



## **An Introduction to Teaching Wilfred Owen**

**by Lucy Freeland**

**2018-10-23 15:41:45**

Wilfred Owen has always been one of my favourite writers to teach, because his poetry is like a stripped nerve ' alive, electric, painful, and full of power. Getting students to engage with this material can be the key to converting your classroom's most fervent poetry cynic into an advocate for the pen as mightier than the sword! It is worth bearing in mind, however, that both world wars are starting to lose their immediacy for students. Having grandparents who fought even in the Second World War already puts me in a minority in my staff room, so those in the generation below must feel the distance even more keenly. To that end, watching recitations by actors via YouTube and stressing the incredible human interest of a body of work created within fifteen hair-raising months offers one ticket to success. These are not just the poems of another faceless 'dead guy' from years ago ' these are the very real products of war and of humanity stretched to its absolute limit.

Whilst Owen's language speaks for itself, this poetry is dynamic and requires, in my opinion, bringing to life by fleshing out historical detail. Authentic propaganda, British Path footage of shell-shocked soldiers, snapshots of the trenches, handwritten letters, diary entries ' it all combines to create the image of Owen as a relatable, fallible human in a situation of utter global horror. And how did he react to his hellish surroundings' Quite simply, by writing. In my experience, Owen's compulsion to return to our basic form of communication and put pen to paper is something our fast-paced, social media generation find very humbling. I like to ask them what the alternative would be today ' would we tweet from the trenches' One of my students suggested Instagram would be polarised between figures of authority manipulating #gridgoals by showing valiant propaganda, and real soldiers depicting intermittently censored pictures of the horrors of war.

To that end, my resources rely heavily on visual stimuli. The outline of lessons via PowerPoint take as their background the very real scenes of suffering, hardship and sometimes even moments of unexpected humour. I foreground Owen's writing by first explaining what he was reacting against, showing jingoism to be at variance with reality. Free writing is a great starter in a module on Owen's poetry as it allows the students to put themselves in the boots of the soldiers. Working to a timer also recreates a sense of urgency, of scribbling down thoughts and feelings like wildfire in between the call of duty. Using a backing track of conflict from YouTube and dimming the lights ever so slightly creates an immersive experience ' harness that imagination! The facsimile documents made available by the University of Oxford, therefore, are something I can't wait to use. Seeing work edited and scribbled on by the man himself will bring the words to life in a way no printed edition, however beautiful, would be able to manage.

'Dulce et Decorum est' and 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' are my go-to poems. It is easy, once the groundwork has been laid, to slip in language analysis in a way that carries real meaning for students. Why has Owen chosen the oxymoron of 'doomed youth?; what point is he trying to make' What is the effect of that verb 'flung' in the ever-powerful 'behind the wagon we flung him in?' Why not used 'placed?' Why use present participles in the tricolon 'he plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning?' What is Owen trying to say about watching somebody

die?

The old teaching adage of 'a technique must always be followed by the effect it creates' is often something I find I do not have to reiterate in essays resulting from this module. Students love finding the devices Owen uses as it feels like decoding someone's most private thoughts and emotions. Indeed, it seems second nature to attribute an effect when the poetry is so emotionally charged.

Owen's poetry makes the job of an English teacher easy. This is why people write, and this is why language is powerful!

## Sample material

- [WW1 poetry -- Teaching plan yr 9 \(.docx\)](#)
- [Exposure -- Teaching plan yr 9 \(.docx\)](#)
- [Exposure techniques -- worksheet \(.docx\)](#)
- [Anthem for Doomed Youth -- powerpoint \(.pptx\)](#)
- [Anthem for Doomed Youth -- worksheet \(.docx\)](#)
- [Dulce essay -- powerpoint \(.pptx\)](#)
- All combined: [Owen teaching material](#)

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## Owen's influence on Carol Ann Duffy

by Marcy Tanter

2018-10-17 16:13:46

Carol Ann Duffy's poem 'An Unseen' depicts a soldier going off to war, but we don't know which war, or even which country the soldier represents, giving him a universal quality<sup>[1]</sup>. The narrator is watching them walk away 'towards the dying time?[he] walked to the edge of absence,' to be seen no more. As she continues to watch the space where the soldier had been, she thinks of the child that soldier will never father, and multiplies that circumstance by so many times that she concludes '?all future / past, an unseen. Has forever been then' Yes, / forever has been.' Not only will we lose a generation of men who will never be fathers, but we also lose an unseen generation whom we will never know. The toll of war is not just on the present and the past; it also touches the future which, for her (and for us) is an unseen time.

