

Wilfred Owen: *Dulce Et Decorum Est*



Paper: Individual and Society

Lesson: Wilfred Owen: *Dulce Et Decorum Est*

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Introduction



John Singer Sargent's *Gassed* presents a classical frieze of soldiers being led from the battlefield -- alive, but changed forever by individual encounters with deadly hazard in war. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I_in_popular_culture)

'*Dulce et Decorum est*' (1920) by Wilfred Owen (18 March 1893 – 4 November 1918) belongs to the genre of war poetry and is one of his most celebrated poems in the canon of English poetry. The poem is a compelling commentary on the futility of war, violence and large-scale destruction. Thus it becomes an apt literary and historical specimen for a detailed study of the atrocities, which were a byproduct of World War I. The primary objective of this unit is to understand Owen's work in the light of changing trends in technology, warfare, and poetic expressions. Central to this exercise are the concerns and events related to pre -and -post World War I conditions, Owen's early life, his experiences in the battle field and his close association with another soldier and anti-war poet, Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967)¹.

¹Like Owen, Sassoon too wrote poems that were strikingly critical about war. "*Suicide in the Trenches*", "*Hero*", "*Aftermath*" and "*A Letter Home*" are some of his most popular poems addressing the issue of war.

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Wilfred Owen: Biographical Sketch



Wilfred Owen

<http://en.wikipedia.org>

Wilfred Edward Salter Owen was born in Oswestry, on the Welsh borders of Shropshire, England. He came to be recognized as one of the most powerful poetic voices of World War I.

World War I: Centered primarily in Europe, World War I began on 28 June 1914 and lasted until 11 November 1918. Over 200,000 soldiers died in the trenches.

Trench-Foot-It refers to an infliction of feet. The accumulation of water at the bottom of the trenches led to the rotting of soldiers' feet.

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Owen had English and Welsh ancestry. His father Thomas Owen- a former sea-man and mother, Susan Shaw, eventually grew dissatisfied because of the constraints of married life. The former felt that his job as a station-master was underpaid and insipid while the latter perceived marriage as an impediment to her musical, intellectual and economic aspirations. Eldest of four children², Owen shared a close relationship with his mother and developed a doting and protective attitude towards others. When Owen was four years old, the demise of his grandfather Edward Shaw, and the decline in financial status forced the family to move to a modest settlement in Birkenhead. He received education at Birkenhead Institute from 1900 to 1907. Meanwhile, his father got transferred to Shrewsbury as an Assistant Superintendent on the railways and here Owen attended Shrewsbury Technical School (later known as the Wakeman School) and completed his graduation in 1911 at the age of 18. Owen's experimentation with poetry began around the time with John Keats³ (1795- 1821), the famous Romantic poet, as the major influence and inspiration.

Due to insufficient financial aid, Owen was denied admission into the University of London. He then, entered a period of religious study by becoming an unpaid lay assistant to the Reverend Herbert Wigan, a vicar of evangelical predilection in the Church of England, at Dunsden, Oxfordshire. During this time a close interaction with the poor children at the parish led him to disillusionment with the Church, both in its ceremonial and social welfare undertakings.

In 1913, Owen went to teach at the Berlitz School of English in Bordeaux, France. His stay in France introduced him to the works of French poet Laurent Tailhade (1854 - 1919). He returned home in 1915 and enlisted in army. During this period, Owen started pouring the miserable experiences at the frontline in his letters to his mother. He was soon diagnosed with suffering from **shell-shock** and returned home on 2 May. In June, he arrived at

²Two brothers, Harold and Colin, and one sister named Mary.

³ John Keats was an English poet and is one of the central figures of the second generation of Romantic poets.

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Craiglockhart Hospital to receive medical aid for his disturbed psychological condition and here he met Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), another English soldier and war-poet like Owen himself. This association greatly influenced Owen's poetic career. In November 1917, Owen returned to his regiment. Nonetheless, he continued to write poetry during this time, some of which got published in 1918. In September of the same year, he returned to frontline where he received the Military Cross for bravery. During the crossing of the **Sambre-Oise Canal**, on 4th November, 1918, Owen- one of the most influential modern poet- was killed in action and is buried at Ors Communal Cemetery.



