

“Dulce et Decorum Est”

By Wilfred Owen



Critical Evaluation

- **My subject is War and the Pity of War. The Poetry is in the Pity” - Owen.**
- **By analysing the poetic techniques of ONE of these poems – “Disabled”, “Spring Offensive”, “Exposure” or “Dulce et Decorum Est” – show how Owen uses the poetry to convey the pity.**

Introduction

- Owen's shocking and moving poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" describes the horrific, undignified death of a comrade from gas poisoning.
- The word choice, tone, imagery and other poetic techniques used in the poem are effective in bringing out the "pity of war" and showing how it is an old Lie to claim "it is a sweet and fitting thing to die for your country".

Synopsis of poem

- The poem describes the soldiers returning from the front for a period of rest. They are all exhausted and look ragged. They do not look like proud military men marching in uniform at all but “like beggars”.
- They hear the gas shells trying to find their range but are too lethargic to worry about them. Then suddenly the enemy find their range and the shells hit them. One man fails to fit his helmet in time and is gassed. Owen, as the officer in charge, cannot help him when he comes towards him for assistance.

Synopsis continued

- The man chokes to death in a slow agonising torture. His dying body is “flung” on a wagon and the soldiers have to march behind and watch his tormented body spewing up blood “from the froth corrupted lungs”.
- Owen asks his reader if this is a patriotic and heroic death or if it is a lie to say “it is a sweet and fitting thing to die for your country.”

Techniques to show the “pity of war.”

- The poet uses a simile to show the condition of the troops returning from the Front - “coughing like hags”
- Far from being strong, fit military men, these soldiers as just like old women who resemble witches spluttering unable to breathe properly.

Metaphor and word connotation

- Owen uses a metaphor and word with frightening connotations when he describes the flares as “haunting”.
- This suggests that these flares scare the troops like ghosts and sound like the wailing of spectres. The men cannot rest because they are pursued by these frightening noises.

Connotation and word choice

- Owen describes the effort of the men returning from the line. They do not march proudly but “trudge” through the mud with exhaustion and effort. The word choice conveys the noise and difficulty of plodding through the wet mud when being totally worn out.

Metaphor and alliteration

- The metaphor “Men marched asleep...Many had lost their boots but limped on bloodshod” conveys the lethargy felt by the soldiers. They walked as if in a dream not fully aware of the shells. The alliteration draws attention to the line and gives the sound of men muttering in sleep.

Word choice and connotation

- The neologism invented by Owen “bloodshod” (instead of “bloodshot” which usually refers to eyes) suggests the wounds of trench foot which was a horrific and painful injury suffered in the trenches.

Hyperbole, alliteration and metaphors

- The hyperbole or exaggeration of “All lame...all blind” indicates how vast numbers suffered trench foot and eye injuries.
- The metaphor
“Drunk with fatigue, deaf even to the hoots
Of gas shells dropping softly behind”
suggests how exhausted and lethargic these men were so that they ignored the dangers of the shelling. Just as a drunken man staggers unsteadily, so too the soldiers could not march properly through exhaustion and like a deaf person they could no longer hear the shells

Exclamations and word choice

- A change of pace is shown in the exclamation marks which indicate panic as the gas shell hits them releasing its poison.
- The connotation of “ecstasy” implies extreme pleasure and relief at managing to fit the gas mask in time to avoid being poisoned.

Transferred epithet

- The words “clumsy helmets” implies that the helmets themselves were awkward not the men who were frantically trying to fit them.

Present participles and simile

- Owen uses present participles to show that all this is happening in the present and going on around him:
“fitting...yelling...stumbling...floundering like a man in fire or lime...guttering... choking ...drowning.”
- The simile describes a man unable to breathe in a cloud of lime or in a fire where there is no oxygen.

Simile and extended imagery

- Owen makes this personal when he describes his own reactions to the man who cannot breathe any air only poisonous gas and Owen himself sees this man through the green visor of his mask. So in the same way the man appears to be “drowning” in the “green sea”.

Word choice, personal pronouns and present participles

- The word “plunges” extends the imagery of the sea. Owen used “lunges” in his first draft and so this choice of word suggests the noise and desperation of the man diving at him for assistance like a man diving into water. The present participles extend the metaphor of being unable to find air and “drowning” in poisonous gas.
- By using “my dreams” and “plunges at me” Owen makes this personal – piteous memory he will never eradicate.

Change of viewpoint – second person pronoun

- By using the second person pronoun “you” Owen addresses the reader directly – the patriots with no experience of war back home.
- “if you too could pace...if you could see..”
- This forces the reader to face the horrors and pity of death from gas poisoning.

Word choice and alliteration

- Owen uses effective word choice and alliteration to build up the horror and pity of the man's death. The soldier was "flung" on a wagon while his comrades walked behind watching his death agonies. The word "flung" shows the lack of respect and the alliterative "watch the white eyes writhing" draws attention to the pain and torment the man experienced in dying.

Climax and simile

- The description builds to a climax with the phrase “hanging face” describing the contortions and twisting of the man’s expression as he dies and the simile “like a devil’s sick of sin” paints a picture of a gargoyle spewing out the evil effects of the gas poisoning.

Second person address “you”

- The direct address to the reader using “you” draws the reader into Owen’s own personal experience: “if you could too could pace... if you could hear...you would not tell...” Owen allows the reader to experience the horror and feel the pity of war he experienced.

Word choice and similes

- The horrific description builds up to a climax with Owen using vivid adjectives and onomatopoeia “the blood come gargling from his froth-corrupted lungs.” This creates the sound of the man’s dying agonies and a picture of the vomit from his insides.

Climax and similes

- The final climax is when Owen describes the soldier's death as "Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud of vile incurable sores on innocent tongues." The angry tone and indignation are shown by the words "cancer," "sores", and "innocent." No one could fail to be moved by the scene!

Tone – bitter sarcasm

- In the final address to the reader as “my friend” Owen is bitterly sarcastic. He uses patriotic words like “zest”, “ardent”, “glory”, to show that it is a Lie to claim that it is a sweet and fitting thing to die for your country! When these words are used, they seem totally out of place in contrast to the reality Owen has described which shows the horror and pity of war.

Conclusion – terms of question and personal response

- Owen employs many poetic techniques very effectively to show the horror and pity of war in this shocking and moving poem. The bitter tone becomes clear at the end when the poem moves from the general to the particular and then directly addresses the reader. Patriotic war poems seemed irrelevant after this poem.