

“War is waste and a searing fire”⁽¹⁾: The Anti-War Theme in Women’s Poetry of World War I, World War II and American Wars in the Middle East

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It is no mystery that war means loss for all parties. No one can be called a winner because to be called so one must make sacrifices to gain the opponent’s surrender. The war “game,” as Donald A. Wells believes,

is a monstrous charade or a gigantic chess gambit which we have played for so long that, like the Roman attitude toward the arena, we have forgotten that the players are persons.⁽²⁾

The whole “moral fabric”⁽³⁾ of a nation is twisted to make it believe that murder is heroism. All the teaching that has been dedicated to inspiring respect to other human beings vanishes during wars. Instead, another “code of ethics”⁽⁴⁾ is introduced which simply accepts war as “an activity involving nobility or a rugged recklessness”⁽⁵⁾ differentiating between “organized murder” (which is war) and “individual murder, which is socially taboo.”⁽⁶⁾ The bloodshed, suffering, and horror of wars have awakened poets to responsibility.⁽⁷⁾ If Yeats called it “a terrible beauty,”⁽⁸⁾ William Sherman (1820-1891) called it “hell” as he comments: “Its glory is all moonshine ... War is hell.”⁽⁹⁾ Men would argue in a nauseating way though they were believed to be tough. In fact, in spite of all the sordid description of life in the trenches (provided by men), women had proved to have the ‘guts’ for it. A soldier woman-writer, who was the first female to join World War I in Russia, had to endure much of men’s misbehaviour⁽¹⁰⁾ than to endure war itself. However, she, along with her Death Battalion, faced the fact that men were going to abandon them in the field and, therefore, they decided to go forward without their ‘brothers-in-arms’:

The line was arranged that men and women alternate, a girl being flanked by two men.

We decided to advance in order to shame men, having arrived at the conclusion that they would not let us perish in No Man’s Land.⁽¹¹⁾

Surprisingly, this incident had actually happened. The media, until this day, had mislead millions of people into believing that women had nothing to do with war. Tangible evidence proved that women led the war. Botchkareva was only one of many:

“Ha, ha! Women and officers will fight!” they railed.

“They are faking, whoever saw officers go over the top like soldiers, with rifles in hand?”

“Just watch those women run!” joked a fellow, to the merriment of a chorus of voices.

We gritted our teeth in fury but did not reply. Our hope was still in these men. We stuck to the belief that they would not follow us and, therefore, avoided alienating them.

At last the signal was given. We crossed ourselves and, hugging our rifles, leaped out of the trenches We moved forward against a withering fire of machine guns and artillery, my brave girls ... marching steadily against the hail of bullets.⁽¹²⁾

It was women who made it happen!

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Women writers attacked war from a view point. They did not concentrate on the horrors like men (or as men expected them to do). They focused on a humanitarian side as well as political issues. They argued more reasonably and with real faith in what they do. Emmeline Pathick-Lawrence, for instance, explored the fact that war consumes riches:

For, whether there is a decisive victory for one side or the other, or whether there is not, peace must come within a measurable distance of time for the simple reason that war cannot feed itself. War is absolutely destructive. It subsists on the resources which can only be accumulated in time of peace.⁽¹³⁾

War cannot last forever for the “simple reason” that it must exhaust something it cannot produce. Such a fact cannot be realized at the beginning of a devastating war which was the first of its kind in modern times. This knowledge was the by-product of the shock that the war being fought was a sham.

The shock had the greatest effect in World War I as a first of a series. Women poets attacked the very points pro-war poets enforced: the causes. In “A Fight to Finish,” the speaker magnifies a cross section in society to expose those who called for war:

‘Fight the Year out!’ the War-lords said:

What said the dying among the dead?

‘To the last man!’ cried the profiteers:

What said the poor in the starveling years?

‘War is good!’ yelled the Jingo-kind:

What said the wounded, the maimed and blind?

‘Fight on!’ the Armament-Kings besought:

Nobody asked what the women thought.

‘On!’ echoed Hate where the fiends kept tryst:

Asked the Church, even, what said Christ?⁽¹⁴⁾

In couplets, the speaker divided the society into anti-war and pro-war activists. The speeches in quotation marks would have had a heroic impulse if it were not for the speaker identification. Identifying the pro-war speaker as a “War-lord,” a “profiteer,” a jingoist, an “Armament-king” and “Hate” alienated the rest of the society. It would create ramble and rebellion as to why would anyone fight for these people. Every one of those collected benefits from war in one way or another. Most of them got materialistic gain through selling weaponry to the fighting armies. “There is nothing more expensive for an arms-dealer than peace.”⁽¹⁵⁾ Arms dealers sell weapons of different kinds around the world and sometimes they turn to war-lords, i. e. a person who operates outside the control of governments. A warlord could grow powerful enough to control military conflicts around the world through trafficking guns.⁽¹⁶⁾ Their profit is their first priority and, therefore, waging wars is a habit of theirs, a way of living.

Profiteers are the second type of war-mongers. Just as warlords trade in weaponry, profiteers do in basic human needs, especially food.⁽¹⁷⁾ Another type are kings and emperors.⁽¹⁸⁾ They wage war and send people to die in the name of loyalty or fake heroic slogans. All these profit-seekers gain something in one way or another and they are actually soldiers of Hate who orders them to keep the slaughter going.

On the other hand, there are the unheard classes of people. They are trodden upon but never heard. They are ordered to sacrifice without the slightest care about their needs and desires. This forgotten class is represented by: “the dying among the dead,” “the poor in the starveling years,” “the wounded, the maimed,” the “blind,” “the women” and “the Church.” These representatives are taken from battlefield as well as home front and that strikes a very

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important point as war mongers were taken from home front only where they were secure in their ivory towers. The battlefield ignored voices are the “dying,” “the wounded, the maimed” and the “blind.” They are war casualties and, thus, the ones who have taken the direct ‘blows’ of war. The “poor” and “the women” are representatives of home front. They are neither protected nor fed and left exposed to all kinds of torture by war mongers. They are never asked what they think of war because women are thought to be natural pacifists. However, if their men are dragged into war, they would be left moneyless and jobless and, most likely, responsible for a family. Prices rise at times of wars so how the poor and helpless are expected to support themselves and their families is non of war-mongers’ concerns.

Religion, represented by the Church, takes its place among the neglected in this poem. It would be surprising because, in heroic poetry, it was quite obvious that poets cried out loud with religious slogans to convince people participate in their so-called holy wars. The truth is that religion is not heard unless it can be manipulated to fit war-mongering.⁽¹⁹⁾ The voice of true religion is lost, the real spirit of forgiveness and benevolence is misused and, thus, misunderstood.

In “Education,” the home-front is attacked and held responsible for casualties. Only this time, it is not war mongers who are to blame but the mothers:

The rain is slipping, dripping down the street;
 The day is grey as ashes on the hearth.
 The children play with soldiers made of tin,
 While you sew
 Row after row.⁽²⁰⁾

The speaker uses feminine imagery (sewing) to familiarize the reader with the cosiness of a safe house. The mother is addressed as a victimizer not a victim here because she allows her children to play with tin soldiers while she is busy with sewing. The rain becomes a symbol as it is slipping just like these boys. The rain here is the boys’ hearts; now that it is slipping, they are lost forever. The day becomes grey because the children’s destiny is being written. The mother is oblivious of her kids; she lets them slip away by falling for tin soldiers and identifying with them. The tragedy goes on as the rain symbol is developed:

The tears are slipping, dripping one by one;
 Your son has shot and wounded his small brother.
 The mimic battle’s ended with a sob,
 While you dream
 Over your seam.⁽²¹⁾

The rain becomes tears as their playing develops into a battle. Their destiny is now more definite and their mother slips further into dreams neglecting her children more and more. The brothers shooting each other goes deeper than just playing. If the boy grows up believing it is fine to shoot his own brother, it will be fine, too, to kill his fellow human beings. The rain and tears turn into blood which is far more serious:

The blood is slipping, dripping drop by drop;
 The men are dying in the trenches’ mud.
 The bullets search the quick among the dead
 While you drift
 The Gods [sic.] sift.⁽²²⁾

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The children become men and they join war: real war this time. Their blood is spilled and they die. The mother has wasted God’s gift to her as if she used a sift and let her boys fall through while she busied herself with trivial housework. Their blood becomes the “ink”⁽²³⁾ with which history is written: it starts as “White”⁽²⁴⁾ (innocence) and turns to “Orange”⁽²⁵⁾ (youth and strength) then “Red”⁽²⁶⁾ (bloodshed) and finally “Grey”⁽²⁷⁾ (death and decay).

If the child is the father of man,
Is the toy gun father of the Krupps?⁽²⁸⁾
For Christ’s sake think!
While you sew
Row after row.⁽²⁹⁾

War and war mongering starts at home as the mothers allow their children to play with inappropriate material (“toy guns”). They grow up fantasizing about war and they join it when they grow up thinking it the game they used to play as kids. They volunteer as an adventure but they lose their lives in the process. It is true that the speaker attacks women here but s/he does so because s/he believes they can change the world through the way they educate their children. Women must be aware of the immense power they own. They must prepare their children to face the deception and expose the ugliness of wars. They must be prepared as children to question the glory described in “The Band.” It is glory and childish dreams that tempt those boys to join the army.

