

WILFRED OWEN

“DULCE ET DECORUM EST”

This handout was prepared by Dr. William Tarvin, a retired professor of literature. Please visit my free website www.tarvinlit.com. Over 500 works of American and British literature are analyzed there for free.

An ANSWER KEY is provided at the end of this handout (p. 3).

I. INTRODUCTION

1. A Britisher, Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) fought in World War I. He was killed in battle on November 4, 1918, ironically just a week before the Armistice ending the war.
2. His wartime poems show the horror, not the heroism, of warfare.

II. “DULCE ET DECORUM EST”

1. Title: The title, taken from a poem by the Latin poet Horace, translates as “It is [est] sweet [dulce] and [et] proper [decorum, that is, what one is expected to do] to die [mori] for [pro] one’s country [patria]” (27-28). Note: In Latin, *dulce* is pronounced as “dul-see” and *et* as the short *e* in “get.”

The title is ironic: The poem is meant to shock the civilians at home, who believe that war is noble and glorious.

2. Theme: An attack on war by stressing its dehumanizing horrors.

Note: Anti-war literature is relatively recent, arising principally in the nineteenth century. In most literature, war is praised in either of two ways:

(1) War is a way for a person to manifest his or her heroic nature, as in Homer’s epic The _____ or Shakespeare’s _____ IV and _____ V plays.

(2) War is a way to rid the world of evil, as in the Old English epic, _____, or in Tolstoy’s great novel _____ and Peace.

3. Structure: In this _____-stanza poem, two principal structuring devices are used: Pronouns and Imagery.

4. Pronouns: In stanza one (1-8), the first person plural pronoun “_____” dominates.

In stanzas two (9-14) and three (15-16), the first person singular pronoun “_____” is emphasized.

In stanza four (17-28), the second person pronoun “_____” is used. The speaker of the poem is a soldier in World _____ I.

5. Imagery: Three central images, appealing to the senses of both sight and sound, reinforce the idea of the unnaturalness and the horror of war.

(1) Stanza one: In the first eight lines, there are images of physical impairment and old age: The soldiers returning from a battle are “_____ double” (1), limping (2), “lame” (6), “blind” (6), “drunk with _____” (7), and deaf (7) to the sounds of shells falling near them (8).

They move like “old _____” (1) or cough “like _____ [ugly old women]” (2), even though the soldiers are presumably young. The irony is that these are young men, who should be in the prime of their life, have been forced into the premature frailty of _____ age.

Dehumanization is conveyed by the image “_____ -shod” (6), since people usually think of _____, not men, as “shod.”

The soldiers have no sense of _____ or honor in regards to their service; rather, they are moving as robots, going on without an understanding of where or why. Their attitude is one of horror, disillusionment, and fatigue.

(2) Stanzas two and three: The second eight lines (9-16) stress the imagery of “_____” (14, 16) to suggest one soldier’s vain attempt to get his gas-mask helmet (10) on in time. Succumbing to poison _____ is compared to drowning. The speaker observes this scene as blurred by chemicals and by the shield of his own _____ (13-14).

In the aftermath of the gas attack, the speaker refers to his constant “dreams” (15) of his dying comrade “_____ [ing]” (16) at him for help.

Furthermore, through the use of the “_____ sea” (14) imagery, a person senses the lack of connection between the war and anything solid, natural, or real.

(3) Stanza four: Lines 17-28 concentrate on the imagery of dreams and nightmares. The speaker draws readers even further into a nightmarish world detached from reality, asking the reader to consider the situation in “some smothering _____” (18).

The images here are both visual—“_____ eyes writhing” (19) and “his _____ face” (20)—and auditory—“gargling” (22). The simile, “like a _____’s [face] sick of sin” (20), brings home that war is _____.

The speaker then addresses the dream world which civilians, who are unaware of the nightmare of war, live in. He calls their dream world that war is glorious, “The old _____” (27). The poem debunks that myth by showing war to be inglorious, unreasonable, and dehumanizing.

6. CACOPHONY is an onomatopoeic subclass of alliteration where the sounds used are by and large harsh.

In this poem the use of harsh sounds is meant to echo the crashing and crushing sounds of war. What cacophonous sounds can you find in lines 16 and 22-23? In line 16, the g, ch, and k of “_____, _____-ing.” In lines 22-23, the g, fr, and k, “Come _____,” “_____ -corrupted,” “obscene as _____,” and “as the _____.”

Note that the k sound in English is typically spelled as a c before the back vowels, a, o, and u.

ANSWER KEY

II. "DULCE ET DECORUM EST"

2. Iliad; Henry; Henry; Beowulf; War.
3. four.
4. "we"; "I"; "you"; War.
5.
 - (1) bent; fatigue; beggars; hags; old; blood; horses; glory.
 - (2) drowning; gas; gas mask; plung[ing]; green.
 - (3) dreams; white; hanging; devil; hell; Lie.
6. guttering; chok[ing]; gargling; froth; cancer; cud.