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# From Pity to Reportage: The Evolving Voice of British War Poets from Wilfred Owen to Keith Douglas in the World Wars [In English]

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the paradigmatic evolution of British war poetry by tracing the aesthetic and ethical transition from Wilfred Owen's emotionally charged testimonial poetics of the First World War to Keith Douglas's observational and detached style emerging from the Second World War, thereby revealing a fundamental historical redefinition of the poet's moral and cultural function in representing modern conflict. Through an interpretive, comparative methodology integrating biographical context with stylistic analysis, the research demonstrates that Owen's lyrical realism—marked by intense sensory imagery, dissonant pararhyme, and the concept of "the pity of war"—sought to dismantle patriotic illusions and expose the industrialized slaughter of modern warfare. His verse functions as both elegy and ethical protest: the poet bearing witness to dehumanization through visceral language that demands moral response. By contrast, Douglas, writing within a socio-historical context already aware of the Great War's disillusionment, consciously rejected sentimental rhetoric, developing an "extrospective" poetics grounded in detached observation and moral ambiguity. His concise, imagistic diction transforms the poet from a participant-witness into a clinical observer, reflecting wartime modernity's desensitized consciousness shaped by mechanized combat and media saturation. The juxtaposition of Owen's moral immediacy and Douglas's disciplined reticence highlights a shift from revelation to documentation, from moral instruction to interpretive independence, echoing the twentieth century's broader epistemological transition from Romantic idealism to empirical realism. Textual evidence from Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est," "Anthem for Doomed Youth," and "Exposure," alongside Douglas's "Vergissmeinnicht" and "How to Kill," reveals divergent approaches to representing trauma—Owen's evocation of pity and communal suffering


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versus Douglas's unemotional precision and awareness of human fragility within impersonal violence. The study argues that this evolution exemplifies the movement of war poetry from the moral witness tradition to a modern documentary mode, marking a redefinition of poetic ethics in response to collective historical trauma. Ultimately, the transformation from Owen's compassionate intensity to Douglas's controlled detachment encapsulates the moral and aesthetic trajectory of twentieth-century British war poetry, wherein the poet transitions from empathetic expositor to analytical recorder, renegotiating the boundaries between art, ethics, and historical testimony.

**Keywords:** Wilfred Owen, Keith Douglas, War Poetry, Reportage, Extrospective, Poetic Voice.



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## Introduction

War poetry is perhaps the most striking and most enduring literary response to the carnage of the twentieth century. Arising out of the unparalleled bloodshed of the First World War and carried on into the Second, it provided soldier-poets with a means of recording the unexpurgated truth of combat while attempting to make sense of its moral and psychological dimensions. It is in the British tradition that no two have more accurately charted this course than Wilfred Owen, the greatest First World War poet, and Keith Castellain Douglas, his most brilliant heir in the Second. Both were volunteers who had witnessed the battlefield with their own eyes and whose lives were cut short in their early twenties—Owen at the end of 1918, Douglas on active service in the Normandy campaign in 1944. Both renounced idealized notions of soldierly honor in favor of plain realism; the difference lies in method—Owen's engaged, moralized realism seeks to elicit pity, while Douglas's clinical realism adopts a detached, reportorial stance that delegates emotional judgment to the reader.

This research paper argues that between Owen and Douglas, the voice of the British war poet shifted from that of an emotional witness to that of a distant reporter. Owen, writing for a home front filled with patriotic feeling and backed by jingoistic propaganda, felt it his moral duty to dispel illusions and present himself before his readers with "the pity of War." His poetry is subjective, spontaneous, and morally robust, designed to shock and offend in order to arouse sympathy. It borrowed from a Romantic tradition, but applied it to the needs of modern barbarity, Owen writing as though every sentence could be employed to save a life by destroying the "old Lie" of heroic sacrifice.

