

COMPREHENSIVE RESEARCH
AND STUDY GUIDE

*Poets of
World War I*

*Wilfred Owen
&
Isaac Rosenberg*

BLOOM'S
M A J O R
POETS

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY HAROLD BLOOM

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Thematic Analysis of “Dulce et Decorum Est”

Drafted in October 1917 while the poet was recovering from shell-shock at Craiglockhart Hospital, “Dulce et Decorum Est,” is one of Wilfred Owen’s most popular World War I poems.

During this stay at Craiglockhart, Owen first made the acquaintance of fellow poet and soldier Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon’s poetry about the war possessed an unflinching, direct language and style that profoundly influenced the young Owen, whose work up to this point had displayed the romantic flourishes and lush imagery one would expect from someone who idealized Keats and Shelley. Sassoon recalls criticizing “the over-luscious writing in his immature pieces” and challenging “the almost embarrassing sweetness in the sentiment” in some of the work Owen showed him.

A look at earlier versions of “Dulce et Decorum Est”—there were four drafts in all—show Owen attempting to develop his critique of the war by adopting a language and tone more appropriate to the nightmarish scenes he had witnessed as a soldier in the trenches. Whether this was a direct result of Sassoon’s criticism or caused by his own developing poetic sensibility, Owen increasingly chose to contrast the ugliness of the fighting experience with the beauty it was destroying. For instance, in the final version of “Dulce et Decorum Est,” Owen removed the following lines, which had appeared in every earlier version:

And think how, once, his face was like a bud,
Fresh as a country rose, and pure [also clean/clar/keen], and young,—

He then replaced them with lines intended to emphasize dramatically the violence and profanity of war:

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—

This shift in successive drafts of “Dulce et Decorum Est” from reliance on more conventional poetic attitudes to more urgent, realistic idioms evoked the hideous death by gas that claimed the lives of so many young soldiers—and it revealed Owen’s transformation into a modern poet with a distinctive voice.

In a letter to his mother, Susan Owen, Wilfred Owen described “Dulce et Decorum Est” simply as “a gas poem,” but this statement does little to convey the full range of poetic and thematic issues the poem addresses. The lines do indeed capture the few, desperate moments before and during a gas attack, as soldiers scramble to put on the masks and protective gear that stand between them and an agonizing death. The title comes from a Latin phrase in Horace, meaning “It is sweet and meet to die for one’s country. Sweet! And Decorous!”; this title suggests that Owen sought to do more than chronicle the event. His goal was to attack the concept that sacrifice is sacred; he hoped to destroy the glamorized decency of the war.

Jingoistic sentiments were widely circulated in the popular pro-war propaganda and poetry that filled the pages of newspapers and magazines throughout England. Owen even had a particular pro-war poet in mind when he first composed “Dulce et Decorum Est”: in earlier versions, the poem is addressed “To a Certain Poetess,” which is now understood as referring to a Miss Jessie Pope, a popular and prolific journalist and author of a number of recruiting poems during the Great War. “My friend” in line 25 of the final version is presumed to refer to her.

Much of the movement and development in “Dulce et Decorum Est” stems from the tension that Owen establishes between the united suffering as a group, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the isolated, subjective experience of the individual when he is most alone—namely, at his own violent death.

The first stanza presents a scene saturated with misery, as Owen uses images of physical deprivation and deterioration usually associated with old age and poverty to convey the unalleviated and inescapable conditions of the life of a soldier. The soldiers are “Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,” “coughing like hags.” They go lame, blind, deaf, and yet continue to march, not in the hopes of achieving some noble aim, but rather simply toward some brief respite from physical exhaustion. Their sensory depletion is such that not even “the hoots / Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind” instills fear.

However the company is jolted out of their ambulatory state when the gas attack begins: “Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling.” The group is saved just in time by their nimble responses—

but then the narrator notices that one among them has not managed to put his gas mask on in time. Instantly, this soldier is set apart from the other men; the narrator observes his panicked reaction from behind the life-saving panels of his own mask. This distance means the difference between life and death.