Duffy's poem is a direct response, after almost one hundred years, to Wilfred Owen's 'The Send-off'. In this poem, Owen's soldiers are marching off to World War One, singing, with flowers pinned on their chests by the crowd members who are cheering them on as they leave. The narrator watches the soldiers get on the train and depart. This narrator, like Duffy's, watches the train depart and thinks of the men on that train, aware of what may lie in their future:

Shall they return to beating of great bell  
In wild train-loads?  
A few, a few, too few for drums and yells,  
May creep back, silent, to the village well,  
Up half-known roads. (*W. Owen. This is no. 165 in ed. 'The Complete Poems and Fragments'*)

Should these men happen to return, they will not be met with the same fanfare that has sent them off. The narrator realizes that it will not be train-loads who return, but only a few, whose return won't be noticed by anyone. They will come home to silent villages and towns, even to be silent themselves. So while Carol Ann Duffy's men won't come home or have children, Owen's might come home ' but their silence could well result in a similar end.

Wilfred Owen's legacy is greater than a record of his feelings about the war; what he has left us is a reminder that humanity's survival depends upon these men we send off into battle without much thought. He notes that the men went off '[s]o secretly, like wrongs hushed-up,' as if they were to blame for the slaughter to which they were being sent, from which too few would return. Carol Ann Duffy latches on to Owen's poignant imagery as her soldiers 'walked to the edge of absence?', a great nothing from which there was no return. All of Owen's soldiers, the survivors and those killed in action, have now passed away, and Duffy acknowledges them by saying 'forever has been.' For those men, forever was indeed 'an unseen' time: their lives were either a short lifetime or years of being wracked with awful memories. For us, for the future readers of Owen's and Duffy's poems, 'forever' lives on as these poems are read and re-read, as long as soldiers are sent off to war, in silence or with fan-fare.

#### **Editor's note:**

[1]The poem "An Unseen" by Carol Ann Duffy is in copyright and cannot be reproduced here. It is [published on the Guardian website](#) for personal use and can be reused under certain conditions (see <http://syndication.theguardian.com/open-licence-terms/>).

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## **"The Poetry is in the Pity": Wilfred Owen and the Memory of the First World War**

**by Vincent Trott**

**2018-10-16 12:12:19**

A memorial to the poets of the First World War stands in the corner of Westminster Abbey. Inscribed upon the memorial are sixteen names, including Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg and Rupert Brooke. One voice, however, speaks for this collective: also inscribed upon the stone slab, encircling the names of all the other poets, are the words of Wilfred Owen: 'My subject is War and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the Pity' (1963, 31). This memorial reflects Owen's prominent reputation. He is, without doubt, the most famous poet of the First World War.

We take Owen's fame for granted today, and few would deny his literary quality. But there was nothing inevitable about the poet's rise to prominence. When Owen was killed in action in November 1918, a week before the Armistice, he was largely unknown. Only five of his poems had been published, and these had not reached a large audience. How, then, did Owen become such an important figure?

In 1920 the publishing house Chatto & Windus published the first collection of Owen's poetry, edited by Edith Sitwell and Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon ' another well-known poet of the war ' had met Owen when both were convalescing at Edinburgh's Craiglockhart hospital in 1917. He encouraged Owen to write during this period, and would continue to champion his poetry after the Armistice. Sassoon and Sitwell's edition did not sell in great numbers, but newspapers responded favourably. The *Manchester Guardian*, for instance, described Owen's poems 'as enough to rank him among the very few poets whose work has more than a passing value' (1920, 3).

