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Department of English
B.A. Part-III, English (Hons.)- Paper VI

Strange Meeting

-Wilfred Owen

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
“Strange friend,” I said, “here is no cause to mourn.”
“None,” said that other, “save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world

Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

“I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now. . . .”

Introduction:

“Strange Meeting” is one of Wilfred Owen’s greatest poems. A soldier in the First World War, Owen wrote “Strange Meeting” sometime during 1918 while serving on the Western Front (though the poem was not published until 1919, after Owen had been killed in battle). After ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ and ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ it is one of his most popular and widely studied and analysed. Siegfried Sassoon called ‘Strange Meeting’ Owen’s passport to immortality; it’s certainly true that it’s poems like this that helped to make Owen the definitive English poet of the First World War. As Owen himself put it, the poetry is in the pity.

Analysis of the Poem “Futility”:

Owen’s “Strange Meeting” also takes place in a strange land, though here it is not in our own world but in the underworld, the afterlife – what the speaker of the poem identifies as Hell.

In summary, “Strange Meeting” is narrated by a soldier who dies in battle and finds himself in Hell. There he meets a man whom he identifies as a ‘strange friend’. This other man tells the narrator that they both nurtured similar hopes and

dreams, but they have both now died, unable to tell the living how piteous and hopeless war really is. This other soldier then reveals to the narrator that he is the enemy soldier whom the narrator killed in battle yesterday. He tells the narrator that they should sleep now and forget the past.

The rhyming couplet is associated in English verse with, among other things, the heroic couplets of John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, and many other 'Augustan' masters of the form. But the First World War, whilst it contained undeniable heroism, was not a heroic war: the mass slaughter of men on an industrial scale was something far removed from the romanticised battles of Homer's Trojan War or Virgil's account of Aeneas' conquest of Rome. Heroic couplets are not appropriate for an unheroic war. But to highlight the fact that Owen's war must be seen as the latest and most horrific in a long line of wars, his poem calls to mind the tradition of the heroic couplet but gives it a twist: instead of rhyme, his lines come in pairs of pararhyme – half-rhyme which denies us the satisfying 'click' of a proper, full rhyme. So we get *escaped/scooped* (rather than, say, *escaped* and *gaped*), *groined/groaned* (instead of *groined* and *joined*, for instance), and so on. The rhymes are near-misses that keep us on edge throughout the poem, echoing the strange setting of the poem and the troubling nature of the poem's subject matter. The 'rhyme' comes from the similarities between the consonants rather than the vowel sounds.

Such a rhyme scheme also echoes the paradoxical nature of "Strange Meeting". The pararhyme reinforces the paradox. The paradox is that the narrator of the poem escapes the hell of war to find himself in Hell; that he is confronted by an enemy whom he calls his 'friend'; not only this, but he calls him 'Strange friend', oxymoronically combining the idea of the strange and the familiar, stranger and friend.

Note the use of the word 'loath' in the poem's penultimate line: the enemy soldier says he 'parried' the narrator's attack but 'my hands were loath and cold'. If you're loath to do something, you're reluctant – the soldier already realises the commonality between him and his supposed enemy, and doesn't seem to have the heart to kill a fellow human being. Remember how, when this 'enemy' soldier had first recognised the narrator, Owen's narrator had described him as 'Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless' – like a priest forgiving someone for his sins. All is forgiven. They have both given their lives, the 'undone years' of their prime, for a war whose pity the living they leave behind will not heed. All Owen can hope for is that those who read 'Strange Meeting' will heed it.

Theme:

The Horrors of War

"Strange Meeting" is a poem about war, but it doesn't focus on heroic deeds or grand victories. Instead, the poem treats war as horrifying, wasteful, and dehumanizing: in the words of the enemy soldier, it presents the "pity of war distilled." According to the poem, war destroys the landscape in which it's fought; it erodes the natural solidarity between human beings, turning people who might be friends into mortal enemies; and it robs the soldiers who fight of their capacity to speak truth to power—to resist the wars in which they give their lives. What's more, the trauma of war lingers even after the battle is over.