BBC Documentary on Wilfred Owen

Wilfred Owen: *Dulce Et Decorum Est*

<http://www.youtube.com>

War Poetry

War has been a pre-occupation of myriad artistic endeavours in all forms of expression-be it poetry, novel or visual representation. War poetry dates back to ancient times. The heroic armies and great battles for honor and land have attracted much attention from the poets not only for the sake of experimenting with the creative faculty, but with the explicit aim to foster feeling of nationalism as well. The earliest examples of war poems are the **epics** written in different civilizations; Homer's *Iliad* clearly stands out to be one of the founding texts of Western literature that seems to link the antiquity with the medieval and the modern era.



Achilles tending the wounded Patroclus

Iliad - Attributed to Homer, *Iliad* is an ancient Greek epic poem that is set during the days of Trojan War and narrates the events leading to the battle between warrior Achilles and

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King Agamemnon. It is a tale of not just the few final weeks of war, but alludes to various legends and events related to the siege. Along with another epic, *Odyssey*, it is considered to be one of the greatest specimens of Greek epic poetry and they contribute to what one can call the ancient code of Heroism. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>)

Love sonnets by Sir Phillip Sydney (1554 - 1586) employed specific imagery of war to explicate the discords of love. Furthermore, poets like William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Alfred Tennyson (1809 - 1892), etc. have used various images of war in order to either express its after-effects and consequent grief or to address issues related to heroism and patriotism.

The poetry of war, on the one hand, has retained its traditional form. On the other hand, it has incorporated in itself the changing trends and techniques of warfare along with the ever-changing literary preferences. During the ancient times, the ideas of duty, honor and country were upheld; the poetic imagery celebrated the battle field, the decorated combatants, and the zeal to kill and die for one's honor and country. With the advent of modern times, the poetic imagery and expression underwent a change; the focus shifted from the glorification of war to the intense grief and loss of life.

(a) WAR POETRY AND MODERNISM

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"Reality has changed, in fundamental ways that called into question the assumptions on which art, and civilization itself, has been based."
(Hynes, 2011:11)

After World War I, England got transformed into an entirely new place as far as history, art, society, class, etc. are concerned. The psychological and social disruption caused by war was encoded in Modernist texts in a variety of ways. War became a symptom of modern condition. It saw a rapid development of potent weapons of mass extermination and brought many nations within this sphere, whether directly (through slaughter) or indirectly (as a result of industrial mobilization). This led to an inversion of the classical tradition of individual bravery as survival was no more a matter of gallantry.



Clockwise from the top: The aftermath of shelling during the Battle of the Somme, Mark V tanks cross the Hindenberg Line, HMS Irresistible sinks after hitting a mine in the Dardanelles, a British Vickers machine gun crew wears gas masks during the Battle of the Somme, Albatros D.III fighters of Jagdstaffel 11. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>)

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The conditions during the wartime were becoming increasingly grim leading to appalling repercussions. The unprecedented occurrence of 'shell-shock' among soldiers surfaced which showcased the futility of this ingenuity adopted by mankind for inventing more effective ways to kill. Thus, war called for a re-examination of the foundation of the society (Eksteins 307). This re-examination occurred in the contemporary literature of an age, which expressed the severe aftermaths of the hostilities of the First World War. The British and German poets tried to present this new vision of reality in their works and for the **solidier poets**, who were caught in the middle of the mechanized combat, this challenge was more ideological than aesthetic. While some followed the model of Georgian poetry⁴, the others could successfully modify the avant-garde techniques. Poetry during this time, thus, seemed to express the language of trauma.

