

Dulce et Decorum Est (1917)

BY WILFRED OWEN

*This poem is based on Owen's
experience of trench warfare.*

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.*

"Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori"



This sentence means "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's fatherland".

It is from the Latin poet **Horace (Odes, 65-68 BC).**

Horace borrowed the line from Tyrtaeus, a Greek poet of the second half of the 7th century BC.

A MANIFESTO FOR WAR POETRY

THE ROLE OF THE POET

Owen is admired for his extreme **realism** of his portrait of war.

**IN DULCE ET DECORUM EST
OWEN GIVES THE READER A
LOT OF HORRIBLE DETAILS
ABOUT DEATH BY GASSING.**

A young soldier dies vomiting blood and spit, because of the destruction of his lungs by gas.

The physical and psychological suffering of the soldier's death agony mounts steadily towards the climax on the word "*Lie*" and the *anger* it carries with it.

It is **NOT** sweet and fitting
to die for one's country.

In conclusion, we can say that *"Dulce et Decorum Est"* is **a poem against the glorification of war.**

The poems for which Owen is now remembered were nearly all written between the summer of 1917 and the autumn of his death.

**However, very few were
published in his lifetime.**

*(Dulce et Decorum Est, written
in 1917, was published in 1920)*

In 1918 he began assembling them for a book for which he was considering a *Preface* to explain the **purpose** and subject matter of his poems.

"This book is not about heroes. [...] Nor is it about legends, or lands, or anything about glory, honour [...] or power, except War.

Above all, I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War.

*"Yet these elegies are to this generation
in no sense consolatory.*

*They may be to the next. All a poet can
do today is warn.*

*That is why the true Poets must be
truthful."*

Owen claims that the subject matter of his poems is the reality of war, and its main theme is "pity", that is to say the poet's sadness at so much suffering and death.

The **role of the poet** is to convey the horror of war to those who have no direct experience of war, so that future futile and destructive conflicts can be avoided.

In such a context the poet's main concern is **not** with melodious language or **perfection of form.**