

A Psychoanalytical Approach to Wilfred Owen's War Poetry

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Abstract: Wilfred Owen, honored as the most important poet during WWI, is determined to reveal the truth about the war from a soldier's point of view. "Dulce et Decorum Est" and "Hymn for Doomed Youth" are his most prestigious works, a strong testimony to his innovative spirit and his coordinated verse. His war poetry has been discussed by many scholars both abroad and at home through different points of view: stylistics, literary devices, themes, Owen's ideas about war, or the differences between Owen's war poetry and others'. Most people have focused on the mental traumas of soldiers caused by war, but only a few people utilize psychoanalytical theories to analyze his poems. This paper is thus a psychoanalytic approach to Owen's war poetry, drawing on Freud's war thought and Fromm's theory of alienation of human nature, with a focus on further exploration of themes in Owen's writing. The conclusion is that Owen's war poetry is intended to convey the idea that the essence of war is the instinct of destruction masked by idealistic motives or the instincts of love, to shed light on the alienation caused by war and to represent a glimmer of hope for war by declaring violence to be a choice despite instincts. Through analysis, this paper intends to make a better understanding of Owen's war poetry.

Keywords: Wilfred Owen; Sigmund Freud; instinct; Enrich Fromm; alienation.

1. Introduction

1.1. Wilfred Owen and His War Poetry

As Niccolò Machiavelli put it, when the war started you are willing to, but not at the end of your happiness, war is like Pandora's box, with an ocean of catastrophes in it, and yet, under the tempting guise of idealistic motives or patriotism, it is not like a war in the first place. It is these soldiers like Wilfred Owen that pay the price for the ignoramus' opening the box; inside the box, the bloody truth about the war is laid out for all of us by those, like Wilfred Owen, who have dual identities as both a soldier and a creator. So it's high time we heard the wake-up call of the war despite the peaceful area that we have opened, and the best choice is Wilfred Owen with his war poetry which is brought to life through his experience at the front line.

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), is venerated as one of Britain's greater war poets. As a soldier, he is initially optimistic about war and exhilarated in battle; however, after he witnesses much life and death and suffers mental and physical traumas, the brutality and wastefulness of war are gradually blown out of the glorifying waters, and he eventually becomes a strong protestor against the war with his poems as a powerful weapon [21].

Another contemporary poet by the name of Siegfried Sasson, an anti-war poet, is instrumental in opening Owen's career as a poet. His war poetry, particularly the best-known "Dulce et Decorum Est" and "Anthem for Doomed Youth", is inspired by Sasson's war satires, aimed at revealing the meaninglessness and brutality of war, instead of praising patriotism and glorifying war, which is represented in Rupert Brooke's "jingoistic" pre-war verses [9]. Romantic poets, especially John Keats, also have a heavy influence on Owen's creation. For instance, the poem "Anthem for Doomed Youth" is inundated with potent auditory effects and precisely the kind of relentless strength that Keats expounded on, a concrete example of Keats' renowned adage that poets must

"load every rift of their subject with ore" in their poems [4]. With the Modernist Movement that aims to try out new forms of poetry spreading the verse circles in the 19th century, it can also be found in Owen's poems that old-fashioned forms, such as the perfect rhyme, are questioned and give way to new ones, such as slant rhyme and pararhyme [26]. The thoughts of war that flow through his verses have strong implications for many Modernist poets who have never been to the war, rescuing them from the glorified illusions of war and causing them to protest the war through their writings [12].

1.2. Literature Review

Wilfred Owen's war poetry has been widely studied in the past, and studies of the previous have focused on a variety of concepts, including his style, the literary devices it employs, its themes, its comparison and contrast with other poets' war poetry, and Owen's thoughts on war that it reflects and so on.

In terms of style, Li Xuanli's article is a stylistic analysis of "Dulce et Decorum Est" based on three layers: phonetic, lexical, and meaning, aiming to reveal the brutality of the war, calling for a greater focus on the teaching of the poetry of war, and popularizing methods of stylistic analysis, which help to enhance learners' ability to appreciate the style of the poem as well as their ability to write [23].

