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## **Wilfred Own Re-Visited: A Psychoanalytic Reading of War, Memory, and Crisis of Identity in Wilfred Owen's Poem *Mental Cases* \***

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses upon the psychoanalytic reading of Wilfred Owen's poem *Mental Cases*. In so doing, first, the paper examines how the disturbing experiences and feelings of a tragic event such as a war, torture, rape or murder, which the surviving victims, civilians and veteran soldiers store in the realm of their unconscious in the Freudian sense, start annoying their feelings after a while. That is, these memories of the past event continuously come later on in life under the troubling influence of recurring flashbacks of the traumatic events, nightmares, irritability, anxiety, and social withdrawal. Eventually these undesirable traumatic past experiences and memories repressed in the unconscious obviously causes individuals to have a kind of psychological disorder which powerfully affects their daily behaviour, life and identity. Secondly, the paper explores this relationship between conscious and unconscious aspect of life, along with the perception of identity, in Owen's poem *Mental Cases*, in which the shell-shocked, war-torn veteran soldiers, who experienced and witnessed the shock of World War I and the death of their fellow soldiers, constantly remember the soldiers and innocent civilians who were brutally killed or whom they brutally killed in World War I. Now, these veteran soldiers call back those unhappy times, along with the death of soldiers and civilians, and then suffer in their psyche with a sense of guilt and disappointment: that is, recalling their shocking traumatic war experiences and their killing of many innocent people apparently cripple their vision of life and shatter their identities in the present. Through his representation of these veteran soldiers in such a way, Owen, as in his other poems, artistically and forcefully shows his own reaction, anger and dissatisfaction about the war and its distressing outcome in *Mental Cases*. Finally, the paper also examines how Owen's critical view of war and its traumatic post-war effect still find meaning today because we unfortunately witness every day the loss of millions of lives in the contemporary world. As the post-effect, the paper will give from the Bosnian civil war during the period of 1992-1995.

**Keywords:** War, Psychoanalysis, Unconscious, Trauma, Identity.

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War is as old as human history. As seen throughout history, along with various experiences human beings have undergone, it has had different shapes with overtly and covertly varying purposes. A few critics argue that it has some positive consequences, yet there are many other critics, intellectuals and writers, who have perceived how war by and large brings about destruction, bloodshed, and death; it, as a traumatic event, visibly leaves behind devastation, misery, frustration, and tears as obviously witnessed in World War I and II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, civil wars such as Afghan and Bosnian Civil Wars, and also seen today in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere in the world (Fussell, 1975; Pease, 1992; Bruning, 2000; Keegan, 2000; Filipović, 2006; Beckett, 2007; Collins, 2007; Horne, 2012; Makos and Alexander, 2013 and Jaffe, 2014). Unlike the initial prediction with a successful result for the British Empire and its allies, World War I lasted long, increasing the number of physical and psychological casualties: “some 8,700,000 lives had been lost (including 780,000 British—virtually a whole generation of young men) and the prolonged horrors of trench warfare had seared themselves into the minds of the survivors”, while there were “Desolate, war-scarred landscapes with blasted trees and mud everywhere, trenches half-filled with water and infested with rats, miles of protective barbed wire requiring individual ‘volunteers’ to crawl through machine-gun fire and cut it so an advance could begin, long continued massive bombardments by heavy artillery, and a sense of stalemate that suggested to the soldiers involved that this living hell could go on forever...” (Norton, 2006, p. 1954). Eventually, “those poets who were involved on the front, however romantically they may have felt about the cause when they first joined up, soon realized the full horror of war, and this realization affected both their imaginations and their poetic techniques. They had to find a way of expressing the terrible truths they had experienced” (p. 1954). Influenced and inspired by the devastating results of the war, therefore, writers, poets and playwrights have created literary works not only to bring the reality of the war to the public attention but also to raise awareness about both the brutality and futility of the war. For example, Samuel Hynes explains how the poets in general were influenced by the impact of the war. He maintains that “[a]ny one who reads war poets will sense at once the note of praise that comes through the violence, anger, and grief” and elucidates that “men may not perform Great Deeds any longer, but they can be tough, stoical, and humorous under stress, they can be loyal to each other, they can feel pity, and they can perform their meaningless destructive duties faithfully and with skill”, and for him, the “myth” of war is “a Myth without the flags and the martial music, but not without values” (1982. p. 23). In Ahmad Abu Baker’s view, “Hynes suggests that the poets’ reaction against war was manifested in the search for the human element which unites all the soldiers even on hostile fronts, in their response to the meaningless destructive orders they performed, and in the psychological problems which they consequently suffered, either

