Teaching Wilfred Owen's War Poems and the Bible

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WILFRED Owen is represented in most high school textbooks by "Dulce et Decorum Est," a realistic anti-war poem of World War I. I suggest that this poem is only one of a half dozen or more war poems by Owen that could be taught successfully in high school. Assuming that we would not want to teach all thirty-two of Owen's war poems, I suggest that we teach those poems containing allusions to the Bible and thereby accomplish several things at once: introduce our students to a recent poet whose reputation is steadily rising, illustrate the complexity and effectiveness of successful allusions, familiarize students with important episodes in the Bible, and provide students with a nucleus of war poems that can serve as a frame of reference for much of the war poetry written today.

Owen's most extensive use of the Bible occurs in his short poem "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young," an adaptation of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac as told in Genesis 22. In the original story Abraham is portrayed as a devout patriarch who obeys without hesitation God's terrifying command that he slay his only son; he is rewarded for his obedience by being released from the command just in time to save his son. In Owen's poem he is portrayed as a war lord whose pride causes him to slay his son and half the youth of Europe as well.

Owen's choice of Abraham to represent the older generation of war makers seems rather puzzling, especially if we consider the context of the original story. In Genesis the story stands as the culminating episode of Abraham's long life of devout obedience to God. Before the story opens Abraham has obeyed without question or protest God's command to leave his homeland for an unknown country, he has sacrificed personal gain on several occasions to live in peace with his neighbors, he has twice rescued Lot from adversity, he has interceded for the inhabitants of Sodom, and he has received with humility the many promises of God that he would, though old and childless, become the founder of a great nation. His name has become synonymous with humility,
peacefulness, obedience, and divine favor—all of which are confirmed in this final crisis of his life.

Such a humble and peace-loving man is a good choice for the role of a proud war lord in a parable whose basic technique is shock. Owen's parable, like many other parables, withholds its meaning until the very end. Owen keeps the reader off guard by following the account in Genesis closely in the first thirteen lines of his poem, then changing the original story abruptly to create the shock. He converts the ram caught in the thicket to the Ram of Pride and makes Abraham into a war lord whose refusal to slay his pride causes him to slay his son, "And half the seed of Europe one by one." This surprise ending reminds the reader of the conclusion of other great parables, such as Nathan's reproach to David—"Thou art the man" (II Samuel 12:7) and Jesus' admonition to the clever lawyer—"Go, and do thou likewise" (Luke 10:37). In each instance the surprise ending drives home the moral of the parable.

However, to be successful, a surprise ending requires more than a reversal of the reader's expectations. While he leads the reader along to expect one thing, the writer must subtly introduce details pointing in another direction so that when the ending is revealed the reader's shock is reinforced by a recognition of consistency within the poem. This delicate balance between plausibility and incredibility is maintained superbly by Owen as we shall see if we examine the source and then study his adaptation.

**Abraham Tempted To Sacrifice His Son Isaac**

And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, "Abraham."

And he said, "Behold, here I am."

And he said, "Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of."

And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said unto his young men, "Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you."

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together. And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, "My father." And he said, "Here am I my son."

And he said, "Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"

And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering." So they went both of them together.

And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham."

And he said, "Here am I."

And he said, "Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me."

And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and beheld behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.

**The Sacrifice of Isaac is a masterpiece of compact narration, certainly one of the finest stories in the Bible.**
Abraham receives the command to sacrifice his son, and he obeys promptly, a fact dramatized by the simple phrase "and rose up early in the morning." His unquestioning faith is suggested by the absence of any reference to inner conflict. The story concentrates on outward preparations: saddling the ass and proceeding with the two young men, his son Isaac, the wood, the fire, and the knife. The omission of details of time and place and condition of the journey focuses the reader's attention exclusively on the approaching sacrifice—we are simply told that "on the third day" Abraham recognized the appointed spot. The focus narrows still further when he asks the servants to remain behind while he and Isaac complete the journey. He divides the load with Isaac, giving him the wood and keeping the fire and the knife in his own hands. When Isaac asks about the lamb for the offering, Abraham's answer, "God will provide," reveals his complete trust and his ability to allay Isaac's fears. When they reach the top of the mountain the details of the altar and the movements of Abraham—binding Isaac and reaching for the knife—are depicted with frightening clarity. When the angel intervenes, Abraham again demonstrates his faith. Without being told to do so, he sacrifices a ram whose appearance he apparently considered providential.

