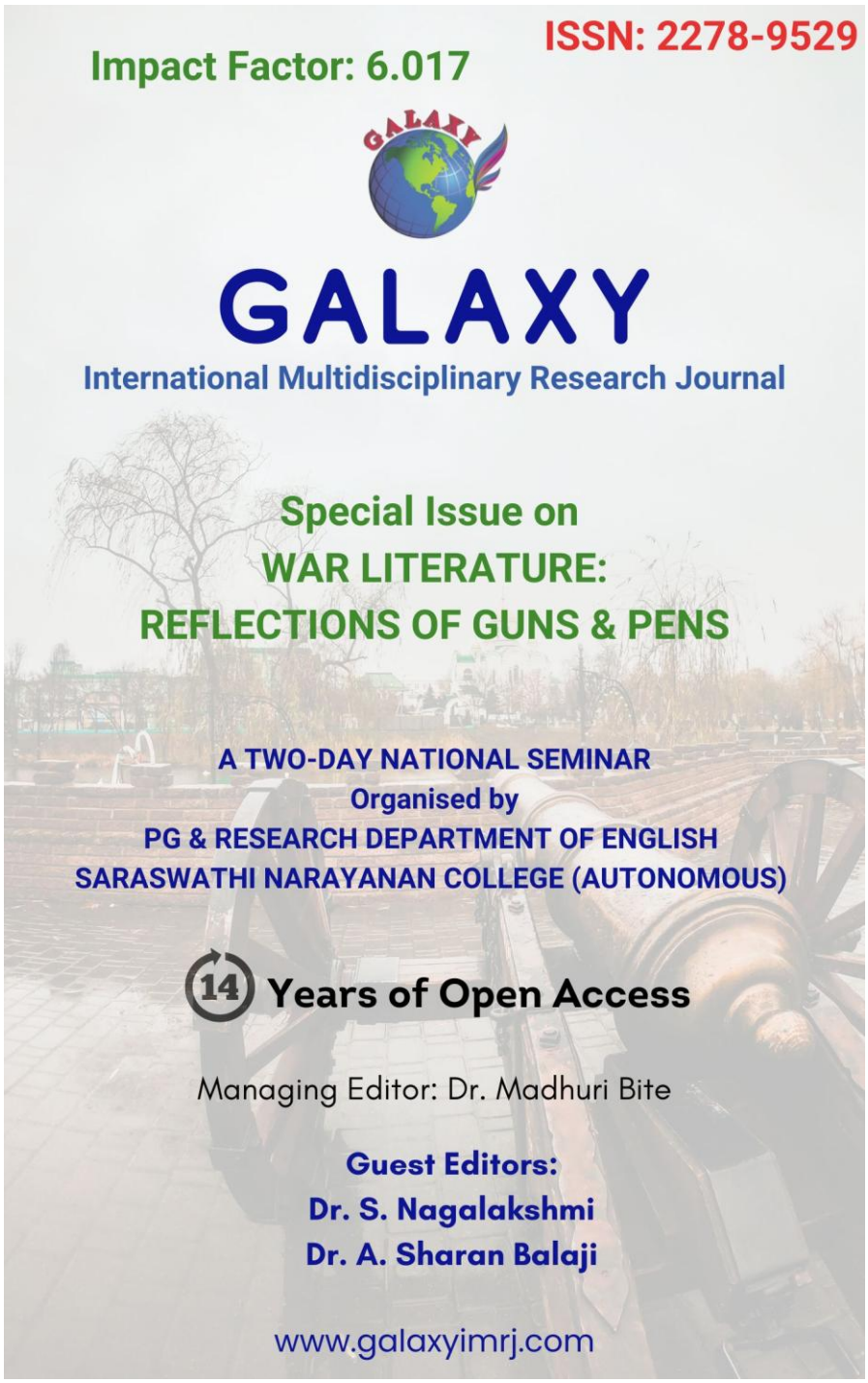


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Patriotism to Disillusionment: A Comparative Study of Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" and Wilfred Owen's "Dulce Et Decorum Est"

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Abstract:

War poetry provides a unique insight into the experiences and emotions of those who participated in war. This article explores the contrasting perspectives of war, comparing Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier" and Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est". Brooke's poem presents an idealistic view of war, whereas Owen's poem presents the grim reality of the frontline soldiers, through his own experiences of being a trench soldier. Comparing the themes, tone, imagery and the historical contexts of the poem, this paper sheds light on the shift in attitudes toward world war I i.e. from glorification to disillusionment of war.