Concerning its themes, In Li Na's article, she explores the common theme of anti-war in Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" and Sasson's "They", noting that they both use ironic imagery to express their hatred of war, with the former ironically comparing the young soldiers on the battlefield to beggars, and claiming the saying that soldiers die for their nation is sweet and glorious is a lie, with the latter drawing an ironic contrast between the people's praise of the soldiers and the physical trauma they experience, and he argues that they both express the subject of anti-war through the portrayal of mental and physical trauma to soldiers caused by war [19].

In terms of Owen's war thought, Marc Cyr's paper aims to challenge the ideas that Owen rejects or utterly transforms the "traditional representation of war" and to claim that he is a

poet “having achieved a unified view of war”. Soldiers in his poems, for example, are depicted both as bearers of “greater love” and as killing machines. She also points out that this kind of unification or conflict is strikingly evident in his dramatic monologues such as “Strange Meeting” [3]. In Chen Yunzi’s article, she makes a comparison and contrast between Brook’s poem and Owen’s poem in terms of its technique of expression, style and themes, further illustrating their different thoughts about war and death, with the former celebrating soldiers’ sacrifice for their nation, while the latter condemning the horrors of war [26].

Carol Acton’s article compares and contrasts Owen’s and others’ war poetry in terms of its literary devices in relation to paradox and parenthesis, pointing out that in addition to expressing the paradox in a way that embodies the general condition of humanity, these poets encourage us to look at war as a symbol of the condition of humanity [1].

In short, as one of Britain’s most significant war poets, Wilfred Owen with his war poetry has been studied by many scholars from different points of view. However, a psychoanalytic analysis of its creation has rarely been carried out.

1.3. Thesis Structure

This paper will fill the gap by drawing on psychoanalytic theories — Freud’s war thought and Fromm’s theory of alienation of human nature — to analyze Wilfred Owen’s war poetry and to further illustrate its themes and demonstrate the horrors of the war. The first chapter is a summary of the background of the poet and his poems and a review of the literature. In the second chapter, the paper briefly introduces the main ideas of Freud’s theory and Fromm’s theory. In the third chapter, this article applies these theories to the analysis of its themes, focusing primarily on the denial of the glorified idea of war, the alienation of soldiers, and the transmission of hope for war hidden in these poems. The paper goes on to conclude that beneath the glorious waters of war lies stones of meaninglessness and wastefulness, alien fish flocking to physical and mental death and feeling isolated from the familiarity of the past while a little treasure chest of hope half buried in the sands basking in rays of filtered light in the waters, all of them vividly portraying the reality of war.

2. A General Introduction to the Psychoanalytical Theories

2.1. Sigmund Freud’s War Thought

Freud’s war thought manifests itself in “Why war?”, which is a letter between him and Einstein in connection with the war expected by the League of Nations, where Freud psychoanalytically analyzes the essence of war, responding to Einstein in terms of the idea that war is related to human instincts [17].

2.1.1. The Two Basis Instincts of Human Being

Human has two basic and unavoidable instincts which are stably and simultaneously influencing our behaviors and mentality to the point of death to be satisfied, meaning that only one instinct cannot promote the evolution of man unless it collaborates with the other, which is the prerequisite for Freud’s discussion of war. The two instincts, the life instinct and the death instinct, are the polar opposite of each other, with the former seeking to unify all life forms as a whole, while the latter pursuing the destruction of life. These two instincts, equally necessary for the development of us as

human beings, do not distinguish between right and wrong [2].

2.1.2. The Ultimate Psychological Cause of War

The death instinct manifests itself in two primary forms: one presents itself as a fight, a battle, or war, with its energy directed outward; the other manifests as self-accusation, penance, or self-destruction, with its energy turned inward. Both forms can assume a dominant role, suggesting that to alleviate the impulse for self-destruction, individuals may feel compelled to destroy others [17].

Only when integrated with the life instinct or some idealistic motives, can the death instinct be satisfied [17]. In the record of history, many wars have been waged to release destructive energy with a few seemingly justified excuses. WWI, for instance, begins with the assassination at Sarajevo as an excuse that subconsciously intensifies the destructive motives [2].

To sum up, the ultimate psychological cause of war is that the death instinct is fulfilled in combination with the life instinct or idealistic motives.

2.1.3. The Ways to Respond to War

Freud believes that while the death instinct cannot be suppressed, it can be presented in other ways in place of war, based on which he offers two psychological ways of fighting against war.

