

Figurative Language In Owen's Poems

Posted on September 13, 2023

Introduction

Wilfred Owen's war poetry uses figurative language not to decorate battle but to force readers to experience its bodily, psychological, and moral violence. In "Dulce et Decorum Est," "Disabled," and "Asleep," simile, metaphor, personification, irony, imagery, sound, and symbolism dismantle the public language of patriotic glory. The original essay correctly recognizes that Owen challenges idealized warfare, but several interpretations are too literal or inaccurate. The soldier in "Disabled" has not merely lost sensation in his knees; he has lost his legs. The phrase "waiting for dark" suggests evening, loneliness, dependence, and death, not an impulsive wish to die. In "Asleep," the "pillows of God's making" are not simply white clouds in heaven. They are part of an ambiguous consoling vision in which earth, sleep, death, and divine rest overlap. (Stallworthy, n.d.)

Owen's effectiveness comes from the tension between poetic beauty and horrific subject matter. His language can be musical, but its music often breaks into coughing, choking, stumbling, or silence. Figurative devices make war strange enough to be seen again after patriotic slogans have made it familiar. They also reveal the limits of representation: the speaker can describe a gas victim's face or a disabled veteran's isolation, yet no comparison can fully contain the suffering. Owen's poems therefore ask the reader to distrust inherited phrases and to attend to the human body that those phrases conceal.

Simile, Sound, and Irony in "Dulce et Decorum Est"

The opening similes immediately destroy the expected image of upright, disciplined soldiers. The men are "Bent double, like old beggars under sacks" and "coughing like hags." The comparison is shocking because these are young soldiers rhetorically transformed into exhausted, aged, socially marginalized bodies. "Beggars" suggests deprivation rather than honor, while "hags" violates conventional masculinity by comparing soldiers with stereotypically old women. Owen is not insulting either group; he is exposing how war strips the soldiers of the youthful strength celebrated in recruitment imagery. The heavy sounds of "knock-kneed," "coughing," "cursed," and "sludge" slow the line and make the reader hear the march as physical labor.

The gas attack changes the pace. The cry "Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!" interrupts the dragging rhythm with panic. One soldier fails to fit his mask and appears "as under a green sea." This metaphor turns poisoned air into drowning water, making a familiar act—breathing—impossible. The speaker watches through the glass of his own mask, so perception is distorted and enclosed. The dying man is near enough to see but unreachable. Later, he returns in dreams, "guttering, choking, drowning." The

three participles prolong death rather than allowing one heroic instant.

The description “His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin” is not simply about blood resembling the devil’s color. The simile imagines a horror so extreme that even a devil, a figure associated with sin, would be disgusted. Owen then compares the damaged lungs with cancer and the wounds with “vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues.” These comparisons reject the belief that battlefield suffering purifies the nation. The body is diseased, corrupted, and innocent at once.

The poem’s title and final Latin phrase create bitter irony. *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* means that it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country. Owen calls it “the old Lie” after making the reader witness the kind of death hidden behind the saying. His target is not every form of loyalty or sacrifice, but adults who repeat noble abstractions to “children ardent for some desperate glory.” The poem’s figurative language supplies the evidence against the slogan. (Owen, n.d.)

Metaphor, Contrast, and Social Abandonment in “Disabled”

“Disabled” shifts from the battlefield to the life that follows it. Its central figure sits in a wheeled chair, “waiting for dark,” while boys’ voices sound from the park. Darkness functions literally as evening and metaphorically as isolation, dependence, and a future narrowed by injury. The poem repeatedly contrasts the present with memories of movement, sport, sexuality, color, and public attention. This structure shows that disability is experienced not only through physical loss but through the changed behavior of other people.

The phrase “before he threw away his knees” is a deliberately harsh metaphor. The soldier did not casually discard his body, but the wording imitates the logic of recruitment and youthful impulsiveness. He enlisted partly for social reasons: to please a girl, to wear a uniform, to participate in masculine excitement, and perhaps because he imagined war as an extension of football. “Threw away” compresses the distance between decision and consequence. It also contains self-accusation, though responsibility belongs more broadly to a culture that made enlistment appear glamorous.

