THE WAR AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN TRACED THROUGH **POETRY**

**Credits**

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Class 5ALS

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The following work is aimed at recognise five common keywords, related to the war and/ or the role of women during the First World War, belonging to six different poems:

* T1. The Soldier, Rupert Brooke, *1914*
* T2. In Flanders Fields, John McCrae, *1915*
* T3. Dulce et Decorum Est, Wilfred Owen, *1917*
* T4. The Glory of Women, Siegfried Sassoon, *1918*
* T5. They, Siegfried Sassoon, *1919*

**Firstly**, I will **analyse** each poem, considering the title, the structure and the denotative elements in order to better have the sense of the message and the meaning of such texts.

**Secondly**, I will identify five **keywords** for each poem, proper to summarize their message and their crucial themes.

**Thirdly**, I will arrange the results of the previous steps in a more technical way, throughout a **tabulation**, which is a suitable format to observe the dissimilarities and analogies between the poems and the related poets’ points of view.

**In conclusion**, I will depict a brief **synopsis** of the entire work, reflecting on the data collected and on the connections between them. Therefore, I will compare the different poems in order to find some communal themes or concepts and then I will recognise five suitable keywords to trace the most common idea of the war and the role of women through poetry.

**FIRST AND SECOND STEP**:

Analysis and keywords identification

T1. The Soldier

If I should die, think only this of me:

      That there’s some corner of a foreign field

That is for ever England. There shall be

      In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,

      Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam;

A body of England’s, breathing English air,

      Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,

      A pulse in the eternal mind, no less

            Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;

Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;

      And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,

            In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

*Analysis:*

Reading the title, the reader may suppose the poem to be about a soldier’s feelings, point of view or about his actions and role during the war. Many conjectures are possible, because no kind of judgement is offered by the title. You must go on reading in order to find out the poet’s point of view.

Taking into consideration the structure of the poem, it is easily understandable it is a sonnet, made up of an octave and a sestet. It is evident that it is coherent with the Elizabethan structure while it is linked with the Petrarchan rhyme scheme: ABAB CDCD EFG EFG.

The poem starts with a conditional tense, making the reader conscious that when the poet wrote “The Soldier” he was still alive. It is so a strategy to express his point of view, of course, in a poetical way.

Going on reading, the reader understands the poem deals with a soldier, who is addressing to somebody, telling him or her what to think just in case he should die. He speaks about his dust, underlining the link with such specks of dust and the whole England. Also in the following verses, the speaking voice persists connecting him to England and all her aspects: “her sights”, “sounds”, “thoughts”… The death is set in a foreign field, a field of battle, which is considered by the soldier to be England however. Therefore, an intelligent reader should wonder why such piece of field, even if “foreign”, is perceived by the speaking voice as part of the English soil and, in addition, why it is forever England and not of another nationality. He or she may suppose the speaking voice to be strictly connected to his homeland, as it is visible by the final verses of the octave. The speaking voice seems to be grateful towards England because she produced him, formed him and allowed him to gain a long-standing experience. It follows that the “ways to roam” do not merely stand for some streets but, in a metaphorical way, they hint at opportunities of knowledge.

The speaking voice describes his death resorting to the last breath and pulse, contrasting the end of his life with the eternity of his soul: his “eternal mind”. This idea is reinforced by the image of “heaven”, which is not a generic one, but the English heaven.

So, the poem deals with a soldier’s feelings and thoughts about his death during war. The thoughts are strictly connected with the speaking voice’s nationality, “by England given”, in an English heaven.

It is evident “heaven” and other semantic choices such as “blest”, “evil”, “eternal mind” are Biblical references, coherently with Brooke’s faith. Here evil stands for the enemy, for someone the poet depicts as a man who deserves to be killed.

The link between the themes faced by Brooke’s poem and the ones quite gathered by the Bible reinforces the message: dying for one’s country is a noble gesture. In addition, it is also evident the speaking voice believes that England is the noblest country for which to die, since it was the one which educated him and contributed to his maturation, no less than a mother.

*Keywords*:

* Homeland
* Sacrifice
* Dust
* Eternal mind
* Death

T2. In Flanders Fields

In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place: and in the sky  
The larks still bravely singing fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the dead: Short days ago,  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved: and now we lie  
In Flanders fields!

Take up our quarrel with the foe  
To you, from failing hands, we throw  
The torch: be yours to hold it high  
If ye break faith with us who die,  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields

# The poem was composed at the battlefront on May 3, 1915 during the second battle of Ypres, Belgiumby Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae. He wrote the poem a few days after his friend and former student, Alexis Helmer was killed by a German shell.

