

Army leadership essay



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Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" is an attempt to illustrate the helplessness of men caught in a gas attack. Owen describes the general condition of men involved in a war. Owen opens the poem with a description of a group of discouraged soldiers retreating from the front lines of the battlefield. The men are clearly fatigued and worn down.

He talks about the shock of a gas attack and then focuses on the aftermath of this tragic event on someone who lives through it. The image of that dying soldier is one that the narrator can never forget. That memory makes the narrator give some bitter advice to readers about the nature of warfare and the outcome of blind patriotism. Owen describes his experience of walking behind the wagon in which the dead man has been placed, seeing the corpse frozen in the twisted agony of its death. That sight, he says, would prevent any man from adopting convincingly the notion that dying for one's country is somehow righteous.

When I read "Dulce et Decorum Est" I noticed the intensity of Owen's images. Owen is able to make the horrors of warfare come alive in this poem. Some of those images are expressed in carefully chosen metaphors; others are simply presented in graphic language that describes the scene as the narrator sees it or remembers it. Unlike the heroes of earlier wars, these soldiers do not face death at the hands of a recognizable enemy who comes at them with a sword or spear. Instead, death comes from afar; worse still, it comes impersonally in the form of an dangerous poison that destroys life in a brief instant of agony (which Owen contrasts subtly with the "ecstasy of fumbling" [line 9] that occurs when the men try to put on their masks). These soldiers utter no death-bed speeches.

Instead, the only sounds heard by those under gas attack are incoherent yells and—after death—a “gargling” from “froth-corrupted lungs” that occurs as the corpse of the soldier too slow to put on his mask in time is sent off to be buried. *Dulce et Decorum Est*” graphically depicts a central irony of death on the modern battlefield: No matter how righteous the cause may be, the individual soldier can expect nothing but misery in combat and an horrible end should he be unfortunate enough to become a casualty.