

## 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