Dulce et Decorum Est

POEM TEXT

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 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.

SUMMARY

The speaker begins with a description of soldiers, bent under the weight of their packs like beggars, their knees unsteady, coughing like poor and sick old women, and struggling miserably through a muddy landscape. They turn away from the light flares (a German tactic of briefly lighting up the area in order to spot and kill British soldiers), and begin to march towards their distant camp. The men are so tired that they seem to be sleeping as they walk. Many have lost their combat boots, yet continue on despite their bare and bleeding feet. The soldiers are so worn out they are essentially disabled; they don't see anything at all. They are tired to the point of feeling drunk, and don't even notice the sound of the dangerous poison gas-shells dropping just behind them.

Somebody cries out an urgent warning about the poison gas, and the soldiers fumble with their gas masks, getting them on just in time. One man, however, is left yelling and struggling, unable to get his mask on. The speaker describes this man as looking like someone caught in fire or lime (an ancient chemical weapon used to effectively blind opponents). The speaker then compares the scene—through the panes of his gas-mask and with poison gas filling the air — to being underwater, and imagines the soldier is drowning.

The speaker jumps from the past moment of the gas attack to a present moment sometime afterward, and describes a recurring dream that he can't escape, in which the dying soldier races toward him in agony.

The speaker directly addresses the audience, suggesting that if readers could experience their own such suffocating dreams (marching behind a wagon in which the other men have placed the dying soldier, seeing the writhing of the dying soldier's eyes in an otherwise slack and wrecked face, and hearing him cough up blood from his ruined lungs at every bump in the path—a sight the speaker compares to the horror of cancer and other diseases that ravage even the innocent), they would not so eagerly tell children, hungry for a sense of heroism, the old lie that "it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country."

THEMES

THE HORROR AND TRAUMA OF WAR

Wilfred Owen wrote "Dulce et Decorum Est" while he was fighting as a soldier during World War I. The poem graphically and bitterly describes the horrors of that war in particular, although it also implicitly speaks of the horror of all wars. While it is easy to comment on the "horror of war" in the abstract, the poem's depiction of these horrors is devastating in its specificity, and also in the way that Owen makes clear that such horror permeates *all* aspects of war. The banal daily life of a soldier is excruciating, the brutal reality of death is unimaginable agony, and even surviving a war after watching others die invites a future of endless trauma. The way Owen uses language to put readers inside the experiences of a soldier helps them begin to understand the horrific experience of all of these awful aspects of war.

In the first stanza of "Dulce et Decorum Est," the speaker thrusts the reader into the mundane drudgery and suffering of the wartime experience, as the speaker's regiment walks from the front lines back to an undescribed place of "distant rest." This is not a portrait of men driven by purpose or thrilled by battle. Instead, they are miserable: "coughing like hags," cursing as they "trudge" through "sludge" with bloody feet. They march "asleep," suggesting that these soldiers are like a kind of living dead. The terror and brutality of war have deadened them.

While the speaker is clear that the life of a soldier is painful and demoralizing, he demonstrates in the second stanza—which moves from describing the communal "we" of a regiment to a specific dying man—that death in war is also terrible: barbarous, agonizing, and meaningless. In the first two lines of the second stanza, the speaker captures the terror and dumb confusion of facing a gas attack (a feature of Word War I combat, which had never been used to such a terrible extent before that war), with the movement from the first cry of "Gas!" to the urgent amplification of that cry ("GAS!"), which is then followed by all the men "fumbling" with "clumsy helmets." The speaker then describes a particular man unable to get his helmet on time, "stumbling" and "flound'ring" like a "man in fire" while the speaker can only watch helplessly from within his own mask. This other soldier's death is mired in confusion and pain. There isn't even an enemy to face; it is a physically agonizing death offering no ideal or purpose to hold onto.

The poem's very short third stanza suddenly plunges into the speaker's own mind. In doing so, the poem reveals another aspect of the horror of war: that even *surviving* war offers ceaseless future torment. The surviving speaker describes himself as seeing in "all my dreams" this man dying in agony. The speaker can't escape this vision, which means he can't ever achieve the "rest" that was the sole positive thing mentioned in the first stanza. The speaker's sleep is permanently haunted by the trauma of the death he has witnessed.

Since the third stanza is written in the present tense, it indicates that these dreams *never* fade. The speaker, who has survived—perhaps for a moment, perhaps the entire war—is permanently scarred by this trauma for however long his life will last. The poem's portrayal of the horror of war, then, is complete and total. It reveals *all* aspects of war—living through it, dying in it, and surviving it—as being brutal, agonizing, and without meaning.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16
- Line 17
- Lines 18-24

THE ENDURING MYTH THAT WAR IS GLORIOUS

In its first three stanzas, "Dulce et Decorum Est" presents a vision of war—and World War I in particular—that is entirely brutal, bitter, and pessimistic. The fourth and final stanza marks a shift. While the first stanza focused on the "we" of the regiment, the second focused on the "he" of the dying soldier, and the third on the "I" of the traumatized speaker, the fourth stanza focuses on the "you" of the reader. In this stanza, the speaker directly addresses the reader, trying to make them understand the brutal reality of war. This is an effort to contradict what the speaker describes as the "old Lie," the commonly held belief—communicated in the lines of Latin from the poet Horace ("it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country")—that war, and dying in war, is meaningful and full of glory.

It is possible to read this last stanza in a hopeful way by imagining that the poem *could* effectively communicate to non-soldiers the brutality of war. In this view, Owen wrote the poem with the belief that by highlighting the juxtaposition between a sanitized image of honorable death (as described by Horace) versus the messy, horrifying truth of actual war, perhaps the poem's audience will change its attitude towards war and cease cheerfully sending young men—mere "children"—to die in agony.

To read the poem in a hopeful way, however, requires readers to believe that empathy *is* enough to change central beliefs. This is a plausible reading, but it hinges on the speaker's descriptions being disturbing and evocative enough to counter what Owen describes as a sentimental belief about war that dates back to antiquity—a difficult task for one short poem, no matter how powerful. In light of this, it's perhaps a more careful reading of the poem to interpret the final stanza with a degree of pessimism. In this reading (while one might still agree that Owen wrote the poem in hopes of changing minds), the speaker is ultimately pessimistic about his ability to change the civilian public's attitude towards war. As the speaker puts it: *If* the audience could experience the trauma the speaker describes ("the white eyes writhing," the "gargling from froth-corrupted lungs"), then they wouldn't pass their patriotic militarism down to their children. But they *don't* experience it, except through the language of the poem, and the poem gives a hint of despair that such language isn't enough.

