Disabled

POEM TEXT

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.

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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.

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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.

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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.
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.

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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.

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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?

SUMMARY

He sits in his wheelchair, waiting for evening to fall. He shivers in his horrible gray hospital uniform, which—like him—doesn't have any legs and stops at the elbow. He hears boys having fun in the park, but it sounds to him like a sad church song; their voices are full of joy and contentment as the day comes to an end. He listens to these voices until sleep comes along like a caring mother and takes him away.

It was around this time of evening that the town used to be a lively, joyous place. There would be glowing lamps hanging like new flowers in the bluish trees, and girls casting admiring looks as the light fell. This was back before the man lost his legs. Now he'll never again know the feeling of girls' slender waists or the warmth of their gentle hands—now they treat him like he has some odd disease.

There used to be an artist who was crazy about the young man's face, which made him look even younger than his actual age—and that was only a year ago. But now he feels old. His back will never be strong again. He lost all his youthful color in a faraway place: it was poured down a cavity created by artillery fire until his veins were empty. In that moment, half of his lifetime seemed to rush by as purple spurts of blood gushed from his thigh.

In his pre-war days, he actually used to *like* the sight of blood on his leg after a soccer match, when teammates carried him high on their shoulders. It was after one of these matches, when he'd had a bit to drink, that he decided to enlist in the army. But now he wonders why. Someone told him he would look good in the uniform; maybe that was why. Or maybe he enlisted because he wanted to impress a girl named Meg—yes, that was it, he wanted to please flirtatious, unattainable young women; *that's* why he joined the army. The authorities were happy to sign him up, smirking as they wrote down the lie he told them, which was that he was 19 years old. He didn't really think much about German soldiers—didn't see them as particularly guilty or evil—and he didn't pay attention to Austria's involvement in the war. He wasn't afraid yet of fear itself. Instead, he imagined keeping jewel-handled daggers in his plaid socks, fancy salutes, caring for his weapon, taking time off, getting paid even after coming home, team camaraderie, and passing on his knowledge to younger soldiers. Soon enough, he was sent off to war as drums and cheers sounded around him.

Some people applauded him when he came back, but it wasn't like when sports fans celebrate a goal. Just one man, who seemed regretful, brought him some fruit and actually thanked him for his service. But then this man asked about the state of his soul.

Now the soldier will spend a few years ailing in various institutions and do whatever the rules say is best for his health. He'll accept whatever pity and government assistance might come his way. Tonight he saw how women looked away from him and toward strong men whose bodies were still intact. It's so cold and late! Why won't someone come and put him to bed? Why isn't anyone coming?

THEMES

THE TRAGEDY OF WAR

"Disabled" creates an evocative portrait of the enduring horror of war. The poem focuses on a WWI veteran for whom the tragedy of war remains a daily reality. As the rest of society moves on, the soldier's injuries—both physical and psychological—effectively prevent him from re-entering the world he knew and loved before enlisting. Despite having survived the onslaught of shells and machine-gun fire, the soldier's life, in the poem's view, is as good as over. The poem, then, speaks to the lasting tragedy of war, and the way its trauma leaves soldiers feeling forgotten by and removed from the rest of society.

The poem contrasts two moments in time—*back then*, before the war, and *now*, the poem's present—to show how, though only a short period of time has passed, war has changed this young man's life beyond recognition. The soldier now sits in a wheelchair, having lost both his legs in the fighting, and spends his time waiting for the comfort of sleep as an escape from the painful stillness of daily life. As he contemplates how things used to be, it becomes clear that he's been permanently damaged by the war both physically and psychologically.

Back before the war, life was pretty good for the soldier! The poem captures the spirit and energy of his youth, showing it to be a time of excitement and adventure. The soldier used to like dancing with girls his age; the whole town seemed to be "swing[ing]" with fun. He was so handsome that an artist was obsessed with his face and wanted to paint it. He used to play football and was often carried on the shoulders of his teammates after a victory. In other words, he had everything going for him, and his future looked promising. It was this optimism, in fact, that spurred him on to volunteer for the military, despite being underage.

