“DULCE ET DECORUM EST”

“Dulce et Decorum est” is a war poem written by Wilfred Owen, one of the most significant war poets, during World War I.

His experiences of the war led him to represent the war through crude and realistic details, but also with pity and human sympathy.

“Dulce et Decorum est” is an example of Owen’s statement of the horror of war. The poem focuses on the terrible new chemical weapon of World War I: Gas.

“Dulce et decorum est” is divided in four irregular stanzas. Each stanza deals with a precise point, indeed the reader can notice that in the first stanza the poet introduces the situation, in the second he describes the gas attack, then in the third the reader can find the description of poet’s dream-nightmare and at the end he describes the soldier’s death and produces the poem’s message.

The narrator is the poet himself as the reader can infer it by reading line 14:”…I saw him…” and “…in all my dreams…”(15), “he pluges at me…”(16), “my friend…”(25). So, the reader can see that Owen writes from “within” the war, he is inspired by his own experience.

The title is written in Latin and it is a quotation from the Latin poet Horace. It means "It is sweet and honourable". It means that it is a wonderful and great honour to fight and die for your country. But the most important thing is that the title is ironic. The intention was not to induce pity as to shock, especially civilians at home who believed war was noble and glorious.

The first stanza is made up of 8 lines and describes some men who are marching away from the front, as the reader can understand it by reading in line 4: ”towards our distant rest”, and in line 8: ”that dropped behind”.

There is also represented a frontal attack on the enemy’s tranches. The reader can say that it isn’t an heroic scene because the soldiers are given grotesque traits such as: ”like old beggars”(1) and “coughing like haugs”(2).

Moreover by reading line 3 ”we turned our backs”, the reader can notice that they are withdraw before meeting the enemy.

The scene is described from the point of view of a soldier who is the poet himself, in fact he says: “we”, “our”, and he gives a description of the exhausted soldiers, as: “asleep”, “lame”, “blind”, “drunk”, “deaf”.

It is important that through metaphors you can also realize that this is not an heroic combat because the soldiers have been badly wounded and mutilated. In fact, many have lost their boots as we can read in line 6 “blood-shod” and in lines 7-8 “the hoots of gas shells”.

The second stanza is different from the first, in fact it is made up of 6 lines and there is a change in tone and rhythm.

This change of atmosphere is provoked by the sudden gas attack, and the urgency of the warning is rendered through the word “gas” which is repeated twice, the use of exclamation marks and the printing of the word “gas” first in small and then in capital letters.

This second part begins with the two words “gas, GAS!” but the first “gas” is linked to the preceding section where the soldiers are deaf because of the noise of gas shells. The second word in capital letters wakes them up from their sleepiness in time to put the masks on.

In line 9 the word “ecstasy” may mean frenzy because the soldiers seem crazy after the gas attack and it suggests animal instincts, awkwardness, confusion, blind panic, frantic movements.

Moreover, the image of frantic movements and confusion is emphasized by the use of some “-ing” verbs as: “fumbling”, ”fitting”, “yelling out”, “stumbling” and “floundering”.

On the second stanza the poet focuses on the description of the one soldier who was too late in putting his “helmet” and who is introduced by the indefinite pronoum “someone”, and on the presence of the gas.

By analysing the word “green” we can realize that the gas used in World War I was chlorine. By reading from line 13 to line 14 we can understand that the poet is seeing the horrible scene through the green glass of his gas-mask.

The third stanza is made up of 2 lines and it focuses on the poet’s nightmare. The dream-nightmare in lines 15-16 is both real and imaginary. Its function is to build up an emotional climax before the final address of the last stanza: “in all my dreams”(17), “if in some smothering dreams you too could pace”(17).

The poet’s dream introduces the reader, in fact the poet wishes him to experience himself the awful reality of war.

Some expressions convey that the dream is a nightmare, for example: “all my dreams” reveals that the dream is recurrent. Moreover, as usually happens in nightmares, the dreamer is “helpless”.

In this stanza the soldier’s condition in underlined by three “-ing” verbs which are “guttering”, “choking” and “drowning.

The idea of suffocation continues in the fourth stanza through the presence of the adjective “smothering”.

The dreams are defined as “smothering” because they are nightmares, the poet recreates in his dreams the scene of the soldier’s death which is imprinted in his memory and he feels that he is also choking with gas.

The core of the stanza focuses again on the image of the dying soldier and dwells on him with shocking details to stress the horror of war, for example: “behind the wagon that we flung him in”(16), “the white eyes writhing in his face”(17), “his hanging face”(18), “the blood come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs”(21-22).

Moreover this description is emphasized by the use of similies as “like a devil’s sick of sin”(20), “obscene as cancer”(23) and “bitter as the cud of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues”(23-24).

The description is made up so painfully on purpose, since the poet is talking to someone identified through the presence of two words: “you”(17,21,25) and “my friend”(25). Perhaps the poet is addressing an idealist or patriot who is thinking or speaking of war in terms of glory while someone is sending young men to die on the front. In fact the soldier-poet asks the reader, who stays at home, to come along and see for himself the ugly face of death.

By analysing the last stanza we can infer that “children” are opposed to the “men” described in the first stanza. In fact, the children are described as “ardent for some desperate glory”, instead men as “panic-stuck” and tired out, and thinking only of survival.

The poem ends with a Latin sentence: “Dulce et Decotum est pro patria mori”(27-28) which is the epitome of a centuries-old tradition of patriotism.

Moreover, the Latin sentence sounds noble and idealizing, while the contest is realistic. Owen underlines his opinion about the war which is considered as something horrible and to be avoided.