

Sample Two (Higher Level) Poetry: "Dulce Et Decorum Est" by Wilfred Owen

As the following poem is very well known, you may want to give yourself practice by deciding how you would plan a commentary on it, and then compare with the sample provided.

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.

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.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
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;
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.

The candidate's commentary transcribed verbatim from the tape recording:

This poem was written in 1917 while Owen was receiving treatment at Craiglockhart hospital for shell shock. It's very typical of Owen's works because it derives from his own personal experience of the war. Firstly "Dulce et Decorum Est" is the title of the poem. It's an allusion to Horace's Odes and it means "It is sweet and fitting to die for your country."

I'm going to start with 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* "

The first stanza deals mainly with the physical condition of the soldiers and it's very, he uses words like "beggars" and "hags" to show the dehumanizing condition these soldiers are in. This is like the youth of England, and they've been reduced to "hags" and "beggars", and they're limping and trudging. He uses onomatopoeia here with "sludge" and "trudge", which really emphasises the difficulty and the heaviness and fatigue that they're experiencing. And the "haunting flares" – later on in the poem we're told that he suffers from haunting nightmares and so this is sort of, this is echoed later on in the poem. Then, when he mentions "our distant rest", "towards our distant rest began to trudge", the distant rest could also be seen as the final rest, death, and sort of, the inevitability of it.

Then it continues, in the second part of the first stanza:

*"Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on bloodshod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind".*

"Men marched asleep" is an oxymoron – because, obviously, if you're asleep you can't be marching, and just again reiterates the exhaustion that these men are experiencing. They "limped on, blood-shod". The word "shod" usually refers to horses, horses are shod, and so it's again, it's dehumanising, like degrading the soldiers to animals, almost. "All went lame; all blind". This is reminiscent of a biblical scene, and Owen was known to use a lot of biblical allusions and, er, references in his poetry because it was one of his great influences. Er, "drunk with fatigue". You think "drunk" is very incapacitated, and its sort of that they're overwhelmed and enveloped in this sort of drunk, heavy exhaustion so that they can hardly walk. And they're deaf "even to the hoots/Of tired outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind". They're deaf even to the sound of the shells and even the shells themselves are characterised as tired, so its like the whole, the whole atmosphere is one of heavy exhaustion.

And, we have an example of internal rhyme here, "outstripped" and "dropped" and "Five Nines" and "behind", and this sort of lulls, makes the last line of the stanza very lulling, with a sharp contrast with the beginning of the second stanza, which is an immediate change in pace, it's more rapid, using punctuation and capitalization. It starts: "*Gas! GAS! Quick boys! –an ecstasy of fumbling,/ Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time*". And its Owen going back and reliving a moment and the, the change in pace with "*Gas! GAS! Quick, boys*", it really brings you back into the panic and brings you into the moment, and "an ecstasy of fumbling", you can just feel the total confusion of, er the moment.

"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". This actually is based on a true event that Owen experienced, that when they were, they were out in... a field or whatever, and there was a gas attack, and someone didn't have time to put their helmet on, and ended up dying in front of him, and it was something that really left a great impact on him, and he still dreams about it and it haunts his, his nightmares.

The use of the word "floundering" is found also used in "The Sentry" and he liked the sound of it because it really showed like the confusion and fumbling and er, the sort of helplessness of this man. He mentions the "misty panes". The panes of the gas mask were actually made of celluloid, and they would be tinted slightly green, and also the colour of the gas is like a mustardy-green colour. And he uses water imagery here, "as under a green sea I saw him drowning" to show how the gas sort of envelops you and surrounds you as if you were under water. And also "drowning", the effect of the gas on the lungs, it brings water on the lungs, and it would be the same physical effect as if you were drowning. And it really helps give the reader a vivid image of this man dying, suffering, the fact that he's drowning, he's totally helpless.

And then the next sentence or stanza –it's a one-sentence stanza:

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

Again we have drowning brought up again, and the use of the words "guttering, choking drowning", the repetition of sort of, like very, words that really get to you like throat- punching words that can make you really feel and imagine the suffering of this man. And the fact that this man is "plunging" at him, you can imagine in a nightmare this haunting figure coming at you, and like you, can hardly escape it. And also, "my helpless sight": it's again, it's the feeling of inability to help someone in his weakness, and also his guilt.

Then the last stanza is where the real message of his poem lies. and it starts:

*"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..."*

Again, you have the smothering dreams. They're almost inescapable and you can't do anything about them. And the fact that the pronoun changes to 'you' – it's sort of shocking, because suddenly Owen's addressing the reader and as we see later, it's more society at large, it's the collective responsibility of society to take responsibility for the effect of war on these people, and the consequences.

