

“Disabled” and “Mental Cases”

Wilfred Owen: the Pity of War and the Wounded Body

Dr. Tanim Dutta

Assistant Professor & Head, Department of English
Buniadpur Mahavidyalaya
University of Gour Banga, West Bengal



What we shall cover

- 1 Literature and Disability: the general idea
- 2 The context of the two poems
- 3 Wilfred Owen: the war poet
- 4 His philosophy of war, and the “Pity of War”
- 5 Publication: how the poems reached us
- 6 “Disabled”: a close analysis
- 7 “Mental Cases”: a close analysis
- 8 The two poems together: war and disability

PART ONE

Literature and Disability

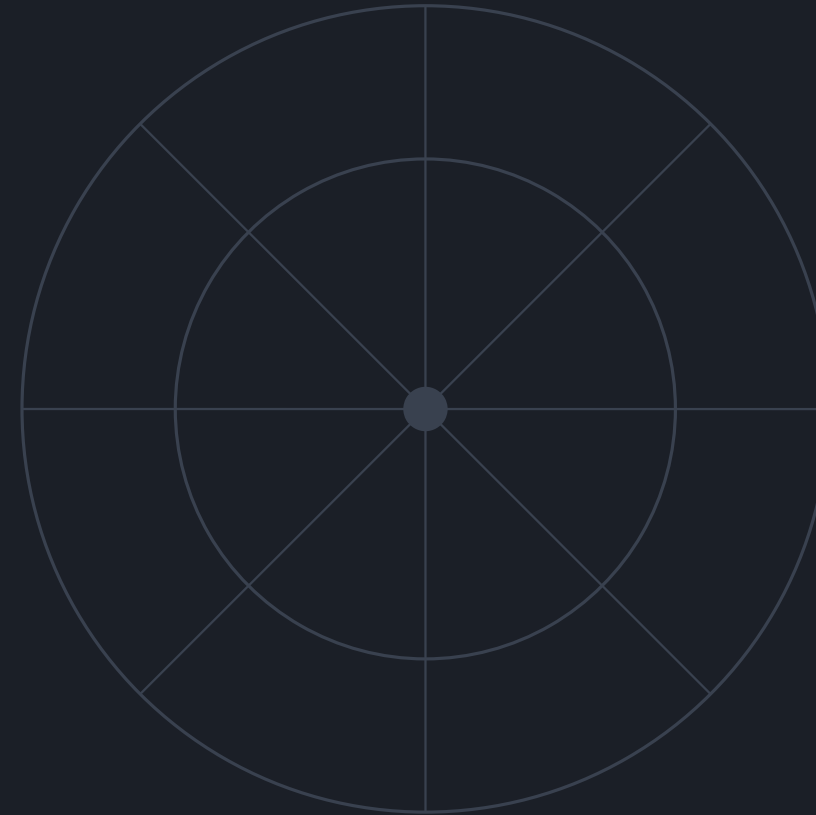
The general idea — a short vocabulary that will change what we are able to see in the two poems.

impairment / disability

the four models

the normate

the stare



Impairment is in the body. Disability is in the world.

IMPAIRMENT

A condition of the body or the mind: an amputation, blindness, chronic pain, a psychiatric illness.

It is described in medical language, and it is located in the person.

DISABILITY

The disadvantage a society creates when it builds only for certain bodies: stairs without ramps, the stare, segregation, charity instead of rights.

It is located in environments, rules and attitudes.

In Owen's "Disabled", the shell takes the young man's limbs in a single clause. The park, the girls, the rules and the institutes take his life — and they need the other forty-three lines to do it.

The models of disability

● Medical model

Disability is a defect in the individual, to be cured or managed by experts. The person becomes a patient, and finally a case.

● Social model

Impairment is bodily; disability is the oppression produced by barriers and attitudes. The thing to be repaired is society.

● Cultural model

Studies the meanings a culture attaches to bodily difference — omen, punishment, pathos, contagion. This is where literature lives.

● Rights model

Disability as human difference to be respected, not tragedy to be pitied. Behind the UNCRPD (2006) and India's RPwD Act (2016).

Owen writes in 1917, six decades before the social model was named — yet his poems behave as though he already knew it.

Ideas we shall carry into the poems

● Normalcy

Lennard Davis: “normal” is a nineteenth-century invention, born with statistics. The problem is not the odd body but the tyranny of the average.

● The normate

Garland-Thomson: the imagined unmarked body — able, male, whole — by which everyone else is measured. Owen’s word for it is “whole”.

● The stare

A way of looking that turns a person into a spectacle. Its opposite — the eye that slides away — disables just as efficiently.

● Narrative prosthesis

Mitchell and Snyder: literature leans on disabled figures as a crutch for meaning, then leaves them behind. A test we shall apply to Owen.

Four terms only. Each one will be used on a particular line of Owen before the session ends.

Why literature matters to disability studies

- **Literature rehearses what a culture feels**

Long before law or policy catches up, poems and novels are where a society tries out its attitudes to bodily difference — and where those attitudes can be caught in the act.

- **Poetry works through the body**

Rhythm is breath; metre is a pulse; a line can be cut short like a limb. In these two poems, form is not decoration — it is the argument in another medium.