As he sets the scene of the poem—describing the deep, dark tunnel in which he finds himself—the speaker describes war as a fundamentally destructive force. Indeed, "titanic wars" have cut the tunnel in which the speaker finds himself. In other words, war created "Hell" itself. And though the tunnel is protected from the battle above, it leaves its mark on the soldiers stuck below: the enemy's soldier's face is "grained" with "a thousand fears" even in Hell (that is, you can see the fear and anxiety forever etched on this soldier's face). The violence of the battle has

even deprived the enemy soldier of his humanity. Instead of being a full human being, he is a “vision”: he has been reduced to being a specter or a ghost. The speaker thus portrays war as a force that permanently damages and diminishes both the landscape and the people who fight it.

In his long speech, the enemy soldier picks up on this theme. Instead of granting him dignity and immortality through heroic deeds, war has robbed him of hope and life. The enemy soldier’s key hope is that he would be able to tell people about the horrors of war, and thus prevent future wars. However, because he has been killed in battle, he won’t be able to convey this message to the world—and, as a result, the world will continue to go to war without questioning why their governments resort to violence: “none will break ranks.” Just as the war has diminished the enemy soldier’s own humanity, making him into a “vision” instead of a full human being, so too it will continue to deprive other people of their humanity: they will become, he notes, like violent animals: “swift” as the “tigress.”

Though the enemy soldier hopes that people might be convinced—if only they knew the truth of war—to turn away from violence, he doesn’t see any way that this hope will come true: he’s been killed in battle and his death will serve to justify more killing. And, in a cruel **irony** revealed only at the end of the poem, he was killed by the poem’s speaker—the very person to whom he addresses his long meditation on the futility of war. Nevertheless, the enemy soldier address the speaker as “my friend,” suggesting that they could’ve been, should’ve been friends: war has obscured the natural solidarity and friendship that they should share.

Though the enemy soldier has been killed in battle, the poem takes up his message, offering it to the reader. And in this way, the poem critiques war on the enemy soldier’s behalf, asking the reader to turn away from violence and toward reconciliation and solidarity.

Reconciliation and Solidarity

“Strange Meeting” presents a pretty bleak view of human society, which seems unwilling to stop fighting. Yet the poem also presents that violence as a *choice*—something that people *decide* to engage in—rather than something innate to human beings. The two soldiers at the heart of the poem might very well have been friends in different circumstances. They even share the same hopes and dreams:

"Whatever hope is yours, / Was my life also," the enemy soldier proclaims.

By illustrating their shared humanity, the poem suggests that war creates division where none need exist. What's more, the fact that the enemy soldier forgives the speaker in death and says they both can rest now—finally achieving some sort of peace—suggests that reconciliation and solidarity might be a sort of antidote to the horrors of war.

In his long speech at the center of the poem, the enemy soldier argues that war and violence are not necessary or even natural for human societies. Instead, he imagines that people are presented with a decision: they can move toward a peaceful world or they can “trek from progress.” In other words, they can either advance or they can slide backwards, downwards, into violence. For this reason, it's not foolish to imagine a better world—and the enemy soldier lays out some of the dynamics of that world: people will know the “truth untold” about war—that it's horrifying and not glorious—and they will work to avoid it. Indeed, he imagines himself repairing the damage caused by war, washing away the “blood” that “clogged ... chariot-wheels.”

But despite this hopeful, even beautiful vision, the enemy soldier doesn't show a lot of optimism that it will actually come to pass. Instead, he argues that people take violence as a cause for further violence, a cycle with no obvious exit. He presents this as a betrayal of the underlying possibility for solidarity and reconciliation between the people who fight each other.

The poem stages this betrayal in its final lines, where the enemy soldier reveals who killed him: the speaker himself. The enemy soldier announces, “I am the

enemy you killed, my friend.” The line is **paradoxical**: one might wonder how the soldiers can be both enemies and friends. But the enemy soldier’s implication is clear: they are only enemies because their countries have decided to fight each other. Once all that is stripped away, they are friends again, as they were at first, before the war. Friendship, not violence and enmity, is the natural relationship between human beings.

This is a bitter **irony**: all the devastation, horror, and dehumanization that the poem describes is unnecessary. In fantasizing about a better world, a world in which the two soldiers are friends instead of enemies, the soldier demonstrates just how unnecessarily brutal and horrifying *this* world actually is.

