

## POLITICAL, MORAL, AND EXISTENTIAL NIHILISM IN WILFRED OWEN'S POEM "THE DEAD-BEAT"<sup>1</sup>

This paper analyzes "The Dead-Beat", a war poem by Wilfred Owen, from the perspective of nihilism, or its three specific kinds (political, moral, and existential nihilism), as Alan Pratt, a theoretician and researcher of nihilistic philosophy, categorized this notion. According to Pratt, political nihilism refers to the idea that current political structures are false, moral nihilism means that good and evil are relative categories, whereas existential nihilism means that human life is intrinsically devoid of any higher (teleological) purpose, and as such not worth living. Through the misfortunate demise of "The Dead-Beat's" protagonist on the WWI Western Front, the poet advocates all three kinds of nihilism, for, as the paper argues, the poem's tragic hero does not die of a wound but as a result of his revelation that the existence of an individual human being or soldier, especially if trapped in the trenches of history's first mechanized war and abandoned by both his state leadership and his closest kin, is meaningless (and it is precisely in this fact that the presence of political, moral, and existential nihilism lies). This paper views "The Dead-Beat's" nihilism in contrast with the ideology of materialistic progressivism as propounded by both positivist philosophers and liberal theologians of the nineteenth century. Apart from dealing with the tragic hero's mental derangement as the cause of his death, I also stress irony as a particular quality of "The Dead-Beat" and also of Owen's complete poetic war opus.

**Keywords:** Wilfred Owen, the First World War, war poetry, political nihilism, moral nihilism, existential nihilism, irony, dehumanization, alienation.

### 1. Introduction

Although the nineteenth century was the peak of Western Civilization's optimism, with its belief in the predetermined progress and success of the human race (predetermined either by God, as it was held by liberal

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theologians, or by nature, as it was theorized by the positivists Auguste Comte [1798–1857] and Herbert Spencer [1820–1903]), the period per se was far from being marked by intellectual unanimity. Simultaneously with and in stark opposition to the optimistic philosophies of the day, whether metaphysical-secular or purely secular,<sup>2</sup> the nineteenth century also gave rise to an emphatically pessimistic school of thought, a philosophical system which was unofficially established by the aesthete Nietzsche [1844–1900] and the anarchist Bakunin [1814–1876], and at the core of which was the idea that all values – political, moral and existential – are baseless, so that intrinsically the world has no other meanings and purposes other than those artificially read into it by the sheer will and cognitive activity of human beings (Pratt). This kind of ideology was known as nihilism, and, as the upcoming events of the twentieth century were to show, its destiny was to grow from relative obscurity in the second half of the nineteenth century, as still marked by the prevalence of Christian and bourgeois optimism, into the prevailing philosophical stance of the Western World, the emergence of Sartre [1905–1980] and Camus's [1913–1960] existentialism in the 1940s and 50s being of particular importance in that respect (Pratt).

The outbreak of the First World War can by all means be regarded as the turning-point in the struggle between optimism and pessimism, which was just about the time immediately preceding the ominous Sarajevo assassination of Austria's Archduke Franz Ferdinand [1863–1914] (i.e. the final decade of the nineteenth century, otherwise known as *fin de siècle*,

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2 I use 'purely secular' to denote Comte's and Spencer's anthropocentric evolutionism as a philosophy which rejected the question of God's existence and so argued that the evolutionary laws of nature, though possibly not created by a deity, are inherently benevolent to the human race, while my phrase 'metaphysical-secular' refers to the liberal interpretations of the Holy Bible which, over the course of the nineteenth century, were particularly popular among the Protestant denominations of Christianity (in Britain and North America), and which virtually accepted the (Deistic) idea that the allegedly "utopian" technocracy of the industrial, capitalist civilization was, due to its increasing material wealth and its ever-lessening frequency of large-scale wars, the initial phase of the New Jerusalem (McGrath, 2013: 196). The latter view, as being based on the belief that God desires a material utopia in this world, differed from the literal interpretation of the New Testament, according to which material wealth had nothing to do with the Kingdom of Heaven as a transcendental (immaterial) utopia and according to which that Kingdom (i.e. the New Jerusalem) was supposed to be realized in a new world, one that would succeed the old, sinful one, following its apocalyptic destruction.