In the final two lines of "Dulce et Decorum Est," Owen implies this pessimistic view in two main ways. First, and simply, the speaker allows Horace to have the final word. The speaker undercuts Horace's lines by calling them a lie, but that description comes before the Latin text. That Horace's words are allowed to end the poem implies a sense that Horace's words and belief in the glory and honor of war will outweigh the vision of horror described by the poem. Further, by referring to this false story about the glory of war as "the old

Lie," and then quoting a Latin line from the Roman poet Horace, the speaker makes clear that the depiction of war as glorious is not just a simple *misconception* made by those unfamiliar with war. It is, rather, a *lie*—a purposefully told falsehood. And it is a lie that has been told for thousands of years in order to inspire young men to willingly give their lives to serve the political needs of their countries.

"Dulce et Decorum Est" is not, then, simply trying to reveal the horror of war to the unknowing public (though it certainly *is* trying to do that). The poem is also condemning the historical institutions and political/social structures that have, for time immemorial, sent young men to their deaths based on pretty tales of glory. The poem demands that the reader face the truth and no longer be complicit with that old Lie, but even as it does so, it seems to bitterly perceive that nothing will change, because nothing ever has.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 17-28

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

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.

Owen begins the poem with a description of marching soldiers. His focus is on the grimness and misery of the situation, which seems to have rapidly aged the men and zapped them of life. In the first line, the speaker compares the soldiers to "old beggars" bent under their burdens. In line 2, he compares their coughing to that of "hags," a derogatory term for old women, and emphasizes their physical weariness as they struggle through mud. In lines 3 and 4 he clarifies direction, showing the reader that the soldiers are marching away from enemy territory (marked by the "flares") and towards the place where they will be able to rest.

The first four lines thus set up a scene, helping the reader understand the soldiers' fatigue, their frustration (expressed by cursing), and the constant danger that still surrounds them (represented by the flares). Owen uses consonance to lend a harshness to the sounds of the poem. In the first line, the letter "b" appears in three stressed words ("bent," "double," and "beggars"). This gives way to hard "c" and "k" sounds, with "sacks," "coughing," "cursed," and "backs." Although the "k" sounds of "knock-kneed" are silent, they contribute visually to the hard consonants of this section. The sibilance of "distant rest," meanwhile, makes it stand out from the rest of the landscape, sounding like a whisper, perhaps not entirely real.

These lines are basically in iambic pentameter, a meter that consists of five iambs per line. This sets up the expectation that the rest of the poem will follow this pattern. Owen does play with stress a little, though. He crams more stressed syllables into the first two lines than belong in iambic pentameter.

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags

This decision sets the rhythm of the poem rocking. It's over-stressed, unstable, reflecting the instability and roughness of the scene the speaker is describing.

LINES 5-8

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 4 -8 of the poem elaborate on the physical condition of the soldiers. The speaker emphasizes their weariness through the use of hyperbole. The soldiers are not *actually* "asleep," "lame," "blind," "drunk," or "deaf," but the extreme conditions they are experiencing make these descriptions feel accurate. Another way to read these hyperbolic statements is that the trauma of the war makes them feel lame, blind, drunk, and deaf, even if in a strictly physical sense they are not.

The detail of the "lost boots" and "blood-shod" feet is particular and vivid, as it gives the reader something specific to focus on within the atmosphere of general suffering and produces a visceral sense of pain. These men don't even have shoes to protect their feet from the wear and tear of marching. Their feet are thus cut and bleeding, so that it seems like they are wearing shoes of blood. Nevertheless, they must continue walking. The overall image here is almost of the walking dead—the men are asleep, lame, drunk, blind, deaf, and blood-shod. The war has deadened the men, even if it hasn't yet killed them.

Lines 7 and 8 introduce a new danger with the dropping of "gas-shells," weapons that released poison gases like phosgene, chlorine, and mustard gas. The soldiers' senses are so numb at this point that they don't even hear the shells dropping, however, and so aren't alert to their danger. This highlights the horror of war, which is so deeply traumatic the soldiers don't even discern an immediate threat to their lives.

Owen skillfully replicates the surprise of the attack by letting it sneak up on readers as well, using soft sounds and innocent-seeming words. The shells drop "softly behind" with only "hoots" to signal their presence. The poem also uses enjambment at the end of line 7 after the innocent-seeming "hoots" to entice the reader to rush on to the next line, which reveals the gas-shells. In contrast to the poem's opening lines, the consonants here are mild. Owen uses sibilance again,

letting the whispering "s" sounds of "hoots," "gas-shells," and "softly" contribute to the quietness of the attack.

These lines maintain a general march of iambic pentameter, but with very significant exceptions:

> 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.

Line five is mostly iambs, with a single trochee inserted in the middle for "many," while line 6 contains four iambs followed by a single trochee at the end. But in line 7, which starts with "Drunk," it's almost as if the meter itself has become drunk. And line 8 is notable because it only contains nine, rather than ten, syllables: it is as if that missing syllable is the moment of silence before the men realize what is happening and panic sets in.

LINES 9-10

> *Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling*
> *Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,*

With the stanza break, the reality of danger slams into the poem. Line 9 begins with the exclamation "Gas!" which is immediately repeated in all caps. The urgency of the situation is clear, as someone exclaims "Quick, boys!" and the soldiers get their gas masks on "just in time." Without protection, poison gas was lethal. Even moderate exposure could damage a soldier's eyes, nose, throat, and lungs. The gas masks the men had to put on to protect themselves, though, were bulky and suffocating, so they could not be worn all the time. Because of this, soldiers would have to move quickly to get their masks on at the first sign of gas.

Owen describes the panic to put on gas masks as an "ecstasy of fumbling." Ecstasy is usually used to describe an overwhelming state of joy or pleasure. The soldiers fumbling to put on their masks are completely overwhelmed by terror, vividly aware of their mortal danger for the first time in the poem. War has taken what is usually a word connoting joy, and turned it into terror.

Owen once again jams a lot of stressed syllables into the meter in line 9, before slipping back into more straightforward (though not perfect) iambic pentameter in the following line.

> Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
> Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,

These four stressed syllables in a row have an emphatic force. Instead of rocking forward in steady motion, the line blasts, shouts, shocks. This language effect upholds the panic and urgency that the speaker is trying to communicate. By dropping back into the poem's overall metrical system for the last four feet of line 10 (after the trochee of "Fitting" to start off), Owen communicates a sort of relief. The soldiers have put on their gas masks, and are relatively safe.

LINES 11-14

> *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.*

Line 11 introduces an individual character. The poem up to this point has focused on the collective experience of a group of soldiers. Now, the reader sees "someone" whose experience is breaking off from that of his companions. Unable to get his mask on in time, the man panics and begins to feel the effects of the gas. His voice is just a yell, beyond words. His movements are clumsy, "stumbling," already out of control.

