

Poetryclass Fresh ideas for learning from The Poetry Society

'Dulce et Decorum est' & intertextuality in Wilfred Owen

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Overview

This resource uses Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum est' as a springboard for discussion about the role and implications of allusion in poetry, an aspect of literature often overlooked with younger groups.

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori – or the “old Lie”, as Owen describes it – is a quotation from the *Odes* of the Roman poet Horace, in which it is claimed that “it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country”. Circulate both Horace and Owen’s poems (reprinted below) to your pupils, asking them to read first the Horace and then the Owen.



Topics at a glance

- War poems
- Classical literature
- Literary heritage poems
- Comparing texts
- Allusion

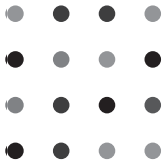
Horace: background & context

Quintus Horatius Flaccus (Horace) was a Roman poet writing about 2,000 years ago. Horace was born in Italy, around 65 BC, and was educated at prestigious academies in Rome and Athens.

Most importantly – at least from a historian’s perspective – Horace’s life bears witness to considerable political upheaval. This included the civil war which started after the assassination of Julius Caesar; the battle at Actium (31 BC) where Mark Anthony was defeated; and the rise and consolidation of power by Caesar Augustus (formally known as Octavian). This period of transition between the Roman republic and Augustus’ rule heavily influenced his poetry as Horace was one of a number of poets commissioned by the Emperor Augustus to write favourably about his rule and its positive effects on Rome.

Horace’s ode is part of a collection of six poems focused on patriotic themes (known as the *Roman Odes*). For the most part, Horace claims that the young man can achieve virtue in battle and war, a sentiment his readership would have accepted quite readily. Since death comes even to those who turn tail and flee, is it not better to die in the pursuit of victory for one’s homeland?

Left: Wilfred Owen, from *Poems* (1920)



While the poem exudes jingoistic, pro-war rhetoric against Rome's age-old enemies the Parthians, note that there are moments in the poem after line 13 which convey war in a less favourable way. Indeed, one of the issues to always consider when reading Horace is whether he means what he says. Horace had first-hand experience of warfare, having served in the Roman army in his youth. It is no doubt significant that in another of Horace's poems (*Odes* II.7.10) he admits that when he fought at the Battle of Philippi, he dropped his shield and fled.



Right: Quintus Horatius Flaccus (Horace) as imagined by the German artist Anton von Werner, 1905.

Different contexts, differing attitudes

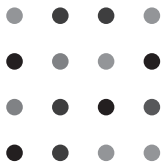
Horace wrote in an age of revolution. In his youth, he had lived through the atrocity of a bloody civil war and fought in some of its battles. This war had begun with the assassination of the dictator, Julius Caesar, but ended with victory for Caesar's nephew Octavian, who defeated his opponent, Mark Anthony, in the Battle of Actium (31BC).

Octavian then began a systematic campaign to put Rome back on her feet – under his own monarchical rule, rather than that of the aristocracy (the senate). To legitimize this controversial move, he renamed himself 'Augustus' (a name suggestive of religious reverence) and began a publicity campaign to emphasise his role in bringing peace to Rome. Horace's poems were all part of this publicity, which projected an image of a Rome newly returned to peace and prosperity, and presented Augustus as a saviour.

Owen's poem was written in 1917 during the First World War – a year before Owen's death in action. Conscripted in 1915 till his death in 1918, Owen's experience of war was quite different from the hand to hand fighting experienced by Horace. The horrors of chemical warfare loom large in 'Dulce et Decorum est'. Owen had experienced the atrocities of war personally: he was hospitalised with concussion and later suffered shellshock. Owen never lived to see the conclusion of World War I.

Allusion

Owen's quotation of Horace is called an allusion. An allusion is more than simply copying from another work: it is a conscious reference that invites critical engagement with another work that the reader is assumed to have read.



A scene from the altar of peace in Rome, built during Augustus's rule (17 BC). This tranquil image displays a fertility goddess with two babies at her breast; various flora and fauna give the impression of a plentiful harvest. It suggests the welcome return of peace and prosperity after years of bloody war.