- **Owen gives us a person, not a case-file**

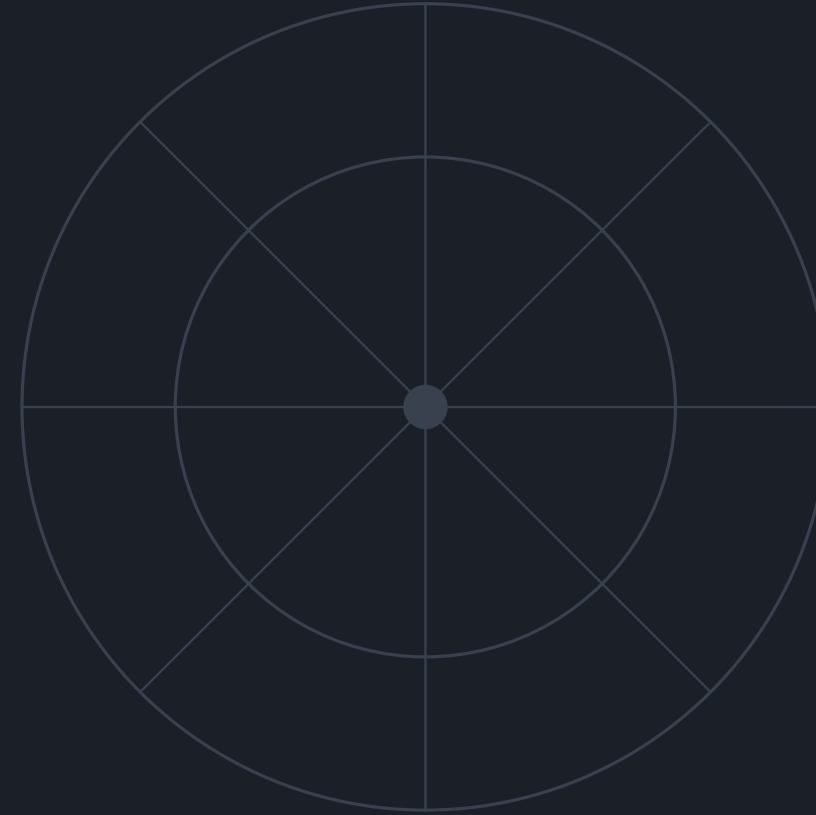
We are placed inside one man's evening and one ward's memory. That is something no pension ledger or medical report can do.

And one caution: sympathy is not the same thing as solidarity. When we admire a poem for its compassion, we should still ask — who speaks here, and who is only being looked at?

PART TWO

The context of the two poems

A new kind of war produced a new scale of disablement — visible in the body, and invisible in the mind.



The Great War made disability a mass experience

700,000+

British soldiers received limb wounds

41,000+

came home as amputees

c. 2 million

returned with some disability

c. 900,000

drew a disability pension by 1922

The body was priced.

Pensions were graded by part — a full pension for the loss of two or more limbs or of sight, fifty per cent for a leg amputated below the knee. The state issued a tariff for human parts, and the man in “Disabled” will live on it.

Disability became an institution.

A Ministry of Pensions, convalescent hospitals, limb-fitting centres and training workshops appeared almost overnight. Owen’s word for all of this is “institutes”.

Figures: The National Archives; Historic England; Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health (2021).

Shell shock: the context of “Mental Cases”

● A new diagnosis

The term “shell shock” entered use in 1915. Officers were more often given the gentler label “neurasthenia”. Some 80,000 British servicemen were treated for such conditions during the war.

● Symptoms

Tremor, paralysis without injury, mutism, blindness and deafness with no physical cause, nightmares, and the uncontrollable return of what had been seen.

● Suspicion

Many were suspected of cowardice or malingering; a number of shell-shocked men were court-martialled and shot. The wound had no wound to show.

● Treatment

Anything from electrical treatment and discipline to the talking cures and “work cure” practised at Craiglockhart, where Owen was himself a patient.

Owen writes “Mental Cases” about the ward he had lived in — not as a visitor, but as a former patient.

Where the two poems were written

“DISABLED”

- Drafted at Craiglockhart War Hospital, Edinburgh, in October 1917.
- Robert Graves read the draft on 14 October 1917 and called it a fine poem.
- Revised at Scarborough in July 1918.
- Owen thought so well of it that he planned his first collection under the title Disabled and Other Poems.

“MENTAL CASES”

- Begun in late 1917 as a draft called “The Deranged”.
- Completed at Ripon and Scarborough in the summer of 1918.
- Written after his own treatment for neurasthenia at Craiglockhart.
- Belongs to the great burst of 1918 that produced “Strange Meeting”, “Futility” and “Exposure”.

One poet, one hospital, two wounds: the body in the first poem, the mind in the second.