when the camp of the pessimists was joined by such, scientifically and aesthetically oriented, thinkers as T. H. Huxley [1825–1895], H. G. Wells [1866–1946], Oscar Wilde [1854–1900], and Aubrey Beardsley [1872–1898]) gaining momentum and yielding nearly an equal balance of power between the two warring sides. In other words, it was precisely the First World War as the first mechanized armed conflict in the history of warfare, and a war which took a heavier death toll than any of the previous wars in Europe or anywhere else, that turned out to be mankind's decisive disillusionment as to its own ability to create a paradise on earth, a disillusionment which was to reach its full and, as I should say, to this day undiminished, intensity in the Nazi genocide and nuclear holocaust of the Second World War.

It is precisely from the trenches of the “Great War” that one of the most powerful nihilistic voices was heard, and that from a poet named Wilfred Owen [1893–1918], whose competence to speak in favour of Nietzsche's philosophy of axiological nothingness can hardly be surpassed by any of his contemporaries, successors or precursors, not exempting Nietzsche himself as a “father” to all philosophical nihilists to date. The competence in question stems from the fact that Owen had the opportunity to experience some of the heaviest fighting on the Western Front firsthand during his engagement as an active combatant and junior officer (January–May 1917 and August–November 1918), at the end of which he would be killed in an attempt to lead his unit across the Sambre Canal at Ors (on 4 November 1918) (Owen & Bell, 1967: 13–14, 16; Sassoon, 1921: vi). As a result of Owen's exposure to the horrors of trench warfare, his war, or had I better say, anti-war poetry was pervaded by pessimism, dehumanization, despair, nothingness, and irony, or anger with Britain's state leaders who have heartlessly dispatched their youth to fight a hellish war to their material ends. It is the verses of this Shropshire writer, whose posthumous fame now exceeds that of Jessie Pope [1869–1941] or Rupert Brooke [1887–1915] as strongly jingoistic and, at the outset of the war, favourite British poets, what greatly helped to alter the original view of the Great War as a deed of patriotic heroism in favour of a far bleaker reality that the First World War was a ruthless military campaign where men died by the million in ways more degrading than any time before, and where the worth of the individual human life was reduced to nothing (Walter, 1997: xxii; Gomez, 1999: 69).

In this paper I will attempt to look into “The Dead-Beat”, one of Owen’s depictions of the grim reality of trench warfare and, according to Hipp (2005: 54), the poem with which the writer commenced his work on telling the stories of his fallen comrades who would never live to tell them by themselves. Given the fact that, excluding epistemological nihilism<sup>3</sup> as the fundamental kind of nihilism providing the basis for all of its other kinds, the notion can be understood in three different ways – political nihilism as denoting the impropriety of all current political structures, moral nihilism as signifying the impossibility of distinguishing between good and evil, and existential nihilism as referring to the intrinsic meaninglessness of human life – I will, in the course of my analysis, strive to stress the different kinds of nihilism as defined above (Pratt). The subject of my inquiry being almost entirely philosophical [i.e. thematic], I will not pay much attention to the stylistic features of the text – that is to say, the only stylistic aspect thereof I will deal with is tone, whereas rhyming and metre will not be in the scope of my interest.

## **2. Nihilism in “The Dead-Beat”**

Owen wrote “The Dead-Beat” on 21 August 1917, while at Craiglockhart War Hospital (Edinburgh), where he had arrived in late June that year for shell-shock treatment (Owen & Bell, 1967: 485–486). The first version of the poem, which was read by Owen’s war friend Siegfried Sassoon [1886–1967] immediately upon completion, differed significantly from its final version, which Owen produced in the spring of 1918 at Ripon (Yorkshire), where he was transferred after being fully recovered from his trauma (Simcox, 2001). In other words, the first version of “The Dead-Beat” was made up of five four-line stanzas, whereas the final one was reduced to four stanzas with an unequal distribution of lines per stanzas (stanza I: 8 lines, stanza II: 7 lines, stanza III: 3 lines, and stanza IV: 2 lines) (Owen & Bell, 1967: 485–486). As explained by Owen himself in a letter to his cousin Leslie Gunston [1895–1988], dated 22 August 1917, Sassoon evaluated the original version as flawed because of its fourth stanza, which he labelled as “facetious” (Owen & Bell 1967: 486). So, following the advice of his more experienced literary colleague – already an established poet