As the 1920s progressed, Owen began to attract more readers, particularly as disillusionment with the war began to surface. In 1929 a publishing boom in war memoirs and novels ' the most successful of which was Erich Maria Remarque's 1928 *All Quiet on the Western Front* 'revealed a public appetite for books which depicted the conflict as horrific and futile. Owen was not yet a household name, but his poetry chimed with these representations of the war. In 1930 the BBC included his poetry in its Armistice Day radio broadcast, and in 1931 Chatto & Windus decided to publish a new collection of his poems, edited by the war poet and memoirist Edmund Blunden.<sup>[1]</sup> This new edition was also a critical success: a reviewer in the *Sunday Times* wrote that 'I cannot believe that anyone who really cares about English poetry will leave this book unread' (1930, 9).

Despite this, in 1936, W. B. Yeats famously omitted Owen from his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, arguing that 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry' (1936, xxxiv). Yeats's decision was controversial, however, and the BBC's magazine, the *Listener*, expressed surprise at this omission (Redmayne 1936, iv). Indeed, the literary world was generally more appreciative: Ian Parsons's anthology, *The Progress of Poetry* (1936), for example, included seven of Owen's poems. Editors were also drawn to Owen throughout the Second World War, his poems appearing in Julian Symons's *An Anthology of War Poetry* (1942) and Robert Nichols's *Anthology of War Poetry 1914 ' 1918* (1943).

During the 1960s Owen's reputation increased dramatically. The composer Benjamin Britten incorporated Owen's poems into his *War Requiem*(1962), which marked the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral. Chatto & Windus also played a crucial role, publishing a new collection of Owen's work, edited by Cecil Day Lewis, in 1963. Evolving understandings of the First World War further bolstered Owen's reputation. In the light of the Second World War ' which had a clearer moral justification ' people increasingly began to view the First World War as a futile bloodbath. Owen's poems, which emphasised the war's devastation, complemented this perspective. Critics responded enthusiastically to his work, and anthologies ' such as Brian Gardner's *Up the Line to Death*(1964)'privileged the poems of Owen and Sassoon over more patriotic or heroic depictions.

Educationalists also started to recognise Owen's significance. His poetry first appeared on A-Level examination papers in 1961 and was taught and examined regularly in subsequent years. From 1967 onwards, many pupils studied Owen at O-level, his poetry reaching an even wider audience after the government increased the school-leaving age to 16 in 1972. Although not all schools taught Owen, many pupils encountered his poetry throughout the 1970s and beyond. These developments cemented Owen's position within the canon of English literature and reinforced a moral message that warned against the brutality of war. Gradually, Owen's poetry became central to popular understandings of the conflict.

Literary, commercial and educational factors, therefore, combined with an evolving memory of the war centred on suffering rather than heroism, enhanced Owen's reputation throughout the twentieth century. In 2018, a hundred years after his death on the Western Front, Owen retains his position as the pre-eminent poet of the First World War.

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## Notes

[1] An advert for the radio broadcast can be found in *The Times*, 8 November 1930, p. 9.

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# Dulce et Decorum Est: Wilfred Owen's Latin

by Elizabeth Vandiver

**2018-10-15 09:56:16**

Wilfred Owen fought hard to learn Latin. He was acutely aware of the importance of the classical tradition in English poetry. In addition, he was determined to attend university if he could, and he needed Latin for the entrance examinations. However, his educational path meant that opportunities for learning the language were scarce.

Owen began Latin at his first school, the Birkenhead Institute, but when he was fourteen his family moved to Shrewsbury. He enrolled in the Shrewsbury Technical Institute, which did not offer Latin. His later attempts to study the language on his own were only moderately successful. When Owen chose to give a Latin title to one of his poems, Siegfried Sassoon had to correct his friend's garbled 'Apologia pro poema mea' to 'Apologia pro poemate meo.'

