Figurative Language In Owen’s Poems

Posted on September 13, 2023

View this essay online:
https://academic-master.com/figurative-language-in-owens-poems/

Introduction

Wilfred Owen’s war poetry uses figurative language as a form of moral argument. In “Dulce et Decorum Est,” “Disabled,” and “Asleep,” simile, metaphor, personification, irony, symbolism, imagery, and sound resist the public language that turns war into honor, adventure, or patriotic spectacle. Each poem approaches a different condition of the soldier: combat, survival with permanent injury, and death. Owen’s technique is effective because he repeatedly transforms familiar images into disturbing ones. Young soldiers resemble prematurely aged bodies, poisoned air becomes a drowning environment, enlistment is remembered through the language of waste, and death is imagined through the uncertain gentleness of sleep. Figurative language does not soften suffering; it makes readers confront experiences that conventional military vocabulary can hide. Across the three poems, the human body becomes the measure against which slogans are tested. Lungs, limbs, faces, memory, waiting, and earth provide more truthful evidence than abstract claims about glory. Owen therefore uses poetic beauty in deliberate tension with physical destruction, forcing the reader to question language that makes violence appear clean or meaningful.

Violent Simile and Bitter Irony in “Dulce et Decorum Est”

“Dulce et Decorum Est” begins by overturning the expected image of disciplined, youthful soldiers. Owen’s opening similes compare exhausted men with old beggars and coughing hags, images associated with age, poverty, weakness, and social marginality rather than military strength. The comparisons expose how warfare prematurely ages the body and empties the uniform of ceremonial dignity. Sound supports the imagery: heavy consonants and dragging rhythms make the march feel laborious before the gas attack abruptly changes the poem’s pace. During that attack, the speaker perceives a fellow soldier as if he were drowning beneath a green sea, converting the act of breathing into suffocation. The image is especially powerful because the gas mask places a transparent barrier between witness and victim, making the dying man visible but unreachable. Later descriptions of damaged lungs and a face distorted beyond ordinary recognition refuse any clean separation between battlefield heroism and bodily corruption. The poem’s final irony emerges because its ancient patriotic motto cannot survive the physical evidence the poem has forced the reader to imagine.

Metaphor, Memory, and Social Exclusion in “Disabled”

“Disabled” relocates the consequences of war from the battlefield to civilian life. Its central figure sits in a wheeled chair and remembers a former life shaped by sport, movement, sexual attention, color, and public admiration. Darkness works on several levels: it marks the approach of evening, but it also suggests isolation, dependence, a narrowed future, and the social withdrawal of people who once celebrated him. Owen’s harsh metaphor that the soldier effectively “threw away” his knees compresses the distance between youthful enlistment and irreversible loss. The language reflects self-accusation, yet the poem also implicates the culture that made uniform, masculinity, romance, and athletic courage appear continuous with war. The veteran’s injury has not removed his desire for recognition, but the behavior of others turns physical impairment into social exclusion. Women’s attention shifts toward men considered whole, crowds that once cheered are absent, and the poem ends in repeated dependence on attendants who have not arrived. Figurative language therefore shows disability as both bodily change and a relationship between the injured person and an environment that has failed to sustain his dignity.

Personification and Ambiguous Rest in “Asleep”

“Asleep” uses quieter figurative language to contemplate a soldier after death. Sleep is a traditional metaphor for death because it suggests stillness, rest, and release while leaving open the question of what, if anything, follows. Owen places the body within the natural world and personifies the earth as though it might receive, support, or protect the dead. This apparent tenderness is deliberately unstable. A body can look peaceful precisely because it can no longer communicate pain, and the poem cannot prove that death itself is comforting. Religious imagery similarly creates possibility rather than certainty. The image of resting on cushions formed by God’s creation can suggest hills, soil, or a natural bed, but it does not need to be read as a literal vision of heaven. Human violence has brought the soldier to this resting place even while nature seems to cover him gently. The poem’s power comes from holding consolation and unease together. Unlike heroic commemoration, it does not transform the dead soldier into a national symbol; it attends to bodily stillness and the limits of what survivors can know.

Shared Figurative Patterns Across the Three Poems

Taken together, the three poems form a sequence of combat, aftermath, and death. “Dulce et Decorum Est” presents a body being destroyed in action, “Disabled” presents a body that survives but enters a society unable or unwilling to respond adequately to its altered needs, and “Asleep”

presents a body after life has ended. Owen repeatedly challenges abstraction by attaching large ideas to material experience. Patriotism is measured against poisoned lungs; masculine adventure is measured against amputation and dependence; religious comfort is measured against a corpse lying in the earth. He also transforms familiar cultural symbols rather than simply rejecting them. The soldier ceases to resemble the upright hero, the battlefield becomes an environment of drowning, sport becomes a misleading analogy for combat, and sleep becomes an uncertain figure for death. These transformations reveal how metaphor can expose the assumptions built into ordinary language. The poems differ in tone, but all resist the conversion of individual suffering into a neat collective story in which sacrifice automatically acquires meaning through national ceremony.

Sound, Form, and the Limits of Representation

Owen's figurative language works with sound and form rather than operating as a separate layer of ornament. In "Dulce et Decorum Est," dragging rhythms, abrupt exclamations, choking verbal patterns, and harsh consonants alter the reader's physical pace and imitate exhaustion or panic. "Disabled" relies on shifts between remembered vitality and present stillness, so contrast becomes structural as well as figurative. The repeated final appeal for assistance produces helplessness through rhythm without reducing the veteran to a symbol of pity. "Asleep" uses calmer movement and softer natural imagery, making stillness itself emotionally unsettling after poems filled with action and damage. Owen also demonstrates the limits of poetic representation. No simile can reproduce gas poisoning, amputation, loneliness, or death completely. His comparisons are powerful precisely because they reveal the inadequacy of inherited phrases that claim to explain those experiences too easily. Poetry becomes a form of witness rather than a promise of total comprehension. The reader is asked to approach suffering closely enough that familiar patriotic or consoling formulas become difficult to repeat without reflection.

Conclusion

Figurative language in Owen's poetry is an instrument of witness, critique, and ethical pressure. The similes and metaphors of "Dulce et Decorum Est" transform soldiers into exhausted, damaged bodies and expose the distance between patriotic rhetoric and gas warfare. "Disabled" uses darkness, memory, color, and the language of waste to show that injury continues after combat through social abandonment and altered expectations of masculinity. "Asleep" personifies nature and uses sleep as a deliberately uncertain metaphor for death, allowing consolation without pretending that the dead soldier's experience can be known. Across all three poems, Owen repeatedly replaces abstractions with human consequences. His craft does not argue that war can be represented perfectly; instead, it demonstrates how easily familiar language can conceal suffering and how poetry can resist that concealment. By returning attention to particular bodies, memories, and forms of dependence, Owen asks readers to judge military glory against the experiences it excludes. The enduring force of the poems lies in this refusal to let elegant public language erase physical and emotional cost.

Works Cited

Owen, Wilfred. “Asleep.”

Owen, Wilfred. “Disabled.”

Owen, Wilfred. “Dulce et Decorum Est.”

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