

Analysis of poem anthem for doomed youth

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



" Who longs to charge and shoot,

Do you my laddie."

This jingoistic wartime poem by Jessie Pope ignites Owen's anger at these false impressions of war. This is evident in such poems as *Dulce et Decorum est*, originally penned towards Pope, hence the initial title, *To a Certain Poetess*. Owen's " senses were charred" at the sight of the " suffering of the troops", such accusations about the nature of warfare fuelling the malice of his work. Owen never openly retaliates, instead opting to include his resentment towards writers like Pope in his poems. Owen frequently conveys his convictions of lost youth in *Anthem For Doomed Youth* by referring to " the hands of boys", evidently refusing to acknowledge the maturity of the men.

Owen's numerous references to religious symbols heightens the effects of his poems. In *Anthem*, we hear the " demented choirs of wailing shells." Angelic choirs are ironically reversed as Owen negates Christian ritual as being unfitting for those who die amid screaming shells. In *Mental Cases*, we also bear witness to Biblical images, asking if we are:

" Sleeping, and walk hell

But who these hellish?"

Owen often compares war to Hell, comparing soldiers to creatures undergoing eternal torment, " Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows". This adds to the created impression of those driven mad by war, as he asks if the " multitudinous murders" these men have committed has doomed them

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to Hell. Owen insists these soldiers are not to blame, for 'we' dealt them this "tormented" fate. Anthem is a similar reversal, where Owen utilizes heavenly elements, "orisons". Yet, these spiritual references are used negatively: the only true regret is the "holy glimmers of goodbyes" in the dying soldiers' eyes. The gloriousness of Heaven and God is ignored, extending the distressing impact of the poem on the reader, as similar devilish imagery is used in other poems, such as the gas victim's "devil sick of sun" face in Dulce. This imagery is so contorted it is unearthly, and seemingly impossible - just as the devil becoming tired of sinning is impossible. Owen's verbal images are parallel to artwork of the time, in particular Otto Dix's Assault Under Gas, shown below.

In this art piece, Dix mirrors the tortured, hellish scenes of Dulce, with the cries of "Gas!" almost audible. The visual imagery suggests the mental effects of the attacks on the soldiers, highlighted by the colour grey - as if life had been drained from them. Owen would have been aware of this, as he was treated at Craiglockhart Hospital for shellshock, amongst men whose "slumbers were morbid and terrifying."

In Futility, the image of the Sun is frequently used. It is often associated with life and its joys, however, Owen is very sarcastic in his reversal of the sun, first writing:

"If anything might rouse him now

The kind old sun will know."

Owen then goes on to criticise the Sun, labelling it as useless. He asks why we are created and given warm life, when war destroys everything of value:

" O what made fatuous sunbeams toil

To break earth's sleep at all?"

Owen also adopts animal imagery to his poems to further the displayed messages. In Anthem, Owen's opening line contains the powerful simile comparing soldiers as those, " who die as cattle?" referring to the high numbers of dead soldiers, especially young soldiers, being cut down in their prime, just as cattle would. Owen suggests they were grown for a specific reason (to fight), and killed once they had met their purpose (being slaughtered on the battlefield). In Owen's first draft of Anthem, written, with guidance from Siegfried Sassoon, in Craiglockhart, he stressed the " cattle" reference as an emotional jeer at the overly ambitious generals who used the men as cannon fodder.

The parallel to animals is used to great effect. In Dulce et Decorum est, Owen details the men who " had lost their boots, limped on, blood-shod." " Boots" and " shod" remind us of the horses used in the war, who had iron-shod shoes - portraying men as if they were beasts of burden, slumbering forward with heavy loads on their back - the worry and terror of what would face them weighing the men down. We see the effects of such an affliction in Mental Cases, where the " jaws that slob their relish" disparage " us who dealt them war and madness" by " pawing". Such quotes accentuate the

dehumanisation of these men that once "sang their way", signalling the end of their transition into "rocking" wrecks.

Owen recreates the horrors of war through his gruesome graphic imagery, particularly in Dulce's "green sea", where the "flound'ring" of the victim "smothers" his dreams. The realisation of such a sight is alarming to the reader. Even in Owen's time, such a description would shock the reader into picturing the "sick of sin hanging face". Owen's passion displays the real effects of such a grim and "monstrous" war, trying desperately to erase the false screen created by such jingoistic writers as Pope.

One of Owen's tendencies is to incorporate intense sounds to support the potent imagery:

"We were caught in a tornado of shells"

This extract, from one of Owen's letters, provides insight into his writing of Anthem:

"The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells"

Owen uses his "submerged memories of warfare" to great effect, frequently applying onomatopoeia to his poems - the "stuttering rifle's rapid rattle" in Anthem, and the "batter of guns" in Mental Cases. The powerful resonance of the weapons intensifies the empathy the reader has for the "sacrificed men", as the hellish scene recreates the "rattling" in our own ears, as if we, the reader, were there. In Futility, a direct contrast is apparent, as the "

whispering of fields at home" signifies the sharp difference between the frontline action, and the calmness of Blighty.