due to shell shock or to the horrible scenes of dead soldiers or even both as mentioned before” (2007, p. 126). Moreover, Brian Gardner approaches the effect of World War I from a different point of view in which he argues that “the poets of 1914-18 found the nobility of man in war, even if they did not find much nobility in war itself. They found a brotherhood that transcended the barriers of class, strong at the time; of religion, of race, of every facet of society” (1976, p. xx). Finally, Abu Baker argues:

World War I and World War II caused the birth of many war poets who acutely describe the horrors of war and the terrible human loss. War poetry is classified as Modern poetry that is authentic, genuine, revolutionary and free from the tyranny of Tradition. Indeed, the First World War caused a drastic change in the poetry of the twentieth century. Poets who witnessed this war, like Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, and Wilfred Owen, among others, could not simply write poetry which celebrated nature: the terrible experience of war left its thumbprint on their thinking as well as on their imagination. Many of them suffered from psychological problems during and after the war due to shell shock and/or the horrible scenes of mutilated bodies and human parts scattered on the battlefield. War poetry captures the physical and emotional lineaments of modern war: the pain, weariness, madness, and degradation of human beings under intolerable strain. It attempts to crystallize the moment as it offers images of young soldiers in action. Some poems of this era highlight the case in which a soldier survives war physically but remains obsessed with its bitter horrifying memories which drive him crazy (2007, p. 125).

In this long quotation, Abu Baker points to the fact related to the writing of poetry as a result of terrific impact of the war. For him, as for the other critics, a new genre, called “the war poetry”, developed as being “authentic, genuine, revolutionary and free from the tyranny of Tradition”, and this new poetry solely deals with and draws attention to the dreadful experience of the war instead of writing the “poetry which celebrated nature” as in the romantic poetic tradition. For instance, Lesley Jeffries debates that modern war poets were experimenting with “new material” and “new methods of writing” (1993, p. 10). Likewise, Dennis Brown associates the subject of experimentation in modern war poetry with the “disorientation” brought about by the dreadfulness of the Great War among many other reasons (1989, p. 11). As discussed above, writers and poets alike, though different in their methods and approaches, have responded artistically to the wretchedness, absurdness and “futility” of the war, particularly to its post-traumatic consequences, or what is called “posttraumatic stress disorder”, which, like shadow, constantly haunt and disturb the psyche of particularly veteran soldiers throughout their lives in particular and the public in general. Of these writers and poets, Wilfred Owen, the soldier-poet of World War I, is very eminent.

In his poems such *Futility*, *Dulce et Decorum est*, *Disabled*, *Exposure*, *Strange Meeting*, and *Anthem for Youth*, he not only represents his first-hand keen experience and observation of the horror of the war on the front, as well as his rigorous anger concerning the irrationality and uselessness of the war which, he believes, obviously results in the death of innocent people and destruction of human civilization, but he also deals with how experience and memory, along with its traumatic outcome stored in the unconscious during the war, incessantly revisits the psyche of the veteran soldiers, shatters and eventually leads them to a sense of crisis in their identities.