Douglas already had an audience well experienced in the atrocities of warfare in the modern world. His Britain was one that lived in the shade of the Somme and Passchendaele, where entire towns had lost their sons, and where there was a war memorial in almost every village. The introduction of radio, newsreels, and photojournalism had further stripped battle of mystery. Douglas admired Owen but had no duty to second his warnings; rather, he assumed an "extrospective" mood—detached, watchful, analytical—"informing" war's brutal realities without overt emotional guidance. His writing is lean, straightforward and unflinching, documenting the mechanisms of survival and killing with the objectivity of a field report, leaving it to the reader to come to terms with its meaning without the poet's emotional mediation.

Their differences were not entirely matters of temperament, but results of their own times. Owen's England was still viewing the battlefield through the Victorian ideals of heroism and imperial pride, something he chose to break down with unflinching depictions of mud, gas, and maiming. Douglas's Britain, two decades later, had already been hardened by the disillusionment of the Great War but now faced an even more industrialized and internationalized world war. The war poet's task had changed: no longer to prophesy for the unenlightened, but to record for a public already informed. Mass media technologies—newsreels, radio broadcasts, and widely circulated wartime photography—had by the Second World War made images of combat more immediate and collective than they had been in 1914–18, changing popular expectations about what literature needed to supply.

Putting Owen and Douglas against one another thus exposes not only the continuities of British war poetry, but how it is reformed through the pressures of cultural memory, shifting media milieux, and shifting moral imperatives for literature in war. Owen's appeal to sympathy occurred in a culture still infected with propaganda and ignorance of war, whereas Douglas's bluntly reportorial style is the mark of a desensitized culture less gullible of self-consciously moralized discourse. Their break suggests a broader redefinition of the authority of the war poet: from interpreter and advocate for the agony of the soldier to witness with clinical precision that cannot be easily interpreted.

In order to follow the evolution, the paper initially locates Owen and Douglas within the biographical and cultural frames of their existence, establishing how their lived lives predetermined their own poetic agendas. It then applies a twofold biographical and naturalistic methodology to analyze their poetry, recording the impact of external



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pressures, the times they wrote in, and personal belief on their poetic voice. The criticism proceeds in two large comparative halves: initially, an analysis of Owen's affective realism and commitment to pity; subsequently, an analysis of Douglas's "extrospective" detachment and commitment to reportage. An ultimate synthesis threads together these threads to argue that the transition from pity to reportage is not merely a stylistic shift, but an evolutionary imperative in the public position of the war poet—one which represents the broader realignment of twentieth-century sensibility towards modern war.

Understanding this change from cherished Owen to journalistic Douglas requires a contextual critique that considers both the very personal nature of their experiences and the broader cultural and historical forces that shaped them. As both men wrote their iconic poems in direct adjacency to war, their writing cannot be separated from their experiences in it. At the same time, their different moments in history—Owen's in the horror of industrial slaughter in 1914–18, Douglas's in a world already accustomed to it—engendered different artistic necessities. Accordingly, the present research is based on a combined biographical and naturalistic approach, which allows us to map how the individual experiences of the war, social origin, and literary traditions they had inherited shaped the evolution of the British war poet's voice across two generations of conflict. In doing so, this research contributes to additional understanding of the manner in which literature reflects and reframes war's cultural meaning, that Owen's "pity" and Douglas's "reportage" remain vital coordinates in the infinite dialogue between history and poetry.

This study thus examines how the British war poet's voice evolved between the two World Wars by focusing on the contrasting poetics of Wilfred Owen and Keith Douglas. The research is guided by the following questions: how does Owen's emotionally charged voice of pity differ from Douglas's detached voice of reportage in representing the experience of modern warfare?
in what ways does this transition reflect a broader cultural shift in the poet's role—from moral witness to objective observer—within twentieth-century British war literature?

It is assumed that the shift from pity to reportage mirrors a transformation in the moral and aesthetic function of the war poet: from emotional advocacy that seeks to elicit sympathy (Owen) to analytical documentation that transfers interpretive responsibility to the reader (Douglas).



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## Theoretical Framework

This reading of Wilfred Owen and Keith Douglas is based on an interaction between biographical and naturalistic literary approaches—two views that are particularly suited to the study of soldier-poets whose verse arises directly out of combat experience. War poetry is not a detached or purely aesthetic process; it is conditioned by the proximate necessities of setting, circumstance, and writer's confrontation with death. In Owen and Douglas's work, these forces were imbricated in their art, affecting not only what they wrote, but how and why. Their poems are thus readable as an intersection of personal experience and larger historical conditions, an intersection that demands a form able to take account of both personal and environmental determinants of meaning.