First, people need to strike a balance between life and death instincts, forming two kinds of affective bonds: one is the bond with loved ones, referring to family members such as parents, partners and children in a narrow sense, to the public in a broad sense; on the other hand, there is the bond built by the sense of identity or coherence of emotions on which the civilization is built, arising from anything from which people can benefit greatly. For instance, if people realize that there are more benefits from peace or negotiation rather than from violence, war can be removed from the physical world as much as from the mental world [17].

Second, cultural evolution can be utilized to fight against wars, which means that the development of human intelligence and the internalization of aggressive motives place a limit on basic instincts, and give rise to fears of wars, both of which result in anti-war ideologies. Anything that promotes cultural evolution is therefore a powerful weapon for contesting war [17].

2.2. Erich Fromm’s Theory of Alienation of Human Nature

The founder of humanistic psychoanalysis, Erich Fromm, devotes his entire life to the exploration of the law of human survival in society. The main topic of his theories is human alienation. He emphasizes that human alienation casts deep light on moderns’ deep psychological mechanisms and character structure and that with incessant social development, the individualized process of people evolves where man cannot rid himself of the co-existence of freedom and loneliness [24].

2.2.1. The Cause of Human Alienation

Firstly, alienation has its origin in external circumstances. Fromm’s discussion of the relationship between individuals and the outside world can be found in *Escape From Freedom*, emphasizing that the increase in people’s capacity and the growing loneliness accompany the evolving process of individualization. To overcome loneliness, human beings have to yield to the rules of the external world or perform certain activities spontaneously, with the former leading to

the abandonment of their initiative and integrity, which intensifies their insecurity and makes them harbor hostility and aggression towards others. WWI begins, as Western society is plunged into belligerence, all sectors of society advocating war whether they want to resist aggression or defend the homeland. Even if a person, especially young people, does not want to join the battle, he or she must strive to maintain a bond with the outside world [18].

Secondly, the alienation of human beings results from the cruelty and horror of the thing itself. Fromm believes that something extremely threatening is one of the main factors that increase people's sense of meaninglessness and deepen their repression, both of which ultimately cause them to erupt into destructive tendencies that are the manifestation of man's intolerance of weakness and loneliness [18].

2.2.2. The Manifestations of Human Alienation

Fromm classifies human alienation into four different kinds, and this paper will introduce only two of these, the first is the alienation from human relations including relationships between the individual and his fellow citizens, and between people and themselves. The second is the alienation in the unconscious spheres.

Firstly, the relationship between people should have been loving and creative, but it turns out to be cold, shallow and machine-like. It is often based on mutual interests and mistrust, following the egoistic principles. They tend to be more concerned with their issues than others'.

Secondly, People gradually realize that they are no longer unique and compassionate. There are many trading tendencies in the relationship between the individual and his inner self; that is, he treats himself as an emotionless commodity selling his talent, labor, and true self, expecting to be sold for a good price [24]. With this kind of alienated personality, people lose their dignity and the right to become their true selves. The alienation in the unconscious spheres, hidden within people's subconscious minds, is manifested in the deference to the authoritative voice, the embodiment of what the majority advocate and believe. It drives people to pursue sameness with others and swim with the tide, and it deprives people of the capacity to think independently. Once people disobey the collective will, they will be cast into endless loneliness and isolation, which reduces their sense of safety and belonging [24].

2.2.3. The Result of Human Alienation

Marginalization is the outcome of human alienation. Originally, the term marginal man referred to the cultural hybrids produced by cultural and racial conflicts, who are not capable of being integrated into the mainstream cultural system as well as their own culture, whereas now broadly refers to individuals who are not able to integrate themselves into the external world as well as their internal selves. Fromm points out that people tend to become alienated to overcome external oppression and adapt to the environment, which makes people alien to their true selves. Disobeying the collective will results in them being labeled as marginal men [18].

3. The Analysis on the Themes of Wilfred Owen's War Poetry

Reading Wilfred Owen's war poetry can be seen as an underwater adventure, with fierce undercurrents, animals killing each other in an unnatural way, which reveals the truth about war, full of horrors and alienated soldiers, while there

are always rays of sunshine of hope for war, hidden in Owen's poems, being filtered through the seemingly calm surface that glimmers in the sun, which embodies the stereotypes about war that Owen wishes to break out of.

