2000 First Place

War Imagery in Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est”
and Sting’s “Children’s Crusade”

Is it really sweet and fitting to die for one’s country? This may seem glorious to some, but to those who have studied World War I and its terrible consequences, this seems a lie. The poet Wilfred Owen was a participant in this war, and wrote the poem “Dulce et Decorum Est” (“It is sweet and fitting [to die for one’s country]”) to his poet friends about the voracity, hopelessness, and futility of war, and the desperate plight of the soldiers involved. Almost seventy-five years later, the popular artist Sting worried about the world in which his son was growing up, a world in which older, experienced adults took advantage of innocent children to increase their own power. Using World War I as a comparison to his own time, he wrote the song “Children’s Crusade” about these scheming, power-hungry people. Both these poets describe a war in which children were abused, controlled by other’s selfish wants. Although Sting mainly uses strong allusions to describe the soldiers’ loss of innocence, Owen’s poem uses jarring, tangible images of reality that are emotionally more universal.

As in other effective poetry, Sting uses strong language to convey the world’s cruelty toward the innocent. He describes the soldiers in the war using the phrases “Virgins with rifles” (3), “Pawns in a game” (5), “Marching through countries they’ve never seen” (2). These phrases appeal to parental nature and sense of decency. “Virgins” suggests not only a feeling of innocence, but a feeling of virtue about to be lost. Sting uses the phrase “the flower of England, face down in the mud” (11), giving us a beautiful, fresh image to symbolize these young soldiers. He then ruins the pristine image by covering it with filth, showing the young mens’ fall from innocence. To add insult to injury, he then stains the flower with blood, the blood of “a whole generation” (12), creating the vision of a shocking massacre. Sting uses flowers as uniting images in the poem, especially
the poppy, which is the first flower to grow on graves after a war. Consequently, there are fields of poppies on the Belgian and French battlegrounds, the graves of many World War I soldiers. These fields of poppies have come to symbolize remembrance of the dead and the war itself. The poppy is also used to make opium, a vital part of Sting’s second message in the poem, which is the sale of destroying heroin to children. This dual image of poppies facilitates the use of allusions that compare the past to the present.

These moving allusions made to past slaveries and injustices are paramount to the understanding of “Children’s Crusade.” The title itself refers to an event in the thirteenth century when several hundred children were recruited to take the Holy land from the Muslims. The expedition made it as far as the Mediterranean, where the children were sold into slavery by the same monks who had recruited them. When this is compared to World War I soldiers, we see the captivity and injustice of those youth, “pawns” of the “corpulent generals” (13). This image of slavery is capitalized in another of Sting’s allusions: Sting chose to use the phrase “children of England” (9), with the preposition not common in English possessives, instead of “the English children,” or “innocent soldiers,” because “children of England” sounds like the Biblical children of Israel, God’s chosen people who were enslaved by the Egyptians. The Egyptians of the children of Israel’s day are akin to the controlling fat wine-hungry generals that are the children’s captors, and we see more deeply the selfishness of those blubbery commanders.

Besides using jarring images to convey emotion, Sting uses music to inject more emotion into his verse. Most of the piece is written in a minor mode, a mode of music which implies sadness, longing, and other mostly negative emotions. This mode changes to a major mode on the first line of the chorus, a mode which has more positive, joyous connotations. These lines herald the good news that the “children of England would never be slaves” (9), but as the tone of the chorus changes, this major mode only creates a sarcasm, as the children of England are slaves despite their desires. The music moves grudgingly back to the minor mode, dropping back into despair for the soldiers. The poem also becomes more memorable because of this musical nature. As with most songs, many lines are repeated, such as the chorus and even lines in the verse, giving a feeling of unity and implanting themes in the mind. Even those who don’t know what the song means may find themselves whistling it, pondering its origins.
In contrast to “Children’s Crusade,” which focuses on allusions, Wilfred Owen’s poem creates tangible images of death and the zombie-like state of a soldier. Owen seems to dwell more on the loss of innocence that has already happened than on the state of the soldiers before their involvement in the war. He drills his images into our mind through constant repetition, only slightly changing the images after each use. From the first line, he presents an image of “old beggars under sacks” (1), giving us not only an image of poorly clad people, but also weak, destitute, demoralized people. He then compares the soldiers with “hags” (2), “haunting flares” (3), and men “marching asleep” (5). These separate and small phrases contribute to an overall image of soldier zombies, already dead and still marching without realizing what they have become. The soldier who is gassed in the poem is described as having a “hanging face” (20) and “incurable sores on innocent tongues” (24). These examples of Owen’s walking dead scare and then convince us of war’s terrible nature. Owen then takes these images and makes them universal to the situation: “All went lame; all blind;” as if these conditions are everywhere, and it is the war that made everything this way (6).