But joyful memories of youth become painful once they're gone forever. War steals lives in more ways than one, the poem implies—through death, of course, but also through ongoing physical, psychological, and emotional trauma. The happy images of the soldier's youth are firmly in the past. War—and his injuries—have suddenly made him "old," as if having stolen his youth.

Now, then, the young man lives a *much* different life than the one he should have had. Children's voices in the park sound like a sad hymn, women treat him like he has some odd "disease," and only one man properly thanks him for his efforts in the war. The poem concludes by strongly implying that the man's life is as good as over. Now, all he can hope for is "a few sick years in institutes" and the "pity" of those around him. He understandably questions whether it was worth fighting in the war, given that nobody really appreciates him. The tragedy of war is therefore not just its immediate horror and violence, but also its long-lasting and devastating effects—effects that can make people feel alone and cut off from any kind of happiness.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 7-13
- Lines 14-20
- Lines 21-29
- Lines 40-46

THE GLORIFICATION AND DISILLUSIONMENT OF WAR

"Disabled" takes aim at the ways in which society romanticized fighting in WWI and, in doing so, sold eager young soldiers a lie. The poem implicitly criticizes the idea, peddled early on in the fighting, that war is a fun, heroic adventure rather than a brutal, horrific experience. Ultimately, the poem suggests that society's glorification of war is at once dangerous

and deeply hypocritical; not only does society lead many young men to their deaths, but it also essentially abandons those disillusioned soldiers who manage to make it home.

Like many young men of the time, the soldier in this poem was enthusiastic about going off to fight and had no real concept of the consequences. When he joined the war effort, it was on a kind of whim. Someone said he would look good in the uniform, and he thought signing up might impress girls. He didn't think about the political causes of the war nor the reality of fighting, but rather about the glory of being a military man.

The poem also notes how the young man had once "liked" the look of blood on his leg after a minor soccer injury, which suggests that injuries made him seem strong and brave—and that he never really considered how much more severe his battle wounds might be. He also appreciated the attention of his fellow players when they held him on their shoulders after a hard-fought victory. The implication is that this young man thought war would be like a game; he believed that fighting would earn him the love, admiration, and respect of those around him.

Society did nothing to discourage the young man from believing in this illusion, and instead actively promoted the idea that war could be fun, honorable, and heroic. For example, the young man was allowed to enlist despite the authorities being well aware that he was lying about being old enough to do so. Newly drafted soldiers were then treated to pomp and ceremony, sent off to war with drumming and cheering crowds that echoed the atmosphere of the young man's soccer games.

War quickly revealed its true colors, however, as its horrific violence left the young man "disabled" and, in his own view, practically dead to the world. War, he learned, is *nothing* like a game. While he once liked the look of blood dribbling "down his leg" after a soccer match, now he has no legs at all. While he imagined striking uniforms—with "jewelled hilts / For daggers in plaid socks"—now he's stuck in "his ghastly suit of grey." And while he was sent off to war with enthusiasm, he returns to muted cheers that can't even match the sound of "crowds" cheering a goal in soccer. Women don't look at him, and just one serious man has thanked him for his service. In other words, he has received none of the glorious rewards promised by war—only misery and pain.

He is, then, utterly disillusioned, since the same society that once celebrated the young man now turns its back on him, leaving him to fade away through his "sick years" in various "institutes." Society, the poem implies, sells young men a lie about war, but then fails to deal with the consequences of that lie.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 21-36
- Lines 37-39

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,
And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,
Legless, sewn short at elbow.

The poem opens on a young man who has been injured in war. He has now returned from the war, but his life has changed irrevocably. His name is never specified, nor is the town where he's from. This lack of specificity lends the poem a sense of universality, suggesting that the man's story is as common as it is tragic.

Sitting in a "wheeled chair," the young man "wait[s] for dark." The fact that he's in a "wheeled chair" suggests that he must be pushed around by the staff who work in the hospital, especially since he has lost the lower halves of his arms—as made evident by the fact that his hospital-issued clothing is both "legless" and "sewn short at elbow." The implication here is that he can't operate his wheelchair because he doesn't have any forearms, though this isn't necessarily an accurate reflection of what is and isn't possible for wheelchair users. Nonetheless, the young man's immobility will, as the poem goes on, form an important sense of juxtaposition with the energetic activity of his pre-war youth.

