

## The Art of Mourning in First World War Poetry

### Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'

Wilfred Owen's presentation of mourning is far more direct and angry than the elegiac nostalgia present in Edward Thomas' poetry, or the symbolic depictions of mortality found in the poems of Isaac Rosenberg. The frustration and anger Owen felt at being a young soldier facing what appeared to be inevitable death on the front line, is clearly exemplified in the poem '*Anthem for Doomed Youth*' [1].

The title of the poem establishes the angry, melancholy tone prevalent throughout the sonnet. 'Anthem' usually describes an emblematic chant adopted and sung in praise of achievement or patriotism. Owen uses it ironically; the young soldiers are heading off to die for their country, and this is not a cause for celebration. The use of assonance in the description 'doomed youth' creates a strong, ominous association between the two words, implying that the death is an inescapable fact - a guarantee for all those fighting on the frontline.

The opening lines read as follows:

*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 (1-4).*

The lines are full of sound imagery, employed in an attempt to depict the tumultuous, unnatural, and unprecedented noise present in warfare: the sound of gunfire, explosions, gas bombs, and men dying. The use of assonance in lines 2-4 carries the sounds and stress of the words throughout the poem to represent the continuous barrage of gunfire and the subsequent death of hundreds of men.

The speaker then goes on to make direct comparisons between traditional mourning ritual and the lack of ceremony present in the trenches:

*No mockeries for them from prayers or bells,  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,-  
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;  
And bugles calling for them from sad shires (5-8).*

Once again sound is identified as being an important signifier symbolising traditional funeral rites and warfare. The noise of the 'demented choirs of wailing shells' brings an ironic, human aspect to the artillery

that the soldiers 'the 'cattle' ' are lacking.

### **Edward Thomas 'As the Team's Head Brass'**

Edward Thomas' poetry presents an interesting strain of mourning directly influenced by traditional pastoral tropes. Thomas' depiction of the English countryside provides a lens through which the reverberating consequences of the Great War, removed from front line action, can be viewed. His poems depict rural scenes and present an elegiac cadence which describes a war pastoral infused with nostalgia for rural England; a nostalgia created to counteract the horrors of war, and to mourn the countryside traditions modernity was rapidly transforming.

'*As the team's head-brass*' displays the impending repercussions of the war and its intrusion into rural England. War has seeped into the pastoral idyll, lurking within the lines of his poem as it lingered around the consciousness of those left at home. The speaker immediately initiates the reader into a pastoral setting by observing the rural ritual of ploughing. The traditional practice is well underway in the scene the speaker describes, and Thomas directly intertwines the structure of the poem with the act of ploughing itself: as the speaker becomes assimilated into the rural setting, the activity of ploughing becomes absorbed into the poem:

*Every time the horses turned  
Instead of treading me down, the ploughman leaned  
Upon the handles to say or ask a word,  
About the weather, next about the war.  
(?)  
So the talk began-  
One minute and an interval of ten,  
A minute more and the same interval.(9-18)*

Thomas gives rural England a voice, created physically through the ploughman's conversation and symbolised via the act of ploughing itself. The structure of ploughing frames the dialogue, and the use of the half-rhymes turned/leaned, word/war and began/ten creates momentum and continuity in the lines, reflecting the physicality of the conversation which moves with the ploughing. The use of half-rhyme implies a separation, allowing for pauses and interjections within the conversation. This breaks up the blank verse and creates gaps which serve to demonstrate the intrusion of the war into rural England by allowing for the subject of warfare to interject the act of ploughing - an invasion that symbolises change and the destruction of rural traditions.

The connection between the countryside and the war is emphasised further by the dialogue between the speaker and ploughman, a conversation which illuminates loss experienced in rural communities: "Have many gone from here?" "Yes: a good few / Only two teams work on the farm this year" (23-24). The ploughman's assertion acts as a pun, symbolising teams of farm labourers and teams of horses as both were used in warfare. In its double meaning, the response simultaneously reinforces the allegory of destruction and fragility behind Thomas's pastoral scene. The ploughman's statement alludes to the losses encountered beyond the sphere of the poem on the battlefields in France, and serves to illustrate the consequences of warfare upon rural traditions and local life.