Down the street comes the marching music,
New-called soldiers go swinging by.
Hark! the roll of the drums’ deep triumph;
Thrill of the bugles proud and high;
Singing of war and pomp of battle,
Glory and honour that shall not die.⁽³⁰⁾

The speaker skips a few months (or weeks) to present another image of “[y]oung men broken in life’s fair morning.”⁽³¹⁾ They would never “follow the drums again”⁽³²⁾ because they have been crippled. This depiction of young men lying sick in hospitals breaks the heroic spirit of the first stanza. The emphasis on their youth (“life’s fair morning”) deepens the tragedy and mocks the “[g]lory and honour” of the first stanza. The deception is made through music as if the boys were hypnotized or a magical spell was thrown upon them:

Silence, silence, oh, lying music!
War is waste and a searing fire;
Youth and gladness and all things lovely
Trodden out in the bloody mire.⁽³³⁾

Young men are drawn to war’s music as moths are to the fire. A late revelation or self-realisation occurs here because these young men have already participated and lost much. The music does not cease, on the contrary, it keeps tempting new boys: it keeps “calling/ ‘Glory! Glory! beyond desire!’”⁽³⁴⁾ and again they go tempted, not willing. Their misfortune is repeated over and over and the casualties are just children:

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Crippled for life at seventeen,
 His great eyes seem to question why:
 With both legs smashed it might have been
 Better in that grim trench to die
 Than drag maimed years out helplessly.⁽³⁵⁾

The speaker in the poem describes a gloomy image of a teenage war casualty. It would be astonishing for World War I poetry to speak of soldiers so young, but that child “told a lie to get his way/ [t]o march, a man with men, and fight.”⁽³⁶⁾ He was not prepared properly to fight the deception of the “lying music.” If it were not for his injury, one would have thought of his lie as bravery. However, it is tragic to find a boy of seventeen springs crippled while his playmates “are still at play.”⁽³⁷⁾

The child within him is emphasized in the lines that follow the news of his injury. He tries to look older because his misfortune forces him to do so; however, his tears tell how “broke with pain”⁽³⁸⁾ he is:

But when the dreaded moment’s there
 He’ll face us all, a soldier yet,
 Watch his bared wounds with unmoved air,
 (Though tell-tale lashes still are wet)⁽³⁹⁾

The wet eyelashes tell a lot about that child. He cries for his loss although not in front of others. He regrets the day he lied about his age. This young fellow is not the first and will not be a last. So many follow him in the queue of sacrifice. After all, it is a crippled man (a war casualty) which tells people what war is really like in “July 1914”:

A one-legged passerby came through
 And, alone in the courtyard, said:

“Horrible times are near. Soon
 we’ll be crowded with fresh graves.
 Expect famine, tremors, death all around,
 eclipsing of the heaven’s light.”⁽⁴⁰⁾

The crippled man acts as a mad oracle. He stands in a courtyard, alone, and speaks as if saving the living is a hopeless job. He waits in the courtyard for “fresh graves” which, he is sure, would soon fill the place. The graves are “fresh” in two ways: they will be new and they will hold young people. Just like an oracle, the crippled man knows what he is talking about and he describes what is to be expected: “famines, tremors” and death. No one but a war casualty who had actually lived through a war and lost much would know what war really is. The speaker in the poem quotes the crippled man using past tense while the rest of the poem is written in present: they have heard his warning but never thought of it seriously. They quote him now when his prophecy, unfortunately, comes true:

There’s a burning smell. Four weeks
 the dry peat’s been burning in the bogs.⁽⁴¹⁾
 Even the birds haven’t sung today,
 the aspen no longer shivers.

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The sun’s become disfavoured by God,
since Easter no rain sprinkles the fields.⁽⁴²⁾

Nature is angry with people or, more precisely, God is probably expressing His anger through nature’s. Men have abused the power granted to them by God and used it for destruction. Peat fields are burning but not for the benefit of human beings. They are being destroyed because of war. The birds disappear, the sun changes for a worse state, and the rain does not fall anymore so the fields will not be watered. The man-made fields need water and people say “public prayers” so God would send rain. Interestingly, the poetess’s employment of the tragic sense is potentially effective, for the prayers are answered but in a different way:

Not in vain were the public prayers,
O how the earth yearned for rain!
With red liquid the trampled fields
were warmly watered.⁽⁴³⁾

The fields are watered with blood (“red liquid”) instead. The sky is angry with them and, therefore, their prayers are far from being answered. The reason behind God’s anger is further mystified in “August 14”:

God said, “Men have forgotten Me,
The souls that sleep shall wake again
And blinded eyes must learn to see.

So since redemption comes through pain
He smote the earth with chastening rod.
And brought Destruction’s lurid reign.⁽⁴⁴⁾

The scene here suggests that God sent wars to punish people for forgetting Him because pain is the way to redemption. Amid the dilemma of destruction and unanswered prayers, they reach an undesired conclusion:

But where His desolation trod
The people in their agony
Despairing cried, “There is no God.”⁽⁴⁵⁾

Instead of remembering God, people denied His existence and believed He was either not there at all or that He forgot them. The agony and suffering they have been through are unspeakable. The pain has worse effect on them than religion. Is war God’s anger or is He angry because men abused a God-given power? It is too much for the poor to think of as they worry about their daily needs. They pray for different things, not like political activists. All they need is for their hunger to stop.

Why can’t we live on love and air?
It would be such a blessing!⁽⁴⁶⁾

Their prayer makes more sense than many well-written speeches: if people were to live on “love and air” instead of food and water, they would have never fought because war is

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instigated by hatred. At the same time, the poor would have never felt hungry because their good-heartedness would have kept them full.

This poem tells a lot about the economic crisis during war that only the poor had to suffer:

How carefully she cuts the bread,
How thin she spreads the jam!
That’s all she has for breakfast now,
Instead of eggs and ham.

In dealing with tradesmen, she
Is frightened at the prices.
For meat and fish have both gone up,
And butter too, and rice has.⁽⁴⁷⁾

In such economic predicament, any capable member of the family must work to provide a living. It is different, however, with middle class families: they work to provide for the army and eat little to send all they can to the trenches. In the process, they neglect their actual duties and affect children psychologically. If a child is secure and far away from the front, it is the household that brings the war inside by tormenting the children and forcibly depriving them from their simple needs. In “Sing a Song of War,” the speaker is a child. He describes only one military event at the beginning. This one scene turns his house upside down. In fact, it changes his whole world. He sees soldiers marching and waving to the crowds. Then, as if it were a festival, the family goes home for tea:

Home we go to tea,
Bread and margarine to ea,
War economy!

If I ask for cake, or
Jam of any sort,
Nurse says, ‘What! In War-time?
Archie, certainly not!’

Life’s not very funny
Now, for little boys
Haven’t any money,
Can’t buy any toys.⁽⁴⁸⁾

The nurse is very shallow as she deprives a kind of food just because other kids do not have the money to buy toys. She does not think of them as human beings who need food like the soldiers she is so worried about. The shallowness of that middle class house goes on through the mother:

Mummie does the house-work,
Can’t get any maid,
Gone to make munition,

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‘Cause they’re better paid⁽⁴⁹⁾

It seems that the mother’s complaints have nothing to do with her family’s well-fare but are about doing the house-work. It is more important for her to get a maid for house-work than to take care of her neglected child. A kid is forced to realize what war is:

All the world is topsy-turvy
Since the War began.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Unfortunately, there is no substitute for war in the twentieth century. Peace is never less harmful because, in the twentieth century, peace is mere cease fire period in which all the suffering of post-war traumas goes on. Peace speaks revealing itself to the public in a poem of the same title:

I am awful as my brother War,
I am the sudden silence after clamour.
I am the face that shows the seamy scar
When blood has lost its frenzy and its glamour
Men in my pause shall know the cost at last
That is not to be paid in triumph or tears⁽⁵¹⁾

Peace is more like a revelation period when men realize what they have done and “begin to judge the thing that’s past”⁽⁵²⁾ more objectively. Peace is like a “light upon [the nation’s] darkness”⁽⁵³⁾ which will help them “behold what [they] have done.”⁽⁵⁴⁾ The only good thing about peace is that it is “the end of crimes.”⁽⁵⁵⁾ It is a fact that “peace is but a state/ [w]herein the active soul is free to move.”⁽⁵⁶⁾ The period that separated the two world wars lost its definition as peace as soon as World War II started. In “Peace Ironical,” the scene breathes frustration; everything is quiet and calm but no beauty nor happiness can be found anywhere.