PART THREE

Wilfred Owen

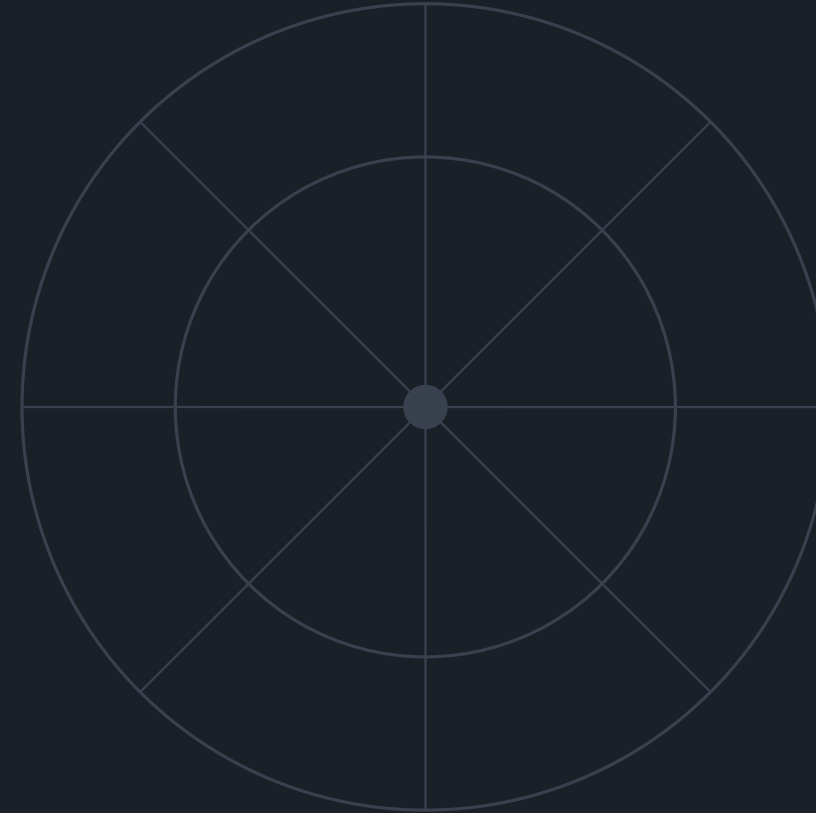
1893 – 1918

A life of twenty-five years, a working career as a poet of about fifteen months, and five poems printed while he lived.

Craiglockhart

Sassoon

the pity of War



Wilfred Owen: the shape of a short career

1893

Born on 18 March at Oswestry, Shropshire, into a devout and straitened family. An early devotion to Keats.

1913–15

Teaches English at Bordeaux, and hesitates for a year over whether the war is his business.

Oct 1915

Enlists in the Artists' Rifles; commissioned into the Manchester Regiment.

Jan–May 1917

The Somme sector. Blown up by a shell and trapped for days near a dead fellow officer. Diagnosed with neurasthenia.

Jun–Nov 1917

Craiglockhart War Hospital, Edinburgh. Meets Siegfried Sassoon in August. Drafts "Disabled" in October.

1918

Ripon and Scarborough: "Strange Meeting", "Futility", "Exposure", "Mental Cases". Drafts his Preface.

Aug–Oct 1918

Returns to France by his own choice, and is awarded the Military Cross.

4 Nov 1918

Killed at the Sambre–Oise Canal, one week before the Armistice. The telegram reaches his mother as the peace bells ring.

Craiglockhart: the turning point

A hospital for officers whose nerves had given way — the very condition “Mental Cases” describes.

*Owen arrived as a patient.
He left with a subject,
a method and a nerve.*

Dr A. J. Brock and the work cure

Brock treated nervous collapse with purposeful activity. Owen edited the hospital magazine, *The Hydra*, and taught at a local school. Therapy turned into apprenticeship.

Siegfried Sassoon

Sassoon was there because of his public protest against the conduct of the war. He gave Owen permission to write about the war directly and satirically; Owen gave the movement its finest ear.

The irony worth keeping

The most compassionate English poems about broken bodies and broken minds were written inside a hospital, by a patient.

Owen's philosophy of war

- **Truth against propaganda**
His quarrel is with what "Dulce et Decorum Est" calls the old Lie, and with recruiting verse of the kind Jessie Pope wrote, which invited boys to treat the war as a game worth joining.
- **Warning, not consolation**
He wrote that all a poet could do in his day was warn. The poems are addressed to the next set of boys — the ones whose voices ring through the park in "Disabled".
- **The authority of the soldier**
He speaks as one who was there, and refuses to turn that authority into glamour. The civilians in his poems are the recruiting clerk, the solemn man with fruits, the women whose eyes pass on.
- **A faith under strain**
A devout upbringing turned against a Church that preached sacrifice from safety. He keeps the religious imagery and withdraws its comfort.
- **No heroes**
He refuses the epic tradition altogether. War in Owen produces not heroes but survivors, and the poems follow them home.

The Pity of War

This book is not about heroes.

English Poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.

...

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity.

From the Preface to a collection Owen did not live to publish.

“All a poet can do today is warn.”

What “pity” does not mean

It is not condescension, and not a tear shed from a safe distance. Owen never weeps over his subjects.

What it does mean

Something closer to the Latin pietas — the capacity to feel another’s suffering as fully real. Pity in Owen is an act of exact attention, and it costs the person who feels it.

Why the poetry is “in” the pity

The value of the verse lies in its moral seeing rather than in its music — though the music is how the seeing gets done.

And a warning for “Disabled”

In the last stanza of that poem, pity is something “doled” out in scraps. Owen knew his central word could be corrupted, and he wrote the corruption into the poem.

Features of Owen's poetry

● Pararhyme

Consonants agree, vowels refuse: escaped / scooped, groined / groaned. The ear expects harmony and is given dissonance.

● Keatsian sensuousness

A rich, tactile, colour-soaked diction inherited from Keats — then turned upon mud, blood and stumps.

● Unflinching realism

The unpoetic admitted into poetry: a wheeled chair, a suit of grey, a peg of whisky, drooping tongues, pension rules.

● Irony and parody

He borrows the language of propaganda, sport and hymn, then lets the facts collapse it from within.

● Religion repurposed

Sacrifice, purgatory and scourging applied to soldiers, often to indict a Church that blessed the killing.

● Broken forms

Elegy, sonnet and hymn stanza taken up and deliberately strained, stretched, or cut short.

