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**THE ECHOES OF WAR: NATURE'S REVERBERATION IN THE
POETIC NARRATIVES OF EDWARD THOMAS AND FRANCIS
LEDWIDGE**

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Abstract:

*This paper seeks to analyze and compare two often overlooked First World War poets, Edward Thomas, and Francis Ledwidge, based on the authors' use of natural imagery when portraying their experiences and ordeals as soldiers in the Great War. Thomas and Ledwidge dwell a lot about nature in their poetry to express feelings of isolation, acceptance of death, and the impermanency of life. Thus, the current paper discusses how nature as a sanctuary and symbolism of the soldiers' existentialist perspective can be outlined by analyzing Thomas's *Lights Out* and *In Memoriam (Easter 1915)* and Ledwidge's *A Soldier's Grave*. The study shows that these poets draw upon the natural world not simply as background or setting, but as an intimate component of their subjective and existential strategies in the face of war. The focus on the marginalized poets suggests that the field of war poetry requires reconsideration, and that war trauma can be explored from a wide range of perspectives.*

Keywords: *Edward Thomas, Francis Ledwidge, Nature, Soldier Poets, etc.*

When we think of English poetry, we are right to think of William Shakespeare, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Milton, and all the other patron saints of English literature. Their magnificence demands, and even needs, independent study: One lesson on Chaucer or Milton is insufficient; one lifetime of Shakespeare is inadequate. There is still a space for theme studies of poetry for English literature lovers. For the reader who wants to understand how individuals regard a certain subject, studying poetry via a theme that is related to a specific historical frame is an eye-opening experience. Of course, thematic studies must be time-bound, lest they be confused with the present misunderstanding of social concerns masquerading as 'themes' in literature. In other words, 'love poetry' or 'women's poetry' are not appropriate subjects, but rather a haphazard grouping and misunderstanding of the (excellent) poet's intellectual depth. History is one of the finest predictors of significant issues that may be addressed via poetry and literature in general: what we consider major times in history are crucial periods in human growth, thus poetry from that period and on that topic is, of course, worth studying. The poems that chronicled World War I, made one of the largest contributions to modern English poetry was the war poetry, owing in large part to the significance of WWI in human history. One of the finest methods to approach literature on the subject is through poetry written by soldiers.



The work of a few writers, including Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Siegfried Sassoon, has lasted to become what Andrew Motion refers to as a 'sacred national text.' Although the term 'war poet' is typically associated with active soldiers, war poetry has been composed by many 'civilians' caught up in warfare in various ways: Cesar Vallejo and W.H. Auden during the Spanish Civil War, Margaret Postgate Cole and Rose Macaulay during World War I, and James Fenton in Cambodia. During the worldwide, 'total war' of 1939-45, which included the Holocaust, the Blitz, and Hiroshima, almost no poet was spared the horrors of war. The same might be said of civil wars and revolutions in Spain and Eastern Europe. However, this does not imply that every poet responded to war by writing explicitly about it. For some, the correct response of a poet was to remain silent intentionally (conscientiously). War poetry is not always 'anti-war.' It is, nevertheless, about life's big questions: identity, innocence, remorse, allegiance, fortitude, empathy, humanity, responsibility, desire, and death. War poetry's reaction to these problems, as well as its connection of immediate human experience to periods of national and international crises, lends it an extra-literary significance. Even Shakespeare, according to Owen, appears 'vapid' after Sassoon: 'not, of course, because Sassoon is a greater artist, but because of the subjects.' War poetry is now being studied all across the world. It has become a part of national mythology, as well as a statement of historical consciousness and political conscience. The way we read – and possibly revere – war poetry reveals something about who we are and who we aspire to be as a country.

The purpose of this paper will be to present two war poets, one Englishman and one Irishman, who expressed the sensation of being a soldier in the Great War and, in turn, were altered by this event. Edward Thomas and Francis Ledwidge were two such poets whose works used natural elements to convey a soldier's alienation and acceptance, even embracing, of impending death. These two poets were common men, and it is easy to overlook excellent writers who did not achieve international acclaim within the canons of English and Western literature. Many times, it is only through the art of small men that we can comprehend the magnitude of the forces we produce and that encompass us as they spiral out of control. Edward Thomas was a poet from England who was born in 1878. He enrolled as a soldier at the age of 37 in 1915 and was killed on the first day of battle in Arras, France, in 1917, following two years of training. Francis Ledwidge, born in 1887, joined the army at the age of twenty-seven in 1914 and was killed three years later at Boezinge, Belgium. Despite the fact that each of these men composed multiple poems inspired by their experiences serving in the Great War, they were not interested in the war as a political or contentious issue. In fact, those familiar with war poetry might wonder why not to mention well known, WWI poets, like Wilfred Owen. All soldiers were diverse people who understood war differently. Take his most famous poem, 'Dulce et Decorum Est', The poem is moving, no doubt, because it is a true depiction of war. Even in his blunt description of the battle, Owen manages to describe death in beautiful verse, "Dim through the misty panes and thick green light / As under a green sea, I saw him drowning" followed by a nightmarish description of the image that haunts him in his sleep. The moral of the story? It is a lie, that it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country. Owen's message resonated with many anti-war activists, and this statement is not



meant to detract from what is an exceptional poem with intricate literary devices. However, scholars do think Owen's political message has influenced his appreciation as a poet as being more for his message, not for his poetry. The most admirable quality of lesser-known war poets is their humility, which is more concerned with coming to terms with themselves as soldiers, as powerless victims of fate, than criticizing the world for what has occurred to them. What Thomas and Ledwidge appeared to realize was that during times of war, when a soldier was lost and alone, man's connection with himself took precedence over all else. While the spirit of the soldier who sacrifices himself for others is revered, what occurred in these soldiers' thoughts was a necessary sort of solitude that transformed into self-reflection.

