

## Dulce et Decorum Est by Wilfred Owen

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 tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped 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 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.  
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.

## **Glossary**

The words 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' are from a Latin ode written by the poet Horace around two thousand years ago. The poem ends with the full saying: 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.' This means: 'It is sweet and right to die for your country.'

**Flares** – rockets which were sent up to burn brightly and light up any soldiers or other targets.

**Distant rest** – the exhausted soldiers were heading for a camp away from the front line where they would be allowed to rest for a few days.

**Hoots** – the noise made by shells flying overhead.

**Outstripped** – the men have managed to march beyond the reach of the shells which are now falling behind them.

**Five-Nines** – explosive shells

**Gas** – poison gas which destroys the lungs within seconds.

**Helmets** – gas masks.

**Flound'ring** – floundering. Stumbling and struggling to stay upright. This word is often used to describe somebody who is struggling to stay afloat in the water, so it ties in with the idea of the soldier drowning in the poison gas.

**Lime** – a chalky substance which burns flesh.

**Panes** – the glass part of the gas masks.

**Guttering** – gurgling and choking. Guttering is also used to refer to a dying candle flame as it flickers. Owen probably meant to evoke both images in his use of this word.

**Cud** – regurgitated grass chewed by cows. The green froth bubbling from the dying man's lips reminded Owen of the cud.

**Zest** – enthusiasm.

**Ardent** – very keen.

## Background

Wilfred Owen wrote this poem as a response to the pro-war poetry that was popular before and during the First World War. He wanted people to read about the realities of war and to realise that it was not a noble and exciting game full of opportunities for honour and glory.

Wilfred Owen was killed in action just one week before WWI ended. He was twenty five years old.

## Analysis

In the first stanza, Owen sets the scene. The soldiers are trudging wearily back to camp where they may get a brief rest from the horrors of the front line. The soldiers, although they are young, are 'Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,/Knock-kneed, coughing like hags'. This image is in sharp contrast to what many people at the time would have associated with fighting men. There is no glamour or glory in Owen's description: some soldiers are barefoot, all are exhausted and lame as they stumble towards their 'distant rest'. Behind them, shells fall, but the men are deaf to the sound, so focused are they on getting to the camp.

The broad vowel sounds and the alliteration ensure that the pace of this first stanza is slow, reflecting the pace of the weary men who are 'Drunk with fatigue'.

In the first stanza, Owen tells us that 'Men marched asleep'. In the second stanza they are awoken, but it is to a living nightmare. The soldiers are attacked with poison gas and they suddenly spring into action. The capital letters and the exclamation marks add to the sense of urgency: 'Gas! GAS!'. The use of internal rhyme in this stanza: 'fumbling', 'clumsy' and 'stumbling' focuses our attention on the men's awkward movements. In their desperate haste to put on the gas masks, the men are clumsy. In this 'ecstasy of fumbling' one soldier does not get his mask on in time. Helplessly, Owen watches as the man stumbles and chokes on the poison gas. Owen is watching through the glass eyepiece of his own gas mask and it appears to him as if the other man is drowning 'under a green sea'. This simile, in which Owen compares the clouds of green gas to a green sea, is a powerful one. It adds a sense of unreality to the scene, almost as if Owen momentarily cannot take in the reality of what he is seeing. A man is dying in front of his eyes and he can do nothing but watch.

The third stanza is only two lines long but it is no less powerful for that. The dreamlike, unreal quality of the last stanza is continued here when Owen tells us that his dreams are haunted by the image of the dying man he could not save.

The imagery in the fourth stanza is chilling and horrific. The dying man is 'flung' into a wagon as he can no longer walk. The word 'flung' shows how cheap life has become and how there is no dignity afforded to the dying. This is understandable, of course, as the soldiers can do next to nothing to help their comrade. He is just another victim of the senseless waste of life that marked World War One. There is little time for compassion.

As Owen paces behind the wagon, he sees the soldier's death throes. The man is writhing in agony, and every jolt of the wagon brings blood bubbling up from his ruined lungs.

Owen addresses the reader directly in this stanza, saying that if those who read his words could see the appalling reality of war, they would not be so quick to tell children 'the old Lie' that dying for your country is a sweet and noble end. There is nothing sweet or right about a man choking slowly to death in the back of a wagon.

**Theme:**

The horror and futility of war

**This poem could be used to answer a question on:**

- ✓ War
- ✓ A poem I would recommend
- ✓ Interesting imagery

