



Dulce et Decorum est

by Wilfred Owen

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STUDY

Dulce et Decorum est is a poem of the First World War written by Wilfred Owen, one of the most well-known of the war poets. Owen joined the war effort believing that he and others were doing the right thing in fighting. He quickly became disillusioned through the sheer horror of war. He died in the final days of fighting in 1918 and most of his poetry was published posthumously in 1920. Many of his poems deal with the horrors he and the other soldiers faced in the trenches of Belgium and France.

Title

The title of the poem is actually part of a Latin phrase: "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" meaning "It is sweet and proper (good) to die for your country". Originally Owen had dedicated this poem to the poet Jessie Pope, a female reporter and writer of patriotic verse for the war effort. She specialised in writing verse promoting the war and making everything seem like a game, probably in an effort to get young men to enlist. Owen later changed his mind and titled the poem **Dulce et Decorum est**. This line appears in the final two lines of the poem and is the 'Lie' Owen suggests is being told to the young men who volunteer to fight. The 'My friend' he accuses of lying in this way may be Jessie Pope.

Structure and Themes

Dulce et Decorum est is a poem told from the first-person perspective of the poet. He relates his own experiences of the war including the graphic nature of death by chlorine gas poisoning. The poet relates both the events as they happened, using the exclamatory phrase: "Gas! Gas! Quick boys!" to show the panic felt at a gas attack and how these events affected him later. The poet still struggles with memories of what happened to the soldier in front of him. Owen creates a detachment to the lines about his dreams by separating these two lines from the rest of the second stanza, showing their distance from the event itself. The man has been damaged by the gas attack and the second stanza is also damaged (separated) showing this.

The poem could be seen to have three stanzas of eight lines each with a final subsidiary phrase but these are broken up by the poet in various ways. There is also an alternate rhyme scheme (ABAB) throughout, perhaps to represent the relentless trudge of the men towards their resting place but this is varied with the use of caesura and enjambment throughout. These alterations remind us of the uncertainties the soldiers face and this is made even more explicit when the soldiers' trudge back to camp is interrupted by a gas attack throwing them into panic.

Ideas and Language

The poem begins by showing us the suffering of the exhausted soldiers as they march away from the front lines and return to a base to sleep. Their total exhaustion is shown in the use of images of the elderly though these men are all young. They are described as 'old beggars' and 'like hags', 'knock-kneed' and 'bent double'. Their discomfort is highlighted through the loss of their boots, their feet so injured that they seem 'blood-shod'. The repetition of the word 'all' in 'All went lame; all blind' shows us that none of the soldiers has escaped the weariness and suffering of the war.

The men suddenly face a gas attack and the panic amongst them is evident through phrases like 'an ecstasy of fumbling'. One soldier does not get his 'clumsy' helmet on in time and is killed by the gas. Similes here describe him as if on fire 'like a man in fire or lime' but quickly shift to similes of water and

death by drowning. 'As under a green sea' shows us the green colour of the gas and that the 'guttering, choking, drowning' in the gas fumes is like death by drowning in the sea.

The poet cannot get over the death and sees it 'in all' his dreams. The dead man 'plunges' at the poet in his dreams showing how vivid and realistic these events are to Owen. The description of the death of the man continues in this dream-like state where the graphic use of similes: 'Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud' reinforce the horror of the soldier's death.

Eyes are 'writhing' and his lungs are 'gargling'. These powerful verbs go a long way towards the graphic description. His face is 'hanging' 'like a devil's sick of sin', a reminder of the images of devils perhaps on Michelangelo's **Last Judgement** in the Sistine Chapel. There is no honour in this death, it is graphic and vivid in order to highlight the 'lie' of the Latin phrase: 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori'. The phrase, meaning that it is sweet and right to die for one's country, is shown to be a fallacy once Owen has exposed the true horror of the death of a single soldier. Leaving the phrase in the original Latin perhaps shows the separation between the educated elite making the decisions about war and the actual young men fighting the battles. It may also show the idea of honour in battle as outdated and old-fashioned.

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