The biographical approach is still of value in situating Owen and Douglas in their period and individualistic settings. Biographical criticism is based on the assumption that a writer's actual experience leaves an indelible imprint on the work, and with soldier-poets, this connection is unusually transparent. As Jon Silkin writes in *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War*, war poetry is not descriptive but testimonial, the product of the conflict between personal experience and collective trauma (Silkin, 1972, p. 22). Owen's war experience during the First World War placed him at the center of the unprecedented carnage of trench warfare, in which gas attacks, barbed wire, and witnessing mutilated bodies redefined the soldier's encounter with life and death. His own work is unthinkable without an understanding of his moral agenda: to penetrate the wartime patriotic jingoism of the home front and reveal what he famously called "the pity of War."

By contrast, Douglas's own personal history falls within a generation already shaped in cultural memory of the Great War. His Normandy and North Africa experience put him in a more mechanized, more cosmopolitan, and more familiar theatre of war to his readers. His writing is thus a chronicle not of the need to enlighten the uninformed but to put into words with unvarnished realism a known reality. The biographical method thus provides the groundwork that is necessary for an understanding of their respective poetic strategies as a result of generational experience and consciousness of history.

The naturalist method presents a different structure beyond the single individual to inquire about how environment and impersonal forces organize soldier and text. With roots in the writing of Émile Zola, naturalism is interested in determinism. Human beings are often portrayed as helpless before chance, heredity, and the overwhelming

power of environment. As Northrop Frye has indicated in *Anatomy of Criticism*, naturalism "tends to reduce characters to functions of setting" (Frye, 1957, p. 34), and it is readily adapted to the battlefield, where human agency is translated into the operations of war. Owen's poetry recreates this naturalistic vision with a haunted clarity: soldiers are victims of man-made and natural brutality—translated into "cattle" in *"Anthem for Doomed Youth"*, or slain not only by shells but by the "merciless iced east winds" in Exposure. Formally, his pioneering use of pararhyme throughout his work reinforces this determinism by refusing the neat, resolved closure of traditional verse, mirroring the chaotic and unresolved nature of a world governed by chance and brutality.

Douglas, more in line with an attention to dehumanization, proceeds further in the direction of clinical observation, presenting soldiers as replaceable bodies in the war machine. In poems such as "Vergissmeinnicht", his language equates men to "ants," stripping away identity in a bid to accentuate their diminution to anonymous victims of warfare mechanized. In turn, Douglas's "lean writing" and unflinching syntax reflect a naturalistic commitment to raw documentation, presenting the soldier as a mere function of the environment with minimal poetic mediation. According to Santanu Das in *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, modern war has a tendency to erode individuality through imposing distance between body, machine, and land (Das, 2005, p. 91). Douglas's "extrospective" style may be seen, then, as a naturalism carried further into the mid-twentieth century: a refusal of lyric subjectivity to uninvolved reporting.

Unlike Owen, who was influenced by the late Romantics and Sassoon, Douglas's style was shaped by his pre-war studies at Oxford, where he engaged with poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, absorbing Modernist sensibilities that favored detachment and a more objective lens. Crucially, his service as a forward reconnaissance officer in the North Africa Campaign (specifically El Alamein) exposed him to a new type of mechanized, impersonal warfare that profoundly dictated his shift from the lyrical to the clinical. This background is vital to understanding his commitment to what he termed the 'extrospective' approach.

Taken together, these methods give us an even more complete scheme of interpretation. The biographical approach explains why Owen and Douglas wrote as they did—their sense of responsibility, their publics, and their own experiences of violence. The naturalistic approach makes it clear the way they represent the battlefield as a world governed by powers beyond human control. While biography places the poets in their mission-driven generations, naturalism indicates how much their poetry





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aligns with the overall reason of modern war: the abstraction of the individual into a thing of a mechanized universe. Naturalism's concern with determinism is reflected not only in imagery but in formal technique. In Owen, pararhyme, sudden caesurae, and unexpected enjambments work audibly to prevent closure, making resolution impossible and thereby dramatizing the sense that individual will is overwhelmed by external forces. In Douglas, terse declarative sentences, frequent enjambment that propels the line without lyrical punctuation, and sparse, documentary diction function like forensic notes: form becomes a method of extrospection, converting lyric into field-recording rather than elegy.

