Dulce et Decorum est – Wilfred Owen : Analysis

The text depicts the front lines of World War I; specifically, of British soldiers attacked with chlorine gas (diossido di cloro, un gas esplosivo). In the rush when the shells with poison gas explode, one soldier is unable to get his mask on in time. The speaker of the poem describes the gruesome effects of the gas on the man and concludes that, if one were to see first-hand the reality of war, one might not repeat mendacious platitudes like *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*: "How sweet and honourable it is to die for one's country."
These horrors are what inspired Owen to write the poem, he was able to voice his own opinion on the atrocities of war, and what it was like to be in those situations.

The title of this poem means 'It is sweet and fitting'. The title and the Latin exhortation of the final two lines are drawn from the phrase "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" written by the Roman poet Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus):

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori:
mors et fugacem persequitur virum
nec parcit inbellis iuventae
poplitibus timidove tergo.

Dolce e dignitoso è morire per la patria:
la morte raggiunge anche l'uomo che fugge
e non risparmia le gambe tremanti
o le spalle della gioventú imbelle.

These words were well known and often quoted by supporters of the war near its inception and so were of particular relevance to soldiers of the era.

The poem is in two parts, each of 14 lines. The first part of the poem (the first 8 line and the second 6 line stanzas) is written in the present as the action happens and everyone is reacting to the events around them. In the second part (the third 2 line and the last 12 line stanzas), the narrator writes as though at a distance from the horror: he refers to what is happening twice as if in a "dream," as though standing back watching the events or even recalling them. Studying the two parts of the poem reveals a change in the use of language from visual impressions outside the body, to sounds produced by the body – or a movement from the visual to the visceral. In the opening lines, the scene is set with visual phrases such as "haunting flares," but after the gas attack the poem has sounds produced by the victim – "guttering," "choking," "gargling." In this way, Owen evokes the terrible effects of chlorine gas corroding the body from inside.

In May 1917 Owen was diagnosed with neurasthenia (shell-shock=stress post traumatico, nevrastenia, esaurimento nervoso, nel suo caso dovuto alla guerra) and sent to Craiglockhart hospital near Edinburgh to recover. Whilst receiving treatment at the hospital, Owen met the poet Siegfried Sassoon, who was to have a major impact upon his life and work and to play a crucial role in the dissemination of Owen's poetry following his untimely death in 1918, aged 25.