Rear Guard & Dulce Et Decorum Essay, Research Paper

The nineteenth century was irrevocably swept away in a tide of mud and blood with the coming of World War I. The Great War lasted from 1914 through 1918. More than eight million soldiers lost their lives in the struggle between the Central Powers and the Allies. The old ideals of warfare fought by aristocrats and gentlemen vanished beneath gas attacks, trench warfare, and heavy artillery bombardments. Enlisted men would spend weeks in the most unbearable trenches of the front line. These trenches were the most treacherous place to be in the war. Many of the soldiers suffered from trench foot, starvation, dysentery, shell shock, and body lice and if these didn t get to them the mortar and gas attacks were sure to. World War I posters attracted men to enlist pledging honor, duty, and camaraderie, going back to the Latin saying that it is sweet and honorable to die for one s country. In times when battles were fought with daggers and swords this was true, but times change and with the innovation of tanks, machine guns, and artillery shells this is no longer justifiable. Many soldiers lost appendages, choked to death on their own intestines, or were made undistinguishable by the overpowering blast of a mortar. Humanity began to develop resentment for the brutal conditions in the war trenches along with the writers of the time. Poets like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen showed the antipathy through the vivid images of the trenches that they created in their works. Sassoon s The Rear Guard and Owen s Dulce et Decotum Est use the shocking imagery of trench warfare to dissuade humanity from the belief in the glory of battle and the honor in dying for one s country in war.

Sassoon uses descriptive imagery in an attempt to show that trench warfare is not honorable but treacherous and brutal. Sassoon shows that the glory in dying for one s country in the battlefields is demolished through the image of death that he creates. As he wanders aimlessly through the trenches, noticing the horrid smell in the air, he asks assistance from a man lying on the floor, [a]nd flashed his beam across the livid face / Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore / Agony dying hard ten days before; / And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound (Sassoon lines 15-18). The conditions of the trenches in the war are unbearable. Sassoon finds nothing but despair in the discovery of a rotting solider laying across the trench floor. This man laying there ten days putrefying away gripping his own would without aid from others proves that he did not die honorably. Many critics recognize the presence of imagery in Sassoon s works as well. Mr. Sassoon s verses touch not our imagination, but our senses (Murry 386). The description of the trenches that Sassoon provides needs no aid of the imagination to produce an effect. He relies solely on the reaction of disgust by the senses to get across his point. The realistic image of a dead man gripping the wound that cost him death puts the readers in his perspective. The atmosphere of the trenches appears so horrific that, in Sassoon s opinion, it is more honorable to die on his own grounds. As he wandered through the trenches, He climbed through the darkness to the twilight air / Unloading hell behind him step by step (Sassoon lines 24-25). He feels that the conditions outside, amidst enemy fire, are better than the horrid trenches, so he steps above the darkness into the light and leaves the hell that he has come to know. The despair that the trenches cause leads him to step into enemy fire to a more honorable death. Literary critics recognize the presence of this descriptive imagery in Sassoon s works. The experiences of battle, awful, inhuman, and intolerable as they are, can be comprehended only by the mind which is capable of bringing their horror and their inhumanity home to the imagination of others (Johnston 266). Sassoon uses the dramatic images to show the world how terrible the conditions are in reality. The deception that the world has about the war is brought to reality when Sassoon s poem was introduced. Sassoon s dramatic images are meant to show the world the conditions of the war trenches and the absence of glory in dying in war.

Owen uses shocking images in Dulce et Decorum Est in order to prove to the youth of the world that to die for one s country is neither sweet nor honorable. After fighting for countless days, the exhausted soldiers began to retreat to a camp away from the front lines where they could rest for a few days before returning to fight. The soldiers Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots / [o]f tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind. / Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! (Owen lines 7-9). The withdrawing soldiers were unaware of the fact that the enemy was firing upon them from behind. Today police officers are not allowed to shoot a criminal in the back because it in considered dishonorable, the same goes for war. These soldiers were seeking relief from the strenuous conditions of the trenches in the front line. The enemy, seeing a chance to attack, surprised them with a gas attack. Literary critics recognize the fact that the images portrayed in Owen s writings do not agree with the title that to die for one s country is sweet and honorable. The entire series of images in the poem is oriented toward the Horatian motto which concludes it [is sweet and honorable to die for one s country] [e]verything in the poem seems to exist only to show the falsity of this motto in modern warfare (Hazo 367). The title of the poem is contrary to the images it creates which show that it in neither sweet nor honorable, but horrifying and appalling to die in war. Owen s description of the gas attack is not meant to be honorable, but is meant to satirize the Horatian motto. Through his description of death in the battlefields Owen shows the dishonor that war entails. The soldiers ran as the 5.9 inch shells fell to the ground behind, some managing to get on their gas-masks survived, but Owen notices one man in the field who fail to fit his gas mask on time. I [Owen] saw him drowning / [i]n all my dreams, before my helpless sight, / [h]e plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning (Owen lines 14-16). The chlorine gas in World War I once taken in the soldiers began choking on the gas just as if they were drowning. The gas eats away the soldier s entire respiratory tract, rendering them helpless. Owen uses this image to show the hopelessness involved in battle and his utter disgust for the methods of fighting. To die by gas, choking on the remnants of lungs is in no way honorable. The use of imagery in Owen s writings to show the inaccuracy of the saying, Dulce it decorum est pro patria mori is also acclaimed by many critics of literature. Dulce et Decorum Est is a realistic record of the most disgusting side of war, which was meant to be, and even today still succeed in being, deeply disturbing to the reader which discourage from the ignorant glorification of war (Draper page 228-9). Owen is a first hand witness to the war and therefore his vivid accounts are as close to real as can be provided. His gruesome descriptions are meant to dissuade the youth of his time from the deception that it is honorable to die for one s country. In Owen s opinion, there is no glory of honor in dying for one s country in battle.

Siegfried Sassoon s The Rear Guard and Wilfred Owen s Dulce et Decorum Est use the appalling imagery of trench warfare to deter mankind from the belief in the glory of battle and the honor in dying for one s country in war. Sassoon shows this through his dramatic presentation of the rotting death involved in the trenches. Owen shows his detest through a description of a gas attack in which a solider dies without glory. The battlefields of the First World War were some of the most atrocious that the world has seen. The gas, mortars, and land mines were new developments in the artillery field and were unknown to many soldiers. Their effects had not yet been tested on people and were found to be most drastic. The honor in dying in battle went away with the number of shrapnel related deaths and the glory was lost along with the use of a gas that swept away many unaware soldiers.

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