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3 The term refers to the view that it is impossible to attain absolute knowledge of the world (Pratt).

at the outbreak of war – Owen eliminated the criticized stanza, and with a bit of modifications of his own invention, finally produced the piece that would become part of both posthumous collections of his war poetry (the 1920 one edited by Sassoon and the 1931 one edited by Edmund Blunden [1896–1974]) that would eventually earn him the status of “the best of the poets to have emerged from ‘the war to end all wars’” (Walter, 1997: xx–xxii).

Although “The Dead-Beat” enjoys neither the fame nor the wide critical acclaim of “Dulce et Decorum Est”, “Anthem for Doomed Youth”, or “Futility” as some of Owen’s most frequently anthologized pieces, the poem, to my mind, makes an interesting subject of research because one can find in it a wide spectrum of nihilistic ideas. Unlike “Dulce and Decorum Est”, which can be studied solely from the perspective of political and moral nihilism (re-evaluation of the propriety of patriotic war), or “Futility”, which is characterized by the presence of only existential nihilism (transvaluation of ontological teleology), “The Dead-Beat” contains instances of all the three kinds of nihilism – political, moral, and existential. The referred to kinds of nihilism as pointing to the meaninglessness of all social bonds in existence and human life in general are essentially grounded on the complete estrangement of Owen’s unnamed protagonist from the people he is sharing his life with, both at home in England and in the trenches of northern France. This estrangement is in close connection with dehumanization of not only the poem’s tragic hero but also of the hero’s, Biblically speaking, ‘neighbours’ (who are, in fact, to be blamed for the “dead-beat” soldier’s alienation), which leads to the revelation that life is devoid of any objective value and therefore not worth living.

In terms of plot, “The Dead-Beat” tells of a soldier who, shortly after a devastating German air-raid on the British trenches, drops “dead-beat”, unable to rise. Though being entirely unwounded by the bomb-attack, the soldier is eventually taken out of the trench on a stretcher under suspicion of feigning mental derangement to avoid further involvement in fighting. In the end, the word reaches his fellow-comrades that the dead-beat soldier has died in the frontline hospital, so that his mental derangement turns out to be not only real but also lethal. In this way, Owen’s title reveals itself as darkly comic since the word ‘dead-beat’, which is usually understood metaphorically as denoting an exceedingly tired person (so tired that they cannot stand on their feet, thus resembling a dead man or woman), in this

case demands a literal interpretation, for the British combatant, anguished by mental horror, falls literally dead. Dark humour, by the way, just like dehumanization, with which it goes hand in hand, is an important element of this poem and contributes in large measure to its atmosphere of irredeemable despair.

The air of dehumanization mentioned above is more than obvious already at the outset of the poem:

He dropped,—more sullenly than wearily,  
Lay stupid like a cod, heavy like meat,  
And none of us could kick him to his feet;  
just blinked at my revolver, blearily;  
—Didn't appear to know a war was on,  
Or see the blasted trench at which he stared.  
'I'll do 'em in,' he whined. 'If this hand's spared,  
I'll murder them, I will.' (Sassoon, 1921: 17)

As observable, the poet begins his story *in medias res*. The hero is shown in a 'blasted trench' as dropping 'more sullenly than wearily', which hints at the real problem behind the soldier's refusal to continue fighting given in the next (second) stanza. In other words, though it would not be wrong to suppose that the protagonist is indeed physically tired of war – which is alluded to by the mention of adverb 'blearily' in the fourth line, a word containing a strong semantic reference to physical weariness – it is nevertheless clear that his sullen (i.e. bad-tempered) manner of dropping is more related to his conscious refusal to remain erect and at further disposal to his commanders than to the fact that his sinews will simply no longer move due to excessive fatigue. The reason behind this mental disorder is further hinted at in the closing lines of the stanza when the protagonist desperately 'whines' (the verb usually refers to either a child's or an adult's cowardly complaint about an issue the complainer is too weak to resolve) that he is intent on killing particular persons if he anyhow survives the ongoing war.

