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William Wright

*The University of South Carolina Aiken, Aiken, SC*

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## Hardy and Owen on World War I: Explications and a Comparative Analysis of "The Man He Killed" and "Dulce et Decorum Est"

### Keywords

Thomas Hardy, Wilfred Owen, The Man He Killed, Dulce et Decorum Est

**Hardy and Owen on World War I:  
Explications and a Comparative Analysis of  
“The Man He Killed” and “Dulce et Decorum Est”**

William Wright  
*The University of South Carolina Aiken*  
*Aiken, SC*

**B**oth Thomas Hardy’s poem “The Man He Killed” and Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” approach war as a general theme. While the poems pertain to World War I specifically, Owen’s poem refers to World War I in its language, while Hardy’s does not. Each poem reflects the sensibility of a poet confronted with his own war experience and both affect the reader strongly. This effect is achieved through differences in sensibility and technique on the part of the poets. Both poems approach war as a negative quality, but there are explicit differences in the pieces: although both relate instances of combat, Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” positions the reader directly *within* this combat, thus inducing an intuitive,

incendiary response. In "The Man He Killed," Hardy evokes emotion by avoiding allusion to emotion itself and suggesting less about combat than Owen does. Instead, Hardy focuses on the moral dilemma of the narrator. Also, the narrator in Hardy's "The Man He Killed" never alludes specifically to World War I; Hardy teaches a general lesson about war. However, putting the poem in context, the astute reader realizes that the poem was written during World War I, and ultimately the impetus for the poem's creation. An examination and explication of the differences in form and language of the two poems reveals both to be emotionally evocative and lucidly wrought.

In "The Man He Killed," Hardy employs informal diction to situate the reader with the narrator: one observes a normal soldier reflecting on having to kill a man who was once (or who could just as well have been) a friend. The informal diction augments both the connotative and denotative weight of the poem. Idiom, colloquial words, and rhyming are all combined to form the unique diction of "The Man He Killed," which enhance the impact and focus of the ideas and emotions. While, like "Dulce et Decorum Est," the poem asserts that war is tragic and afflicts one's morale and conscience, it more specifically claims that war has the frightening potential to alter a friend into foe. To create this effect, the poem

begins *in medias res*: we get the sense that the soldier is in the middle of his conversation:

‘Had he and I but met  
By some old ancient inn,  
We should have sat us down to wet  
Right many a nipperkin! (5)

Note the quotation mark, indicating dialogue being relayed to a listener. Since this context is understood, one discovers that the language is conversational, and that idiom is in effect. The phrase “right many a nipperkin,” in the first stanza, is the first notable example of this usage. Note, also, diction used in the third and fourth stanzas:

‘I shot him dead because—  
because he was my foe,  
Just so: my foe of course he was;  
That’s clear enough; although

‘He thought he’d ‘list, perhaps,  
Off-hand like—just as I—  
Was out of work—had sold his traps—  
No other reason why. (5)

One senses that the recounting narrator is discovering through telling his tale the great contradiction at the heart of his act. While the narrator ruminates upon his actions, there is the sense through the diction and conversational

idiosyncrasy that he begins to understand the irony of this contradiction: the fact that he is associating with someone (the reader) just as he might have associated with the soldier in *any other* context besides war-combat. Again, this sense of climaxing realization is observed in the diction, specifically in the repetition of "because" in the second line of the third stanza, signifying a paused thought before the narrator deduces that the man he killed was indeed his foe. He solidifies his claim by adding, "[j]ust so: my foe of course he was / That's clear enough" (5).

However, Hardy's use of diction, rhyme, and conversational idiosyncrasies might persuade one to perceive this to be a rationalization on the part of the narrator: directly proportionate to the narrator's realization that his actions are contradictory are the feelings of increasing self-consciousness. Consequently, the narrator wavers between his perceptions of whether the man he killed was indeed a potential friend, or that war itself warranted the victim to the status of "foe." The poem takes a conversationally transitional turn when the word "although" is used in the fourth line of the third stanza. This word suggests that the narrator is going to contradict his claim, to some degree, and that "the man he killed" was *not* a foe.

Moving into the fourth stanza, we discover this is indeed the case. The first line does not reveal this, however: "He thought he'd 'list, perhaps." The line contains

a distinct, regionalized, British vernacular usage of “list” as opposed to “enlist” to aid in constructing the conversational language of the narrator. The phrase “off-hand like” is another example of Hardy’s use of stylistic idiom. The narrator then associates his “foe” with himself when he uses the words “just as I” (between two dashes, as though the phrase is a recursive aside); then, the narrator goes on to further humanize the soldier he killed by remarking on his (the opposing soldier’s) being “out of work” and the selling of “his traps.” Ominously, the stanza ends by revealing that there was “no other reason why” the soldier decided to join the war. Hardy has successfully equated the narrator to his foe and vice versa.

