

**GREAT WAR (1914-  
1918): ENGLAND:  
WILFRED OWEN**



# **GREAT WAR (1914-1918): ENGLAND: WILFRED OWEN**

## **Description**

By an in-depth analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how Wilfred Owen's poetry is shaped by an intense focus on extraordinary human experiences, and how it tries to give the readers a specific message about the futility of war.

## **Subjects**

English / Language Arts  
European History  
World History

## **Grade Level**

11-12

## **Duration**

180 minutes (2 x 90min)

## **Tour Links**

- Windsor
- Houses of Parliament
- Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey
- Imperial War Museum, London

## **Essential Questions**

- Who was Wilfred Owen?
- What experiences did he have in the Great War?
- What was England's role in driving the European continent towards war in 1914?
- How did Owen's experiences in the Great War influence his writing?
- What message permeates Owen's poems? Is this message timeless?

# Academic Summary

## **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 disappointed shells 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 floundering 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.  
*Wilfred Owen, 1917*

In the span of four short days in the heat of summer in 1914, the entire world held its collective breath while everything that Europe knew about itself came crashing down. The Great War was beginning, a war that no one, and yet everyone, wanted. Over the next four years, millions of men would give the ultimate sacrifice in the trenches of France for ideas that most never really understood. Millions more would forever be scarred, both physically and mentally, by the horrors of war. In the end, the terrors of a new type of warfare, that of the trench system, unthinkable only a generation earlier, would permanently ingrain themselves on a collective consciousness. Poison gas of different types, mainly chlorine and mustard, was used by both the Allies and the Central Powers during the war. Gas attacks, only occasionally fatal, were designed specifically to strike fear into enemy troops in the trenches. The tactic worked. Of all the images of the western front, perhaps the most frightening to soldiers was the sight of green or yellowish gas clouds billowing across no man's land towards their positions.

Wilfred Owen, a British junior officer in the BEF who served two stints on the Western Front between 1916 and 1918, experienced just such attacks. While in France, Owen

wrote a number of poems about what he saw as the horrors of war. Unfortunately, he didn't live to see them published. In the last week of the conflict, on 04 Nov 1918, leading his troops in a crossing of the Sambre-Oise Canal, Owen was shot and killed by German soldiers. Perhaps ironically, his mother received the telegram informing her of his death on 11 Nov 1918, as bells were ringing letting the public know of the armistice on the Western Front.

Owen's poems were published after his death. Today he is regarded as the leading poet of the Great War, known best for his imagery on the horrors of trench warfare. By an in-depth analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how Wilfred Owen's poetry is shaped by an intense focus on extraordinary human experiences, and how it tries to give the readers a specific message about the futility of war.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the main ideas of Wilfred Owen's poetry from the Great War.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the use of images and themes in Wilfred Owen's poetry from the Great War.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the overall message Wilfred Owen tried to give his readers through his poetry and whether or not he was successful in doing so.

## Procedures

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What do think of when someone mentions the word "war"? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed below. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Poetry of Wilfred Owen. (20 min)
- Video – Dulce et Decorum Est (5 min)
- Video – Chemical Warfare of World War I (40 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Wilfred Owen and his Great War poetry, taking notes as appropriate. (30 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework the night before class to prepare for class discussion.
- Group Activity – Discussion on the Wilfred Owen's poetry and his use of images and language to give the readers a message about the horrors and futility of war.

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Using specific examples from the text, explain in detail how Wilfred Owen used imagery and language to portray the horrors and futility of war on the Western Front.

## Extension

### **On tour: Westminster Abbey (Poet's Corner)**

While on tour, you will visit Westminster Abbey. In the South Transept, students will see a section called "Poet's Corner", so named due to the large number of literary figures buried and commemorated there. Some, like Geoffrey Chaucer (1400) and Charles Dickens (1870) are actually buried in the Chapel, while others, such as Shakespeare and Longfellow merely have memorials in Poet's Corner. Wilfred Owen is buried in France where he died, but he is memorialized on a special WWI poet's stone slab that was unveiled in 1985. See if students can recognize any other names from the ones memorialized on the slab (Siegfried Sassoon is probably the most well-known other than Owen).