Alliteration between "**w**heeled" and "**w**aiting" links these two words together, highlighting that all the man can do is sit around and wait for others. Instead of doing things himself, he has to wait for things to happen *to* him. The suggestion that he's "waiting for dark" could mean he longs for the comfort of sleep, but it also might refer to the eternal rest of death. This seems particularly likely, given that the rest of the poem implies he doesn't feel life is worth living anymore.

His "ghastly" gray suit almost portrays him as one of the living dead—like a zombie of sorts—and his shivering underlines this lack of life or vitality. Gray, after all, is a very drab and lifeless color, indicating a certain absence of warmth. This description of the young man's clothing also suggests that he's a shadow or ghost of his former self; the alliteration between "**g**hastly" and "**g**rey" emphasizes that the man himself sees his suit as terrible and ugly, perhaps hating that he has to wear something so depressing and lifeless.

In line 3, the poem's pacing is blunt and unsparing. The man is "legless," the poem states, and this word is isolated (or severed) by the caesura that follows it:

Legless, || sewn short at elbow. [...]

This calls attention not just to the fact that he no longer has any legs, but also that his arms have been cut off at the elbow. The caesura after "elbow" spotlights the same thing, cutting the sentence short before the end of the line in the same way that the young man's limbs were cut short as a result of the war.

LINES 3-6

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.

The poem juxtaposes the motionless figure of the young soldier with the activities taking place outside. He hears sounds drifting from a nearby park: the voices of boys playing and people having fun. Although to most people such sounds indicate happiness and joy, to his ear they sound like a sad "hymn." This simile evokes the music of funerals and the sorrow of lost life. Because the young man *can't* go out to enjoy himself, these sounds only remind him of how tragically his life has changed.

Assonance appears in lines 4 and 5, as the soldier uses the /oy/ sound alongside the /ay/ sound:

> Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,
> Voices of play and pleasure after day

The /oy/ sound places particular emphasis on the phrase "voices of boys," calling attention to the youthful sounds that torment the soldier—these sounds, after all, surely remind him of a time before he was confined to the hospital, back when he could enjoy his youth. Similarly, the /ay/ sound accentuates the words "play" and "day," stressing the juxtaposition between the serious environment of the dark hospital and the playful atmosphere outside, where boys are still enjoying the evening.

The poem also uses anaphora in this moment, repeating the phrase "voices of." This spotlights the sound-related imagery of the scene, as the "voices" outside torment the wounded soldier like some kind of painful music he can't ignore—these voices just keep bombarding him. Worse, he can't even push himself away from the window because of his immobility.

The only mercy available to him, then, is sleep. The poem describes falling asleep with a metaphor, comparing it to the caring attention of a mother. Sleep briefly calms the young man like a mother might calm a screaming baby—but it can only do this if he remains unconscious. Motherhood, of course, relates to care, love, and nurture, all of which the young man's life arguably lacks. His only comfort, in other words, comes from leaving behind the world altogether, suggesting that there's nobody in his waking life to take care of him in any meaningful way.

LINES 7-10

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.

In this section, the poem explores the juxtaposition between the young man's happy pre-war days and his dismal post-war reality. This is a contrast that will run throughout the rest of the poem, as the soldier feels more and more like his pre-war days are nothing but a remote memory from another lifetime.

The young man remembers what it *used* to be like around "this time" of evening. The entire town, the poem indicates, used to "swing so gay"—that is, a happy buzz of excitement used to hang in the air. The implication here is that this used to be the young man's favorite time. The trees would be full of "glow-lamps" hung by youngsters, and these lamps metaphorically "budded in the light-blue trees," suggesting a sense of growth, renewal, and new life (and thereby sex!).

