

A Hundred Year Old Agony And Its Reflections: Wilfred Owen`'s *Anthem for Doomed Youth*¹

*Yüz Yıllık Acı ve Yansımaları: Wilfred Owen`'ın Anthem for Doomed
Youth Şiiri*

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Abstract

As agreed by majority of literary critics with regard to English Literature, one of the most outstanding aspects of World War I is the amount of excellent poetry it inspired. What is perhaps the greatest body of war poetry ever written was produced by British poets from 1914 to 1918. Indeed, as emphasized by Roby (1993), those few bloody years spawned into "two generations" of war poets; the first caught up in the awful and blind patriotism of the hour, among them are Rupert Brooke, Julien Grenfel, Robert Nichols and the second composed of anti-war satirists and soldier-poets of English Literature; Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. This paper will focus on a poem of one of soldier-poets, Wilfred Owen`s *Anthem for Doomed Youth*. The main aim of the paper will be to dwell on different poetic strategies used by the poet via stylistic analysis, and an attempt will be made to illustrate how stylistic features of the poem contribute to the overall meaning of the poem.

Keywords: World War I, War Literature, English Literature, Wilfred Owen`s Poetry, War and Literature

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Öz

I. Dünya Savaşının pek çok muhteşem şiire esin kaynağı olduğu, İngiliz Edebiyatına ilişkin edebiyat eleştirmenlerinin çoğunun üzerinde hemfikir olduğu bir konudur. İngiliz şairlerin yazdığı en etkileyici savaş şiirleri, 1914`ten 1918 uzanan yıllar arasında yazıldı. Roby`nin de (1993) vurguladığı gibi, bu kanlı yıllar “iki şair neslinin” de ortaya çıkmasına neden oldu. Bunlardan birincisi, Rupert Broke, Julien Grenfel ve Robert Nichols gibi kendilerini kör bir vatanseverliğe kaptırmış şairler grubu iken, diğeri Siegfried Sassoon ve Wilfred Owen gibi İngiliz edebiyatının savaş karşıtı satiristlerinin ve asker-şairlerinin oluşturduğu gruptu. Bu makale, asker-şairlerden biri olan Wilfred Owen`in *Anthem for Doomed Youth* başlıklı şiiri üzerine odaklanmaktadır. Ayrıca makalede, şiirde şair tarafından kullanılan farklı şiirsel stratejilerin nasıl kullanıldığı deyişbilimsel yöntemle ele alınmakta ve şiirin deyişbilimsel özelliklerinin şiirin anlam bütünlüğüne nasıl katkı yaptığı irdelenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: I. Dünya Savaşı, Savaş Edebiyatı, İngiliz Edebiyatı, Wilfred Owen Şiiri, Savaş ve Edebiyat

100 Year Old Agony

It has been 100 years since the whole world has been dragged into a horrendous war. The year 2014 marks the one hundred-year old agony that the human race suffered in trenches. Condemning the war and its bloody results is one option; but understanding the sufferings and agonies of those who witnessed this wrecking war is another. And the later one is made widely available by literature. By approaching the First World War from this perspective also allows us to realize once again that literature is there to add a different dimension to the life (may it be joyous or agonizing) since a piece of literature provides its reader with the unique opportunity to read between the lines, and through language, to see beyond what the ordinary eye catches. In the times of insufferable pain and horror - regardless of the conditions - war literature is usually full of praise for human beings and their heroic deeds; and it is there to weave the knot between life and death (Öztoğat, 2014).

Not the figures or numbers but the cries from the trenches

The summer days of 1914 were so uncommonly pleasing that Trevelyan describes those days in the opening pages of his book *The Summer of Katya* as follows:

“Every writer who has dealt with that last summer before the Great War has felt compelled to comment on the uncommon perfection of the weather: the endless days of ardent blue skies across which fair weather clouds toiled lazily, the long lavender evening freshened by soft breezes, the early mornings of bird song and slanting yellow sunlight. From Italy to Scotland, from Berlin to the valleys of my native Basque Pyrenees, all of Europe shared an exceptional period of clear, delicious weather. It was the last thing they were to share for four terrible years – save for the mud and agony hate and death of the war that marked the boundary between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, between the Age of Grace and the Era of Efficiency.” (pg.1)