The last stanza confirms the narrator’s sentiment; making a blanket statement about his war-created predicament:

‘Yes; quaint and curious war is!  
 You shoot a fellow down  
 You’d treat if met where any bar is,  
 Or help to half-a-crown!’ (5).

This series of lines deems war “quaint and curious” because of its effect on a human being in particular and humanity in general. Hardy is asserting through his narrator that war renders human relationships impossible. Hardy’s measured injection of casualness into these phrases magnifies the contrast between war and peace by

creating a comparison between the seemingly simple lines and the intensity of the definitions behind the words. In other words, the textual simplicity, the pleasing iambic trimeter, and the ending rhyme in “The Man He Killed” create a beguilingly easy, sedate atmosphere. This atmosphere serves as a fluid conduit through which the reader is transported to the rattled conscience of the war-torn narrator. Therefore, the general meaning of the poem—that war makes the human unfeasible—is revealed more clearly with a parallel relationship between the denotations and informal idiom.

Rhymes are also used to an important degree in “The Man He Killed.” The poem follows an *ABAB CDCD EFEF GHGH IJJ* rhyming scheme. Also, rhyme in Hardy’s poem creates particular expectations for the reader, which may be misleading. It is difficult to imagine such a human, conversationally toned implication successfully delivered with such a formal rhyme pattern. In this way, though, the rhyming scheme helps to create the language-theme paradox in the poem: while the rhyme lightens the mood, it assists in the movement of the language, thus helping to more seamlessly impart Hardy’s message concerning war, regret, and humanity’s fragility. For example, the lines:

But ranged as infantry,  
And staring face to face,



I shot at him as he at me,  
 And killed him in his place (5)

are easy to read; however, the message within the rhythmic language is hardened and unpleasant.

By using a rhyme pattern in the poem, Hardy creates an additional contrast that is parallel to the differences of war and peace. He establishes a peaceful positioning and harmony in the words, but the ideas based upon them are dissonant and grim. The rhyming, informal diction contributes to the general meaning of the poem, for it clarifies the change from a friend to a foe. The poem successfully evokes emotion by keeping with this informality; by maintaining its informal diction even though it is written in a formal style. The diction displaces this fact and humanizes the narrator.

Too, the poem evokes an emotional response from the reader due to its *lack* of allusive elements to emotional constructs. For example, the narrator never delineates into expository sadness, external loathing or obvious self-hatred, but is mentally balanced on the edge of dialogical or monological rumination, and what is apparently a gradual illumination and acknowledgment of the ironies of war. Thus, by the last stanza, the crescendo reaches an apex of sagely sarcasm:

'Yes; quaint and curious war is!  
 You shoot a fellow down

You'd treat if met where any bar is,  
Or help to half-a-crown!' (5)

The poem is simply one soldier relaying his tale of meeting another soldier, fighting and killing him, and remarking on how easily this foe might have been a chum in a pub in a context other than war. The subtly chilling realization is that the listener (or reader), given the informal diction of the narrator, could be a person in a pub, listening.

Though Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" has a few aspects in common with Hardy's "The Man He Killed," the two poems are distinctly different. While both poems use rhyme to a significant degree, for example, Owen's "Dulce" emphasizes a more formal diction, along with use of metaphor and graphic imagery. Also, the narrator's purpose in "Dulce et Decorum Est" is to recount a memory of his *witnessing* a fellow comrade dying in a gas raid and then to inject emotion into the reader by changing from first person to second person in the fourth stanza, targeting the reader more directly. The result is an instinctive, perhaps even numbed response on the part of the reader: we are displaced into the narrator's nightmarish predicament and then cornered by the message at the end of the poem.

