

## NATIONAL 5 CRITICAL ESSAY EXEMPLAR – ‘DULCE ET DECORUM EST’

**Answers to questions on Poetry should refer to the text and to such relevant features as word choice, tone, imagery, structure, content, rhythm, rhyme, theme, sound, ideas . . .**

**Choose a poem which describes a person’s experience.**

**By referring to appropriate techniques, explain how the description of the experience makes the poem more interesting.**

A poem which describes a person’s experience is ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ by Wilfred Owen. The poem is about a gas attack on a group of soldiers as they return from the trenches of World War I. The speaker describes the event itself, the trauma it causes him, and then ends with the speaker directly challenging pro-war propagandists. Owen makes the poem interesting by vividly and horrifically describing the gas attack and its aftermath.

Owen’s descriptions make the poem more interesting because they are horrific and unexpected. In the first stanza, the speaker describes the experience of a group of soldiers returning from the battlefield. In the first line of the poem, Owen uses a simile to describe the soldiers: ‘Bent double, like old beggars under sacks’. The soldiers are compared to broken-down, weak old men who can barely walk. This idea of soldiers is very different to the image suggested by the poem’s patriotic title. ‘Dulce et decorum est...’ is the first part of a Latin phrase which means ‘It is noble and right to die for your country’. Owen’s description of the soldiers and the conditions they are fighting in completely undermines this idea. The huge difference between the title and the descriptive opening line shocks the reader, making the poem more interesting.

Later in the first stanza, Owen uses hyperbole to develop his description of the soldiers’ experiences. We are told that the soldiers are ‘deaf’ to the sound of the shells falling behind them. By using ‘deaf’ Owen stresses how tired and numb the war has made the soldiers. The description gives the reader a stronger sense of the soldiers’ experience. This makes the events of the poem seem more real to the reader, increasing his or her interest.

Owen’s word choice makes the experience sound particularly horrific and gives us a strong sense of the soldiers’ emotions. In the second stanza, Owen describes the experience of the gas attack itself. The soldiers put on their helmets with ‘an ecstasy of fumbling’. ‘Ecstasy’ has connotations of religious intensity. This description conveys the incredible terror and desperation of the men as the gas surrounds them.

Owen describes an unlucky soldier’s death using nightmarish imagery. We are told that he is ‘flound’ring like a man in fire or lime’. This simile provides a strong visual sense of the speaker’s

experience - he can see his comrade thrashing about as violently as though he were on fire or burned by chemicals. The speaker adds that he saw this 'as under a green sea'. This surreal descriptive simile gives the experience an interesting surreal quality. It is as if the event is too horrific to be real.

In the third stanza, the speaker describes his dreams in the aftermath of this event, showing how much the experience has affected him. His word choice makes the experience sound particularly horrific and gives us a strong sense of the soldiers' emotions.: 'In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, he plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning...'. The speaker describes his sight as 'helpless', giving a sense of the lack of power soldiers felt during and after a warzone. Owen uses a list of violent verbs to describe the death of the soldier in the speaker's nightmares. Each word in the list builds on the horror of what's happening, and the fact that the speaker is described as 'helpless' only makes it worse.

Owen's descriptions make the experience of war described in 'Dulce et Decorum Est' more shocking, more dramatic, and more vivid. Each of these things increases the reader's interest in the poem by giving us a sense of the horror of the event he describes. I feel that it is very difficult to imagine just how awful such events must have been. Wilfred Owen's descriptions interest readers by giving them a sense of something most of them will hopefully never experience.