

## ENGLISH: *WAR POEMS*

How does this extract (below) from ‘Dulce Et Decorum Est’ introduce us to the important ideas in Owen’s poetry?

In your response, make detailed reference to at least TWO other poems set for study.

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Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge  
Till on the haunting flares, we turned our backs  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
But limped on, blood-shod

Wilfred Owen’s engaging poetry effectively demonstrates important ideas through his graphic descriptions and ability to create vivid images in the reader’s mind. Owen aims to present to his readers an alternative perspective of war; a war which involved the dehumanisation of soldiers and challenges the ideals of honour and courage promoted by those at home. These important ideas are incorporated throughout “Dulce Et Decorum Est” and “Anthem of the Doomed Youth”. “Dulce Et Decorum Est” portrays flawed idealism of war and how this conflicts with the horrors on the battlefield whereas “Anthem of the Doomed Youth” captures the evil of war and the grief experienced by those at home as a result of the loss of loved ones. Each text effectively influences and alters the reader’s initial perceptions of war and attempts to make the reader aware of the atrocious reality, brutality and futility of war as well as the dehumanisation of soldiers.

Important ideas concerning the harshness and futility of war as well as its ability to dehumanise soldiers in “Dulce Et Decorum Est” are depicted in its unique structure. The reader is first presented with the title of the poem, a quote from Roman poet Horace. This title means “it is sweet and right to die for one’s country” and is ironic since it does not represent the content of the poem, instead it contradicts it. The quote is Latin, a language of greatness, dignity, wisdom and the Church. However, Owen intends to convey his message that there is nothing dignified or great about war. As well as being used as the title, the Latin quote is also used the final line of the poem. This cyclical characteristic of the poem reflects the important idea of the continued intentional sacrifice of the young soldiers by those in position of power. The continuous nature of “Dulce Et Decorum Est” also symbolises how those involved in war are “going around in circles”- that there is a lack of purpose. This particular poem is separated into four distinct stanzas which parallel the events and consequences of the gas attack as well as the persona’s nightmares. These four irregular stanzas imply lack of order and control and how war replicates this idea. This also represents the chaotic gas attack which Owen describes in the first two stanzas of this poem. Owen cleverly structured his poem in such a way so it can address important issues regarding war.

Imperative thematic concerns such as the dehumanisation and lack of recognition of soldiers are explored in the first stanza of “Anthem of the Doomed Youth”. The title itself introduces the main ideas of the poem. The connotation of “anthem” is positive and implies loyalty and pride of one’s country. However, “doomed” implies hopelessness and a predetermined fate. The opening of the octet is the rhetorical question “what passing-bells for those who die as cattle” compares young soldiers to cattle. This dehumanises young men since they have a predetermined fate to be callously slaughtered in huge numbers, like cattle. “Monstrous anger of guns” and “stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle” follows the opening sentence and this personification makes the guns seem more powerful and that soldiers are weak when compared to them. The alliteration of “rifles’ rapid rattle” determines the pace of the poem as well as reflects the hasty and continuous sound of guns of World War I. The lack of acknowledgement of fallen soldiers’ feats during battle is also questioned. The repetition of definite negatives “no” and “nor” exemplifies the undignified nature of these deaths and effectively shatters any idealised notions about dying for one’s country. The first stanza of

“Anthem of the Doomed Youth” effectively confronts two important issues, inadequate burial or funerary ritual for fallen soldiers on the battlefield and the dehumanisation of soldiers.

“Dulce Et Decorum Est” aims to explore important ideas which were once concealed and these ideas include the degradation of soldiers. Owen reveals to the reader the horrors of war which affect individuals on and off the battlefield and this is successfully achieved in the opening stanza. The poet begins his poem with “bent double, like old beggars under sacks, / Knock-kneed, coughing like hags”. These men, who were once fit, proud and lively, are now prematurely aged, exhausted and suffering severe pain. This degrading image compare young soldiers to old and ill women and this undermines the illusion that these men are the epitome of masculinity. The enjambment of these similes also elongates the image of aging and disability. Dehumanisation of soldiers is continued throughout the opening stanza and reappears in “But limped on, blood-shod”. Owen’s diction of ‘shod’ is appropriate since ‘shod’ is usually associated with horses. The connection between soldiers and horses is similar to the comparison between soldiers and cattle in “Anthem of the Doomed Youth”. Again, like in “Anthem of the Doomed Youth”, Owen personifies guns as “haunting flares” and this makes the guns seem more powerful and that soldiers are weak when compared to them. Haunting implies continuous suffering and this foreshadows the detailed nightmares the persona describes in the final two stanzas of the poem. The young war poet remarkably communicates his personal beliefs and thoughts regarding war with unorthodox imagery and comparisons.

In “Anthem of the Doomed Youth”, Owen depicts the grief and mourning of those at the home in the second stanza and this allows the poet to address impacts of unnecessary deaths of young soldiers. The focus of the second stanza is on the commemoration of the young who are “doomed” to die. It also implies that the numerous deaths of soldiers are a result of a futile war and provokes the reader to question whether war is worthwhile since sadness occupancies war. The second stanza has an elegiac and sombre tone and this reflects the sediments experienced by loved ones. The variation of tone between the first and second stanza highlights the contextual difference between the battlefield and home. The final line of the poem “And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds” has a definite tone attached to it. Dusk can be literally interpreted as the end of a day, but it can also be metaphorically interpreted as euphemism for death. The alliteration of ‘d’ in “drawing-down of blinds” also adds a subtle conclusiveness. Even though the final line suggests the end of day or end of life, ironically it does not represent the end of war. It is evident throughout the second stanza of “Anthem of the Doomed Youth” that war is futile when considering the number of fallen soldiers and how that impacts those at home.

Evidently, Wilfred Owen successfully communicates his ideas through his poems. The conflicting ideas of war: the idealisation which was once proposed to soldiers and the reality, as well as futility of war and the dehumanisation of soldiers are incorporated throughout “Dulce Et Decorum Est” and “Anthem of the Doomed Youth”. These important ideas represent Owen’s beliefs which he hopes will continue throughout evolving time and context. Each poem attempts to undermine the traditional view that war is glorious and honourable. Each poem successfully conveys the bitter and callous realities of war which allows the reader to eventually comprehend the ‘truth’.