# Web Links

## Lesson Plan Websites

- [poetryfoundation.org/poem/175898](http://poetryfoundation.org/poem/175898)  
Dulce et Decorum Est – from the Poetry Foundation
- [poetryfoundation.org/poem/176831](http://poetryfoundation.org/poem/176831)  
Anthem for Doomed Youth – from the Poetry Foundation
- [iwm.org.uk/centenary](http://iwm.org.uk/centenary)  
“First World War Centenary” – Imperial War Museums. Articles, primary sources, films, photographs and podcasts on the Great War – great resource for teachers and students.
- [www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/)  
First World War Poetry Digital Archive (website) – from Oxford University – fantastic resource for teachers and students studying the Great War. Contains links to primary and secondary sources, not only on the poetry (including Wilfred Owen’s works), but also other information on the Great War itself – archive itself contains over 7000 items of text – highly recommended.
- [owenstudy.wordpress.com/](http://owenstudy.wordpress.com/)  
“The Poetry of Wilfred Owen” (website) – outstanding website dedicated to Owen and his poetry – contains 7 separate academic lessons on Owen and his work, analyzing everything from specific poems, to his use of language and on the messages he tries to give readers – highly recommended resource for teachers and students, especially those who want to do an in-depth study of Owen’s work and its impact on society.
- [warpoetry.co.uk/Owena.html](http://warpoetry.co.uk/Owena.html)  
“Wilfred Owen” (website) – from the War Poetry Website (UK)
- [mrbaldwinshscenglish.weebly.com/wilfred-owen.html](http://mrbaldwinshscenglish.weebly.com/wilfred-owen.html)  
“Close Study of Text: Wilfred Owen” (website)
- [poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/305](http://poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/305)  
“Wilfred Owen” (website) – from Poets.org
- [www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/owen](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/owen)  
“The Wilfred Owen Collection” (website) – from the First World War Poetry Digital Archive at Oxford University
- <http://www.selkirk.scotborders.sch.uk/subjects/englishweb/Dulce.ppt>  
“Dulce et Decorum Est” PowerPoint from Selkirk High School (UK)
- [teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2 minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes – from Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA – highly recommended for teachers.
- [nickellyear12english.wikispaces.com/file/view/Owen.ppt](http://nickellyear12english.wikispaces.com/file/view/Owen.ppt)  
“The Poems of Wilfred Owen” PowerPoint
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ga-hgaQCKpE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ga-hgaQCKpE)  
“Chemical Warfare of World War 1 -- Full Documentary” (video)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=c49tRplMh-Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c49tRplMh-Y)  
“Dulce et Decorum Est” – reading of Owen’s famous poem from the BBC

## Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilfred\\_Owen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilfred_Owen)  
“Wilfred Owen” – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dulce\\_et\\_Decorum\\_est](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dulce_et_Decorum_est)  
“Dulce et Decorum Est” – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthem\\_for\\_Doomed\\_Youth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthem_for_Doomed_Youth)  
“Anthem for Doomed Youth” – Wikipedia article
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/the\\_united\\_kingdom/london](https://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_united_kingdom/london)  
On the Road: London – city facts on London from Passports Educational Travel
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/the\\_benelux\\_countries/country\\_profile](https://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_benelux_countries/country_profile)  
On the Road -- Country Profile: The Benelux Countries from Passports Educational Travel

## Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/austria/great-war-austrian-ultimatum-to-serbia](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/austria/great-war-austrian-ultimatum-to-serbia)  
Great War – Serbian Front: Austrian Ultimatum of 1914
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-causes-of-the-war-1914](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-causes-of-the-war-1914)  
Great War – Lights Going Out in 1914
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-armistice-day-1918](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-armistice-day-1918)  
England and the Great War – Armistice Day 1918
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/great-war-clemenceau-views-at-versailles](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-clemenceau-views-at-versailles)  
Great War – France: Clemenceau's Aims at Versailles
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/great-war-battle-of-the-somme](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-battle-of-the-somme)  
Great War – Battle of the Somme 1916
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/battle-of-verdun-1916](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/battle-of-verdun-1916)  
Great War – Battle of Verdun
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/great-war-first-battle-of-the-marne-1914](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-first-battle-of-the-marne-1914)  
Great War – First Battle of the Marne 1914
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/great-war-schlieffen-plan](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/great-war-schlieffen-plan)  
Great War – Germany: The Schlieffen Plan
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/great-war-eastern-front-treaty-of-brest-litovsk-1918](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/great-war-eastern-front-treaty-of-brest-litovsk-1918)  
Great War – Eastern Front: Treaty of Brest-Litovsk 1918

## Key Terms

- Chemical Warfare
- Chlorine gas
- Great War
- Mustard gas
- Shell shock
- Trench Warfare
- Western Front
- Wilfred Owen

