Dulce et Decorum Est
By Wilfred Owen
1921

Wilfred Owen was an English poet and soldier, often considered one of the leading poets of the First World War. Many of Owen’s poems deal with the violence of war and the effect it has on soldiers. During World War I, mustard gas and other chemicals were used to attack the enemy, causing great destruction and human suffering. As you read, take notes on how the author uses imagery to develop the central theme of the poem.

[1] Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags,¹ we cursed
through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.²

[5] 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 gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! —An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets³ just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound’ring⁴ like a man in fire or lime. —
Dim through the misty panes⁵ and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

[10] In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering,⁶ choking, drowning.

1. an old, sick woman
2. Trudge (verb): to walk slowly with heavy steps
3. Gas masks were originally called “helmets.”
4. struggling
5. The gas masks had glass panes, to help preserve vision, while helping to ensure the safety of the soldiers.
6. burning
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,
[20] His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gurgling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, —
[25] 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.  

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7. Smother (verb): to completely cover and trap
8. walk
9. Writhe (verb): to twist in pain
10. Froth (noun): a bubbly foam
11. partly digested food
12. Vile (adjective): extremely unpleasant
13. Zest (adjective): extreme enthusiasm
14. Ardent (adjective): very interested
15. The phrase is written in Latin, a language that has not been spoken for hundreds of years. It literally means: “It is sweet and honorable to die for one’s country.”
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: What does the word “ecstasy” mean as it is used in line 9? [RI.4]
   A. extreme enthusiasm
   B. wild and uncontrolled activity
   C. a loud voice
   D. a medicine used to prevent chemical poisoning

2. PART B: Which detail from the text provides the best clue to the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
   A. “Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!” (line 9)
   B. “Fumbling...Fitting the helmets on just in time” (lines 9-10)
   C. “But someone still was yelling out” (line 11)
   D. “He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning” (line 16)

3. Why does the author capitalize the word “gas” the second time it is written in line 9? [RI.5]
   A. to demonstrate that it was hard to hear with bombs being dropped
   B. to reveal that soldiers could not see what was going while wearing the gas masks
   C. to show that the soldiers were so tired that they were not paying attention
   D. to emphasize the urgency and danger of the situation

4. How does the imagery in the poem contribute to the mood? [RI.5]
   A. The speaker describes a chaotic, brutal scene that creates a very grave mood.
   B. The speaker describes an action filled scene which contributes to the exciting mood.
   C. The speaker provides a description of the environment which creates a gloomy mood.
   D. The speaker shows some soldiers surviving the green chemical gas to create a hopeful mood.

5. Why does the author likely include the phrase “you too could pace” (line 17)? [RI.5]
   A. to show that the speaker of the poem was a victim of gas attacks during the war
   B. to reveal that the speaker of the poem has dreams about walking around a wagon and seeing a friend suffer the effects of a gas attack
   C. to help the reader realize that the speaker of the poem lost a friend in the war during a gas attack
   D. to highlight the deeply troubling nature of the poem by appealing directly to his audience
6. Identify a central theme of the poem. How is this theme revealed through specific literary devices? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. The final line of the poem is written in Latin, a phrase that has not been spoken for centuries. Why do you think the author chose to write the phrase in Latin? How does the literal meaning of the phrase: “it is sweet and honorable to die for one’s country,” contribute to the central theme of the poem?

2. Wilfred Owen was a soldier in World War I. How do you think experience in the war inspired him to write this poem? How does war change people?

3. Even though they were outlawed before the war began, gas attacks were still used by both sides during the war. Why do you think both sides were willing to use gas attacks when they knew how much suffering they would cause?

4. Why do you think children were told that “it is sweet and honorable to die for one’s country”? Do you think that children today are still told the same thing? Why or why not?