It is interesting to note that the whole event unfolds before the eyes of the poem's narrator, that is, the author, which is a common trait of Owen's war poetry. The poet, therefore, is an active participant of the tragic event described, and it is precisely in the fact that Owen, as a soldier-poet who produced almost his entire body of work after his first engagement

at the front line, based his poems on concrete experience that, according to Shanks (1977: 322), lies this writer's superiority to both Jessie Pope, as a woman poet who never saw what real fighting on the Somme looked like and so produced abstract, anticipatory descriptions of war, and Rupert Brooke, as a soldier-poet who wrote all his verses from the viewpoint of someone who is yet to enter the field of battle and therefore authored romantic war poetry which was as abstract and anticipatory as Pope's.

As for the physical descriptions of the dead-beat protagonist, Owen compares his supine body with a cod and a piece of flesh. The soldier is referred to as lying stupidly ('lay stupid like a cod'), his eyes are described as blinking 'blearily' at the narrator's revolver as if devoid of all traces of intelligence, which, as a matter of fact, is immediately corroborated in the fifth line, where the unfortunate man is presented as seemingly unaware that 'a war [is] on'. The soldier is, furthermore, shown as being kicked and probably threatened with pistols by his comrades who, being entirely used to death and deprived of sentimentality, do not hesitate to use violence for the purpose of bringing the fallen man back to his feet. It is clear that the dead-beat soldier is wholly dehumanized – he is deprived of intelligence, likened to a dead animal with merely physical existence (a fish suffocated outside of water or a piece of butchered meat), and treated like a kicking bag by his fellow-combatants. The individual soldier, as it turns out, exists only as a raw physical force with orders to fight to the death on behalf of his state leadership; his humanity is none and had to have been totally erased the very moment he set his foot onto the hellish battlefield of the Western Front.

The reason for the soldier's conscious loss of fighting will and, as it will eventually turn out, reconciliation with his own death, is thoroughly described in the second stanza:

A low voice said,  
 'It's Blighty, p'raps, he sees; his pluck's all gone,  
 Dreaming of all the valiant, that aren't dead:  
 Bold uncles, smiling ministerially;  
 Maybe his brave young wife, getting her fun  
 In some new home, improved materially.  
 It's not these stiff's have crazed him; nor the Hun.' (Sassoon, 1921: 17)

The explanation is given by the tragic hero's fellow-soldier and is in itself the only element in the poem attenuating the all-pervading impres-



sion of alienation. In other words, after a thuggish attempt by the men in the trench to lift their comrade's languid body, what follows is a clear insight into the causes of the soldier's loss of 'pluck' (i.e. courage, or determination to keep fighting), which are known to the owner of the 'low voice' because, as one might suppose, the dead-beat soldier, who would have received letters from England informing him about his domestic affairs there, must have confided in this new friend of his about their contents in the hours of rest prior to this final engagement; and it is the very fact that one of the soldiers knows exactly what troubles his dispirited comrade that helps the violent scene from the first stanza seem less dehumanizing than it might appear at first glance. Speaking of this, the close relationship between the dead-beat combatant and his sound fellow-soldier is by no means out of place in this context because, irrespective of the severe mutilation of emotionality that most soldiers engaged in mechanized warfare experience at the front, it is also true that friendships forged under such circumstances are often very strong and, in the event of survival, life-long.