It is clearly seen in biography how the various moments in history conditioned the poets' rhetorical position—Owen's impassioned witness against Douglas's uninterested recorder. We see in naturalism how the two poets, despite their tonal distinction, shared a war-consciousness of dehumanizing machinery because they translated it into conflicting aesthetic shapes. As Paul Fussell famously asserted in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, literature of the two world wars evidences an ongoing conversation between memory, cultural expectation, and brutal fact of combat (Fussell, 1975, p. 174). By synthesizing naturalism and biography, Owen and Douglas are not alone but set within the broader literary response to modern war.

Lastly, this theoretical perspective allows for a richer appreciation of the development of the role of the war poet over two generations of conflict. In reading Owen and Douglas from the double lens of biography and naturalism, the work locates their poetry as cultural witness as well as aesthetic form—an emerging genre of witness influenced by changing soldier-society relations and by literary representation of conflict. It is this intercession—between the personal and the historical, the emotional and the clinical—that makes Owen and Douglas important bookends for a revolutionary era of British war poetry.

## Literature Review

Critically there has been a long understanding of the disparity between the styles of Wilfred Owen's poetry and Keith Douglas's, but few studies have expressed the distinctions in terms of an overt design for change in the position of the British war poet. Much of the debate about Owen concerns his role as poet of pity, solidly located in the Romantic tradition but himself writing about the technological horrors of modern warfare. Allen Tomlinson situates Owen's poetry in the Shelleyan tradition, seeing



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in his poetry the Romantic concern with moral truth and the restorative power of art (Tomlinson, 1993, p. 83). This Romantic heritage shaped his application of metaphor, tone, and imagery to unite beauty and horror in heightening his anti-war. Daniel Hipp also holds that Owen's poetry acted as psychological therapy for the poet to cope with both his individual trauma and the ethical issue of having killed people. Esther Sánchez-Pardo expands upon this view by commenting that Owen's poetry's cathartic power lies in its capacity to affect the reader's simultaneous experience of horror and pity—practically the duality Owen defined when he claimed his theme was "the pity of War." Paul Fussell's seminal *The Great War and Modern Memory* also places Owen's writing in the deconstruction of honor and glory fantasies, setting him in the literary reinvention of modern war.

While Owen's position in this tradition is firmly fixed, Keith Douglas scholarship always positions him as a detached poet. Mac Hammond's early description of Douglas as a "detached soldier-poet" remains essential, followed by later critics noting his detached, observing style (Hammond, 1952, p. 356). Fran Brearton points out Douglas's careful avoidance of what she calls "Owenesque pity and suffering," claiming that his rejection of obvious sentiment is a self-conscious departure from the emotionalism of his predecessors. Laurie James Laker expounds on this direct comparison with the comment that Douglas "trusts his readers far more than Owen does" by writing down the same war conditions without instructing them how to feel. His "extrospective" tone allows the battlefield to tell its own story, reducing the poet's role to that of a chronicler, rather than an interpreter. Adam Piette also finds Douglas's reliance upon "documentary accuracy," noting that his refusal to moralize is already an ethical stance, compelling the reader into immediate confrontation with things war.

Several studies refer to the influence Owen had on Douglas but usually in a passing manner and not as part of an overall comparative discussion. Desmond Graham, Douglas's biographer, does acknowledge Owen's influence but adds that Douglas consciously shunned imitating his style for fear that any imitator of a generation already conversant with the horrors of war would be otiose. Barry Spurr furthermore opines on this divergence, suggesting that Douglas's reserve was not a sign of emotional lack but a strategic move to increase the reader's investment in war's bodily and moral truth (Spurr, 2004, p. 19). Guy Cuthbertson more recently has highlighted the cultural saturation of Owen's reputation in Britain in the mid-twentieth century and how inevitably this would have shaped Douglas's determination to create an independent poetic persona.