The speaker initially uses two similes to try to describe the gassed soldier. The first is "like a man in fire," which gets across the intensity of the suffering. The man moves as if he is being burned. The speaker thinks next of "lime," often called "quicklime," which is an alkaline substance that reacts with water and causes dangerous burning irritation to eyes, skin, and lungs. Lime was an early instance of a "chemical weapon," used to injure and temporarily blind opponents. Possibly this is why Owen brings it up here, since the use of poison gas in WWI had relatively few precedents. But quicklime is also used in industry, such as steelmaking. The similes, then, take what is an entirely unfamiliar experience to non-soldiers — being gassed — and puts it into terms — being set on fire; experiencing the pain of encountering quicklime — that are more common and accessible. The similes make the non-soldier more able to experience the horror of being gassed.

Through the misty goggles of his gas mask, the speaker sees the landscape as dim, full of the green glow caused by chlorine gas. He compares this landscape to being underwater, and this leads him to a new way of explaining what he is seeing. "I saw him drowning," he says. This decision to move from simile to metaphor intensifies the image. It is not "like" the man is drowning, he *is* drowning.

That the description of the soldier covers *both* burning and drowning, suggests also that this is a new and complicated kind of suffering. It takes three different examples of danger (fire, lime, and water) to get across what the dying man is experiencing. The fact that the speaker struggles to explain what this kind of death looks like makes it all the more frightening, emphasizing the horrific and decidedly inglorious nature of death in war.

LINES 15-16

> *In all my dreams before my helpless sight,*
> *He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.*

In line 15, the poem suddenly shifts to a third stanza, and the speaker shifts the poem in two ways: from the past to present

tense, and from a description of the exterior world to a description of the speaker's own interior world. These two lines reveal the speaker's current, traumatic reality, in which, having survived the previous gas attack, he now has recurrent nightmares about the gassed soldier his earlier story describes. The images are inescapable, appearing in "all" his dreams. The use of the word "helpless" is key: the speaker is helpless to escape these visions of the past, and is helpless and unable to assist the soldier, just as he was during the event, and can only witness the dying man's suffering over and over again.

Formally, there are several interesting things about these two lines. The stanza break shifts the setting of the poem, signaling that it is moving into new territory. This makes sense, since we are now out of the original narrative and into the speaker's present life. However, this break comes at an odd point in the rhyme scheme:

- The poem's first stanza is 8 lines long, and follows the rhyme scheme ABABCDCD.
- The second stanza begins to follow this pattern, but does not complete it. After six lines that follow the scheme ABABCD, the break comes, leaving the rhyme incomplete. However, the third stanza then completes the rhyme scheme from stanza 2 ("sight" rhymes with "light"; and "drowning" rhymes with itself.

Why does Owen make this decision? Arguably, he is again using form to further emphasize and embody the meaning of the poem. In this case, the new stanza is not capable of standing on its own; it's as if it is a shard that has broken off the previous stanza. It isn't a complete pattern. It's linked to the previous stanza, but cut off from it by the break. Similarly, the speaker is linked to his past through trauma, but cut off from it by time. He is doubly "helpless": helpless to escape it, and helpless to go back and change it.

It is also interesting that Owen chooses to rhyme "drowning" with itself, using the word to end lines 14 and 16. Rhyming a word with itself, or "identical rhyme," is very unusual in English-language poetry. It has the effect of calling extra attention to the word, and deadening the motion of the poem by looping back to what's already been said. In this case, "drowning" becomes a word of obsession. It captures how trauma forces the speaker to keep reliving the gruesome experience of this moment, and also subtly puts the reader in a similar position: the reader is also forced to relive the moment, through the repetition of the word.

"Drowning" is also notably a present-tense verb, which implies continuing action. The soldier's death is not finished, in the past. Because of the speaker's inability to leave it behind, the man continues "drowning" even after the fact. Owen adds to this effect by including two new verbs, "guttering" and "choking," which magnify the ongoing horror of the speaker's dream.

In terms of meter, line 15 is fairly regular iambic pentameter. But line 16 is nothing of the sort:

He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning

There isn't really a single iamb in the line, *and* the line has 11 symbols. Almost all of the feet start with a stress (as opposed to the unstressed-stressed pattern of an iamb), and then the line goes on longer than expected. The meter itself captures the sense of the dying man plunging toward the speaker, and the extra syllable elongating the line hints at the way that the speaker finds this nightmare impossible to escape.

LINES 17-20

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;

The last stanza of the poem is one long conditional sentence. Owen begins with "If" and then spins the sentence out, keeping the reader waiting for completion of the thought. *If* the reader could experience what the speaker does in his dreams... then what?

In line 17, the speaker describes his dreams as "smothering," echoing the suffocating effect of the poison gas and the inescapability of the recurring nightmare. Then the description moves past the gas attack to the moments after: walking slowly behind the wagon that holds the dying soldier. This detail adds to the agony of the dream. The speaker moves slowly and endlessly, forced to watch his companion's suffering.

The description "the white eyes writhing in his face" in line 19 is unsettling, as it evokes the uncomfortable and disturbing sensation of eyes rolling back far enough to expose the whites. Eyes also shouldn't be able to writhe, a verb which refers to a twisting motion (in pain or otherwise). The movement of the soldier's eyes is thus deeply unnatural and frightening.

Repetition comes into play again in lines 19-20, with "his face,/His hanging face." The sight of the face is strong enough that the speaker has to repeat it for emphasis, intensifying the image with the verb "hanging." This is also a strange word for the context. To hang something is to fasten it on a point without support from below, often allowing for free motion. An arm can hang, or even a head, but a face shouldn't be able to. This imagery suggests that even as his eyes contort the man's face itself is limp and lifeless, an item simply dangling from rather than animated by the living being behind it.

In line 20, the speaker then compares the face to "a devil's sick of sin." This simile is about extremity; how much horrifying sin would it take to make even a devil "sick" of it? This language

thus highlights the intensity of the soldier's suffering, which is beyond the usual territory of human experience. As he does in other places in the poem, Owen here uses consonance, with the "s" sounds in "devil's," "sick," and "sin" combining to hiss harshly.

LINES 21-24

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,—

In line 21, Owen reinforces the structure of the conditional sentence that makes up the final stanza by repeating "If" — this repetition keeps the sentence rolling while piling on more clauses. The repetition also builds tension, as readers must wait longer for the follow-up they know must be coming.

The speaker's description of the soldier coughing up blood is grim and intimate, and the speaker again turns to simile to explain the horror he's seeing. He uses the word "obscene," meaning something offensive or disgusting to standards of moral decency, and compares the obscenity of the sight to "cancer."

