

Dulce et Decorum Est – Wilfred Owen

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

8 October 1917 - 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.