# It is made up of three stanzas, which are not of the same length, indeed the first one is built up by five lines, the second is a quatrain and the third is a sestet. It is so an unusual pattern that follows the rhyme scheme AABBA AABC AABBAC. Such rhyme scheme seems to put the anaphoric sentence “In Flanders Fields” in a strategic position, which allows the reader to fix it into his or her mind.

# Reading the title, the intelligent reader should understand the allusion to the specific homonymous fields, land of fighting during the First World War, when many soldiers died.

# ‘Its references to the [red poppies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papaver_rhoeas) that grew over the graves of fallen soldiers resulted in the [remembrance poppy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Remembrance_poppy) becoming one of the world's most recognized memorial symbols for soldiers who have died in conflict.’ (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_Flanders_Fields>)

# Indeed it is one of the most famous poems related to the war, used also for propaganda, to recruit soldiers, as in the case of “The Soldier”. However, it shows a different opinion and it provides a different message.

# The first quatrain opens with the image of poppies, red symbolic flowers, growing on the soil where many crosses stand on, along extended lines. The third line reinforces the idea of a place where dead people stand, as visible by the metaphor of the crosses, which stand for death, and of course for graves. The reader should wonder why poppies, which are red and simple flowers, are associated with the symbol of death. Going in depth with the symbolism of that noun, you can learn poppies, coherently with the collective imagination, are often associated with the meanings of consolation, oblivion and rest. Now the juxtaposition poppies-death should appear to you more logical and coherent. However, just reading the first three lines, the reader ignores whom the crosses stand for. It is visible just thanks to the following metaphor, referring to the larks who sing above the guns. It follows that the people who perished on that soil were soldiers. The poppies could so represent the symbol of consolation for their death and the larks’ songs could stand for a kind of eulogy. Therefore, the first stanza makes use of elements taken from the vegetal world and from the animal kingdom in a metaphorical way, to talk about some human beings’ death.

# On the contrary, the second stanza focuses on the death soldiers, whose point of view is expressed, as visible from the personal pronoun “we” that is repeated three times. In just four lines, the reader can get an idea of the soldiers’ fate during the war, whose life is subtracted or preserved in just a moment. Here the speaking voice declares to be dead, but not only: he and his perished comrades stand for the Dead itself. The determinative article and the capital letter referring to their condition leads the reader to attribute a further meaning to such expression. In addition, the sudden change of the verb tense, from the simple past to the simple present, reinforces the image of the soldiers’ death, who cannot live, experience, love and be loved anymore. As a consequence, the poet’s aim may be to universalize the soldiers’ dead in that specific soil’s condition and to give the readers pause for thought regarding this slice of the soldier’s life, or death.

# The last stanza, which is longer than the others, contains the dead soldiers’ appeal towards a generic “you” that could stand for the other soldiers who are still alive. Such conjecture is possible thanks to the subject of the exhortation, aimed to drive the addressees to go on fighting and not forget them who are gone out for the same purpose. The appeal is highlighted by the metaphor of the torch: since their light is dimming, they want to call their still alive comrades in order to perpetuate it. Holding the light high gain twofold significance: it hints at the continuation of the fighting, but also at the perpetuation of the dead soldiers’ memory.

*Keywords*:

* Eternal rest
* Oblivion
* Commemoration
* Light
* Field

T3. Dulce et Decorum Est

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.

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,

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.

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,

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,—

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*.

*Analysis:*

Reading the title, the reader may be curious to find out why it is written in Latin. Some documents and memoirs related to the period of the First World War show that the sentence was highly known and quoted by the England population. It follows that the addressee of the poem was not only a cultured élite able to speak and understand the Latin language and literature, but maybe the whole English population who experienced the context of the war, even indirectly.

Going on reading, it is possible to notice the poem is almost addressed to young people, “children ardent for some desperate glory”, who have a misrepresented idea of the war. Such idea is the one conveyed by the title itself, which recall an extract from a Latin saying, taken from Horace’s [Odes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odes_(Horace)) (III.2.13). In the saying, Horace’s point of view related to the soldiers’ behaviour is evident: on one side he condemns the ones who escape the war, defined as coward and shameful warriors while, on the other, he praises the brave soldiers who accomplish bold and quite heroic deeds. In particular, the poet encourages Roman young people to imitate their ancestors’ virtues and heroism. However, it is interesting to notice Owen does not quote the entire saying: he withholds the referent of the denotation. On my opinion, it is done on purpose for two reasons: firstly, to tempt the reader going on reading, secondly to let him or her think the poem will be about something sweet and honourable. It is so a strategy to mislead the reader who, at first glance, thinks the poem will be strictly connected to the lyrical poetry, the elegiac style and also to the Greek poetry of the Archaic period, as Horace’s one.