This is an interesting choice of words, given that cancer isn't usually described as obscene or offensive in a moral sense. It's impersonal, a disease that attacks the body. Owen's use of the word urges reconsideration, however; perhaps there is something about cancer that is morally revolting in the way it invades and feeds on an innocent body. The poisonous gas is offensive and horrifying in a similar way. The moral revulsion might also stem from the fact that death by cancer was essentially meaningless: cancer struck seemingly for no reason, and (at the time) it was incurable. There was no heroic victory to be had against cancer, no ideals to hold up. There was just gross, terrible death. By equating such a death to the soldier's own death, Owen is arguing that the death that soldiers face is similarly unheroic and pointless.

The next simile Owen uses compares the blood the soldier coughs up to "incurable sores" on "innocent tongues." This simile begins with "cud," or the partly digested food that cows and some other animals chew before swallowing again. The speaker isn't talking about literal cud, though. The "cud" here refers to sores, infections on "innocent tongues." By associating "incurable sores" with "cud," Owen creates a distinctly upsetting texture. The sores are rough, grainy, wet, chewed on. They are "bitter," too. This doesn't just refer to actual taste, but to the harshness of the situation at hand. The mere fact of the sores existing, and being incurable, is bitter.

Looking back at the soldier's coughed up blood, readers have images of both sores and cud in their minds. Such images are physically disgusting, and also made morally upsetting through Owen's emphasis on "innocent tongues." Like cancer, the poison gas attacks innocent victims. The gas, however, is a manmade creation that humans then use on each other—a fact that again underscores the horror of and lack of glory in war.

LINES 25-28

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
.

Line 25 signals the resolution to the long conditional sentence. The speaker comes finally to his point, ending the stanza. *If* his audience could experience the horror of his dreams, *then* they would not pass on to their children the idea that war is glorious.

An explicit audience comes into play here. The speaker is addressing "My friend," which could mean one literal person or refer to a larger group of people. Whoever he is addressing is representative of or in agreement with the culture at large, and they enthusiastically pass on, with enthusiasm ("high zest") the belief that dying in war for one's country is honorable and glorious. The words "my friend," and the speaker's relationship to his readers, can be read in two ways here. In the first, the speaker might be authentic in calling the reader "my friend," and believe that the reader may be open to the speaker's message about the horror of war. In the other, the speaker may be speaking bitterly and sarcastically, and believe that anyone passing on the "old Lie" about war and glory is in fact no friend at all. One of these readings isn't more correct than the other; both can co-exist. And perhaps the speaker is himself unsure of what he thinks of the "friend."

Meanwhile, the children who are told this story are "ardent for some desperate glory." Through this description the poem captures the perniciousness of the "old Lie." An older word, "ardent" has associations with literature about romance and adventure. Owen is describing children who have been listening to this "Lie" in many stories about chivalry and honor, not just one Latin line. These are children who have been raised within this entire tradition, stretching from the Latin words of Horace all the way up to era of World War 1. They have been primed by this tradition — by the "old Lie" — to see going to war as a positive thing, as a means to glory. The phrase "desperate glory" describes a kind of fever pitch of emotion. For something to be desperate, it is hopeless, a last chance. Desperation is a state of final danger. If glory is here, it comes at a high price. Owen's desperate glory describes, then, a glorification of death — a glorification his entire poem has served to refute, by depicting a real death, in all its lack of glory, and its terrible inglorious cost.

It is worth taking a moment also to note that Owen capitalizes "Lie," which gives it weight and definition. So, first of all, it isn't a misconception. It is a lie — it is told purposefully. Second, this isn't any old lie, but *the* old Lie — it is central, and endures. It is the lie that death in war is glorious and honorable, and the

implication is that it is a law told by those who are powerful so that, when those leaders need armies in order to either protect or expand their power, they have willing young men to fill the ranks.

The final words of the poem, which the speaker identifies as the actual text of the "old Lie" are in Latin. The lines are a quotation from Horace that is often translated as "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country." That original poem celebrates bravery and resilience in battle, with cheerful generalizations about the perils of war. By including the original lines of the poem here, Owen evokes how far back into history the myth of glorious patriotic death goes, and therefore how deeply ingrained it is in modern culture. The speaker, then, even as he asserts that such beliefs are the "old Lie" which sends young men to pointless, awful deaths and must be abandoned, also acknowledges just how strong a hold the "old Lie" has. Owen has written a poem that, perhaps better than any other, captures the horror of war, and exposes the "old Lie" for what it is, and yet even he gives Horace the last line. Owen clearly hopes to combat the old lie, but the structure of the poem hints that he is pessimistic about being successful.

The meter in the final lines of the poem again echo its broader themes. Line 27, which includes the beginning of the quotation, continues to follow the rough iambic pentameter of the rest of the poem. But Line 28 breaks the pattern definitively—it contains just three feet instead of the expected five. Through this incompleteness, Owen may be underlining his point that Horace's line doesn't tell the whole story about war, and that it leaves out the true brutality the speaker has recorded. In addition, this poem is also about the sudden, unnatural ending of a particular life. To end it halfway through its final line echoes this horrible cut off.

SYMBOLS

THE DYING SOLDIER

Although the dying soldier in "Dulce et Decorum Est" is an individual character within the narrative, he also stands in for a generation of young men exposed to the brutality of WWI. The speaker's argument rests on the implicit truth that the dying soldier's experience isn't isolated, and that to the contrary there were many, many deaths like this one. That the soldier is associated with the word "innocent" in line 24 emphasizes the injustice and horror of his death and that of others like him.

As an innocent, the poem also connects the soldier to the "children" of line 26, who are also, by virtue of being children, "innocent." The dying soldier, and the generation he represents, cannot be saved. Their lives have already been forfeited to war. But the poem makes clear that the next generation—the children—are doomed to repeat the pattern, unless the "old Lie" is finally seen as being the lie it is.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "someone still was yelling out and stumbling / And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—"
- **Line 16:** "He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning."
- **Lines 18-24:** "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,—"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

In the title and the final two lines of this "Dulce et Decorum Est," Owen alludes to an ode by the Roman poet Horace. Horace's ode encouraged young men to find fulfillment and discipline in military service. The poem criticizes cowardice and weakness, pointing out that everyone dies in the end, whether gloriously or not. Given this, Horace argues that it is best to strive for courage and a steely temperament. The quotation—which in English reads "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country"—might have been familiar to Owen's original readers, if they were Englishmen with a similar education background. Horace's Odes were a common text in Latin lessons of the era before World War 1, and Horace's ideas of what is and isn't virtuous and honorable were commonly accepted as being correct. In fact, this exact quotation was carved into the wall of a prestigious military academy in England in 1913. The kind of "wisdom" that Horace represents is ingrained, respected, even taken for granted.