Owen's method of dramatic description seeks to make the physical and psychological suffering of the war more vivid to the reader, who is invited to share the eyewitness perspective of the narrator. After the opening paragraph, "Dulce et Decorum Est" focuses exclusively on the individual agony, in the manner of the cinema close-up, while simultaneously insisting that the spectator cannot adequately imagine the experience. Despite the almost hyperbolic accumulation of detail, there is something inconceivable about a death so horrible, and so for the narrator as well as the reader, the experience is reduced to a dream. "If in some smothering dreams . . .," Owen writes, and then later on line 21, "If you could hear . . ."; he is trying to convey the horror of this death to those who were not there to witness it, but he knows deep down the futility of his efforts.

The ghastly final moments of the soldier's life unfolds in the surreal landscape of the gas attack, which turns the visual field into a misty netherworld of "thick green light, / As under a green sea." The image of the dying man's body being carted off as the narrator walks behind it is relived again and again in the narrator's dreams. The contrast between this dream-like setting and the violent and graphic images and sounds of death—"guttering," "choking," "drowning," "writhing," "hanging," "gargling"—allow Owen to further underscore the gap between the reality and fantasy of war, a gap that is epitomized for him by the facile use of the old lie "Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori." ❀

Thematic Analysis of “Strange Meeting”

Drafted at some point between January and March 1918, “Strange Meeting” may not have been considered complete by Wilfred Owen. His friend Edmund Blunden has called it “the most remote and intimate, tranquil and dynamic, of all Owen’s imaginative statements of war experience,” while Siegfried Sassoon once described it as Owen’s “passport to immortality, and his elegy to the unknown warriors of all nations.” Critics have largely agreed, viewing “Strange Meeting” as one of Owen’s most haunting and complex war poems.

“Strange Meeting” is told from the point of view of the narrator who attempts to escape the death and thumping guns by going down into the trenches. Once there, however, he finds that he has descended into Hell, where he is confronted with a man he himself has killed. Unlike the hatred and violence exploding above ground, this underground encounter between the two soldiers from opposing armies and nations is infused with an elegaic sense of reconciliation and regret. There, in the silence of the trench / underworld, the soldier and the stranger can reflect on the larger meaning of the war and the toll it is taking on the young men of Europe.

The use of “strange” in the title could be referring to the fact that enemies are not expected to meet face to face in a spirit of reconciliation but rather in search of revenge. Or Owen could have been using “strange” simply to describe the unusual encounter between the living and the dead.

As in “Dulce et Decorum Est,” in “Strange Meeting” Owen deftly fuses the realistic world of the trenches with that of a dream landscape. The subterranean meeting provides a chance to escape from the fighting above as well as a chance to gain a more critical and objective perspective on the fighting.

After a brief prologue describing the narrator’s removal from the fighting, the other three stanzas of the poem detail the “strange meeting” between the two men. Initially, the distance between the two figures is maintained by Owen’s description of the dead soldier’s unpleasant physical condition. His face is ingrained with “a thousand pains,” and he looks up at the narrator with “piteous recognition in fixed eyes” while “lifting distressful hands.” But in the course

of this strange meeting, even the most basic and essential distinctions of war—between “I” and “you,” “enemy” and “friend”—will be dislocated and, at least momentarily, overcome. From the moment the two figures in “Strange Meeting” speak, the differences between them fade into the background. “Whatever hope is yours, / Was my life also,” the soldier states.

But the focus quickly shifts from an examination of the specific trajectory of these two men’s lives to a discussion of the artistic, personal, and historical implications of the war more generally. The pursuit of beauty is no longer possible, the soldier begins, in a world destroyed by war, when future generations have only this bloody legacy and “will go content with what we spoiled / Or, discontent, boil bloody.” If he had been left to his pre-war pursuits, the fallen soldier suggests, he would not have been responsible for the deaths of others. And just as he recognizes his responsibility for cutting short the lives and potentials of other men, he talks about his own death as the severing of an unfinished existence: “For by my glee might many men have laughed. / And of my weeping something had been left, / Which must die now.”