"Disabled" uses full rhyme, but scattered so irregularly that the ear can never settle. "Mental Cases" abandons rhyme altogether.

Publication: Owen in print

● In his lifetime

Only five poems were printed — a few in *The Nation* and in *The Hydra*, the magazine he edited at Craiglockhart. He died almost unknown as a poet.

● 1919

Seven poems appear in *Wheels: Fourth Cycle*, the annual anthology edited by Edith Sitwell, which is dedicated to his memory.

● 1920

Poems by Wilfred Owen — a slim volume of twenty-three poems, edited by Siegfried Sassoon with Edith Sitwell, published by Chatto & Windus. Both “Disabled” and “Mental Cases” first appear here, with the Preface.

● 1931

The Poems of Wilfred Owen, edited with a memoir by Edmund Blunden — the edition that made his reputation for a generation.

● 1963

The Collected Poems, edited by C. Day Lewis, with Blunden’s memoir. Owen enters the university syllabus.

● 1983

The Complete Poems and Fragments, edited by Jon Stallworthy — the standard scholarly text, which prints the drafts and variants.

Both prescribed poems are therefore posthumous. Owen never saw either of them in a book.

PART FOUR

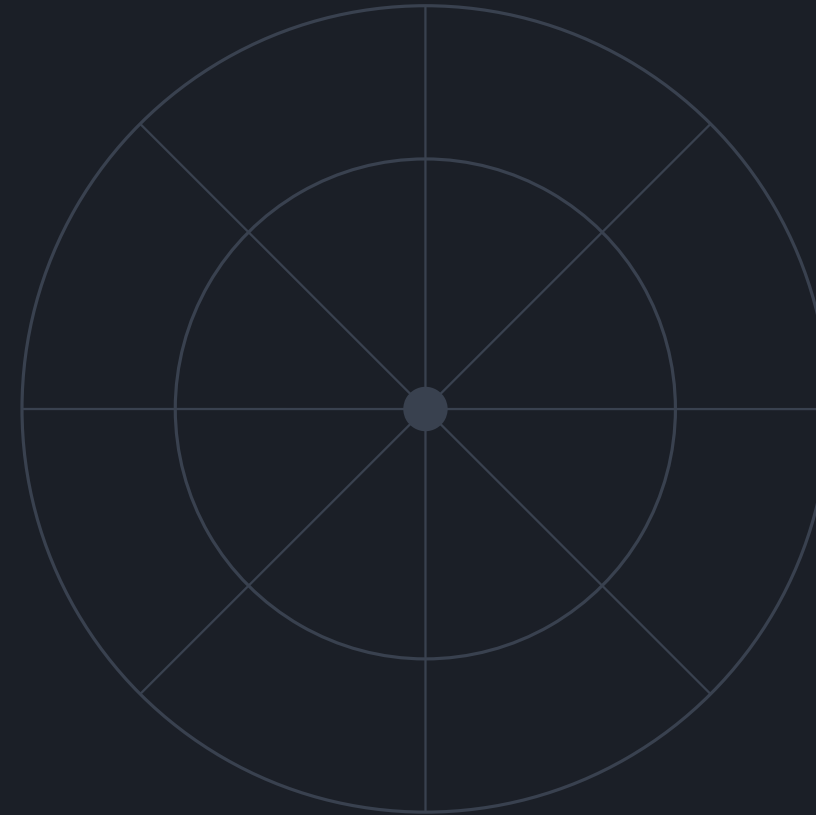
“Disabled” an analysis

The text is on every slide. Read the stanza aloud first, then take the points one at a time.

war

the body

the social world



“Disabled”: the poem at a glance

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE POEM

A young soldier, never named, sits in a wheelchair at dusk in a park, listening to boys at play.

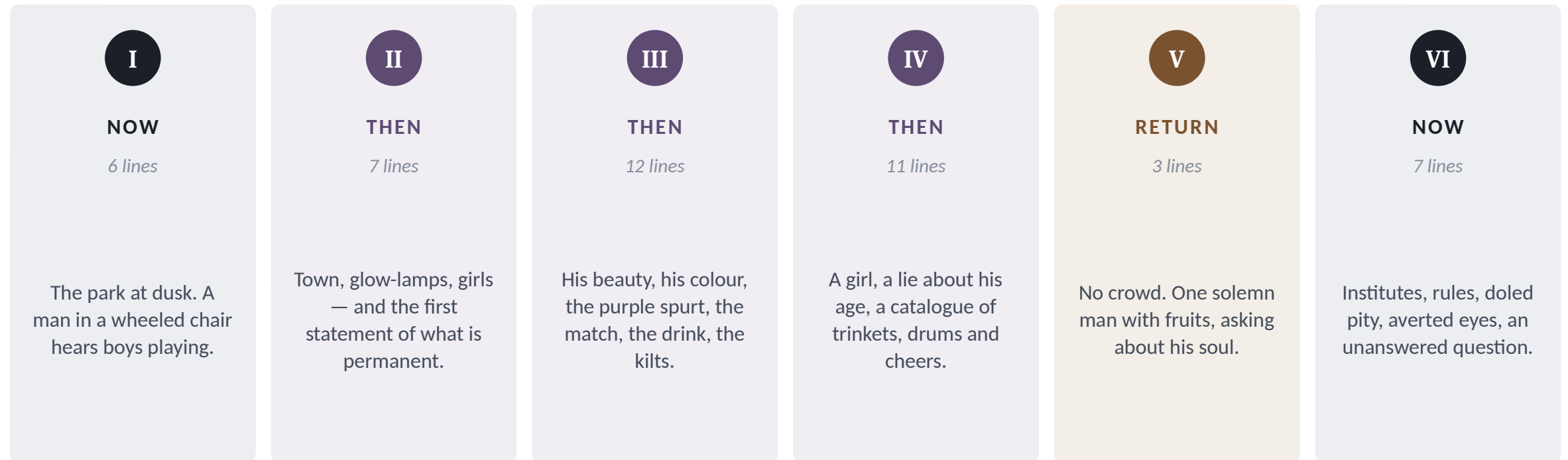
He remembers the town, the girls, his own beauty, a football match, and the evening he enlisted to impress them.