It is one of literary history's great ironies, then, that one particular Latin phrase is now better known from Wilfred Owen than from its original ancient Roman context. A Google search for the words *dulce et decorum est* brings up thousands of hits; the first forty-nine of these reference Owen, and the fact that those words were actually written by Horace, a Roman poet of the first century BCE, only emerges on the sixth page of the Google search where many people would probably never find it. A search for the whole phrase (*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*) does feature Horace as the first hit, but the next ten hits and most of those for the

next several pages refer to Owen. Owen has displaced Horace as the author of these Latin words.

And yet it seems quite probable that Wilfred Owen himself did not know the origin of what he called, in a letter to his mother, 'the famous Latin tag'. By the late nineteenth century, the phrase *dulce et decorum est* had taken on a life of its own as a stirring sentiment to use in patriotic stories and poems and as an inscription for war memorials. Douglas Kerr suggests that Owen may have heard Lieutenant-Colonel W. Shirley's rousing recruiting speech, which includes the Latin line (1993, 173-74, 183), and Guy Cuthbertson points out that a poem by that title appeared in the *Boy's Own Paper* in 1916 (2014, 163). Along with these possible contemporary sources, I suggest another—a Boer War memorial in the vestibule of St. Pancras New Church, Bloomsbury.

In October 1915, Owen spent two weeks in a boarding house on Tavistock Square while he was in London to enlist in the Artists' Rifles. The Headquarters of the Artists' Rifles is on Duke's Road, just opposite the churchyard of St Pancras. Owen does not mention the church in any of his extant letters from this period, but it seems quite possible that he went into it. Someone standing in the doorway of the Headquarters and looking across the road would see the church's famous Caryatid Porch, an architectural feature that could well have piqued Owen's interest in the building. If he did go in, he would have seen in the vestibule a memorial to Alfred Frederick Cleave, who died in the Boer War, aged twenty-two—coincidentally, the age Owen was when he enlisted. *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* appears prominently on this memorial, before the personal inscription.<sup>1</sup>

Did Owen see this memorial, or hear Shirley's lecture, or read the poem in *Boy's Own Paper*? There is no way to know. But taken together, these possible sources remind us that the tag *dulce et decorum est* was embedded in contemporary British culture, as a standard form of praising and commemorating death in battle.

Certainly, when Owen denounced *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* as 'the Old Lie?', he was very likely thinking more of the tag's militaristic use in British popular culture than of anything that Horace may have meant to imply about warfare in 1st century BCE Rome. Horace himself, after all, had been a soldier who served at Philippi; he was not writing out of ignorance about the reality of grisly death in battle or out of any naive belief that dying from a sword- or spear-wound would be 'sweet' or pleasant in any literal sense. Owen's indignation was not so much at the classical saying itself, I think, as at the uses to which it had been put by specifically British authors. As is well known, early drafts of 'Dulce et Decorum Est' were headed 'To Jessie Pope' and another 'To a Certain Poetess'. I have argued elsewhere that the faux Latin inscription at the end of Newbolt's 'Clifton Chapel' may also have been in Owen's mind as part of what he meant by 'the Old Lie' (2010, 395). Unlike Horace, Jessie Pope and Henry Newbolt could both fairly be accused of glorifying and romanticizing realities of which they had no experience, and both of them wrote specifically for children, with the apparent intent to make those children 'ardent for some desperate glory'.

How deeply ironic it is, then, that Owen's poem has become so embedded a part of modern literary consciousness that readers cannot now encounter Horace without thinking of Owen. Owen's recasting Horace's words as 'the Old Lie' has shaped the way later generations read not only Owen's poem, but Horace's as well. Indeed, Owen's framing has affected modern readings of other ancient literature too. As a professor of Classics at a small American college, I have encountered many students who assume, without hesitation, that any poetry concerning war must be 'anti-war'. They automatically read the *Iliad* as an anti-war poem; they assume that Horace must have been writing ironically when he declared that death for one's fatherland was 'sweet and fitting?'; they read a bitterly ironic tone into Simonides's epitaph for the Spartan dead at Thermopylae

(?Stranger, go tell the Spartans that we lie here, obedient to their laws?) as well. Owen's presentation of ancient militarism as an 'Old Lie' has carried the field, and teachers of classics now have to persuade their students to believe that there were times and contexts in which such exhortations to die for one's country were not meant ironically. Owen famously said that 'the true Poets must be truthful?; for many readers, 'Dulce et Decorum Est' has recast basic assumptions about what can be 'true' concerning war and the experience of death in battle.

