

Portrayal of death in dulce et decorum est, and how to tell a true war story

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



If war were to be personified it would be the grim reaper, looming over our shoulder as our inevitable demise draws near. No matter how much we plead or beg for our life, it will eventually be violently ripped from our hands. Dulce et Decorum Est, a poem written by Wilfred Owen, and How to Tell a True War Story, a fiction story written by Tim O'Brien, each has their unique approach to portraying death. Owen recalls the realities of war by showing readers the urgency the soldiers feel when faced with death. O'Brien exposes the real meaning of war by showing that soldiers will always be tainted with death whether it be physically or metaphorically. Death can come in different forms; however, remember this when concerning war, war does not bring glory. War does not bring peace. No matter what circumstances war's truest form is death.

Wilfred Owen was a British soldier during World War I and died one week before the war ended. Most of his poems, including Dulce et Decorum Est, were written during his time in the war. His poem, Dulce et Decorum Est, follows the traditional 14-line sonnet iambic pentameter except for the occasional line breaks to emphasize the horrors of war. The poem starts at a slow pace, depicting the generic scenes of war, " Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge, / Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots, / Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots" (2-7). Abruptly, the line breaks in stanza two and all hell breaks loose, " Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! — An ecstasy of fumbling" (1). Sonnets are neat and follow a specific guideline. Similarly, soldiers are to follow orders and be organized; however, that is not the reality of war. Notice, Owen uses an unfamiliar word to describe the soldiers, ecstasy. Usually, ecstasy is used to describe someone drunk with

pleasure but instead, the soldiers are in delirium with panic. The author goes as far as to describe a man in stanza three, “ guttering, choking, drowning.”

(2). Horrors of war cannot be easily summed up in a pretty little sonnet.

Readers can see that their death is anything but sweet, which is ironic to the poem’s title, Dulce et Decorum est — a Latin phrase from the Roman poet Horace: “ It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.” In the last stanza, it describes the tolls of war has done to a soldier:

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, (2-6).

His death was not beautiful and as a reader, I could not find any glory in his death. We like to romanticize war, especially in movies and books. We like to concentrate on winning the war or soldiers feeling fulfillment even if they died in the end; however, it is all one big lie. The poem sees that dying for one’s country is a waste of life and a desperate glory, calling the title “ The old Lie”. Yes, the reality is that when there is war, death is unavoidable; one man’s victory is another man’s loss, but death does not come like dying of old age. War is a form of death and in the worst possible way. Imagine living every day fearing for your life, not knowing how you will die. Maybe you

might be torture to death, blown to bits, gunned down by the enemy, or even die of a dreadful disease. War is not glorious. War is death and you are just sitting in the waiting room waiting for your turn.

The rhythms and words of Wilfred Owen's poem stand out from the many others about war and death and is a powerful evocation of death. Take another poem as an example, *The Soldier* written by Rupert Brooke. In a sense, the reader can view *The Soldier* as a complete opposite from *Dulce et Decorum Est*. *The Soldier* is a 14-line sonnet iambic pentameter and portrays death for one's country a noble deed—dying for England is the most glorious deed you can receive. In the first stanza, it talks about the speaker's love for England and when he should meet his demise, it was for England and all her beauty:

If I should die, think only this of me,

That there's some corner of a foreign field

That is forever England. There shall be

In that rich earth a richer dis concealed;

A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,

Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,

A body of England's, breathing English air,

Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home. (1-8).

After reading parts of the first stanza, you can't help but think, is this even real? Although it is beautiful and wonderful to love your country to the extent you will give your life willingly, it sounds like empty promises. The words do not hold any true meaning. Similar to Dulce et Decorum Est when it describes how tired the soldiers are. It is just like every day saying, something we already know. We know that we should love our country and not be afraid to protect it. We know that soldiers will be tired after going to war. The Soldier follows this theme throughout the poem. In stanza two it states, " Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day; / And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness, / in hearts at peace, under an English heaven." (4-6). Bottom line, he not only think dying for your country is a noble deed but a way to thank England for providing him a satisfactory life; however, Dulce et Decorum Est breaks away from this lie and sheds light the realities of war.

Instead of telling readers, this is what you should die for, Dulce et Decorum Est tells readers, this is how you will die when you go to war. It is a fact. This is the reason Dulce et Decorum Est poem stands out from other poems. With a sudden break in rhythm, the readers are in slight confusion like the soldiers in the poem. We try to comprehend the sudden change and try to adapt. In the third stanza, the two lines play along with the man choking to death. Personally, after I read stanza three, I found myself out of breath because I read the lines under one breath. Dulce et Decorum Est feels so close to home, that we can't help ourselves but share the emotions of the poem. Not only does the poem portray war in its most undesirable form, but

also we are able to understand and relate to the poem more so than poems like *The Soldier*. Perhaps that is because deep down, we know that with war there is death and there is no redemption from war.

