‘Disabled’ by Wilfred Owen

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Wilfred Owen’s powerful anti-war poem ‘Disabled’ (1917) was republished in the *Guardian* newspaper on November 13 2008, as part of the newspaper’s seven-day focus on aspects of the First World War. That day’s topic was ‘Art and War’, and it included discussions of how artists and writers had sought to turn their experiences of the First World War into art. Owen’s poem was published by itself with no commentary and no explanation given for its presence, so the reader was left to make up his or her own mind.

The poem ‘Disabled’ was written while its author was a patient at Craiglockart War Hospital in Scotland. Owen had been sent to Craiglockart after being diagnosed with ‘neurasthenia’ (‘shell-shock’). It was here that he met his fellow poet Siegfried Sassoon, who was also a patient. The writer Robert Graves, who had come to the hospital to visit Sassoon, read ‘Disabled’ and praised it highly. As an anti-war poem, ‘Disabled’ is moving and powerful, but when looked at for its portrayal of disability, it is extremely problematic, invoking as it does familiar disablist tropes of asexuality, helplessness and hopelessness. The poem has an omniscient narrator, who tells the story of the central character, an unnamed ex-soldier, who has returned from the Great War with severe and life-changing injuries:

‘He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,

And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,

Legless, sewn short at elbow…..’

(‘Disabled’, lines 1-3)

These few lines paint a melancholy picture, both of the extent of the soldier’s injuries (he appears to have lost at least three, and possibly four limbs), and also of his isolation – in describing him as ‘waiting for dark’ Owen suggests that he has nothing and no-one to distract him from his thoughts or to help him fill time.

As the poem continues, Owen builds upon the sense of loss and despair that he has created, leaving the reader in no doubt that, before the soldier received his injuries, his life had been full of excitement, promise, and hope:

‘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.

(lines 7-10)

Since being invalided out of the army and sent back to hospital in Britain, however, the soldier’s prospects (particularly of being the object of a girl’s romantic desires) have vanished:

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.

(lines 11-13)

These lines make it clear that Owen wants to show that enforced celibacy will now be the soldier’s lot, and that if anyone does look at him, it will only be as an object of pity. This impression is reinforced in the final lines of the poem:

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?

(lines 40-46)

Though this final stanza, like the rest of the poem, is extremely moving, it is also highly problematic. Owen portrays the soldier in such a way as to leave the reader in absolutely no doubt that, now he is disabled, all the things that made his life fulfilling and enjoyable are irretrievably lost. There are two points to bear in mind here. Firstly, Owen himself had seen much front-line service, and furthermore he wrote ‘Disabled’ whilst a patient in a military hospital. Consequently, he would have been well aware of the kinds of life-changing injuries that soldiers invalided out of the Great War could receive. Secondly, Owen was a highly political poet, who was – or who, at least, became – a passionate critic of the Great War. In his other poetry – most notably in works like ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ – he raged against the lies that he insisted had induced young men in their millions to join the armed forces, to fight and die for their country. One of Owen’s most famous pronouncements was ‘My subject is War, and the pity of War. The poetry is in the Pity’. By this he meant that war was the ultimate evil, subverting all the values that human beings were supposed to hold dear – values such as goodness, justice, compassion. In this way the maimed soldier in ‘Disabled’ is an emblematic figure – one who shows the terrible cost of war. But as Disability Studies academics and activists have shown, to afford disabled characters a purely emblematic status is both to shield oneself from the reality of continuing to live life and exist in the world with an impairment, and to adopt an overly fatalistic attitude to the difficulties – both physical and psychological – that someone with an impairment may experience. Throughout the poem, for example, Owen impresses upon the reader the soldier’s isolation: he has no-one with him, he has no prospects, he will never be a husband or father, the only gazes he will attract will be ones of pity or embarrassment. In this way Owen leaves the image of the maimed ex-soldier hanging, as if in aspic. He is a monument to Owen’s hatred of war, but he does not exist as a real human being. This squeamish refusal to consider how life might continue once someone has acquired a severe impairment arguably persists in our own times with the widespread support for assisted suicide, the adherents of which claim to be motivated by compassion and respect for personal freedom, but who may in reality be hampered by a refusal to consider seriously how life may be lived in a different way.

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