

Wilfred Owen Poems

Dulce Et Decorum Est - 1917

- Start with opening information:
 - Owen wrote this poem at Craiglockhart in 1917. It was probably redrafted at Ripon in 1918.
 - *Dulce et Decorum Est* was originally entitled 'To Jessie Pope'. Jessie Pope was an extremely patriotic poet and journalist. Owen wrote *Dulce et Decorum Est* as much as a response to her pro-war verses (such as *The Call*, below) as to describe the horrors of a gas attack. The use of the term 'My Friend' is ironic. Pope was someone who actively encouraged the young to go and die. She was, in Owen's view, their enemy since she sought their death.
- I will be approaching the poem thematically
 - The themes of the poem that I will be exploring are
 1. **The plight of the soldier**
 2. **The tragedy & horrors of war**
 3. **The farce of patriotism**
- Provide contextualisation and overview of extract
 - This poem was written by Wilfred Owen, a war poet who focused on anti-war poetry after experiencing the horrors of World War 1 first hand.
 - In fact, this poem was written when Wilfred Owen was at Craiglockhart, a war hospital at which Wilfred Owen underwent treatment after suffering shellshock during his time on the battlefield, and we see his intense personal experiences with war reflected onto the poem that he writes, for example the Sentry.
 - This poem in particular, is a combination of two sonnets. The first one presents a vignette (A brief description) from the frontlines, particularly a chlorine gas attack that caught soldiers by surprise and took the life of one. In the second sonnet, Wilfred Owen is left to reflect on the event and in doing so passes commentary on the supporters of the war and those who write propagandistic poetry (in particular, Jessie Pope) in support of war efforts, suggesting that if they truly knew the horrors of war, they would not support it so wholeheartedly.
 - Structure: the poem consists of 4 stanzas of varying lengths with the first 14 lines (which can be read as a sonnet) depicting situations and events, particularly a chlorine gas attack, that the soldiers suffer. And the next 14 lines (the second sonnet) reflecting the consequences of the series of events. → used to add emphasis to the last two lines and also for the change between the first 14 lines and the last 14 lines. The last couplet sums up the whole poem (farce of patriotism), and is his main point of the poem.
- **The plight of the soldier**
 - 'Bent double, like old beggars under sacks', 'Knock-kneed, coughing like hags'
 - The soldiers are presented to the reader as old and frail people when in actual fact they should be fit young men. This highlights the toll the war has had on them mentally and physically, that they are now drained
 - This disparity in age also highlights their loss of innocence as brought about by the war and represents the plight of the soldier

- 'Bent double' and 'knock-kneed' are spondaic in nature, emphasising these lines and highlights the physical suffering of the soldiers as well as their loss of innocence
- Rhyme structure – Perfect ABABCD CD masculine rhymes
 - The entire poem follows this structure strictly and it almost feels like a forced order, perhaps a reflection of the structure of marching soldiers
 - Long 'udge' sounds in stanza 1 in "sludge" and "trudge" create the the thickness of limited mobility experienced by the men and highlights the slowness of their movements.
 - "umb" sounds in stanza 2 in "fumbling", "clumsy" and "stumbling" connotes frantic movement that lack precision.
- Rhythm
 - Metrical variations in the 2nd line of the poem – "Knock-kneed(spondee), **coughing**(trochee) like hags(iambic), **we cursed through sludge**(iambic)" – creating an eerie and disconcerting effect in readers. The metrical variations also breaks the usual upbeat tone of an iambic pentameter. This is to signify the lack of happiness and hope that the soldiers' feel.
 - Last line of stanza one, "Of gas-shells dropping softly behind." Catalectic line creates emotional tension within the reader. The lack of a 10th syllable creates an effect similar to the calm before the storm.
 - This effect is emphasised through the juxtaposition of the the lack of action "dropping softly behind", in the last line of stanza 1, and the first line of stanza 2, "Gas! GAS! ... ecstasy of fumbling", where the soldiers are whipped into action.
- Diction
 - 'Men marched asleep', 'Many had lost their boots', 'Fitting the clumsy helmets'
 - A sense of childlikeness about the soldiers is conveyed in these two lines and this highlights an innocence about the soldiers that is lost on the frontline
 - In the same way that children lose their footwear, so too did soldiers. Additionally, this evokes more sympathy for the soldier, who had to march on in rough terrain barefoot, the muddy terrain to which their boots were probably lost
 - A transferred epithet from the soldiers onto the helmet brings up the childlikeness of the soldier.
- 'In all my dreams before my helpless sight, he plunges at me'
 - Intimate and personal experience with the death of his comrade
 - Despite being the start of the second sonnet, these first two lines are separated from the rest of a sonnet. This emphasises the haunting nature of the image imprinted onto the mind of the speaker who is left with the image for the rest of his existence.
- 'the wagon that we flung him in'

