



POST-WAR DIS-ILLUSIONMENT AS REFLECTED IN ENGLISH POETRY

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ABSTRACT

What is the condition of the society in which we live today? Today the whole world is in a terrible mess. Uncertainty, a fundamental agnosticism and a sense of uneasiness that we are hastening confusedly towards unknown ends are all that we can make out of it. Today the mind of man no longer rests on secure foundation. In his note on the 'Waste Land', T. S. Eliot adds that, "A sense of desolation, uncertainty, of futility, of the groundlessness of aspiration, of vanity of endeavour and a thirst for life-giving water which seems suddenly to have failed, are the signs in consciousness of his unnecessary re-organisations of our lives". This state of mind is a state of complete unbelief and this prompted Henry James to exclaim, 'Thank God, I have no opinion', and Yeats to declare:



*"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold,
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world".*

KEYWORDS: Post-war, Disillusionment.

INTRODUCTION

The period of twenty-five years (1914-1939) between the outbreak of the First World War and the beginning of Second World War offered the sharpest possible contrast to the official serenity of the Victorian era. The First World War with its almost overwhelming anxieties, sacrifices and disasters, came as a terrific shock to a society that had felt itself permanently free from the barbarousness of wholesale destruction of life and devastation of property. The Military triumph achieved by England and her Allies in 1918 was, however, followed by a period of reaction, at first, hopeful and optimistic, and later, sceptical and cynical. The end of the war created as many problems as it solved. The experience of England during the Second World War (1939-1945) was for more catastrophic than that during the First World War, because in this conflict not only the military forces but the civilian population were intimately involved.

Even before the outbreak of the First World War, there had been evidences of the beginning of a poetic renaissance. The development of this revival was unquestionably quickened by the high emotions, tense anxieties, and the tragic losses of four years of intensive warfare. Though a number of poets met death in battle, the more fortunate survivors and many who were not active participants

found themselves moved to poetic utterance. Thus there was the crisis in English poetry which was related to the social, political and moral crisis of the modern world. The great war saw an outburst of poetry, but many of its writers won praise rather by the stark sincerity of their sentiments than by any original poetic genius, while many more were killed before promise had time to ripen into fruition. Broadly two phases may be distinguished. The first was one of patriotic fervour, almost of rejoicing in the opportunity, self sacrifice in the cause of human freedom and revival of the romantic conception. But, as the carnage grew more appalling and the end seemed as distant as ever, other poets arose with the declared intention of shattering this illusion of the splendour of war by a frankly realistic picture of the suffering, brutality, and the futility of struggle. Perhaps something of its realism and its depth of understanding has found an echo in the experience of disillusionment Post-War generations. The disillusionment that grew out of the war contributed to the emergence of modernism, a genre which broke with traditional ways of writing, discarded romantic views of nature and focused on the interior world of characters.

The following are the main War Poets who were affected by the repercussions of the age:

RUPERT BROOKE:

English poet Rupert Brooke, after enlisting in Britain's Royal Navy, wrote a series of patriotic sonnets, including "The Soldier," which read:

*If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England.*

He saw the world with a clear eye and recorded what he saw with directness and clarity. Even before the outbreak of the war, he had become known as a poet of youthful romantic cynicism.

Charles Hamilton Sorley:

Sorley had made the voyage within and his poems have a solidity that contrasts with the hollowness of the smooth verses of the Georgians. The poems that he wrote in the last years of his life express new attitudes to the war which are quite different from those of Brooke. They are the attitudes of men who have known the horror and boredom of modern warfare at first hand. There is also a new attitude to fallen; death in action is no longer regarded as beautiful and heroic, but as terrible and piteous, too terrible for cheap emotion. Sorley's sonnet on the dead, probably the last poem that he wrote, is the first competent attempt to deal with this difficult theme:

When you see millions of the mouth less dead
Across your dreams in pale battalions go,

Finally Sorley made a notable attempt to express a new attitude to the world crisis. He had learned that "Patriotism is not enough", and in his sonnet addressed to Germany he shows the war not as a defence of an ideally beautiful England against wicked enemies but as a tragic cleavage between two great nations blinded by hatred:

You are blind like us. Your hurt no man designed,
And no man claimed the conquest of your land.