Keywords: patriotism, disillusionment, trauma, romanticism, realism.

Britain is known for its imperialism all over the globe. It has fought and allied several countries in wars. History that defines the military interest of Britain runs back to the establishment of the new model army by Oliver Cromwell in the year 1645 during the English civil war. This effort by Cromwell not only highlights the nation's attitude of colonialism, but also a long-term plan to strengthen its army and expand its territory. Though the nation has

fought several wars, the wars in the late 19th and early 20th century played a significant role in shaping Britain's political and social landscapes. For Britain, war is a mixture of patriotism, expression of military power, a challenge to prove its global position. For these reasons, the country was aggressively imperialistic in its attitude during the mentioned periods. The concept of war was glorified because of the impact of imperialism, the result of war. British soldiers were celebrated as heroes. The men in war were also put into a position where they felt pride proving their identity of being a soldier as it was rooted on masculinity, and individual and collective honour.

Literature produced in the British isle plays a significant role in sculpting the public understanding of war. The history of its literature runs back to the times of the Anglo-Saxons, where they orally celebrated heroes narrating their stories sitting around fire, feasting. The glorification of bravery paved the way to the exaltation of war. Evidence for this could be traced from the literature produced in the medieval and renaissance period, beginning with *Beowulf* to *Henry V* of Shakespeare. During these periods, war was glorified as an act of honour, duty and a divine will. After some period, during the 17th and 18th century, war was considered necessary for the expansion of the British empire, which could be observed in Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Defoe's *Memoirs of a Cavalier*. In the Romantic and Victorian era, because of the efforts of some writers who stressed on the importance of nature and humanity, the glorification shifted towards the warriors which naturally led to the questioning of the consequences of war. Writers like Byron and Tennyson highlighted the loss and reckless nature of war through their works *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. Though the late 19th century writers viewed being a part of war as a duty, they also started portraying the harsh realities of colonial conflicts which could be decoded in Kipling's *The White Man's Burden* and Hardy's *The Dynasts.*

At the beginning of World War I, though war was still seen as a duty and a patriotic endeavour, there were some poets who voiced out the horrors of the war. The poets who spoke about war can be categorised into two: the early war poets who supported and glorified war, and the trench poets who rejected this romanticised view. Of these categories, Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen were significant poets of the century, who led the people in two contrasting ways through their poems. This paper takes up Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" and Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" for scrutiny.

Rupert Brooke, a romantic patriot was born in the year 1887. He is known for his patriotic and idealistic view of war. He celebrates war as a noble duty, which is evident in his poem "The Soldier". He views war as a means to elevate national and personal glory. For this reason, his poems became successful as Britain was bubbling with energy and enthusiasm for its imperialistic endeavours at that time. He died in 1915, without witnessing the horrors of the war. Moreover, he does not hold any experience in trench warfare. Whereas, Wilfred Owen, is a remarkable poet known for the depiction of the brutality of war through his poems. Being a trench soldier, he learnt the value of being alive by continuously witnessing death. This qualifies him to use poetry as a tool to expose the myths associated with idealised notions of war. Of his various anti-war poems, "Dulce et Decorum Est" serves a significant purpose.

"The Soldier" was an early world war poem written before the horrors of trench warfare was widely known. He elevates the idealization of war to the extent of which it could be compared to a spiritual journey. He tells how a soldier's sacrifice via war paves way for peace in Britain. He also highlights how it earns a permanent ownership over a land for Britain. He narrows the readers' perspective by claiming the authority of stating this is how his death should be looked upon, with zest. This also reveals his intense patriotism which is observed in the following lines:

"If I should die, think only this of me:

That there's some corner of a foreign field

That is forever England." (Brooke)

The beginning line reveals his readiness to die. This acceptance of death is strengthened by referring to the period after his death, where he sets an expectation of how his death should be perceived by the people of England. Though ''I" refers to an unknown soldier, the majority of the study interprets it to the poet himself, representing patriotic English soldiers.

Rupert Brooke proudly presents the zest of a patriotic English soldier by describing the happiness associated with his body being buried in a foreign country. He explains how that piece of land becomes a part of England because of the body of an English soldier buried there. He uses the word "richer dust" to disclose the pride he carries being a British soldier. Even after death, his body still carries nationality through which he becomes rich even as a dust. This intensifies the happiness obtained from death, for a soldier.