He came home to no welcome. He will now live in institutions, on whatever pity is given him, waiting for someone to put him to bed.

FORM AT A GLANCE

- Forty-six lines in six verse-paragraphs of unequal length: 6, 7, 12, 11, 3, 7.
- Loose iambic pentameter, constantly interrupted.
- Irregular rhyme: dark / park, grey / day, hymn / him.
- Third person — but the boy’s own idiom keeps entering the narration.
- The protagonist is never named. The title has already named him.

A montage of “then” and “now”



- The poem is cut like a film: there are no signposts between past and present, and the jolt is the point — this is how memory behaves for him.
- Every remembered brightness is set against a present deprivation, so the past is not a refuge but an instrument of pain.
- The stanza that should be the climax — his homecoming — is the shortest in the poem. Form does the arguing.

The park at dusk: a man who can only wait

He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,
And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,
Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park
Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,
Voices of play and pleasure after day,
Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.

- No name, no rank, no place. The poem opens on a pronoun, “He”, because the title has already told us what he is. A person has been replaced by a category.
- “waiting for dark” — his one remaining verb is waiting. The last two lines of the poem will tell us what he is waiting for.
- “Legless, sewn short at elbow.” A sentence with no subject and no verb: the grammar is amputated along with the body. “Sewn” is a tailor’s word, and it turns the man into a garment stitched to length by other hands.
- The stanza belongs to sound, not sight. He cannot follow the boys; he can only hear them. “Voices ... Voices” closes around a man who cannot move towards them.
- “like a hymn” turns children’s play into a funeral service — and quietly reminds us who these boys will be in a few years.
- “mothered” is the tenderest word in the poem and the cruellest. Sleep gathers the children home; nobody gathers him.
- **Hear the rhyme: hymn / him. The sacred song and the excluded man, joined by sound alone.**

Memory: the town, the lamps, the girls

About this time Town used to swing so gay
 When glow-lamps budded in the light-blue trees,
 And girls glanced lovelier as the air grew dim,—
 In the old times, before he threw away his knees.
 Now he will never feel again how slim
 Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands,
 All of them touch him like some queer disease.

- The tense changes to the habitual past, “used to swing”. Memory arrives not as one incident but as a whole social world, now closed to him.
- “Town” is capitalised into a person: the town itself used to dance. What he has lost is not only a body but a membership.
- “glow-lamps budded in the light-blue trees” — electric light made organic. Buds promise flower and fruit; his life will produce neither.
- “before he threw away his knees” — not “lost”: threw away, as one throws away money. Knees mean kneeling, dancing, football and sex: Owen chooses the joint that carries a whole way of being alive.
- The register is touch, not sight — slim waists, warm hands. War poetry usually lives in the eye; Owen makes his subject the skin.
- “All of them touch him like some queer disease.” Two meanings at once: their touch feels like an illness to him, and they touch him as though he were one. Disability read as contagion — the exact mechanism of stigma.

The beautiful boy, the wound, and the football match

There was an artist silly for his face,
 For it was younger than his youth, last year.
 Now, he is old; his back will never brace;
 He's lost his colour very far from here,
 Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,
 And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race,
 And leap of purple spurted from his thigh.
 One time he liked a blood-smear down his leg,
 After the matches carried shoulder-high.
 It was after football, when he'd drunk a peg,
 He thought he'd better join. He wonders why...
 Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts.

- “younger than his youth, last year” — a paradox with a date attached, and the date is the shock. This is not ageing; it is violence done to time.
- “He's lost his colour very far from here” — colour means complexion, blood, and the regimental Colours; and the line refuses to name the Front. He pours it “down shell-holes till the veins ran dry”: a libation offered to nothing.
- “And leap of purple spurted from his thigh.” The most violent beauty in the poem. “Leap” gives the blood the vitality he has lost, purple is royalty and bruise at once, and the thigh is the seat of strength and generation. The wound is written as a castration.
- Two kinds of blood now stand side by side: the “blood-smear” of the football field, worn like a medal, and the purple that left his thigh. The boy could not tell them apart in time.
- “It was after football, when he'd drunk a peg, / He thought he'd better join. He wonders why...” The decision that ended his life takes half a line, is made drunk and follows a game; the ellipsis is the hole where a reason should be. And “a god in kilts” names what did the recruiting: vanity, not a cause.

How a boy was enlisted: a lie and a list

That's why; and maybe, too, to please his Meg,
 Aye, that was it, to please the giddy jilts,
 He asked to join. He didn't have to beg;
 Smiling they wrote his lie: aged nineteen years.
 Germans he scarcely thought of, all their guilt,
 And Austria's, did not move him. And no fears
 Of Fear came yet. He thought of jewelled hilts
 For daggers in plaid socks; of smart salutes;
 And care of arms; and leave; and pay arrears;
 Esprit de corps; and hints for young recruits.
 And soon, he was drafted out with drums and cheers.