What is also interesting about the language used by the 'low voice' is that it is colloquial and elided, that is to say, with omitted sounds, and as such typical of the uneducated masses of British youngsters deployed in northern France to help restrain Kaiser Wilhelm's [1859–1941] Prussian militarism. The words 'stiff' (colloquialism for a dead body), 'Blighty' (soldiers' term for Britain in the First World War, probably derived from the fact that fighters would have been sent home to Britain [i.e. 'Blighty'] after sustaining a wound [i.e. 'blight'] on the battlefield), and 'Hun' (a common term for Germans during World War One not only among British soldiers but also among British intellectuals, who thus distinguished the alleged knighthood of their armies from the barbaric [i.e. Hunnic] inhumanity of the German troopers) are particularly telling of this, and, in this respect, it is easy to perceive linguistic similarity between Owen's anti-war "poetry of concrete experience" (Shanks, 1977: 322) and Rudyard Kipling's (1865–1936) pro-war abstract, anticipatory poetry, since the latter, as a writer who never fought in the trenches, also frequently used colloquial soldierly speech as well as the word 'Hun' in his war poems.

As for the explanation of the dead-beat soldier's mental crisis, or its specific content, it is, as I note, conspicuously tinted with bitter irony. In other words, the owner of the low voice as the only man in the trench sympathizing with the fallen soldier reveals that it is the sense of being



betrayed by his closest relatives and family members what has crucially rendered the lying combatant incapable of further service on the front line. It is clearly stated that it is not the corpses (i.e. 'stiffs') of the killed British lying everywhere around the trench what has deprived him of courage, but rather the fact that his uncles, and especially his young wife, have used him as a mere tool to accomplish their personal, material gains. In case of his uncles, who are spoken of as 'smiling ministerially' (which obviously alludes to their ministerial positions in Britain, so that the roles of elderly cousins and state leaders are blended in one word), the gains in question might be the profit that the entire political elite of the British Empire will attain once the war has been won by England's sacrificed youngsters, whereas in case of the unfaithful young wife, who clearly establishes an anti-Homeric pattern of marital relations in war poetry (what I am referring to is the woman's refusal to await the outcome of her husband's patriotic effort in northern France, and her haste to remarry a wealthier man, which is in stark contrast with Odysseus' Penelope, who patiently kept her wooers at bay in spite of her husband's ten-year absence from Ithaca), the gains would be in the opportunity to obtain a better living standard in a richer household. The ministerial uncles as well as the young wife are given ironical epithets alluding to their cowardice (the uncles are 'bold', the wife is 'brave', and all of them collectively are 'valiant'), that is, their staying at home without any compassion for England's male youth sent into what was at that point an unprecedented bloodshed in the history of warfare. What is more, Britain's government ministers even showed great zeal in verbally supporting the war, the hypocrisy of which was intelligently ridiculed not only by Owen in some other poems of his and by Sassoon as Owen's anti-war poet-colleague, but also by Kipling in "A Dead Statesman", which this once staunch supporter of anti-Prussian war effort wrote as a statement of his later disillusionment with the British pro-war policy (after the horrendous demise of John Kipling [1897–1915], the latter's son, at the Battle of Loos in September 1915).

It is the fact that the ones who were supposed to show the highest degree of love and understanding for the dead-beat soldier actually betrayed him what reveals the tragic hero's awareness that the concept of the world as an appropriate anthropocentric setting for a meaningful existence is a lie, so that neither the (secularized) Church nor the bourgeoisie as advocating ontological teleology are right in arguing that mankind is guided