This is a stark reminder from Owen that, whilst everything's fine and calm in Britain, there are " full-nerved" men dying in France. The continuation of Anthem's onomatopoeic clatters is mirrored most notably by Mental Cases' " batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles". The rhyming extends Owen's vivid ideas by suggesting that, as well as fighting and seeing the misery of comrades falling, the sounds of the " multitudinous murders they once witnessed" replay constantly in their minds, reminding them of the torment they met.

In Dulce, we can 'hear' the " guttering choking" and " gargling" of the " hanging face", as well as visualize the grotesque scene, subjecting the reader to view the true nature of war further. As well as applying haunting adjectives to his work, Owen utilizes pace to maintain his high level of passion. This is most evident in Dulce, where each verse is different in speed. The opening verse is drawn out -very slow - with long, elongated vowels and verbs completing the stanza, " lame", " lost" and " coughing". This mirrors the fatigue of the soldiers, who would be deprived of sleep and be very slow in their speech. As the poem progresses into the gas attack, a pacy, urgent tone is adopted, with the cries of " Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!" As Owen describes the gas victim's painful end, the solemnly spoken words are slower, reverting back to the lingering sounds of the first verse, " writhing". In Anthem, the " passing bells" of the funeral suggests a slow, sombre tone,

as is the case with funerals. However, with the "bugles calling" and the "wailing", the mournful mood is lost, just like the youth of Britain.

Owen often ends his poems with an accusatory conviction, a controversial one that projects his innermost feelings, chosen to express the untold truths about war, and how the patriotic campaigns to conscript men are disgraceful. In Anthem, Owen ends with:

" Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,

And each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds"

This is a direct contrast to the whole poem, where Owen suggests the "monstrous anger of the guns" accompanies them in death. Instead of his habitual ending of a "Lie", Owen's ending is surprisingly peaceful, displaying a compassion for the dead previously unseen in his other poems. Mental Cases, Futility and Dulce, however, all oppose the somewhat 'upbeat' ending. Dulce ends with

" The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est

Pro patria mori."

Owen flat out accuses the old saying, and the certain poetess, that to die for your country is not sweet and meet. Owen even goes as far as ironically rhyming "glory" and "mori", as to satirically jeer at Jesse Pope, completely contradicting her. Owen asks if "my friend, you would not tell... the old Lie", passionately addressing the reader, but also the frank direction at Pope not to print her jingoism, ironically donning her "friend". This mirrors the ending

to Mental Cases, where a sharp change of address sees the blame of the "extrication" shift to "us who dealt them war and madness". Owen deliberately develops the poem to the startling climax, enveloping the blame around society as a whole, and not just certain poetesses.

Dulce and Mental Cases match in descriptions, where the futile attempts to "pick" and "snatch" combine to provide the reader with an overwhelming sense of grief, at having sent these men off to war. Owen's ideas mean that we, the modern reader, feel this guilt at having sent innocent youths to their untimely deaths, when we had done nothing. However, contextually, the reader would have read this, and known that they had done wrong, becoming guilt-ridden at their mistake. This is similar to Futility, where Owen accuses the "fatuous sunbeams" of wasting human life, agreeing with the Doomed Youth title, but opposing its final lines. Futility describes how men are killing others, ending life, when we should not be ordering the termination of it - undoing God's work, when it is not our right to.

Owen's feelings towards death, and the ending of life, are the fundamental issues in his poems. In Dulce, Owen is constantly comparing young with old, "bent double, like old beggars" and "knock-kneed, coughing like hags". Dulce also details how the men "marched... drunk with fatigue", explaining the exhausted state of the men. These three quotes are shocking, as these men are young, energetic men, but they're being reduced to quivering wrecks - suggesting men age quicker in the trenches, due to the horrors they see, and what they have to experience. This is a direct juxtaposition, where the young are dying before the old (A role reversal), but are seen as being

'old' themselves. Owen's visual ideas on death are nothing short of morbid, describing:

" at every jolt, the blood

Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs"

In *Dulce and Mental Cases*, Owen adopts a macabre approach to extend the demons of these men. In *Dulce*, the " white eyes" of the " hanging face" suggest death is upon the man, and that he is looking at the men to choose his next victim. This idea is carried into *Mental Cases*, where there are men " whose minds the Dead have ravished". Owen suggests, through a conviction of anxiety, that death is omnipresent, and that the worst fear is to become a " purgatorial shadow".

Owen writes to display one main conviction: that the false pretences of war are just that - false. By writing about such shocking and disturbing issues, Owen breaks the fabricated lies and makes his feelings known by adding ambiguous sentences to his poems, " marching asleep" - fatigue of war, or asleep to the glorious propaganda that recruited them? Owen's poems are full of truths, however controversial they seem, and he projects his convictions and feelings any way he can, regardless of consequences.