

Stylistic devices in dulce et decorum est

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Use Of Poetic Elements In “ Dulce et Decorum Est”

Wilfred Owen uses many of the elements of poetry to support the idea that war is brutal in his poem, “ Dulce et Decorum Est.” Starting with the speaker’s imagery, and leading into simile, hyperbole, repetition and diction, the reader gets a strong sense of the intended central theme in “ Dulce et Decorum Est.”

The speaker’s diction lends heavily to the imagery in “ Dulce et Decorum Est.” Imagery plays into setting the scenery of the poem. The reader gets a sense of the grim environment through descriptors that carry negative connotation. First, the speaker describes the flares that fly over the backs of the soldiers as “ haunting.” The speaker then follows and describes the physical state of the men as “ knock-kneed’,” bent-double”, and “ blood-shod”. In one of the most graphic lines the speaker describes his comrade reacting to poison gas as “ flound’ring like a man in fire or lime” (“ Dulce” 12). Not only is this a fantastic use of imagery, but the line also introduces metaphorical elements which the poet uses to tie into the central theme.

The speaker’s use of simile throughout the poem is a way for the poet to emphasize the suffering of the men, and enable the reader to connect with the soldiers and experience that suffering. The speaker first describes the men as “ bent-double, like old beggars” (“ Dulce” 1). The metaphor conveys more than just the physical state of the men, it also helps to shed light on their mental condition. The idea of the men as “ old beggars” carries with it many more implications. Through comparison the men embody all of the suffering that one would associate with an old beggar. It is through these

implications that the reader is able to infer and understand the men's suffering and come closer to understanding the central theme of the poem.

The poet also uses hyperbole when the speaker describes watching his comrade react to the poison gas. The speaker remarks, "As under a green sea, I saw him drowning" ("Dulce" 14). The speaker does not actually see the man drowning. Rather, the poet is using hyperbole here to emphasize the man's suffering and his panicked reaction to the poison gas. The hyperbole may also refer to the comparison of the poison gas cloud as a "green sea" which would suggest that the thick cloud the poison gas creates is so large and encompassing that it might be compared to the sea. The visualization created by the hyperbole of the man drowning is two-fold. First, the reader visualizes the man's reaction to the gas. Secondly, the reader gets a glimpse of the speaker's reaction to watching his comrade become enveloped by the gas. In both instances the reader is not meant to take the speaker's word literally, but rather it serves to emphasize the situation by creating imagery and giving the reader a greater sense of the gravity of the situation.

Another element that adds to the central theme is the poet's use of repetition in the poem. In line 14 and 16 of "Dulce et Decorum Est" the overall rhyme scheme of paired couplets is slightly altered when the speaker repeats the word drowning at the end of line 16. The poet does this to emphasize not only what is occurring, but also to create a sense of urgency in the reader's mind. The poet is attempting to draw the reader in and make them experience the reality of the man's death. More repetition can be seen

with the use of repetitive suffixes in line 16 when the speaker explains that the man is “guttering, choking, drowning” (“Dulce” 16). This repetition uses strong consonants which create an unpleasant sound when spoken aloud which adds to the unpleasantness of the central theme.

Perhaps most important of all elements is the poet’s tone. Owen is able to masterfully convey his theme through his use of tone. The speaker’s word choice often adds to the overall negative feel of the poem. The poet uses descriptors such as “incurable”, “vile”, “bitter”, “obscene”, “writhing”, “smothering” to add to the ambient feel of the poem. Finally, in the last few lines of the work Owen alludes to another piece of written work by the Roman poet Horace, when he quips:

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. (“Dulce” 26-29)

These lines are the essence of Owen’s central theme. Owen challenges the line that Horace made famous, which roughly translates to, “It is sweet and glorious to die for one’s country.” Rather, Owen argues that the line is an “old lie.” Most importantly, Owen establishes the precedent for challenging this line through the use of other elements throughout the poem depicting the brutality of war.