- Listen to the voice. “Aye, that was it” is not Owen’s idiom but the boy’s. The narration is infiltrated by his own speech, so that he convicts himself without ever being mocked.
- The motives descend: a particular girl, girls in general, the look of the uniform. Politics never appears.
- “He didn’t have to beg” — planted here to detonate in the last stanza, where he lives on what is doled to him.
- “Smiling they wrote his lie: aged nineteen years.” The recruiter’s smile is the state’s collusion. He is under age; the adults know; the pen moves anyway.
- “And no fears / Of Fear came yet.” Fear is capitalised into a person he has not yet met. Everything the poem does not describe is held in that capital letter.
- Then the catalogue — jewelled hilts, plaid socks, smart salutes, leave, pay arrears, esprit de corps. War imagined as accessories and small perks, strung on “and ... and ... and” like a boy’s shopping list.
- “esprit de corps” means the spirit of the body. The body has since been dismembered, and the spirit of the body is what took it apart.

The homecoming: three lines, and no crowd

Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal.
Only a solemn man who brought him fruits
Thanked him; and then inquired about his soul.

- The shortest stanza in the poem is his homecoming — and that is the argument. The return is cut short, sewn short, exactly as the body was.
- “but not as crowds cheer Goal” — the comparison damns a whole society in eight words. The nation’s real religion is the match, and the capital letter makes “Goal” an idol. Note the implication: the war itself has no goal anyone can cheer.
- “Only a solemn man who brought him fruits” — charity arrives as one visitor, a serious face and a small parcel. Fruits are what you carry to a child or an invalid.
- “Thanked him” is italicised in the text, which marks the word as strange and isolated. One man in the kingdom says thank you.
- “and then inquired about his soul” — the clergyman’s question, and the poem’s quietest savagery. Religion attends to the soul of a man whose body was destroyed with the Church’s blessing.

The sentence passed: institutes, rules, the dole

Now, he will spend a few sick years in institutes,
 And do what things the rules consider wise,
 And take whatever pity they may dole.
 Tonight he noticed how the women's eyes
 Passed from him to the strong men that were whole.
 How cold and late it is! Why don't they come
 And put him into bed? Why don't they come?

- “Now, he will spend a few sick years in institutes” — not a description but a sentence handed down. The future tense is a verdict, and “sick” makes him permanently a patient.
- “institutes” — plural, impersonal, bureaucratic. This is institutionalisation, the period's standard answer to disability, and the opposite of a home.
- “And do what things the rules consider wise” — the rules do the considering; he has been relieved of judgement. This, and not the amputation, is the loss the social model cares about most.
- “And take whatever pity they may dole.” To dole is to give out in scraps, and the dole is state relief. Pity has become a ration — set this against the Preface.
- “the women's eyes / Passed from him to the strong men that were whole” — not staring, but sliding away. Being unseen is its own violence, and “whole” is the whole ideology of the normal body in one syllable.
- “Why don't they come / And put him into bed?” The boy who lied about his age to become a man must now be put to bed like a child. The poem ends on a question, not a moral.

Six expressions worth a paragraph each

- **“ghastly suit of grey”**

Hospital greys. “Ghastly” is both ghostly and horrifying: he is already half a spectre. Grey is the colour of the present, against the light-blue and purple of the past.

- **“sewn short at elbow”**

Tailoring language for a surgical fact. The euphemism is more brutal than plain speech, and the grammar is cut short with the limb.

- **“threw away his knees”**

Agency falsely given to the victim, as though he had squandered his own body. Compare “Smiling they wrote his lie”, where the blame belongs elsewhere.

- **“leap of purple”**

Life-force rendered as colour, escaping the body. The most athletic word in the poem is given to his blood, because he can no longer move.

- **“a god in kilts”**

Recruitment through vanity and display rather than argument. “A god” is immortal, admired and whole — every syllable an insult to the man in the chair.

- **“pity they may dole”**

Pity as a ration, handed out in measured scraps. The same word that names Owen’s poetic creed names the state’s humiliation of him.

A strong answer traces one image across the whole poem rather than listing devices stanza by stanza.

“Disabled”: war and disability studies

WHAT THE POEM SEES BEFORE ITS TIME

- The impairment occupies one clause; society’s response occupies forty-three lines.
- The disabling agents are named one by one: the recruiter who smiles, the crowd that cheers elsewhere, the girls whose eyes pass on, the rules, the institutes.
- “Whole” is exposed as an ideology rather than a fact.
- Charity is shown to humiliate: pity is “doled” like relief money.
- **Written in 1917, six decades before the social model was named.**

AND AN OBJECTION WORTH MAKING

- The soldier is also a device. He carries the anti-war argument and is given no future, no work, and no speech but a plaintive question.
- His disability is figured as sexual death and social extinction — an able-bodied fear projected onto a disabled life.
- This is what Mitchell and Snyder call narrative prosthesis: the disabled body used as a crutch for meaning.
- **Owen’s compassion was radical for 1917. Its terms are ones disability studies has since learned to question. Both statements are true.**

