

## Dulce Et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!-An ecstasy of fumbling,  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...  
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,-  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori.

*Wilfred Owen*

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## ANALYSIS ONE

In October 1917 Wilfred Owen wrote to his mother from Craiglockhart, "Here is a gas poem, done yesterday.....the famous Latin tag (from Horace, Odes) means of course it is sweet and meet to die for one's country. Sweet! And decorous!"

While the earliest surviving draft is dated 8<sup>th</sup> October 1917, a few months later, at Scarborough or Ripon, he revised it.

The title is ironic. The intention was not so much to induce pity as to shock, especially civilians at home who believed war was noble and glorious.

It comprises four unequal stanzas, the first two in sonnet form, the last two looser in structure.

Stanza 1 sets the scene. The soldiers are limping back from the Front, an appalling picture expressed through simile and metaphor. Such is the men's wretched condition that they can be compared to old beggars, hags (ugly old women). Yet they were young! Barely awake from lack of sleep, their once smart uniforms resembling sacks, they cannot walk straight as their blood-caked feet try to negotiate the mud. "Blood-shod" seems a dehumanising image - we think of horses shod not men. Physically and mentally they are crushed. Owen uses words that set up ripples of meaning beyond the literal and exploit ambiguity. "Distant rest" – what kind of rest? For some the permanent kind? "Coughing" finds an echo later in the poem, while gas shells dropping softly suggests a menace stealthy and devilish. Note how in line 8 the rhythm slackens as a particularly dramatic moment approaches.

In Stanza 2, the action focuses on one man who couldn't get his gas helmet on in time. Following the officer's command in line 9, "ecstasy" (of fumbling) seems a strange word until we realise that medically it means a morbid state of nerves in which the mind is occupied solely with one idea. Lines 12-14 consist of a powerful underwater metaphor, with succumbing to poison gas being compared to drowning. "Floundering" is what they're already doing (in the mud) but here it takes on more gruesome implications as Owen introduces himself into the action through witnessing his comrade dying in agony.

Stanza 3. The aftermath. From straight description Owen looks back from a new perspective in the light of a recurring nightmare. Those haunting flares in stanza 1 foreshadowed a more terrible haunting in which a friend, dying, "plunges at me" before "my helpless sight", an image Owen will not forget.

Another aspect again marks Stanza 4. Owen attacks those people at home who uphold the

war's continuance unaware of its realities. If only they might experience Owen's own "smothering dreams" which replicate in small measure the victim's sufferings. Those sufferings Owen goes on to describe in sickening detail.

The "you" whom he addresses in line 17 can imply people in general but also perhaps, one person in particular, the "my friend" identified as Jessie Pope, children's fiction writer and versifier whose patriotic poems epitomised the glorification of war that Owen so despised. Imagine, he says, the urgency, the panic that causes a dying man to be "flung" into a wagon, the "writhing" that denotes an especially virulent kind of pain. Hell seems close at hand with the curious simile "like a devil's sick of sin". Sick in what sense? Physically? Satiated? Then that "jolt". No gentle stretcher-bearing here but agony intensified. Owen's imagery is enough to sear the heart and mind.

There are echoes everywhere in Owen and with "bitter as the cud", we are back with "those who die as cattle". (ANTHEM FOR DOOMED YOUTH). "Innocent" tongues? Indeed, though some tongues were anything but innocent in Owen's opinion. Jessie Pope for one perhaps, his appeal to whom as "my friend" is doubtless ironic, and whose adopted creed, the sweetness and meetness of dying for one's country he denounces as a lie which children should never be exposed to.

A poem seemingly written at white heat. Harsh, effective in the extreme, yet maybe too negative to rank among Owen's finest achievements: those poems in which he transcends the scorn and the protest and finds the pity.

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## ANALYSIS TWO

Students who are familiar with the main effects of World War I will be able to appreciate the soul-shocking contrast offered by Wilfred Owen in "Dulce Et Decorum Est" between the idealistic way in which the war was viewed by outsiders - "Dulce et decorum est / Pro Patria mori" - and the bloody actuality of its trench-bound, gas-infected battles - "Gas! Gas! Quick boys! - An ecstasy of fumbling. . . ."

In its beginnings people spoke of World War I as a war "to end all wars", a war to "make the world safe for democracy." Like Armageddon which is referred to in *Revelations* as a great battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, the titanic conflict which engulfed the nations of Europe in 1914 was viewed from both sides as a crusade against evil. When political leaders of France and England pronounced it a gallant effort to safeguard the rights of the weak and to preserve international law and morality, thousands of idealistic young men from both the working classes and the aristocracy - like the young poets, Wilfred Owen and Rupert Brooke - rushed into the fight, only to discover that in reality it was sordid and ugly, and ended in death. In all its ideals the war failed, for as Owen and other writers have so poignantly illustrated, it became simply a large-scale endurance test in the trenches against mustard gas, machine guns, liquid fire, and exploding bullets. Furthermore unlike any previous battle fought by the British, it was no mere expedition involving a few regiments but an onslaught that slaughtered seven million allied soldiers, disabled three million, and resulted in untold civilian casualties.

For outside reading on some of the historical aspects of World War I, students could be referred to the following accounts: *Propaganda Techniques in The World War* by H. D. Sasswell; *The Real War, 1914-18* by B. H. Liddell Hart; *The Coming of the War* by B. E. Schmitt; and *England's Holy War* by 1. C. Willis. Two novels, *All's Quiet On the Western Front* by Remarque, which is now considered a kind of classic, and *A Farewell To Arms* by Hemingway which describes the Italian campaign, could also be recommended, along with Katherine Anne Porter's short story, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider", which describes the reaction of people at home to the war.