The sea swings idly, full and bluish white
Like skimmed milk. Over the reeking boats
That lie like whales immobile on the beach,
The avid gulls poise, plunge, retreat, return.⁽⁵⁷⁾ (Italics mine)

The frustration is expressed through the vocabulary used. Describing the sea swinging as idle and the sea water as “skimmed milk” shows how the poet looked at the empty half of the cup. The boats are similar, for the speaker, to dead whales (“immobile”). The quietness of the situation is so unwelcome here because it represents peace and peace is not as good as it may look. “The air speaks peace today”⁽⁵⁸⁾ yet “peace is but illusion.”⁽⁵⁹⁾ The speaker still remembers the previous war when people were “rescued, injured, dazed with nothing left.”⁽⁶⁰⁾ In time of peace, nations get ready for another war by accumulating riches.

The dull sound
Of thrumming engines, high, invisible,
Strikes fear, and dark monotony of night

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Torn by the siren’s undulating scream
 Breathes out suspicion. The bland moon
 We eye distrustfully, we who like moles
 Grope in the tunnels of our blackened streets.⁽⁶¹⁾ (Italics mine)

All the natural scenes lose their meaning as they all wait passively for war to shatter whatever hope is left. The siren’s song that used to be a temptation for sailors in myths becomes screams of suspicion. Even the moon is featureless and cannot be trusted anymore. People are like moles, hiding underground (probably shelters are meant here) because they are frightened.⁽⁶²⁾ Governments “mock this peace”⁽⁶³⁾ by starting another war. In “ATCHUNG! ATCHUNG!”, war is personified to speak for itself. Peace, in both world wars, is spoken of as a helpless, hopeless state of waiting for a war. On the other hand, war sounds powerful telling how devilish its acts are.

I’m war. Remember me?

.....
 I kill marriages.
 If one dies, one weeps and then heals clean.

.....
 I kill families.
 Cut off the roots, the plant will root no more.

.....
 I drink gold.
 How kind of you to pour it without stint
 Into my sleeping throat. In case I die?

.....
 I am the game that nobody can win.
 What’s yours is mine, what’s mine is still my own.
 I’m War. Remember me.⁽⁶⁴⁾

The word “war” is written in a small letter in the first line. A “war” starts very weak but draws strength as it kills and consumes riches to become “War.” It is impersonated as a devilish monster whose sole purpose is destruction and money. It is the only game in which all sides are losers. War asks at the beginning “Remember me?” but at the end it enjoins the reader to remember by forcing itself as an identified and well-established being with its capital first letter. The question that forces itself here is why anyone would join war if it is so abominable. “A Democrat’s Chapbook” provides a surreal, but only, reason:

Beautiful in their formation, in the days of thousands
 Distant and imperative (for we did not know war)
 Bright flashed the eyes of the smiling man
 With a spectre behind them: (we did not know war)
 Gay smiled the lips of this attractive person
 With a twist, as he unbuckled his holster. (We did not know war.)

We knew little of the eternal peaceable graves
 Only another sort of death.

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Hence in the grey eyes the spectre.⁽⁶⁵⁾ (Italics mine)

War is rendered a fine young man “smiling” at people with “[b]right” eyes. This image is familiar as a deception method. War tempts people to join through the unmatched beauty described at the beginning. Temptation, like the “lying music” in “The Band,” is expressed through vivid and shiny imagery: “beautiful,” “bright,” “flashed,” “smiling,” “[g]ay,” “attractive” and “peaceable.” The previous list gives the reader a sense of relaxation. Psychologists use optimistic and/or shiny imagery to calm their patients or hypnotize them.⁽⁶⁶⁾ The speaker expresses how war, as an attractive being, affects the minds of men.⁽⁶⁷⁾ They feel war is “imperative” because they feel the urge to join it. The new aspect of war is that it is followed by a spectre with a holster and grey eyes. That spectre is death. The more they are drawn to the charming young man, the more ready the spectre is to take their lives. The men are speechless. All they know now is that they “did not know war.” The sentence is repeated three times for the sake of emphasis. Each time, it is written in a different form for more emphasis. The first is “for we did not know war,” in line 8, is more of a casual comment; they meet somebody new and say they have never met him before. The second, “we did not know war” in line 10, the “for” is removed so it sounds more of a desperate call. As if they are saying, it is not fair to allow war to take us because of our ignorance. The third, “We did not know war” in line 12, is a hopeless and helpless cry. The capital “w” emphasizes the feeling that all is lost because it comes after the spectre has “unbuckled his holster.”⁽⁶⁸⁾ With the “We,” they focus on themselves as if seeing their lives slipping so quickly, unexpectedly and for nothing more than an infatuation with a deceptive and false beauty. The men in the scene are dead because they have been deceived by the beauty of war and forgot to check on its armed grey-eyed companion. “With Lamp in Hand” suggests that men can be easily tempted as they are originally created to be fragile towards the deception and as to be slaves of “treasures”:

Men! In exchange for a good piece
Of rib, you carve, you sculpt
From our bones—you have reigned
From the saddle,
Have beaten the anvil
For centuries,

Fiddling with slide-rules.⁽⁶⁹⁾

Men “carve” and “sculpt” women’s bones into things to exchange for food (“a good piece/ Of rib”). They would sacrifice women for anything so trivial as food because they look down upon them. Men control the situation while in their ivory towers (“From the saddle”) without caring, or daring, to take a closer look. This tense relationship between the sexes has gone so far for ages and men are likely to stick to their bad habits.

You clip, you kill,

For you the whole
World is mould.⁽⁷⁰⁾

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They strive for power without acknowledging the role of women in their lives and history. On the contrary, they marginalize women and try to break their spirit:

You hang on our loins
Aprons
Or clothe us
In your abstractions—

O, you cry with bared chest
I'm a hero! And we,
We manage somehow
To behold you. See,
After you fall
We see, we bandage your brow⁽⁷¹⁾

The women are envisioned as puppets or servant created only for the pleasure of the man. They are presented as beings that can be clothed and ordered around by men, but the truth is: women endure men's ill behaviour because they see them as big children. Men play heroes and wars but they eventually fall and resort to the kind hearts of women to take care of them. Women stand by men, support them and nurse them when they need. It is not a weakness to do so but a strength. The saddle image is completed when women “bandage [men's] brows” in line 29: they are wounded in the brow because they fell from the saddle. It is not only their brow that is wounded but their pride as well and they come to women to heal all that. Women have the upper hand now and they help lessening men's temper and brutality. They moderate and train the hungry beast within the man. However, the man, in his ivory tower, thinks he is the master of all, “a hero” he cries like an animal (“with bared chest”) forgetting the fact that he would be lost without a woman by his side.

Women's mercy and power are contrasted with men's hard-heartedness and false heroism in the following lines:

Last night my dream behold me
Clothed in the white apron
Of Florence Nightingale⁽⁷²⁾
And you, you were wounded, shot in the lung
Or was it your legs that were maimed?
Beethoven-deaf, you
In that field hospital in the Crimea

And so mercifully, with the solace
Of febrifuge⁽⁷³⁾ from ward to ward
I went with lamp in hand
And from the first breath I knew
That you'll start all over again
And do wonders
Anew and silly things too,
My brothers.⁽⁷⁴⁾

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All women are as kind and hardworking as Florence Nightingale. They are obedient and patient when maltreated and merciful and kind-hearted when needed. The speaker recalls an incident where a man lies half dead in a field hospital. She has saved his life, but probably regrets it. She knows that as soon as he is strong enough, he will start another war.

After experiencing World War I, the last thing women would worry about is dead men. The casualties, in World War II, varied more as weaponry became more developed and sophisticated. Not only weapons, but also psychological tactics were used to break people’s spirit of fighting back in the invaded lands.⁽⁷⁵⁾ World War II was definitely more barbaric than its predecessor:

My mother held me by my hand.
Then someone raised the knife of parting;
So that it should not strike me,
My mother loosed her hand from mine.
But she lightly touched my thighs once more
And her hand was bleeding⁽⁷⁶⁾

The brutality of the killer is set in contrast with both motherly feelings and child-innocence. The murderer’s knife goes for the child but the mother sacrifices herself instead though longing to touch her child once more with her blood-stained hand. She probably has tried to push him away from danger but her strength fails her. The cruel-hearted killer does not give up; he kills the child with that same knife in a way that makes the child suffer slowly before dying.

After that the knife of parting
Cut in two each bite I swallowed—
It rose before me with the sun at dawn
And began to sharpen itself in my eyes
Wind and water ground in my ear
And every voice of comfort pierced my heart⁽⁷⁷⁾

The ugliness of the deed is more heart-breaking when told by the child. It is striking, however, how the child describes his death: his innocence overcomes the ugliness and the mess the killer caused. Even after seeing his mother being killed, he calls the murder weapon “the knife of parting” because as a living being, he would be parted with the one he loves, his mother. The details of how the child is killed are expressed in an innocent language: “[c]ut in two each bite I swallowed,” “sharpened itself in my eyes” and “voice of comfort pierced my heart.” He takes the knife’s blows patiently though he does not understand what pain is yet. The first stab causes a vertical cut in his throat, the second plucked his eyes and the third goes through his heart. It is the voice of the knife going through his heart (the last stab) that is comforting to the child. He cannot understand pain, probably, and, therefore, does not know why the last stab relieved him. For a child to take comfort in a knife going through his heart is too much, even for men, to handle. It shows what a beast was that monster who killed such innocence.