Power of Poetry

In order to halt this course of events, Owen, through the strange friend, explores ways in which poetry and pity can restore the human spirit. The poet has the courage, mystery, wisdom and mastery to stop ‘the trek from progress’ l.28. When the flight can go no further and the nations retreat into ‘vain citadels’ l.33; when ‘much blood had clogged their chariot wheels’ l.34, the poet will ‘wash them from sweet wells’ and reveal ‘truths that lie too deep for taint’ l.36. In order to achieve this, Owen - the poet, the strange friend, the Christfigure - ‘would have poured my spirit without stint.’ l.37

Imagery in “Strange Meeting”:

Simile

The power of “Strange Meeting” lies in Owen’s use of language rather than in his creation of imagery. Owen’s similes and metaphors in “Strange Meeting” are not simple and straightforward. In line eight the soldier lifts his hands ‘as if to bless’. It is possible to read this as a comparison, a simple simile describing the way the hands are raised. However the whole idea of friendship and forgiveness works

against that interpretation; he is in fact literally blessing his killer. The hands raised ‘as if to bless’ are in fact raised in blessing.

Owen describes people of the future as being ‘swift with the swiftness of the tigress’ l.28 giving the impression of speed and violence more terrible than the contemporary war.

Metaphors

‘beauty.... mocks the steady running of the hour’ l.20 - The mocking nature of beauty is a personification closely linked with the metaphor of time running out. This image comes from an hour-glass where sand runs through a waisted flask to mark the passage of time.

‘much blood has clogged the chariot wheels’ l.33 - This is figurative only in part. The ‘chariot wheels’ suggest an ancient war but also represent the machinery which drives forward any and every war. The desire to ‘wash them from sweet wells’ l.35 is a picture of how the soldier longs to cleanse and purify the bloodshed in so many battles. The image of living, healing water comes from the Bible where it is an image of healing, cleansing and the eternal life offered by Jesus. It is also found in the poem “The Send-off” where the few returning from the battle field seek out ‘village wells’. The blood is not metaphorical.

‘I would have poured out my spirit without stint’ l.37 - This shows the willingness of the soldier to make sacrifices for truth. The idea is that the soldier would sacrifice his ‘spirit’ l.37 in the cause of freedom, rather than blood. This echoes Owen’s personification of war l.25 which results in the distilling of pity. The literal product of the distillation process is pure spirit. Owen gives us a picture of war being reduced to pity. The man wants to pour out this pity without holding anything back. The biblical sources of this metaphor would have been very familiar to Owen with his strong Bible-based upbringing.

Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were' l.39 - This is a metaphor for psychological suffering. It is also a reference to Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane.

'The cess of war' l.38 - The 'strange friend' is not however prepared to pour out his spirit 'on the cess of war'. A cesspit was a primitive method of collecting sewage. This strong, crude image reflects the depth of feeling Owen and the soldier have about war.

Personification

Owen uses personification more than metaphor in "Strange Meeting"

- **'That sullen hall'** of l.10: Hell takes on a human mood
- **'No guns...down the flues made moan'** l.13: reminds us of the angry guns of Anthem for Doomed Youth
- **'The pity war distilled'** l.25: suggests that war is the distiller who creates the spirit or essence of pity. Something which is distilled is said to be purified; it is reduced to its essence.
- **'Vain citadels'** l.33: the wall-less fortresses of the future reflect the vanity of humanity (or it could be that they have been constructed 'in vain' as they will not hold back the forces of destruction).

The personification of places, weapons and the war itself makes the 'strange' friend's message stronger.

Oxymoron

Owen uses oxymorons in the 'dead smile' l.10 of the 'Strange friend' l.14 as he brings together those who have been on separate sides of the chasm of war.

Symbolism

- **Hell**: It is ironic that this is where Owen arrives when he escapes the war, thereby conveying his fears for the future of humanity
- **Blood and water**: Blood l.12,34 symbolises the agony and loss of life due to war and water the means of healing
- **Guns** symbolise the destructiveness of war
- **Friendship and beauty** stand for what Owen sees as the counterbalance to war with its hatefulness and ugliness

- **Pity** is a major theme but also symbolic of all that Owen seeks to write about in his poetry.

Acknowledgement (Sources taken help of):

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