towards perfect success (i.e. a lasting age of peace and plenty) by either a benevolent God or benevolent laws of nature. The dead-beat protagonist, in other words, realizes that the current political structures (primarily, the state and the family) and the current (Christian and bourgeois) morality of the Western World as being based on the values of altruistic love, matrimonial faithfulness, and willingness of the old to sacrifice themselves for the young are merely empty phrases rather than a firmly established set of social institutions, and that, in reality, human beings are no better (perhaps even worse) than the beasts in the woods as minding little else but the satisfaction of their individual egotistic urges. The defeated soldier, as one might argue, understands that “man is a wolf to man”, so that an individual human being, if loved and needed by no one, can never find a place under the sun. Such a person (as the soldier is himself), therefore, must be gone, and although his last words are those of planned vengeance, the soldier’s swift demise in the final two short stanzas of the poem leaves no room for doubt as to the overwhelming power of nihilistic ideas that have been brought home to him during his ghastly adventure on the Western Front. In other words, the man simply does not have the mental strength to pull himself out of the hell he has been cast into and, overpowered by the philosophy of general nihilism – that is, the realization that the existing political structures are false (political nihilism), that “good and evil are nebulous” (Pratt) (one person’s evil is another person’s good and vice versa – moral nihilism), and that the individual human life has no importance in a world as treacherous and violent as this (existential nihilism) – seems to unresistingly hasten to certain death. It is worth mentioning, apropos of this Darwinian-Nietzschean thread of argument, that political and moral nihilism are, in fact, almost inseparably intertwined because there can be no morality as a system of social patterns determining how human beings will behave to each other without the political structures binding those human beings and bringing them into different units of social integration.

The final pair of stanzas as describing the main character’s ultimate disappearance from the scene and his subsequent death away from the trench marks the climax of the poem’s ironical overtones:

We sent him down at last, out of the way.  
Unwounded; –stout lad, too, before that strafe.  
Malingering? Stretcher-bearers winked, ‘Not half!’

Next day I heard the Doc's well-whiskied laugh:  
'That scum you sent last night soon died. Hooray!'  
(Sassoon, 1921: 17)

In other words, after a slight attenuation of the poem's grim atmosphere in the shape of the hero's empathetic fellow-soldier, the dead-beat Englishman is taken 'out of the way', as the poet tells us, thus probably pointing to the fact that, in the eyes of his comrades, or at least the majority of them, the lying man is beyond repair and as such a mere obstacle in a blasted British trench which, as I suppose, must promptly be put again in order for the sake of renewing the fighting capacity of the unit. In this manner, the spirit of dehumanization is lifted onto a higher level and, in the very end, reaches its peak with the utterly inhumane treatment of the crazed soldier at the hands of the army's medical personnel.

That is to say, as quoted above, the stretcher-bearers, though immediately realizing that the 'unwounded' fighter (the word 'strafe', by the way, signifies an attack from a low-flying airplane) is not malingering (i.e. pretending to be incapable of further service), nevertheless accompany their off-the-cuff negative answer ('not half') to the dubious combatants by a wink, a clownish gesture which hardly suits the sorrowful occasion. In addition, the final announcement of the dead-beat patient's swift demise (probably in one of the army's medical wards nearby) is accompanied by the announcer's (doctor's or 'Doc's') 'well-whiskied laugh'. The latter act of body language is, to my mind, the worst of all the indicators of dehumanization in this poem because to guffaw at somebody's swift death – most probably because it will spare the doctor the time and effort that he would have otherwise had to invest in aiding the patient – to call the disabled man 'scum' (i.e. rubbish), and even rejoice at his demise with a loud exclamation 'hooray' is nothing short of being a heartless daemon in the human shape (one should remember here the 'ministerially smiling' uncles and the young woman 'getting her fun / [i]n some new home, improved materially', for the Doc's malicious laughter can be seen as a natural continuation of the previous elements of the poem's simultaneously bitter and comic irony). From this it is clear that, in reality, the dehumanization in question cuts both ways – for it is not only the dead-beat protagonist that is deprived of humanity but also (and even more) all the men and women surrounding him both now in France and earlier in Britain, who, as one is induced to infer, are to be blamed for the protagonist's dehumanized

status. Therefore, the tragic hero emerges as a victim – not a victim of the German troopers incessantly assailing him with their bombs, bullets, and poisonous gas, but a victim of his closest kin and comrades (especially the former) – and is, as it convincingly seems, a sensitive creature that suffers because of abandonment and the brutish heartlessness of the hypocrites who are incomparably less ethical than him.