As I was led to death
I still felt in the last moment

“War is waste and a searing fire”

The unsheathing of the great knife of parting.⁽⁷⁸⁾

It is as if the child is “led” to a beautiful place, he describes dying as being “led to death.” He cannot be sure he would meet his mother after death because he is probably too young to know that. His surrender to the “great knife” is caused by his suffering. He cannot name pain, but he takes the last stab as comforting and calls the knife “great” for granting him such “comfort.” In contrast with the “voice of comfort” in line 12, there’s the “unsheathing of the great knife”; the voice of the knife going into his heart is comforting because it means the end of pain, but there is the voice, or the feeling of the knife going out. He calls it “unsheathing” as if his little heart became a home for that “great knife”; when the knife leaves the heart, it is leaving its sheath (a cover for the blade). This little body has fully covered the knife’s blade (he was stabbed with the whole blade though his body is so small) and, thus, the knife’s “unsheathe[ing]” from his body makes it ready to kill another innocent person.

This child dies at dawn (“It rose before me with the sun at dawn”) and another, in “A Son,” dies at noon:

A middle-ages farm-labourer lived here,
 And loved his wife; paid rent to hard eternity
 Six barren years, till thorn-tree-blesses she bore
 A son with a bird’s glint, and wheat-straw hair.
 Sweet life! Yet neither boasted.⁽⁷⁹⁾

A simple hardworking couple, who loved each other and trusted God, has been childless for six years until God blessed them with a son. The boy was beautiful and their life was quiet. They were content with God’s gifts, though they were not rich. Their kind-heartedness and benevolence can be seen in the fact that they never “boasted.” However, all that sweetness ended with the “September of the War”⁽⁸⁰⁾

A jettisoned bomb fell; at noonday there,
 Where take my dusty oath a cottage stood.

 ‘At least he had struck seven,’ she said, ‘this year—’
 Of different grace, of blood.
 The man looks bent; yet neither grids at God
 Remembering it was beautiful while it lasted⁽⁸¹⁾

The war killed the seven year old boy; a bomb fell on his cottage. Incredibly, the parents patiently bear their misfortune; they trusted God and felt that the son was a temporary gift that God chose to take back. The mother is sad and the “man looks bent” but they both think “it was beautiful while it lasted.” When they had the boy, they were content because they thought of him as a compensation for the hardships of life. Later when they lost him, their compensation was that they still have God.

God, in World War I, was depicted angry with man. In World War II, it is man’s guilt that is concentrated upon. In “Christ at Berchtesgaden,” the speaker creates a hypothetical scene of Christ descending to earth and witnessing what human beings have done.

If Christ went to Berchtesgaden,

“War is waste and a searing fire”

.....
 If He saw Hitler,
 Abandoned of good,
 Screaming, blaspheming, raving,
 Would He not stand
 Strong and lovely as the face of the mountains outside,
 Quiet as when He stooped and wrote with His finger in the dust,
 Compassionate, all-knowing,
 Gathering power of God as a chalice is brimmed with living wine by a priest;
 Would He not say:
 Come out of the man, though unclean spirit
 As he said of old time?
 So the devil would depart, howling from his servant,
 And better days would dawn for holier men.⁽⁸²⁾

The focus is on Hitler because the speaker believes that he is to blame for all casualties and losses. War is a man’s sin and he must pay for that with his own life (“Come out ... thou unclean spirit”). Hitler should be punished for serving the devil. In “Still Falls the Rain,” the guilt is of a bigger scope: it includes all humanity. Every sin made anyone, since Christ was born, is like a nail in the cross. As if everyone participated, and are still participating, in the crossing with their sins. War, especially World War II, is their worst sin ever committed.

Still falls the Rain—
 Dark as the world of man, black as our loss—
 Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails
 Upon the Cross.⁽⁸³⁾

The speaker is lamenting the decline of human morals. The “Rain” here is a rain of bombs not water and, thus, lost its function as a symbol of life. This “Rain” is “[d]ark,” “black” and “[b]lind”: dark because it is caused (or created) by man who lost the touch of kindness and compassion, “black” as it brings death and “blind” because it does not differentiate the good from the bad. Blind rain of bombs hits everyone with no exception. The same adjectives are used in simile to describe “the world of man,” “our loss” and “the nineteen hundred and forty” years of human life. In the twentieth century, the “world of man” has become darker than it ever was; it is stained with unlimited greed and it is that greed that pushes men to invent more powerful weapons. The world is dark also because of the so many wars. The “loss” is described as “black” although no loss can be taken positively. This loss, in particular, is black because so many lives were lost, not only material destruction. Humanity has lived its whole 1940 years in ignorance (“Blind”) and sin. Man has violated the very essence of Christ’s teachings and every violation is a new nail “[u]pon the Cross.”

Humans lost their humanity with the coming of industrialist. Their “pulse of the heart”⁽⁸⁴⁾ has changed into a “hammer’s beat”⁽⁸⁵⁾ and their “feet” are “impious[ly]” treading upon “the Tomb.”⁽⁸⁶⁾ Alchemy is referred to as “the Field of Blood”:

Still falls the Rain
 In the Field of Blood where the small hopes breed and the human brain

“War is waste and a searing fire”

Nurtures its greed, that worm with the brow of Cain.⁽⁸⁷⁾

Alchemy is what man used to kill his brother human being.⁽⁸⁸⁾ Out of greed, they develop more destructive bombs and they are gradually overcome by greed until they become the incarnation of evil or Cain. The image of greed is further developed with “Dives and Lazarus”⁽⁸⁹⁾ who are biblical characters mentioned in a parable in Luke:16. The story tells how a rich man refuses to help Lazarus, the beggar who is “full of sores.”⁽⁹⁰⁾ They both die and Lazarus is welcome in heaven by A’bra-ham while the rich man is sent to hell and wishes Lazarus would “dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool [the rich man’s] tongue; for [he is] tormented in this flame.”⁽⁹¹⁾ The voice in the poem asks Christ to have mercy on both because even the greedy rich man does not deserve to die in this unkind way.

have mercy on us—

On Dives and Lazarus:

Under the Rain the sore and the gold are as one.⁽⁹²⁾

It is only greed that has tempted scientists to invent the atomic bomb; this is indeed the main theme in “Dirge for the New Sunrise”:

Bound to my heart as Ixion⁽⁹³⁾ to the wheel,
 Nailed to my heart as the Thief upon the Cross,
 I hang between our Christ and the gap where the world was lost.⁽⁹⁴⁾

The speaker feels the torment of being bound to a heart. A heart would make her feel more pain and pity for casualties so it is more of a punishment to have one at the time of war. She compares herself to Ixion who was bound to the wheel for committing sinful violation of the laws of his time. She also identifies with the Thief who was crucified beside Christ. Her crime is simply seeing the truth. The words make her suffering come alive and the reader is compelled to feel her rebellion against her world as well as her heart. It is not enough to be bound to a heart like hers, she is nailed to it as well. As if she tried to escape it and had to be nailed to it. Her heart makes her the link between Christ (as source of celestial teachings) and her world which “was lost.” She is supposed to abridge that gap and restore benevolence.

—The ghost of the heart of Man ... red Cain
 And the more murderous brain
 Of Man, still redder Nero⁽⁹⁵⁾ that conceived the death
 Of his mother Earth, and tore
 Her womb, to know the place where he was conceived.⁽⁹⁶⁾

The poem suggests that brutality, not greed, is what made man create the nuclear bomb. Man is just like his ancestors, Cain and Nero, willing to kill if not desiring to. Man does not have a heart anymore; it is a “ghost of the heart” that is left inside him. Man is like “red Cain” and the “still redder Nero” a killer by instinct. His “murderous brain” overcomes the “ghost of the heart” and pushes him to commit bloody and horrible crimes. Nero’s mother is dealt with more as another murderer than an innocent victim. After all, she is the one who brought such a criminal to the world: “Mother or Murderer, you have given or taken life—/ Now all is one!”⁽⁹⁷⁾ because a greater threat is created:

“War is waste and a searing fire”

But no eyes grieved—
 For none were left for tears:
 They were blinded as the years
 Since Christ was born.⁽⁹⁸⁾

The nuclear bomb evaporates a radius of 17.7 kilometres within 20 seconds.⁽⁹⁹⁾ The eyes can neither weep nor grieve because there are no eyes. Greed is the disease that has turned men to beasts and had them sell their hearts for gold. They are turned into “Ant-men”:

But I saw the little Ant-men as they ran
 Carrying the world’s weight of the world’s filth
 And the filth in the heart of Man—
 Compressed till those lusts and greeds had a greater heat than that of the sun

And the ray from that heat came soundless, shook the sky
 As if in search of food, squeezed the stems
 Of all that grows on the earth till they were weary
 —And drank the marrow of the bone.
 The eyes that saw, the lips that kissed, are gone
 Or black as thunder lie and grin at the murderous Sun.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾

