

Wilfred Owen's



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If Wilfred Owen's war poetry had one main aim, it would be to expose "the old lie": that war is always a good and justified thing and that it is a good thing to die for one's country. Owen had experienced first hand the horrors and tragedies of the First World War, so he inevitably wanted to break open the false facade and let the world know the truth.

I am going to explore what I find to be three of his best poems and show how he achieved this aim. Owen was born on the 18th of March 1893 in Shropshire, England. He received a good education as a child and in 1915 he enlisted in the army when he was 22 years old. He was injured in a shell explosion in France and transferred to a war hospital back in England, where he was given the chance to stay for the rest of the war. But due to his loyalty to his troops, he returned to the frontline. He was killed in action attempting to lead his men across a canal on November 4th 1918.

His death was particularly tragic as it came just a week before Armistice Day and the end of the war. A common misconception is that all war poets of the First World War were against war. Usually on their way to war, some famous poets such as Rupert Brooke wrote some very famous war poems. Poems such as "The Soldier" and "The Volunteer" give very positive and romanticised views of war and words such as "lance", "chivalry" and "legion" came up very regularly. These poets were not stupid or attempting to get people to enlist, they just didn't know any better due to the classic public school education and the fact that there was no media, such as films to, inform the public of how terrible war is.

Even Wilfred Owen himself wrote a very famous pro war line: "O meek it is and passing sweet to die in war for others". Propaganda from the likes of Jessie Pope and Prime-Minister Herbert Asquith was believed by most people and many signed up because of Pope's poem "Who's for the game?": which compared war to merely a fun game that everyone will enjoy even if they "come back with a crutch". Herbert Asquith wrote "The Volunteer" which was one of the most romanticised war poems of all time. It was about a young boy in a "city grey" with "no lance broken", who goes to join the army.

He dies but "lies content" and euphemistically goes to join the "Men of Agincourt". These poems are incredibly full of euphemisms of war and mention no words like "pain" or "death". But when poets who thought they could find "glory and honour" in war actually arrived at the battlefields everything changed and the anti-war poems began. "Dulce Et Decorum Est" is arguably Wilfred Owen's most famous poem.

It uses very figurative language in order to describe the horrors of a gas attack on a few men while they are "marching towards their distant rest". It is split up into three parts. The first part describes the "men marching asleep" "towards their distant rest". The second part describes the gas attack. Most of them manage to get their gas masks on, but one man "fumbles" and "drowns". In the third part Owen describes the horror of walking behind the wagon they "flung" him into and watching him slowly and painfully dying.

He then addresses Jessie Pope as "my friend" and tells her that if she had seen what he saw; she would not tell the "old lie" with such "high zest". As

mentioned earlier, Owen uses very figurative language in "Dulce Et Decorum Est". The poem uses similes and metaphors very commonly. It opens with an effective simile. The men are "bent double like old beggars under sacks". The word "old" is effective because most of the soldiers were only 20-30 years old, so they are not old, but made old by their disabilities that they have received through the war.

When Owen writes "distant rest" that the soldiers are marching towards, he could mean their certain death, as that is what they probably believed they were marching towards. In the second verse Owen uses his punctuation well to make the verse explosive. There is an exclamation mark after the first "Gas", and then the second "Gas" is done in capitals to really to make it explosive. At the end Owen starts an extended metaphor comparing the man who has been gassed dying to him "drowning" under a "green sea". This is an effective metaphor as Owen knows that many readers won't have experienced being gassed, but they will probably have experienced holding their head under water and realised how hard it is to breathe.

This helps the reader relate to the poem and makes for a more effective metaphor that stands out in people's mind. The third verse is a very small verse where Owen vividly describes the young man metaphorically "drowning" before his "helpless sight". What makes this verse effective is that during this verse, Owen uses the present tense verbs "guttering, choking, drowning", to give the reader a feeling of it still happening and makes them feel as if they are there watching it happen. The fact that these verbs are onomatopoeic means that the death is also heard vividly by the reader.