*Will the conjectures of the reader be disregarded by the reading of the poem?*

The answer is: **yes**! The poem totally overturns the readers’ opening expectations, right from the first line.

The poem is based on the poet’s experience of the horrors of war in the trenches, and so it stands for an effort to communicate the ‘pity’ of war to future generations. Indeed, Wilfred Owen has effectively taken part to the conflict; he has fought and has experienced the shocks of war, as visible by his biography notes.

Therefore, the speaking voice, that is a soldier’s voice, is actually the poet himself.

Considering the general comprehension of the whole poem, the intelligent reader immediately finds out the topic: the wickedness of the use of gas, which will stand for a deeper message. Actually, the poem traces the consequences of the modern use of gas as a weapon of destruction. Indeed Owen meticulously portrays a gas attack at the frontline, paying particular attention to the description of the soldiers’ physical and psychological condition.

The first quatrain builds up a vivid image of the soldiers’ way of living, or better, surviving at the frontline. They are depicted as “old beggars”, coughing “hags”, injured, wounded, tired and worn-out. Therefore, the speaking voice exploits a metaphorical language in order to empathize the soldiers’ description. Even if they are young, they are compared to hags and beggars, who seem to stand for adolescents and young people’s antithesis. It follows that the war and its vicissitudes are able to overturn each certainty that is valid in a period of peace. The soldiers Owen talks about are deformed on two levels: physically, if you stand on the denotative level, metaphorically and psychologically, if you move to the connotation of the text.

Indeed, the second section of the poem moves from the man marches, to the gas attack. The soldiers are out of range of the Five-Nine bombs, away from “No Man's Land”, they are out of the trenches and they are now forced to be responsive in order to survive. However, not all of them are able to put the gas masks on in time. There are so reactions of “yelling out” and “stumbling”, which are strong semantic choices, followed by the image of someone burning in a fire, with no possibilities of rescue. Now the speaking voices focuses on one of such unlucky soldiers, wounded by the bombs, “drowning”. This is another metaphorical image, which reinforces the idea of a certain death, a totally absence of assistance, due to something lightning quick, which will determine many lives’ elimination.

The speaking voice tells all the soldiers became “lame”, “blind”. It is evident that not all of them where injured at the same way, but using the adjective “all” he extends some individual hurts to the totality’s. It is a strategy to universalize the condition of the soldiers, who are indeed generic soldiers, whose nationality is not highlighted. Such stylistic choice of hiding the enemy’s identity is also useful to build up an atmosphere of mystery and curiosity.

The second quatrain appeals to sight and hearing, as if the speaking voice wanted the reader to be present at the dramatic scene. It seems that the reader fights alongside the speaking voice and perceive with him the absurdity of war. His aim is reinforced by lines 15-16, when the speaking voice reveals he is compelled to re-experience the facts described in the poem each night, in his dreams which are, of course, nightmares. In this way, the poet moves from a physical description, to a psychological survey, exploiting his same experience. The use of the present simple highlights the periodicity of the dream, as an eternal cycle. Such image is coherent with the repetition of the verb “drowning”, which connects the previous description with the subject of the speaking voice’s dreams.

Therefore, the third quatrain portrays the difficult memories of the speaking voice in having looked at first person one of his mates’ death, in all its sides and facets, in all the resulting pain of a drowning man, whose light is blowing out. The metaphor is developed in the last stanza, the longest one. Shocking images come out through the poet’s mind: the white eyes of the soldier and his face cut off by the gas. The strength of the image grows rapidly, in a crescendo of deformation and degradation. The soldier is so compared to a devil, but what is even more disconcerting is the image of the evil, no less than the speaking voice, repulsed by the sight of the scene.

In the conclusion, the speaking voice addressees to his friend, unveiling the message of the whole poem and the missing piece of the title. The saying professed by Horace, that is “Dulce et Decorum est pro patria mori” is a lie: dying for one’s homeland is not honourable. It is just a falsehood, which withholds the brutal reality of pain, suffering, injuries and death.