In a story as compact as this one (four hundred words), the few repetitions that do occur take on special significance. "Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest" (v. 2) and "Thy son, thine only son" (v. 12) emphasize Abraham's love for his son and thus magnify the horribleness of the temptation. It is well to remember in this connection that Abraham does not know that the command is given to tempt him. The reader is given that information but Abraham proceeds on the assumption that the sacrifice will be consummated. The other repetition—"They went both of them together" (vv. 6 and 8) also serves to emphasize Abraham's attachment to his son.

Such, then, is the story that climaxes and confirms Abraham's long record of obedience to divine law, a story sharply etched on the reader's mind because it is told with such economy and precision.

In converting the story into sixteen lines of anti-war poetry, Owen reduced the story to a third of its length and added a few significant details. His deletions and additions reveal a great deal about the formation of a successful poem.

The Parable of the Old Man and the Young

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went, And took the fire with him, and a knife. And as they sojourned both of them together, Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father, Behold the preparations, fire and iron, But where the lamb for this burnt-offering? Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps, And builded parapets and trenches there, And stretched forth the knife to slay his son. When lo! an angel called him out of heaven, Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad, Neither do anything to him. Behold, A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns; Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him. But the old man would not so, but slew his son, And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

UNDERSTANDABLY Owen changed those details that might remind the reader of Abraham's saintly qualities. He makes no reference to the fact that Abraham acts in obedience to God's

commands. He quotes Isaac's question about the lamb almost verbatim, but he omits Abraham's reply, "My son, God will provide himself a lamb for the burnt offering." Instead of answering his son's question Abraham responds by binding him with belts and straps. The next major change concerns an addition rather than omission. In Genesis the angel that told Abraham to spare his son said nothing about the ram, but in the poem the angel commands Abraham to slay the Ram of Pride. Abraham disobeys and precipitates a world war.

Of major importance is another change introduced by Owen. He changes Abraham's name back to Abram, suggesting a person less wise and less experienced than the devout man of Genesis 22. Abram's name had been changed to Abraham in Genesis 17 to commemorate his faithfulness and the renewal of God's promises of a son, a great progeny, and great prosperity. Using the earlier name, though an anachronism, strips Abraham of some of the superhuman qualities he had acquired at the end of his life and makes him more suitable for the role of war maker in the parable.

Owen's minor changes also contribute to the success of the poem. Iron (1. 5), belts and straps (1. 7), and parapets and trenches (1. 8) are words not found in Genesis but are needed to prepare for the conclusion. Beginning the poem with So may be a faint echo of God's command in Genesis, but its effect may well be to arouse curiosity about the journey. Adding the words sojourn and first-born does not contribute to changes in connotation, but it does help to condense longer passages in the original.

Does the omission of the reminders of Abraham's good qualities reduce the shock and weaken the parable? Not necessarily. Owen could assume that his readers would respond in a traditional manner to a retelling of the familiar story whose central character had become legendary for obedience to God. To make the conclusion plausible enough to produce shock rather than rejection, Owen altered just enough of the details to give the poem a consistent tone.

The tempo of the poem should also be considered. Not only has the story been reduced to a third of its length; the story is retold so rapidly that Abram's actions seem abrupt and cruel, devoid of the spiritual significance they have in Genesis. This pacing becomes all the more effective in view of the fact that many of the cadences of the original story are preserved in the poem. The tempo suggesting the new parable and the cadences suggesting the original story thus prepare for and reinforce the final juxtaposition: a Biblical saint serving as a modern war lord.

Another of Owen's poems that relies heavily on the Bible for its full meaning is "Greater Love." The title is taken from Jesus' discourse with his disciples at the last supper when he said, "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Greater Love
Red lips are not so red
As the stained stones kissed by the
English dead.
Kindness of wooed and wooer
Seems shame to their love pure.
O Love, your eyes lose lure
When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!

Your slender attitude
Trembles not exquisite like limbs
knife-skewed,
Rolling and rolling there
Where God seems not to care;
Till the fierce love they bear
Cramps them in death's extreme decrepitude.

Your voice sings not so soft,—
Though even as wind murmuring
through raftered loft,—
Your dear voice is not dear,
Gentle, and evening clear,
As theirs whom none now hear, 
Now earth has stopped their piteous 
mouths that coughed.

