

FROM BATTLEFIELD TO PAGE: WAR TRAUMA IN TRENCH POETRY

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Trauma, in its many forms, is deeply rooted in human history and experience. It breaks up a person's sense of self, changing memory, perception, and emotional responses. War, violence, loss, and personal suffering can fracture identity, making it difficult for survivors to articulate their pain. Because of this, trauma has long been studied across disciplines, from psychology to literature, as experts seek to understand how individuals process and express their traumatic experience.

One of the most powerful mediums for exploring trauma is poetry. Unlike prose, poetry's fragmented, rhythmic, and symbolic nature closely mirrors traumatic memories—often disjointed, emotionally charged, and resistant to linear narration. Whether through war poetry, autobiographical verse, or symbolic imagery, poets have found a way to capture the unspeakable, shaping personal anguish into a shared, collective experience. This analysis explores how poetry functions as both an expression and a processing tool for trauma, offering insight into the cognitive, emotional, and physical dimensions of suffering.

The role of memory in shaping traumatic experiences is crucial. War often leaves unerasable marks on the psyche, resulting in emotions such as grief, anxiety, and guilt (LaMorie, 2011; Neria & Litz, 2004). Poets of the Great War articulated these emotions through vivid recollections of battle and loss, creating poetry that serves as both personal testimony and historical record.

Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est* depicts the horrors of gas warfare with haunting imagery: "*Bent double, like old beggars under sacks.*" The realistic descriptions force readers to confront the brutal realities of trench life, removing romanticised notions of war. Similarly, Charles Sorley's *When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead* highlights the overwhelming grief of mass casualties, emphasising the collective nature of war trauma.

Metaphors play a vital role in shaping how individuals conceptualise their trauma. Flusberg et al. (2018) argue that war metaphors function as cognitive tools, allowing people to express complex emotions and experiences more perceptibly. In Siegfried Sassoon's *Counter-Attack*, the chaotic outcome of the battle is described with stark and violent imagery, forcing readers to feel the realities of war.

Isaac Rosenberg's *Break of Day in the Trenches* uses metaphor to highlight the absurdity of war, as a rat moving freely between enemy lines symbolises the futility of human conflict. This illustrates how poetry serves as both a cognitive framework and a means of emotional engagement, helping individuals process and communicate their traumatic experiences.

Beyond serving as historical testimony, poetry also serves as a tool for psychological recovery. Writing allows individuals to externalise their pain, providing a structured way to process emotions (Bracegirdle, 2011). This aligns with the therapeutic function of war poetry, where poets transform their pain into emotional narratives that resonate with readers.

Autobiographical poetry is particularly significant in this context, providing authors a way to separate their emotional pain from their physical selves. In Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, she reflects on the grief and loss of her fiancé and brother, illustrating how personal narratives serve as powerful tools for articulating trauma evoking change and bringing visibility to private experiences. Edward Thomas and Isaac Rosenberg vividly depicted trench warfare realities, showing the true side of war.

The fragmentary nature of traumatic memories further shapes how war experiences are conceptualised. Kolk and Fisler (1995) discuss how trauma can overwhelm cognitive mechanisms, leading to dissociation and fragmented recollections. Poetry, with its non-linear structure, often mirrors this fragmentation, reflecting the chaotic and disorienting nature of traumatic experiences.

Owen's *Exposure* captures this cognitive dissonance, using disjointed imagery to convey the soldiers' psychological and physical pain. The poem's structure reflects the fractured nature of traumatic memory, illustrating how war disrupts the human psyche.

Understanding the impact of trauma on mental health is essential. This relationship is well documented, with PTSD being one of the most studied conditions in trauma research. Many trench poets, including Sassoon and Owen, suffered from what was then called "shell shock"—a term that predates modern PTSD. Their poetry reflects this psychological turmoil, portraying not only the external horrors of battle but also the internal despair and numbness that persist long after the war ends. For example, Sassoon's *Suicide in the Trenches* sharply depicts the mental decline of a young soldier, revealing the devastating impact of war on the psyche. The poem forces readers to face up the reality that trauma does not end with war—it remains in the minds and bodies of those who experience it.

Although trauma leaves deep psychological wounds, trench poetry provides a means of preserving memory and making sense of past suffering. By shaping personal suffering into verse, poets ensure that individual and collective experiences of war are not lost to time. John McCrae's *In Flanders Fields* is considered as this power of remembrance. While the poem grieves the colossal loss of war, it also urges future generations to keep the memory of the fallen alive, demonstrating how poetry can bridge the gap between personal grief and historical continuity. In this way, poetry becomes not only an expression of trauma but also a means of safeguarding its legacy.

Conclusion. The poetry of World War I serves as both a reflection and a processing mechanism for war trauma. Through vivid imagery, metaphor, and fragmented structure, trench poets have given voice to the unspeakable, capturing the emotional and cognitive dimensions of trauma. Their works not only document the psychological toll of war but also provide a means of processing grief, guilt, and despair. The potential of poetry highlights its role in both personal healing and collective remembrance. While war leaves lasting scars on the human psyche, poetry offers a way to transform suffering into resilience, ensuring that the voices of those who survived remain heard across generations.

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