The poetess uses weak creatures like ants to express the enormity of human greed. Ants carry about five times their weight and they pick man’s garbage. The Ant-Men are interested in material gain which is “the world’s filth” because they have no noble aim. They combine all the hatred in the world with the dirtiness of their hearts and turn it into the nuclear bomb. The explosion is described as having “greater heat than ... the Sun” but it is “soundless” because no ears are left to hear it. It kills or, more precisely, evaporates everything. The explosion “murder[s] the Sun” and “grin[s]” at it as if winning some kind of battle. The sun nurtures life on earth while the atomic bomb kills it and banishes it for years to come. “Hiroshima” describes the effect of the bomb:

I can see
 that mushroom hanging
 hovering ominously
 even on a clear, bright
 summer’s day –
 Amid the clapping voices
 of children,
 and soft, unspoken words
 like silk and sake:
 Amid the chatter of rice tables,
 square, low,
 and cushions:

 large eyes ...
 that do not accuse me.⁽¹⁰¹⁾

“War is waste and a searing fire”

The shape of the explosion is like a mushroom and the speaker could see it (or imagine it) above the quiet city. The explosion erases all the life off the scenes: it destroys schools (“the clapping voices/ of children”), quiet homes (“the chatter of rice tables,/ square, low,/ and cushions”) and the cosiness of safety. All is annihilated by “the Tomb of Science.”⁽¹⁰²⁾ Only frustration could be left after such a catastrophe.

In “Regatta,” a comparison to previous ages is made. It is a turn to the glory of the past to ease, or maybe deepen, the tragedy of the present war. The speaker proudly remembers the Armada and the English victory in 1588 and another battle “[t]here hundred years later.”⁽¹⁰³⁾ The third stanza tells about World War II:

The little ships of Dunkirk
Drove forward into hell:
Death on the beaches, death from the air –
Machine-gun, bomb, and shell.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾

The mere mention of guns makes the whole scene breathe of frustration and death. On the other hand, “O Susana” provides a record of the twentieth century: war and peace alternate but peace is never positively spoken of. The poem starts with 1917 promising young Susana with a husband who is coming back from the front.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ The husband is never mentioned again so he probably went back to the front and was killed or never found. The scene moves to Susana in 1933 with

children who rely
On what you can scrape up for them
From a dole that’s running dry.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾

The children’s relying on her confirms that her husband is no more. However, it is not one child, so her husband could have been a war casualty who lived with some war injury and he died soon leaving her with kids to take care of. Susana “now” is in World War II, and her son is twenty years old.

It’s time for him to die
In a blazing fighter-bomber like
A comet down the sky.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾

Her son, like his father before him, joins war but he becomes a pilot. His plane is hit so he literally falls ablazing from the sky, like a comet. Susana is left with seven grandchildren (no kids of her own: they probably died in that war) to take care of in peacetime. However, if poverty was her agony between world wars, now she has to worry about the atom bomb.

O, Susana, now, Susana, don’t you cry
With seven little grandchildren
All growing up so high:
In peacetime with the atom bomb
Susana, don’t you cry.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾

“War is waste and a searing fire”

The speaker keeps asking Susana not to cry in World War I, peace time, World War II and peace time again. She is suffering all alone as a helpless civilian. She brings up kids and sends them to die.

The gap that separated any two wars is known as cease fire because it is a mere rest to accumulate funds and weapons to start again. As soon as the European countries understood that war is no good, U.S.A., ostensibly, took an ‘oath’ to “free” the world from tyranny and to spread democracy and slogans which lack credibility even within the United States itself. Vietnam War, or Nam as American soldiers call it for short, is no less disappointing than the world wars. It is true that only two countries were involved but the awakened new “consciousness of America’s role among the nations as a major exponent of democracy”⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ makes it the one responsible for losses in the invaded country. U.S.A. has acclaimed power after World War II because the atom bomb set a new definition for power. With the new power, U.S.A. gave itself the right to be the defender of other countries’ so-called freedom.

The poetry that resulted from these wars has shown the atrocities and unfairness of such activities and the counterfeit of U.S. claims. The freedom wars’ poetry strictly concentrated on four major themes: the children as war victims, the women (as both soldiers and civilians), the soldiers’ suffering, and the war life of civilians. These are the major concerns of the non-political women poets.

Vietnam was a disappointment for the Americans as their soldiers looted and raped the country they were sent to free. Afghanistan, on the other hand, regained the American self-assurance and restored the image of the soldier as a hero. In fact, he was seen as a victim as well. Soldiers were unaware of the damage they caused (except for those who were originally mercenaries) and, thus, they were not to be held responsible for their actions and killing them was considered brutality. Sympathy with U.S. soldiers started with Afghanistan War and developed dramatically in Iraq War in 2003. In Afghanistan War, the ghost of Vietnam War still haunted the U.S. public opinion, but in Iraq War, the fear vanished and the new pride of the American bravery appeared instead. It was the pride that initiated sympathy with battlefield conditions and, thus, with soldiers. Autobiographies of some soldiers took their place as best-sellers in U.S.⁽¹¹⁰⁾

That hyperbolic heroism was stained with suffering. The soldiers suffered severe traumas due to their improper training. Just as World War I soldiers suffered from “shell shock,”⁽¹¹¹⁾ Vietnam War soldiers suffered from PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder.⁽¹¹²⁾ Later, American and British soldiers had been diagnosed to have the same symptoms of Gulf War veterans and which was called Gulf-War-Syndrome at the time.⁽¹¹³⁾ These psychiatric illnesses were due to the horror of the battlefield as compared to the amusing training by video games the soldiers had. The more complicated the weaponry became, the more alienated the soldiers were from battlefield and the more psychologically disturbed veterans would be when they lived real action. More dangerously, the soldiers might get alienated even from the land they were supposedly ‘liberating.’ In “Iraqi Haiku Series,” an American soldier expresses distress and helplessness because of this same alienation:

here at this check point
i stop each car with raised gun
women and children

i can’t speak the tongue

“War is waste and a searing fire”

what the hell does the man want?
he's waving his arms⁽¹¹⁴⁾

It did not matter to the soldier what the civilian wanted. He invaded the land with a vast army but he could not care for the inhabitants of that land. He even shot them whenever he felt threatened:

stop i said stop stop!
but none of them understood
i had no options⁽¹¹⁵⁾

Soldiers felt the predicament because they see combat for real. Their comrades, as well as civilians, were being killed in front of them. “[y]ou get used to it:/ four thousand of my brothers have died.”⁽¹¹⁶⁾ “April 5, 2003” and “April 23, 2004” depict the suffering of a female soldier witnessing the death of her comrades:

Two Iraqi women ...
... drive through a checkpoint near Haditha Dam,
killing three men—
all Rangers, they be!
One woman jumps from the car
... screams ...
Pregnant, she be ...
The innocent babe
Knows not killing spree
So total dead makes six, from this homicide gesture,
Brought on by the whim of one Devil's jester.
.....
Tears for the dead, tears for the living
Tears for the tears we cannot bury.⁽¹¹⁷⁾

It might be harder for a woman to bear death but she is surely asked to be strong. A female soldier is obliged to go on fighting to honour the memory of dead comrades, but a widow is left with nothing. In “Soldier's Widow: A Generic Photo,” a widow at her husband's funeral is portrayed. She is trying to look strong but the ceremony makes it impossible for her to fake her strength.

The widow always wears a black coat.
She is cold in this coat even in summer.
She is here to receive the flag.
She is here to say hers is a small sacrifice
for God and for the country.⁽¹¹⁸⁾

Her presence is required by the state to perform in front of an audience. They want her to say she has offered her beloved husband as a sacrifice on the altar of freedom; “for the country,” they say, and “for God.”

“War is waste and a searing fire”

Valium

is the drug of choice for such occasions.
 She will not cry out. She will not collapse.
 Two men, solid as a pair of bookends,
 flank her and grip her arms.
 They wear dark suits or other uniforms.
 “Hero” is the theme of the eulogy,
 As if her husband chose to give his life.⁽¹¹⁹⁾

The staged heroism and the awkwardness of the situation sicken the widow. She does not believe in what she is supposed to say and the only practical solution is to be under effect of drugs. She drugs herself intentionally so she would not have to endure the pain. Her husband, like his comrades, had no choice; he agreed to fight for the state but not die for it.

Tonight, she will sleep with the widow’s quilt,
 The folded flag taken from his coffin.⁽¹²⁰⁾

A widow’s suffering is more elaborated in “Wind and Widow” to include her suffering after the war ends:

wind elegiac—wind
 strains of hair from women who die in the bombing
 strains of hair from widows who raise orphaned children
 the war after ten years has gone by⁽¹²¹⁾

Women as civilians experienced humiliation, but as soldiers, they underwent lots of pressure from their superiors. The physical interests of male soldiers are projected negatively and savagely in wars. They think they would be protected as heroes and such “minor” crimes would not be mentioned once war was over. Even when it is still in progress, it is overlooked because war matters most. In fact, the huge difference between the numbers of females and males in the army makes the fewer (the females), not the weaker, targeted.

why won’t he leave me
 always there licking his lips
 like an animal

 i ought to report
 how he stalks me everywhere
 yet i’m too afraid

 he’s got lots of friends
 then I walk past them⁽¹²²⁾

Besides, the female soldier is aware of her feminine situation as the male is aware of his masculinity. The male soldier, bestially, licks his lips, whereas the female soldier, conscious of her might, goes “too afraid,” not of him only but of the whole bosses who are men concerned more with war progress than with her ‘fear.’