The consonance and alliteration here is pleasant, evoking the enjoyment of such evenings:

> When glow-lamps budded in the light-blue trees,
> And girls glanced lovelier as the air grew dim,—

The combination of /l/, /b/, /d/, and /g/ sounds creates a lush effect that feels especially poetic and beautiful, thus evoking the pleasant memories that the young man associates with this time of evening (and this time of year). In other words, the soldier used to be a typical young man who enjoyed the looks of other attractive young people. There is a sense of deep satisfaction and contentment here, as though life used to be full to the brim. Now, though, it's empty.

The end-stop at the end of line 9 (after "dim") indicates an abrupt, almost violent shift, the happy memories suddenly giving way to the tragic reality of the present. Those times described above were the "old times," before the young man "threw away his knees." Of course, he didn't *throw* them away intentionally—most likely it was an enemy shell that caused his injuries. But the choice of words here evokes wastefulness, since people usually throw away trash, not body parts! This suggests that the soldier doesn't see his pain as a great and worthy sacrifice, but instead feels like his injuries were all for nothing.

LINES 11-13

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.

These lines continue the juxtaposition between the young man's pre- and post-war lives. The idea that he'll "never feel again how slim / Girls' waists are" suggests that he used to

spend his time in romantic embraces—now, though, he doesn't think anyone will be attracted to him, so he laments the loss of this kind of intimate pleasure.

Alliteration between "now" and "never" shows the extent to which the soldier's current life is defined by what he now lacks. He no longer has the privilege of enjoying abundance and or joyful excess. There's also no going back to the happiness he had before the war; his injuries are permanent. Whereas he once experienced affection and intimacy, now there is only loneliness and isolation.

The young man feels that girls now "touch him"—if they touch him at all—as if he has "some queer disease" ("queer," in this context, means strange or odd). This simile highlights his sense of isolation and his feeling that nobody wants to engage with him because of his injuries. He now sits on the margins of society, overlooked and perhaps even *feared* by some because of his sad or troubling predicament. The stanza/section break after line 13 portrays this sense of distance, creating a short silence during which the phrase "queer disease" echoes with painful sadness.

LINES 14-16

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;

The third stanza introduces another pre-war memory, as the young man remembers that an artist used to love the look of his face. This confirms the previous stanza's implication that the soldier was a handsome, attractive young man before the war. He was *so* handsome, in fact, that he seemed to possess some kind of *unique beauty*—a beauty that attracted an artist, who went "silly for his face." That is to say, the artist thought there was something special and enticing about the young man's face.

And that special quality, it seems, emanated from his youthfulness. Using polyptoton, the poem describes the soldier as seeming "younger than his youth." In other words, he looked even younger than he actually was—and he was really young!

That was *only* "last year." And yet, so much has changed since then. "Now," the poem says, "he is old." Of course, he isn't *actually* old; the poem later reveals that he was underage when he enlisted, which means he's not even 20 yet. Nonetheless, he *feels* old, knowing that his "back will never brace." The idea here is that he'll never again stand up tall and strong. And this is because war—and the injuries sustained during it—has stolen his youth from him. There's also a certain feeling in the poem that his life will be much shorter now, meaning that (just like an elderly person) he's a lot closer to death than he was when he was still able to enjoy his youth before the war.

LINES 17-20

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.

These lines build upon the idea that the soldier has lost his youth even though he's still technically a young man. He has, the poem indicates, "lost his colour," suggesting that his health has declined considerably. Coloration is often associated with healthy blood circulation, so to say that he has *lost* this color implies that he's sickly and pale. He is, then, as wan and lifeless as his "ghastly suit of grey." Or, to put in another way, he has become a shadow of his former self.

The poem metaphorically suggests that the soldier lost his vitality on a faraway battlefield by pouring it "down shell-holes till [his] veins ran dry." The term "shell-holes" refers to the small cavities in the earth created by enemy artillery shells, so to say that his color "poured" into these "shell-holes" suggests that his blood—and, thus, his life force—ran freely into these craters. Or, more simply: he got shot, and his blood ran into the earth.

As this happened, "half his lifetime lapsed," implying that this injury shortened his life. The idea of "half his lifetime laps[ing]" in that one moment could also suggest that his life flashed before his eyes—a common thing to happen to people who undergo near-death experiences, and something that surely makes people feel older and more world-weary once they survive.