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Though these critics have thoroughly examined the stylistic contrast between Owen's passionate eyewitness account and Douglas's objective reporting, the implications of the shift have been studied less often and in less detail. Contemporary criticism usually comes at their differences in terms of temperament or taste, not as means of responding to new historical and cultural demands. As Santanu Das has persuasively argued in a longer study of the literature of war, the material and psychic conditions of modern combat cannot be dissociated from the cultural modes through which they are mediated. But in comparative studies of Owen and Douglas, this contextual approach has remained under-explored.

Placing Owen and Douglas alongside contemporaries strengthens the claim that voice-shifts respond to broader currents. For World War I, poets such as Siegfried Sassoon and Ivor Gurney share Owen's ethical anger and elegiacism; for the Second World War, writers like Henry Reed and John Pudney display tendencies toward reportage, documentary tone, or ironic distance. This comparative frame suggests that Douglas's detachment is not wholly idiosyncratic but resonates with a mid-century move toward documentary plainness in wartime verse.

This paper extends previous comparative work by situating their stylistic divergence within shifting cultural and media contexts. Owen wrote for a public that was still entwined with romanticized illusions of war; Douglas wrote to a public already desensitized to such fictions, requiring not a warning but an unremitting report. By presenting their stylistic divergence as a movement in time, it is possible to appreciate the manner in which the literature of the twentieth-century conflict evolved to accommodate the shifting needs of its readership. By placing Owen and Douglas not simply as two conflicting figures but as figures from consecutive cultural periods, this book contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the war poet's evolving role both as eye-witness and chronicler of modern conflict.

## The Voice of Pity: Wilfred Owen's Poetic Mission

Wilfred Owen's poetic voice was forged in explicit counterpoint to the dominant culture of his time. In the early years of the First World War, the British home front was sustained by an idealized vision of military service, aided by jingoistic poetry from poets such as Jessie Pope, whose patriotic verse romanticized fighting as a glorious adventure. As did numerous men of his generation, Owen himself was initially spurred by such propaganda to enlist. The reality he discovered in the trenches—





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endless mud, mass-produced death, and the mental disintegration of his comrades—shattered this illusion. It was in the wake of this disillusionment that Owen declared his intent with precision: his poetry would do the opposite of glorifying war, but would rather bear witness to "War, and the pity of War."

This compassion was not sentimental weakness but a moral stance founded on realism. Owen believed the most appropriate response to the war was to represent its reality. His poetry is therefore both "realistically and rather emotionally" charged, combining painstaking physical detail with a moral imperative to shock his readers into awareness. In "Dulce et Decorum Est", the first image—soldiers "Bent double, like old beggars under sacks" (Owen, 1965, p. 55)—self-consciously strips away heroic imagery, replacing the language of dignity with the language of degradation. The subsequent gas attack scene, with a soldier "gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs," (Owen, 1965, p. 56) forces readers to bear witness to the intimacy of death, making pity inevitable.

Owen's other poetry indicates how completely pity dominated his aesthetic. In "Anthem for Doomed Youth", the mechanized slaughter of soldiers is rendered in the language of ritual: "What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?" (Owen, 1965, p. 53) The comparison of "cattle" reduces soldiers to slaughtered animals, depriving them of individuality and dignity. Yet Owen's compassion restores another sort of dignity—his lament is an elegy, offering symbolic rites where actual rites were absent. Similarly, in *Exposure*, the bitter winter is as lethal as the enemy's firepower, the "mad gusts" (Owen, 1965, p. 59) pulling on the wire clowning men into powerless victims of nature's indifference. In both poems, Owen depicts soldiers not as instruments of heroism but as bodies subject to forces—artillery, weather, indifference—that destroy individuality. His pity thus adheres closely to the naturalistic vision of men trapped in worlds they cannot control. In *Exposure*, the soldiers' fate is sealed not by enemy action but by the indifferent brutality of the weather, emphasizing their deterministic powerlessness. This emotional commitment to the soldier as a tragic figure is further seen in poems like "The Send-Off," (Owen, 1965, p. 77) where Owen employs classical symbolism and lament to elevate the doomed men—a profoundly Romantic gesture—reinforcing his role as an elegist and emotional witness.