Youthful idealistic views of war and the myth of the soldier’s sacrificial regeneration of his country are replaced by the cynical recognition that no amount of blood will suffice to end the fighting. Redemption and reconciliation seem only a remote possibility, since the men who fought in the war and, therefore, have some insight into the Truth, have been maimed and killed. The work of the poet will remain incomplete and the truth of the war—“The pity of war, the pity war distilled”—will never be told.

As the image of a second Fall, “Strange Meeting” is terrifying in its representation of the ultimate retrogression of humanity and its disintegration of values. In this time of crisis, when “none will break ranks” and nations send their youth to battle like lambs to the slaughter, the role of the poet is forced to undergo a transformation. His new pursuit must be the “truth untold,” his function becoming social and political rather than solely personal or aesthetic. And yet the poet’s identification with the dead soldier implies the futility of this very endeavor and warns that the truth will remain “untold.”

The identity of the stranger has been explained in a number of different ways. Some critics have regarded him as Owen’s double, who shares the poet’s artistic vision and spiritual destiny. However,

Owen himself, until a late stage of revision, thought of the stranger as “a German conscript,” and thus as an enemy counterpart rather than a double or *Doppelgänger*. Still others have set aside the specific political context of the war and seen the enemy as representing every person’s alter ego, the evil and aggressive portions of the soul.

In all of these readings of “Strange Meeting,” we are left with the idea that war turns human beings not only against each other but also against themselves. Through his experience in the war, the soldier loses his ability to empathize and identify with all men; hence, the physical death represents the spiritual death of both the person and society.

Critics have noted that similar themes of universal brotherhood in the face of death are found in Shelley’s *Revolt of Islam* and Keats’ *Endymion*, the former perhaps providing the title for Owen’s poem. In *Revolt of Islam*, Shelley’s narrator, who has lost consciousness as a result of a dangerous wound, awakens to find himself confronted by the enemy soldier who inflicted it:

And one whose spear had pierced me, leaned beside,
With quivering lips and humid eyes—and all
Seemed like some brothers on a journey wide
Gone forth, whom now strange meeting did befall
In a strange land . . .

Both *Revolt of Islam* and *Endymion* are concerned with the reconciliation of enemies and the underlying commonality that links all humanity to each other. “Strange Meeting” is thus an example of how Owen’s connection to the Romantic tradition could produce a powerfully lyrical and yet unmistakably modern poem.

In addition to its compelling narrative, “Strange Meeting” also stands apart due to its rhythmic structure. One major influence that Owen exerted on the technique of English verse is his development of the half-rhyme. The principle behind this technique is that instead of changing the initial consonant while retaining the vowel sound, the consonantal framework is retained and the vowel changed (groined/groaned; moan/mourn). For Owen the use of half-rhyme gave his work a less “poetic” feel. Achieving this easier, unpretentious, colloquial speech became particularly important for Owen after meeting Sassoon. As John Middleton Murry observed in his 1921 review of *Owen’s Collected Poems*, “These assonant endings

are indeed the discovery of a genius.” Some critics have argued that Owen’s use of half-rhyme actually met a more compelling, emotional need and offered a unique expression of that diffidence and lack of self-confidence that he possessed. In constructing these half-rhymes, Owen frequently made sure that the second rhyme was lower in pitch than the first, giving the couplet a “dying fall” that creates a kind of inexorable, muffled beat registering a haunting uneasiness and frustration. ❀

Thematic Analysis of “Anthem for Doomed Youth”

“Anthem for Doomed Youth” was written at Craiglockhart in September and October 1917. Sassoon helped with the revision of the poem—there were at least seven drafts—and, according to a letter Owen wrote to his mother, supplied a title as well.

