

Dulce et Decorum Est

by Wilfred Owen¹

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 tired, outstripped Five-Nines² 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 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.

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

If in some smothering dreams you³ 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.⁴

¹ Wilfred Owen was only twenty years old when World War I broke out in 1914. Twice wounded in battle, Owen was rapidly promoted and eventually became a company commander. The shocking violence of modern war summoned Owen's poetic genius, and in a two-year period he grew from a negligible minor poet into the most important English-language poet of World War I. Owen, however, did not live to see his talent recognized. He was killed one week before the end of the war; he was twenty-five years old.

² German howitzers often used to shoot poison gas shells

³ Some versions of the poem carry the dedication "To Jessie Pope," who was a writer of patriotic verses

⁴ "Dulce et decorum est / pro patria mori" – a quotation from the Latin poet Horace, translated as *It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country*

Imagery is the vivid appeal, through language, to any of the five senses.

Some questions (to be completed in writing for tomorrow)

1. List examples of imagery in this poem. For each example, state which sense (or senses) to which the imagery appeals. (It may well be more than one!)
2. How does that imagery impact the reader? (Choose two or three that have the most impact and explain why.)
3. What is Owen's argument in this poem? That is to say, what lesson does he want the reader to learn from this poem? (Settle on one theme – and only one.)