3.1. The Essence of War: Death Instincts Masked by Love Instincts or Idealistic Motives

The Latin line in the title is taken from the Roman poet Horace, which is to say that it is glorious and meaningful for soldiers to die for their native land during a war, which has become common sense during WWI, while Owen through his poems is aimed at breaking this "old lie" [6]. From Freud's point of view, war, at its core, is death instincts masked by love instincts or idealistic motives that potentially implant the false idea of war in people's minds and intensify death instincts, which is vividly portrayed in Owen's poems.

In "Anthem for Doomed Youth", soldiers are equated with "cattle" whose purpose in life is to be killed, which suggests that death instincts have controlled soldiers with an intent of self-destruction [4]. The images of "passing-bells" "candles" "pall" above their coffins and "flowers" represent religious motives to romanticize war as a heroic act and a greater love, all of which turn into "choirs of wailing shells" and "anger of guns" driving them to let go of their destructive momentum, the polar opposite to the glorified scene of the war [4]. The faces of loved ones, hope of peace, and people's understanding of war mentioned in this poem are the source of the love instincts in the mind of soldiers intensifying their death instinct to fight with enemies.

In "The Next War", the speaker portrays "Death" as soldiers' ally or old friend, which demonstrates not only that death is inevitable in war, but also that the instincts of death have dominated their mind [26]. Ironically, The last two lines compare the romanticized and real version of the war, with the former intended to save lives and end the war while the latter releasing destructive power in the name of "flags" symbolizing national desires for territorial expansion or other interests instead of patriotism or a greater love which the government or church implants into soldiers' mind to intensify their death instincts [26].

The poem "Smile, Smile, Smile" is Owen's critique of the picture of smiling wounded soldiers displayed by newspapers that romanticizes the war by establishing the image of soldiers as heroes instead of those who struggle with the instincts of death [16]. In this poem, the speaker satires the newspaper's claim that "the men's first instinct will be making home while "war has just begun", demonstrating that death instincts are inescapable and are intensified by the idealistic motive of "making home". "They are happy now", which suggests the common sense that soldiers are happy when they die for their country, even though they have become "undying dead" with only one remaining life purpose, that is, killing more people during another war for the gratification of their death instincts, demonstrating their existence and reclaiming their inner peace [16].

In "Strange Meeting", a dramatic monologue from a soldier, the speaker points out that the public and government will be content with the destructive power of soldiers, while discontent with their loss. Therefore, "swift with swiftness of the tigress", they continue to dispatch soldiers, utilizing their death instincts to destroy enemies, demonstrating that the relentless release of death instincts as monsters is the core of warfare [10].

In “Exposure”, “God’s invincible spring”—God’s promise of peaceful times to come after war, the source of love instincts, represents the efforts of the church to romanticize war and intensify the death instincts of soldiers on the battlefield; however, when struggling through endless killing, soldiers believe that the “love of God seems dying”, and that God is the one who made them born to be soldiers who die on the battlefield, intensifying their death instincts [7].

The glorified idea of war implanted in soldiers’ minds runs through the verses in “Disabled”: he “liked” the wounds on his leg and being “carried shoulder-high”, which represents that young people believe that injuries are the symbol of bravery, and that the war, like the game of soccer, will bring them admiration and love [5]. “He was drafted out with drums and cheers”; “smiling they wrote his lie”, both of which demonstrate that the public and authority are trying their best to deepen the heroic and honorable impression of war—the source of love instincts—in soldiers’ mind to get them to release their destructive power [5].

3.2. The Brutality of War: the Alienation in and After the War

As a war poet and soldier, the majority of his poems are written from the soldiers’ perspective, depicting not only their physical suffering but also their unknown psychological journey — the process of their alienation in and after the war, thus demonstrating the horrors of war.

3.2.1. The Birth of Killing Machine: the Alienation of Soldiers

It is concluded from Fromm’s theories that it is the public’s idea and the brutality of war that lead to the alienation of soldiers. Firstly, many of Owen’s poems demonstrate to readers the common sense of war: “Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori” in “Dulce et Decorum Est” [6]; “They are happy now, poor thing” in “Smile, Smile, Smile” [16]; “proud fighter brags he wars on Death” in “The Next War” [26]; “men will go content with what we spoiled” in “Strange Meeting” [10]; to “look a god in kilts” and “to please the giddy jilts” in “Disabled”, all of which stand for the belligerence of the public and the government [5]. Implanted by this type of warfare ideology through osmosis and afraid of leaving their loved ones in disgrace, people flock to the battlefield, marking the beginning of their alienation, giving into the outside world by swallowing the wrong idea of war or giving up their critique of war.

