"Dulce Et Decorum Est" – Teacher Notes

**Dulce Et Decorum Est**

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. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of disappointed shells that dropped behind.

GAS! Gas! Quick, boys!-- An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime.--
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,--
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

WWI has become known as the "chemist's war," according to Chris Reddy. There were numerous technological advances in chemical warfare during the First World War. In 1914, the French introduced tear gas (ethyl bromoacetate). When the supplies of bromine began to dwindle they switched the active ingredient to chloroacetone. In 1915, [Germany](http://voices.yahoo.com/theme/506/germany.html) introduced chlorine gas, which "is a powerful irritant that can inflict damage to the eyes, nose, throat and lungs. At high concentrations and prolonged exposure it can cause death by asphyxiation" (Romano). In 1917, Germany introduced mustard gas, which was delivered using artillery shells. Once the gas had settled into the ground it could stay there for days, weeks, and in some cases even months. Mustard gas could be lethal if one was exposed to it for long periods of time; the effects of mustard gas on a person are: "internal and external bleeding and attacked the bronchial tubes, stripping off the mucous membrane. This was extremely painful and most soldiers had to be strapped to their beds. It usually took a person four to five weeks to die of mustard gas exposure" (Sidell).

Wilfred Owen served in the First World War and so he had first hand experience of the gas attacks by both sides. He was very good friends with Siegfried Sassoon, whom he met while in Craiglockhart War Hospital. Both men were there being treated for shell shock. Owen returned to active duty in March 1918. He was killed in battle a week before the Armistice.

Translated "Dulce Et Decorum Est" means: it is sweet and meet to die for one's country. Sweet! And decorous! This poem is separated into four distinct sections: mustard gas attack, chlorine gas attack, nightmare, and post-traumatic stress. This poem was originally dedicated to Jessie Pope, who wrote poems that urged young men to enlist in the military. Owen is basically refuting Jessie Pope's opinion that it is considered a glorious act to enlist and fight for your country.

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,

Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge, (lines 1-2)

**Question** why beggers? why does the image of hags coughing suggest?

Beggars used to put everything they owned in some sort of sack, which they would then carry over their shoulder. The soldiers, like the beggar, are bent over in pain. The soldiers could also be vomiting from the gas attack. "Knock-kneed," suggests that the soldier is trying to keep his knees together and his feet wide a part as a way to keep himself steady so that he can continue to walk. Owen compares the soldiers to "old beggars" and "hags" as a way to say that the soldiers have lost their youthfulness due to fighting in this war. The symptoms listed here make me think that this was a mustard gas attack; the soldiers would have experienced blisters on their skin, sore eyes, and vomiting.

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. All went lame; all blind;

Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots

Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind (3-8).

The soldiers tried to go back to camp to recover from the effects of the mustard gas attack. "Haunting flares" are the flashes of light that accompany artillery shells. "Distant rest" can be interpreted in two ways: first, when the soldiers reached camp they would be able to rest and recover from the attacks; the second interpretation could be death. It could take a while for a soldier to die from exposure to mustard gas. "Limped on blood shod" furthers the opinion that this was a mustard gas attack, because men would get sores over their body from being exposed to this gas. Of course, it is also possible that they were just hit with artillery fire, but in keeping with the context of this poem it makes more sense that this would be an effect of some sort of gassing. "All blind" was another symptom of mustard gas; the eyes would become very inflamed and puffed up so that it would make it hard for them to see. "Five-Nines" are the 5.9 caliber shells that were fired on the British soldiers in this particular instance. When the shells were fired they made a very high-pitched sound, described by Owen as hooting.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!-An ecstasy of fumbling,

Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;

But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,

And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...

Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning (9-14).

This is the part of the poem that describes a chlorine gas attack. "An ecstasy of fumbling" can be interpreted as the soldiers so overwhelmed with being scared and nervousness that they are fumbling with their helmets while they are trying to put them on. The helmets referred to here are gas masks. There were many varieties of gas masks during WWI; with each new development in gas warfare the helmets had to be adapted to protect the soldiers. In the early days of chlorine gas attacks, men would put damp clothes over their mouths and noses, which would reduce the effects of the gas on the men. Gas masks were later produced to protect the soldiers from this gas. In lines 11 to 14, a soldier who did not get his mask on in time is dying. During a chlorine gas attack, those who stayed still suffered less than those who ran around; therefore movement worsened the effects of the gas. Also, the higher off the ground that you are the better off you will be. The gas is denser [the closer](http://voices.yahoo.com/topic/35079/the_closer.html) to the ground that you are and so it is more potent closer to the ground. "Misty panes" are the little windows in the gas masks. The "green light" is characteristic of chlorine gas; this light was one of the reasons why this gas was considered to be less dangerous than the other colorless and odorless gases. The "green sea" describes the dense green fog that this gas created when introduced to the air. This man most likely suffered from asphyxia, which is the lack of oxygen or having an excess of carbon dioxide in the body; these two conditions would leave the person unconscious and then if left untreated he would die.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,

He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning (15-16).

This section can be read as a nightmare. This scene of death haunts the narrator of this poem. These men saw death every day and with the introduction of gas warfare one could argue that death took on a whole new significance for them. The drawn out deaths of men exposed to the gases will leave more of an impression on the mind than that of a quick death. More and more men had to be treated for post-traumatic stress disorder due to them not being able to deal with everything that they saw while they were enlisted. The soldier described here is slowly dying. Line 16 lists all the actions that a person would do if their air supply was cut off.

If in some smothering [dreams](http://voices.yahoo.com/theme/872/dreams.html) you too could pace

Behind the wagon that we flung him in,

And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,

His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood

Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,-- (17-24).

This section of the poem describes the way a soldier with post-traumatic stress would think. The narrator describes this dream as smothering like he is the one that is suffocating rather than the soldier. There was little that could be done for the soldiers once they were exposed to this gas and that made people feel really uneasy. "Like a devil's sick of sin" could mean that the soldier was as tired as the devil of the sin that he and others took part in. "The blood come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs" is a very descriptive image that would probably make anyone sick to their stomach if they actually had to see it first hand. This is an image that would stick with someone for a long time, haunting their memories. It is these kinds of memories that can cause post-traumatic stress disorder.

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children argent for some desperate glory,

The old lie: Dulce et decorum est

Pro patria mori (25-28).

Owen is referring to Jessie Pope when he says "my friend." He is telling her that if she knew the reality of the war she would not be propagandizing it to young men. Pope preys on the young men's desire to be glorious heroes without telling them the ramifications of enlisting.

Works Cited:

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