Color imagery intensifies the contrast. Before the injury, the town glowed and girls looked at him; after it, he wears a gray suit and experiences women’s eyes passing “from him to the strong men that were whole.” Owen reflects the period’s assumptions about bodily wholeness and masculinity, but he also criticizes the society that treats the veteran as socially dead. The wound did not remove his need for love, recognition, and agency. Other people’s pity and avoidance complete the exclusion. (Owen, n.d.)

The poem ends with the repeated question, “Why don’t they come?” The line may refer to nurses or attendants, but its emotional reach is wider. The veteran who was once cheered now waits for basic assistance. Repetition produces helplessness without making him a passive symbol. His dependence

is partly physical and partly institutional: the nation that encouraged his sacrifice has not created a meaningful life around his survival. The poem's figurative language therefore attacks both war and the postwar abandonment of injured people.

Personification, Earth, and Ambiguous Consolation in "Asleep"

"Asleep" approaches the dead soldier through quieter language. Sleep is itself a traditional metaphor for death, offering tenderness while preserving uncertainty. The body lies among natural forms, and the earth appears to receive or shelter it. Owen uses personification to make nature seem maternal and protective, yet this consolation is never secure. A corpse may look peaceful because it no longer moves, but the poem cannot know what the soldier experiences.

"High-pillowed on calm pillows of God's making" joins physical earth with a religious image of rest. The pillows may suggest hills, soil, or the natural support beneath the head; they are not necessarily clouds or proof that the soldier is in paradise. The divine phrase allows a hopeful interpretation, but Owen's syntax also recognizes that human hands and war have placed the body there. Nature's calm contrasts with the violence that preceded it.

Personification makes the earth act as though it can soothe, cover, or reclaim the soldier. This can be read as comfort, but it can also be unsettling. The natural world continues while individual life ends. Unlike patriotic commemoration, the poem does not turn the dead man into a national emblem. It focuses on bodily stillness and asks whether the deepest sleep is relief, annihilation, or passage. Figurative language holds these possibilities together rather than resolving them. (Owen, n.d.)

Shared Patterns Across the Three Poems

All three poems oppose public abstraction with bodily detail. "Dulce et Decorum Est" shows a body poisoned in action; "Disabled" shows a body living with permanent injury; "Asleep" contemplates a body after death. Together, they cover combat, aftermath, and burial. The sequence reveals why glory is inadequate: it cannot describe gas entering lungs, social desire withdrawing from an amputee, or a dead soldier absorbed into earth.

Owen also transforms familiar cultural images. Soldiers become beggars rather than heroes, gas becomes a green sea, recruitment becomes the throwing away of knees, and death becomes sleep. These transformations do not make pain unreal. They help the reader perceive realities that ordinary language protects against. Irony is especially important because the poems often borrow the language of honor, beauty, sport, religion, or rest and turn it against the systems that use those ideas carelessly.

Sound reinforces the images. Harsh consonants, broken exclamations, dragging rhythms, and repeated questions make the poems physical to read. Owen's famous concern with "the pity of war" is not sentimental softness. Pity is a form of moral knowledge that interrupts the conversion of people into military numbers. His craft brings readers close enough to suffering that inherited slogans become difficult to repeat.

Conclusion

Figurative language in Owen's poems is an instrument of witness and critique. The similes in "Dulce et Decorum Est" age and degrade the marching soldiers, while the green-sea metaphor and diseased imagery expose gas warfare's horror. In "Disabled," metaphor and contrast show how an injured veteran loses social recognition as well as mobility. In "Asleep," personification and the sleep metaphor offer an uncertain form of peace without claiming that death is simple consolation.

Owen does not argue that words can reproduce war perfectly. He shows how easily words can lie and how carefully poetry must work against that lie. His images return attention to lungs, limbs, faces, memory, waiting, and earth. By doing so, they challenge readers to judge war not by ceremonies or Latin mottos but by what it does to particular human beings.

Works Cited

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Owen, Wilfred. "Disabled."

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Stallworthy, Jon. *Wilfred Owen*. Oxford University Press.