He also expresses the “ominous” sense in this “uncommon” perfection:

“Many who have described that summer claimed to have sensed something ominous and terminal in the very excellence of the season, a last flaring up of the guttering candle, a Hellenistic burst of desperate exuberance before the death of a civilization, a final, almost hysterical, moment of laughter and joy for the young men who were to die in trenches.”
(pg.2)

It did not take long for this “ominous sense” come to life; and the “uncommon perfection” was soon replaced by a common bitterness shared by the whole mankind. What remains from the bloody years that started in the August of 1914, are not solely white and black pictures of the soldiers who went on a war that they all thought had a just cause, and numbers that indicates the dead toll in some already faded pages of the log books kept during the war. What is remaining today, and will continue to remain in the years to come, are the words that are whispered by the writers and poets of the age whose main concern was the men and women (both civil and soldier) who bitterly became the witnesses of their times. In the lines of the writers and poets who depicted the war, we do not have the figures and numbers, but the cries from the trenches that reach to this very year and remind us all once again the futility of the war.

Wifred Owen (1893-1918), whose poetry will be the concern of the paper, makes it crystal clear that the most vivid description of the war and its conditions come from the war itself. He denotes: “My subject is War, and the pity of War. The poetry is in the pity.”

Wilfred Owen is considered to be among the greatest of war poets. He was born at Oswestry and educated at Birkenhead and London University, after having spent some time in France as a tutor, he served as an infantry officer from 1915 until his tragic death. He was awarded the military cross. There is no doubt that, beside his artistic skill, being “an insider” makes him an eminent

poet especially as far as war poetry is concerned.

Wilfred Owen's close relationship with another great war poet Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) enabled him to produce more mature works. By simply relying on his personal experience of the trenches, Owen was able to present the naked reality of war, "the boredom, the hopelessness, the futility, the horror, occasionally the courage and self-sacrifice, but, above all, the pity of it" (Albert, 1984). The bitter side of the war did not make any exception for Owen, by a cruel blow of fate, he was killed in action just seven days before the Armistice.

Alongside being a gifted artist with a fine feeling for words and a subtle rhythmic sense, Wilfred Owen was also a true experimenter in verse techniques. And this aspect of his poetry can best be understood by the help of a stylistic approach.

In the present article, by focusing on Wilfred Owen's *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, an attempt will be made to illustrate how the lexical choices of the poet make him to translate the speech and imagery of one community into that of another, how the deviation and parallelism play important roles in the process of meaning making and how the phonetic-sound pattern of the poem contributes to build up the idea of horror of the war.

Stylistic Features of *Anthem for Doomed Youth*

In *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, we are clearly exposed to a register which shifts the relations with family, church and the battlefield. And, this should not be considered a surprising fact or a mere coincidence. Such a register is one of the consequences of the fact that Wilfred Owen was an assistant to a reverend in his childhood. From an early age, he was susceptible to the language of church and such an exposure unclogged him a ground of discourse that is exclusive to the topics, themes and ideology of religion. And, as expected, he exploited this peculiar register in his poems excessively. After having spent agonising years in the army, Owen also acquired the language of the trenches, and army language is equally prominent in *Anthem for Doomed Youth*. In the poem, Owen makes use of both army and church discourse

in order to reveal the violence, agonies of the war and silence of a family in mourning with their blinds drawn.

Throughout the poem, by the help of the register of funeral rituals, the actuality of the death of a soldier is depicted. In this way, the reader is also given an opportunity to compare the serenity in the preparation and execution of the funeral rituals and the aftermath of inescapable death for the young soldiers. Therefore, in Anthem for Doomed Youth, we have two different lexical groupings; words such as bells, orisons, prayers, choirs singing hymns, candles, altar boys denote religious ceremonies whereas doomed youth, gun fire, rifle, shells, dead soldiers denote battlefield. This difference is reinforced by the graphologically deviant nature of the poem. There is a gap between the octave and sestet of the sonnet; army discourse in the octave and; church discourse in the sestet can be observed.