“War is waste and a searing fire”

Citizens at time of war lose their hope and stop planning for the future. They act like puppets idly and live their moment. Some of them lose even human feeling like anxiety and become confused about their own thoughts.

In the cold afternoon
 a woman sits by a window knitting.
 She seems so patient and so anxious.
 Patient for she has the rest of her life.
 Anxious for these may be her last moments.

No sighs.
 No smiles.
 Is it grief she hides?
 Or is it happiness?
 Is she filled with hope?
 Or is it doubt she feels?⁽¹²³⁾

The woman is confused about her feelings that she shows none or she might undergo a state of apathy caused by the too much suffering brought about by the war. The speaker suspects something then changes his/her mind about it. The feminine imagery of knitting makes the atmosphere cosy; however, the continuous mix-up of feelings confuses even the speaker. Nothing is definite in war; neither feelings nor life. The woman cannot decide whether she is happy or not with the situation. War would affect people negatively: they may feel unhappy, miserable, helpless, or even enraged. This lady is lost in perplexity that she is deprived of such an effortless thing as feelings. The invaders reached to her mind as well as her land; she is robbed of freedom and security in the out-world and inner-world.

The effect the war has on females cannot be set apart from the suffering of the children in their custody. In “Curse the Rainbow,” the children cannot understand the light of bombing and they think it is rainbow. Their innocence makes them mix all kinds of light: they confuse rainbow, thunder, and bombing.

As the sky brightens,
 our children flee the porch.
 Through the trees,
 I follow their tumblesaulting, like monkeys in the pasture.

.....
 Your plea through the distant thunder
 Calls me back. I reach unfolding fingers
 for you to follow, pause and breathe.

.....
 As the clouds clear the sky from gray
 to sunset scarlet, again, I wait
 through the pounding, my back to the children
 and the trees. I damn the storm, the barbed wire between us,
 want to scrape napalm into your memory
 to ease your pain and mine.

As one last lightning strikes, I wonder if I can go on.⁽¹²⁴⁾

“War is waste and a searing fire”

Their father is dead, and their mother chases them through the woods. Probably she is leading them to a shelter somewhere. They run innocently thinking the light in the sky friendly; they may think their father waiting for them at a beautiful playground and that their mother is chasing them at play. Their innocence forces the poet to curse the rainbow, or what they think is a rainbow.

A child that loses his parents become more vulnerable to dangers and some of them are shipped to U.S.A. for adoption. The quandary that faces them is the uncertainty and vagueness of their future. They would be shipped like pieces of furniture and placed at foster homes. In “A New Year’s Wish for a Little Refugee,” the child is too young to think of all dangers and possibilities. He is taken as a “little child” so it would be easier to teach him to forget his origin.

Let me send you some words, a simple wish.
 It’s New Year’s Eve—black night shrouds skies and seas.
 A miracle saved your life, O little child!
 Aboard that boat, all perished, all but you.

.....
 But where are both your parents, little child?
 You’re pouring tears, enough to fill the sea.

.....
 This New Year’s Day, alone on foreign soil,
 you will feel like a seaweed washed ashore—
 you won’t know what the future hold for you.⁽¹²⁵⁾

The adoption is not much of a problem as the brain wash that would follow it. The new family would make him feel ashamed of his “yellow skin”⁽¹²⁶⁾ and “change what’s now [his] name.”⁽¹²⁷⁾ The speaker urges the child not to feel ashamed nor forget where he came from. He must remember who he is and the kind of suffering his family went through till he lost them. The brain wash would be gradual until his mind is as clear and clean as a white sheet.

They will send you to school where you’ll be taught
 their land’s own history, modern ways of life.
 You will grow up denying what you are—
 you’ll never hear your forbears spoken of.

Let me send you some words, a simple wish
 for this new year, for scores of years to come.
 O little child, may you keep intact,
 your past of sorrows, all your world of griefs.⁽¹²⁸⁾ [sic]

The brain wash is just a fragment of the occupation. Just as some armies physically abuse females of the invaded country to break their spirit, they steal their children and raise them as their own. They rob the nation of its pride and inflict upon it shame. The luckier children get killed: their death is a mercy in this case. In “Iraqi Haiku,” the child flies above all horror and pain.

“War is waste and a searing fire”

I am floating now
 above the wreckage
 i am free to come and go

 i do not feel pain
 as i float past you
 i am beyond all pain now

The child is given a bonus by death: he cannot feel pain. He can see his family and he knows what is happening, but never feels pain nor sadness.

brother runs to me
 or what was once me
 but i'm free to come and go

 i dive heading into sky

pure iraqi sky
 where prayers rise up
 like the sweet steam of couscous⁽¹²⁹⁾

Living through war is hard enough for grownups; having to suffer with kids makes war-time life more difficult. The normal life, in “Two Villages,” is the life in the trenches. That is where they spend their days and anything else would be unfamiliar and, thus, abnormal.

whereas the people have dug tunnels
 and trenches they are able in this way
 to [sic] lead normal family lives⁽¹³⁰⁾

In “Three-Letter Word,” war is depicted as a monster that imprisons every human and rations not only food but love as well. Life through war, which is the three-letter word here, has many phases and varieties of difficulty.

I've felt fire burn in my throat and that fire was History unmade, History in the making; one early morning one hundred armies marched through my esophagus, some used spears and guns and rocks and a few used chemicals and atomic power; but the truth of the matter was, no one wanted to be there, that was the ___ we don't want to think about⁽¹³¹⁾

If they could cope with such a situation, they would become devoid of life, dehumanized.

those who lived during it and after it, who ate the rationed rice, used the rationed spools of thread, rationed needles (three per family), rationed gruel, fuel, and the rationed love in the rationed space⁽¹³²⁾

“War is waste and a searing fire”

They were given nothing. War is the criminal here as the speaker blames neither political leaders nor enemy soldiers. It is true they start war and cause misery, but if war is the same everywhere and at all times, it is the guilty monster that needs to be eliminated.

The poems tackling the anti-war theme do not show any hope in the future of humankind. The future for them does not involve peace and even peace is feared because it would bring another war which could be more advanced technologically and, thus, more destructive. One would expect the leaders to mourn the casualties or feel sorry for their families, but Adolf Hitler shatters that hope as he says: “In starting and waging a war it is not right that matters, but victory.”⁽¹³³⁾ Leaders would never care for their subjects; all they worry about is whether they win a war or not. They do not think of the lost lives as loss to their countries; the lost lives are necessary sacrifice in the path of victory and glory, they believe. They have their own interests and greed to think of. Even their values differ from the common people’s. Heinrich Himmler comments on the mass murder in Eastern Europe.

Most of you know what it means when a hundred corpses are lying together, when five hundred are lying there, or when a thousand are lying there...This is an unwritten and never-to-be-written page of glory in our history.⁽¹³⁴⁾

NOTES

(1).Eva Dobell, “The Band,” in Vivien Noakes, *Voices of Silence: The Alternative Book of First World War Poetry* (Surry: Sutton Publishing, n.d.), 223, line 14.

Eva Dobell (1867-1963) volunteered a nurse and corresponded with POWs. She was a published poet before World War I and she produced five further volumes after the war.

(2). Donald A. Wells, “Preface” in *The War Myth*, (New York: Pegasus, 1967), 12.

(3). Nellie Letitia, “The War that Ends in Exhaustion Sometimes Mistaken for Peace,” in Margaret R. Higonnet (ed.), *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999), 46.

(4). Allan Bold (ed.), *The Martial Muse: Seven Centuries of War Poetry* (Exeter: Wheaton, 1976), 15.

(5). Ibid.

(6).Ibid.

Bold discusses this very point as the red line that separates two types of poets:

The state, for its part, has continued to insist that collective military murder can be justified as something totally different from criminal murder. Some poets accept the state as the supreme arbiter of morality, others do not. Basically, that is the difference between the pro-war poet and the anti-war poet. (Bold, 15)

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(7). Michael Foss, *Poetry of the World Wars* (London: Michael O’Mara Books Limited, 1990), 7.

(8). W.B. Yeats, “Easter 1016.” in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, Margaret Ferguson et al. (eds.), (New York: Norton & Company, 2005), 1194.

(9). A battle-weary American General. Sherman is a graduate of Michigan Military Academy. Quoted in Bold, 15.

(10). Maria Botchkareva in her autobiographical short story “Introduced to No Man’s Land” relates an incident when she needed to take a shower after a day in the trenches but there was only one public “bath-house.” The Commander, although sympathised with her, could not be of any help:

“But what can I do, Yashka?” he remarked, “I can’t keep the whole Company out to let you alone make use of the bath-house. Go with the men.” . . .