The fourth and final verse probably uses the most effective language out of all of them. Some believe when Owen seems to address the reader by saying " You" and " My friend" that he is addressing Jessie Pope, one of the main Propaganda writers and someone who Owen was extremely opposed to. But these second person narratives also make the reader feel more involved and allow them to understand more about the tragedy of this gas attack. Owen's choices of verbs in this verse are very skilful. Owen uses verbs such as " writhing" and " gargling" to give clear verbal images to the reader.

But one verb that truly stands out is " flung". Owen uses this verb to get across how common terrible tragedies like this were and that bodies weren't even treated with care and respect anymore. This gives a good image of Owen's view of war. The last thing Owen says in this poem is almost certainly to Jessie Pope and the rest of the propaganda writers but also tells the readers something; that if they had seen all of this terror and tragedy they would most definitely not tell " with such high zest" the one thing that Owen fought so strongly against-" the old lie": Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori- that it is sweet and fitting to die for your country. " Disabled" is a much less figurative poem than " Dulce et decorum est", but still puts across a message.

The language in disabled does not need to be figurative though, as the literal language already puts across an image that is powerful enough. The basic storyline is about a young teenage boy who decides to go to war because he thinks it is his duty and the right thing to do and comes back with no limbs. The boy in this poem symbolises all young men, and the poem basically describes why so many young men decided to lie about their age so they

could go to war and also how much they regretted doing so when they saw the truth behind the propaganda. I believe that what Owen is attempting to do with this poem is to stop young men making this mistake in the future and to tell the world the reality of what ended up happening to them.

Throughout "Disabled", Owen uses the third person narrative so as to make the main character feel more isolated from everyone else. This builds sympathy for him.

The poem opens straight away with the third person word "He". The first verse describes the boy sitting in his wheeled chair, "waiting for dark". I think that "waiting for dark" is effective as it tells you that this boy has nothing else left to do and "dark" could possibly symbolise death.

Throughout this poem, Owen uses an extended metaphor comparing the joy of his life to colour.

He begins this in line two by referring to his uniform as a "ghastly suit of grey". At the end of the verse, the boy begins to think back to before the war began. In the boy's flashback, Owen describes the "gay" town in which he lived. Owen tries to make this sound like a perfect place to live by filling it with colour and life. In the second line, it describes the "light blue trees".

This contrasts with the earlier "grey" and keeps up the extended colour metaphor. In the fourth line, Owen says "before he threw away his knees". I find this effective as it tells you that this boy wasn't forced into this, but he volunteered. The fourth verse is much of the same thing but describes the boy himself as a handsome sort of boy, and then how he lost his limbs in a shell explosion. It does not use very figurative language, but I find that one

thing stands out: Owen uses the metaphor " Now he is old" to show that this boy isn't really old, but made old by the war, and that he has very little left to live for.

The fourth verse tells that story of the boy joined up. The first two lines describe how he once " liked a blood smear down his leg" and after his football matches he liked to be " carried shoulder-high". This basically means that he liked a heroic image of himself. This is one reason why he decided to go to war. Another reason is " to please his Meg" and that " someone said he looked a god in kilts". This also adds to the background to the character that Owen adds in this verse by using words and phrases such as " aye", " giddy jilts" and " drunk a peg".

These show the characters Scottish background and help build a little more sympathy as the reader can see the character as a real person now. I think that Owen manages to produce a negative image of the recruitment officers in the 8th -9th lines in the fourth verse. I think that the words " smiling" and " lie" used together produce an evil sort of image about these people who Owen hated so much. The tenth line in this verse reads " Germans he scarcely thought of all their guilt".

This shows that he has no idea of the horrors that lie ahead. The fifth verse is small, but still manages to describe his disappointing return. The first line tells us that " some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer goal". This shows his regret for joining up. Then the man that " inquired about his soul" is slightly patronizing as it shows he has nothing else left.

