

The Truth about War

This semester we looked at two war stories, that both had a similar theme. Both were written from the point of view of a male soldier, explaining the reality of war. I chose to explore deeper into Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce et Decorum est" (1917) and "How to Tell a True War Story" (1990) by Tim O'Brien. Both these authors do a good job of creating an image of what war really is, many times civilians are misinformed, filled with the idea of war simply being a showcase of acts of bravery and heroic stories. While soldiers are in fact brave and heroic, there is much more that goes beyond that. In this paper I will outline how these two pieces tell the truth about war and identify the problems of war, supporting my idea through the definition and events that occurred during the two wars that were presented in these two texts, those two wars being World War 1 and the Vietnam War.

"Dulce et Decorum est" is a poem that is set during World War 1. Years before the war an event known as the "cult of the offensive" took place in Europe. According to Stephen Van Evera, "Militaries glorified the offensive and adopted offensive military doctrines, while civilian elites and publics assumed that the offense had the advantage in warfare," (Evera, 58). This event is said to be a principle cause of the First World War, beginning in 1914 and lasting until 1918. This was such an unfamiliar time for citizens all around the world. This was a time of "new". By the end of the war the world would see all types of advancements. Some of these advancements involved technology such as telephones and wireless communications; others involved transportation like, tanks and airplanes (Kaminski, 1). During the time of war both the Central Powers, consisting of: Austria-Hungary, Germany, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire, and the

Allied Powers consisting of: Serbia, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Belgium and the United States used some form of propaganda to engage citizens. The goal of propaganda was to encourage citizens to join the army or assist war efforts by conserving their resources and also purchasing war bonds (Kaminski, 1). I believe that propaganda is one of the major lies that contributes to the poem “Dulce et Decorum est” and “How to Tell a True War Story”.

Propaganda falsely advertises war, making it appear as though a person will be strong, courageous or tough if they fight in war. It encourages young men to join the military because it would be “the right thing to do” while also encouraging civilians to support war efforts. In the Poem “Dulce et Decorum est” it allows the reader to gain a deeper understanding of what war really is from the battle grounds.

In Owen’s line “Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!-An ecstasy of fumbling, Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;” (Owens, ll. 9-10) the reader is put on the frontline. Owen transports us to the battlefield by informing us of the situation, using explanation points to help us understand the urgency. We are able to sense the danger through his punctuation and the amount of times he uses explanation points. This is a line that also opens up the opportunity to feel the same stress a soldier might feel on the frontline. The way Owen mentions getting the helmets on just in time causes some suspense, allowing the reader to realize that every second counts when battling in war. A soldier’s ability to recognize when something is happening and react appropriately all has to be done precisely in order to keep their life. This is part of the harsh truth that is not mentioned when war was being advertised. Many people would assume that you leave for war and you come back a hero. However, we learn from “Dulce et Decorum est” that not all soldiers do return. This poem takes us through Wilfred Owen’s tragic experience of losing a friend to the Gas that was previously mentioned. While at war, Owen painfully witnessed one of the other

soldiers drowning in his own blood. This is what leads him to end the poem by saying that if others were to witness such vile acts, they would not proudly say the lie “Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.” (Owen ll. 27-28). (Translation: It is sweet and right to die for your country.)

“How to Tell a True War Story” has a similar theme but was written in regards to the Vietnam War. Interestingly, O’Brien wrote this text twenty years after the war, while Owen’s wrote his poem during his War, World War 1. According to Harry G. Summers, the Vietnam War was most frustrating from the Army’s point of view. He says “ As far as logistics and tactics were concerned we succeeded in everything we set out to do. At the height of the war the Army was able to move almost a million soldiers a year in and out of Vietnam, feed them, clothe them, house them, supply them with arms and ammunition, and generally sustain them better than any Army had ever been sustained in the field.” (Summers 1). This quote greatly exemplifies the frustrations of war. Even when the United States was succeeding, they still fell short to North Vietnam. Perhaps this idea of, how could all this success lead to failure, is what caused O’Brien to write “How to Tell a True War Story” twenty years after the war. I believe this thought might have been haunting him, resulting in him writing about his experience. He goes through so much pain and grief, loses a friend, but for what? This is an idea that I believe contributes to the truth about war. Many of us aren’t affected nearly as much as the ones actually battling at war. While we may watch our loved ones and friends go through this, we cannot truly understand what they experience. This is what causes us to lose meaning; these soldiers put their lives on the line and don’t always come out victorious. Some civilians are affected for a period of time, but that feeling of pain, grief and sometime failure and questioning lives on in soldiers. O’Brien makes this evident in his story when he says,

