**Dulce et Decorum est**

**by Wilfred Owen**

**Background:**

1917 in many ways was the pivotal year in his life, although it was to prove to be his penultimate. In January he was posted to France and saw his first action in which he and his men were forced to hold a flooded dug-out in no-man's land for fifty hours whilst under heavy bombardment. In March he was injured with concussion but returned to the front-line in April. In May he was caught in a shell-explosion and when his battalion was eventually relieved he was diagnosed as having shell-shock ('neurasthenia'). He was evacuated to England and on June 26th he arrived at Craiglockhart War Hospital near Edinburgh. This poem was written while Owen was recuperating from shell shock at Craiglockhart hospital in Edinburgh in 1917. It is a realistic and graphic poem about the horror of war which was written in response to propaganda poems written by Jessie Pope. Reading her poetry today it's not hard to work out why Jessie Pope's work has been forgotten:

*Who knows it won't be a picnic – not much-*

*Yet eagerly shoulders a gun?*

*Who would much rather come back with a crutch*

*Than lie low and be out of the fun?*

But during the war, thanks to the good offices of the Daily Mail and other such stalwart champions of the national cause, her tub-thumping, eerily jolly exhortations to fight reached a vast readership while the poets we now revere were virtually unknown. In fact, Owen’s poetry didn’t become popular until the 1960’s.

Dulce et Decorum Est was a direct response to her writing, originally dedicated "To Jessie Pope etc.". A later draft amended this as "To a certain Poetess", later being removed completely to turn the poem into a general attack on anyone sympathetic to the war. In hindsight, Pope's poetry seems to take a light-hearted approach towards a conflict nowadays considered brutal in the extreme, though her views were by no means atypical of the general public at the time and her poetry needs to put into context, she was a humourist.

**The title:**

The Latin title of the poem, Dulce Et Decorum Est, makes the reader first believe that it is a pro-war poem as these words can be translated as ‘it is sweet and meet (proper)”. The phrase is taken from a work by the poet, Horace that many schoolboys would’ve studied at school. The full phrase at the end of the poem ‘Dulce Et Decorum Est Pro patria mori’ can be translated to ‘sweet and proper to die for one’s country.’ In other words, it is a wonderful and great honour to fight and die for your country. Obviously the title and the phrase are both ironical in nature.

**Summary:**

**Stanza 1 – describes the condition of the men**

The poem begins with a description of a group of soldiers retreating from the front lines of the battlefield. The soldiers are bent over with fatigue and are compared to ‘old beggars under sacks’ clearly indicating the crippled state of the soldiers in the war. They are unable to walk because of their ill health. The soldiers are coughing like ‘hags’ and kept on cursing and walking through the ‘sludge’. The men are exhausted ‘men marched asleep.’ Many of the soldiers have lost their boots, are seen limping on ‘blood shod’, heightening the grim scene. ‘All’ of them were lame and blind. The hyperbole here emphasizes the terrible condition that the men were in. The repetition of the fatigued state of the soldiers is evident throughout the first stanza, ‘old beggars under sacks’, ‘men marched asleep’, and then in the final lines of the stanza, ‘Drunk with fatigue.’ The soldiers are so tired that they did not hear the droppings of the Five-Nines (gas shells) behind them.

**Stanza 2 – describes the gas attack**

Someone notices the gas shell and shouts, ‘Gas! Gas! Quick boys!’ The soldiers are immediately transported into an ‘ecstasy of fumbling.’ They are in a hurry to put on the mask before the deadly poison can take their lives. All except one are successful. He was found ‘yelling and stumbling/ And floundering like a man in fire or lime.’ The narrator looks back and finds the soldier’s protective mask being engulfed into the ‘green sea’.The narrator and the other comrades look upon the ‘helpless sight’ of the soldier dying in agony, ‘he plunges at me guttering, choking and drowning.’

