

Essay on anthem for doomed youth by wilfred owen

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‘ Dulce et Decorum Est’ by Wilfred Owen

A Comparative Analysis

Although both these poems are by the same British poet and both might be thought of as ‘ anti-war’ in different ways, they differ in their structure, use of language and overall emotional impact.

‘ Anthem for Doomed Youth’ is a sonnet and the structure of the sonnet seems to act as a restraint on Owen’s feelings. The poem also contains an extended metaphor. In talking about the huge loss of life in the First World War, and mentioning the soldiers who “ die as cattle” (line 1) (inevitably as if in a slaughterhouse), Owen develops an extended metaphor which is centred on the idea that these dead soldiers are dying in such huge numbers that they are not given proper funerals. Each element of a real funeral is compared to an element of the battlefield and this creates a poignant sense of sadness. Thus, instead of the “ passing bells” (line 1) that would accompany a church service, these soldiers are buried to the sounds of “ the monstrous anger of the guns” (line 2) and “ the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle” (line 3) – where the alliteration gives the phrases an onomatopoeic quality. There are no choir boys to sing at their funeral – only the “ shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells” (line 7) – and again the onomatopoeia of “ shrill” and “ wailing” add to the impact of this line. ‘ Anthem for Doomed Youth’ is a lament for all the dead soldiers who have died and received no proper funeral service. The poem gives us a vivid sense of the sounds of the battlefield, but the constant references to the church funeral service give the poem a tender, gentle mood of sadness and profound sorrow. In fact, Owen uses that very word – “ tender” – when writing that they will have no flowers

at their funerals except “ the tenderness of patient minds” (line 13) - the memories and thoughts of their still-living comrades. Thus, although the poem implies criticism of the war (the slaughter of youth who are “ doomed” and “ like cattle”) the predominate emotion is one of deep sadness.

‘ Dulce et Decorum Est’ has a very different one and no extended metaphor, although the individual metaphors are striking and convey Owen’s anger at what he calls the “ old Lie.” (line). ‘ Anthem for Doomed Youth’ was about all the dead soldiers on the Western Front. ‘ Dulce et Decorum Est’ is about a particular group of soldiers who are heading back from the trenches for a break from duty. They are clearly exhausted and have lost the ability to feel: they “ lame,” “ blind,” and “ deaf.” (lines 5 - 6). The Owen describes a gas attack and there is the immediacy of direct speech - “ Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!” - and the soldiers rush to put their gas masks on. Owen then focuses on one man who is too slow and inhales the poison gas. The memory of watching the man die haunts his dreams and then, in the final section of the poem, addresses “ you,” and asserts that if “ you” could have seen the man die then you would no longer believe in “ The old Lie” (line 27). The old lie is the Latin saying that gives the poem its title and its final sentence and which means, “ It is sweet and honourable to die for your country.” Owen use of similes and metaphors in the final section is especially powerful. The dead soldier’s face is “ like a devil’s sick of sin” (line 20) which suggests that war is evil; the blood gargling up from the soldier’s lungs is “ as obscene as cancer” (line 23). Owen implies that telling the old lie is as sinful and as evil as cancer. The “ you” who Owen also terms “ my friend” (line 25) seems to be all those who tell the old lie about dying for your country - politicians and

propagandists. It is made worse in Owen's eyes because they tell this lie with "such high zest" (line 25) in order to recruit young men whom Owen describes as "children ardent for some desperate glory." (line 26). The poem ends on a note of bitter anger at the manipulation of young men encouraged to join the army.

Two famous poems by Wilfred Owen - one full of tenderness, pity and profound sadness; the other full of bitter anger at the cruelties of war and the lies told about it.