

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 gas-shells dropping softly 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 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.

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 1917 / 1918

Comment [K1]: The obvious irony of the title leads people to believe that this is a pro-war poem – taken from Horace – the eventual contrast makes the poem even more bitter

Comment [K2]: Note the foregrounding – this suggests that not only are they physically crippled but that they may be carrying other burdens. Note also the harsh monosyllabic nature of the first word

Comment [K3]: The unflattering similes quickly undermine the idea of a glorious war hero

Comment [K4]: Repeated structure here, again a crippled phrase is foreground. The comma helps make the phrase seem isolated, like the soldiers may have been

Comment [K5]: The sibilance and harsh consonants imply bitterness and the sludge itself is a symbol for the suffocating, trapped lives the soldiers are leading – the word itself sounds heavy, weighed

Comment [K6]: These semi-mystical terms give the poem a nightmarish / hellish / otherworldly feel

Comment [K7]: A key word as this is one of the first points at which we begin to realize that a war is being described

Comment [K8]: Sense of isolation and abandonment

Comment [K9]: This oxymoron reinforces the horrific conditions of the men: unable to rest – like zombies – lives controlled by generals

Comment [K10]: The repetition reinforces that this is true of all

Comment [K11]: A further series of images that undermine heroism – culminating in some sensory deprivation - crippled and ungallant, exhausted, blood-shod is a graphic image

Comment [K12]: Quiet and sinister – and, like the soldiers, we don't realize the significance of this until a bit later

Comment [K13]: The monotonous a/b rhyme scheme reflects the dull predictability of the march and the soldiers lives – enjambment prolongs the sentence length and intensifies this blurriness

Comment [K14]: Short sentences and exclamation mark suggests a sudden change of pace – sudden panic – eight line structure breaks – interesting the rhyme pattern continues

Comment [K15]: Beautiful oxymoron – suggesting delight and joy, perhaps reinforcing confusion of the attack, relief once helmet is fitted or is it a play on the glory that war should have been

Comment [K16]: Personification, transferred epithet from the men, but also suggesting inadequate equipment

Comment [K17]: The double simile here, and similes throughout are simple descriptions – so people can learn the truth and relate to it

Comment [K18]: Haunting nightmare images, a sense of detachment and isolation from him – no heroism – no one helps

Comment [K19]: The drowning images reflect the action of the gas which would have filled the lungs with liquid – the contrast with the idea of fire suggests perhaps double torture

Comment [K20]: These aren't the dreams that people are meant to have of war – the idea of haunting nightmares!

Comment [K21]: Helpless is a double edged ambiguous word here – is Owen helplessly enduring this death or is he helpless because he doesn't help – the implied cowardice is a shocking war admission

Comment [K22]: A sense of desperation

Comment [K23]: An interesting word – like a flame dying

Comment [K24]: The idea again of drowning or suffocation – almost like this is something he can't escape from

Comment [K25]: Direct address to the reader, to involve them

Comment [K26]: Cold brutality of the war, men like animals

Comment [K27]: Again ambiguous – is he hanging upside down or gallows hanging – if so, who has killed him

Comment [K28]: The final disgustingly detailed image builds towards a direct attack / command to the reader in simple language

Comment [K29]: This obviously applies to the poisoned soldiers, but it also has connotations of lies – like the lies young soldiers were fooled into believing and then repeated