This ethical undertaking is embedded not only in his subject but in his very form. Owen's pioneering use of pararhyme—the pairing of words with similar consonants but different vowels (e.g., groaned/groined, hall/Hell)—creates a sense of unresolved dissonance. The rhymes are



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close but "off," refusing the neat, satisfying closure of traditional verse. This formal choice is a reflection of his thematic purpose: just as there can be no neat resolution for the tormented soldier, there can be no straightforward harmony in the poem. The clashing sound of his lines becomes an audible figure for a world disrupted, making the reader hear the brokenness that he depicts.

A focused close reading of Dulce et Decorum Est shows how Owen's formal choices choreograph pity. The sustained pararhyme in the gas-attack sequence (for example, the consonantal echoes in "gargling" and "froth-corrupted") creates sonic dissonance that unsettles expectation, while the final apostrophic address— "My friend, you would not tell with such high zest"—forces moral alignment by speaking directly to the reader. Similarly, in Anthem for Doomed Youth the juxtaposition of liturgical diction with the image of soldiers as "cattle" stages a formal inversion that converts elegiac conventions into a moral indictment.

What distinguishes Owen's pity is the active work it performs in controlling reader response. His poetry does not merely describe but prescribes the feelings of its readers, ensuring the desired reaction of pity, indignation, or grief. As Daniel Hipp has maintained, Owen's poetry was a therapy—for reader and writer alike—by translating trauma into language designed to call forth empathetic understanding (Hipp, 2002, p. 38). Strange Meeting, generally considered his masterpiece, dramatizes this work: the speaker engages in a conversation with a dead enemy soldier, who speaks to him, "I am the enemy you killed, my friend." (Owen, 1965, p. 58) Pity here breaches national boundaries, collapsing the distinction between Self and Other. Thus, Owen redefines war poetry not simply as testimony but as moral lessons: his pity compels his readers to confront the human expense of the war.

Here is a basic difference from Douglas: where Owen controls the reader's emotional reaction, Douglas will deny his own emotional signals, permitting the reader to interpret occurrences independent of authorial prompting.

**The Voice of Reportage: Keith Douglas and the "Extrospective" Eye**

By the time Keith Douglas enlisted in the Second World War, the literary and cultural context had changed drastically. Douglas's formation as a poet was shaped by his pre-war education and battlefield role. At Oxford he read Modernist poets and critics whose compact, allusive methods encouraged restrained diction; on active service he served as a forward reconnaissance officer in North Africa (including El Alamein)



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and later fought in Normandy, experiences that demanded precise observational reporting under pressure. These intellectual and military conditions together predisposed him toward an "extrospective" stance that privileges outward description over inward moralising.

The horrors of the Great War were engraved on the public mind; newsreels, radio, and photographs had separated combat from any romantic connotations. For Douglas's generation, the problem was not so much what war was like, but how to respond to its reality without succumbing either to propaganda or to sentiment.

Douglas acknowledged the authority of Owen but consciously tried not to fall into the "Owenesque pity" that had marked First World War poetry. To his mind, that emotional ground had been covered with such totality that it would be redundant to revisit it. Douglas set out instead to "analyze and explain what he saw," adopting a style he referred to as "extrospective"—a gaze outward into the physical facts of war, rather than inward into personal emotion. This was a deliberate shift away from the emotionally charged testimony of Owen and toward the dispassionate, observational voice of reportage.

In "Vergissmeinnicht", Douglas stumbles upon the decaying body of a German soldier weeks after a battle. The image is shown without comment: the corpse is "sprawling in the sun," its "burst stomach like a cave," with a "dishonoured picture of his girl" beside it (Douglas, 2011, p. 82). The imagery is stark, uncompromising, and unframed by morality. The reader can opt to pity, be repelled by, or be indifferent to it. By not prescribing the emotional response, Douglas puts the full interpretive burden on the audience—a strategy that demands active engagement and, paradoxically, can make the experience more unsettling than Owen's guided sympathies. The poetic "I" in Douglas's verse is less engaged in an emotional drama and more a lens, focusing the reader's attention on those details a camera would capture.