PART FIVE

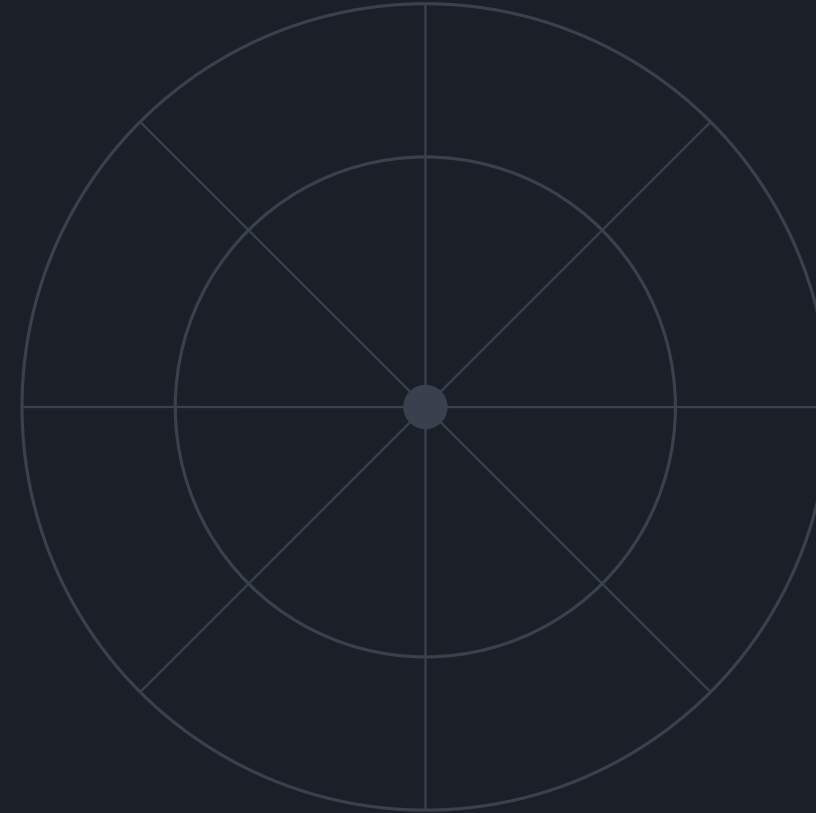
“Mental Cases” an analysis

The same poet, the same hospital, the other wound: an injury that leaves no mark for society to see.

war

the mind

the reader accused



“Mental Cases”: the poem at a glance

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE POEM

A speaker looks at a group of men in a ward at twilight and asks, in horror, who they are.

A second voice answers: these are men whose minds have been destroyed by what they saw and did in the war.

The poem ends by turning on the reader — the men reach out towards “us who dealt them war and madness”.

FORM AT A GLANCE

- Twenty-eight lines in three verse-paragraphs: question, answer, consequence.
- No rhyme. Heavy stresses and falling line-endings give a rocking motion, like the patients themselves.
- Diction drawn from the Bible, from Dante and from Macbeth.
- The men are never named or individuated: “these”, “they”, “men”.
- The pronoun changes to “us” in the last two lines.

The question: who are these?

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,
Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,
Baring teeth that leer like skulls' tongues wicked?
Stroke on stroke of pain,—but what slow panic,
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?
Ever from their hair and through their hand palms
Misery swelters. Surely we have perished
Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?

- The poem opens with five questions and no answers. We are placed in the position of a visitor who does not know what he is looking at.
- “Who are these?” — not “who is he”. They are a plural, a ward, a category. The title completes the work: they are cases, not persons. Compare the title “Disabled”.
- “purgatorial shadows” — not hell but purgatory: suffering that is endless and purposeless, endured by men who are not dead.
- The description is close to disgust — drooping tongues, jaws that slob, teeth that leer. Owen risks our revulsion because revulsion is what these men actually meet.
- “Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets” — the face read as a shelled landscape. Eye sockets become craters: the battlefield has been transferred onto the body.
- “Misery swelters” — misery becomes a climate, sweating out of the hair and the palms. Not an emotion they have, but a weather they live in.
- “Surely we have perished / Sleeping, and walk hell” — the observer’s own grip slips. The poem is already contaminating the person who came to look.

The answer: minds the Dead have ravished

—These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.
Always they must see these things and hear them,
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
Carnage incomparable and human squander
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.

- The answer arrives after a dash, as if reluctantly. “Ravished” means raped, carried off, violated: their minds are not damaged but violated.
- And the perpetrator is “the Dead”, capitalised — not the enemy, not the shells. What has broken them is the company of the men they could not save.
- “Memory fingers in their hair of murders” — memory is given hands, and they are intimate, intrusive hands.
- “Multitudinous murders” echoes Macbeth’s “multitudinous seas”. These men are made into Macbeth: not merely frightened but guilty — not only casualties of war but its instruments.
- “Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter” — the cruellest line in the poem. Lungs are the organ of both breath and laughter; the men walk over friends whose laughter they remember.
- “Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles” — internal rhyme makes the noise mechanical and unending.
- “human squander / Rucked too thick for these men's extrication” — “squander” turns men into waste, “rucked” is a domestic word for crumpled cloth, “extrication” is administrative. One heap of bodies, and no way out.

The consequence — and the accusation

Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented
Back into their brains, because on their sense
Sunlight seems a bloodsmear; night comes blood-black;
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh
—Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,
Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.
—Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;
Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.