Owen's juxtaposition of the Latin quotation at the end of the poem with his moving description of an incident in the war shows the opposition between the ideal and the real which resulted in such colossal failure. The vivid, emotional account of the episode of gas poisoning on the battlefield alters Horace's statement that it is a sweet and glorious thing to

die for one's country so that it takes on a tone of bitter irony. Instead of sounding lofty and impressive, the old adage now rings hollow. Clearly the war pushed the British into the twentieth century, with the results that the classical ideals which were formerly cherished became outmoded. While the use of this Latin motto must have intensified the contemporaneity of the scene when the poem was first published, today it also has the effect of raising Owen's poem to a universal level, so that "Dulce Et Decorum Est" becomes a condemnation not only of World War I, but of all war. Students should be able to appreciate that when the statement was first coined in Roman times things were probably no different than they are today, although warfare was on a smaller scale. Suffering and death remain the same, and no amount of idealization or propaganda can change this fact.

"Dulce Et Decorum Est" is not tightly compressed or objectively written because it was produced when the heat of the battle was high, as a way of showing outsiders what was really happening. Owen's poem is written boldly in the first person so that pity and terror, the two tragic elements, are profoundly felt by the reader. In addition, vivid, descriptive phrases verging on the sensational, such as "the blood / . . . gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs", add to the drama along with short dramatic sentences and lines such as "Bitter as the cud", and the comparison of the incident to a terrifying nightmare. - "In all my dreams before my helpless sight / He plunges at me." Finally, by addressing the reader directly - "My friend, you would not tell with such high zest. . . / The old Lie" -Owen draws his audience into the reality of the situation, thus making his poem a powerful condemnation of war in the twentieth century.

In the first four lines the situation and the setting are dramatically presented. Some soldiers are returning from a battle, exhausted and suffering - " And towards our distant rest began to trudge." It is dark outside for there are "haunting flares", and there has been a recent rainfall as they are cursing their way "through sludge." The weariness and pain of the men is vividly suggested by words such as "bent double", "knock-kneed", and "coughing", and by a comparison of them to "beggars under sacks" and to "hags." Not so long ago the soldiers were young and virile (like Owen himself who was killed near the Sarne Canal at the age of twenty-five, seven days before the war ended), but now they are aging and emasculated by the degenerative effects of the battle. It is interesting to note that the poet does not say whether the skirmish has been won or lost since his purpose is to show that in war nobody wins.

In the next four lines the idea of war as a defeat for all of humanity is indicated by a description of the dehumanized state of the soldiers. While the short sentence, "Men marched asleep", indicates the absence of vitality and spirit, the description of them without shoes "bloodshod", not only indicates their physical suffering but also suggests their loss of human dignity. In the series of impressions set off by semi-colons and emphasized by short, heavily-stressed words such as "lame" "blind" "drunk" and "deaf", the loss of all their physical senses is shown. Having degenerated to such an insensate state, the soldiers accordingly are unable to hear "the hoots / Of gas shells dropping softly behind."

In contrast to the softly-dropping, insidious gas shells, the shouts of "Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!" in line nine indicate that at least one person is conscious enough to notice the danger and to warn his comrades. The use of the word "ecstasy" in the description of the men fumbling to put on their gas-masks is appropriate here because it conveys their dazed confusion. Similarly the description of the gas-masks as "clumsy helmets" prepares the reader for the old Roman adage that appears at the end of the poem, and thus links World War I with all wars. Despite their exhaustion, the soldiers are all able to fit on their masks "just in time", with the exception of one who perhaps signalled the warning in the first place. The immediate effects of the gas upon this individual are dramatically shown in the participles used to describe his wild movements "yelling", "stumbling", "floundering", and by the phrase "in fire or lime" which denotes the fumes as burning and choking.

In lines thirteen to sixteen the poet presents his own reactions to the poisoned man in an account that draws the reader closer to the situation. His own exhaustion and the fact that he is looking through goggles, coupled with the stricken soldier's drunken movements in the gaseous haze of the night, makes the scene a phantasmagoria –

Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight. . . .

However, the use of the harshly realistic participles, "guttering, choking, drowning", show that it is not after all an illusion, but an actuality.

By line seventeen the reader has become a part of the event as the poet addresses him directly:

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in. . . .

While people today are perhaps better able to sympathize with Owen's attitude to war, it is understandable that, with phrases such as "the white eyes writhing" and "his hanging face", he should try to shock the readers of his time into feeling the brutal effects of war. Furthermore, with the description of the soldier's face, "like a devil's sick of sin", war is shown to be an evil itself, rather than a force to destroy evil as it was considered in 1914.

Again the reader is drawn into the experience in lines 21 to 24, with the words:

If you could hear, at every jolt (of the wagon), the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs.

With the short line "Bitter as the cud", which shatters the blank verse metre of the poem, the horror reaches a high point, for the words suggest how the man has been reduced by war to an animal level. With his lungs affected by the poison gas and his "innocent" tongue blistered with "vile, incurable sores", it is clear that he would be better off dead.

In addressing the reader as "My friend" in the last four lines of the poem, Owen is being bitterly ironic, since it is the people who are not directly involved in the war but who "tell with such high zest / To children ardent for some desperate glory, / The old Lie" that are responsible for such unimaginable suffering. What makes the poet so angry is not so much "the old Lie" itself, but rather the influence it has upon impressionable young men - "children" whose lives are cut short or made forever painful by rushing idealistically into battle.

The Latin adage at the end of the poem acts as an ironic climax. Juxtaposed with the earlier description of the suffering soldier, the old high-blown words now ring false. No further comment or explanation is necessary, for the reader by now can fully appreciate the dramatic difference between the ideal and the real. Thus the poem stops short - but sounds a prophetic note for the changing attitudes towards war in our own time.

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