Often, poets include allusions as a way to connect a poem to a traditional event, myth, or idea—to place their own poem into that tradition. But Owen includes the allusion to Horace for exactly the opposite reason. Owen's poem—which is full of brutal, awful death that is marked by only confusion and agony, and to which glory and courage could not even begin to apply—seeks to expose the entire traditional belief in the glory and honor of war as being a lie. That he includes the original lines from Horace, and not a paraphrase or English translation, makes clear that it is the *entire* tradition, from Roman antiquity to the time of World War I, that he sees as fraudulent and destructive. Put another way: Owen seeks to undermine and refute what he is alluding to.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 27-28:** “Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori / .”

SIMILE

Owen uses several similes in this poem. Mostly he uses them for sensory effect, to deepen and clarify the image he is creating. To emphasize the exhaustion of a marching company of soldiers, he compares their posture to that of "old beggars" and their coughing to that of "hags." He's giving the reader references outside of the specific context of war, references the reader has actually experienced, it allows the reader to more fully access the awfulness of war. The soldiers are not glorious heroes; they are like beggars and hags.

In line 12, the speaker compares the dying soldier to a man struggling in "fire or lime." Again, this is an attempt to clarify the image. The reader likely does not know what someone suffering from gas poisoning looks like. But they might have a clearer image for someone on fire, or exposed to quicklime, which was used in industrial practices. Once again, the simile makes what a reader hasn't and can't experience, into something that the reader can more easily imagine.

In line 23, two similes compare the soldier's coughed-up blood with cancer and incurable sores. These similes are less visual than the previous ones. Instead, they use association to make an argument. We understand cancer and infection to be bad things; Owen places the effects of gas poisoning in the same world as these more familiar diseases, encouraging the reader to feel the same fear and disgust towards it. Further, though, these similes also undercut the idea of glory in war. Rather than heroically measuring themselves against some human enemy, Owen connects dying by gas to dying by cancer (which at the time was incurable). It is not heroic. It is just senseless, implacable, awful death.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “like old beggars under sacks”
- **Line 2:** “coughing like hags”
- **Line 12:** “like a man in fire or lime”
- **Line 20:** “like a devil’s sick of sin”
- **Lines 23-24:** “Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud / Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—”

METAPHOR

The first instance of metaphor occurs in the second stanza, when Owen uses the word "drowning" to describe the soldier's death. Where poisonous gas is likely unfamiliar to readers, the idea of drowning is not; Owen's language in this moment thus forces readers with no first-hand knowledge of war to grapple more intimately with the exact, horrific nature of the soldier's final moments.

Owen supports this metaphor by repeating it in line 16, but also adds another. The soldier is "guttering." This is not a verb you can apply to human beings. It's almost exclusively used to describe flames flickering, burning unsteadily, on the verge of going out. To say that the soldier is "guttering" makes the reader stretch to imagine how this is possible and what it looks like. The force of the metaphor asks us to reconcile what can't happen (a person guttering) with the reality that the speaker is trying to communicate, again emphasizing the unnatural horror of war.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** “I saw him drowning”
- **Line 16:** “guttering,” “drowning”

CONSONANCE

Owen uses consonance liberally in this poem. Its general effect is to heighten the intensity of the lines. He opens with forceful "b" sounds in "bent," "double," and "beggars." Moving on, there is a series of hard "c" or "k" sounds, with "sacks," "knock-kneed" (although only visually), "coughing," and "cursed."

This use of repeating consonant sounds creates a sense of crowding, intensifying the experience of reading the poem and evoking the suffocating horror of war. There is also a natural slowness built into reading a poem with this many hard sounds. Whether reading it aloud or silently, the reader has to go slowly enough to comprehend all the dense lines.

In fact, the forced slowness mirrors the marching of the soldiers in the first stanza. It's interesting that Owen's use of consonance lightens in the second stanza, when the action begins to move more quickly. There are a few lines where the reader is a little more free to read swiftly, as the soldiers rush to put their gas masks on.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “Bent double, like old beggars ”
- **Line 2:** “Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed”
- **Line 3:** “Till on the haunting flares we turned”
- **Line 4:** “towards our distant rest began to trudge.”
- **Line 5:** “Men marched”
- **Line 6:** “All went lame; all blind;”
- **Lines 9-10:** “fumbling / Fitting”
- **Line 11:** “someone still was yelling out and stumbling”
- **Line 19:** “watch the white eyes writhing”
- **Line 23:** “cancer, bitter as the cud”
- **Line 24:** “ incurable sores on innocent tongues,”

ENJAMBMENT

The most interesting use of enjambment in this poem comes at the end of line 7, where Owen breaks after "the hoots" before revealing that this sound is the falling of "gas-shells." This

moment of enjambment functions in a couple of ways. First, it encourages the reader to hurry to the next line to discover what the unfinished clause is leaving out. The soldiers are "deaf even to the hoots," but what does that mean? What kind of hoots are they hearing? Second, this enjambment breaks the sound ("hoots") off from what it represents ("gas-shells"), mirroring the soldiers' own inability to process the danger of their situation. As the speaker points out, they are "deaf" to the sound. The reader, for a moment, is oblivious along with them. "Hoots" is a fairly innocent word. When the next line begins, the revelation that it refers to the falling weapons comes as a surprise.

Enjambment throughout the rest of the poem acts to propel the action forward and contribute to the sense of ever-mounting, uncontrollable horror.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "hoots / Of"
- **Lines 9-10:** "fumbling / Fitting"
- **Lines 11-12:** "stumbling / And"
- **Lines 17-18:** "pace / Behind"
- **Lines 21-22:** "blood / Come"
- **Lines 23-24:** "cud / Of "
- **Lines 25-26:** "zest / To"
- **Lines 27-28:** "est / Pro"

REPETITION

In this poem, Owen uses repetition both for emphasis and for rhythm. In line 9, an anonymous voice calls out "Gas! GAS!" as a warning. The first exclamation is enough to explain the danger, but the second, this time in all caps, intensifies it. The repetition here also breaks the meter, giving us a foot with two stressed syllables instead of one unstressed followed by one stressed. Again, this is an intensifier, throwing off the reader's expectations for rhythm.

The next instance of repetition comes in lines 14 and 13 with the word "green," emphasizing the way the gas and gas mask distorts the speaker's vision of the surrounding world. In lines 14 and 16, the word "drowning" is not only repeated close to itself, but also rhymed with itself. This repetition creates a loop, linking the past moment of the second stanza to the present moment of the third. It intensifies the image of the drowning soldier, mirroring the speaker's inability to leave it behind. It also deadens the rhythm of the poem. Rhyming a word with itself takes away from the forward motion of the lines, weighing us down and trapping us in a loop even as the speaker is himself weighted by his trauma and unable to escape the traumatic vision of the dying soldier.

