretched tight  
across skulls like membranes across the rice drums  
we sometimes heard through rattling palms,  
that even eyes clenched shut,

won't convince us they're only rocks.

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