Tim O'Brien was a soldier during the Vietnam War and many of his stories, like *How to Tell a True War Story*, are inspired by his experiences in that war. *How to Tell a True War Story* starts off telling a story about a boy named Bob Kiley, who is also commonly known as Rat Kiley. His friend, Curt Lemon, dies from a horrible accident and Rat writes a letter to Lemon's sister. He wrote her a heartfelt personal letter about how much Lemon meant to him and all his memories he had with her brother; however, she never returns the letter and Rat calls her a "dumb cooze". War is never moral and generally, nothing good comes out of it. That is the reality and the sad truth. The author states, "It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, not suggest models of proper human behavior... If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted... then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie." (35). We sometimes forget who we are sending out to war and who are actually fighting for our war. Young men like Rat Kiley are just kids. They do not know the true terror of war and nor are they ready for it. If they do manage to survive and get back home, they do not return the same. Do not think that sending boys to war is a noble deed because war always reduces any noble idea to obscenity. *Dulce et Decorum Est*, shows a glimpse of what happens when soldiers go to war. It is not like the movies or books where the main character comes out unscathed from war. It is chaotic and traumatizing especially when you see your fellow soldier die in front of your eyes. War is

death, and we should not pretend that it is not. Accept the ugly truth and stop justifying it with baseless lies.

The author recounts another story told by a fellow soldier named Mitchell Sanders. There were six guys patrolling in the mountains for a weeklong basic listening-post operation. If they hear anything suspicious they were supposed to call in artillery and gunships. So, for days the six guys are sitting in silence and listening. After a while, the men start to hear voices and sounds, "... they hear the champagne corks. They hear the actual martini glasses. Real hoity-toity, all very civilized, except this isn't civilization. This is Nam." (38). It only worsens to the point they were hearing voices from the trees, monkeys, and the country itself. The guys go crazy and call in artillery forces. When colonel asks what happened, the six men do not say a word and just stare. Mitchell Sanders states, "... the guys don't say zip. They just look at him for a while... and the whole war is right there in that stare. It says everything you can't every say... certain stories you don't ever tell." (39). Thinking about death, we think of literal death—end of life. Dulce et Decorum Est shows this perfectly when soldiers are hit with gas bombs and struggling to breath; however, death can come in different forms. Death not only claims our physical body but our soul. Although the six men didn't die, readers can sense a feeling of emptiness. It is as if they are just an empty shell of who they once were. Within all the bloodshed and chaos, you start to lose yourself. You start to question yourself and ask why are you are there. The only thing you can be certain is your absolute ambiguity.

The last story O'Brien tells the readers is what follows after Lemon's death. The unit comes across a baby water buffalo. Rat Kiley tries to feed the water buffalo, but it does not eat. Instead, Rat shoots the animal multiple times while crying; however, he does not shoot to kill but only to hurt it. The unit ends up throwing the barely breathing baby water buffalo down the village well. War does not only affect a singular person. It is a chain reaction, resentment passed down to one another until it spirals out of control. Rat feels resentment toward Lemon's sister for not replying to his letter and his grief over Lemon's death leads him to torture an innocent baby water buffalo. Then the unit throws the soon to be dead water buffalo in the village well, which readers can assume will poison the water. This means that the village will have no clean water to drink and become sick after drinking the tainted water. The innocent villagers will die at the hands of war despite not being part of the war. Soon, all the anger and resentment will pile up, and they too will join the war to fight against the Americans. War is just a continuous cycle of hatred and death. Dulce et Decorum Est shows readers the horrors of war soldiers have to face, constantly fighting to escape death's clutches; however, in reality, innocent civilians and animals are caught in the crossfire. No matter if you are a civilian, soldier, or an animal, nobody is safe from war.

A true war story is a never-ending story, " You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it." (43). Despite all the horror in the stories you tell, no one can really fully understand the extent that you went through. They will only have scratch the surface and even then they would brush it off because

they find it unpleasant, “ Usually it’s an older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics. She’ll explain that as a rule she hates war sorties, she can’t understand why people want to wallow in blood and gore.” (43). It is just human nature to avoid things that are disturbing and war is not an exception. War is not a fairy tale, and as it is said many times in this paper, war comes in the form of death. War portrays the ugliest parts of death and bares it naked for the world to see; however, we choose to cover it up. Is it sweet to die for one’s country? Are war stories even real? The biggest question of them all, why do we cover up the ugly truth with a beautiful lie? War is many things, but glory is not one of them nor is beauty. Many times society tries to hide the undesired parts of the war and covers it with a blanket of lies, hiding away the hideous truths; however, deep down, we know that war will be and always be a form of death.