

“Dulce et Decorum Est”

By Wilfred Owen

- 1 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.
- 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 tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.
- Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! -- An ecstasy of fumbling,
10 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.
- 15 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,
20 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, --
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.

“Dulce et Decorum Est” – the title is a Latin saying, “It is sweet and right.” The phrase was often repeated at the start of the war. The full quote is at the end of the poem and translates to “it is sweet and right to die for your country.”

Flares– To flame up with a bright, sudden light.

Distant Rest– safety of the camp.

Hoots– The noise made by the shells rushing through the air.

Five-Nines– 5.9 caliber explosive shells

Gas! Poison gas. Gas fills the lungs with fluid and has the same effects as when a person is drowning.

Helmets– the early name for gas masks

Panes– glass in the eye piece of the gas masks

Plunges– To throw violently.

Smothering– to suffocate.

Pace– To walk.

Gargling– To force air quickly from the mouth, referring to the sounds in the throat of the choking man.

Obscene– offensive.

Cud – normally the regurgitated grass that cows chew. Here a similar looking material was coming out of the soldier's mouth.

Incurable– incapable of being altered.

Zest– intense. Ardent– intensely devoted.