

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori: the old lie, the young die

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" Dulce Et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori The Old Lie, The Young Die Wilfred Owen, who died in action in his twenty-sixth year, towards the end of the First World War, is one of the best known of the War Poets. He had known quite early in his life that he wanted to be a poet, but it was the experience of war that truly made him one. He believed that it was the poet's duty to truthfully warn his readers against the horrors of the world, and every word of prose or verse that he wrote after enlisting in the war was forged in the fire of his own pain and passion. As his poems are so closely linked with the circumstances of his life and death, one could, perhaps, employ to best advantage, the biographical approach to " Dulce Et Decorum Est," as to any other poem of Wilfred Owen.

In the war years, almost all able-bodied young men felt the urge to enlist, and among the minority who didn't, few could resist the pressure, coming as it did from every corner, even from one's own mother and sisters. Owen was one of the latter-he joined the war because he was force-fed the " Old Lie": " It is sweet, and right, to die for one's country." He had enjoyed his military training, but his life on the front was an experience of Hell. Although introspective and solitary by nature, he treasured the communal experience of living with his comrades-in-arms even in the most hellish conditions. His heart was full of pity for them, and he realized that it was his duty to record the truth of his feelings and theirs. " Dulce Et Decorum Est" and all his other war poems are therefore the authentic record of the feelings of those on the battlefield, and as such, have done all that any poet could have done to fight the war against war.

The very first line of the poem, " Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,"

is significant because the poet is writing about men of his own age or younger. All the pain of war is brought out in the lines that describe the painful journey of the men through the sludge, dodging shells and bullets, wary of sniffing poison gas. The young poet coins the expression " blood-shod" when speaking of soldiers who had lost their boots, but had to march on over snow and stone nevertheless. " All went lame; all blind;/ Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots" of the shells. But even more pain and sorrow and suffering lay in store for them.

The poison gas warning leads to " an ecstasy of fumbling" for masks, but one man was too slow and Owen's words make us feel all the raw pain of that young man " guttering, choking, drowning." The poet's instinct for coining the right word for an uncommon experience is seen in " guttering" just as " blood-shod" had been the most appropriate word in its context in the first stanza. The poet saw the young man drowning in the gas, before his " helpless sight" and " in all my dreams." That single sight would have been enough to kill the sleep of any hapless spectator for life.

The final stanza of the poem addresses itself to the reader, who, without any direct experience of war, might feel the need to recite, with " high zest" the " Old Lie" to " children" who might swallow it as Owen himself had done, just months ago. The poet's frenzy of words in this stanza makes certain that none who read it could hope to escape " smothering dreams" of the " bitter" " obscene" " vile" " writhing" pain of the young man " gargling" blood " from the froth-corrupted lungs." Would any reader ever again mouth the Old Lie to any young child Perhaps, in our time, this poem should hang from every bush and blare from every corner for every man and woman in the world to

understand the pity and the horror and the truth of war.

References

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