Douglas's lineation often withholds closure, driving the reader forward through enjambment while denying a consolatory cadence. In Vergissmeinnicht his images are delivered in compact units that snap back against one another, the enjambment creating a camera-like focus that isolates detail rather than resolving it into moral commentary. In How to Kill the short, clipped lines and plain verbs carry a procedural rhythm, transforming violent acts into recorded sequence and reinforcing the poem's forensic distance.

Other poems corroborate the extrospective method. In *How to Kill*, Douglas describes the act of shooting an enemy with clinical precision: the victim is reduced to "a sort of option," a character who "turns into a





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ball of dust." (Douglas, 2011, p. 82) The language is stripped of sympathy, conveying death as a technical process and not a moral crisis. Similarly, in Cairo Jag, Douglas portrays the desert war zone with unsentimental accuracy, noting that soldiers "live on rumours, scraps of news," (Douglas, 2011, p. 87) their individuality overwhelmed by the grinding machinery of logistics and survival. Critics such as Fran Brearton have implied that this reticence is not an absence of feeling but a strategic aesthetic, one that is suited to the historical moment: a readership already familiar with atrocity no longer required emotional guidance, but trusted in its own interpretive ability (Brearton, 2001, p. 10).

Douglas's clinical objectivity is never more apparent than in *How to Kill*, which describes the act of killing with surgical precision. His characteristic use of unadorned language, short declarative lines, and frequent enjambment—where lines run over without punctuation—reinforces this sense of detached, objective reportage, compelling the reader forward through the action without the lyrical pause or emotional mediation typical of Owen's verse. This technical approach ensures the focus remains on the event itself, leaving the emotional weight entirely with the reader.

Douglas's detachment should therefore not be mistaken for indifference. His "lyric-cynic" mode, as Adam Piette has described it, is a calculated aesthetic approach, designed to present war as it is rather than as it might be lived (Piette, 1995, p. 58). The style is consonant with his cultural context: Britain in 1944 was already braced for mourning, saturated with visions of destruction, and wary of the consolatory rhetoric that had followed the First World War. Douglas did not attempt to arouse conscience but to direct perception, setting war before us as a sequence of facts needing interpretation rather than pity.

**From Prophecy to Post-Mortem: A Shift in Poetic Gaze**

This historical and naturalistic pressure, however, should not be read as total determinism. Individual temperament and conscious aesthetic decisions also matter: Owen's moral pedagogy and Douglas's forensic restraint are both ethical poises chosen by poets who weighed obligations to readership, craft, and conscience. Acknowledging agency alongside structural influence permits us to view stylistic evolution as negotiation rather than fate. The evolution from Owen to Douglas is ultimately a progression from the subjective experience of suffering to the objective recording of fact. Owen's speaker is an empathic participant whose





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personal suffering becomes a universal occasion for pity. His is a moralizing gaze; he looks at the gassed soldier in "Dulce et Decorum Est" and speaks to the reader directly: "My friend, you would not tell with such high zest / To children ardent for some desperate glory, / The old Lie." He interprets the horror for us, ensuring we make the "right" moral judgment. His is the voice of a prophet, condemning a blind society for its sins.

Douglas's speaker, by contrast, is a detached coroner. He has a forensic glance. In "Vergissmeinnicht", he gazes upon the dead soldier and comments on the physical evidence: the decay, the gun, the photograph, and the lover's inscription, which has "survived the lover." The poem concludes not in a moral lesson, but in the cold, factual irony of the scene. Douglas performs a post-mortem, laying out the evidence and allowing the reader to determine the cause and meaning of this death. He is relying on us to feel the pity, or outrage, or numb shock, on our own.

This evolution is concurrent with the movement from Romantic-colored testimony to modernist reportage. Where Owen had laden his poetry with moral urgency and symbolic resonance, Douglas pared his style down to factual report, mirroring the more documentary role of literature in a mass media-dominated age. As Desmond Graham observes, Douglas's eschewal of pity was not indifference but recognition that the public sphere had changed: war poetry could no longer be revelation, but record (Graham, 2012, p. 182).

