Short Questions and Answers on

Wilfred Owen's "Disabled" and "Mental Cases"

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I. "Disabled"

1. When and where was the poem written, and when did it reach print?

Owen drafted the poem at Craiglockhart War Hospital, Edinburgh, in October 1917 and revised it at Scarborough in July 1918. Robert Graves read the draft that October and praised it, and Owen later planned to publish his first collection under the title Disabled and Other Poems. It appeared posthumously in Poems (1920), the volume edited by Siegfried Sassoon.

2. Why is the poem called "Disabled"?

The title names a condition where a name should be. The soldier is never identified in forty-six lines, so a person has been replaced by a category and the reader meets the label before the man. The word also carries the argument of the poem, since what finally disables him is society rather than the shell that wounded him.

3. Where is the young soldier sitting, and what is he waiting for?

He sits in a wheeled chair in a public park at dusk, shivering in his ghastly suit of grey and listening to boys at play somewhere beyond him. He is waiting for dark, and waiting is now his only action, since he can neither walk towards the voices nor join the life going on around him in the gathering dusk.

4. Explain: *"Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park"*

From the first stanza, this is the poem's only account of the wound itself, given in five words. The clause has neither subject nor verb, so the grammar is cut short exactly as the body has been. "Sewn" belongs to tailoring and makes the man a garment, while the enjambment carries us out into other people's happiness.

5. Why do the voices of the boys sadden him, and what does the simile add?

The boys play freely in the park while he cannot move towards them, so their pleasure becomes the measure of his loss. He can hear them but never join them. The simile "rang saddening like a hymn" turns children's play into a funeral service, and it carries a warning, since these boys will form the next generation of recruits.

6. What is suggested by the word "mothered" at the end of the first stanza?

Sleep gathers the children home to bed as a mother would gather them, so the verb is the tenderest in the poem. It works by contrast, since nobody gathers the soldier, who is left outside in the cold and the dark. Care in this poem is always being offered to somebody else, and never to the man in the chair.

7. How does the poet contrast the remembered town with the present park?

The town of the past is lit and coloured, with "glow-lamps budded in the light-blue trees" and girls who "glanced lovelier as the air grew dim". The present offers only grey clothing, cold and gathering darkness, and the poem cuts between the two without warning. Memory is no refuge here, since every remembered brightness measures what has been taken away.

8. Explain: *"In the old times, before he threw away his knees".*

From the second stanza, where he remembers the town before the war. The casual idiom implies waste and carelessness, as though he had squandered his own body like money, and it quietly places the blame upon him. Knees mean kneeling, dancing and football, so Owen chooses the joint that carried a whole way of living, now closed to him.

9. Explain: *"All of them touch him like some queer disease."*

The line closes the second stanza, where he has remembered the warm hands of girls. The grammar is deliberately double, since their touch now feels to him like an illness, and they touch him as though he were infectious. "Queer" means strange or unaccountable, and the line records the stigma that reads disability as contagion and makes him untouchable.

10. Explain: *"And leap of purple spurted from his thigh."*

From the third stanza, the line describes the arterial bleeding that cost him his limbs. "Leap" is the most athletic word in the poem and is given to his blood, since he himself can no longer move. Purple suggests royalty and bruising together, and the thigh, the seat of generation, makes the wound a sexual death as well as an injury.

11. Why did the young man enlist?

Not from any conviction. He enlisted to please his Meg and "the giddy jilts", because someone had said he would "look a god in kilts", and because he had drunk a peg after a football match. Germans and Austrians "did not move him". Vanity, drink and a girl, rather than politics or patriotism, sent a boy of eighteen to France.

12. Explain: *"Smiling they wrote his lie: aged nineteen years."*

Taken from the fourth stanza, the line shows recruiting officers accepting his false declaration of age. He was under age, the adults knew it, and the pen moved regardless. Their smile makes a fraud resemble kindness, and the flat official phrasing of the last three words records the state assisting in his destruction while appearing merely to complete a form.

13. Explain: *"Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal."*

This opens the three-line stanza describing his return. The comparison measures his homecoming against a football crowd and finds it wanting, while the capital letter makes "Goal" an idol of the nation. The implication is harsher still, since the war itself has produced no goal that anybody can cheer for. The crowd that once carried him shoulder-high has moved on.

14. Explain: *"Thanked him; and then inquired about his soul."*

This closes the shortest stanza in the poem. The solemn man who brings him fruits is the only person who offers thanks, and Owen italicises the word to mark how strange such gratitude has become. The visitor then attends to the soul of a man whose body was destroyed with the Church's blessing, while the fruits confirm his new status.

15. Explain: *"And take whatever pity they may dole."*

From the final stanza, where his future in institutions is foreseen. To dole is to hand out in measured scraps, and the dole was also the name for state relief, so pity becomes a ration. Set against Owen's Preface, where pity is the poet's virtue, the line shows the same word corrupted into charity and handed out by officials.