Poetry took the form of a 'wounded' sub-genre - the scars and wounds seemed to tell their own narratives. An excerpt from William Shakespeare's *Henry V*, wherein King Henry encourages his troops for the battle is essential to understanding of the wound-motif in war poetry:

"This day is call'd the feast of Crispian.
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a-tiptoe when this day is nam'd.
....
Then will he strip his sleeves and show his scares,
And say, "These wounds I had on Crispin's day."
Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
But he will remember with advantages
What feats he did that day." (Act IV, Scene III)

The war-wound clearly stands to strengthen the national identity rather than threatening it, bestowing grand authority to its bearer. One can see an exact inversion of this tradition in the poetry of World War I. The poets explicitly evoke the speaking wound from their memory bank but only to speak of the horrors of war. The classical figure, Philomela, can

⁴ An anthology of lyrical poetry produced during 20th Century, edited by Sir Edward Marsh and published between 1912 and 1922. The title suggests a new poetic age with the accession of George V in 1912.

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be considered as the prototype of this association between traumatic memory and poetry in the Western poetic tradition.

Philomela: A Greek figure popularly known as the younger daughter of Pandion I, King of Athens and Zeuxippe. She was raped and mutilated by her sister, Procne's husband, King Tereus of Thrace. After this tragic death, she transforms into a nightingale and the song of the bird is perceived as a sorrowful lament.

The soldier poets of the First World War implored and exploited such semblances to construct the poetry of physical pain and mental agony. The soldiers not only suffered physical injuries, but were also terribly affected by a range of psychological conditions called 'shell-shock' or neurasthenia. Over the course of the war, doctors treated more than 50,000 cases of shell-shock and by the 1920s almost 114,000 applications related to war trauma were reported (Child, 164). Shell-shock was initially seen as a state of hysteria normally associated with only women. Thus, to associate it with the condition of the soldiers would have challenged the classical ideas of masculinity, heroism and war. The situation got worse when it was suggested to shoot any soldier who did not suffer physical injury, but suffered psychologically. It was during this time that the Freudian ideas of neurosis and the unconscious⁵ gained currency in England, which proved highly effective in treating the soldiers afflicted with horrors of war.

(c) WILFRED OWEN'S WAR POETRY

*"My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The poetry is in the pity."* -Wilfred Owen

Wilfred Owen's corpus of poetry comprises of very few poems, but his name has become synonymous with war poetry. His effectual poetic voice introduced him to the literary world as the spokesman for the youth who risked their lives in the war-field, rather than being a

⁵ Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), an Austrian neurologist, is popularly known as the founding father of psychoanalysis. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1919-20) and *Ego and Id* (1923), he produced his theories of the divided mind resulting into conditions like psychosis and neurosis.

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mere imitator of Keats and other influential poets. The major recurring themes in his poetry include **surreal**, irrational nature of war; loss of innocence in the face of rapidly changing world; compassion for fellow comrades; problematic Church and State dynamics; and poet's duty to speak effectively of the atrocities and futility of war.

But he would not have been the war-poet as we know him today, without the profound effect of Siegfried Sassoon whom he met at Craiglockhart in August 1917. Sassoon's poetic influence was almost immediate. In his discussions with Sassoon, Owen was introduced to the use of irony and vernacular language in poetry. Sassoon was critical of over-luscious element and overtly sweet sentiments in Owen's immature pieces (Bloom 11-20). As a result, the eventual process of drifting away from idealizing Keats to narrating the grim reality of wars proved to be an essential turning point in Owen's life. Also, Sassoon introduced Owen to the poetry circle, which included poets like Robbie Ross (1869-1918), Robert Graves (1895-1985), H. G. Wells (1866-1946), Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) etc., which broadened Owen's outlook on poetry.



Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. <http://blogs.yis.ac.jp>

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In the hands of poets like Owen and Sassoon, the pastoral element of Georgian Poetry - daybreak, flowers etc. - got transformed into a dynamic and deft expression of British soldiers' traumatic experiences in the trenches. The natural images like wheat, sun rise, poppies, and cyclical years turned into the signifiers of the cost the humans paid for war. Owen wrote most of his poems during the period of recovery from shell-shock. The practice of building on the graphic horrors along with the acquisition of public and political rhetoric of protest in his work eventually marks the end of his long enduring and intense psychological struggle, which was a result of horrid experiences in the war field.