This paper focuses upon the psychoanalytic reading of Owen's poem *Mental Cases* (1918). In so doing, first, the paper examines how the disturbing experiences and feelings of a tragic event such as a war, torture, rape or murder, which individuals store in the realm of their unconscious in the Freudian sense, start annoying their feelings after a while. That is, they continuously come later on in life under the troubling influence of recurring flashbacks of the traumatic events, nightmares, irritability, anxiety, and social withdrawal. Eventually these undesirable traumatic past experiences and memories repressed in the unconscious obviously causes individuals to have a kind of psychological disorder and crisis which powerfully affects their daily life, behaviour, and identity. Secondly, the paper explores this relationship between conscious and unconscious aspect of life, along with the perception of identity, in Owen's poem *Mental Cases*, in which the shell-shocked, war-torn veteran soldiers, who experienced and witnessed the shock of World War I and the death of their fellow soldiers, constantly remember the soldiers and innocent civilians who were brutally killed or whom they brutally killed in World War I. Now, these veteran soldiers call back those unhappy times, along with the death of soldiers and civilians, and then suffer in their psyche with a sense of guilt and disappointment: that is, recalling their shocking traumatic war experiences and killing of many innocent people apparently cripple their vision of life and shatter their identities in the present. Through his representation of these veteran soldiers in such a way, Owen, as in his other poems, artistically and forcefully shows his own reaction, anger and dissatisfaction about the war and its distressing outcome in *Mental Cases*. Finally, the paper also examines how Owen's critical view of war and its traumatic post-war effect still find meaning today because we unfortunately witness every day the loss of millions of lives in the contemporary world. As the post-effect, the paper will give from the Bosnian civil war during the period of 1992-1995.

In her article "The Conscious and Unconscious Mind", Kendra Cherry recapitulates Sigmund Freud's view of the structure of the mind and of the development of personality in his theory of psychoanalysis in that she states that "behaviour and personality derives from

the constant and unique interaction of conflicting psychological forces that operate at three different levels of awareness: the preconscious, the conscious, and the unconscious” (Cherry, 2016, para. 1. See also the detailed original text in Freud, 1963, pp. 116-150). Freud often explained the structure of the conscious and unconscious mind by means of his metaphor of “iceberg” in which “conscious awareness is the tip of the iceberg, while the unconscious is repressed by the ice hidden below the surface of the water,” (Para. 1) or it is what Virginia Woolf calls “the dark places of psychology” (1984, p. 162). Cherry continues to describe the Freudian concept of the unconscious mind:

The unconscious mind is a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that outside of our conscious awareness. Most of the contents of the unconscious are unacceptable or unpleasant, such as feelings of pain, anxiety, or conflict. According to Freud, the unconscious continues to influence our behaviour and experience, even though we are unaware of these underlying influences (Cherry, 2016, para. 10. For a similar argument, see also Wilson, 2002).

Why “the unconscious mind continues to influence our behaviour and experience” later in life is the fact that it “contains all sorts of significant and disturbing material which we need to keep out of awareness because they are too threatening to acknowledge fully” (McLead, 2015. Unconscious Mind, para. 6). On the other hand, whatever an individual does to keep away from the effect of these frightening and painful events and desires, particularly the effect of frightening and painful events and memories of the past, which were locked away in the unconscious mind through the process of repression, it is almost impossible for them to avoid these effects completely because there are “abundant points of contact with conscious processes,” which definitely affect the current behaviour, life and identity of these particular individuals mainly in negative ways because the experiences and memories of these traumatic painful events in the past which individuals underwent and suppressed are not “latent” but constantly haunt and disturb them later on in their daily lives by transforming into a rigorous energy in the unconscious (Freud, 1963. P. 118). This painful energy, once it makes contact with conscious state of personality, strongly annoys individuals and then undermines the basis of their stable sense of identity. They, like the shell-shocked Septimus Warren Smith in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), still fight a war or hallucinate a rape in their mind; its shadow and memory, along with its frustration, anger and anxiety, persistently re-visits their vision and subsequently disturbs his/her psyche, leading to a sense of identity crisis. In this respect, psychoanalytic reading of tragic events, which also has a close relationship with

trauma writing, provides us with possibilities and ways not only to understand traumatic events and then search for ways to represent them but also to dig up the root-cause behind the identity crisis (Whitehead, 2004, p. 3).