The title of Owen’s piece, “Dulce et Decorum Est,” is his only literary allusion, yet he uses it in such a way that it is not lost to an uneducated audience. Because Latin is seen as a scholarly and noble language, and the language of the Roman Catholic church, just seeing the Latin phrase without knowing the meaning can connote some lost age, a time past when chivalry and honor was important. When one understands the meaning of the Latin, “It is sweet and fitting [to die for ones country],” the phrase seems incredibly outdated when compared with the ugly, immediate war presented by Owen. The nobleness of the Latin turns into bitter sarcasm, and we feel resentment for the person who even suggests that dying for one’s country is sweet and fitting. The phrase is also repeated at the end of the poem, neatly sandwiching the blunt, harsh facts of war within the bitterness.

Although also able to visually convey meaning, the form of “Dulce et Decorum Est” is more complicated and yet freer than the form of “Children’s Crusade.” “Dulce et Decorum Est” divides into three super-stanzas made of two quatrains of rhyme scheme ABAB. The last stanza contains three quatrains, setting it apart from the other two stanzas. However, this last quatrain does not fit the form of the others. It really has only enough syllables for three lines, and the last line is cut in half to complete the rhyme scheme. This conveys
the stretching out of a soldier’s life until the last possible moment, when it comes to an abrupt halt in the five-syllable last line. This form also brings attention to the last phrase, which is also the title of the poem. Despite this well-organized rhyme scheme, the poem at first reading does not seem to rhyme. Possible reasons could be the shear length of each line or Owen’s word choice, but the appearance of free verse does create a poem that seems to move as these soldiers do, limping along, their surroundings blending together.

When the two poems are closely compared, the universality of Owen’s poem becomes more apparent. Although Sting does use graphic images that move the audience, Owen’s extremely graphic descriptions are more vivid and disconcerting to the mind. Sting’s phrase “Strewn on the fields” (6), and other phrases bring images of haphazard and disregard for human life, but Owen’s poem goes into incredible detail to tell of the death of one soldier drowning “under a green sea” of gas (14). These details make the poem much more immediate, bringing the horrible images closer to reality. Owen also uses more common images all can understand, such as death, dreams, and destitute people. He also gives deep descriptions of those things all may not understand. For example, even if his audience didn’t know that Gas was a cruel weapon that killed ruthlessly during this time, they would be able to gather from the description of the soldier’s death what Gas was, and its capacity for killing. Even Owen’s major allusion to the Latin poet Horace is usually explained by a quick footnote. Sting, on the other hand, offers no explanation for his title and it is unlikely that most listeners would recognize the historical allusion. Although Sting could have used program notes, in this case he chose not to use them.

Besides the effective use of details, Owen’s poem uses a freer form to better express youth’s injustice than Sting well-ordered format. Owen is able to use more words to set up a tone and personalize the poem. He also takes advantage of the format of his poem by breaking it (the truncation of the last two lines), creating a visual image that brings out the Latin phrase so vital to the poem. For the sake of the continuity that music demands, Sting could not break his form for effect. Sting’s poem is also limited by the small number of words that could be used. As a result, his repetition of ideas and themes in variant ways is extremely limited. Even this short poem translates in to a five-minute song, which may be longer than some of his audience’s attention spans.
In addition to challenging audience’s attention spans, Sting’s poem may challenge the intellect of his audience of mature Americans and Britains. Owen’s poem, on the other hand, is understandable to many audiences. Most people who listen to Sting, the traditional pop-rock audience, would probably have no idea what the original Children’s Crusade was, making the poem’s defining image obsolete. One of the poem’s other images, the sale of heroin to British children, remains unknown to the American audiences who do not know that Soho is an urban district of London, or why the last stanza comes to the present time, or why those people would be heroin addicts. His audience would know about World War I, because it was a world defining time and many of their ancestors fought and died in it. The parallels of these three eras are not defined, and the audience gets lost. In this way, the musical nature of the poem distracts from its overall message, as the listener gradually pays less attention to the words he does not understand and concentrates just on the music and other surface beauties of the song.

Sting wrote “Children’s Crusade” seventy-five years out of context, and most of the terribleness of the war had been forgotten. In contrast, Owen participated in the war, and experienced first-hand the things discussed in his poem. Owen actually died during the conflict, only a week before the peace agreement was signed ending the war. His words grow from his experience to reach a closer, more personal level, telling things with which all are familiar, but in a shocking and gruesome way. Although Sting’s poem becomes intricate once its background is understood, his poem loses significance when he fails to consider his audience. The most he could hope for was a general anti-war feeling, which is only one of the points that form his argument, instead of a feeling for the plight of the children of his day. The theme of heroin addiction remains unknown to most. Sting does wield effective images, as does Owen, but as Sting’s allusions remain unknown, Owen’s tailoring to basic human emotions makes us regret the soldiers’ loss of innocence.