

LITERATURE AND DISABILITY: ENGMJ-702
Module I, Option I: Wilfred Owen's "Disabled" and "Mental Cases"

Society and the Wounded: Disability in Wilfred Owen's "Disabled" and "Mental Cases"

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Wilfred Owen is remembered for declaring that his subject was "War, and the pity of War". Yet in "Disabled" and "Mental Cases" his real subject is not the moment of wounding but everything that follows it. Disability studies offers a distinction that is useful here: impairment is a condition of the body or the mind, while disability is the disadvantage a society creates around that condition. Owen's two titles name conditions where a name should be, and both poems argue that what finally destroys these soldiers is not the shell but the world that receives them.

The Great War (1914-18) produced disablement on an unprecedented scale. More than seven hundred thousand British soldiers received limb wounds, over forty-one thousand came home as amputees, and roughly two million returned with some lasting disability. A Ministry of Pensions graded the body by part and distributed relief accordingly, while convalescent hospitals and training institutes absorbed the survivors. Alongside these visible injuries came some eighty thousand cases of what was called shell shock - a wound with nothing to show, whose sufferers were frequently suspected of cowardice. Owen knew both worlds from within. He was treated for neurasthenia at Craiglockhart War Hospital, where he drafted "Disabled" in October 1917, and he completed "Mental Cases" at Ripon and Scarborough in 1918. Both poems appeared posthumously in *Poems* (1920), edited by Siegfried Sassoon.

In "Disabled" the impairment occupies a single clause – "Legless, sewn short at elbow" - five words, and it is over. The remaining forty-three lines belong to society, and the disabling agents are named one by one. Recruitment works through vanity and adult collusion: "Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts", and at the recruiting office "Smiling they wrote his lie: aged nineteen years". The crowd that once carried him "shoulder-high" after a football match now offers nothing – "Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal". Intimacy is withdrawn: "All of them touch him like some queer disease", a line in which his body has itself become a contagion. His future is an institution, "a few sick years in institutes", where he will "do what things the rules consider wise" and "take whatever pity they may dole". That verb is devastating: pity, which Owen made his own poetic virtue, has become a ration handed out in scraps. Finally, the women's eyes pass "to the strong men that were whole"- and the word "whole" exposes the standard by which he is now measured. The poem ends not on a wound but on an unanswered social question: "Why don't they come?"

"Mental Cases" makes the same argument about the mind. The title is the hospital's own vocabulary, reducing men to cases and files. They are a plural without names- Who are these? - rocking as "purgatorial shadows" in a twilit ward, removed from public view. Owen forces us to stare, describing "Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish", until our own revulsion becomes part of the evidence. Yet the cause lies outside them: these are "men whose minds the

Dead have ravished”, carrying “Multitudinous murders they once witnessed”. The echo of Macbeth makes them guilty as well as afraid. Then the frame breaks: “Snatching after us who smote them, brother, / Pawing us who dealt them war and madness”. The verb “dealt” is the crux of the whole question. Madness was not merely suffered; it was distributed by people, and the reader is counted among them.

Together the poems describe two opposite exclusions. The amputee is pensioned, pitied and put on display; the shell-shocked man is hidden away. Both are removed from ordinary life, one by being looked at wrongly and the other by not being looked at at all. A careful answer should add a qualification: Owen’s soldier is given no future, no occupation and no speech beyond a plaintive question, so that his disability serves the poem’s anti-war argument- what David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder call “narrative prosthesis”. Owen’s compassion was radical for 1917, and its terms remain open to question. On the central point, however, the two poems are unambiguous: disability here is something dealt to men, not something that merely happens to them.