Like Sassoon, Owen not only declared his strong rejection of war, but also expressed the increasing affliction and unrest among the people about the war propaganda. Thus, his work has a universal appeal and its visionary compassion holds relevance in the contemporary era. Owen's attitude towards war is reflected in one of his letters he wrote to his mother:

"The war affects me less than it ought. But I can do no service to anybody by agitating for news or making dole over the slaughter...I feel my own life all the more precious and more dear in presence of this deflowering of Europe. while it is true that the guns will effect a little useful weeding, I am furious with chagrin to think that the Minds which were to have excelled the civilization of ten thousand years, are being annihilated- and bodies, the product of aeons of Natural Selection, melted down to pay for political statues.."

(Letters

282)

It clearly states that Owen felt disillusioned by the jingoism of the war propaganda and protested against it in his work. Only five of his poems were published before his sudden death in war field. 'Body' as a metaphor for the horrors of war often reoccurs in his poetry. '*Anthem of Doomed Youth*', '*Dulce Et Decorum Est*', '*Futility*', '*Strange Meeting*' and '*The Parable of the Old Men and Young*' are some of Owen's most applauded poems.

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A scene from the movie *Regeneration* (1997), on composing *Dulce et Decorum est*

'Dulce Et Decorum Est': Summary

'*Dulce Et Decorum Est*' is one of Owen's popular poems based on an anti-war theme. It was originally written as a personal letter to Jessie Pope (a prolific journalist, children's fiction writer and versifier whose patriotic poems glorified war that Owen so despised) and took the form of a full-length poem when Owen decided to address a wider audience, particularly the supporters of war. Through this poem, the poet rejects the conventional notions of heroism, honour and glory associated with wars. He builds upon a powerful series of horrid images that effectively portray the physically and psychologically challenging predicaments faced by the soldiers during World War I.

After a grueling fray at the war-front, the narrator and his troop of marching soldiers are returning to their base camp. Debilitated owing to the exertions of war, on their way back they are attacked by a gas shell, which causes confusion and panic. A soldier gets fatally gassed, which initiates his slow death; the gas impairs his internal body organs, as if eating him from within, and he is soon covered all over in his own blood. This daunting image of a dying comrade permeates the narrator's dreams forcing him to re-live the tormenting moments in the present.

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A trench scene

<http://ichef.bbci.co.uk>

The manner of death described in the poem seems to suggest that there is no justification for such physical violence followed by a miserable death. As the narrator witnesses the dying soldier, through a dim "thick green light" (line 13), choking and vomiting blood, he asserts with a vehement conviction, that there is no glory associated with such a death. According to him, if one witnesses this unnerving sight they will not tell children, who are eager to march into war fields to earn personal eminence and national honour that it is pleasant and proper to die for one's country. The last line, borrowed from an ode by the Roman poet Horace, "*Dulce et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori*" (It is sweet and proper to die for one's country) distinctly establishes the meaning of the poem. The title becomes extremely ironical in relation to the events described in the poem and through this poetic device, Owen successfully conveys his message.

Analysis

Owen drafted 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' in October 1917 in Craiglockhart Hospital in Scotland, where he was recovering from shell-shock caused by his experience in trenches, and was published posthumously in 1920. It is said that Owen wrote four drafts. Harold Bloom credits Sassoon's influence for this exercise in adoption of a more appropriate language and tone in Owen's work required to describe the disturbing experiences of war (Bloom 14). The

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title of the poem is ironic. In a letter to his mother he called it a "Gas poem", perhaps because the poem captures a few harrowing and desperate moments before, during, and after a gas attack on the soldiers returning from the battlefield. Owen uses essential literary devices to heighten its vibrant poetic imagery.

The opening lines sets a scene saturated with anguish. It is just like any other day on a battlefield. The description of the soldiers' grim condition, as an image of physical breakdown, catches immediate attention.

*"Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,*
(Lines 1-2)

Even before the gas attack, the world of the soldiers has turned into a living nightmare, which is reflected through their physical appearance. Using simile in the first two lines, Owen compares the wretched soldiers with beggars and hags. While the former conveys a sense of deteriorated living conditions and its inescapability, the latter suggests the idea of an impending doom as hags⁶ are often associated with both old age and decay fitting well into poem's morbid atmosphere.