Finally, the repetition of "face" in the poem's fourth stanza seems to suggest the incomprehensibility of the dying soldier's pained visage, which the speaker refers to twice to emphasize how unsettling and horrific the image is.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Gas! GAS!"
- **Line 13:** "green"
- **Line 14:** "green," "drowning."
- **Line 16:** "drowning."
- **Line 19:** "his face,"
- **Line 20:** "His hanging face,"

APOSTROPHE

In the last stanza of the poem, the speaker explicitly addresses an audience for the first time through the use of "you" and then "My friend." Owen's choice to address "My friend" is particularly reminiscent of forms of poetry that traditionally address a specific person in a short closing stanza, known as an envoi. While this stanza isn't a traditional envoi, it does function as an opportunity to speak to a particular audience.

The speaker is either addressing a single person ("My friend") or, more likely, a larger group of people represented by the "friend." In either case, the addressee is someone who perpetuates harmful ideas about war in the service of patriotism.

The address makes it apparent that the speaker has an argument. His point is that, if his audience could understand the actual suffering and trauma of war, they would stop passing down the idea that war is a good and glorious thing. By using the phrase "My friend," the speaker makes his argument personal. The addressee is intimate to the speaker; they share concerns and affections. Rhetorically, this is an effective choice. It brings the listener closer, using the basis of friendship to make a more personal request. On the other hand, it is also possible to read "my friend" as hiding an underlying bitterness or anger, and a belief that anyone who buys into the "old Lie" could never in fact be a friend of the young people sent off to war to die.

On another level, the "friend" the poem addresses is the reader. Because the poem was written for publication, rather than as a private letter, we must understand ourselves as part of the intended audience. Owen is asking us to examine our own understanding of war, and question what beliefs we pass down in ignorance or knowledge.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "you too could pace"
- **Line 21:** "If you could hear"
- **Line 25:** "My friend, you would not tell with such high zest"

HYPERBOLE

In the first stanza, the speaker uses several instances of hyperbole to describe the condition of his company of soldiers. He describes them as marching "asleep" to emphasize their state of semi-consciousness. He claims that all of them are "blind" and "drunk," due to their extreme physical conditions. These adjectives aren't literally true, but they get to the emotional truth of the situation.

The speaker first describes the soldiers as "lame," which is more literally accurate. Most of them are probably injured in a way that inhibits their walking, especially those without boots. However, to describe them as "blind" is less plausible. Their vision may be damaged in various ways, or blurred by fatigue. But they certainly aren't "all blind." Similarly, they probably aren't "drunk," though their loss of motor control due to exhaustion might feel and look like drunkenness.

The important thing here, though, is not accurate description. What the speaker is getting at is extremity. He exaggerates the adjectives he uses in order to show us that the situation is severe, beyond the usual boundaries of experience.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Men marched asleep"
- **Lines 6-7:** "All went lame; all blind; / Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots"

IMAGERY

"Dulce et Decorum Est" is packed with images that depict horror and suffering in war. Imagery serves the narrative of the poem by giving readers a vivid sensory experience, but its purpose goes beyond just storytelling. The speaker is making the argument that if his audience could share his traumatic memories, they would fundamentally change the way they talk and think about war.

Each stanza of this poem carries at least one image, usually more. In the first line, there is the image of the soldiers as old beggars, struggling wearily towards safety. In line 6, the speaker refers to barefoot soldiers as "blood-shod," a frightening image of shoes made from blood that captures the brutal experience of the war. In line 7 they are "drunk with fatigue," a hyperbolic statement that also serves as an image: one sees the soldiers stumbling, dazed, disoriented.

The second stanza introduces the image of the gassed soldier, which becomes the central image of the poem. The speaker tries out several ways to describe this image, from "flound'ring like a man in fire or lime" in line 12 to "drowning" in line 14. As the poem goes on, he continues to complicate and obsess over the image, offering more details and more comparisons. The last image of the poem is particularly gruesome, making the reader picture "vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues" as similar to "cud," the partly-digested food that cows chew.

The speaker can't actually share his nightmares with his readers, but he has the next-best tool at hand, which is imagery. The images in this poem are an attempt to communicate, as closely as possible, what death in war actually feels and looks like.

The vividness of the images also stand in contrast to the original Horace ode that the poem alludes to in its last two Latin lines. Horace's ode steers clear of specific images. In that poem, the most detailed image offered is that of a lion charging through waves of blood. This is an exciting image, but hardly specific. Horace's poem describes war as being neat and clean, a matter of ideals like honor and courage, and its imagery is similarly clean and abstract. Owen holds that war is brutal and awful, full of confusion and agony. In Horace's poem, we don't see the actual human impact of battle. In Owen's poem, we do.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, / Knock-kneed, coughing like hags,"
- **Line 6:** "blood-shod"
- **Line 7:** "Drunk with fatigue"
- **Line 12:** "flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—"
- **Line 14:** "drowning"
- **Lines 20-24:** "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,—"

OXYMORON

There is one clear example of oxymoron in line 26 with the phrase "desperate glory." The word "desperate" indicates a situation of hopelessness, a state of despair. It can also mean a last-ditch effort, an extreme measure taken to avoid defeat. To pair this with "glory," a word that connotes both honor and magnificence, seems contradictory. But Owen's pairing gets to a more complex understanding of glory, in two ways. First, the "old Lie" Owen is speaking against relies on the idea that there is honor in extremes of danger. Glory is, in this worldview, made greater by the danger men face in pursuit of it. But second, Owen is noting how the "old Lie" makes young men — who have no experience of war — desperate to achieve their own glory by throwing themselves into war without understanding its true horrors. "Desperate glory" captures both what must be faced to achieve glory according to the "old Lie," but also that the very effort to achieve glory is itself desperate.

Where Oxymoron appears in the poem:

- **Line 26:** "desperate glory"

VOCABULARY

Knock-kneed (Line 2) - The term "knock-kneed" actually refers to a medical condition. When someone with knock-knees stands straight up with knees touching, their feet and ankles will stay apart. The term is sometimes used more informally to mean a weakness in the legs which causes the knees to hit one another as the person struggles to stay upright. By using the term, Owen is pointing to the extreme exhaustion that causes the soldiers to walk irregularly and with difficulty.

Haunting flares (Line 3) - In World War I, flares were a tool used to briefly light up a portion of the landscape at night. This allowed soldiers to see their enemies on night missions, and to direct fire at them. The use of "haunting" to describe the flares suggests that they linger in the soldiers' minds, or follow them with evil intent as they march — which is accurate, considering that the flares were often followed by bombs or poison gas.