Similarly, Owen's poem *Mental Cases*, written during 1918 in the Craighlockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, represents the traumatized neurotic veteran soldiers of World War I, who undergo horrendous psychological disorder when the images and memories of the shocking war often haunt them later on in their lives, giving rise to a sense of identity crisis after they are back home safely. In the poem, Owen clearly illuminates how the past traumatic experience of the war psychologically damages men's mind and brings about the ghastly physical and mental torment in their present lives. The title of the poem immediately suggests the idea that the poem is about something linked to a neurotic case or a kind of anxiety in life. The poem opens with the questions asked by a distanced observer/narrator, Owen himself, as if he did not know men sitting over there:

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?

Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,

Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,

Baring teeth that leer like skulls' tongues wicked?

Stroke on stroke of pain, - but what slow panic,

Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?

Ever from their hair and through their hand palms

Misery swelters. Surely we have perished

Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?

In these lines, Owen portrays the pictures of men (the veteran soldiers) in a way that he, as if he is better than them, pities them because they are really in a miserable condition where they “rock” and lament in “purgatorial shadows” under “twilight.” Owen uses “twilight” as a metaphor as if they were between day and night, yet these men are neither dead nor alive, and “purgatorial shadows” with a religious meaning indicate that these men strive to clean themselves of something they committed in the past, but now it disturbs them, putting them in a position where even their physical appearances point out their sadness – their tongues “droop from jaws”; they are untidy and seem “wicked” or cursed with “Stroke on stroke of

pain” without “relish”. The narrator even intensifies the miserable situation: “Ever from their hair and through their hand palms / Misery swelters. Surely we have perished / Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?” In this first stanza, Owen represents a view of identity which seems to have “perished” physically and psychology.

The causes behind this “perished” view of identity become obvious at once in the second stanza because the “memory” of “the Dead” of World War I, which the veteran soldiers repressed in their unconscious, frequently haunts their vision; they visibly feel guilty and traumatized:

-These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.  
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,  
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.  
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,  
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.  
Always they must see these things and hear them,  
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,  
Carnage incomparable, and human squander  
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.

In the quotation above, memory or flashback is significant in two ways. First, memory, as in the Romantic poetic tradition and modernist literature, builds a bridge between the past and the present in which the veteran soldiers have “double conscious” oscillating between the past and the present in their vision: that is, they lose their sense of fixed identity when they sensuously go in their vision beyond the border of the present, so that they are sensuously split up and fragmented in their lives. Secondly, what the veteran soldiers witnessed and suppressed in the unconscious, which is closely linked to the Freudian psychoanalysis, comes to their present once they recall their war experience: they remember “Multitudinous murders”, “Wading sloughs of flesh”, “Treading blood from lungs”, “Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles”, and “Carnage incomparable, and human squander”, which were “Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.” All these images are still fresh and crystal clear in the memory of the veteran soldiers, yet they do not remain latent in their unconscious, and on the contrary, they are so intense and active that they turn into a vigorous energy, which

comes out and obviously breaks into pieces the physical identity and mental structure of the veteran soldiers:

Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented  
Back into their brains, because on their sense  
Sunlight seems a bloodsmear; night comes blood-black;  
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh  
- Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,  
Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.

Like Septimus Warren Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, whatever the veteran soldiers do and wherever they go in Owen's *Mental Cases* cannot get rid of tormenting vision of "bloodsmear", so that their "eyeballs shrink" as if they are dead. Life they lead seems futile without meaning but doomed to failure and despair in their lives. For them, everyday "Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh."

However, what the flashback or recurring memories of World War I enable the veteran soldiers to see the reality of the "Awful falseness" and "madness" of the war:

- Thus their hands are plucking at each other;  
Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;  
Snatching after us who smote them, brother,  
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.