It is familiar that victimization of the young soldiers was one of the main objectives of Owen's war poetry, for as the poet himself wrote in a preface to his complete collection of poems that he would never live to see published – "The subject of it [this book] is War, and the Pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity" – so that, in the context of "The Dead-beat", it becomes clear that the author tried and obviously managed to convey his message that the young soldiers sent into the Western Front's "mouths of Hell"<sup>4</sup> to settle other men's disputes were not the radiant knights but down-cast martyrs of the Great War, whereas all those who neither dared to fight their wars on their own nor were willing to provide sincere, compassionate support to their "uniformed scapegoats" were its villains (Sassoon, 1921: ix; Day Lewis, 1964: 109). After all, in stressing the soldiers' need to be sympathized with rather than viewed as chivalric men under arms gladly serving their patriotic duty, in one of his other poems Wilfred Owen addressed the British public at home with the following words: "[...] These men are worth / Your tears: You are not worth their merriment"<sup>5</sup> (Sassoon, 1921: 5).

The closing two stanzas of the poem, it is also worth mentioning, add extra intensity to the impression of political and moral nihilism as I have referred to them above. In other words, the medical profession as an integral part of industrial civilization proves itself no less farcical than the state, as one of the highest levels of social integration, or the family, as the very lowest and most rudimentary one. The depicted stretcher-bearers and the alcohol-loving doctor (his nickname 'Doc' probably alludes to his charlatanism as a kind of behaviour totally out of place on the front line) are presented as entirely unsympathetic and incapable of seeing their neighbour's evil as their own evil and, thus, their characters go in favour of the idea that the currently held Christian and bourgeois social norms and

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4 Owen's metaphorical expression for trenches in his poem "Cramped in That Funnelled Hole".

5 From "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo".

institutions are artificial and valueless in the circumstances of mechanized war. As for existential nihilism, also described above, it too becomes all the more intense with another pair of dehumanized human beings dehumanizing the misfortunate hero.

So, "The Dead-Beat", albeit presenting a very strange way of dying on the battlefield – the soldier neither dies of a physical wound as inflicted externally or by himself, nor does his mental issue drive him to suffer for a long time before passing away, but is rather driven into swift death by mental derangement – is, on the whole, almost an unchangingly depressing piece of poetry. Its single hint at the existence of a true friendship between the soldiers, who, as one is induced to believe, are no more than mere cannon-fodder on the field of a politician's battle, is insufficiently powerful to alter its overwhelming atmosphere of dehumanization and emotional alienation. The poem, just like many other much-praised poetic pieces by Wilfred Owen, is a vivid testimony to one of the most horrifying events in human history, which, as it turned out, gave a decisive momentum to the popularization of the philosophy of nihilism throughout the world. It is a soldier-poet's account of the Great War, a firsthand witness's recognition of all-encompassing futility of the world – and it is for this reason that it strikes the reader as all the more persuasive.

### 3. Conclusion

I have looked into "The Dead-Beat", one of Wilfred Owen's war poems, or, in more specific terms, I have endeavoured to shed light on the reasons behind the strange demise of the poem's tragic protagonist. The conclusion I have reached is that the poem's hero dies because he has been dehumanized and turned into an alienated person by both his fellow-participants in Britain's 1914–1918 campaign in northern France as well as his family members and state leaders. The betrayal transgressed by the latter – especially his wife as his closest family member – is what has decisively caused the young soldier to drop dead-beat and forgo any further attempts at continuing his struggle on the front line. In the light of all previously said, it would be correct to argue that the dead-beat soldier's fatal mental derangement (i.e. loss of will to live) has originated from his realization that all his previous life, and by that very fact, all the current political structures and moral and ontological values supporting the, only apparently stable, edifice of the Western civilization are empty, so that any