Though the soldier does not get a chance to witness the new land, it leaves thousands of citizens happy and inspired. This inspiration would pave the way to further conquest. He also tells how he is indebted to his country, being born and brought up, breathing fresh air of the English landscape. He also feels obliged to the good thoughts and personality that England has incurred in him. The poem reaches its zenith when he tells that his soul will become one with the almighty when he loses his life in war. This uncovers the level of devotion he has towards his nation.

While Brooke paints Patriotism through his poem, Owen reveals the disillusionments of war. "Dulce et Decorum Est" was written some time later during the first world war in 1918. It was penned by a man who soldiered the war and talks about the experiences that he faced, in the poem. It was written at a time when military propaganda to get young men to join and fight was in process. It was a period when the British public was eager to celebrate war, taking pride in joining the military, least aware of the sufferings undergone by the frontline soldiers. So,

Owen uses his poem as a tool to disclose the horrors of war. He does this by questioning the statement "*Dulce et decorum est/ Pro patria mori.*" Through this act, he made the people think beyond war and question the impact of patriotism. This notion stands as a stark contrast to Rupert Brooke's poem "The Soldier", which reflects patriotic idealism. Through his poem, Brooke lets the citizens know his desire for people to view his death as a noble sacrifice for the country. This example displays how Owen differed from his contemporaries in his perception towards war. He also takes immense courage through his words, standing against the British men in power who wanted to disseminate the idealistic perception of war.

The anti-war poem by Owen makes the readers understand the meaninglessness of war. Through imagery and symbolism, he exposes the physical and mental suffering of soldiers in war. He brings to light the psychological impact of the soldiers including his own experiences with shell-shock. Owen adopts a method in his poem to uncover the brutalities and terrors of war. He begins the poem by describing the mental and physical exhaustion of the soldiers in the war field. Then he describes the gas attack to show the chaos and terrification of war. Then he proceeds to paint the futility of patriotism.

From the beginning, he demolishes the ideal physical expectation of a soldier as a well-built, strong person. He describes soldiers as broken men who are exhausted and drained even to move forward. By comparing them to 'beggars', he reduces them from their ideal heroic state. Through the usage of similes like "like old beggars" and "like hags", he portrays them as weak figures. This also reveals the fact that these soldiers are not energetic and victorious and lack human spirit, merely surviving, tired and sick.

The primary part of the poem is the description of the gas attack. The line "Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!" portrays the instant fear in the minds of the soldiers. The distorted structure and the desperation in the line mirror the disordered scramble of soldiers making efforts to move in search of life. This thought to protect themselves in the war field pushes these soldiers to

destroy others. He intensifies this by describing a soldier who struggles to secure his mask on time. Through this soldier, he presents the excruciating and smothering nature of death by poison gas, where the death is slowed mixed with pain.

The line “In all my dreams before my helpless sight,/ He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning”, the poet talks about the psychological impact of war that torments him as a soldier. It brings to light the trauma where he is stuck between helplessness of protecting himself and helping his fellow soldier. This nature of war, not only kindles the selfish attitude of the soldiers, but also makes them numb to pain, death and suffering. It also underlines inescapable mental trauma of the soldiers. Moreover, this line also reveals the cruel stages of death, underscoring how soldiers become victims of such a mechanical process of killing, carrying permanent physical and mental scars.

In the final stanza, Owen directly attacks the false glorification of war, which he puts through the line “The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est/ Pro patria mori.*” The phrase “Dulce et decorum est” is a Latin phrase taken from Roman poet Horace, meaning, “it is sweet and fitting to die for your country”. He tells that if a commoner gets a chance to witness blood gargling out of lungs on every gunshot, incurable sores of soldiers, they would not celebrate this false idea of war with high zest. He accuses the blind nationalism of the people which paves way for wars.

Comparing these two poems reveals the two extremes of war. When Brooke’s soldier feels proud to sacrifice his life for his country, Owen’s depiction proves it to be wrong portraying the devastating state of the front line soldiers who are sick of life. Brooke talks about the future after the unknown soldier’s death, which oversees the trauma experienced in war. Whereas, Owen depicts how soldiers fight each second overcoming the dangers in warfield. This presents a zoomed in picture of the warfield. Though Brooke celebrates death, Owen delineates the half-dead soldiers living with scars and wounds for their entire lifetime.

Thus, “The Soldier” and “Dulce et Decorum Est” present two contrasting views about war. When Brooke glorifies war portraying the pre-war optimism, Owen presents the stark realities of war depicting the half dead frontline soldiers. These poems highlight the changed perspectives towards war towards world war I. Through their differing imagery, tone and themes, the poets together offer a comprehensive view of war poetry ranging from its idealisation to its devastating reality.

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