

# **The Visual Imagery Describing the Terrible Condition of the Victims of the War in Wilfred Owen's "Dulce Et Docurom Est"**

Rr. Arielia Yustisiana

Universitas Katolik Widya Mandala Madiun

## **Abstract**

*The article is aimed to find out and analyze the visual imagery that describes the terrible condition of the victims of the war in Wilfred Owen's "Dulce Et Docurom Est". Wilfred Owen is the English War Poet. The article is written in order that the readers know about the gruesome condition of the war.*

*The primary data of the article is a poem written by the war poet, namely, Wilfred Owen. There are some theories used to analyze the data. The basic theories are imagery and setting. There are seven imageries: visual imagery, auditory imagery, olfactory imagery, gustatory imagery, tactile imagery, kinaesthetic imagery and organic imagery. The poem is analyzed by using one poetic device, that is, visual imagery. Another theory is setting. In regard with the topic, the theory of setting is important because the analysis deals with the terrible condition of World War I. Library research is used to collect the data.*

*Every line of the poem visualizes a very terrible depiction of discomfort and lack of dignity that has been experienced by the soldiers. The most vivid image of the victim's condition is when one of the soldiers feels shocked because of sudden gas attack. The particularly graphic nature of the speaker's descriptions emphasizes the idea of death in war.*

**Keywords:** *visual imagery, setting, victim, World War I*

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Background of Study**

One of the literary branches is poetry. According to Kennedy, poetry is a rhythmical composition of words expressing an attitude, designed to surprise and delight, and to arouse an emotional response (2010: 656). Poetry is a unique literary art because readers need thoughtful imagination to interpret such a work. When readers hear the word 'poetry', they will have something in their mind, that is, a poem. A poem is a piece of literary work written by a poet. According to Annas in *How the Poetry Works*,

A poem is concerned with emotion, it is emotion shaped, controlled, and contained in form. A poem often says something significant; it attempts to achieve beauty. Of course, what is significant and beautiful is open to discussion and may change with time and place (1996: 181).

Reading a poem needs a particular emotion to understand its deep meaning because it is concerned with ideas and insights. Everyone has their own understanding in order to interpret the meaning of a poem. Sometimes a poem describes the experiences of the poet himself. One of the poets that explores his life experiences in his literary works is Wilfred Owen. Wilfred Owen was a famous British war poet in World War I. He served as an infantry officer, was awarded a decoration for bravery, and was killed a week before the armistice.

The researcher gets interested in discussing one of Owen's war poems entitled "Dulce et Decorum Est". In this poem, Owen would like to criticize how terrible the war is. His opinion is that death in war is gruesome, undignified, and in no way sweet or becoming as is suggested by the quote referenced in the poem –Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori. This opinion resonates throughout the piece, particularly through the use of figurative language and compelling imagery. Imagery is language that evokes sensory images. There are seven kinds of imagery, that is, visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, kinaesthetic, and organic imageries. The researcher focuses on the study of imagery dealing with terrible condition of the war in Owen's poem entitled "Dulce et Decorum Est".

### **Problem of Research**

Some poetic terms are used. They deal with the setting of Wilfred Owen's poem entitled "Dulce et Decorum Est". The poetic terms are included in sense devices. The article is purposed to analyze the imageries describing the terrible condition of the victims of the war in Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est"

## **REVIEW OF RELATED THEORIES**

### **Imagery**

Imagery is language that evokes sensory images. Baldick states that

Imagery is a rather vague critical term covering those uses of language in a literary work that evoke sense-impressions by literal or figurative reference to perceptible or concrete objects, scenes, actions, or states, as distinct from the language of abstract argument or exposition (1990: 160).

The word 'imagery' is derived from the word 'image' that means a pictorial likeness, literal or figurative, that illustrates idea, object, or action by appeal to the senses. Myers explains "most images in poetry are specific and carefully selected and contain an implied or explicit statement organically connected to the rest of the poem (1989: 139). An image is a concrete representation of a sensory experience or object. A literal image refers to something that can be seen, felt, touched, heard, or smelled. Moreover, Munro elucidates seven images as follows:

Sight: visual images (high cliffs)

Hearing: auditory images (the sounds of water running over the rocks)

Touch: tactile images (the cool of water)

Taste: gustatory images (the taste of clean mountain)

Movement/ tension: kinaesthetic images (flowing of the blood)

Internal sensation: organic images (I was angry with my foe) (1993: 194)

Literal images are often infused with meanings that go beyond their literal meaning; in some works 'lines of imagery' –or patterns of repeated images –may be identified.

