

Dulce et Decorum Est

Introductory note

Dulce et decorum Est is a poem written by the English poet Wilfred Owen and published posthumously in 1920 in a book called *Poems*. Owen's preface reads: "This book is not about heroes... My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity."

It is a war poem that transports the readers to the battlefield amidst the horrors of war.

Wilfred Owen also referred to it as a "gas poem", thus hinting at the chemical warfare that was rampantly used during World War. The poet seems to be completely disillusioned with the glorious description of war and therefore decides to portray an absolutely realistic and gloomy picture of War with all its atrocities and suffering. He talks about young boys who were healthy and optimistic when they enlisted for the service but are now reduced to a group of men completely worn out and disenchanted.

Themes

One of the major themes of the poem is War and the perpetual suffering that comes with it, not just physical but also psychological. Nobody is really victorious in a war. In this poem, Owen writes contrary to the popular belief that it is sweet and appropriate to die for one's country as also suggested by the title. In fact, he clearly mentions how people would change their minds if they see what was happening in the battlefield and that there actually is no glory in dying for one's country.

Patriotism and the false glory attached to it is another significant theme that Owen comments upon in this poem. He talks about how the dreams of young soldiers are shattered once they enlist in the army. As they witness the horrid reality of war, their perception of heroism and patriotic fervour changes completely. The opening lines themselves are quite suggestive of the misery that accompanies a soldier,

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,

Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,

Another major theme that the poet blatantly discusses in the poem is Politics and Propaganda.

Most of the times, the reasons for war are quite political, but ironically it is those who have nothing to do with politics that are called up to fight. Wilfred Owen expresses his contempt for politics and political people who play safe by distancing themselves completely from the consequences of war and manipulate ordinary men to participate in it by promising them glory and heroic status.

Structure of the poem

The poem does not have a definite structure so to say. The stanzas are of varying lengths with a couplet in between. The first stanza has eight lines followed by the second stanza comprising of six lines. Then comes the couplet that rhymes with the last two lines of the preceding stanza followed by the final stanza that consists of 12 lines.

Wilfred Owen has deliberately kept away from following a uniformity in the structure so as to emphasize the absurdity and meaninglessness of War.

Language and Diction

The poet uses figurative language throughout in order to convey the central message of the poem. From the very beginning of the poem, the readers are made aware that War is nothing glorious as it has always been hailed. The words like beggars, haunting, bent, sacks reiterates the idea that the soldiers live a life of utmost misery. Theirs is a group of men, exhausted and highly unacknowledged for their efforts. Just like the ambience of the poem, the language too is quite depressing. It creates a War scene that enervates the readers. The vivid imagery used

by the poet immediately hits the readers' minds and pulls them out of their comfort zones only to have a glimpse of War through the poet's experiences.

Conclusion

The poet Wilfred Owen, who is also often termed as a Soldier poet along with others like Siegfried Sassoon and Rupert Brooke poignantly engages with the subject of War. He forms his perspective on War based on his experience in the battlefield which has been immensely shocking for him. Through this poem, he attempts to dispel the popular belief about War and its glory by writing about the agony of the soldiers involved. An important reference to mustard gas is pivotal in understanding the war scenario. Owen talks about a soldier dying of breathlessness and due to choking which is a horrendous sight for him. This scene drastically contrasts with the image of a heroic soldier that people are often implored to form in their minds. However, the harsh reality is far from this fancy idea of celebrating heroism and martyrdom.