

Dulce et decorum est - poetry analysis essay example

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The First World War was the most devastating loss of life in human history up to that point, with nearly 10 million killed in action and millions more wounded or missing. The new technologies and war tactics used in the conflict, with combat aircraft, deadly gases and trench warfare, made this particular war especially devastating. In Wilfred Owen's 1917 poem *Dulce et Decorum est*, he describes the horrors of war, especially the specific terror that occurs during a gas attack in World War I. The poem itself is a treatise on just how atrocious war is, and the inherent disgust that should be given to those who glorify it. Owens, in the poem, seeks to provide the reader with a visceral experience of just how awful World War I (and war in general is), and warns against those who would rush to send others to fight that they know not of what they speak.

The first part of the poem describes the arduous, terrible, and rough grind of a soldier in World War I. The members of the regiment are described in rough terms, destitute and helpless - " bent double, like old beggars under sacks." The soldiers are entirely miserable, trudging through " sludge" and so fatigued they effectively walked in their sleep. All of these things are described as more or less their normal routine; the soldiers simply see these events as par for the course. They cannot stop, even when they have no more shoes; they must keep going even though their bodies begin to fail them. The complete and total misery that Owen describes in this first stanza is indicative of the overall horror of war, particularly World War I; by noting such a dramatic drain of resources, hope and strength, he portrays soldiers in the field as being physically and emotionally worn down by their

experiences. All the same, their government and their military asks them to keep going, pushing them further than they are capable.

The poem next interrupts that dismal scene harshly with the onset of a sudden gas attack. The exclamation of " Gas! Gas!" in the wake of such somber, slowly-moving prose in the first stanza wakes up the reader as the gas attack itself does to the regiment and the poet. The desperation of everyone scrambling to get to their gas masks is described with a palpable tension - " an ecstasy of fumbling" - but the real horror comes when one man does not get his mask on before he begins dying of the gas attack.

Describing him as far away, " as under a green sea," Owen notes just how close he came to death nonetheless. Ending this section with the effect the event had on him - haunting his dreams as he " plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning," notes that he was not fully immune to the effects of that attack - just the gas itself. This couplet in particular shows the lasting and devastating effects of war on a poor soldier, even if he lives.

Finally, Owens closes out the poem with a warning for those who would " tell with such high zest / the old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori" (Owen, 1917). The Latin phrase means " How sweet and fitting it is to die for one's country," and is representative of the gung-ho, warlike attitude of those who would glorify war and present it as a virtuous, noble profession. At the very least, Owen asserts that he believes these people simply do not understand exactly how terrifying and horrific war can be; this is why they march toward it so. Relating the terrible slog along the battlefield to these types of people, Owen essentially states that they would not be so eager to

utter the titular phrase to others who might go to war for them if they knew what those same people would go through.

In conclusion, Owen wishes to use the poem to denote just how awful war can be; World War I, with its random gas attacks and general misery, is something that should be wished upon no one. With his use of great detail and repetition, never holding back the more gruesome aspects of the story, Owen wishes to hammer home the indignities and the inhumanity of military conflict. This is done in the hopes that, the next time someone has the chance to send someone else to that same fate, they will reconsider doing so. In essence, the Latin phrase that the title references is a lie - it is not sweet and fitting at all to die for your country. Often, it is merely unnecessary and tragic. The effects of war have their toll on man, whether or not they die immediately in a gas attack, or if they survive to replay the deaths of their friends in their heads over and over again. Owen wishes to unilaterally dispel any notions of war being glamorous or attractive; from his experiences, war should be avoided at all costs, to spare the human lives lost in many different ways through military conflict.

Works Cited

Owen, Wilfred. *Dulce et Decorum est*. 1920.