

Notes on Disabled by Wilfred Owen:

The man sits in his wheelchair waiting for nightfall. He is chilled in his gray suit which is legless and sewn at the elbows. Boys' voices ring out in the park; the voices are of "play and pleasure" that echo until sleep takes them away from him.

Around this time the town used to be lively, with lamps in the trees and girls dancing in the dim air. These were the old days before "he threw away his knees". He will no longer have the chance to put his arms around girls' slim waists or feel their warm hands. They look at him like he has a strange disease. Last year there was an artist that wanted to depict his youth, but now he is old. His back will not "brace" and he gave up his color in a land very far from here. He let it drain into "shell-holes" until it was all gone. Half of his life is now passed from that "hot race", when a spurt of purple burst from his thigh.

One time before the war he saw a blood smear on his leg and thought it looked like the "matches carried shoulder-high". He had been drinking after football and he thought he might as well sign up for war. Besides, someone had told him he would look like a god in kilts. This is why he joined the war, and it was also for Meg.

It was easy for him to join. He lied about his age – said he was nineteen – and they cheerfully wrote it down. He was not yet thinking of Germans or "fears / of Fear". All he thought about were "jewelled hilts" and "daggers in plaid socks" and "smart salutes" and "leave" and "pay arrears". Soon he was drafted, and the air was filled with "drums and cheer". Only one serious man who brought him fruit asked him about his soul.

Now, after war, he will spend his time in the Institutes, doing what he should do and accepting whatever pity the rulers want to give him. This evening he saw the women's eyes pass over him to gaze on the strong men with whole bodies. He wonders why they do not come and put him to bed since it is so cold and late.

Analysis

"Disabled" is one of Owen's most disturbing and affecting poems. It was written while he was convalescing at Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh after sustaining injuries on the battlefield, and was revised a year later. This work was the subject of Owen's initial relationship to poet Robert Graves. Owen wrote to his mother on October 14th, 1917, saying, "On Sat. I met Robert Graves...showed him my longish war-piece 'Disabled'...it seems Graves was mightily impressed and considers me a kind of Find!! No thanks, Captain Graves! I'll find myself in due time." A few days later Graves expanded his critique, telling Owen it was a "damn fine poem" but said that his writing was a bit "careless". Graves's comment may derive from the fact that there are many irregularities of stanza, meter, and rhyme in "Disabled".

In the first stanza the young soldier is depicted in a dark, isolated state as he sits in his wheelchair. Almost immediately the reader learns that the soldier has lost his legs in a battle. Owen casts a pall over this young man with the depiction of sad voices of boys echoing throughout the park, perhaps as they echoed on the battlefield. The voices throw him back into his memories, which is what will constitute the rest of the poem until the last few lines. Words such as "waiting" and "sleep" reinforce the sense that this soldier's life is interminable to him now.

In the second stanza the soldier reminisces about the old days before the war. He conjures up sights and sounds of lamps and dancing girls before he bitterly remembers that he will not get to experience a relationship with a woman now; they look at him as if he has a "queer disease". It is not explicitly stated that the soldier, like Ernest Hemingway's Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*, suffers from impotency deriving from his war accident, but it is possible that this is also the case. The soldier feels emasculated, ignored, almost betrayed by women.

In the third stanza the recollections continue, with the soldier musing on the happy days of yore. He used to be young and handsome and an artist wanted to draw his face. Last year he possessed youth, he says, but he no longer does - the soldier "lost his colour very far from here / Poured it down shell-holes until veins ran dry". Another famous WWI poet, C. Day Lewis, said this line possesses "deliberate, intense understatement – the brave man's only answer to a hell which no epic words could express" and is "more poignant and more rich with poetic promise than anything else that has been done during this century." In the fourth stanza the boy also recalls that he was a football hero, and that once a "blood-smear" on his leg sustained in a game was a badge of honor. This is in stark contrast to his war wounds, which are shameful. He explains the almost casual way he decided to go to war – after a game, when he was drunk, he thought he ought to enlist. Swayed by a compliment and a girl named Meg, his justification for going to war illustrates his youthful ignorance and naïveté in full effect.

In the fifth stanza he says that he lied about his age to get into the military, and gave nary a thought to Germans or fear. All he thought about was the glory and the uniforms and the salutes and the "esprit de corps". This young man could have been almost any young man from any country involved in the war, who, possessing such youth and lack of worldly wisdom, did not think too deeply about what war really meant and what could happen to his life. Owen is obviously sympathetic to the soldier's lack of understanding, but he is also angry about "the military system that enabled the soldier to enlist through lying about his age". Owen is careful to balance "the immaturity of the soldier...with anger at the view of war as glamorous, a view held by both the soldier before the war and by much of the public throughout."

In the sixth stanza a curious encounter occurs on the boy's way to war – one man who is cheering him on is "solemn" and takes the time to inquire about his soul. It does not seem like the boy took the time to wonder too deeply about this at the time, but the encounter is a foreshadowing of the difficulties to come.

In the seventh stanza the soldier comes back to the present, realizing the bleakness of his future. He knows that he will be in and out of institutes and hospitals, and will have to suffer through the pity of those in power that put him in danger in the first place. What exacerbates his situation is the continued slights from women, who look past him like he is invisible to men that are "whole". The poem ends on a sad and mundane note as the young man wonders why "they" do not come and put him to bed. It is a reminder that he will have to have others do things for him from now on. His days of autonomy, and, of course, glory, are clearly over. The poem is about one soldier, but what makes it so compelling and relevant is its universal quality.