**Stanza 3 – recurring dream**

Owen makes it clear in this two line stanza that he can’t stop dreaming about the soldier’s horrific death. This probably links to the neurasthenia (shell shock) he developed.

**Stanza 4 -**

In the final stanza of the poem, Dulce Et Decorum Est, the poet describes the face of the dying soldier. The soldier’s lifeless body was flung into the wagon. The poet saw the white eyes of the soldier ‘writhing in his face.’ The face hanging loose from the body and is compared to a face of the devil who is tired of sin. One could hear at every movement, the gargling of the blood from the forth-corrupted lungs. The pain undergone by the soldier is ‘obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud of vile.’ The final four lines are sarcastically composed to undermine the noble statement of patriotism that it is honourable to die for one’s country. The full phrase that Owen has used to end his poem is ‘Dulce Et Decorum Est Pro patria mori’ which can be loosely be translated to ‘it is sweet and proper to die for one’s country.’

**Form:**

In "Dulce Et Decorum Est", Wilfred Owen reacts to the war by turning conventional poetic technique into something that appears to be normal on the surface but in reality is tainted and corrupted. Owen's break from the conventional poetic form serves to symbolize the breakdown of society's value system - a system that had been trusted for many years. Owen also breaks from the pretty language prevalent in the poetry of his day to show his society the awful images of real and not romantically heroic war. Finally, Owen juxtaposes the idea of war as devastating and the idea of war as heroic to illustrate the poem's ultimate irony - "Dulce Et Decorum Est, Pro Patria Mori".

Upon one's first consideration of Wilfred Owen's poem, "Dulce Et Decorum Est", the form it takes appears conventional. It rhymes well enough, following an ABAB, CDCD, etc. pattern and traveling in one 8-line stanza, one 6-line stanza, one 2-line stanza and one 12-line stanza. The number of lines and the rhyme scheme of Owen's poem echoes that of the French Ballade which consists of an ABABBCBC rhyme scheme repeated three times followed by a short 4 line BCBC Envoy at the end. Owen's stanza breaks are irregular and he does not separate the last four lines into the Envoy (the last stanza). However, a more significant formal feature of "Dulce Et Decorum Est" is the fact that Owen makes it look like a poem written in Iambic Pentameter. True Iambic Pentameter has 10 syllables and five stresses per line with the stress falling on the second syllable of each foot. It often follows the pattern of real speech, like a heartbeat.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| da | **dum** | da | **dum** | da | **dum** | da | **dum** | da | **dum** |

*“But get thee back; my soul is too much charged.”*

(v.8.5) Macbeth – add on the stresses here

Owen's poem adheres to 9, 10, or 11 syllables per line although there are a few lines which have less. Initially, the reader will point and say, "Oh, Iambic Pentameter". However, there is nothing poetically conventional about the stresses within each line. For example, take the first line. If one were to scan the poem, it would go something like:

**“Bent double, like beggars under sacks,”**

The point is that hardly any line in the poem follows the iambic rhythm of de-Dum, de-Dum, de-Dum, de-Dum, de-Dum. Owen breaks up this iambic rhythm mainly with his use of punctuation. The punctuation (commas in the middle of lines, dashes, hyphens, exclamation points) causes the poem to sound conversational when read. There is hardly any rhythm or music to the lines. Why should there be? Owen's war is not music, Owen's war is not a rhythmic dance. Owen's poem is full of stumbling, fumbling, tired, hopeless, dying men. He is writing about a ghastly scene of war and of a man drowning in poisonous gas. If there is music in Owen's poem, it is a dirge for the dying.

Owen's break from conventional poetic form can teach us a valuable lesson as writers. By studying Keats (one of the Romantic poets that he admired) Owen learnt about the richness of language and the importance of sound. This influenced him in being able to comment on the pity of war by distancing himself from the subject matter so that he avoids mentioning his own sufferings to some extent which allows the soldiers’ miseries to be universal. As a result, much of Owen’s emotional intensity is achieved through irony as the subject matter of war shocks the reader who is more used to reading this style of poetry on the subject of love.

