

Activity 2: Wilfred Owen – Dulce et Decorum Est

Wilfred Owen enlisted in the army in 1915. In November 1918, he was killed while attempting to lead his men across the Sambre canal at Ors.

Pay attention to the different levels of language in this poem. We use different levels of language every day. For example, formal language when writing essays or reports, and informal language when writing a social media post or speaking to friends.

Wilfred Owen – Dulce et Decorum Est

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.

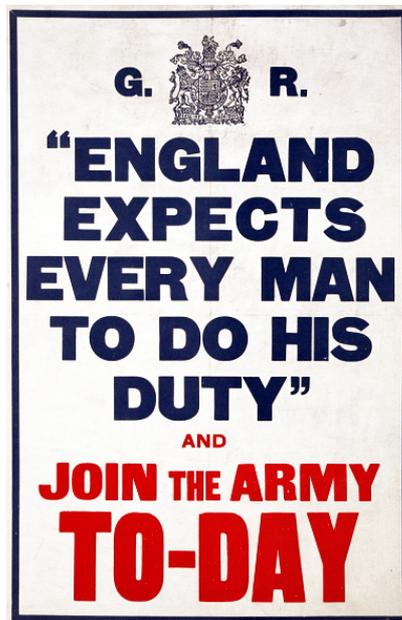
In Owen's poem *Dulce et Decorum Est*, he uses both informal and formal language (in the Latin motto taken from the Roman poet Horace):

Informal: Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!

Formal: Dulce et Decorum est Pro patria mori.

He uses this to demonstrate what he perceives to be 'the truth' of life on the frontline: the informal language shows the panic that they face during an attack, while the formal language in the Latin phrase is presented as 'the old Lie', highlighting the idea that it's a public line presented to the people.

Can you play around with different levels of language? Try responding to one of the following official statements using informal language. If you saw these posters at a bus stop, asking you to volunteer, what would your response be? How would you feel? Try and write the response as if you were speaking to your friends, texting or writing about it on social media.



How would you respond to this using informal language?

Send your examples to live.lessons@bbc.co.uk, or by using the hashtag #bbclivelessons, and you could see them featured on our Live Lesson on the 30th of June.