Seigfried Sassoon:

He was the pioneer of new kind of poetry. He was, however, too honest and too sensitive to continue to live in this world of romantic fantasy, and by 1916 he was writing verses filled with intense sympathy for the sufferings of his fellow-soldiers, and indignation at the stupid cruelty of war:

And then he thought: to-morrow night we trudge
Up to the trenches, and my boots are rotten,

Sassoon was at his best when he combined this pity for the ordeal of the common soldier with a savage irony directed against the stupidity and vulgarity of the people who shut their eyes to the horror of the war.

The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
And cackle at the show, while prancing ranks
Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din.

Life in the first half of the twentieth century was shaken by two major and several minor wars. The intervals between them did not promise peace but on the contrary, threatened still more devastating conflicts. The period up to 1929 was an age of confusion, bewilderment and disillusion.

The following poets were affected by the disillusionment and prostration by the wars but they also endeavoured to search the values to give relief to the present world:-

T. S. Eliot:

From the first, comes something of Eliot's early cynicism, his depressed view of modern life. The bitter satire of *'The Hollow Men'* makes this poem one of the gloomiest that Eliot has ever written. Despair and bewilderment, even fear, are apparent in many poems, and in some, like *Gerontion*, there is a pronounced note of sadness, disillusionment and nostalgia. It has become almost axiomatically accepted that *The Waste Land* is the most significant expression of a certain feeling of disillusion and neurotic boredom in the period after the First World War. This notion Eliot simply calls nonsensical. *The Waste Land* certainly expresses disgust with modern civilization and with post-war society. It has been argued, therefore, that Eliot preaches a kind of mysticism which recommends the aim of turning away from action against cruelty and sufferings of our time.

Woolf's novels reflected this emerging tone, as did the works of Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*) and James Joyce (*Ulysses*). T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," considered to be one of the most significant poems of the 20th century, presents a haunting vision of postwar society, with the opening lines:

*April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.*

W.B. Yeats:-

The views of W.B. Yeats are mentioned as they have everlasting effect on the disillusioned and discontented age. He is aware of the crisis of his time.

After the Second World War, English poetry did not get any setback. The poetic vision is triumphant. For almost ten years after the war it seemed as if British poetry, like Britain herself, was in danger of dying on its feet.

Stephen Spender-

Other important poet to be considered during this regard is Spender. Spender was deeply aware of the suffering and unhappiness of the inter-war period and like Auden expressed his hopes for the longer term. The majority of his poems are short lyrics and he has written mostly about the pity of war and therefore the emotions of the lovers. His interest in contemporary history- chiefly the Spanish war and war II are reflected in his poems. His 'Two Armies' which describes enemy forces resting in the dark only a couple of yards apart describes the pity of the war.

When the machines are stilled,
 A common suffering
 Whitens the air with breath and
 Makes both one
 As though these enemies slept in
 Each other's arms.

Thus English Poets have reflected the horrors of war and the frustration caused by the war in their poetry. The poets who were deeply influenced by the disastrous events didn't become pessimists; on the contrary, they have faced the events boldly and bravely. They have also tried to seek out the remedy for the prevailing problems. Sense of turmoil within the widest possible sorts of expression has been sounded by the poets. They have expressed directly or in parable their present dilemmas and plight of mankind-distrust of the past, despair of this and fear for the future.

CONCLUSION:

The disillusionment and frustration was the work of the World Wars and other political upheavals. The lamps had gone out, not only in Europe but all over the world. In the ensuing darkness, a pall of depression descended over the jaded war-weary world. The poets were deeply influenced by these events. But they did not become pessimists. They encountered all these difficulties bravely and boldly. They endeavoured to search the values in their poetic art. Among them are T.S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats. *The Waste Land* is, from the point of view of its substance, an attempt, articulated with peculiar clarity, to diagnose the disorder; to render its challenge, and in its final section to deliver a 'message emphasizing certain human values'. Yeats goes far beyond the present train of thought. He does not have his roots in the Aesthetic Movement for nothing. His outlook and philosophy are sometimes present in his verse when they do not dominate it.

It is a sense of turmoil which, in the widest possible varieties of expression, has been sounded by the poets of our time. We can see how they interpreted the fevered temper of the age in their very choice of complex and often chaotic subject-matter. Some express directly or in parable their personal dilemma and plight of mankind-distrust of the past, despair of the present and fear of the future.

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