## Notes

1. See the War Memorials Register WMR-47616 at the Imperial War Museum for further detail.

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# At the Water's Edge: Wilfred Owen and Water

by Gerald Dawe

2018-10-15 09:36:46

By the look of the photograph reproduced in Jon Stallworthy's biography, it was a fairly run-of-the-mill canal but for the bare trees and shattered planks. The Sambre and Oise canal, to which Wilfred Owen led his platoon that lethal day in November 1918, looks chilly, dusky and ominous. Many men died trying to cross the canal; as Stallworthy describes it, the 'far bank bristled with German machine guns?[that] kept up a scorching fire' (Stallworthy 2013, 284-5). The dramatic culmination of the fatal crossing is captured in telling detail: 'Through the hurricane the small figure of Wilfred Owen walked backwards and forwards, between his men, patting them on the shoulder, saying 'Well done' and 'You're doing well, my boy?' before 'at the water's edge, giving a hand with some duckboards, he was hit and killed' (286). According to one witness, the Battalion 'eventually crossed lower down by means of a bridge near the village of Ors, a few miles south of Landrcies' (*Collected Poems* 1963, 178).

Water, like other natural elements, features sparsely in Owen's poetry. The sea, rivers, coastlines and canals are abstract or even shockingly nightmarish, such as 'As under a green sea' in 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' or 'Yet search till grey sea heaves' in 'Elegy in April and September (jabbered among the trees)'. Owen's landscapes are more often than not claustrophobic, alienated, de-familiarised like the Dickensian image of the boat, 'Budging the

sluggard ripples of the Somme' in 'Hospital Barge'.

Might these estranged imaginings go back to his childhood and a bizarre experience in 1902 when, aged nine, Owen along with his parents and siblings visited Ireland for the second time on holiday 'the first had been in 1898 when he was five' That second summer holiday in Tramore, Co. Waterford is recalled in Harold Owen's *Journey from Obscurity* and retold in Stallworthy's biography. Fishing, swimming and strolling seemed to be the order of the day, notwithstanding family anxiety about a shark that had been caught and displayed: 'Tom persuaded two fishermen to help him drag it back, through the darkening village, to the jetty where it had been landed in triumph some hours before. It was restored to its element and sighted in the bay on numerous occasions for many months afterwards' (2013, 26). But it is a further experience in the village which catches the eye.

Out for a walk the family 'came to an open space' and where they were, in Harold's recollection, 'faced with what appeared to be a sheet of water'. The 'eerie quality of a mirage?', 'this mist?', 'utter unreality?', this 'dreamlike unrealness' and 'weird mystery' transforms the ordinary Irish countryside as the family outing 'realized that the water and the wall of mist were receding' (10). The 'whole scene' we are told 'had taken on a transcendent appearance' in which 'my mother and Wilfred were trembling violently' before their mother gives 'a stifled scream' on seeing 'standing ten yards or so from us, the shadowy figure of a tall man'. The father and his family watch as the unresponsive figure disappears: 'We all looked back towards the lake. It was no longer there' (1968, 10-11).

This extraordinary event 'which the local fisherman and his wife 'begged [the Owens] not to speak of it to anyone at all [?] to forget all about it entirely' (1968, 13) 'sounds very like a classical Irish folk tale of the Visitant foretelling of danger and death. In the obscure light of such a disorientating experience are there grounds for psychological insight into what may have been on Owen's mind during the final moments of that self-less rallying of his 'boys' along the deadly water's edge a mere sixteen years later?

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