The word "double" in the first line metaphorically suggests that the soldiers have become dual personalities; highlighting the transformation they have undergone- from the confident warriors before the war to the weary men they have become now. They labour through gore and "sludge" (a region covered under wet mud), which is suggestive of both the restricted movement of the soldiers and their disturbed state of mind. From being like beggars and hags they become "blind", "drunk", and "deaf" in the next few lines:

⁶Hags are also associated with sorcery (and death). The comparison with the witches carries in it the cultural weight of myriad literary anecdotes, for example, the Three Witches or Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare (1564-1616).

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*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."*
(Lines 3-8)

The idea of abnormality associated with soldiers' state of being is introduced when the poet says that they "march asleep" (line 5). War is a state of abnormal conduct that cannot yield productive results. Some of them have lost their boots yet the soldiers continue to march towards a "distant rest" despite all the torturing impediments, not to achieve some noble goal, but in a hope to find some respite from the physical infirmity (line 4). The "hoots of gas shells" hardly install fear as the sensory abilities of the soldiers have been weakened by the physical realities of war (lines 7-8). The troop is brutally jolted out of their ambulatory state when a gas shell is dropped on them and this "turns the visual field into a misty nether land" (Bloom 16):

*"Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring 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."
(Lines 9-14)*

From a collective trudge, the tension and focus now shifts to the suffering of an individual and the narrative voice too changes from third person to first person. While everyone fits their helmets, the narrator notices one soldier still struggling with his helmet. The flurry of actions leaves the group with no collective power. At once, this soldier is set apart from others and the narrator helplessly observes his terrified and distraught actions through his own helmet's glass panel that separates life from death.

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The nightmarish element of the poem is echoed in the narrator's premonition that the aforementioned soldier will be a casualty of war. He will succumb to poison gas, an act compared to "drowning" in the poem. These lines metaphorically highlight the immeasurable distance between the narrator and aforementioned soldier and thus, form the thematic heart of the poem. It is this formidable sight of a dying comrade being carted off in a wagon with the narrator walking behind him that haunts him in his dreams. This lends the poem a **surreal** strain. The Surrealists espoused 'automatic writing' and "took their imagery from the unconscious and created a super or *sur* (meaning above or beyond) realism" (Childs 121). The image of dream is essential to this process and Owen has effectively put it in use in his poem. The narrator oscillates between the pain of the past and that of the present.

*"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;"* (Lines 15-18)

The suffering soldier vomits blood with every jerk of the wagon as if throwing out the bitterness of war hitherto stored inside him. His eyes move painfully in all directions and his facial expression reflects the light of life slowly diminishing. Harold Bloom perceives this contrast between the dream-like setting and the graphic violence and sound of death as Owen's technique to accentuate the difference between reality and fantasy of war. In the last stanza of the poem, the narrator tries to convey the dismay of this close encounter with death to those who were not there to witness it:

*"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; Dulceet Decorum est*

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Pro patria mori." (Lines 21-28)

For most of the First World War Soldier Poets, the body becomes a metaphor for a speaking wound that narrates the story of pain and suffering. Owen too seems to evoke the speaking wound in these lines; as if the injuries speak of the physical torture endured by the soldiers in the trenches. In the final draft of the poem, Owen replaces the lines: "*And think how, once, his face was like a bud, / Fresh as a country rose, and pure [also clean, clear, keen], and young-*" with "*bitter as the cud / Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues*" in order to dramatically emphasize the profanity of war (Lines 23-24). In this sense, his poetry speaks the language of trauma and it underlines his transformation into a modern poet with an individualistic expression.