Heart, you were never hot 
Nor large, nor full like hearts made 
great with shot; 
And though your hand be pale, 
Paler are all which trail 
Your cross through flame and hail: 
Weep, you may weep, for you may 
touch them not.

The soldiers, according to Owen, are 
making a mockery of civilian concepts 
of love and beauty and sacrifice. Soldiers 
whose “eyes are blinded in my stead,” 
whose love forces them into “death’s 
extreme decrepitude,” whose coughing 
ceases only when their mouths are 
stopped with earth, whose hearts are 
large and full because they are “made 
great with shot”—they are the ones who 
demonstrate Jesus’ greater love and re-
enact his sacrifice even while they are 
being forced to violate his command 
against murder.

The comparison of the soldiers with 
Jesus in the title and in the heart of the 
poem becomes a complete identification 
in the last line where the soldiers carry 
the cross “through flame and hail,” and 
the young girl, who has served as a foil 
for the soldiers throughout the poem, is 
told that she cannot approximate their 
supreme sacrifice: “Weep, you may 
weep, for you may touch them not.” In 
Luke 23:28, Jesus tells the women who 
are following him to the crucifixion, 
“Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for 
me, but weep for yourselves, and for 
your children.” In both instances the 
sacrifice is of such a nature that weeping 
is futile, even irreverent.

WITH some hesitation I now recom-
mend that other Biblical echoes be 
examined. I hesitate because finding 
alusions and parallels can easily get out of 
hand and impoverish rather than enhance 
the study of literature. As a general 
guide, I suggest that we rule out dis-
cussions of allusions and parallels that 
do not clearly illuminate the poem. If 
we proceed cautiously we can on oc-
casion deepen the student’s experience 
with a poem by bringing in parallels and 
analogues that may or may not be a di-
rect allusion. The question is not, Can I 
prove that the author consciously re-
ferred to this passage, but rather, Will 
I add anything to the students’ enjoy-
ment and understanding of the poem if I 
present other passages of literature 
brought to my mind by something in 
the poem—a scene, a theme, a mood, a 
phrase with unusual word order, the 
rhythm or cadence of a group of words, 
perhaps even a single word.

The depth of Owen’s veneration for 
his fallen comrades (and, conversely, his 
outrage over the war) comes through 
with greater force if we consider the im-
lications of the word touch in the last 
line. Now that the sacrifice of the soldiers 
has been equated with that of Christ, it 
is relevant to recall the significance of 
the word touch in the Gospels. We are 
told that many wanted to touch Jesus 
to be freed from the plague, that others 
wanted to touch him “for there went 
virtue out of him, and healed them all,” 
that he was asked to heal a blind man by 
touching him, that many were healed by 
touching the hem of his garment. Owen 
is saying, by implication, that civilians 
might well experience some cleansing 
themselves if they could touch the true 
nature of the soldiers’ sacrifice, but he 
asserts that civilians cannot hope to un-
derstand or share what the soldiers have 
been through.

Reviewing the prohibitions against 
touching can also enhance the last line. 
After the resurrection Jesus told Mary 
Magdalene, “Touch me not, for I am not 
yet ascended to my Father.” In I Chron-
icles 16:22 David praises God that 
heathen were not permitted to touch the 
Lord’s anointed and in Numbers 4:15 
the sons of Kohath are forbidden to
touch any holy thing in the tabernacle. Because of the rich connotations acquired by the word touch, Owen's prohibition against touching the bodies of the soldiers thus serves to sanctify the soldiers and criticize those to whom the words are addressed.

If the class is receptive and the time is available, the matter of allusions and parallels could be carried still further. The impact of the eighth line, “Where God seems not to care,” can be strengthened by placing it alongside other expressions of loneliness, despair, abandonment by God: Coleridge's Ancient Mariner describing his isolation at sea with “So lone it was that God himself/Scarce seemed there to be”; the exiled Jews weeping by the rivers of Babylon because they cannot sing “the Lord's song in a strange land” (Psalm 137:4); the many cries of despair in the other Psalms when the speaker feels that he has been abandoned by God.

A consensus seems to be developing that “Greater Love” is one of Owen's very best poems. I say this to indicate that many things besides Biblical allusions should be taught in this poem, such as the counterpointing of sexual love and sacrificial love and the dramatic progression from comparison to identification, from a caustic tone to an elegiac tone.