Psychological reading of Owen's *Mental Cases*, the memories of the veterans soldiers and their identity crisis enables us to see the reality of the war which still traumatizes the world and takes away the lives of innocent people across the world – the reality which enables the veteran soldiers and also us to discern the truth is the fact that the war is "awfully false", "madness" and futile. In this respect, the way Owen represents the war and its aftermath effect on the veteran soldiers is a strong political act whose aim is not simply to interpret the war and death but to radically change the ways the war has been perceived in life: that is, he strives to make the reader and general public more sensitive towards and aware of the war and

its tremendous consequences in the lives they lead, so that Owen's poem, like the poems of the other war poets, could be the foundation for a radical reorganization of the national and international world thought in a more humane way. As debated above, what the war leaves behind is not peace and prosperity but obviously ash, "boildsmear", tear, destruction and broken lives, along with the devastation of civilization as seen today in Iraq and Syria and elsewhere in the world. Through his representation of the veteran soldiers as "wicked" and "tormented" with "Drooping tongues from jaws" caused by World War I, which was the war of "**rival imperialisms, an international armaments race**" (Norton, 2006, p. 1954), Owen tries to give a powerful universal message to the world in two ways. First, the old patriotic slogans were very much ideological and proved to be false in the sense that no war has brought a sound success but suffering and destruction of innocent lives and civilization. Secondly, Owen seeks to create a universal brotherhood, as well as a world where the individuals, though romantic, enjoy their lives to the full in peace. In the poem, he symbolically achieves it when the "hands [the suffering veteran soldiers] are plucking at each other" with a sense of awareness of brotherhood. In the poem, not only does he reveal the irony and contradiction between the inhuman picture and general expectation of the war, but he also raises awareness about the suffering of the war and situation left behind.

Unfortunately, what Owen complained about the result of World War I and what message he tries to give to the world in *Mental Cases* almost hundred years ago are still bitterly felt today in the contemporary world. In fact, nothing has changed since World War I. The world is still under the effect of "**rival imperialisms, an international armaments race**" in the Middle East, Africa, Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and elsewhere in the world, and the suffering, along with the traumatic aftermath effect of the war, still keeps on in different ways during and after the war, upsetting the lives of millions today. In this respect, the paper also debates the Bosnian war between 1992 and 1995, establishing a relationship between the consequences of World War I represented by Owen in *Mental Cases* and that of Bosnian one. Personally, I lived in Bosnia with my family for five years and witnessed the bitter consequences of the civil war between 1992 and 1995. I talked to many war veteran soldiers, listened to the horrific stories of displaced persons like my landlords, raped women and former concentration camp detainees and eventually visited many graveyards of mass killing such as the one in the town of Srebrenica, where almost eight thousands people are buried. The 1990s were subjected to many upheavals and conflicts in Europe, as well as in the Eastern Europe. In 1989, the Berlin Wall collapsed; immediately afterwards, the communist Soviet fell apart, and the republics under the Soviet started gaining their independence. The process of break-up also started in Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and mainly