There is also the disturbing image of a "leap of purple" blood "spurt[ing]" from the soldier's leg. Along with the word "race" in line 19, the word "leap" is an extremely active verb that rings out with a certain irony, since the young man is now in a perpetual state of stillness. These active verbs also anticipate the thoughts about sports that the soldier has in the next stanza.

The sound of these lines intensifies the troubling imagery. For example, the alliteration of "lifetime lapsed" grabs readers' attention, while the double-stress of "hot race" creates a forceful sound that conveys a sense of violence and panic. Then, in line 20, consonance and assonance combine in "purple spurted" to spotlight the horrific sight of blood squirting from the soldier's leg.

The main reason that the poem emphasizes this graphic image is to convey the utter shock and terror of getting injured on the battlefield. Although the young man should have expected that something like this might happen, it seems he was somewhat unprepared for the actual experience of getting shot. The language here also has some subtly sexual undertones, since the word "spurted" could be understood as a kind of ejaculation—the man's injury on the battlefield thus completely overshadows all of the sexual activity alluded to in the previous stanza, cementing the idea that his days of youthful pleasure are over.

LINES 21-24

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.

The fourth stanza, which is by far the poem's longest, discusses the young man's motivations for signing up for war. Like many young people, he didn't really think much of it, maybe seeing it as a kind of adventure (there was plenty of societal pressure to support this fantasy). To go with this sense of adventure, these lines also pick up on the sports-related words in the last stanza—"race" and "leap"—by recalling the soldier's memory of playing soccer.

The young man used to enjoy the slight danger of sports, liking it when he'd look down after a soccer match to find a "blood-smear" on his leg. He also relished the adoration of his fellow players after a victory. Sports are a kind of simulation of war, since they involve working alongside teammates toward a common goal and against a shared opponent. In fact, war is often sold to young men as a kind of game (see Jessie Pope's poem "Who's for the Game?" for a great example).

Flying high on the adrenaline of winning a soccer game, the young man had a bit to drink and "thought he'd better join." This makes it seem like his decision wasn't much more than a whim based on some vague idea about triumph and glory—abstract concepts that don't necessarily play out as one might expect on an actual battlefield.

And yet, this rather impulsive decision irreversibly altered the young man's entire life. The pause created by the caesura after "join" in line 24 hints at a moment of deeper contemplation: "He thought he'd better join. || He wonders why." The caesura slows down the pace here, giving this moment a thoughtful tone that helps illustrate the soldier's regret. The end-stop after "He wonders why" has a similar effect, as though the soldier is lost in thought as he tries to figure out why he went to war in the first place.

LINES 25-29

Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts.
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.

All the of the man's reasons for joining the army are a little shallow or impractical, indicating that he went to war without really thinking the decision through. He wanted the admiration of his peers, and, even more so, of certain young women (especially a woman named Meg). To add to this, someone told him he would look striking and impressive ("look a god") in the uniform, thus appealing to his vanity.

The poem's reference to "kilts" possibly indicates that the soldier is from Scotland. Some Scottish regiments wore kilts during World War I, so the young man was perhaps attracted to the way he would look in uniform. However, the kilt obviously didn't turn him into a "god" like his acquaintance suggested it might; instead, he remained mortal, vulnerable to the many dangers of the battlefield.

Had he known that he would end up losing his limbs, it's likely the young man would have thought twice. But his idea of war didn't have much to do with reality. Simply put, he was naive—and understandably so, since it's hard to fully grasp the horror of war without experiencing it firsthand, especially when it's made out to be so exciting and glorious.

Trying to pinpoint why, exactly, he decided to enlist, the soldier concludes that it was primarily "to please the giddy jilts." In other words, he thought that all the girls would love him as a soldier. But now, in his injured state, his reality is the complete opposite: there are no young women vying for his attention, and when they do happen to interact with him, they touch him as if he has some kind of "disease." There is, then, a tragic irony at play here—in trying to win over the young women's affection, the young man ended up putting himself in a position in which they hardly notice him.