Owen changed this form to prove a point and to change society's attitudes. It is important to note that Owen could never have changed poetic technique without first understanding what he was changing. We must remember that poetry, like painting, sculpture, dance, or music, is an art form. Any formal school established to study an art form teaches its students the history of the art form and the history of the technique of that art form. The school encourages its students to utilize past and present techniques and finally it gives its students the knowledge and the skills to use their own creativity to evolve or change what already exists. Poetry is a dynamic force. Poetry will always change and it will always evolve as long as there are new writers to write. But tradition and traditional forms must be respected and understood in order to change it.

**Imagery:**

There are certain elements that should exist within any poem such as metaphor, simile, personification, alliteration, imagery, etc. All of these things keep the poem focused on the subject and keeps the subject "tight". Tightness of imagery is an essential difference between a good poem and a great poem. When your image loosens, you lose your reader. When you keep your image tight, the reader stays with you. A poem can have more than one image, but the images must somehow work together. In "Dulce Et Decorum Est", Wilfred Owen does this brilliantly through the use of his graphic language.

There are 4 main image groups which run all the way through the poem.

**Sleep or dreams:**Owen suffered from "horrendous nightmares symptomatic of shell shock. The experience of battle, banished from his waking mind, erupted into his dreams and thence into poems..." (1909). Instances of this image are found in line 3-haunting, line 4-rest, line 5-"Men marched asleep", line 7-fatigue, line 9-"tired, outstripped Five-Nines", line 15-"In all my dreams", and line 17-"smothering dreams".

**The sea and drowning**. These images can be found mainly in the second and third stanzas in line 12-flound'ring, line 13-"misty panes (portholes), line 13 "thick green light", line 14-"as under a green sea, I saw him drowning", line 16-"guttering, choking, drowning", and line 22 "gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs".

**Un-coordination.** These are found in line 1-Bent-double, line 2-Knock-kneed, line 6-lame and limped, line 7-drunk, line 9-fumbling, line 10-clumsy, line 11-stumbling, and line 19-writhing.

**Loss of the senses.** These are found in line 3-"turned our backs" (blindness/ignorance), line 6-blind, line 7-deaf, and line 15-"helpless sight".

Owen also shows us a small group of images which are just ghastly pictures of war and occur largely in the last stanza. In any case, all of the specific image groups work together and throughout the poem to show us a vivid picture of war. These images are utilized by Owen to show the ultimate irony and the moral of the poem; it is not in fact a "sweet and meet" fate to die for one's country even though current writers of his day were touting it as something heroic. This irony is illustrated in a clever juxtaposition (another poetic technique) at the end of the poem. The men who enlist are "innocent" (line 24), they are "children" (line 26) who have learned that war is full of "high zest" (line 25) and this makes them "ardent for some desperate glory" (line 26). The innocents are willing to believe the Lie but they will, of course, learn differently once they experience the war first hand.

The reader's attention does not wander throughout the poem because of Owen's consistent imagery. By the end of the poem, the reader can fully appreciate the irony between the truth of what happens in the trenches and the Lie being told at home. It is this attention to form and imagery that makes the poem effective.

"Dulce Et Decorum Est" is a reactionary poem. Owen reacts to a horrible war and to the Lie being told about war. He shows us his reaction through the changes he makes to poetic form illustrating the breakdown of an established system (after all, the poets who were touting the war were still sticking to form), and through the realism of his language.

Poets must react. Effective Poetry is usually a reaction to something experienced first hand by the author. Poets also must educate themselves in classic form and attempt to write in classic form. Whether success occurs while attempting classic form is another matter. The point is that we must appreciate the traditional past of the art form and we must utilize poetic device in any poem we try to write. A gut reaction, a respect for form, and a utilization of poetic devices go hand in hand in hand.

