**DULCE ET DECORUM EST(1)**

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,   
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,   
Till on the haunting flares(2) we turned our backs   
And towards our distant rest(3) 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(4)    
Of tired, outstripped(5) Five-Nines(6) that dropped behind.  
Gas!(7) Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,   
Fitting the clumsy helmets(8) just in time;   
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,   
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime(9) . . .   
Dim, through the misty panes(10) 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,(11) 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(12)    
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,   
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest(13)    
To children ardent(14) for some desperate glory,   
The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est   
Pro patria mori.(15)

Wilfred Owen  
Thought to have been written between 8 October 1917  and March, 1918

Notes on Dulce et Decorum Est

1.  DULCE ET DECORUM EST - the first words of a Latin saying (taken from an ode by Horace). The words were widely understood and often quoted at the start of the First World War. They mean "It is sweet and right." The full saying ends the poem: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori - it is sweet and right to die for your country. In other words, it is a wonderful and great honour to fight and die for your country.

2.  Flares - rockets which were sent up to burn with a brilliant glare to light up men and other targets in the area between the front lines (See illustration, page 118 of Out in the Dark.)

3.  Distant rest - a camp away from the front line where exhausted soldiers might rest for a few days, or longer

4.  Hoots - the noise made by the shells rushing through the air

5.  Outstripped - outpaced, the soldiers have struggled beyond the reach of these shells which are now falling behind them as they struggle away from the scene of battle

 6.  Five-Nines - 5.9 calibre explosive shells

7.  Gas! -  poison gas. From the symptoms it would appear to be chlorine or phosgene gas. The filling of the lungs with fluid had the same effects as when a person drowned

8.  Helmets -  the early name for gas masks

9.  Lime - a white chalky substance which can burn live tissue

10.  Panes - the glass in the eyepieces of the gas masks

11.  Guttering - Owen probably meant flickering out like a candle or gurgling like water draining down a gutter, referring to the sounds in the throat of the choking man, or it might be a sound partly like stuttering and partly like gurgling

12.  Cud - normally the regurgitated grass that cows chew usually green and bubbling. Here a similar looking material was issuing from the soldier's mouth

13.  High zest - idealistic enthusiasm, keenly believing in the rightness of the idea

14.  ardent - keen

15.  Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori - see note 1 above.

## Symbol Analysis – disfigurement

Even before the shells drop and the world turns into a living nightmare, Owen concentrates on the ways that bodies get warped by the war. Emphasizing the ways in which men break under the stresses of war, our speaker creates a battle zone peopled by the walking dead.

* Line 1: "Bent double, like old beggars under sacks" is a simile, which compares the men marching to beggars. Starting the poem off with an image of men "doubled" creates the possibility that the soldiers really have become two people: the men they were before the war and the creatures that they are now.
* Line 2: More similes. This time the men are "Knock-kneed, coughing like hags." How do we know it's a simile? Well, it's a comparison that's created by using the word "like" to link the subject (the marching men) to another term (the hags).
* Line 5: "Men marched asleep." Line five starts out with a stark image. People don't usually walk in their sleep, unless something is seriously wrong. Making abnormality the norm seems to be one of the major functions of this war.
* Line 6: The parallel construction of the lines "All went lame; all blind;" emphasizes misery as a universal condition. No one escapes. No one.
* Line 15: The speaker's reference to his "helpless sight" creates an almost paradoxical image: his sight works well. After all, he *can* see the image of the man dying – in fact, it's our speaker's all-to-active sight, which becomes the problem. What Owen is actually describing, however, is the helplessness of the speaker himself. If that's the case, then "sight" functions as a synecdoche, standing in for the speaker as a whole.
* Line 18: The imagery created by describing "the white eyes writhing in [a soldier's] face" is horrendous. It's almost like the eyes have lives of their own: they've detached from the working of the body as a whole.
* Lines 21-24: Owen is racking up some serious imagery points here. From gargling blood to cancer-like sores, we've got it all. This poem is a true house of horrors. We get to witness as a soldier's body breaks down entirely.

## Symbol Analysis – allusion to other things

Although we don't get too many allusions, the ones we do get are central to the message of the poem. In fact, we begin and end with a shout-out to one of the founding fathers of Western literature, Horace. Why? Well, that's a good question….

* Line 2: The simile comparing soldiers to old hags has potential as an allusion as well. Think about it: literature is chock-full of nasty old hags. There's the witch in "Hansel and Gretel" and the witches of[*Macbeth*](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/literature/william-shakespeare/macbeth.html). Even the old crone who helps the Sheriff of Nottingham in*Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* could probably fall into the "hag" category. Owen probably knew that his description would carry lots of cultural weight and used it to his advantage. Why compare soldiers to witches? Well, we'll leave that up to you.
* Line 20: The devil's always a popular allusion in poems about bad stuff. Frankly, he's about as bad as it gets.
* Lines 27-28: Ah, the biggie. This is the allusion to beat all allusions. It's one of the most-quoted lines of 20th century poetry…and Owen didn't even write it himself! Referring to a popular school text allows Owen to take a swing at all the popular rhetoric about the glories of war.

## Symbol Analysis - nightmares

Just how "real" is this war scene that we're reading about? Well, that's a tricky question. For our speaker, it's too horrible to seem real at all. That's why we get so many descriptions of the battlefield as a bad dreamscape (you know, like one of those horrible night terrors that you had as a kid). The only difference is that you could wake up sweating and run to your parents. For this guy, the dream is the real deal.

* Line 2: See our analysis in "Allusion" of the simile comparing hags to soldiers here. If hags are witches, then they fit pretty well into the whole nightmare vibe that's being created.
* Line 2: Check out the alliteration in this line: the repeated "k" sounds begin to have an echoing quality, like the words that bounce around in a nightmarish fog.
* Lines 13-14: The imagery of these lines is pretty intense. Murky green lights and all-encompassing fog? Sounds scary to us.
* Lines 15-16: Here's where our speaker gets serious about his dreams. The image of the dying soldier becomes a literal nightmare, one which haunts the speaker for the rest of the poem.
* Line 19: This line is all alliteration all the time. The "w"s in this line just keep stacking up.
* Line 20: More sound play. Sibilance is the name of the game in this line: repeating "s" sounds create a sort of hissing on our tongues. Oh, and did we mention the allusion to the devil in this line? He's pretty nightmarish.