The narrative voice contradicts the historical tradition of glorification of war- *Dulce et Decorum est Pro patria mori.*" (It is sweet and proper to die for one's country) and evinces that there is nothing proper about meeting a tragic fate in the battlefield. It attacks those people at home who uphold the continuation of war and encourage youth's participation in it. This wounded voice symbolizes authenticity rather than a loss of authority and meaning; as a witness to the violence of war and oppression, it becomes paradoxically authoritative in nature.⁷ Those who aspire for desperate glory will understand the spiteful truth hidden in "white eyes writhing" (Line 19) or the "face like a devil's sick of sin" (Line 20); albeit, unlike the devil, the soldiers have not committed any sin in fighting for their country. Yet merciless killing on both sides of war is seen here as a sin against humanity. This is the naked reality of war and if one sees this deadly dance of horror and death over the corpse of humanity, they will not pass on the hollow claim inherent in this old saying as 'truth' to the younger generation.

Irony in the Title:

⁷ Jeffrey Sychterz's 'Scarred Narratives and Speaking Wounds: War Poetry and the Body' in *Pacific Coast Philology*, Vol. 44, No. 2, *Violence and Representation* (2009), pp. 137-147.

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“Fight on them by the ships together. He who among you finds by sphere thrown or spear thrust his death and destiny, let him die. He has no dishonor when he dies defending his country, for then his wife shall be saved and his children afterwards, and his house and property shall not be damaged, if the Achaians must go away with their ships to the beloved land of their fathers.”
(Homer: ‘Book Fifteen’, *Illiad*)

The idea of war and honor as two related categories are highly influenced by the early Greek literature. Jasper Griffin, in *Homer on Life and Death*, asserts that Homeric hero embraces the horrors of war and death for glory and this thought is behind the Horatian idea of hero as well.⁸ Owen invokes a popular phrase from the classical literature of chivalry and honour, ‘*Dulce et decorum*’ and questions this absolute imperative to justify martial course of action.

The title of the poem is in Latin and also appears in the last two lines of the poem. The source of Owen’s Latin adage is Roman poet, Horace’s Ode II in his book III of Odes. Owen uses only a part of the entire line in the title and stops at “Dulce et Decorum Est”, that is, “It is sweet and proper to die”. Further, in the poem, he paints a morbid picture of war-brutality, suffering and death- and challenges the classical tradition that celebrates war. As opposed to this is the emptiness of war demonstrated through the pathetic condition of soldiers and the large-scale loss of life. There is nothing sweet about a man drowning in his own blood- “guttering”, “corrupted lungs” and there is nothing proper about the “white eyes withering” and a “hanging face” (line 19-20). It only pertains to complete negation of life and effectively unveils the emptiness of the trumped-up truism of this old patriotic saying. The title is ironic because the poem attempts to subvert the claim of this old saying by painting the real picture of war and the trauma associated with it.

⁸ Griffin, Jasper. *Homer on Life and Death*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980, pg. 102.

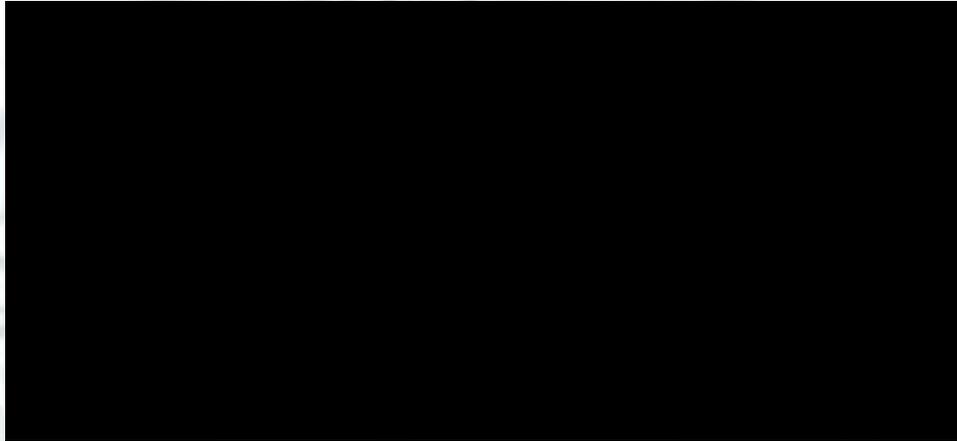
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Conclusion