### **Isaac Rosenberg 'Returning, We Hear the Larks'**

In the first published edition of Isaac Rosenberg's collected works, Siegfried Sassoon described the qualities he believed separated Rosenberg from other war poets of the era:

*'he saw things in terms of sculpture, but he did not carve or chisel; he modelled words with fierce energy and aspiration, finding ecstasy in form, dreaming in grandeurs of superb light and deep shadow (?)'. [1]*

Sassoon identifies an artistic dimension to Rosenberg's work which draws upon aspects of sculpture and painting to essentially carve from language distinctive corporeal images and binaries of darkness and light. These themes are prominent throughout Rosenberg's work, exemplified via his 'painting' of distinct images through the use of pictorial tropes, the infusion of Biblical themes, and his preoccupation with the human rather than nature. The human subject appears as the main differentiation between his presentation of mourning and the pastoral lamentation found in Edward Thomas' poetry.



[2]

Isaac Rosenberg in Uniform [Public Domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Rosenberg had completed a large amount of work before his trench experiences but it is the trench poems which serve to highlight the evolution of mourning from a pastoral elegy expressed by Edward Thomas into a lament compiled of fragmentations emblematic of death and destruction - Rosenberg's attempt to configure the violence created by the Great War and intensified by life in the trenches.

*'Returning, We Hear the Larks'* is one such poem which illustrates the infusion and influence of Rosenberg's artistic background with his poetry; he had previously drawn a painting entitled *'Hark, Hark the Lark'*, an ominous charcoal and monochrome wash which depicts several figures staring unseeingly into the night sky; the central theme of which he incorporates into the poem.

The first stanza serves to create a sense of ominous pervading darkness, reinforced by the opening line *'Sombre the night is'* which, through the reversal of syntax to create exaggerated stress upon the adjective

'Sombre', reinforces the atmosphere of melancholic darkness, and creates an understanding that the night is expected to be serious and nothing more. The personification of the night through the emotive word 'sombre' reflects the mood of the soldiers and sketches a sense of impending doom, which the speaker confirms in the final line, claiming to know 'What sinister threat lurks there'.

The oppressive and sinister darkness established by the first stanza makes the surprise on hearing the larks in the third stanza more pronounced; instead of the expected malignant arrival of shells or artillery fire, the speaker describes the unexpected pleasure felt upon hearing the birds:

*But hark! joy-joy-strange joy.  
Lo! Heights of night ringing with unseen  
larks.  
Music showering on our upturned list'ning  
faces. (9-13)*

The interjection of the speaker and the plosive extra stresses and repetition of 'joy-joy-strange joy' conveys not only surprise at hearing the larks but also draws attention to the phonetics of the stanza, which stresses the sound of the line. The importance of sound is a central theme: not only does the speaker of the poem become a listener, but the second line of the stanza also emphasises sound, as the men can only hear the larks, not see them. Sound is exemplified further through the use of assonance describing the 'heights of night ringing' with the sound of the birds, which foregrounds the phonetics of the line and establishes the stanza as centralised around sound.

'Returning, We Hear the Larks' renders sound as an important signifier, as birdsong is reformed in a war context to correlate with death. Thus, joy at hearing the skylark becomes an ironic tool where birdsong indirectly acts as a reminder of death even if it does not bring death itself. It is only an interlude between the horrors of warfare, a short moment of joy made strange and unnerving by what it juxtaposes. Rosenberg inverts joy through his manipulation of the aural: he describes the sound as 'Music showering on our upturned list'ning faces', creating an ironic experience because the face is not used to hear.

Rather, the exposure of the upturned faces expresses the vulnerability of the men, searching for the unseen in the sombre night, attempting to see rather than hear. As the final stanza indicates:

*Death could drop from the dark  
As easily as song  
But song only dropped,  
Like a blind man's dreams on the sand  
By dangerous tides (14-21).*

Rosenberg emphasises the pervading threat of death which accompanied life in the trenches. His acquaintance with mortality is underlined through the use of alliteration in the first line to suggest a continuous morbid presence. The lines present birdsong and death as interchangeable and the sound is rendered ominous; although a welcome relief to the artillery fire that usually emerges from the darkness, it represents only a momentary interruption to the terror lurking on the outskirts of the poem. The sound of birdsong in *Returning, We Hear the Larks* serves as a memento mori - a reminder that death is close at hand. This notion is further reinforced by the striking image of the closing simile describing a blind man's dream, which highlights the fragility and juxtaposition between the beautiful, inspiring moment of listening to the larks, and the lurking danger of the unseen warfare beyond the trenches.

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#### **Links**

[1] <https://writersinspire.org/anthem-doomed-youth-readings>

[2] <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AIsaacRosenberg.jpg>