The soldier's story is also typical of World War I in that he was underage when he enlisted. Soldiers were supposed to be at least eighteen, but recruitment officers routinely turned a blind eye to underage recruits, which is why he didn't "have to beg." In fact, the officers thought it was quite funny to go along with the young man's lie, "smiling" as they wrote down his falsified age. This all emphasizes the man's youth and lack of experience at the time of signing up, making his current circumstances all the more tragic because it's clear he didn't really know what he was getting into.

LINES 30-36

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.

The poem builds on the young man's initial naivety surrounding what it would actually mean to go to war. In these lines, it becomes clear that he thought very little about the *reality* of war, instead indulging fantasies about military service that couldn't have been farther from the truth.

Apparently uninterested in the circumstances that led to the war in the first place, the young man wasn't motivated to fight by the specific details of World War I—he "scarcely thought of" Germans (enemies of the UK during the war), nor did he pay attention to Austria (yet another enemy at the time). He also had "no fears / Of Fear" itself, at least not "yet."

In other words, because he probably had never experienced true fear in his life, he didn't know to prepare himself for the extreme terror of war. This, of course, would all change as soon as he found himself in the horrific conditions of combat. Still, though, he apparently managed to carry an initial wave of youthful optimism and enthusiasm into the war.

Rather absurdly, he imagined owning a dagger with a "jewelled" handle. While World War I soldiers *did* carry trench knives, they weren't lavishly decorated or bejeweled. This is thus a very romantic vision of war, one that is possibly based on ideas of what conflict *used* to be like—perhaps as far back as the Medieval Era!

Of course, some things that the young man imagined really *were* part of a soldier's life at the time: things like "salutes," caring for weapons, and even taking "leave" or receiving back-pay ("pay arrears"). However, these things certainly aren't what would define a person's overall military experience—after all, most of the things the young man imagines here are exciting and pleasant! While it's true that soldiers sometimes were given "leave" from the battlefield, the overwhelming majority of their wartime experience took place in dirty trenches on dangerous battlefields.

That the young man thought about "jewelled" daggers and "plaid socks" instead of the horror of battle suggests that he romanticized what it means to go to war. There is no mention of insomnia, loss of limbs, constant artillery fire, hunger, trench foot, lice, disease, or any number of the other terrors World War I soldiers faced.

The alliteration at the end of this stanza is noticeable because it gives the words a forceful emphasis that matches the young man's pre-war enthusiasm:

> And soon, he was **dr**afted out with **dr**ums and cheers.

The repetition of the /dr/ sound makes the language here feel strong and determined, reflecting the young man's sense of determination. To him, going off to war was very exciting and rewarding! The next two stanzas, however, shatter this illusion.

LINES 37-39

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.

Upon his return from the war, the young man's reception was much more lukewarm than he expected. There was some cheering, but not as much as when he'd left—and nothing compared to the noise made by crowds when a goal is scored in a soccer match.

Once again, the poem juxtaposes the soldier's pre-war life with his post-war life. The young man has made an incredible sacrifice—supposedly for the good of his country—but now his fellow citizens don't really seem to care about him. The use of polyptoton between "cheered" and "cheers" highlights the discrepancy between the celebration he actually receives and the celebration he *expected* to receive:

> Some **cheered** him home, but not as crowds **cheer** Goal.

This repetition reminds readers of one of the reasons the young man went to war in the first place: he thought it would bring him the kind of glory and appreciation he used to enjoy after soccer matches. But this, he discovered, was not the case at all.

In fact, it's almost as if society didn't want to acknowledge its own role in influencing the young man's decision to go to war. After all, there seems to have been a bit of societal pressure and encouragement to enlist in the military, which is why the young man romanticized going to war in the first place. Now that this decision has impacted his life so profoundly, though, society has apparently moved on from the war. But unlike everyone else, the young man can't do this.

There *was*, however, one person—a "solemn man"—who seemingly understood what the soldier went through. He offered him sincere thanks and brought him fruit as a gesture of gratitude. But then he "inquired about his soul," implicitly suggesting that he saw the young man as doomed and in need of religious salvation. And though this doesn't necessarily mean his empathy was insincere, it *does* imply that he's a member of the clergy, meaning that part of his job is to make these rounds and offer sympathy to people in need. His kindness undoubtedly still counted, then, but it's clearly not the kind of personal appreciation the young man expected when he first went off to war.

