Dulce Et Decorum Est

The classic poem "Dulce Et Decorum Est" was written from Wilfred Owen's hospital bed sometime between 1917 and 1918 during the middle of World War I. Owen was a soldier in WWI who fought for the British military. This poem was written to his mom describing war and how awful war really was. The title, “Dulce Et Decorum Est,” means that it is sweet and proper to die for one's country. However, this poem delivers a message that says the complete opposite. The title is from the lyrical poet, Horace of Rome, who claimed that dying for one's country was a true honor. Authors Andrew Spacey and John Hughes each offer additional insights, pointing toward poetic devices and internal insights that shed future light on the poem.

The line “dulce et decorum est pro patria mori” was written by Horace who wrote between the times of 46 BC to around 8 BC. He was a leading Roman poet who wrote about love, friendship, philosophy, and the art of poetry (Grant). The line “dulce et decorum est pro patria mori” is extremely patriotic, saying that it is sweet to give your own life for the country, which means that it is a good feeling or satisfying to give your life. It also says that it is proper, meaning it’s something you’re supposed to do for your country. However, the poem is trying to show the reader that dulce et decorum est is a complete lie. It is not by any means sweet and proper to die for one's country. War is not sweet, and dying a torturous death is not sweet nor proper.

In the first line of the poem, the speaker uses first person, including himself along with the “old beggars” or other soldiers on the battlefield. The poem starts off with “old beggars” who are “coughing like hags.” This simile shows the soldiers are in awful conditions and in a very poor physical state. When Owen uses beggars he's presenting an image of a person needing help because they aren’t necessarily self sufficient. The use of beggars, coughing, and hags is used for a reason. The amount of the letter G’s used within those words stand out. When people think of the sound a G makes it’s not a pleasant sound, and he is trying to get the reader to think of the soldiers as in an unpleasant state. Owen also states “Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs.” This has a deeper meaning to it. The soldiers were in such a condition they could turn their backs on their own country at the time. Until the haunting memories of war came, they could've never turned their backs on their own country. “The men marched asleep... Drunk with fatigue” uses imagery to reveal the condition all of the soldiers are in. Both of these quotes are metaphors that describe the soldiers mental states, which are very poor. There is very strong irony between marching and asleep with marching being very organized and uniform, while asleep means not alert or attentive, by any means.

The first stanza alone tries to build a scene and idea of war that is disgusting and awful for those fighting for one's country. The second stanza of the poem starts off with “Gas! GAS! Quick, boys.” Wilfred Owen is using all caps to help emphasize the severity of the situation as gas comes in all of the sudden surprising the soldiers. He also uses repetition to show the urgency that the soldiers need to abide by to get away from the gas. During WWI chemical gas bombs were thrown from trench to trench. These gas bombs were filled with different types of gas that could blister the skin or get into the lungs, which over the next day or two could cause the lungs to fill with fluid and end in death (Everts). Owen builds up the tension as he describes the soldiers putting their gas masks on just in time, except for one soldier who ends up “drowning” under a sea of green. Owen speaks as a first hand witness as one of his fellow soldiers inhaled the gas because he didn’t get his gas mask in time. It shows Owen’s helplessness as his fellow soldier couldn’t breath and was dying in the gas. He also adds in “flound’ring like a man in fire or lime.” This haunting simile makes the reader picture a man struggling in a cloud of gas with the feeling that he is on fire.

Andrew Spacey made a point about the poem written almost like it was a nightmare and not even real life. “The speaker widens the issue by confronting the reader (and especially the people at home, far away from the war), suggesting that if they too could experience what he had witnessed, they would not be so quick to praise those who die in action” (Spacey). Owen is trying to capture some emotion in the reader within these lines. This relates back to the conflict between the title and the argument of the poem. John Hughes also breaks down an extremely important two line stanza reading, “In all my dreams, before my helpless sight / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.” “This recurrent nightmare is the climax of the poem's tendency, in its first half, toward an unfolding of the poet's interiority, his personal responses, amid the texture of events it describes” (Hughes). Hughes talks about Owen’s interiority in a way that suggests the poem is autobiographical. He also talks about the poem as if it were a nightmare, like Andrew Spacey.

The poem also paints a picture in the reader's mind of the drowning man suffering and dying a torturous death with the line, his face is “like a devil's sick of sin.” This is the picture Owen is describing within his nightmare. By painting this picture of the single soldier, this poem wants us to look at the bigger picture of war being something that is not a good feeling and not a way anyone should want to die. This is extremely ironic because of the titles meaning.

There are many examples of irony throughout the poem. The irony between the title of the poem and the poem itself is not something to go unnoticed. The poem as a whole paints horrific images in the reader's mind to contradict the title to say that war is anything but proper and honorable. Believing it is sweet and proper to die for one's country is a complete and utter lie. Giving your life for your country is not proper and not by any means something to make yourself feel good. War is gruesome and will leave those that are a part of it scarred for life and haunted with images no person should have to deal with, images that will never leave their minds.

Citation Page

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