Secondly, the representation of threatening war appears in almost all of Owen’s poems through different angles: the battlefield environment and the situation of soldiers, with “merciless iced east winds”, “gunnery rumbles”, “pale flakes with fingering stealth” in “Exposure”, all of which describe the situation where soldiers are nearly frozen to death [7], with soldiers being likened to “old beggars”, “hags”, and portrayed as “lame”, “blind”, “drunk with fatigue” and “drowning” in “Dulce et Decorum Est”, which represents the weakness of man while the invincible stance of war [6]. It is this feeling of insignificance driven by the invincible warfare that makes them intolerable of their weakness, thereby alienating themselves as a killing machine, with dying or not dying the only issue in their minds. In “The Next War”, Death is personified as “old chum” of soldiers, physically and mentally close to them, demonstrating not only that war threatens the soldiers’ lives at any moment, but also that they are alienating themselves as Death’s ally, a reaper, with strong destructive motives motivated by the horrors of war [26]. In

“Arms and the Boy”, “bayonet-blade” is personified as bloody, “cartridges” as “sharp with the sharpness of grief and death”, and “bullet-leads” as blind and blunt, all of which reflect not only the threatening nature of the war, but also the destructive power of soldiers. The transition from “laughing around an apple” to having “claws behind his fingers” represents the soldiers’ alienating process triggered by the horrors of war illustrated above [13].

From Fromm’s perspective, in modern Western society, human beings become alienated as commodities with how high the prices are the norm of success. The price on the battlefield is equated to the number of lives one kills or the amount of blood they spill, measuring the values of one’s existence. In “Smile, Smile, Smile”, the speaker points out that sacrificing himself in the place of peace is the only way to demonstrate their existence [16].

3.2.2. The Birth of Enemies: the Alienation of Relationships Among Soldiers

Moreover, war is a kind of life, and the battlefield can be thought of as a small-scale society with an extensive network of relationships. Relations in modern Western society, from Fromm’s perspective, have been twisted, based on mistrust and the principles of egoism. Transferred to the war society, with the soldiers facing a living dilemma at any time, with goodwill passing and death instincts bursting out, relationships between soldiers on different sides will be alienated at a higher level.

The soldier in “Strange Meeting”, near to death, imagines his meeting with the enemy soldier again who killed him. He proclaims that they share the same dreams and hopes and that they might be friends in different circumstances, which indicates that enemies are created by war. “Strange Meeting” is the speaker’s imagination, which means that in reality, soldiers have no opportunities to show their sympathy towards their enemies and their common humanity, which demonstrates that it is the dehumanized ruler: war that dehumanizes each his citizen, thus the relationships among them [10].

3.2.3. The Birth of Marginal Men: the Alienation of Relationships Between Soldiers and Society

Marginal men are born not only after the war but during the war as well. In “S.I.W.”, the speaker introduces to readers a type of soldiers who are forced to go to war and are pessimistic about war, which makes them marginalized in the war society. Having struggled in fear of being killed at war and worries about the future isolation of the belligerently immersed society and being a family disgrace, they commit suicide [15]. Those who are found to be making the same choice that the poem portrays resorting to self-harm in the hope of being sent back to their home are being marginalized by the public and the government.

After the war, marginal men are born as a result of the soldiers’ psychological suffering from PTSD and physical trauma, and the public’s lack of compassion and caring. In “Mental Cases”, the speaker represents that “multitudinous murders”, “sloughs of flesh”, “batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles” continue to haunt the soldiers, reminding them of their sins, making it impossible for them to reconnect with society [9]. In “Disabled”, the soldiers are depicted as sitting “in a wheeled chair”, sunk in a deep depression towards the surrounding happiness and suffered by sleepiness, with girls “touching him like some queer diseases”, with “only a solemn man who thanked him”, with a bright pre-war future, while “a few sick years in institute” after the war, all

of which demonstrate that it is the soldiers psychological and physical traumas that cause them to lose faith in life, choosing to marginalize themselves, and that the public's indifference to them marginalizes them from society, meanwhile corroborating Fromm's claims about the alienation of relations between people and their fellow citizens [5].

