

## ***“Dulce et Decorum Est”***

“Dulce et Decorum Est” is a poem which provides a tangible look at the horrors of the First World War. In general, it describes the terror of gas warfare and the horrifying and agonizing death faced by its victims.

### **Dulce et Decorum Est**

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 disappointed shells 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 floundering 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.

**~ Wilfred Owen**

<sup>1</sup> *Sweet and fitting it is to die for one's country. (Horace, Odes, III.ii.13)*

The Latin saying “Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori” was widely understood and often quoted around the start of the First World War. However, due to Owen’s poem, this saying has come to take on an entirely different tone: In essence, how sweet and fitting the irony.

In order to fully appreciate “Dulce et Decorum Est” it is important to understand the images to which Owen referred. The following passage from John Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell: Trench Warfare in World War I* (1976) includes a description of mustard gas poisoning, and a first-hand report from a nurse who dealt with the victims of this poisoning:

“With mustard gas the effects did not become apparent for up to twelve hours. But then it began to rot the body, within and without. The skin blistered, the eyes became extremely painful and nausea and vomiting began. Worse, the gas attacked the bronchial tubes, stripping off the mucous membrane. The pain was almost beyond endurance and most cases had to be strapped to their beds. Death took up to four or five weeks. A nurse wrote:

I wish those people who write so glibly about this being a holy war and the orators who talk so much about going on no matter how long the war lasts and what it may mean, could see a case – to say nothing of ten cases – of mustard gas in its early stages – could see poor things burnt and blistered all over with great mustard-coloured suppurating blisters, with blind eyes... all sticky and stuck together, and always fighting for breath, with voices a mere whisper, saying that their throats are closing and they know they will choke.”

1. What does “Dulce et Decorum Est” describe? Identify some of the images used. (e.g. “bent double, like old beggars under sacks”)

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2. Owen uses very concrete language. What words, in particular, show the horror of the incident?

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3. a) Identify Owen’s argument.

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- b) How does Owen make his point? What literary/poetic techniques does he use?

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