The movement away from guided emotional response towards reader-controlled interpretation is thus at the heart of the evolution this paper strives to map. By employing a combined biographical and naturalistic methodology, we discover that Owen's compassion arises from his position as a soldier writing to a society still committed to the romance of war, while Douglas's journalism is the result of a generation already accustomed to atrocity. Remade, each poet in his own way, the task of war poetry for his time—and together they show us the development of the war poet's voice from prophet of pain to coroner of its aftermath.

Beyond its literary significance, this study illustrates how war poetry functions as a cultural document that registers changing moral and psychological attitudes toward violence. By tracing the movement from Owen's compassionate testimony to Douglas's detached observation, the paper contributes to our understanding of how artistic voice mediates between personal trauma and collective history. The findings suggest that poetic representation can shape readers' moral perception of warfare, transforming empathy and detachment into historical awareness. This



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insight underscores the continuing pedagogical value of war poetry in revealing how language and form negotiate ethical engagement in times of crisis.

## Conclusion

The transition from Wilfred Owen's war poetry of sympathy in the First World War to Keith Douglas's poetry of reportage in the Second World War is more than a stylistic difference between two great war poets. It is a change in the war poet's role within culture, one which reflects broader changes in Britain's relationship with modern warfare. Owen's voice was heard when the world was yet to be seduced by patriotic myths, and when the home front had no idea of the physical and psychic devastation in the trenches. His task was therefore pedagogic and ethical: to puncture propaganda with unbending realism and to enforce sympathy through measured emotional investment. As Dominic Hibberd states, Owen's poetry was as political as it was poetic and was written to unpick the false consciousness that underpinned the war (Hibberd, 2002, p. 211). Owen's poetry subjects the reader to coldly crafted images of terror so that the actual nature of war cannot be read as glorious or noble.

Twenty years later, Douglas was to inherit a world already drenched in the memory of the Great War and assailed by the grim imagery of global conflict in the new media. For such an audience, the role of war poetry was no longer to warn but to record. Douglas's "extrospective" manner, with its commitment to precise external observation and its refusal to dictate an emotional response, is an answer to this. His own poetry depends upon the reader to navigate themselves through the moral landscape, offering an unmediated report rather than a lesson. Some critics such as Desmond Graham have emphasized that Douglas saw himself less as a "recorder of fact" than as a moral teacher, withholding from himself the desire to explain. Along the way, Douglas makes the war poet into a reporter providing testimony and allowing judgment to the reader.

This shift from pity to reportage marks growing maturity in war poetry during the twentieth century. Owen gave voice to the awfulness of industrial warfare, creating a paradigm of empathy and moral outrage that redefined the ability to portray war in poetry. Douglas, building on that foundation, stripped away even the traces of authorial rhetoric, allowing the brutal facts of the battlefield to speak for themselves. Along the way, they trace the path of a literary tradition breaking out of the emotional lament of revelation to the hard, uncompromising gaze of documentation.



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At one level, the evolution between them mirrors the overall cultural process of innocence giving way to stark familiarity with the conditions of modern warfare, one marked by growing ubiquity of mass media and popularization of mechanized violence in the public imagination.

By following this evolution, we see how the voice of each of these poets was shaped by his era and how both responded with a realism that would not sentimentalize war. Owen's pity and Douglas's reportage, though distinct in tone and style, are similar in purpose: to confront war's reality. The difference is one of where they leave the reader—Owen leading them to the moral center, Douglas forcing them to find it for themselves. That shift not only remakes the war poet's mission but also challenges us, as readers, to consider how we handle the continuing shadow of war in an era when its images are intimate and inescapable. As Paul Fussell reminds us in The Great War and Modern Memory, war poetry is always politically engaged, never an anthropological examination of the battlefield alone; it's about the cultural work of memory. From this view, Owen and Douglas do not just sit as poets of their wars but as voices in an ongoing literary debate about how societies explain violence, trauma, and memory.

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