Infantry warfare was just a secondary resource in battle due to the machinery utilized during the Great Conflict, and this shift in armament prohibited the individual soldier from having a direct role in this industrialized war. People's faith in a noble vision of one body of men fighting arm in arm was broken when they learned that troops were dying inhumanely and in large numbers. The issue then arose, what was a single man's position in the face of such widespread devastation? His individuality was truly destroyed by a swarm of troops who were regarded as commodities. What 'higher' self-esteem could the soldier bring to a cause bereft of greatness?

For Edward Thomas and Francis Ledwidge, poetry was a method for them to contemplate their place and themselves, and nature was an important component of this relationship since it was a direct way for them to envision home. Because home was seldom in the soldiers near vicinity, it may be argued that he frequently relied on his immediate surroundings for comfort and reassurance. Both Thomas and Ledwidge established a close relationship with nature. Nature's characteristics, such as the ongoing duality of life and death, the beauty of creation and destruction, resembled what they were experiencing on a regular, and they regarded it as a reflection of their existence. However, Thomas and Ledwidge employed nature in their poems not only to relate their experiences, but also to provide a place of recognition for the individual faceless soldier as a way of commemoration. They chose the emblem of a grave to manifest this sentiment.

Francis Ledwidge was able to depict nature as serene and personify it as a force of aid for the dying soldier. One can further analyze his poem 'A Soldier's Grave'. Ledwidge instantly establishes a narrative tone with his opening phrase, which aids to soothe the reader since the poet seems like he is delivering a pleasant story that takes place in a tranquil milieu, 'the stillness of midnight'. The simple alternating end-rhyme scheme heightens this sentiment by concluding each stanza in a way that sounds complete, and the word choice (lull, soft, lifted, gently) reassures the reader that what is occurring to the soldier is a good thing rather than a negative idea. In 'A Soldier's Grave,' Ledwidge briefly mentions the passage from life to death when he portrays the soldier being hauled down death's slopes. Edward Thomas expanded on this excursion in greater detail in 'Lights Out,' which he wrote in 1916, soon before going to war. The poem is about the process of dying, and he compares it to wandering in the woods to explain this gradual departure, which he refers to as a slumber. The presence of nature here plays a significant role: it is no longer depicted as a loving and sympathetic force, as Ledwidge did in his poem; rather, Thomas portrays it as intense and inescapable. Nature, in this respect, has tricked and captured the traveler wandering through the forest,



which might cause the reader to view nature as a negative force. The subsequent stanzas, however, rectify this false assumption as Thomas defends the forest as being a neutral place where all emotion is distilled and where the traveler can rid himself of all earthly cares. For both of these poets, the transience of nature was a way to understand and justify their role as a soldier likely to die at any moment.

Because there were insufficient graves to accommodate the number of victims in the Great War, the grave utilized by these two poets serves as a metaphor for what it represents. In the instance of Edward Thomas, the burial served as a symbol of remembering rather than a tangible monument. He never mentioned, described, or referred to graves in his writings. Thomas' attention to the grave was drawn to the writings that would typically appear on a gravestone, and he recreated them in lyrical structure and style in his poetry. This elegiac form, which is typically used for epitaphs, appears in numerous of his pieces. Thomas recognized a difference with epitaphs since they represented both the fixed and the transcendent, and he even gave them literary worth. 'In Memoriam (Easter 1915)' is an example of such a poem. Thomas acknowledges that seeing the life of the flowers that have not been picked calls to mind the death of the soldiers: the presence of one thing represents the absence of another. He uses the flower as a symbol of both remembrance and impermanence to recall the past, note the present, and contemplate the future and prefers to invoke them through nature even though the poem, as the title expresses, is meant to be an elegy or epitaph of some sort for the men who died in the war. 'A Soldier's Grave' by Francis Ledwidge. It bears some similarity to 'In Memoriam (Easter 1915)' since flowers are also mentioned and used as a symbol of remembrance, but the flowers are only secondary to the greater symbol which is the actual earth-grave, which is the main subject of the poem. Here, however, the grave is one with nature, or, rather, the grave is a platform for nature.

The poet's career doesn't end once he dies. The soldier's career arguably does. The poet-soldier, then, has died physically, but what remains of him is his art. There was, however, a certain inhumanity about the way soldiers' deaths were regarded. Since both poets managed to create something that transcended their persons and lasted long after being killed in the war, their absence was not necessarily detrimental to the poetry itself. Both poets console the horrors of war with the beauty of nature and portray nature as playing an active role in death and life. By attributing these characteristics to nature, Thomas and Ledwidge are displaying self-awareness in their role as a soldier. They hint, likewise, at their acceptance of death since their poems display a similar disposition towards mortality, where the thought of dying comes no longer as a fear, but as a part of nature.

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