The soldiers in "Dulce et Decorum Est" are presented through a blur of dark verbal forms—*coughing*,

*haunting, fumbling, yelling, stumbling, guttering, choking, drowning (twice), smothering, writhing, hanging, and gargling.* These words aid in constructing the sense of the war's horrific consequences. They are examples of Owen's facility with descriptive diction, and are uses in language that create the poet's intention of delivering a warning. In other words, Owen is suggesting that war causes us to "writhe," "drown," "choke," "stumble," "yell," "fumble," etc. He warns us with his words. This portentous tone is consistent throughout the poem. Consider the first stanza:

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. (117)

The soldiers are not only "bent double," but they are also "like old beggars"; they are so "drunk with fatigue" that their humanity has been debased. In addition to the simile "like old beggars," the soldiers are compared to "hags" in

the second line. This comparison aids the first stanza in presenting a tone of somnolent, painful restlessness, as the soldiers must “march asleep” and “limp on” despite being “blood-shod.” The reader, distant from this war-torn struggle, is alive and infused with the sensory struggle of the soldiers’ suffering, but the soldiers themselves are “blind” to the struggles around them and “deaf even to the hoots of tired, out- / stripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.”<sup>1</sup>

A stark tonal shift takes place in the second stanza, and we are pulled harshly out of our hazy, fatigue created by the first stanza and “flung” into a frightening realization:

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. (117)

This contrasts so starkly to the first stanza, in fact, that it is enough to induce a visceral response in the reader. Suddenly, we are thrown into an “ecstasy of fumbling”—a prime example of Owen’s figurative language—in which panicked soldiers, in the midst (and “mist”) of a poisonous gas raid, are all dashing to put on their “helmets,” or gas-masks. However, the narrator realizes with horror

(and we, too) that “someone still was yelling out and stumbling / And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime...” Interesting that “fire” is used here as it suggests hell: we will discover parallel metaphorical suggestion in the fourth stanza.

The next few portions of the poem are those that are most painful to focus on, and are, too, the most important. For it is in this dying soldier that the narrator sees the crime and futility of war. The narrator witnesses the soldier “drowning” under a “green sea” of poison gas—this bleak, frightening image is another example of Owen’s craft with figurative language and graphic imagery.

In the third stanza, which is but a couplet, we bear witness to the way the dying soldier imprints the narrator’s thought, so much so that this dying plagues the narrator’s subconscious: “In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning” (117). The fourth stanza conditionally invites the reader to join the nightmare, and relentlessly imparts graphic images of the soldier’s poisoned face; we feel as though we too have been “flung” into the wagon, intimately sharing the narrator’s struggle with death:

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
Behind the wagon 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. (117)

In lines three through eight of this stanza, a cascade of graphic imagery falls upon the reader. The "white eyes" contrast starkly with the soldier's dark, bloodied face, which is "like a devil's sick of sin." This simile is especially notable, for it parallels with the mention of fire in line four of stanza two. Keeping with this thought, the narrator uses the words "corrupted", "obscene", and "vile" in the last stanza, all signifying that the soldier is tainted and baneful as a result of his circumstances. Not only has he lost his innocence, but he can never regain it. The graphic imagery used in "Dulce et Decorum Est," especially in the last stanza, instills in the reader such vivid mental pictures that, as with the narrator, the experience becomes part of our "smothering dreams."

The last four lines effectively draw the poem to a close, asserting that were we to have witnessed all of these dreadful things (which, in a sense, we *have*, especially

given the quality of the imagery and the response it induces), then we would not be prone to an over-zealous sense of patriotism; we would not be *for* war, but indeed, would oppose it fiercely. Were we to have witnessed the agony of death on the soldier's face, just as the narrator did, then we would know the terror of combat and its associated horrors.

The rhyme scheme in "Dulce et Decorum Est" is similar to that of Hardy's "The Man He Killed": ABABCDCD EFEFGH GH IJJKLKL MNMN. However, the rhyming in this poem plays a different role from that of Hardy's "The Man He Killed." While the rhyming in Hardy's poem makes reading easier, and creates a language-theme paradox in the poem, the same technique employed in Owen's poem creates a sense of prodding tension and movement. Thus, the rhymes are more subtle in Owen's lengthier lines, save perhaps for the rhythmical repetition of the word "drowning" in the fourteenth and sixteenth lines.

Both "The Man He Killed" and "Dulce et Decorum Est" are effective in their anti-war messages, and their means at getting to that effect are highly distinctive. While Hardy's poem relies on stylistic idiom and informal diction—and a more prevalent sense of rhyme to contrast the language and its message—Owen tends to rely more on a prodding urgency in his poem; it evokes emotion

and a more intuitive response by using a stream of graphic images and a more formal diction to place us in the setting.

Despite their differences, both poems communicate with great success the tragedy that is war. Their message aids us in realizing, specifically, how terrible World War I was to Hardy, who watched it as an objective observer, and to Owen, who was an actual soldier (and who, in a darkly ironic twist of fate, was killed in the line of duty). These poems are important pieces of literature that carry a powerful message about the problems, hardships, and predicaments posed by times of struggle.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> The reference to the Five-Nines (or 5.9-inch caliber shells) dates the poem and places it within the context of World War I specifically.



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