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“Dulce et Decorum Est” by Wilfred Owen

Soldiers are often depicted as young, handsome men who march with determination into battle and return victorious. These men are strong, courageous, and glad to be helping their country. Wilfred Owen, however, takes an entirely different view on soldiers and the wars they fight. Owen fought in World War One (Roberts), and his poetry gives a first-hand account of the horrors of this war. In one of his most popular poems, “Dulce et Decorum Est”, Owen describes the death of a fellow soldier.

Owen’s poem is made up of four stanzas, and in the first he describes what he sees around him. This stanza sets up the rest of the poem and lets the readers know that the poem is set in a time of war. The soldiers in this first stanza are described as “Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, / Knock-kneed, [and] coughing like hags” (Owen, See Appendix). In these few lines, Owen creates an unpleasant and upsetting image for the readers. The words “hags” and “beggars” are used in particularly interesting ways when the setting of the poem is considered. The word “hags” is often a reference to ugly, old women. These soldiers, however, are probably very young, which creates a skewed view between what the reader expects to be described and what is described. The word “beggars”, too, is not one most readers would expect to see in a poem about soldiers marching in battle. Soldiers are often seen as heroes and are pictured receiving warm welcomes from the towns they return to. To see them described as beggars, then, is the

opposite of what readers would expect. The next lines in the first stanza further describe the soldiers as “Men march[ing] asleep. / Many had lost their boots, but limped on, blood-shod” (5-6). The soldiers can easily be seen marching in an almost dream-like state: half awake and the only thing on their minds is their “distant rest” (4). They are so focused on this rest that they do not even notice their own suffering or the “hoots / Of disappointed shells that dropped behind” (7-8).

The second stanza of the poem is entirely different from the first. Suddenly the sleepy image of the soldiers trudging to rest is interrupted by shouts of “GAS! Gas! Quick, boys!” (9). In their drunken and sleepy march, the soldiers missed the sound of the gas-shells dropping from the sky. Owen describes an “ecstasy of fumbling” (9) as the soldiers are “Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time” (10). These short phrases are very effective because the word “ecstasy” depicts just how desperate and quickly the men are moving to try to secure their gas masks, but because of this sudden rush of adrenaline their movements are not precise, and the soldiers are left “fumbling.” The helmets are described as “clumsy”, implying that they don’t give the soldiers much protection from the gas in the air. While most of the soldiers get their helmets on, Owen describes what happens to one man who is not so lucky. He is “yelling out and stumbling / And floundering 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” (11-14). Owen is seeing this man die right in front of him. He compares the way the man is choking on the gas that surrounds him to the way people might choke on water as they are drowning in a sea.

The next stanza is comprised of only two lines: “In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning” (15-16). While this

stanza is only two lines long, it shows the huge impact this event had on Owen. Not only did he see this man die, but in some way he holds himself responsible. I believe this to be true because he says the man is drowning “before my helpless sight” (15). He feels like the man is reaching out to him, but he cannot do anything to help. This also demonstrates the type of post-traumatic stress many soldiers go through. He describes this event not in the present, but “In all my dreams” (15). While this event is now in the past, he is forced by memory to relive the event again and again.

The final stanza contains the most chilling imagery of the entire poem. Once the man is too near death to walk, Owen has to “pace / Behind the wagon that we flung him in” (17-18). The word “flung” in this line is particularly important. This man who is dying from poisonous gas is simply “flung” into a wagon. The choice of this word shows how little compassion is shown toward his suffering and eventual death. He goes on to say that he had to “watch the white eyes writhing in his face / His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin” (19-20). The word “writhing” is a particularly negative one, bringing to mind images of worms or people in extreme pain. Owen “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” (21-24). The entire description of the man slowly dying shows how much he suffered. His death was not quick, like it would have been if he’d been shot, but it was drawn-out and extremely painful. Owen describes the “blood gargling” from his “froth-corrupted lungs” (22) to further the image the readers get about this man’s suffering. He talks too about the “incurable sores on innocent tongues” (24). The word “innocent” is used to show that these soldiers are young and innocent, yet are experiencing things no one should ever have to go through.

This last stanza is used to address the reader. Owen states that if we had seen all of these events, we “would not tell with such high zest / To children ardent for some desperate glory, / The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori” (25-28). To understand what Owen is saying, it’s important to know what the phrase used at the end of his poem means. This phrase, translated from Latin, means “it is sweet and right to die for your country” or “sweet and fitting it is to die for your native land.” (Wilfred Owen’s ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’). This phrase, according to Owen, is often used to persuade “children ardent for some desperate glory” (26) that fighting in a war is noble, or “sweet and right.” Owen calls this phrase “the old Lie” (27), however, because he feels the phrase depicts war in an untrue light. Children often hear stories of brave heroes and men returning victorious from battle, but Owen has seen the other side of war: the cruel side in which men die slow, tortured deaths only to be flung in a wagon and moved on.

Owen’s poem “Dulce et Decorum Est” shows the cruel and inhumane side of war. This side of war is one many like to ignore, preferring to replace it instead with images of soldiers happy to be defending their countries. These “lies” lead astray the children of the world, whose minds are very impressionable at such a young age. While many believe that war is wrong, Owen is arguing in this poem that one cannot truly know the horrors of war unless they have experienced it for themselves.

Works Cited

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Appendix

“Dulce et Decorum Est” by Wilfred Owen

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

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

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

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