I could not quite make up my mind for a while. But the vermin gave me no rest, and I was nearing the point of desperation. . . . “I’ll go to the bath-house too. I can’t endure it any longer.”

He aproed of my decision, and I followed the Company, arousing general merriment. “Oh, Yashka is going with us to the bath-house!” the boys joked.

See: Higonnet, 162-163.

(11). Botchkareva, “Attack” in Higonnet, 164.

(12). Ibid., 164-5.

(13). Emmeline Pathick-Lawrence, “Motherhood and War,” in Higonnet, 22.

(14). S. Gertrude Ford, “A Fight to Finish” in Catherine Reilly, *Scars upon my Heart*, (London: Virago, 2003), 38. Lines 1-10.

(15). *Lord of War* (movie), Directed by: Andrew Niccol, 2005. 01:05:33.

(16). In *Lord of War*, there is a scene where the profession of war-lord is explained thoroughly in few words

Weisz: I don’t think you and I are in the same business. You think I just sell guns, don’t you? I don’t take sides?

Orlov: But in the Iraq-Iran war, you sold guns to both sides!

Weisz: Did you ever consider I wanted both sides to lose? (*pause*) Bullets change governments far surer than votes. (*pause*) You are in the wrong place my young friend. This is no place for amateurs.

Lord of War (movie), 00:13:56.

(17). In *Mother Courage*, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) plays on the profiteer theme. Mother Courage, a petite profiteer, describes to Cook how people bargain desperately for food:

“War is waste and a searing fire”

In Saxony someone tried to saddle me with a chestful of books in return for two eggs. And in Würtemberg they would have let me have their plough for a bag of salt.

See: Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and her Children*, in *Classics on the Modern Theater: Realism and After*, Alvin B. Kernan (ed.), (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965), Scene 9, 405.

(18). “... the war’s in the hole, and someone’s got to pull it out again! The someone is the Emperor or the king the war has really nothing to worry about, it can look forward to a prosperous future.” Brecht, Scene 6, 390.

(19). The Chaplin, in Brecht’s *Mother Courage*, represents the manipulated religion. He is a proof of how leaders abuse religion:

Around here my gifts and capabilities are grossly misused. In physical labor my god-given talents find no—um—adequate expression—which is a sin. You haven’t heard me preach. Why, I can put such spirit into a regiment with a single sermon that the enemy is mere flock of sheep to them and their own lives no more than smelly old shoes to be thrown away at the thought of final victory! God has given me the gift of tongues. I can preach you out of your senses. (Scene 6, p. 393)

(20). Pauline Barrington, “Education” in Reilly, *Scars*, 6. Lines 1-5.

(21). *Ibid.*, lines 6-10.

(22). *Ibid.*, lines 11-15.

(23). *Ibid.*, line 16.

(24). *Ibid.*, line 17.

(25). *Ibid.*

(26). *Ibid.*

(27). *Ibid.*

(28). Krupp: a “family that formerly owned and operated steel and armament plants in Germany’s industrial Ruhr region. As arms manufacturers the Krupps provided crucial support for Prussia’s and Germany’s military ventures in the 19th and 20th centuries.”

See: *Encarta*, s. v. “Krupp.”

(29). Barrington, lines 22-26.

(30). Dobell, “The Band,” in Noakes, 223. Lines 1-6.

See: Noakes, 420

(31). *Ibid.*, line 9.

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- (32). Ibid., lines 8.
- (33). Ibid., lines 13-16.
- (34). Ibid., lines 17-18.
- (35). Dobell, “Pluck,” in Reilly, *Scars*, 31. Lines 1-5.
- (36). Ibid., line 7-8.
- (37). Ibid., line 9.
- (38). Ibid., line 11.
- (39). Ibid., line 16-19.
- (40). Anna Akhmatova, “July 1914” in Higonnet, 468. Lines 7-12.
- (41). Peat: “compact, dark brown organic material with high carbon content, built up by the partial decay and carbonization of vegetation in the acid water of bogs The formation of peat represents the first stage in the transformation of vegetation into coal Dried peat, often compressed into briquettes, is used ... as a fuel.”

See: *Encarta*, s. v. “Peat.”

- (42). Akhmatova, “July 1914” lines 1-6.
- (43). Ibid., lines 21-24.
- (44). Vera Britain, “August 14,” in Higonnet, 516. Lines 1-6.

Vera Britain (1896-1970) was an author, journalist and lecturer. She abandoned her study at Oxford University temporarily to serve as a Voluntary Aid Detachment during World War I. With all those closest to her dead, she joined Oxford again at the end of the war. She wrote 29 books. Her daughter is the famous politician Shirley Williams.

See: Reilly, *Scars*, 131.

- (45). Britain, lines 7-9.
- (46). Nina Macdonald, “[How doth the little busy wife]”, in Noakes, 334. Lines 15-16.
- (47). Ibid., lines 5-12.
- (48). Ibid., lines 6-16.
- (49). Macdonald, “Sing a Song of War-Time,” in Reilly, *Scars*, 69. Lines 17-20.
- (50). Ibid., lines 31-32.

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(51). Eleanor Farjeon, “Peace,” in Reilly, *Scars*, 36-7. Lines 1-6

Eleanor Farjeon (1881-1965) was born in London and educated privately. She wrote fantasies and children’s stories, and was one of the rare authors whose books found devoted audience among both children and adults. She was a friend of Edward Thomas and his wife Helen. The Farjeon award for outstanding work in children’s literature is named after her.

See: Reilly, *Scars*, 133.

(52). Farjeon, line 7.

(53). Ibid., line 11.

(54). Ibid., line 12.

(55). Ibid., line 16.

(56). Ibid., lines 23-24.

(57). Sybil Powis, “Peace Ironical,” in Anne Powell (ed.), *Shadows of the War: British Women’s Poetry of the Second World War* (Surrey: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 26. Lines 1-4.

(58). Ibid., line 14.

(59). Ibid., line 12.

(60). Ibid., line 14.

(61). Ibid., lines 20-26.

(62). In *Blast from the Past*, a scientist decides to build a nuclear shelter for his family (wife and son) and he programs it to lock down if any explosion happened nearby. Interestingly, raids start so they descend to the shelter and when an airplane crashes in their backyard, they get stuck underground for 30 years thinking the sound was of a nuclear bomb. They live literally like moles in that shelter.

See: *Blast from the Past*, 1999, directed by: Hugh Wilson.

(63). Powis, line 32.

(64). Mary Hacker, “ATCHUNG! ATCHUNG!” in Reilly, *Chaos*, 55. Lines 1, 4-5, 13-14, 20-22, 30-32.

Mary Hacker was born in London. She is an established poet, novelist and contributor to several periodicals. She wrote:

“War is waste and a searing fire”

I passed the 1914-18 war in north London being bombed while my mother tried to give me a normal life. I passed the 1939-44 also being bombed ... in north London, trying to give my children a reasonably normal life.

See: Reilly, *Chaos of the Night: Women’s War Poetry of the Second World War* (London: Virago, 2007), 137.

- (65). Peggy Whitehouse, “A Democrat’s Chapbook,” in Powell, 43. Lines 7-15.

Peggy Whitehouse (1898-?) was born in Belfast and worked in the Ministry of Munitions and Air Ministry. She published her poetry during World War I. Whitehouse was an established novelist, playwright and poet.

See: Powell, 336.

- (66). Hypnosis is “brought about through the actions of an operator, the hypnotist, who engages the attention of a subject and assigns certain tasks to him or her while *uttering monotonous, repetitive verbal commands.*” (Italics mine)

See: *Encarta*, s. v. “Hypnosis.”

- (67). War is tempting in this sense only to men. Women participate for many reasons but never to show off in a “formation” or to feel the power and glory.

- (68). Whitehouse, line 12.

- (69). Agnes Gergely, “With Lamp in Hand,” in Desmond Graham, *Poetry of the Second World War: An International Anthology* (London: Pimlico, 1998), 266-7. Lines 1-7.

Agnes Gergely (b. 1933) is a poet and novelist. She was born in Budapest.

See: Graham, 277.

- (70). Gergely, lines 17-19.

- (71). *Ibid.*, lines 20-29.

- (72). Florence Nightingale was a British nurse in the Crimean War. She struggled to establish nursing as a respected profession after being , for so long, a “low-grade unskilled labor.”

See: *Encarta*, s. v. “Florence Nightingale.”

- (73). A drug that reduces fever

- (74). Gergely, lines 30-44

- (75). One of these psychological tactics was the concentration camps. A concentration camp is an isolated place where men, women and children were confined for political reasons. The authorities of these camps used “unlimited, arbitrary power.” *Encarta*, s. v. “Concentration Camp.”

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(76). Nelly Sachs, “A Dead Child Speaks,” in Graham, 167. Lines 1-6

Nelly Sachs (1891-1970) was born in Berlin and emigrated to Sweden in 1940. She started publishing her work in the twenties and won a joint Nobel Prize for literature in 1966.

See: Graham, 282.

