

"Dulce et Decorum Est"

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Author: Wilfred Owen

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Drafted in October 1917 while the poet was recovering from shellshock at Craiglockhart Hospital, "Dulce et Decorum Est," is one of Wilfred Owen's most popular World War I poems.

During this stay at Craiglockhart, Owen first made the acquaintance of fellow poet and soldier Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon's poetry about the war possessed an unflinching, direct language and style that profoundly influenced the young Owen, whose work up to this point had displayed the romantic flourishes and lush imagery one would expect from someone who idealized Keats and Shelley. Sassoon recalls criticizing "the over-luscious writing in his immature pieces" and challenging "the almost embarrassing sweetness in the sentiment" in some of the work Owen showed him.

A look at earlier versions of "Dulce et Decorum Est"—there were four drafts in all—show Owen attempting to develop his critique of the war by adopting a language and tone more appropriate to the nightmarish scenes he had witnessed as a soldier in the trenches. Whether this was a direct result of Sassoon's criticism or caused by his own developing poetic sensibility, Owen increasingly chose to contrast the ugliness of the fighting experience with the beauty it was destroying. For instance, in the final version of "Dulce et Decorum Est," Owen removed the following lines, which had appeared in every earlier version:

And think how, once, his face was like a bud,
Fresh as a country rose, and pure [also clean/clar/keen], and young,—

He then replaced them with lines intended to emphasize dramatically the violence and profanity of war:

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—

This shift in successive drafts of "Dulce et Decorum Est" from reliance on more conventional poetic attitudes to more urgent, realistic idioms evoked the hideous death by gas that claimed the lives of so many young soldiers—and it revealed Owen's transformation into a modern poet with a distinctive voice.

In a letter to his mother, Susan Owen, Wilfred Owen described "Dulce et Decorum Est" simply as "a gas poem," but this statement does little to convey the full range of poetic and thematic issues the poem addresses. The lines do indeed capture the few, desperate moments before and during a gas attack, as soldiers scramble to put on the masks and protective gear that stand between them and an agonizing death. The title comes from a Latin phrase in Horace, meaning "It is sweet and meet to die for one's country. Sweet! And Decorous!"; this title suggests that Owen sought to do more than chronicle the event. His goal was to attack the concept that sacrifice is sacred; he hoped to destroy the glamorized decency of the war.

Jingoistic sentiments were widely circulated in the popular pro-war propaganda and poetry that filled the pages of newspapers and magazines throughout England. Owen even had a particular pro-war poet in mind when he first composed "Dulce et Decorum Est": in earlier versions, the poem is addressed "To a Certain Poetess," which is now understood as referring to a Miss Jessie Pope, a popular and prolific journalist and author of a number of recruiting poems during the Great War. "My friend" in line 25 of the final version is presumed to refer to her.

Much of the movement and development in "Dulce et Decorum Est" stems from the tension that Owen establishes between the united suffering as a group, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the isolated, subjective experience of the individual when he is most alone—namely, at his own violent death.

The first stanza presents a scene saturated with misery, as Owen uses images of physical deprivation and deterioration usually associated with old age and poverty to convey the unalleviated and inescapable conditions of the life of a soldier. The soldiers are "Bent double, like old beggars under sacks," "coughing like hags." They go lame, blind, deaf, and yet continue to march, not in the hopes of achieving some noble aim, but rather simply toward some brief respite from physical exhaustion. Their sensory depletion is such that not even "the hoots / Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind" instills fear.

However the company is jolted out of their ambulatory state when the gas attack begins: "Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling." The group is saved just in time by their nimble responses—but then the narrator notices that one among them has not managed to put his gas mask on in time. Instantly, this soldier is set apart from the other men; the narrator observes his panicked reaction from behind the life-saving panels of his own mask. This distance means the difference between life and death.

Owen's method of dramatic description seeks to make the physical and psychological suffering of the war more vivid to the reader, who is invited to share the eyewitness perspective of the narrator. After the opening paragraph, "Dulce et Decorum Est" focuses exclusively on the individual agony, in the manner of the cinema close-up, while simultaneously insisting that the spectator cannot adequately imagine the experience. Despite the almost hyperbolic accumulation of detail, there is something inconceivable about a death so horrible, and so for the narrator as well as the reader, the experience is reduced to a dream. "If in some smothering dreams . . .," Owen writes, and then later on line 21, "If you could hear . . ."; he is trying to convey the horror of this death to those who were not there to witness it, but he knows deep down the futility of his efforts.

The ghastly final moments of the soldier's life unfolds in the surreal landscape of the gas attack, which turns the visual field into a misty netherworld of "thick green light, / As under a green sea." The image of the dying man's body being carted off as the narrator walks behind it is relived again and again in the narrator's dreams. The contrast between this dream-like setting and the violent and graphic images and sounds of death—"guttering," "choking," "drowning," "writhing," "hanging," "gargling"—allow Owen to further underscore the gap between the reality and fantasy of war, a gap that is epitomized for him by the facile use of the old lie "Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori."

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