“Often in a true war story there is not even a point, or else the point doesn’t hit you until twenty years later, in your sleep, and you wake up and shake your wife and start telling the story to her, except when you get to the end you’ve forgotten the point again. And then for a long time you lie there watching the story happen in your head. You listen to your wife’s breathing. The war’s over. You close your eyes. You smile and think, Christ, what’s the point.” (O’Brien 8).

In this scenario O’Brien has shared with us, we learn the truth that war is not something you participate in and then you move on from. The lasting effects of war are detrimental to the mind and body leaving soldiers filled with fear and like O’Brien has shared, possibly a harmful mindset towards friends and family. The many psychological disturbances caused by war is one of the ugly truths that often doesn’t get told. Owen could relate to O’Brien because he suffered from shell shock while serving at Serre and St. Quentin in 1917 (The Wilfred Owen Association).

Both texts tell the truth about war by creating vivid imagery and details that take the reader into each of the authors’ own personal experiences with war. Wilfred Owen and Tim O’Brien deliver this message by using two very different genres. Owen is using poetry to tell his story and O’Brien is illustrating a detailed short story to share his experience. By using poetry, Owen gives the reader a quick example of what it is like to be at war. He truly takes us onto the battlefield with us, allowing us to experience what he is experiencing. With poetry he’s able to build a lot of suspense by packing such a dramatic event in twenty-eight stanzas. For example, “In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, he plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.” (Owen ll. 11-12). He does a good job delivering the message. By the end of the poem the reader is finally able to catch their breath again. O’Brien’s short story tells the truth about war in a much different way. Instead of feeling the experience, like the poem makes us feel, we are

listening to him tell us his story. By using this genre the reader isn't necessarily transported to the battlefield with him, but is rather listening to him tell us about his experience. Since writing a short story, O'Brien is not as limited on his word choice nor his content. He's able to take us through his experience, which we learn he also lost a friend in combat like Owen, while often reminding us of what a true war story is not. For example, a true war story isn't moral, cannot be believed, is contradicting etc.. he does this to help tell his story. As he's telling his story as a soldier he uses these short scenarios of the truth about war as a transition method as well as adding important information.

In conclusion, these two texts explain a lot about war that civilians might not see or notice. The importance of these texts is not only to inform people, but I believe it has also works as a reliever for both Tim O'Brien and Wilfred Owen. Through literature they are able to release some of the tension that was built during their time at war. For Owen, he was able to write during the wartime, allowing him to recall such a specific time at war. He is able to fully explain to the audience his experience when he was with his team and caught in toxic gas, scrambling to get their masks on. He does this in such a vivid way that allows the reader to almost feel the stress he once felt. We are taken through the emotional departure of his friend, who unfortunately does not find his mask in time. He ends the poem by talking about the lie of what the government tries to portray war as, an honorable and sweet act. However, war is quite the opposite. This is a frustrating display of war because no one knows what is actually experienced. Instead, there has been a built image of people leaving and doing their job and simply returning as a hero. During the Vietnam War, O'Brien experienced something similar to Owen, having losing a friend and fighting for something that was going unrecognized. He often asks "Why?" through out his story. Even though both these pieces were written decades apart and are about

different wars, they contain the same theme. I believe both these texts do a good job of truly informing the readers about what war truly means.

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