

Dulce et decorum est and the soldier: a comparison

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It is quite possible that never have two poems offered such contrasting opinions on one subject as Dulce et Decorum Est and The Soldier. And the subject, war, is their only connection. Whether or not it is right to die for your country, both poets are vehement in their convictions. It is through the various facets of poetry writing that the authors show their opinions. This is what I shall explore in this essay: which poem more effectively lays down its author's stance on war. In both poems, use of language is paramount to their effectiveness.

However, Dulce Et Decorum Est uses a particularly stylised form of tactile language. Where The Soldier is more reflective, Dulce Et Decorum Est is as graphic as it is bitter. Its vivid images stun the reader with one intense depiction after another: " He plunges at me, guttering, choking". This vivid imagery is reinforced by the poet's almost excessive use of onomatopoeia. This onomatopoeia is in keeping with the dark, bitter tone of the entire poem. Words such as " writhing", " sludge" and " trudge" all convey this sense of resentment from the poet.

The negative comparisons used in the poem correspond with the tone. Lines such as " knock-kneed, coughing like hags", evoke this bitter tone. Another difference in Dulce Et Decorum Est is that it is a lot more emotive because of the realism and physicality: " If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood come gargling from froth corrupted lungs". It compels the reader to see through the eyes of the author, and although this cannot compare to the true horrors of war, it certainly does make the reader contemplate just how terrifying and devastating war is.

Rupert Brooke takes a totally different poetic slant on the war. Perhaps most important is the fact that the only reference to the war is in the first line: “ If I should die, think only this of me”. The dirty, unsightly war is left alone thereafter. Much greater emphasis is placed on what could be called the ‘ Theory of War’, i. e. patriotism. Whereas the language in Dulce Et Decorum Est adds to the negative tone, it emphasises the positive in The Soldier. Firstly, the entire description of England is a peaceful one, one of beauty.

Words such as “ flowers”, “ richer dust”, and finally “ English Heaven”, all suggest England to be like some Earthly Elysium. Virtually all of the language in The Soldier is metaphorical and reflective. The most important metaphor is that of England as a mother. “ England bore, shaped, made aware”, is almost a direct attempt to make the reader feel contrite for even contemplating Owen’s poem, let alone agreeing with it. Brooke’s views on war are at the least romantic, if not bordering on the naive: “ That there is some corner of a foreign field, that is forever England”.

More oft than not, a single soldier’s death in war makes no difference, and ‘ some corner of a foreign field’ is unlikely to be ‘ forever England’. That is to say that if a soldier dies on a foreign battlefield and they lose the battle, the patch of grass he dies on is still owned by the country he was in, and therefore he died in vain. Furthermore, the knowledge that I am standing in a field where thousands of men died, does not make me feel patriotic, rather the fact that people fought there makes me feel proud to be English.

A final language point is Brooke’s use of ‘ classical’ literary diction. Many would consider this language old-fashioned, even for the time: “ And

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laughter, learnt of friends. ” The form of *The Soldier* contributes considerably to the tone of it. Whereas *Dulce Et Decorum Est* is stilted and broken, with uneven stanzas (reflecting the process of war itself), *The Soldier* uses the ‘classic’ sonnet form. This is usually associated with love poems, and probably represents Brooke’s love for his country, which he considers a mother.

Brooke also makes good use of a flowing, lyrical style, with normal rhyming couplets, and a set syllabic pattern. I think that the poets make the themes in both poems quite clear. Wilfred Owen obviously thinks that your country is not worth dying for, and that death in war is an undignified and dark experience. Brooke, on the other hand, believes that you owe your country everything, and that includes the life that ironically, he says your country gave to you. Indeed, he believes that dying for your country is some kind of recompense: “ Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given.

Brooke’s *The Soldier* is poetically and lyrically faultless, his language in the classic style, and in the typified sonnet form. It would seem like the poetic picture of perfection. Yet perhaps these are reasons for its ineffectuality. The rhythmic lyricism becomes almost monotonous, the classic style is outdated even for the time of writing, and some would consider the sonnet form, whilst an apt representation of the poet’s love for his country, totally inappropriate for a subject as serious as war.

In stark contrast, *Dulce Et Decorum Est* throws off all poetic constraints, and is a poem which is totally emotive, conjuring up vivid, morbid, bitter images in the mind of the reader. Although I cannot totally commit to the ideals of

Dulce Et Decorum Est, I do agree that there is no glory in death on the battlefield, and that it is an undignified act, devoid of honour. The final, most poignant irony is that despite Brooke's desperation for an 'honourable' death in combat, he died of blood poisoning from an insect bite, never getting to see the war through Owen's eyes.