

# Wilfred Owen

(1893-1918)



**The writer and his work.** Wilfred Owen was born in 1893 in Shropshire, the son of a railway worker, and was educated in Liverpool. He taught English in Bordeaux in 1913, and then returned to England in 1915 to enlist in the army. He caught trench-fever on the Somme and was hospitalized in Edinburgh. He went back to fight in France in 1918, was decorated for bravery and was then killed one week before the armistice was signed. Owen's experience of the war led him to totally reject not only the traditional themes of Georgian verse, but also its stylistic features. His **poems** are technically remarkable for their extensive use of **half-rhymes**, **assonance** and **alliteration** and for the way that physical detail conveys a vision of horror and apocalyptic desolation.

## Dulce et Decorum Est T90

Wilfred Owen  
*Collected Poems* (1920)



Practise your listening  
with the karaoke



TRACK 048

This poem, published in 1920, is perhaps the best-known and most striking statement of the horror of war and the hypocrisy and ignorance of patriotism in World War I. It is about soldiers under a gas attack. The first stanza portrays the horror of the war through a rich, almost **sensuous language**, using compound words, and stressing wounds, blood and decaying flesh. The central part of the poem deals with the terrible new chemical weapon of World War I: **poison gas**. The scene is relived as a nightmare, with men drowning in a green sea of gas. The soldier-poet emerges to the awful reality of the last stanza, where he follows **the wagon carrying dead or dying bodies**. He asks the stay-at-home reader to come along and see for himself the ugly face of death. After this, Horace's famous Latin tag, learned by generations of British schoolchildren, sounds bitterly ironic.

Bent double,<sup>1</sup> like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed,<sup>2</sup> coughing like hags,<sup>3</sup> we cursed<sup>4</sup> through sludge,<sup>5</sup>  
Till on the haunting flares<sup>6</sup> we turned our backs  
And towards our distant rest began to **trudge**.<sup>7</sup>  
5 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
But limped<sup>8</sup> on, blood-shod.<sup>9</sup> All went lame;<sup>10</sup> all blind;  
Drunk<sup>11</sup> with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots<sup>12</sup>  
Of gas shells<sup>13</sup> dropping softly behind.  
Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! – **An ecstasy of fumbling**,<sup>14</sup>  
10 Fitting<sup>15</sup> the clumsy helmets<sup>16</sup> just in time;  
But someone still was yelling<sup>17</sup> out and stumbling,<sup>18</sup>  
And flound'ring<sup>19</sup> like a man in fire or lime<sup>20</sup>...  
Dim,<sup>21</sup> through the misty<sup>22</sup> panes and thick green light,<sup>23</sup>

1. **Bent double:** piegati in due.
2. **Knock-kneed:** con le ginocchia che si toccano.
3. **hags:** streghe.
4. **cursed:** bestemmiavamo.
5. **sludge:** melma.
6. **flares:** segnali luminosi.
7. **trudge:** arrancare.
8. **limped:** zoppicavano.

9. **blood-shod:** con piedi coperti di sangue.
10. **lame:** zoppi.
11. **Drunk:** ubriachi.
12. **hoots:** rumore.
13. **shells:** bombe.
14. **fumbling:** gesticolio.
15. **Fitting:** mettendo.
16. **helmets:** maschere antigas.
17. **yelling:** gridando.

18. **stumbling:** inciampando.
19. **flound'ring:** lottando.
20. **lime:** calce.
21. **Dim:** annebbiato.
22. **misty:** appannati.
23. **thick green light:** sta vedendo l'orribile scena attraverso il vetro verde della maschera antigas. È anche il gas a produrre luce verde.