Bosnia and Herzegovina suffered more than the other ones (Fisk, 1993; Zarkov, 1997; Olujic, 1998; Murray, M. 2003; Kunitz, 2004; Shaw and Proctor, 2005). The Bosnian civil war was the worst one, which Europe had witnessed since World War II. It erupted in 1992 as a result of the internal conflicts among the Serb, Croat and Muslim communities and ended in 1995. During the civil war, around “100,000 people had been killed” in mass graves and almost a million more were injured in concentration camps and displaced from their homes and forced to migration (Dzidic, 2012). As for the bitter consequences of the Bosnian war, Denis Dzidic argues that “The war has been over for more than 16 years, in which time the country has been more peaceful than even the optimists dared hope. Yet the aftermath of war continues to haunt the country”, the veteran soldiers as in *Mental cases* above and the traumatised surviving Bosnian civilians subjected to ethnic cleansing before the eyes of contemporary world – the raped Bosnian women still recall their awful memories; the terrific new stories of the war come out every day; the people visit the graves of their loved ones and so on, leading to depression and “posttraumatic stress disorder” in the lives of the surviving population. Dzidic continues to maintain that “The former soldiers”, as in the case of the veteran soldiers in Owen’s *Mental Cases*, “are having a difficult time adapting to peacetime, the social psychologist explains, because while they enjoyed the support of their communities during the war, now they are forgotten amidst a ‘vast amount of daily problems’”. Moreover, Ismet Dizdarevic points out concerning the results of the war in Bosnia that “They [the veteran soldiers] are going through the Vietnam syndrome. When veterans return and the media are not on their side then psychological breakdowns happen. These people feel lost, which is why we have so many suicides” (Qtd., in Dzidic, 2012). Besides “suicides”, the veteran soldiers and disabled civilians also complain of lack of support from the government, so that they protest and even burn themselves as a reaction against the current society and world order. Dizdarevic also discusses the situation of children “who grew up during the war” and “had lost their childhood. They were forced to grow up prematurely, because they had to think about survival.” What is also more distressing in Dizdarevic’s view is that “we can see that some of them have become a lot more serious and responsible because of this, but on the other hand, some always feel as if something is lacking because they did not grow up in a normal pace” (Qtd., in Dzidic, 2012). In addition, Massimiliano Bratti, Mariapia Mendola and Alfonso Miranda debate the long-term impact of Bosnian war on mental health of those soldiers who were exposed to painful events, violence and ethnic cleansing, and they concluded their research with the following remarks:

Our findings point to large negative effects of war violence on individual mental health, which last several years after the end of the conflict and which are not mediated by other socio-economic stressors (unrelated to war trauma). Policies of reconstruction, investment, and economic recovery, may not be sufficient alone to completely remove the mental health legacy of war, while specifically targeted health programs may be needed for victimised individuals to overcome the psychological distress caused by the conflict and mitigate the economic consequences of war trauma (2016, p. 31).

Finally, Inger Agger, who studied the methods and strategies to reduce the postwar psycho-social impact in Bosnia, states that “After the war, there is no illusion, there is an emptiness” (2001, p. 240), as Bosnian poet Bisera Alikadic expresses in the last lines of her poem *Burning Skyscraper* (1995):

After the fire, there is no illusion  
scene of fire, ash,  
emptiness is starting.  
If I am a poet after all this evil  
my poetry is a cry (Qtd., in Agger, 2001, p. 240).

In 1999, Kofi Annan, the former Secretary General of United Nations, stated that “We will never forget that Bosnia was as much a moral cause as a military conflict. The tragedy of Srebrenica will haunt our history forever” and BBC Europe broadcasted on 11 July 2015 that “Serbia’s PM Aleksandar Vucic has been chased away by stone-throwing protesters from a ceremony marking the 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia-Herzegovina” (Qtd., in Bratti, Mendola and Miranda, 2016, p. 2).

In conclusion, re-visiting Owen in the present time and exhuming what war caused in the unconscious of the soldiers and civilians, along that of the Bosnian war, re-awaken us to the indispensable fact and reality of war in the contemporary world that once the troubling consequences of World War I and that of the Bosnian war during the 1992-1995 period are compared, unfortunately, there seems no difference; war still keeps on affecting harmfully the lives of people everywhere in in the Middle East, Africa, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and so on, even though its methods and strategies have shifted throughout years. Indeed, there are visible

similarities between what Owen wrote about the tragic World War I and its consequences in his poem *Mental Cases* and what researchers have found out concerning the harsh outcome of the Bosnian war of the 1992-1995. What should be done is that we all, like Owen, should raise our voice, help stop “rival imperialisms, an international armaments race” and profoundly shift the ways the war has been perceived for ages since it is obvious that the war has never brought a sound solution to the problems and conflicts experienced across the world but bloodshed, misery, and tear.

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