Owen creates a world falling apart owing to the atrocities of war. The soldiers with their bodies falling apart strongly communicate Owen's belief that war is the ultimate negation of anything that sustains life. The gruesome description of each and every detail is vivid and invites the reader to share the narrator's eyewitness account, thereby dissolving the lines dividing past from present. The first person account of the poem blurs the interiority of the narrator's voice with that of the reader's experience of reading the poem; the readers are made to closely experience the brutality of excruciating realities of war. The modern warfare technology of First World War replaces the real enemy and becomes a tool of massive destruction. The gas attack is a reflection of a world suddenly gone bankrupt of compassion and reason. The result is so much of physical pain and endless psychological trauma that the war in itself becomes surreal.

Eventually, the poem turns inwards, becoming a mindscape of narrator's chimera. This is suggestive of the fact that a soldier's tormented mind never leaves the battlegrounds. The patriotic fervor gets transformed into a type of deadly life force that destroys the youth in the name of national glory. The poem divides people in two seemingly increasingly irreconcilable worlds- one inhabited by the civilians who fortify ideas like honour, duty and wars, and the other, of the brave soldiers who go through the trauma associated with these ideas. One can say this is an occasion to trace Sassoon's influence as he too sees soldiers in a similar light when he says, "*Soldiers are citizens of death's grey land, drawing no dividend from time's tomorrow*". The poem successfully portrays these two versions of reality and can be considered as one of Owen's best protest against war in verse form. It undeniably constitutes the pity of war.

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A recent adaptation of the poem 'Dulce et Decorum est' (2014 Shorts Showcase Festival Entry)

Important Questions

- 1) What does Owen mean by 'Pity of War'? Critically examine '*Dulce Et Decorum Est*' in the light of Owen's views about war and poetry.
- 2) Discuss the irony in the title of the poem. Do you think that Owen has successfully rejected the idea of heroism and patriotism in the poem?
- 3) Comment on the dream images use by the poet in order to explore the horrors of war and death.
- 4) Do you think that Owen has painted a realistic picture of his own experiences in '*Dulce Et Decorum Est*'?
- 5) *"Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs*

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*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.
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;"*

- a) Describe the condition of the soldiers suggested in the given lines.
 - b) Why does Owen call it a 'Gas poem'?
 - c) How is the dream imagery essential to poem's overall effect?
 - d) Explain the line, "Like a devil's sick of sin".
- 6) *"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; Dulceet Decorum est
Pro patria mori."*
- a) Who are the children "ardent for desperate glory"?
 - b) Critically comment on the last lines in relation to the complete poem.

Glossary

Shell- Shock- It is seen as a state of psychological disturbance; "a condition of alternate moods of apathy and high excitement, with very quick reaction to sudden emergencies but no capacity for concentrated thinking" (Peter Childs, 200:164). With the advancements in the study of this condition it also came to be later known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

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Sambre–Oise Canal - This 17 km long canal is located in northern France. It has a crucial place in the narratives about World War I as the British forces had to cross it during war time. Wilfred Owen was shot dead while crossing this canal.

Epic- An epic is a long narrative poem, particularly belonging to the ancient oral tradition, with the primary focus on depicting life history, deeds, and adventures of the mythical and historical figures or the history of a nation.

Soldier Poets- The soldiers who wrote poetry during the Great Wars and focused on the atrocities suffered by the army on the battle-fields.

Surreal –The terms refers to anything that bears the quality of surrealism. Surrealism is a cultural movement that originated in France in early 1920s. It developed, during World War I, out of Dadaism. The surrealists attempted to project the functioning of the unconscious mind and synthesize it with the conscious mind.

Suggested Links

- 1) The Wilfred Owen Association- <http://www.wilfredowen.org.uk/home/>
- 2) The First World War Poetry Digital Archives-
<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/education/tutorials/intro/owen/ors.html>
- 3) War Literature and Arts- an online journal, Vol. 25, 2013 -
<http://wlajournal.com/>
- 4) BBC Documentary on Wilfred Owen:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0nGcsqU5yA>
- 5) The Great War Interviews: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tx7ZgG9gBhw>

Wilfred Owen: *Dulce Et Decorum Est*

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