*Keywords*:

* Horrors
* Wounds
* (War as a ) Lie
* Death
* Irreversible damages

T4. Glory of Women

You love us when we're heroes, home on leave, (1)

Or wounded in a mentionable place. (2)

You worship decorations' you believe (3)

That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace. (4)

You make us shells. You listen with delight, (5)

By takes of dirt and danger fondly thrilled. (6)

You crown our distant ardours while we fight, (7)

And mourn our laurelled memories when we're killed. (8)

You can't believe that British troops 'retire' (9)

When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run, (10)

Trampling the terrible corpses-blind with blood. (11)

O German mother dreaming by the fire, (12)

While you are knitting socks to send your son (13)

His face is trodden deeper in the mud. (14)

*Analysis:*

Reading the title, right from the start the reader comes across the addressee of the poem itself and he or she may wonder what their glory is referred to.

The poem is written in the Petrarchan sonnet form, with a rhyme scheme of A B A B C D C D E F G E F G. It has a rhythm of Iambic Pentameter and it is made up of an octave and a sestet.

It is full of strong images regarding the war and mainly about the atrocities of the conflict. Such description is possible because the speaking voice lived such experience and so he is able to provide the reader vivid and realistic portraits of how the war was for the soldiers. The pronouns “us and “we” make the reader conscious that the speaking voice is speaking on behalf of not only himself, but of all his comrades. On the other side, “you” stands for women, namely the soldiers’ wives, sisters, mothers or everybody else, who are “distant” from the fighting and whose thoughts and feelings are built up in the poem, even if in a sarcastic way. Indeed the poet uses the strategy of ironic language in order to overturn the reality and so being able to convey a deeper message, more suitable to be stocked into the reader’s mind.

The first octave focuses on how women love men that are heroes, how they take delight in hearing dangerous war experiences, how they crown their beloved or close person for his acts of courage, and how women mourn the memories of those who perished in the war. The theme of death in the battle field is not omitted as it is evident from the related semantic field which contains words as “disgrace”, Danger, “Thrilled”, killed”, “Blood”. It follows that the poet’s aim is to bring how grisly and horrid war is and also what it results in, into clear view.

Sassoon so clearly expresses his point of view regarding the war exploiting women and their condition, their unawareness and lack of true information. He is so efficient to overturn their hypothetical worries, thoughts or conjectures and so he shows the war not as a something deserving honour and glory, but it only brings about pain, loss and death. He displays what the soldiers had effectively to face in order to survive the war and he underlines how he and his comrades survival was different, extremely distant from the women expectations. I think the poem has also the function of teaching, educating about the war. Such instructional and pedagogical feature is surely enough addressed to the ones who were and are still strangers to the horrors of the conflict and who limit theirselves to glorify the ones who really experienced them. The poem is of course a criticism to the violence and the uselessness of the war; a criticism which exploits literary, and in particular the poetic language.

*Keywords*:

* Critic
* Superficiality
* Stereotypy
* Forgery
* War as a fairy-tale

T5. They

The Bishop tells us: 'When the boys come back

'They will not be the same; for they'll have fought

'In a just cause: they lead the last attack

'On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought

'New right to breed an honourable race,

'They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.'

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.

'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;

'Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;

'And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find

'A chap who's served that hasn't found some change.

'And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'

*Analysis:*

The poem is made up of two stanzas of equal length, namely two sestets of iambic pentameter and it follows the rhyme scheme ABABCC DEDE FF.

Reading the title the reader may wonder who the subject pronoun ‘they’ refers to. Considering the whole poem, the reader understands that the poet focuses his attention on the soldier’s condition after the war, once came back from the frontline where they fought and survived. It follows that the poem unveils which changes the war brought in who lived its horrors at first person.

In the first stanza, the poet exploits the figure of a bishop, who stands for the entire religious institution. The bishop does not deny the soldier’s changes, telling “they will not be the same”, but he focalizes on the glory the soldiers deserve for having defeated the enemies, not on the horrors and the tragedies caused by such fighting. The bishop justifies some soldiers ’death with religious arguments, considering them worthy sacrifices.

Indeed right from the start it is evident the presence of two levels of reading and analysis: a denotative one that shows a bishop’s point of view and his argumentation; and a deeper one that unveils the poet’s critic on the Anglican Church. Taking into consideration the first one, the reader can notice that the Bishop connotes the war as a ‘just cause’, a just combat against the enemy, metaphorically personified in the Anti-Christ, so the ones who are considered non-believer”. On the other hand, a deeper analysis brings to surface the poet’s strong critic against the Church, coherently with its unrestrained propaganda aimed to push young people to join the Armies during the first years of the war.