selfless and sensitive person like himself, abandoned by the rest of the world, is completely misplaced in a Darwinian dog-eat-dog-world, and as such has no purpose to go on living. The poem's misfortunate main character as, in my opinion, revealing the attitude of the poet himself strongly advocates nihilism as a philosophical standpoint which renders the teleology of human existence, at least at the level of the individual human life,<sup>6</sup> altogether invalid. The imagery of Wilfred Owen's "The Dead-Beat", with its both direct and retrospective images called to memory in the trench, is, in its own right, a true piece of Beckettian theatre of the absurd (even before Beckett himself), where a number of totally dehumanized and mutually alienated characters, faced with mechanized war as probably the most absurd of all the activities that civilized humanity can become involved in, come to a nihilistic cul-de-sac, with the nameless dead-beat soldier's ill fate speaking on everyone's behalf. The poem – which, by the way, makes no mention of any names (another means of annulling individual personalities of all the presented protagonists in addition to the poet's bleakly ironical language) – is, as I have shown, grounded on the philosophy of nihilism – politico-moral and existential – and along with Owen's other poems, more or less renowned, should, to my mind, place this poet side by side with the great nihilists of the closing three decades of the nineteenth and the first seven decades of the twentieth century, beginning with Nietzsche who wrote before the turn of the twentieth century, to Kafka [1883–1924] as Owen's contemporary and a great precursor of existentialism, to Sartre and Camus as existentialist philosophers and literary figures who, together with playwright Beckett, brought the philosophy of nothingness to its apex. Owen's strength as an artist, when compared to the aforementioned great thinkers of nihilistic thought, resides not only in the choice of poetry as his only means of artistic expression (the ironic style of which is, needless to say, exquisite), but also in the fact that his grimly vivid imagery was almost entirely drawn from his firsthand taste of warfare, a source of experience that not many combatants of the First World War have managed to turn into sublime literary production; and precisely therein lies the great quality of the greatest of all the poets of the Great War.

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6 It is interesting here to call attention to Owen's brief poem "Futility" as his strongest statement of existentially nihilistic views. Unlike "The Dead-Beat", which implicitly (but without lack of clarity) reveals the meaninglessness of the individual life of a soldier, the above-said poem explicitly points to the existential meaninglessness of the entire human race.

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Goran Petrović

**POLITIČKI, MORALNI I EGZISTENCIJALNI NIHILIZAM U PESMI  
„MRTAV UMORAN“ VILFREDA OVENA**

**Sažetak**

Ovaj rad analizira „Mrtav umoran“, ratnu pesmu Vilfreda Ovena, iz perspektive nihilizma, odnosno njegove tri konkretne vrste (političkog, moralnog i egzistencijalnog nihilizma), kako je Alan Prat, teoretičar i istraživač nihilističke filozofije kategorisao ovaj pojam. Prema Pratu, politički nihilizam odnosi se na ideju da su trenutne političke strukture lažne, moralni nihilizam podrazumeva da su dobro i zlo relativne kategorije, dok egzistencijalni nihilizam znači da je ljudski život suštinski lišen bilo kakve više (teleološke) svrhe, te da kao takav nije vredan življenja. Kroz nesrećnu propast protagoniste na Zapadnom frontu Prvog svetskog rata, autor pesme „Mrtav umoran“ zagovara sve tri vrste nihilizma, jer, kako se u radu tvrdi, tragični junak pesme ne umire od rane već zato što otkriva da je život pojedinačnog ljudskog bića ili vojnika, naročito ako je on zarobljen u rovovima prvog mehanizovanog rata u istoriji te napušten kako od svog državnog rukovodstva tako i od svojih najbližih, besmislen (i upravo u ovoj činjenici leži prisustvo političkog, moralnog i egzistencijalnog nihilizma). Ovaj rad nihilizam pesme „Mrtav umoran“ posmatra u suprotnosti sa ideologijom materijalističkog progresivizma koju su u devetnaestom veku zagovarali i filozofi pozitivizma i liberalni teolozi. Osim što se bavim mentalnim rastroјstvom tragičnog junaka kao uzrokom njegove smrti, takođe naglašavam ironiju kao naročit kvalitet pesme „Mrtav umoran“, a takođe i Ovenovog celokupnog ratnog pesničkog opusa.

**Ključne reči:** Vilfred Oven, Prvi svetski rat, ratna poezija, politički nihilizam, moralni nihilizam, egzistencijalni nihilizam, ironija, dehumanizacija, otuđenje.