To sum up, the crowds encourage them to join the battle, acclaiming them in newspapers, which marginalizes them from the war society, while only a few "cheer them home", even treating them as trash, which marginalizes them after the war.

3.3. The Hope for War: the Violence is a Choice

In spite of the anti-war voices carried in Owen's verses, the hope is always there. Here, hope literally means the hopeful tones hidden in the verses. In "1914", the speaker compares the spilling of blood by soldiers to the planting of seeds fulfilling "the need of sowing for new Spring", conveying hope for an end of the war and a flourishing age of civilization [12]. In the last stanza of "Dulce et Decorum Est", the speaker addresses the readers directly in the hope that they will break up the old war ideology [6]. While it profoundly means that the illumination of Owen's war poetry is taken by subsequent generations as a hope for maintaining peaceful times, echoing Freudian ways to fight against the war: establishing affective bonds.

Firstly, Owen's war poetry can reinforce the bond constructed through the sense of identity for peace benefiting humans more than war does. In "1914", the war is compared to the "wild Winter" that destroys the achievements of human civilization accumulated over the preceding seasons [12]. In "Strange Meeting", a dramatic monologue from a soldier's imagination to his enemy, the emotions that flow through his saying are not hatred but forgiveness, which emphasizes the bond established between human beings as a whole which has been weakened in modern society, can be completely shattered by war [10]. His poems feature soldiers "yelling out, stumbling, guttering choking and drowning [6]", "leaguings with death and dying as cattle", or they whistle to others' death like monsters instead of smiling at deathlike heroes, which represents humanity and the meaning of life are stolen by war [26]. Civilization, the invisible bond between human beings, humanity, and the awe of life are hallmarks of our existence as humans, which can be protected if we arrive at peace, which Owen's war poetry alerts readers to.

Secondly, Owen's war poetry may strengthen the bonds between soldiers and their loved ones. The beloved in Owen's verses are portrayed as the "another enemy" of the soldiers. It is only when they go to war that their loved ones can be "proud, aye and glad", while all their promised cheering for the soldiers gives ways for no one to "inquire about their souls", which represents there is a gap between the loved ones' understanding of soldiers' lives and their real lives [5], which can be filled in Owen's poetry that can be considered as a soldier's autobiography: "hunting wild after the wildest beauty in the world" before the war [10]; freezing in "mad gusts", drowning "under a green sea" of gas and dying, or releasing the "monstrous anger of the guns at war [6]; after the war, suffering the physical pain with "three parts shell" like a broken machine losing its meaning of existence, and the the mental trauma of shell-shock or PTSD with "fingers fidgeting like ten idle brats" and inner war relentlessly displaying in his mind to remind him of his irremovable sins,

which show that war will completely destroy a person from the inside out instead of moulding him into a legendary hero, calling on loved ones to care more about the after-war soldiers' recovery and to have a reasonable understanding of the war, which will cause the public to bond closely with the soldiers, spreading the anti-war ideas [14].

4. Conclusion

This thesis investigates primarily through a psychoanalytical approach to Wilfred Owen's war poetry by exploring the romanticization of war, alienation of soldiers, and hope for war. This paper builds on the above research to prove that Owen's verses create a new ideology of war, echoing Freudian war thought and Fromm's theories of alienation, that the glorified idea of war rooted in the mind of the general public, the source of love instincts and idealistic motives, is the incentive for soldiers to release their death instincts destructing each other, which is the heart of the war, that the outside's unreasonable understanding plus the horrors of war, the commercialization of modern people, and the weakening of the bond between moderns accelerate the alienation of soldiers on different sides as monsters, as enemies to one another and as marginal men, and that Owen's war poetry is a hope, except for hopeful tones in his verses, for fighting against war that promotes the establishment of affective bonds between soldiers and the public, and among human beings as a whole through a sense of identity for peace better than war, which is in line with Freudian response to war. The psychoanalytical analysis of Owen's poetry can be of some assistance to readers in gaining a better and deeper understanding of its themes and the truth about the war.

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