Blood-shod (Line 6) - Owen hyphenates two words to create this image that captures the tattered, awful state of the men's feet. To be "shod" is to wear shoes. To be "blood-shod" is to have on shoes of blood.

lame (Line 6) - Lameness refers to injury or other disability that impairs freedom of movement in a body part, especially a limb. Here, the soldiers may have various injuries, or may just be impaired by their exhaustion.

gas-shells (Line 8) - World War 1 marked the first widespread use of chemical weapons. The German military largely introduced poison gases in battle, firing bombshells that contained chlorine, phosgene, or mustard gas. The various poison gases caused an estimated 1.3 billion injuries, including 90,000-100,000 deaths. The gas the speaker refers to in this poem is likely chlorine, which carried a distinctive green tint.

Ecstasy (Line 9) - Ecstasy is a state of being beyond reason or control. It is most frequently used to mean a state of overwhelming passion, pleasure, or joy. In this case, though, it is used to describe a state of feverish fumbling to put on gas-masks during an attack. The use of a word with a normally positive connotation to refer to an actual horrifying experience creates a sense of juxtaposition that amplifies the awfulness of war.

Helmets (Line 10) - A helmet is a protective head-covering, especially one used in battle. The helmets in this poem are specifically gas-masks. Developed to counter the effects of poison gas, the gas-mask featured goggles to protect the eyes and a filter to breathe through. They were heavy and suffocating, so could not be worn constantly. This meant that soldiers had to hurry to put them on at the first sign of danger.

Flound'ring (Line 12) - Owen contracts the word "floundering" with an apostrophe to indicate that it should be read with two syllables rather than three. This is an older poetic convention to allow for more flexibility with words while preserving meter. The word "floundering" indicates struggling, thrashing, or clumsy movements. The soldier is moving wildly and ineffectively in his panic.

Lime (Line 12) - Lime here refers to calcium oxide, or "quicklime," which can cause severe burns when it comes into contact with eyes or moist skin. It can also damage the lungs and throat if inhaled.Quicklime was an early example of a chemical weapon. Military forces in various regions used it to impair enemy soldiers as they advanced by throwing it. While the lime wouldn't cause damage nearly as severe as the poison gases of World War I, it did have the effect of choking and temporarily blinding the people in its path. Quicklime was also used in various industrial practices, such as steelmaking, and so its effects may have been more widely understood by the common population of the time.

Guttering (Line 16) - Guttering refers to the uneven motions of a flame, particularly of one about to go out. It's used here to describe the dying soldier's unsteady movements, implying that he is in danger of burning out.

Smothering (Line 17) - To smother is to suffocate, to injure or kill by depriving of air. More mildly, it can mean suppression, blanketing, or overwhelming. The speaker's dreams are smothering because they weigh heavily on him and overwhelm him. The word also hearkens back to the choking effects of the gas and the suffocation of the gas masks. The speaker's memories of smothering persist, invading his dreams. And the dreams themselves keep occurring, making the dreams themselves smothering as well.

Writhing (Line 19) - To writhe is to move in a twisting way, often from pain or struggle.

Froth-corrupted (Line 22) - Here, Owen again hyphenates two words to create an effect. Because of the gas, the dying soldier's lungs are full of froth, essentially heavy foam, which he is coughing up along with blood. Corruption can refer to infection or rot. The froth has invaded, or infected, the soldier's lungs. However, corruption also means a change from good to bad, a degradation. This is usually meant in a moral sense. Here, it shows that the soldier's lungs have been transformed from functioning breathing machines to something that chokes him.

Cud (Line 23) - Cud is the partly-digested food that a cow (and other ruminants) brings up from its first stomach and continues to chew before swallowing and digesting fully. It is a rough and stringy paste. Owen uses the word to intensify the disgust of his image of "vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues." The word "cud" makes one imagine the sores as having a chewed, slimy texture.

Zest (Line 25) - Zest refers to excitement or intense enjoyment of something. The people whom the poem is addressing in this final stanza are relishing the "old Lie" they tell. They are eager to pass it down. Owen uses the word bitterly, contrasting the

pleasure of "zest" with the awful, actual truth of war.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem doesn't follow a specific traditional form. It consists of four stanzas. The first is 8 lines long, the second 6, the third 2, and the fourth 12. There might be a hidden reference to the sonnet in this structure. A sonnet is a poem of 14 lines in iambic pentameter and this poem has 28 lines—exactly twice as many. The first 14 lines of the poem (stanza 1 and 2) tell a story, while the second 14 (stanza 3 and 4) analyze that story from the present tense. These two parts of the poem could be read as a pair of broken sonnets, though their rhyme scheme does not align with the traditional sonnet format.

The poem as a potential pair of sonnets is not its only interesting structural aspect. Another interesting thing to note is that the second and third stanzas seem like they should be one stanza, since they are linked by their end rhymes (the third stanza finishes the pattern that the second has set up). The break between these two stanzas highlights that the setting of the poem has moved from the past in stanza 2 to the present in stanza 3. At the same time, its unexpected appearance links that present to the past, which makes sense since the third stanza is actually talking about how the speaker can't escape from the trauma of the past (seeing the other soldier die in the gas attack).

METER

The overarching meter of "Dulce et Decorum Est" is iambic pentameter, a line consisting of five "feet," each of which contains an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one (da-dum). Owen regularly diverges from this meter in many subtle ways, however. Some of the lines fall perfectly within the meter:

> In all my dreams before my helpless sight

But most of the lines in the poem are metrically imperfect, and even the variations that Owen makes to the meter are inconsistent. Take, for instance, this line:

> Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge

This line contains two trochees (a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed) before falling back into the iambic pattern. But line 7 seems to break out of the meter entirely:

> Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots

With these variations, Owen keeps the music of the poem from falling into anticipated patterns. This has the effect of keeping readers on their toes, and echoing the unpredictability of the soldiers' situation.

RHYME SCHEME

In contrast to its complexity of meter, this poem follows a very simple rhyme scheme. Sequences of four lines are end-rhymed alternately. The full rhyme scheme is:

ABABCDCD EFEFGH GH IJIJKLKLMNMN

Owen does not use any end rhyme sounds more than twice. He also chooses very simple words for his rhymes. All of them are perfect rhymes, meaning that their stressed syllables (and any following syllables) share identical sounds. Most of them are no more than one syllable, with a couple of exceptions.

The most remarkable use of rhyme in the poem is the rhyming of "drowning" with itself in lines 14 and 16. Sometimes called "identical rhyme," rhyming a word with itself is unusual in poetry. In this poem, it has a deadening effect on the rhythm, dragging readers back to what's already been said as they attempt to move forward. This, in turn, echoes the way that the image of the dying soldier endlessly repeats in the speaker's dreams.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is a soldier, traumatized by an experience he has had in war. He is educated, as shown by his familiarity with Latin poetry. What he wants, within the poem, is to communicate to his readers the horror of his experience and make them question their attitude towards war.

Over the course of the poem, the speaker develops from someone within a group (the marching "we" of the soldiers in his story) to an individual who witnesses a fellow soldier's death. In the third stanza, the reader then moves with the speaker out of his story and into his present life, in which he is haunted by nightmares. In the final stanza, the speaker becomes a rhetorician, using the images from his experience to make an argument.