The message of the first stanza is subverted in the following one. Here the soldiers express their opinion, discrediting the Bishop’s words and his whole message and perspective, making use of a different language and some more realistic arguments. The sentence ‘we’re none of us the same’ (line 7), ironically recalls the Bishop’s speech, as if the discredit is made up line by line harking back to the religious figure’s statements, but overturning each of them.

The following example of the atrocities that brought changes in the soldiers (lines 9-11), telling about the soldiers’ wounds and sufferings are suitable to portray the image of the war as something concrete; on the contrary the Bishop uses a metaphorical and abstract language. The poet also chooses to name some soldiers (George, Bill,..) so that the abstract ‘they’ starts to gain an identity. In response of such statement the Bishop can only say ‘the ways of God are strange’: the answer evokes the disorientation of the Bishop, who has no more religious handholds to support his theory. Indeed, while in the first line the Bishop ‘tells us’, directly addressing the soldiers, in the last line the Bishop simply ‘says’. Here the poet’s point of view is clear: what really cares are not some vague statements accounted for individual interests and own profits, but the real atrocities of the war and almost its consequences.

Therefore, the poem satirically contrasts the moral improvement promised to British soldiers by a Bishop with the physical damage and moral degradation they actually experience.

*Keywords*:

* Critic
* Ideological justification
* Change
* Injuries, wounds
* Bluntness

**THIRD STEP**: Tabulation

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Name of the poem** | Keywords – **The war** | Keywords – **The role of women** |
|  | | |
| The Soldier | * Homeland * Sacrifice * Dust * Eternal mind * Death | - |
| In Flanders Fields | * Eternal rest * Oblivion * Commemoration * Light * Field | - |
| Dulce et Decorum Est | * Horrors * Wounds * (War as a ) Lie * Death * Irreversible damages | - |
| The Glory of Women | * Critic * Superficiality * Stereotypy * Forgery * War as a fairy-tale | * Critic * Superficiality * Stereotypy * Ignorance * Gullibility |
| They | * Critic * Ideological justification * Change * Injuries, wounds * Bluntness | - |
| - | | |

**FOURTH STEP**: Synopsis

The poems I focused on to produce the present work are, although referred to the same theme, the war, do not provide equal points of view.

Some of them, like The Soldier or In Flanders Fields, were used for propaganda; it follows that they were suitable to encourage young people to enlistment. Though, the Soldier provides a stronger sense of patriotism, empathizing the image of the just sacrifice for the homeland and portraying an idyllic vision of the war, as something not just positive, but also glorious, heroic and right. Differently from the other poems, The Soldier was written before the outbreak of the war and maybe this is the reason why it so distant by them. In Flanders Fields exploits some similar themes, as the eternal rest and the fields, which seem to recall the dust of the soil where some soldiers died. It also contains an appeal done by the speaking voice which aims at not being forgot in case of death or, as in the case of Flanders Fields, because his death. The latter poem focuses more on the memory of the fallen soldiers, not withholding the precariousness condition of them at the frontline, whose life is on a knife-edge.

It follows that, even in a different manner and following different poetical strategies, both the poems show a positive perception of the war, justifying the action of defeating the enemy for a just cause.

Owen’s Dulce et Decorum Est totally overturns such idea, quite bringing the truth about the war out. Owen’s goal seems to be discrediting the Old Lie, bringing the truth visible to everybody, especially to young people willing to sacrifice themselves for their homeland or for some superficial propaganda slogan. While The Soldier makes use of abstract semantic choices and of an ideological construction, Dulce Et Decorum Est tells about the horrors of the war, its atrocities, like the soldiers’ injuries, both physical and psychological. The latter poem provides a strong negative image of the war, through a quite explicit condemnation towards the ones who intentionally manipulate the reality of the conflict.

Owen’s point of view is shared by Siegfried Sassoon, although he makes use of an ironical language to build up his critics. Another relevant difference is that Sassoon makes some direct and specific accusations, not generic. In the poem I have analysed, he criticises the whole Church institution and all the women who faced their brothers, husbands, beloved or sons absence due to war. In The Glory of Women, the idealization of the war and the hyperbole of its perception as something fabulous, peaceful and idyllic recalls the Soldier’s one, but Sassoon makes use of the exaggeration to reinforce his denunciations, while Sassoon really believes in such illusory construction.

In conclusion, the five key words, related to the war, I traced through the poems in object are:

* Atrocity
* Idealization
* Critic purpose
* Death
* Memory (poetry as inheritance and source of education)

The five key words related to the role of women are:

* Critic
* Superficiality
* Stereotypy
* Ignorance
* Gullibility