The theme of “Greater Love” reappears in “At a Calvary near the Ancre,” where the soldiers are again depicted as possessing the greater love because they “lay down their life; they do not hate.” According to the poem, Jesus has been deserted by civilian Christians who prosecute the war, but he has found his true disciples among the soldiers.

Advanced students will find many rewards in studying “Strange Meeting,” one of Owen's more difficult poems. It demonstrates the successful use of half-rhymes. It illustrates Owen's skill in merging external and inner dialog. It raises many ethical questions involving both individual soldiers and the larger community. To get the full impact of the poem, teachers will again need to bring in the Bible. When the “enemy” in the poem completes his recital of his attempts to help mankind, he says that he would have been willing to make any sacrifice for others except by means of war.

I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were (lines 37-40).

The reference to the agony of Christ on the Mount of Olives prior to the betrayal—“and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood” (Luke 12:44)—once again links the sacrifice of the soldiers with that of Christ. The allusion suggests that when the speaker in the poem failed to convince mankind to get rid of war, his disappointment was comparable to that of Christ when he was betrayed by his disciples at the conclusion of his ministry.

The phrase “poured my spirit” also has Biblical overtones. It is used several times to express great travail and devotion. Citing a few examples should add significance to the speaker's assertion that he was willing to do anything for humanity. Hannah desired a son so fervently that in her prayers she “poured out her spirit before the Lord” (I Samuel 1:15). To emphasize the extent of his suffering, Job says “and now my soul is poured out upon me” (Job 30:16). In the famous passage on the suffering servant, the prophet says that after enduring many hardships the servant will be rewarded “because he hath poured out his soul to death” (Isaiah 53:12). These passages illustrate once more that poets and others skilled in the use of language can multiply the effectiveness of a passage by using language that has
acquired appropriate connotations in earlier literature.

One of the central problems in the poem is the enemy, the person who speaks all but the first part of the poem. On the literal level he is an enemy soldier, but on the symbolic level he is a part of Owen himself—his alter ego, his conscience, his idealistic self. As we have seen, the enemy has many Christ-like qualities—in the sacrifices he wants to make for others, in his commitment to non-violence, in the reference to foreheads bleeding without wounds. So far so good—the teaching of the poem is improved by citing these parallels. But to go on to say that the enemy is Christ himself, as one critic has done, confuses the reading of the poem. I consider it an example of pushing Biblical allusions to the point where they hinder rather than help the teaching of the poem.

For the sake of completeness I will mention briefly Owen's other uses of the Bible. "Sonnet: on seeing a piece of our artillery brought into action" begins with the words "Be slowly lifted up, thou long black arm," a parody of the words of Jesus to Nicodemus: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:14-15) and of Jesus' words to his disciples: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32). The parody succeeds because it serves Owen's purpose of showing how armaments have become the false gods of the warmakers. Armaments have a fatal attraction for man; he sees in them his way to salvation. The hubris in such thinking is suggested in the allusion to the Tower of Babel in the second line: "Great gun towering towards Heaven."

"Insensibility" begins with "Happy are the men who yet before they are killed/Can let their veins run cold," an echo of "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly" (Psalm 1:1) and probably of "happy is the man whom God correcteth" (Job 5:17). The juxtaposition of solemn Biblical admonitions with situations of war again helps Owen express his outrage over the effects of war on the human spirit.

In summary we can say that Owen uses the Bible to exalt the suffering of the soldiers, sometimes to the level of the passion of Christ, but he also uses the Bible satirically to shock his readers into seeing the hypocrisy of their endorsement of war. We can also say that when an understanding of Biblical allusions and parallels illuminates a work of literature, extended digressions in pursuit of their meaning and function are justified in the cause of improving the teaching of literature. Finally, if the poems mentioned above arouse any interest in Owen at all, they might well be supplemented with poems by Owen that do not allude to the Bible. I would recommend especially "The Send-Off," "Arms and the Boy," "Insensibility," "S.I.W.," "Mental Cases," "Fertility," "Disabled," "The Next War," "Miners," "Inspection," and "Spring Offensive"—all of which are found in The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, a New Directions Paperbook.

Note: Richard Burton's reading of eighteen of Owen's poems is now available on Warner Bros. record B1635, the original soundtrack from the motion picture THE DAYS OF WILFRED OWEN.