In addition, Kennedy in his famous literary book entitled *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Drama and Writing* states that the term image suggests a thing seen, when speaking of images in poetry, we generally mean a word or sequences of words that refer to any sensory experience (2010: 1916). An image may occur in a single word, a phrase, a sentence, a stanza or an entire poem. To speak of the imagery of a poem—all its images taken together—is often more useful than to speak of separate images.

### **Setting: The Condition of World War I**

Setting comprehension is useful because it helps the readers understand the way the author creates the characters' action by using words. Therefore, analyzing the setting in a piece of literature can produce a lot of information about its theme. As stated by Kennedy in *An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, setting includes the physical environment of a story, but besides that setting may involve the time of the story (2010: 18).

The setting of a poem entitled “Dulce Et Docurom Est” is World War I. World War I was an extremely bloody war that engulfed Europe from 1914 to 1919, with huge losses of life and little ground lost or won. The spark that started World War I was the assassination of Austria's Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie. The assassination occurred on June 28, 1914 while Ferdinand was visiting the city of Sarajevo in the Austro-Hungarian province of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

From 1914 to 1917, soldiers on each side of the line fought from their trenches. They fired artillery onto the enemy's position and lobbed grenades. However, each time military leaders ordered a full-fledged attack, the soldiers were forced to leave the "safety" of their trenches. Jennifer Rosenberg states as follows:

The only way to overtake the other side's trench was for the soldiers to cross "No Man's Land," the area between the trenches, on foot. Out in the open, thousands of soldiers raced across this barren land in the hopes of reaching the other side. Often, most were hewn down by machine-gun fire and artillery before they even got close. Because of the nature of trench warfare, millions of young men were slaughtered in the battles of World War I. The war quickly became one of attrition, which meant that with so many soldiers being killed daily, eventually the side with the most men would win the war.

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World War I had extremely been the most terrible war ever in the war history. Many soldiers were killed. They had sacrificed their lives for their nation’s glory. Most of them were still younger than the age. What they thought was they would be famous and appreciated by the people of their nation.

Living during the war was tough and required much bravery, courage, and luck if the people were going to stay healthy, let alone and survive. Life on the war front was hard, food was scarce, and staying healthy was difficult due to the conditions of the camps and the trenches.

In addition, Britain as one of the super-power nations was also unprepared for the terrible destructive power of modern weapon. Only few young men joined the war. Joll states that “At first all those who joined the army were volunteers. But in 1916 the government forced men to join the army whether they wanted to

or not (1984: 160)". There was great sorrow for the dead in World War I. The destruction had been terrible. However, it was natural for a nation in these circumstances to persuade itself that the war had somehow been worth it. Those who died in battle have been remembered.

Therefore, there was also anger about the stupidity of war, best expressed by Britain's 'war poets'. McDowall elucidates as follows:

As the most famous of the 'war poets', Wilfred Owen, wrote shortly before he himself died on the battlefield, "My subject is War, and the pity of War." The poems written by young poet-soldiers influenced public opinion, persuading many that the war had been an act against God and man (1995: 161).

When peace came, there were great hopes for a better future. Nevertheless, the suffering of the war victim never ended and brought severe trauma to the disabled young soldiers who came home.

## **METHOD OF RESEARCH**

The primary data of the article is a poem entitled "Dulce et Decorum Est" written by an English war poet, Wilfred Owen. In Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce et Decorum Est", the narrator is Owen himself. The story tells the tale of one particular day when he has to watch one of his fellow soldiers gruesomely suffocate to death from inhalation of chlorine gas. The narrator paints the soldiers as not necessarily heroic, but rather more desperate and terrified.

The approaches that are used to analyze the poem are the historical-biographical and structural approaches. Those approaches are applicable in order to analyze the poem that is revealed from the imagery dealing with terrible condition and the victims of the war. Guerin in his book entitled *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, states that "Put simply, this approach sees the literary work chiefly, if not exclusively, as a reflection of its author's life and times or the life and times of the character in the work (2005: 51)." Moreover, structural approach is used in order to analyze the irony and symbol. According to Scott, "structural approach is used to analyze the word constituent. The appreciation and evaluation will be clear and easy to understand, so we will discover the truth" (1962: 83).

The data is analyzed descriptively. Punch states apparently as follows:

A descriptive study sets out to collect, organize and summarize information about the matter being studied. To describe is to draw a picture of what happened, or of how things are proceeding, or of what a situation or person or event is (or was) like, or means, or of how things are related to each other (2001: 38).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

“Dulce et Decorum est” is one of the memorable poems written by Wilfred Owen. He is a famous war poet who has experienced the terrible World War I. Moreover, he wrote all his experience aesthetically during he was enlisted as a young sorrowful soldier in the war. The poem is as follows:

### DULCE ET DECORUM EST

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 forth-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 partia mori.

