

Postcard from the Front Lines of Teaching "Dulce et Decorum Est"

Wilfred Owen is the most famous of the World War One soldier-poets, and "Dulce et Decorum Est" is perhaps his most famous work. Yet in criticism and the classroom, the poem's strong anti-war message and its rejection of traditional elegiac consolation tend to subsume the discussion, and relatively scant attention has been paid to the most salient formal feature of this 28-line poem: it is a double sonnet.

The stanza breaks of "Dulce et Decorum Est" do not simply announce the poem's relationship to the sonnet form -- they practically scream it. Owen opens with an eight-line stanza followed by a six-line stanza. This suggests the Petrarchan sonnet from which the English sonnet was first developed. These two opening stanzas are followed by a couplet and a twelve-line stanza. This suggests the English sonnet inverted, literally turned on its head.

The anti-war protest in the poem is strong, but these stanza breaks make it clear Owen also has something to say about the sonnet form. This is my postcard from the field of teaching English, a quick note to tell you what I see in the form of "Dulce et Decorum Est" and would like to see discussed more.

But first, a short sketch---

I encourage my students to think of the English sonnet as a pub. During the English Renaissance, the pub was rather empty. A man could enter, sing, and not feel cramped. As the pub started filling up, people jostled, but in a friendly, fraternal way --- inhabitants clapped each other on the back and sang drinking songs.

This pleasant state of affairs was not long sustainable. Soon good-natured backslapping deteriorated to shoving. Fistfights broke out. But worse than that, the air became stale. By 1917, the year Owen wrote his first draft of "Dulce et Decorum Est", the air was practically noxious:

As the wild deviations from standard iambic pentameter in these (and other) lines attest, this poem is hostile to the sonnet's traditional meter.

And "Dulce et Decorum Est" is also hostile to the form's traditional rhyme scheme. The rhyme scheme of "Dulce et Decorum Est" is, of course, ababcdcd, etc. (the traditional pattern of an English sonnet prior to the turn), but Owen does not complete the turn by ending on a rhyming couplet. Instead, he repeats the sonnet's rhyme scheme prior to the turn in a mimesis of the speaker's recurring nightmare. Owen belligerently refuses to engage with this aspect of the sonnet form even to further emphasize his horror at the war.

The lie teachers like to tell students about poetic form is that its repetitions are inherently pleasing and comforting, because (or so the lie goes) these repetitions mimic the continuity of the world. There are two rather obvious problems with this argument. First, the world is, in fact, not continuous. As any reader must acknowledge, someday everyone she knows will be dead, and someday after that, the sun will burn out and the earth will die. And second, poetic form is not continuous either. Because form is not simply repetition, it is repetition with an implied or prescribed end. Form is, therefore, a reminder of death and the end of the

world. And there is nowhere that the apocalyptic nature of form is more present than in the sonnet, the shortest of the English fixed-forms.

The words "old Lie" are particularly telling, then, in the context of the poem's form. The horror inside of "Dulce et Decorum Est" is not purely a product of the gruesome elegiac content or of Owen's lines fighting their own form. It is also a product of the poem's repetition and cessation of meter, rhyme, and the sonnet form itself. And this horror has always been present in the sonnet. This is why, on so many occasions, the form seems to lead the speaker of William Shakespeare's sonnets to contemplate his and his beloved's deaths: "When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st".

In the early days of the tradition, this territory was not fully explored by poets or critics (perhaps because we would all prefer our poetry and its repetitions to be comforting, the same way we prefer our physical surroundings to be comfortable), but "Dulce et Decorum Est" explodes it.

Works Cited

Owen, Wilfred. "Dulce et Decorum Est" Poetry Foundation [1].

Shakespeare, William. 'Sonnet 18.' Poetry Foundation, Poetry Foundation [2].

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[1] <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46560/dulce-et-decorum-est>

[2] <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45087/sonnet-18-shall-i-compare-thee-to-a-summers-day>