

ENGLISH STANDARD

“Distinctive ideas are at the heart of all poetry”. In your view, what is a distinctive idea explored in Wilfred Owen’s poetry? Explain how this idea is developed in at least TWO poems you have studied.

It is popularly presented that war has served as a means of conflict resolution. However, in actuality war encompasses mass death and suffering ironically creating more conflict. This concept is clearly presented in the poetry of Wilfred Owen, whereby he also conveys the true reality and horror of war. Supporting this notion is the poem Anthem for Doomed Youth which highlights the waste of young lives and evokes pity in conjunction with Futility which demonstrates the pointlessness of war. Owen also challenges historical paradigms in Dulce Et Decorum Est by juxtaposing the glorification and horror of war while reinforcing this in Mental Cases by showing the facade of war in contrast to its damning psychological impacts. Consequently, through the use of various language techniques, Wilfred Owen’s distinctive ideas engender pity and hopelessness; horror and despair which is veiled by the traditional associations of war being heroic.

Anthem for Doomed Youth questions if war can ever provide a dignified or memorable death as is the case with deaths that occur outside the battle field. In the opening line, Owen questions “what passing-bells for these who die as cattle?” using a simile to compare the young soldiers to cattle. This simile creates a distinctive image of human slaughter, demonstrating not only the helpless nature in which they die, but also the sheer number of young men that are killed. The horror of human slaughter is heightened as the composer selects words such as “boys” and “tenderness” to convey the innocence and vulnerability of these soldiers. In this poem, Wilfred Owen begins with the image of human slaughter, and goes on to present the events causing such mass death. Onomatopoeia and alliteration is used in “stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle” to create the atmosphere of war and thus shock the responder. These language techniques form the horrific and realistic image of the heavily artillery fire that the men were subjected to. The alliteration also emanates the repetitive nature and speed of the gunfire thus inferring that the killing of the young soldiers is rapid and repetitive. Therefore, through the use of figurative language, Owen creates a realistic atmosphere in his poem similar to that of war demonstrating its horror and brutality.

Throughout history, war has often been glorified and decorated as a means of propaganda in its favour. “Dulce et decorum est / pro patria mori” is a quote by Horace that roughly translates to: “it is sweet and glorious to die for one’s country”. Wilfred Owen has cleverly used part of this quote for his most famous poem Dulce Et Decorum Est with the intention of refuting what he refers to as “the old Lie”. The title of this poem is ironic because throughout the poem, Owen presents distinctive images that demonstrate how it is not sweet and glorious to die for one’s country. In the first stanza, Owen uses two similes: “bent double, like old beggars under sacks” and “coughing like hags” to present the exhaustion of the soldiers on the front line. The first of the similes creates an image of destitution and poverty that emphasises the exhaustion of the soldiers. Also, the alliteration of “Men marched asleep” combined with the basic rhyming pattern creates a rhythm which highlights how war reduces the soldiers to robotic form, thus demonstrating their utter exhaustion. Hence, the exhaustion of the soldiers in this famed poem is used to reinforce the reality and horror of war which is the common distinctive idea throughout all of Owen’s poems.

Death in war is undignified, impersonal and lacks the solemnity and respect that would be experienced in normal circumstances. This comparison of mourning and funeral rites is reflected in Owen’s poem Anthem for Doomed Youth as a continuation of the presentation of the horror of war. In the poem there is constant reference to funerals through vocabulary such as “orisons”, “prayers”, “choirs” and “pall”. This however is negated through the repetition of the words “No” and “Nor” which state that the dead soldiers do not receive a proper funeral. Contrast is also used in the poem between the sounds of battle and the sombre sounds of a funeral ceremony. This contrast is particularly between the “wailing shells” and the “choirs” which presents the distinctive idea that the common sound of a choir at someone’s death is replaced by the “shrill, demented choirs of wailing

shells". Hence, the undignified, impersonal deaths of soldiers at war allude to the waste of young lives, demonstrating the reality of war which is also criticised and questioned in *Futility*. This particular poem deals with the pointlessness of war, and in conjunction with the previously explained poem, it questions not only the point of war, but also the point of life if we are to mindlessly kill each other at war. Hence, through the effective use of techniques, Owen is able to present the horrific, impersonal deaths of soldiers and war, conveying the reality and the horror of dying at war.

The methods of destruction during the war were often inhumane and caused mass destruction of life, thus demonstrating the horror of war. Supporting this is the poem, *Dulce Et Decorum Est* in which Owen challenges perceptions of war by presenting the horror and reality of war. Most horrific and memorable of all the vivid imagery presented in this famous poem is that of the chlorine gas. After the pace of the poem is increased through the dialogue "Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!" Owen uses descriptive language and a metaphor to describe the "thick green light" of the chlorine gas as a "green sea". This technique enables the composer to create a distinctive image that shocks the responder, which when culminated with the damning effects this gas has on the soldiers; presents the horror of war. As a continuation of the sea imagery, Owen refers to the dying soldier as "drowning". This is a powerful image that accurately portrays that lack of air that this man was receiving, and hence why he was dying. The physical injury presented above is also conveyed in *Disabled* where Owen presents the shocking and graphic imagery of the physical injuries of a returning war veteran. These injuries are debilitating, however not deadly unlike in *Dulce Et Decorum Est*. Hence, the vivid imagery created by Owen enables him to present distinctive ideas, which are ultimately the horror and therefore the reality of war.

Distinctive ideas are at the heart of all poetry, particularly the poetry of Wilfred Owen. The poems composed by Wilfred Owen focus on presenting the reality and horror of war which is most prominently presented in *Anthem For Doomed Youth* and *Dulce Et Decorum Est*. Through the use of various language techniques, Owen creates vivid imagery that ultimately intends to accurately portray the horror of war.