(77). Sachs, lines 7-12.

(78). Sachs, lines 13-15.

(79). Lilian Bowes Lyon, “A Son” in Powell,15. Lines 1-5.

Lilian Bowes Lyon (1895-1949) was the granddaughter of the 13th Earl of Strathmore and cousin of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother. She served as a Voluntary Aid Detachment in World War I and she helped in re-housing the bombed in World War II. She also worked in canteens and shelters in the evacuation of children from the East End of London. She was also named “Angel of Stepney” for her work during the Blitz. After the war, she was severely crippled and had both her legs amputated. She wrote several volumes of poetry.

See: Powell, 316.

(80). Bowes Lyon, lines 7.

(81). Ibid., lines 8-9, 11-14.

(82). Teresa Hooly, “Christ at Berchtesgaden,” in Powell, 5. Lines 1, 3-15.

Teresa Hooly (1888-1973) was born at Derbyshire and was educated privately. Her poems are published in magazines, newspapers and in book form. She became a well-known public speaker and later a Commonwealth Party candidate for Taunton by 1945.

See: Powell, 324.

(83). Edith Sitwell, “Still Falls the Rain,” in Powell, 63. Lines 1-4.

Edith Sitwell (1887-1964) was born at Scarborough and privately educated. Her verse was published in *Daily Mirror* in 1913. Her first volume of poetry was published in 1915. She was an established poet, critic, anthologist and writer of a number of prose works. She was appointed a “Dame of the British Empire” in 1954 and a “Companion of Literature” in 1963.

See: Powell, 333.

(84). Sitwell, lines 6.

(85). Ibid.

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(86). Ibid., lines 8.

(87). Ibid., lines 9-11.

(88). Mark S. Morrison comments on Sitwell’s enmity with Alchemy:

alchemy evokes the horrific transformations of elements and bodies by atomic physics and by the hidden secret essences of elements that “newer alchemy” had discovered could damage or transform the hidden genetic essences of life through radiation sickness, cancer and birth defects. (p. 608)

See: Mark S. Morrison, “Edith Sitwell’s Atomic Bomb Poems: Alchemy and Scientific Reintegration,” in *Modernism/modernity* , vol. 9, no. 4, (Nov., 2002). The Johns Hopkins University Press, [pp. 605-633 FOR BIBLIOGRAPHY].

(89). Sitwell, line 15.

(90). *The Holy Bible* (Authorized King James Version), (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1990), p. 1525. Luke:16:20.

(91). *The Holy Bible*, Luke:16:24.

The rich man is not named as Dives in the English version of the Bible. In fact, Lazarus is the only character that is named in the parables of the New Testament. “Dives” is taken from the Latin text. The word “*dīves*” means “rich” in Latin and, therefore, it was a description as well not a name.

See: William Smith and John Lockwood, *Latin-English Dictionary*, (Edinburgh: Chambers, 2007), s. v. “*dīves*”; *Encarta*, s. v. “Lazarus.”

(92). Sitwell, line 14-16.

(93). A mythological character who was believed to be the first to murder a relative. Ixion murdered his father-in-law in order not to give him “promised bridal gifts.” Repenting to Zeus and forgiven, Ixion tried to tempt Hera. To fool Ixion, Zeus created an image of her out of clouds and Ixion fell for it and sired the Centaurs. “As punishment, Ixion was bound to a wheel that revolved eternally in the underworld.”

See: *Encarta*, s. v. “Ixion.”

(94). Sitwell, “A Dirge for the New Sunrise” available at <http://voiceseducation.org/category/tag/dirge-new-sunrise> (Accessed on June 18, 2010) lines 1-3.

(95). Nero (AD 37-68) was the fifth emperor of Rome. He was known for his brutality as he put his own mother and one of his wives to death. He also blamed the Christians for the fire that destroyed two thirds of Rome at 64 and executed many of them.

See: *Encarta*, s. v. “Nero.”

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(96). Sitwell, “A Dirge,” lines 5-9.

(97). Ibid., lines 13-14.

(98). Ibid., lines 10-13.

(99). *Encarta*, s. v. “Nuclear Bomb.”

(100). Sitwell, “A Dirge,” lines 22-31.

(101). Mary Beadnell, “Hiroshima” in Reilly, *Chaos*, 15. Lines 19-30, 35-36.

Mary Beadnell’s poetry collection *Dale’s Feet* was published in 1969.

(102). Ibid., lines 17.

(103). Teresa Hooley, “Regatta,” in Powell, 42. Line 10.

(104). Ibid., line 19-22.

(105). Margaret Wainwright, “O Susana,” in Reilly, *Chaos*, 122. Lines 1-4.

Margaret Wainwright lived in Yorkshire. Her poetry collection *All the Quiet People* was published in 1970.

See: Reilly, *Chaos*, 144.

(106). Wainwright, lines 8-10.

(107). Ibid., lines 13-15.

(108). Ibid., lines 16-20.

(109). Peter De Vries, “Poetry and the War,” in *The English Journal*, vol. 32, no. 10 (Dec., 1943), 534.

(110). Patricia Spork wrote a diary in poetry that is sold now for around \$150 per copy. Astonishingly, the diary is no more than 48 pages! Brian Turner published collections of poetry after the huge success of his first collection *Here, Bullet*. They both became celebrities!

(111). Shell-shock (Combat Stress Reaction or Battle Fatigue): a military term which refers to a cluster of behavioural signs in veterans resulting from battle stress. It is caused by exposure to warfare, especially shell-fire. The term is replaced with PTSD in modern wars.

See: *Encarta*, s. v. “shell-shock.” See also: Wikipedia, s. v. “Combat Stress Reaction” available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Combat-Stress-reaction> (Accessed on March 19, 2011).

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(112). PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) a mental illness that follow experiencing a traumatic or life-threatening event such as warfare or child abuse.

See: *Encarta*, s. v. “Post-traumatic stress disorder”

(113). A “collective group of medical ailments reported by veterans who served in the 1991 ... Gulf War.”

See: *Encarta*, s. v. “Gulf War Syndrome”

(114). Laura Tattoo, “Iraqi Haiku Poems,” available at <http://www.poetsagainsthewar.org/displaypoem.asp?AuthorID=69537> (Accessed on September 1, 2009) Lines 16-21.

Laura Tattoo (b. 1957) was born in New York. She wrote poetry most of her life. She retired to Oregon after 2001 after becoming disabled with fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue disease. She won the Nina Mae Kellogg Award at Portland State University in 1983. She wrote poetry in English and French.

(115). *Ibid.*, lines 28-30.

(116). *Ibid.*, lines 35-36.

(117). Patricia Spork, “April 3, 2003” in Spork, 35. Lines: 36-46, 50-51.

(118). Fran Castan, “Soldier’s Widow: A Generic Photo,” in Phillip Mahony (ed.), *From Both Sides Now: The Poetry of the Vietnam War and its Aftermath* (New York: Scribner, 1998), 122. Lines: 1-5.

(119). *Ibid.*, lines: 5-12.

(120). *Ibid.*, lines: 13-14.

(121). Le Thi May, “Wind and Widow,” in *Mountain River: Vietnamese Poetry from the Wars, 1948-1993*, eds. Kevin Bowen, Nguyen Ba Chung, Bruce Weigl, (Boston: University of Massachusetts, 1998), 209. Lines 16-19.

Le Thi May (b. 1949) joined the youth brigade and joined the army during the Vietnam-U.S.A. war after she graduated from high school. Currently, she is an editor-in-chief of a Vietnamese magazine. She has seven collections of poetry and three works in prose published. She says: “I believe poetry is my secret sadness which raises its cry when I am alone.”

See: Bowen, Chung and Weigl, 239.

(122). Tattoo, lines 37-39, 46-50.

(123). Y Nhi, “Woman Knitting,” in Bowen, Chung and Weigl, 175. Lines: 1-11.

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Y Nhi (b. 1944) has a degree in Vietnamese Linguistics and Literature from Hanoi University. Her work has been included in poetry anthologies. She received the poetry award of *Văn Nghệ* in 1969 and the award of Vietnam Writers' Association for her book *Woman Knitting* in 1985.

See: Bowen, Chung and Weigl, 262.

(124). Jacqueline M. Loring, “Curse the Rainbow,” in Mahony, 213.

Jacqueline M. Loring: No biographical information available.

(125). Tran Mong Tu, “A New Year’s Wish for a Little Refugee,” in Mahony, 204. Lines 1-4, 7-8, 10-12.

(126). *Ibid.*, lines 16.

(127). *Ibid.*, lines 14.

(128). *Ibid.*, lines 17-24.

(129). *Ibid.*, lines 112-114, 117-120.

(130). Grace Paley, “Two Villages,” in Mahony, 180. Lines 12-14.

(131). Mong Lan, “Three-Letter Word” in Mahony, 258. Lines 9-13.

(132). *Ibid.*, lines 14-16.

(133). *Encarta*, s. v. “Adolf Hitler” Quotations.

(134). *Ibid.*, s. v. “Heinrich Himmler” Quotations.

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