There are many interesting poetic terms in the poem that can be revealed. However, the article focuses on the imagery written implicitly in the

poem. There is a major imagery discussed, namely, visual imagery. This imagery will be discussed below.

### Visual Imagery

It is imagery that suggests a mental picture, that is something seen in the “mind’s eyes”. The poem paints a battlefield scene of soldiers trudging along only to be interrupted by poison gas.

*Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,* 1  
*Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge* 2

The first line of the poem begins by visualizing the very tired soldiers who have crippled, mentally and physically overcome by the weight of their experience in the war. Moreover, the second line shows the reader that they have been convinced that nobody is not able to understand how horribly twisted and deformed the bodies of the soldiers have become. These lines are intended that the people hopefully feel and sense how gruesome the soldiers’ lives in the battlefield are. They can even sense that the soldiers have sacrificed their own lives for unknown pride.

*Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots* 5  
*But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;* 6

These lines depict concise realism of the soldiers’ condition in never-ending battle. The phrase *Men marched asleep* visualizes the walking dead soldiers. The horror of men walking as if they were dead happens because they are out of exhaustion. They are walking bare naked-feet even they do not pay attention on their own health. What they have thought is that they are still alive even they are in the condition of *limped* and *blood shod*. The blood that has been shed seems to clothe the soldiers now. This creates a vivid image suggesting that the war is limiting their very beings. No one could escape from the terrible war that traps them living in misery. It is portrayed in line *All went lame; all blind* that emphasizes misery as a universal condition for the young soldiers in the war.

Moreover, the soldiers feel desperately dead when they experience a frantic cry. Consider the following lines:

*Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,* 13  
*As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.* 14

This is another vivid image that shows a shocking description of a gas attack from which one soldier does not escape. One of the soldiers who has already worn a mask feels stunned awkwardly through his misty pane. He witnesses the suffering soldier dying because of sudden gas attack. The *thick green light* visualizes the fog of the gas which spreads around the soldiers. The very thick fog caused by gas looks like *a green sea*. The imagery of these lines is pretty intense. Murky green lights and all-encompassing fog makes the reader sense scared. The readers imagine and feel the horror condition suffered by the soldiers of the war. Seeing through “*the misty panes and thick green light*” seems that a world suddenly turns upside-down by the dropping of gas shells. The war is a world peopled by the walking dead. Soldiers walk unsteadily through mud and gore, and their own bodies fall apart as they move slowly towards their tents.

<i>If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood</i>	21
<i>Come gargling from the forth-corrupted lungs,</i>	22
<i>Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud</i>	23
<i>Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,</i>	24

These lines depict the disgust which becomes the speaker’s point. The body of the young soldier turns into a mass of aging sores—almost as a version of cancer moving through his body at warp speed. Those lines visualize the soldier’s body which breaks down entirely. The pain suffered by the dying soldier is visible. The dying condition cannot be avoided. The dying soldier has sacrificed his body and soul in the war. The lines portrays clearly that the young soldier experiences the painful dying because of poisoned gas.

Wilfred Owen describes the horrors of war. He makes the reader confront the brutality on the battlefield and the indignities of life back home. He presents the reader with soldiers who have been the victims of poisoned gas. He shows how the war affects physically and psychologically the young men who fight in it. There is no glory and heroism, just the simple soldiers fighting for something which they do not quite understand.



## CONCLUSION

Wilfred Owen is considered one of the greatest English poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and certainly the memorable and vibrant voice of those writing during the terrible World War I. The primary data of the article is Owen's poem entitled "Dulce et Docurom Est". The discussion is about the visual imagery that depicts the terrible condition of the victims of the war. The theory that supports the analysis is the theory of imagery and setting. The former theory focuses on visual imagery, that is, the imagery that suggests something seen in the mind's eyes. The latter one is the theory of setting which portrays the condition of the World War I. The approaches that are used are the historical-biographical and structural approaches. Those approaches meet to analyze the poem. The data is analyzed descriptively.

It is found some depictions of the condition of the victims of the war. The poetic device that is used to reveal the analysis of the terrible condition of the war victims is visual imagery. The poem visualizes the young soldier who does not get his gas mask on in time and suffers from poison. Thrown on the back of a wagon, he coughs and gurgles as his fellow soldiers trudge next to him.

It is learned that the poet, Wilfred Owen retells the horror of the war to the young men on purpose. It is firstly a pride for a young boy to enlist the army and fight for his country. However, they finally experience how horrible war influences their lives forever.

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