- The speaker gives insight into how the deceased are dealt with on the frontline, simply put into a wagon and sent off without any fanfare or ceremony
- This is emphasised by the use of the word flung, which paints a very straight and blatant image of the war, as compared to the romanticized image that other war poets would paint in support of the war
- There is a sense that no respect is paid to the soldiers who died in the process of defending their country, perhaps because the situation does not allow it or because the people really do not care, and this strongly contrasts the picture that would have been painted in propaganda, where young men are fooled into thinking that they will return victorious and be showered with glory as war heroes, when in actual fact, there is a high risk of them not returning at all, and even then, with no due respect paid.
- This ties in with another main theme that runs through the poem, the farce of patriotism
- ‘children ardent for some desperate glory’
 - This statement almost makes it out that men are fooled into joining the war efforts.
 - The presentation of these young men as children highlights their innocence before enlisting and also their foolishness for enlisting
 - The transferred epithet of ‘desperate glory’ also gives insight into the attitude of the young men who enlisted, who were transfixed on the glory associated with war as painted by propaganda, and were not aware of the true horrors of war, perhaps even choosing not to consider it in the interest of their desperate attempt to attain glory
- **Tragedy & horrors of war**
 - Rhythm
 - Stanza one largely follows a regular iambic pentameter, reflecting the relentless but sad routinely nature of the horrors that the men experience in the war.
 - Diction – choice of monosyllabic words - ‘Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!’
 - From a narrative sense, we see that the soldiers are always under threat of enemy attack.
 - The use of monosyllabic words along with exclamations highlights the high pressure and stressful environment the soldiers functioned in.
 - Additionally, while most of the poem adheres to an iambic pentameter, the exclamation ‘Gas! Gas!’ is presented as a spondaic foot, adding to the stressful nature of the situation
 - Rhyme
 - The long “ing” rhymes in a row in line 2 of stanza 3 in “guttering, choking, drowning”, “smothering”, has the effect of slow motion, replicating the horrors of the men drowning in chlorine gas.
 - ‘flound’ring like a man in fire or lime...’

- We see the horrors of chemical warfare and the poison gas which caused the soldier to struggle and die painfully
- The image presented is visceral, comparing the death to being burned alive or by a caustic substance, an image relatable but horrifying to readers. Wilfred Owen's realistic and graphical depiction of the situation allows him to achieve his aim – to present the horrors of war in its most blunt and truthful form to inform the youth of his country the horrors of war.
- The use of the word 'floundering' highlights the struggle and helplessness of the soldier to the situation. Additionally, an apostrophe is used to highlight the immediacy and realistic nature of the situation
- The use of ellipses is a terminal caesura, used to set a solemn tone, to express his helplessness to do anything more than stand and watch as his comrade dies a painful death
- 'As under a green sea, I saw him drowning'
 - The use of metaphor again creates a horrifying image the audience can relate to, that of death by drowning in a large body of water. This highlights the grim overwhelming and insurmountable situation.
 - The use of the word 'saw' also highlights the helplessness of the speaker who can do nothing but watch his comrade die a painful death.
 - Long vowel sounds as in 'green', 'sea' and 'drown' also highlight how the suffering of the soldier was dragged out to make the entire experience seem all the more torturous.
 - This sense of extended suffering is also emphasised by the hypercatalectic nature of this line, containing 11 syllables as compared to the usual 10 of an iambic pentameter.
 - This line ends the first sonnet within the poem and this sense of finality reflects the life of the unfortunate soldier. This haunting image is left with the reader as well as with the speaker.
- 'He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning'
 - Another grim and horrific image is presented by the speaker with the use of a trio of verbs with an internal masculine rhyme scheme to represent the final struggle put up by the soldier in vain. The struggle and its intense nature highlight the nature of the soldier's death. It highlights the wasted life thrown away because of the war.
 - Again the sense of extended suffering is emphasised by this hypercatalectic line that contains 11 syllables
- 'watch the white eyes writhing in his face', 'His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin'
 - Another pair of scenes are used to paint the horrifying nature of the situation and of the war in general
 - The alliterative 'w' drags and expounds on the visceral nature of the torture the soldier suffered
 - Sibilance sets a wicked and sinister tone that reflects the nature of war
 - The speaker presents these scenes as if he is recounting them vividly as if he cannot forget it as much as he wants to and this ties into another major theme of the poem, the plight of the soldier, by highlighting the loss of

innocence, having witnessed death, and the post traumatic stress from witnessing a painful and cruel death

- **The farce of patriotism**

- 'If in some smothering dreams you too could pace behind the wagon'
 - The speaker begins his reflection and in a direct address to the reader, particularly the supporters of war, he suggests that they are only in support of war because they do not understand its true horrors
 - The adjective 'smothering' describes an oppressing and all encompassing situation, and this describes the nature of the frontline effectively with an aggression that shows the speaker's offensive taken up against those in support of war
- 'My friend you would not tell with such high zest'
 - This 'zest' of those in support of the war is made to contrast the attitude of the soldiers as portrayed in the opening lines of the poem, suggesting how vastly different their experiences with the war are and how ignorant these supporters of the war are
 - The way Owen uses 'my friend' is ironically and is actually referring to those whom he strongly disagrees with.
 - "my friend" could be directed at a particular poet, Jesse Pope, who harboured pro-war sentiment and wrote pro-war poems with this 'high zest' that Wilfred Owen refers to.
- 'The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori'
 - This is a famous Latin phrase taught to school children in Britain during that time. It means that it is "good and proper to die for one's country", basically echoing the government's patriotic propaganda.
 - However, By turning "lie" into a proper noun highlights the enormity of the lie taught to them all.
 - The line is also a run on line. The use of enjambment here is possibly again to emphasise the enormity of the **lie** and that the truth cannot be kept from the public and from the youths.
- Tone
 - The tone of the poem is angry and critical. Owen seems to dwell on explicit details of the horrors and misery faced by soldiers in the war to maximise the anti-war message that he wishes to send out to readers.