

Owen's influence on Carol Ann Duffy

Carol Ann Duffy's poem "An Unseen" depicts a soldier going off to war, but we don't know which war, or even which country the soldier represents, giving him a universal quality. The narrator is watching them walk away "towards the dying time?[he] walked to the edge of absence," to be seen no more. As she continues to watch the space where the soldier had been, she thinks of the child that soldier will never father, and multiplies that circumstance by so many times that she concludes "?all future / past, an unseen. Has forever been then? Yes, / forever has been." Not only will we lose a generation of men who will never be fathers, but we also lose an unseen generation whom we will never know. The toll of war is not just on the present and the past; it also touches the future which, for her (and for us) is an unseen time.

Duffy's poem is a direct response, after almost one hundred years, to Wilfred Owen's "The Send-off". In this poem, Owen's soldiers are marching off to World War One, singing, with flowers pinned on their chests by the crowd members who are cheering them on as they leave. The narrator watches the soldiers get on the train and depart. This narrator, like Duffy's, watches the train depart and thinks of the men on that train, aware of what may lie in their future:

*Shall they return to beating of great bell
In wild train-loads?
A few, a few, too few for drums and yells,
May creep back, silent, to the village well,
Up half-known roads.*

Should these men happen to return, they will not be met with the same fanfare that has sent them off. The narrator realizes that it will not be train-loads who return, but only a few, whose return won't be noticed by anyone. They will come home to silent villages and towns, even to be silent themselves. So while Carol Ann Duffy's men won't come home or have children, Owen's might come home - but their silence could well result in a similar end.

Wilfred Owen's legacy is greater than a record of his feelings about the war; what he has left us is a reminder that humanity's survival depends upon these men we send off into battle without much thought. He notes that the men went off "[s]o secretly, like wrongs hushed-up," as if they were to blame for the slaughter to which they were being sent, from which too few would return. Carol Ann Duffy latches on to Owen's poignant imagery as her soldiers "walked to the edge of absence", a great nothing from which there was no return. All of Owen's soldiers, the survivors and those killed in action, have now passed away, and Duffy acknowledges them by saying "forever has been." For those men, forever was indeed "an unseen" time: their lives were either a short lifetime or years of being wracked with awful memories. For us, for the future readers of Owen's and Duffy's poems, "forever" lives on as these poems are read and re-read, as long as soldiers are sent off to war, in silence or with fan-fare.

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