“Anthem for Doomed Youth” was most likely inspired by a prefatory note to an anthology of modern poetry that mentions “the passing-bells of Death.” The differences between the first draft and the last show how Owen began to reconcile his lyrical style with his opinions about the war. The poem works through a series of contrasts to suggest that the realities of war negate the values of ordinary, peaceful life; in particular, war negates Christianity.

Earlier drafts of “Anthem for Doomed Youth” contained more patriotic and sanctifying language, but Owen subsequently added elements to heighten the sense of dissonance between the solemn religious rites known during peace and the cruel parody of these ceremonies in war. The first line, for instance, shows how the experience of death, as well as our response to it, has been warped by the nature of war; in war, men suffer the senseless, anonymous death of cattle, and their death is honored merely with more fighting. In addition to the image of men being slaughtered like cattle, the poem describes the “monstrous anger of the guns,” the meaningless repetition of the pattering rifles, and the “shrill, demented choirs” of the shells. By the end of the first stanza, one is left with the sense that not only does the war erase the trappings of Christianity, but religion itself is revealed to be impotent and meaningless.

The same bugles that now sound the “Last Post” for the fallen soldiers were the ones that previously called them to colors. Church and state are thus both implicated in the betrayal of the soldiers.

Owen’s preoccupation with the inadequacy of traditional evaluations of the world, particularly religion, may have stemmed in part from his own experience with Christianity as a child. Growing up, he read a passage from the Bible every day, and sometimes on Sundays would rearrange his parents’ sitting room to represent a church. Gathering the rest of the family into the room, the young Owen

would provide them with an evening service complete with sermon. Later, while preparing for the university entrance exam, Owen served as a lay assistant to the Rev. Herbert Wigan. He gradually grew disillusioned with the conservative, evangelical religion offered by Wigan, and perhaps this early sensitivity to the limitations of formal religious activity paved the way for his later indignation at the church's support of the war.

Although Owen ultimately rejected conservative, evangelical religion, he was nevertheless continually plagued by a sense of guilt over his conflicting roles as a soldier and Christian. He wrote to his mother of his realization that "pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism."

The difference between the octave and the sestet is striking. The former, which details the experience on the battlefield, lashes out at the incongruities and discrepancies between home-front rites and the degradations imposed on soldiers in battle. The sestet, which brings the reader back to the home-front, suggests that if dead soldiers cannot find immortality in the ritualized abstractions of religious ceremony, then they can still find it in the memory and affection of their families. If the religious rituals in the first eight lines have been overwhelmed by the war, here their consolatory purpose is valorized by the effect they have on the mourners. Candles, palls, and flowers, may be inadequate, but the "holy glimmers of goodbyes" in shining eyes, the "pallor of girls' brows," and the "tenderness of patient minds" offer an adequate response to suffering and death.

The differences in tone between the first and second stanzas have caused some critics to characterize the sonnet as a relapse into Owen's youthful Romanticism, an unintentional glorification of war's death. Jon Silkin, for instance, writes that "there is an ambiguity in the poem in that Owen seems to be caught in the very act of consolatory mourning he condemns in 'What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?'—a consolation that permits the war's continuation by civilian assent. . . ." Along the same lines, Geoffrey Hill has argued that the sestet ultimately fails to provide an appropriate response to the war:

The fact that Owen employs irony in this poem cannot alter the fact that he takes thirteen lines to retreat from the position maintained by

one. If these men really do die as cattle, then all human mourning for them is a mockery, the private and the public, the inarticulate and true as much as the ostentatiously false.

Despite these criticisms, “Anthem for Doomed Youth” is a useful poem for revealing some of the important disjunctions Owen felt the war created. The poem indicates how seriously Owen took his responsibility to voice his outrage and despair on behalf of his fellow soldiers whose voices, he felt, had been silenced by rattling guns and tolling bells. ❀