Wilfred Owen was an educated young Englishman who fought and died in World War 1, and who was outspoken about his anti-war feelings. Given these facts, one can read the poet and the speaker of the poem as being closely related, if not the same person. In fact, one of Owen's letters to his mother in January of 1917 tells a similar story to that of this poem. Because the speaker's visible aim is to make a point to his audience, it makes sense that Owen would write the poem for publication with the same intent.

SETTING

While the setting of the poem is not explicitly named, it likely takes place in France during the winter of 1917. This connection can be made by using the context of Wilfred Owen's actual war experience, and the match between his personal letters and the story of the dying soldier. Even without those, the poem offers clues as to time and place.

- The use of "flares" and "gas-shells" are specific to World War I, since they had not been used in combat before this time.
- The majority of British troops in WWI were deployed to France. (This is certainly true in Owen's case.)
- Chlorine gas, with its distinctive green color, was first deployed by the German army in Belgium in 1915.
- The "clumsy helmets," or gas masks, were developed in response to the introduction of gas. By January 1917, the time of Owen's letter to his mother in which this story appears, gas masks had become standard issue.

One can also think of the setting in terms of the speaker's past and present. The first two stanzas describe an experience from the speaker's past. The third stanza, though, shifts into the speaker's present, some indeterminate time after that war experience. In this way, the poem can both show the horror of directly experiencing the war, and also shows how those traumas continued to haunt those who survived.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wilfred Owen's early literary influences included John Keats and Percy Bysse Shelley, whose poems Owen read as an adolescent in the early 1900s. By the time he began to write poetry seriously, his reading background included William Butler Yeats, A.E. Housman, and Rupert Brooke. Owen wrote nearly all of his mature poems between August 1917 and September 1918. During this time, he was hospitalized in Edinburgh, suffering from shell-shock following his participation in World War I. While hospitalized, Owen formed a friendship with the established poet Siegfried Sassoon.

Sassoon's first published book, *The Old Huntsman* (1917), had been widely read at the time. He had also courted controversy with public anti-war acts. Initially, Owen was shy to approach the older poet. Some of his earlier poems imitate Sassoon's satirical, epigrammatic style. However, as Sassoon would later point out, Owen quickly developed his own innovative style. Sassoon considered his encouragement of Owen as simply coming at the right time to stimulate a talent already present.

Sassoon gave Owen Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu*, a war novel notable for its intense realism concerning death and the conditions soldiers lived in. This kind of brutal honesty appealed to both poets. It certainly affected the way Owen talks about the details of war in "Dulce et Decorum Est."

As Owen and Sassoon worked on and talked about pacifist literature, they put themselves up against a canon of pro-war poetry. Rupert Brooke, who had died in combat in 1915, was acclaimed for his idealistic sonnets about war. In the poem "The Soldier," he writes:

> If I should die, think only this of me,
> That there's some corner of a foreign field
> That is forever England.

This glorified vision of war echoes the earlier treatment of the theme by poets like A.E. Housman, whose poems often uphold the beauty of dying young and for a cause. It also chimes with popular verse like that of Jessie Pope, who wrote prolifically to encourage young men to enlist. Her 1915 poem "The Call" includes these lines:

> Who'll earn the Empire's thanks—
> Will you, my laddie?
> Who'll swell the victor's ranks—
> Will you, my laddie?

Pope's work clearly struck a chord with Owen, whose original draft of "Dulce et Decorum Est" bears an ironic dedication to her (he later revised this to read "To a certain Poetess," and later dropped the dedication entirely).

Sassoon arranged for Owen to meet the literary editor Robert Ross, an old friend and agent of Oscar Wilde. In turn, Ross introduced Owen to several important writers, including Edith Sitwell, Thomas Hardy, and Robert Graves. Owen began to feel himself part of the wider English literary conversation. In the spring of 1918, he began working to publish his first book, which would not be released until after he had returned to the front and died in November of that year.

In terms both of political content and literary style, Owen's poems influence the work of W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender, Dylan Thomas, and many others. His work speaks to the disillusionment and questioning evident in the Modernist movement in literature, as well as an interest in playing with the structure of traditional forms.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Dulce et Decorum Est" was written during the course of World War I, as part of a longer series of poems that address war and specifically the lives of soldiers. Wilfred Owen was hospitalized while writing these poems, recovering from shell-

shock. "Dulce et Decorum Est" frankly discusses the brutality of war, focusing on the introduction of poison gas, which was relatively new to military use (the first effective use of chlorine gas came in 1915).

Owen and his associates were convinced that the war must be ended, since it was taking a massive toll on the lives of soldiers. This was a controversial stance. Conscientious objectors were reviled and even imprisoned. In 1918, the same year "Dulce et Decorum Est" was written, the philosopher Bertrand Russell was jailed for pacifist agitation. Social pressure was intense. Young men who failed to enlist were frequently confronted by women and given white feathers, a mark of cowardice. For Owen as a poet, it was paramount to counteract this kind of pro-war sentiment in two ways: by giving honest, detailed accounts of the kind of horror it condoned, and by making clear that he himself lacked no bravery.

Shortly after writing the bulk of his poems, Owen returned to combat in France. He died in November 1918, one week before Armistice.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Biography of Wilfred Owen — A detailed biographical sketch of Wilfred Owen's life, including analysis of his work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wilfred-owen)
- An Overview of Chemical Warfare — A concise historical account of the development of chemical weapons, with detailed descriptions of the poison gases used in WWI. (https://www.sciencehistory.org/distillations/magazine/a-brief-history-of-chemical-war)
- Listen to "Dulce et Decorum Est" — A recording of "Dulce et Decorum Est," provided by the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46560/dulce-et-decorum-est)
- Representing the Great War — The Norton Anthology's overview of literary representation of World War I, with accompanying texts. This includes two of Jessie Pope's patriotic poems, as well as poems by Siegfried Sassoon and others and various contemporary illustrations. It also suggests many additional resources for exploration. (https://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/20century/topic_1_05/welcome.htm)
- Horace, Ode 3.2 — One translation of the Horace ode that the lines "Dulce et Decorum Est" originally appear in. (http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0025:book=3:poem=2)
- Digital Archive of Owen's Life and Work — An archive of scanned documents from Owen's life and work, including his letters, as well as several handwritten drafts of "Dulce et Decorum Est" and other poems. (http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/owen)
- The White Feather — A brief personal essay about the treatment of conscientious objectors in WWI-era Britain. (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/nov/11/first-world-war-white-feather-cowardice)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILFRED OWEN POEMS

- Anthem for Doomed Youth
- Exposure
- Futility
- Strange Meeting

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