16. Whose eyes pass over him at the close, and what does the word "whole" imply?

The women's eyes, which pass from him "to the strong men that were whole". They do not stare at him; they travel across him on the way to somebody else, and to be unseen in this way is its own kind of violence. "Whole" means undamaged and complete at once, and it exposes the standard by which he is judged.

17. Explain: *"And put him into bed? Why don't they come?"*

The poem closes by repeating a question asked two lines earlier, and nobody answers it on either occasion. The boy who lied about his age in order to become a man must now be put to bed like a child. Owen withholds the consolation an elegy usually offers and leaves the reader to supply what society has withheld.

II. "Mental Cases"

1. When and where was the poem written, and when did it reach print?

The poem began late in 1917 as a draft called "The Deranged" and was completed at Ripon and Scarborough in the summer of 1918, during the last months of Owen's life. Like the companion poem it was never printed while he lived, and it first reached print in the posthumous volume of 1920 that Sassoon edited with Edith Sitwell.

2. Why is the poem called "Mental Cases"?

The phrase is the clinical language of the ward, and a case is a file rather than a person. The plural keeps the men anonymous from beginning to end, since they are identified only as "these" and "they". The title is cold and official, suiting men who are administered rather than cared for, or indeed even named.

3. Who are "these", and where are they seen?

They are soldiers whose minds have broken under what they saw and did in the war, the condition then called shell shock or neurasthenia. They sit in a ward at twilight, out of public sight. The speaker approaches them as a bewildered visitor, and the poem opens with five questions before any answer is given by a second voice.

4. Explain: *"Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,"*

From the opening stanza, where a bewildered speaker looks at men in a ward at twilight. Their rocking was a recognised symptom of their condition, and the falling rhythm of the verse repeats the motion. Purgatory is suffering endured without visible purpose by those who are not finally dead, which dignifies the men and condemns their treatment.

5. How are the faces of the men described?

Owen is deliberately unsparing, giving us drooping tongues, jaws that "slob their relish", and teeth that "leer like skulls' tongues wicked". The eye sockets become craters, "chasms round their fretted sockets", so that the face is read as a landscape under shellfire. He risks our revulsion because revulsion is precisely what these men meet from everyone who looks at them.

6. Explain: *"These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished."*

The line opens the second stanza and answers the questions of the first. The agent is neither the enemy nor the shells but the dead comrades these men could not save, and the capital letter gives the Dead a presence. "Ravished" means violated or carried off by force, so the mind becomes the scene of a crime.

7. Explain: *"Multitudinous murders they once witnessed."*

From the second stanza, the phrase recalls Macbeth's "multitudinous seas incarnadine", spoken by a man who cannot wash his hands clean. The echo makes these soldiers guilty as well as frightened, and "murders" rather than deaths presents them as participants in killing. Their suffering is therefore moral and not merely nervous, which deepens the charge and complicates our sympathy.

8. Explain: *"Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter."*

Also from the second stanza, the line shows the men walking over the bodies of the dead and pressing the blood from their chests. The lungs are the organ of breath and of laughter alike, so remembered friendship is set against present horror. It is the cruellest line in the poem and also the most tender, since the laughter was loved.

9. How does Owen use sound in the poem?

The poem is unrhymed, and its heavy stresses and falling line-endings produce a rocking motion that repeats the movement of the patients. In "Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles" the internal rhyme makes the noise mechanical and unstoppable, so that a reader cannot pronounce the line without the guns entering the mouth, and the bombardment never stops.

10. Explain: *"Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh"*

From the final stanza, where the men's perception has been altered by trauma. Sunlight seems a bloodsmear and night comes blood-black, so that neither brings any relief. The daily return of light, the oldest image of hope in poetry, becomes a wound reopening, and their suffering is shown to renew itself every morning without any prospect of an ending.

11. What is meant by "set-smiling corpses"?

It describes the fixed grimace upon their faces, which resembles a smile yet expresses no happiness whatever. Owen calls it "hilarious, hideous", using "hilarious" in its older sense of wildly cheerful, which makes the horror worse. The effect is grotesque, since the men appear to be laughing while they suffer, and already resemble the dead they are condemned to remember.

12. What do their hands do, and what does the gesture suggest?

They pluck at one another and pick "at the rope-knouts of their scourging", so that the men become their own flagellants. The imagery recalls the Passion of Christ, yet no resurrection follows this scourging. The restless hands also show the body acting beyond the mind's control, which was a recognised symptom of the condition and beyond any power of theirs to stop.

13. Explain: *"Pawing us who dealt them war and madness."*

The last line of the poem turns the pronoun to "us". The men reach out towards the reader, and the verb "dealt" is decisive, since madness was distributed to them by other people rather than simply suffered. Civilians, officers, poets and students alike are named as responsible, and the frame of safe observation breaks, so that we are no longer mere spectators.