Photo: Manfred Heyde.

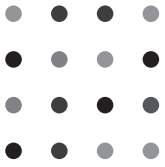
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Discussion points

Consider the difference in emphasis between these two poems. What can we deduce about how attitudes to war might have changed between ancient Roman times and the First World War? What might account for these differences?

- Allusions to Latin poetry as used by Owen might be thought to lend gravity to a piece of literature by signalling or evoking a bygone age or literary tradition. If this is true, what are the implications of using a quotation about war from an age in which attitudes were so different from our own?
- Why do you think Owen chose to keep the phrase *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* in the original Latin? As an “old Lie”, is the phrase retained in Latin to indicate that this notion is old fashioned, or that it is never sufficiently challenged? What poetic merits might there be to keeping the phrase in Latin?
- In his Ode Horace claims that the poor man can win honour in battle, yet the phrase in Owen’s poem, which he complains is designed to goad young men into battle, is only understood by the rich and educated Latin-speakers of the twentieth century. Horace was frequently taught at private schools, and most WWI officers, compared to the working class privates, were privately educated. What do you think this says about Owen’s choice?
- Horace’s poems are thought to have been part of a propaganda campaign. Does that affect how we think of them? Do we trust what he says?
- Do you think it is ever “sweet and fitting to die for one’s country”?



The National September 11 Memorial & Museum. Photo: Edward Stojakovic bit.ly/1RZMDue

Further discussion: Roman poetry in other contexts

A quotation from *The Aeneid*, a poem by Horace's contemporary Virgil, was used in the memorial at the World Trade Centre site in New York.

Why do you think a quotation from a 2,000 year old Latin poem was chosen to memorialise the victims of the Twin Towers attacks? Does invoking the classical past add a sense of timelessness to such a memorial? Is a quotation from 2,000 years ago and in a different language somehow to be taken more seriously?

Page Fright

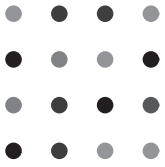
To explore 'Dulce et Decorum est' further, take a look at our Page Fright project where spoken word artist Joelle Taylor performs the poem, and discusses how it is still relevant today. bit.ly/owenjoelletaylor

Notes on Horace's Odes 3.2 (see below)

Parthians: The Parthian Empire, also known as the Arsacid Empire, was based across the Middle East and was an enemy of Rome.

Ceres: Roman goddess of agriculture. The men who followed her 'secret rites' were members of a distinct cult who worshipped her.

Jupiter: The king of the Roman gods, and also god of the sky and of thunder.

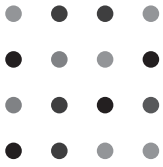


Odes, 3.2

By Quintus Horatius Flaccus, c.23BC

Let the boy, toughened by military service,
learn how to make bitterest hardship his friend,
and as a horseman, with fearful lance,
go to vex the insolent Parthians,
spending his life in the open, in the heart 5
of dangerous action. And seeing him, from
the enemy's walls, let the warring
tyrant's wife, and her grown-up daughter, sigh:
'Ah, don't let the inexperienced lover
provoke the lion that's dangerous to touch, 10
whom a desire for blood sends raging
so swiftly through the core of destruction.'
It's sweet and fitting to die for one's country.
Yet death chases after the soldier who runs,
and it won't spare the cowardly back 15
or the limbs, of peace-loving young men.
Virtue, that's ignorant of sordid defeat,
shines out with its honour unstained, and never
takes up the axes or puts them down
at the request of a changeable mob. 20
Virtue, that opens the heavens for those who
did not deserve to die, takes a road denied
to others, and scorns the vulgar crowd
and the bloodied earth, on ascending wings.
And there's a true reward for loyal silence: 25
I forbid the man who divulged those secret
rites of Ceres, to exist beneath
the same roof as I, or untie with me
the fragile boat: often careless Jupiter
included the innocent with the guilty, 30
but lame-footed Punishment rarely
forgets the wicked man, despite his start.

Translation: A.S.Kline, 2003.



Dulce et Decorum Est

By Wilfred Owen, 1917

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 5
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.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time; 10
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.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, 15
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin; 20
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 25
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.