The parallelism between the first lines of the octave and sestet is also a striking fact. Both of these lines, lines (1) and (9) begin with a question. The question in line (1) "*What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?*" is answered in the proceeding line, but this answer is between dashes and therefore it is internally deviant. And, such a deviation foregrounds the awkward atmosphere of the funeral rite "*for those who die as cattle*". The funeral is also heart-breaking since the only available and appropriate funeral rites for these dead soldiers are mechanical rattles of the guns. The question asked in line (1) also emphasizes that the death of these soldiers cannot be considered as a normal one, on the contrary, it is a kind of slaughter, and the idea of slaughter is foregrounded by a simile in the first line:

What passing bells for these who die as cattle?

In the sestet of the poem, on the other hand, we observe a certain silence. The silence is even more obvious in the description of the family in mourning. The house's blinds are drawn, and this stands alone as a figure for dusk. In the last two lines of the poem there is a syntactic deviation; neither line (13) nor line (14) has a main verb:

(13) *Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,*

(14) *And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.*

Exclusion of auxiliary and a main verb denotes the motionless and the lifeless state of the situation which is a common scene in the mourning households. It can also be said that this deviation might stem from the poet's desire to foreground a cultural custom since in some cultures drawing down the blinds of a house is a way to alert people that either a funeral procession is passing or that there has been a death in the house and all the family members are in mourning.

Verbs and Tenses Utilised in the Poem

In the poem there are only few verbs and they are mostly stative. These few verbs are; *die, can patter, may be held, shall shine*. When we take into account the fact that the poem deals with elegiac moments, it seems natural to have fewer verbs than a descriptive poem.

Anthem for Doomed Youth is in the present tense. By the help of the use of present tense, Owen refers to a specific situation for a particular audience. The situation is a specific one in Owen's poem, because it indicates the lamenting moments of funeral ceremonies of dead soldiers and families in grief, which all were very familiar scenes to Owen. Additionally, by the use of present tense, together with the idea of the futility of war, the repetitive, never ending nature of these ceremonies is also emphasized.

Phonetic-Sound Pattern

Anthem for Doomed Youth has a regular rhyme. In the first eight lines of the poem we have a regular rhyme of ab ab cd cd whereas the last six lines of the poem has a rhyme of abb acc.

The repetition of /r/ sound in the poem builds up the idea of horror of the war and the awesome sounds created by rifles and guns at the battlefield also forms a harmony with the lexical choice in line (4); *patter*:

(2) Only the monstrous anger of the guns

(3) Only the stuttering rifles` rapid rattle

(4) Can patter out their hasty orisons.

The first syllables of *rapid* /ræpid/ and *rattle* /rætil/ are both phonetically and graphologically identical. This phonetic parallelism reinforces once again the violent voices of the war. Repetition of the same vowel sound in *rifle*, *rapid*, *rattle* and *patter* makes the firing machine guns effect stronger and impressive, and this way the sound echoes in the ears of the reader.

Apart from these, there are other alliterative and repeated sound patterns in *Anthem for Doomed Youth*:

(8) And bugles calling from sad shires

(11) Shall shine the holly glimmers of goodbyes

(12) The pallor of girls` brows shall be their pal;

(13) Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds

(14) And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

The repetition of consonant /s/ throughout the poem stresses the importance of visualising “passing-bells” which clearly indicates saddening sounds of ringing in a context of endless sadness.

Conclusion

In this paper an attempt has been made to show how traumatic the summer of 1914 has been, and how this “mechanical slaughter” has been reflected in Wilfred Owen`s poetry. In order to understand the true feelings of the trenches, and people who lost their beloved ones during the horrible years, a stylistic analysis of Wilfred Owen`s *Anthem for Doomed Youth* is presented. Throughout the poem, Wilfred Owen heartbreakingly communicates the sorrow and horror of the trenches. We both have the noise of the battlefield and the silence of the mourning families, and Owen displays these completely different phenomena in a shockingly striking way by deliberate linguistic choices.

Appendix:

Anthem for Doomed Youth

by Wilfred Owen

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
---Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles` rapid rattle

Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,---
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holly glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls` brows shall be their pal;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

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