He mentions "the wagon that we flung him in", and this is sort of paralleled with "The Sentry" because the body is no longer personal, it no longer has an identity, it's just "flung". "Flung is a really careless, inhuman word. You don't fling people, you carefully lay them, but in this case he uses the word "flung" to show how the body is no longer, is void of identity. And it's paralleled in "The Sentry" because in "The Sentry" he refers to the body as 'it' – "he dredged it up for dead", and it's dehumanising again. Also it could be paralleled with Hamlet because "the hand of little employment has the daintier sense". It's just saying that those people who are not exposed to death and war would be more shocked by the fact that this man has died and that you have to deal with the body, but these soldiers have it seen it so much, they've been basically so saturated by it that they can fling the body almost carelessly because it's something they have learnt to accept, because they've been exposed to it so much.

And in this stanza Owen goes through the senses, you can hear, you can feel the smothering dreams and you can see, you can watch the white eyes writhing in his face - this just shows the overall impact of the whole experience, the entirety of the experience on Owen. And he continues "the Devil sick of sin". It's as if he's been saturated by the evil of it, and even a devil would be sick and could not endure as much of the evil and sin that war has created. And he continues:

*"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 ..."*

Again, you can hear the blood gargling in the lungs and "the froth-corrupted" – it's also the physical condition that the water and liquid that would be in the lungs is frothy, but the fact that he uses "corrupted", it's almost like a moral statement and it's placed in contrast with the "innocent tongues", it's the corruption of the innocent and it sort of echoes what Owen is trying to say through the poem, that these innocent people have been exposed to such ghastly horrors that it's completely unacceptable. Also he uses the comparison of "obscene as cancer" and cancer is paralleled with war: because both spread, and grow, destroy and kill. I think it's very interesting that he chooses to use "cancer". Also, "bitter as the cud": this is paralleled with "Anthem for Doomed Youth" because the first line is "Who are these dying like cattle?", and the cud is what cows like chew up, and it parallels with animals again.

And then the last line of the poem is the punch line, the very important line. He says:

*"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",*

and this is the punch line, the message that Owen was trying to get across. "My friend" is referring to Jessie Pope, who was a journalist at the time, who wrote a series of patriotic poems and basically in general he's condemning those er, those people who encourage young men to go off and fight and encourage the propaganda and the recruiting, when they themselves have not experienced the true horrors of war. And the fact that he uses the words 'children' and earlier in the poem "boys", it shows these are not men; these people are not people who have lived a long time and lived a life. These are young, the youth of England going off and being totally slaughtered and it has a deeper effect on the reader to realize that these are children who are being killed, these are not grown men.

Also the overall message of the poem is the condemnation of these people who encourage it, as well as the futility of war as a whole. An example of someone he would probably be referring to through this poem is Rupert Brooke who also wrote a series of patriotic poems, and he said in one of his poems: *"If I should die, think only this of me/ That there's some corner of a foreign field/ that is forever England"*, and Owen, coming out of the experience of it feels very bitter and resentful, and probably frustrated because he knows what war is really like, and these people back home in England don't know how horrible and terrifying the war is. The poem is very typical of Owen. As he once said: *"My subject is war and the pity of war"*, and "All a poet can do today is warn, that's why the true poets must be truthful". And it's very typical because it comes from his personal experience and because he is warning future generations, and also calling upon his own generation to take responsibility for the consequences. It's an example of how Owen really found his voice during the war.

Teacher: Thank you very much

Comment on the sample

This candidate shows a number of strengths. She shows a good understanding of Owen's purpose and emotions; a strong response to the content, entering imaginatively into the life of the poem, of the experience depicted; and a good appreciation of the many different effects of language. It is particularly rare for a candidate to interpret the poem, as it were, from the point of view of the poet himself, showing sympathetic and intelligent understanding of his experience. She shows insight into the connotations of words like "drunk" and "flung", and does some nice cross-referencing, showing links between words that echo or contrast with one another in different parts of the poem, such as "children" and "boys", or "haunting". Her comment on the "tired" Five-Nines is pleasing.

It is also an unhesitating performance. There may be slight adjustments and re-phrasings in mid-sentence, but as a whole the oral has a strong and compelling movement to it, indicating that she is in control of her material, that she understands both whole and parts. One senses that she both reproduces ideas and information gained in class (and this is as it should be), but goes further, reflecting her own individual, personal response and grasp (and this is what examiners would like to see more of).

Her strategy is to take the poem section by section and comment on it. This is an acceptable way to approach a poem that requires much detailed comment (the poetic techniques and effects of language are very concentrated). Also, the poem moves in a narrative and dramatic sequence, so that it makes sense to treat this sequentially. The technique of taking a few lines at a time also means that she can comment in some depth, at the same time referring to other parts of the poem where relevant.

It is very difficult to give a perfect performance, and apart from occasional lapses in vocabulary and some difficulties in following through sentences, this candidate misses something very important to this particular poem –the irony of the title and quotation that frames the poem. There is nothing "sweet or right" about such an experience, and it is a powerful use of a quotation, especially repeating it at the end. This is something that a teacher might ask in a follow-up question. While there is an implicit structure to the performance, following the narrative in a linear way, it might also have strengthened it to call attention to some striking aspects of the poem that she would address in the course of the oral: for example, diction, sound effects, and tone. This might have sharpened the structure of the presentation and facilitated links between one part and another.