- “their eyeballs shrink tormented / Back into their brains” — perception itself has become an injury, so the body retreats from its own senses.
- “Sunlight seems a bloodsmear; night comes blood-black; / Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh.” Trauma has recoloured creation: every day now begins as a wound reopening.
- Follow one word across both poems. In “Disabled”, blood-smear is a footballer’s badge of honour. Here, it is what the sun looks like.
- “hilarious, hideous, / Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses” — the rictus. “Hilarious” in its older sense of wildly cheerful makes the horror worse: they appear to be laughing.
- “Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging” — they become their own flagellants. The imagery is of the Passion, but this scourging has no resurrection at the end of it.
- Then the detonation: “Snatching after us who smote them, brother, / Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.” The pronoun turns. The reader is named as the one who struck them.
- “Brother” is intimate and accusing at once; “pawing” reduces them to animals, yet the gesture is a plea for contact — the very touch that “Disabled” shows being withdrawn.

Six expressions worth a paragraph each

- **“purgatorial shadows”**

Punishment without end and without purpose, suffered by the living. Dante’s purgatory at least leads somewhere; this one does not.

- **“chasms round their fretted sockets”**

The face described as a shelled landscape. The war has not merely injured the body; it has moved into it and taken up residence.

- **“the Dead have ravished”**

Violation, not damage. And the assailants are their own dead comrades — grief and guilt working as a single wound.

- **“Multitudinous murders”**

Macbeth’s word. These men are made accomplices, not only victims: what they cannot bear is partly what they did.

- **“Dawn breaks open like a wound”**

Trauma recolours creation. Sunrise, the oldest image of hope in poetry, is turned into a wound that reopens daily.

- **“Pawing us who dealt them war”**

The frame breaks. We are no longer spectators but the accused, and the poem puts a hand on our sleeve.

Notice how much of the poem’s vocabulary is religious — purgatory, hell, scourging — and how none of it offers redemption.

“Mental Cases”: war and disability studies

● **Psychiatric disability**

The poem insists that a mind can be wounded as a body can. In 1918 that was a contested claim: many believed such men were cowards or malingerers.

● **The language of the case**

The title is the hospital’s own vocabulary. “Mental Cases” names them as files rather than persons — exactly as “Disabled” names a man by his condition.

● **The stare**

The first stanza is built out of staring. Owen makes us look, makes us feel disgust, and then makes us answerable for the disgust we felt.

● **Institution and invisibility**

These men are indoors, in twilight, out of public view. Where the wounded body was at least pensioned and paraded, the wounded mind was simply shut away.

● **Responsibility**

The last two lines refuse the comfortable position of the sympathetic observer. Disability here is not a private misfortune but something “dealt” to them by others.

Two wounds, two poems

	“Disabled” (1917)	“Mental Cases” (1918)
The wound	Visible, countable — legs and an arm.	Invisible, unlocatable — the mind.
The sufferer	One unnamed man, closely followed.	An anonymous plural: “these”, “they”.
The setting	A public park at dusk, among ordinary life.	A twilit ward, sealed off from ordinary life.
Memory	Memory as loss: a bright past against a grey present.	Memory as invasion: the past inside the present, with hands.
Form	Rhymed, irregular verse-paragraphs.	Unrhymed, heavily stressed, falling line-endings.
Diction	Colloquial and lyric by turns.	Biblical, Dantean, Shakespearean.
The reader	A spectator, watching a man who cannot see us.	An accused, reached for in the final line.
Ending	An unanswered question, asked twice.	An accusation, with a hand on our sleeve.

One sentence to carry away: “Disabled” shows a society that will not look; “Mental Cases” shows what happens when it is forced to.

War, the body, and the mind

- **War does not end when it ends**

Both poems are set after the fighting, in a chair and in a ward. Owen's subject is not battle but what battle leaves behind, and how long it lasts.
- **The wound is only the beginning**

What finally disables these men is the society that receives them: the averted eye, the rule, the institution, the ration of pity, the suspicion of cowardice.
- **The body and the mind are treated differently**

The amputee is pensioned, pitied and put on display; the shell-shocked man is hidden. Both are removed from ordinary life, by opposite means.
- **Pity is the method, and the problem**

Owen asks for our pity in order to show us what pity looks like when a state administers it. The poems ask for compassion and distrust charity.
- **The reader is implicated**

"Disabled" lets us watch. "Mental Cases" reaches out and takes hold of us. Together they move the reader from spectator to accused.

Questions

- 1 The titles name conditions, not men. What does each poem gain, and what does it cost?
- 2 “Threw away his knees” and “Smiling they wrote his lie” place blame in opposite directions. Where does “Disabled” finally place responsibility?
- 3 Is the last stanza of “Disabled” an argument for better care, or against the idea of care as charity?
- 4 How does Owen make the reader responsible at the end of “Mental Cases”?
- 5 Compare the treatment of touch in the two poems.
- 6 “The Poetry is in the pity.” Evaluate Owen’s creed with reference to both poems.
- 7 Compare the representation of physical and psychological disability in the two prescribed poems.

Suggested reading

● The poems

Wilfred Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (1983). *Poems* (1920), ed. Siegfried Sassoon. *Collected Letters*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell (1967).

● On Owen

Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen: A Biography* (1974). Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography* (2002). Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975).

● Disability studies

Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997). Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* (2000). Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement* (1990).

● War, the body, India

Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male* (1996). Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (2005). Anita Ghai, *Rethinking Disability in India* (2015). Renu Addlakha (ed.), *Disability Studies in India* (2013).

“Why don’t they come?”

“Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.”

One poem ends with a question nobody answers; the other ends with a hand reaching for the reader. A century later both are still addressed to us — to the buildings we design, the pensions we grade, and the eyes we allow to slide past a wheeled chair in a public park.

Dr. Tanima Dutta

Assistant Professor & Head, Department of English, Buniadpur Mahavidyalaya

