

How does wilfred
owen present the
horror and reality of
war in his poems



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This is a line taken from a draft war poem by Wilfred Owen written before he realised the true horror and reality of war; entitled 'The ballad of Peace and War'. This poem contrasted strangely with his later work, when he wrote of how the fake glamour of war leads to unbelievable suffering.

As a recent critic spoke of his poems: "... He has done as much as anyone to prevent the reading public from being persuaded ever again that death in battle is 'sweet and decorous'".

Wilfred Owen's attitude to war changed from belief of brave, adventurous and exciting tales in war to bitter anger, anger at propaganda, the public and at war itself. It is this in his poems, which portrays the true horror and reality of war. This, I believe is what made Wilfred Owen and his poems so striking. Four of his most famous poems are: 'Dulce et decorum est', 'Disabled', 'Exposure' and 'Anthem for doomed youth'.

Dulce et decorum est, literally translated means 'It is sweet and proper'. At first glance, you would presume that it was one of Owen's earlier pieces. It is not until we begin to read on, stanza-by-stanza that we realise this is not the case. 'Dulce' tells us of the men in the trenches, most who have probably come because of the lie written at the end of the poem, and part in the title. It is sweet and proper to die for one's country'. Owen refers to himself as one of the men: 'we cursed through sludge.

.. 'He tells of one man in particular, in quite vivid detail that did not put his helmet on in time in the gas attack. 'Dulce' is a fine example of Owen's anger and he shows this as sarcasm; implying that society built up the idea of glory and sweetness but the reality of war is far more horrifying.

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Owen opens his poem through the simile ' bent doubled like old beggars under sacks..' ' This is far from the glamorous image people had had in their heads. By bringing this image in the form of a simile, Owen can also draw us into the poem from the start, making it easier for us to imagine the scene, and therefore more real. He describes the soldiers as tired, dirty and bloody.

He uses the metaphor blood - shot to cleverly illustrate the wounded soldiers, comparing them to blood-shot eyes. All this contradicts to the image people had of soldiers back at home. IN stanza two is the gas attack. He uses very vivid language in this stanza: ' An ecstasy of fumbling', ' Stumbling', ' drowning'. ' flound'ring'. This continues into the third stanza where he remembers the ' glittering', ' chocking', and ' drowning' in his dreams.

The rule of three technique here is very effective and enforces the haunting idea that he never forgets the horror of the war. Owen's direct anger to Jessie Pope is just one sentence in stanza 4. The last sentence has much feeling, passion and emotion, which is reflected back into the language and tone of his writing. As he describes himself and the soldiers as they frantically ' flung' the soldier behind the wagon, he suggests the reality of war was panic stricken, fast and scary.

Soldiers had to fling the dead aside and move on to kill others in turn. The very striking line, ' His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin' completely sums up just how horrifying and horrific war is. He is suggesting war is so bad, even the devil would be appalled and sick of it. Owen effectively uses sarcasm to portray his anger directly at Jessie Pope, a poet of war when he

says ' My friend'. Wilfred Owen is saying if you had seen what I had seen, you would not urge them to fight.

The second of these poems is ' Disabled'. In this poem, Owen imagines the thoughts of a very young and severely wounded soldier. He has lost all of his limbs: ' legless, sewn short at elbow', and now sits helplessly in a wheelchair thinking sadly and bitterly of the past. The idea of the poem itself portrays the horror and reality of war. Owen described the young soldier sat in a wheelchair, ' waiting for dark.

.. ' in a ' suit of grey', suggesting he is wearing despair. This is a great contrast to the ' kilts' and ' plaid socks' he was promised he would wear, as described later in the poem. Two striking lines later on depict regret, bitterness, and reality, starting with '.

.. efore he threw away his knees'. He suggests a waste of life.

I think Owen here is expressing his anger towards the authorities that irresponsibly sent those young men to fight. Later on, the second striking line says: ' All of them touch him like some queer disease. ' Here he refers to girls who would once love him, but now are discussed by him. After the second stanza, Owen takes us back in time to the war, separating the two times with stars. This draws us into the poem so we imagine being there ourselves; adding to the reality of the descriptions. In the third stanza we hear perhaps the most horrific reality ever written by Owen, as he describes how the soldier lost his leg in such graphic detail, also using similes and metaphors to add to the effect: ' poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry'.

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Here he refers to his blood pouring down the shell holes, but at the same time half his life poured away. I found particularly effective. Then, after he goes on to say: 'And leap of purple spirted from his thigh'. Here, by explaining it so vividly and bluntly we can really feel the horror and terror of war. His use of words such as 'leap' and 'spurted' are striking alongside the description of blood as purple, not red. This also contrasts with the 'blood - smear' in a football game - this is what he naively thought it would be like in war and he would be treated like a hero just as he had been after the football game.

The fourth stanza is another jump in time, this time back before the war, as the young man remembers his youth, hauntingly and sadly we read of all the things he could once do, but no longer can, shamefully because he was fooled into it by the promise of glory for 'his Meg', as a laugh and to look good in a 'kilt'. By comparing people's thoughts of war so close to the stanza of the reality of war; Owen depicts the vast and foolish difference between fantasy and reality. By the fifth stanza, our hearts are pouring out to the young soldier as we have become so involved. Owen ends by using repetition of 'Why don't they come' for a striking ending as he refers to the women in the institute whom he longs to care for him, so he lies helpless in grey.

This poem is so sad and effective, through Owen's use of metaphors, time travelling and striking language; the horror and reality of war is made clear here. The third poem, 'Exposure' is quite a contrast to 'Dulce', which is filled with the frantic side of war. Exposure, in its own effective way shows

the other side of war, equally as scary and horrifying. Soldiers are marooned on a frozen desert.

On the words of Wilfred Owen ' There was no sign of life on the horizon, but a million signs of death'. In this poem, again Owen is here; he is describing a past experience. In this poem, winter is more dangerous to the men than war. Words and phrases such as ' merciless iced east winds that knife us', link comparisons of weather and war.

As well as the weather, the soldiers have also got the constant worry of when attack comes. Owen communicates their feelings using words such as ' curious', ' nervous', but then finally ending the stanza with ' but nothing happens'. Owen repeats this line throughout the poem to emphasise the reality that often there was no action just waiting. Owen shows the weather as the enemy in stanza three with his strong use of personification, where he compares the dawn to a general: ' Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey'.