

World War I: Cultural Context

Part I: Pre-WWI

The poem below is based upon a failed cavalry charge in the Crimean War. A division of British cavalry suffered heavy casualties after charging a heavily fortified Russian position.

Excerpt from "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (1854)

By Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Half a league, half a league,

Half a league onward,

All in the valley of Death

Rode the six hundred.

"Forward, the Light Brigade!

Charge for the guns!" he said.

Into the valley of Death

Rode the six hundred.

"Forward, the Light Brigade!"

Was there a man dismayed?

Not though the soldier knew

Someone had blundered.

Theirs not to make reply,

Theirs not to reason why,

Theirs but to do and die.

Into the valley of Death

Rode the six hundred.

Cannon to right of them,

Cannon to left of them,

Cannon in front of them

Volleyed and thundered;

Stormed at with shot and shell,

Boldly they rode and well,

Into the jaws of Death,

Into the mouth of hell

Rode the six hundred..|

When can their glory fade?

O the wild charge they made!

All the world wondered.

Honour the charge they made!

Honour the Light Brigade,

Noble six hundred

Close Reading (complete sentences!):

1. What happened to the light brigade? Whose fault is it?

2. How do the soldiers face their fate?

3. What does the light brigade's charge accomplish?

4. How does Tennyson feel about the light brigade?

Historical Context (respond in short paragraph, cite one quote from the text):

5. Based on this poem, how did people in Tennyson's time view war? How did they view dying for your country?

Part II: WWI

Wilfred Owen was a British soldier who fought in France during World War I. He was killed in combat about 6 months after writing this poem, just 7 days before the fighting ended. The phrase “dulce et decorum est pro patria mori” is a line from an ancient Roman ode meaning “it is sweet and honorable to die for your country.”

“Dulce et Decorum Est” (1918)

By Wilfred Owen

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 gas-shells dropping softly 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.*

Close Reading (complete sentences!):

1. (First stanza) Describe the men at the start of the poem. What has the war done to them?
2. What happens to the men in the second stanza?
3. How does Owen describe the aftermath of the attack? How does it affect him?
4. What is the meaning of the phrase Owen closes the poem with? How do you think he feels about this idea?

Historical Context (respond in short paragraph, cite one quote from the text):

5. Based on this poem, how did World War I change people’s view of war and dying for your country?

The Diary of Captain Charles May



Captain Charles May fought for the British against the German Army in France. These are entries from his journals in the lead up to the Battle of The Somme (1 July - 18 November 1916), which is one of the bloodiest battles in World History with over 1 million casualties

June 17, 1916

“I must not allow myself to dwell on the personal – there is no room for it here. Also it is demoralising. But I do not want to die. Not that I mind for myself. If it be that I am to go, I am ready. But the thought that I may never see you or our darling baby again turns my bowels to water.

...My one consolation is the happiness that has been ours. Also my conscience is clear that I have always tried to make life a joy for you. I know that if I go you will not want. That is something.

But it is the thought that we may be cut off from each other which is so terrible and that our babe may grow up without my knowing her and without her knowing me. It is difficult to face. And I know your life without me would be a dull blank.

Yet you must never let it become wholly so, for you will be left with the greatest challenge in all the world; the upbringing of our baby. God bless that child, she is the hope of life to me.

My darling, au revoir. It may well be that you will only have to read these lines as ones of passing interest. On the other hand, they may well be my last message to you. If they are, know through all your life that I loved you and baby with all my heart and soul, that you two sweet things were just all the world to me. I pray God I may do my duty, for I know, whatever that may entail, you would not have it otherwise.”

June 28, 1916

“[We]...were all ready and anxious to get away, to get up and moving and down with the waiting. Waiting is rotten. I think it tries the nerves more than the actual movement of assault. Then one has action, movement, a hundred things to strive for and occupy one’s attention. But, in waiting, there is nothing but anxiety and fruitless speculation on every phase conceivable.”

July 1, 1916

“It was a glorious morning and is now broad daylight. We go over in two hours’ time. It seems a long time to wait and I think, whatever happens, we shall all feel relieved once the line is launched. No man’s land is a tangled desert. Unless one could see it one cannot imagine what a terrible state of disorder it is in. Our gunnery has wrecked that and his front line trenches all right. But we do not yet seem to have stopped his machine guns. These are pooping off all along our parapet as I write. I trust they will not claim too many of our lads before the day is over.”

Captain May was killed 2 hours after writing this entry.



Captain May with his wife and daughter before being deployed