The final verse emphasises his isolation and loneliness. In the second line, Owen shows the boys longing to be as the rebel he was before, but now has to do "things the rules consider wise". Then Owen uses a final repetitiveness to emphasise the boy's loneliness- "Why don't they come? Why don't they come?" The final poem that I will analyse is "Spring Offensive". This is possibly Owen's best and most symbolic poems. The poem follows a group of men taking a brief, yet much appreciated rest in "the shade of a last hill". Then they are ordered to advance over the hill towards the enemy.

Owen vividly describes the terror, fear and high amount of death in the attack. One thing that makes this poem great is that it is effectively split into halves. The first half, the first side of the hill, is the nature-filled and peaceful heaven and on the other side of the hill is the man-made and destructive hell. This is firstly represented by the oxymoronic title: "Spring Offensive".

These are two words that contrast greatly: "spring" representing the first side of the hill as this word gives an image of life and nature and of course "offensive, which represents the other side of the hill, gives an image of death, agony and man-made hell. In the first half of the poem, Owen uses caesura to great effect. Punctuation marks such as commas and full stops are used commonly to slow the reader's pace of reading down to give a more relaxed feel. Also, Owen uses particular vowel sounds to slow down pace. The vowel sound "e" is used commonly in words like "eased" and "knees". At the start of the second verse, Owen leaves some large gaps before writing anything to achieve the same purpose of slowing the reader down.

This then contrasts greatly to the next half where the sounds within words speed up and sentences become short and snappy to build tension. Owen uses a lot less vowel sounds in this half. During this poem, Owen uses some very figurative language to great effect. In the first line, he calls the hill they resting at " a last hill".

This adjective tells us that there is almost certain death on the other side and that this is the " last" thing they will ever see. In the second verse there is an good metaphor saying that " their feet had come to the end of the world". This is effective as it tells you that they have reached the end of their life. In the fourth line of the second verse, the line begins with the word " marvelling" to emphasise it. This points out that these men wouldn't usually stop to gaze and wonder at the flowers and grass swirling, but they have come to appreciate life more now that they've seen so much death.

This is an important message from Owen. The rest of the first half gives many positive images of spring by a good selection of words. Owen uses words such as " wasp and midge", " Warm field", and " buttercups". The first half ends with a simile comparing the brambles that clung to them to " sorrowing arms". These brambles are like a warning from nature, telling them not to go any further.

It is inevitable, that after seeing so much death and hellish, disastrous things happening, Owen will have lost some of his faith in a God. Here he is telling us that nature is his replacement of a God, since he has come to appreciate and like nature a lot more. The soldiers rest ends and the man-made hell begins when " like a cold gust" the whistle sounds. This simile effectively

describes the men's fear. After this Owen states clearly that there were "no alarms of bugles" or "high flags" as they went over the top. What he is telling us here is that there is no glory in war and that no one should believe otherwise.

In the sixth verse, the third line starts with the word "exposed" to emphasise the fact that these men had absolutely no protection or cover and were almost certainly going to die. The last line of the seventh verse underlines one of Owen's beliefs. It says: "Some say God caught them even before they fell". The key word there is "some". Owen believes that things like that were just excuses for war made up by the propagandists and that war is never justified in any case.

The poem ends with the question "why not they speak of comrades that went under?" What Owen is saying is that it is extremely important to remember those that died and that we mustn't under any circumstances forget them and he is asking why nobody talked about the carnage. The obvious answer is that it was all too shocking for these men to mention again; this is what Owen wants to emphasise. I believe that Wilfred Owen's poetry achieved its purpose fully and that no one after reading it will believe that the First World War was for a good purpose and will see behind the false facade of the propaganda. I think Owen's two most important lines in his poetry are "You would not tell with such high zest to children ardent of some desperate glory, the old lie" and "Why not they speak of comrades that went under". These tell his beliefs- that war is never justified and it is not a good thing to die for your country, and also that we must never forget those who died and the suffering that they went through.