**Mood and Tone:**

The mood of the poem is reflective. The poet is thinking about his own condition in First World War.

The tone of the poem is both ironical and sarcastic. The poet tries to present the realities of war through images and haunting words which on the other hand contradict the reality. It is indeed not sweet to die for one’s country. Some may describe Owen as hectoring as his anger is clearly apparent in the last stanza, ‘My friend, you would not tell with such high zest…”

**Alliteration:**

Alliteration is the close repetition of the consonant sounds at the beginning of words to facilitate narration. Examples of alliteration in the poem are

‘Knock kneed’

‘Watch the white eyes writhing in the face’

‘Dulce Et Decorum Est’

**Simile:**

A simile is a figure of speech in which two dissimilar objects are compared and the comparison is made clear by the use of terms like ‘like’, ‘such as’ and so on. Examples of similes in Dulce Et Decorum Est are:

‘Bent double, like old beggars under sacks’

‘coughing like hags’

‘His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin’

**Allusion:**

Allusion is a reference to other works or cultures in prose and poetry. Here, allusions in the poem are in Line 20 and Line 27-28. In line 20, there is an allusion to the devil- that is evil.

In lines 27-28, the allusion is the most quoted lines of the 20th century.

**Neoligism:**

A new word – ‘bloodshod’ sounds like blood shot so emphasizes the exhaustion that the men felt. Also, it relates to the word ‘shod’ which means wearing shoes. It helps to dehumanise the soldiers as it is something you ‘do’ to horses. It also helps to create the image of the men staggering along ‘lame’ after many had ‘lost their boots’ bloody and painfully.

**Transferred epithet:**

In a transferred epithet the adjective or adverb is transferred from the noun it logically belongs with, to another one which fits it grammatically but not logically. So in "dreamless night", dreamless is a transferred epithet. The exact meaning of the sentence is "night when I (or whoever) slept without dreaming," since a night can't actually dream anyway. Foolish idea: It is not the idea itself that is foolish, but the person who comes up with it. She rubbed her sleepy eyes: Her eyes are not sleepy; she is. Knowing smile: The smile itself does not know, it is the person who smiles that knows.

‘clumsy helmets’ is used by Owen to highlight the panic that the men are in during the gas attack.

**Personal pronouns:**

1st person – ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘my’

2nd person – ‘He’

3rd person – ‘You’ ‘my friend’

In the poem he uses the first, second and third persons. He uses, for example, “we” in lines 2,3 and 18, and “I” in line 14, “my” (line 15) and “me” (line 16). We find the second person singular when he wants to make us think and make a reflection of the cruel reality of wars, for example: in lines 21 and 25.

Eventually, we can see the third person singular in the first stanza when he is describing how the soldiers were going to fight (their physical problems).

He uses the past and the present tenses. We can see the first person when he is describing the action of the poem, whereas we find the present tense when he talks about his dream (that man yelling out in his nightmare) to emphasise that it is a persistent affliction. As a curiosity, we must say that 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. Jessie Pope for one perhaps, his appeal to whom as "my friend" is doubtless ironic.

**Owen’s comments:**

*"All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true poet must be truthful."*

*“My poetry is War, and the pity of War. The poetry is in the pity.”*

*“Do you know what would hold me together on the battlefield? The sense that I was perpetuating the language in which Keats and the rest of them wrote!”*

*"I am more and more a Christian. . . Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed: but do not kill." Letter to his mother, May 1917.*

*"I can see no excuse for deceiving you about these last four days. I have suffered seventh hell. – I have not been at the front. – I have been in front of it. – I held an advanced post, that is, a "dug-out" in the middle of No Man's Land.We had a march of three miles over shelled road, then nearly three along a flooded trench. After that we came to where the trenches had been blown flat out and had to go over the top. It was of course dark, too dark, and the ground was not mud, not sloppy mud, but an octopus of sucking clay, three, four, and five feet deep, relieved only by craters full of water . . ."*



**1893-1918**