LINES 40-44

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.

In the final stanza, the poem focuses on the young man's new reality. This section predicts everything that lies in store for him: "a few sick years in institutes," following doctors' "rules" (he has little choice to do anything else), and taking any "pity" that might come his way.

The fact that he will spend "a **few** sick years in institutes" ties in with the idea that his life has been cut short because of his injuries. He's still a young man, but feels old and clearly believes his life won't last much longer. He technically survived the war, but has lost so much that he'll never *truly* recover. Part of him—his youthful lust for life—is already dead.

The poem has already shown that he's tired of life in its current form, and the use of anaphora in lines 41 and 42 emphasizes the joyless repetition that will define his life from here on out:

> And do what things the rules consider wise,
> And take whatever pity they may dole.

This repetition of "and" at the beginning of these two lines conveys a sense of never-ending drudgery, as the soldier's sad life continues on and on.

The stark juxtaposition between pre- and post-war life continues in lines 43 and 44, as he notices that women no longer pay any attention to him. The man naively thought women would find him even *more* attractive once he was a soldier, but now it seems to him that they view him as weak. He "noticed" that the women were only interested in "strong men that were whole," as opposed to someone like him, whose injuries have altered his body forever.

It's reasonable to criticize Owen's portrayal of disability here, since he equates it with inferiority. In fact, the entire poem has a pretty outdated approach to disability, portraying amputation in a very restrictive and cynical light. At the same time, these thoughts seem filtered through the young man's own point of view, so it's possible to read the poem's negative connotations surrounding disability as reflections of the soldier's embittered and pessimistic outlook on his own situation—not necessarily an actual reflection of what it means to be disabled.

LINES 45-46

> *How cold and late it is! Why don't they come*
> *And put him into bed? Why don't they come?*

The final two lines end the poem on an image of utter despair and loneliness. First, the speaker (who functions as an omniscient narrator), exclaims: "How cold and late it is!" The onset of night, which at the beginning of the poem offered a small sense of comfort to the young man, has actually made him feel *worse*. Unable to move, the soldier finds the night "cold" and dark; he has been plunged into discomfort but can't do anything about it.

Two rhetorical questions bring "Disabled" to its unsettling conclusion:

> [...] Why don't they come
> And put him into bed? Why don't they come?

The man longs for sleep because it offers temporary relief from the waking nightmare that has become his life. But the fact that nobody has come to "put him into bed" emphasizes that he has been marginalized and forgotten. Both of the questions in these lines ring out as if in an echo chamber—in fact, the repetition of "Why don't they" contributes to this feeling, as if these questions are literally echoing in the empty hospital ward.

This accentuates the sense of isolation in the poem. The soldier is entirely alone with nothing but his own painful memories. Somebody, the poem implies, should be taking better care of him, but instead he finds himself languishing in the "cold," lonely night—a heartbreaking reminder that nobody cares all that much that he went to war in the first place.

SYMBOLS

DARKNESS AND NIGHT

Darkness and night in "Disabled" symbolize a kind of oblivion, and with it the absence of emotional suffering. Whereas once the young man was active and full of energy, now he's in a constant state of agony because he feels incapable and alone. His injuries, he feels, have changed his life forever, and sitting by the window in the hospital only accentuates this feeling. His waking hours are therefore spent "waiting for dark," which at least represents a brief respite from his bleak, monotonous reality.

The darkness of night can also represent another, more extreme absence: the loss of life itself. The poem strongly implies that the young man has shorn off many years of his life because of his injuries, so "waiting for dark" also hints at his anticipation of his own death. If sleeping is his only comfort, then death will be as comfortable as he could possibly get.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "waiting for dark,"
- **Line 6:** "Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him."
- **Line 45:** "How cold and late it is!"
- **Lines 45-46:** " Why don't they come / And put him into bed? Why don't they come?"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The alliteration in "Disabled" adds emphasis to the language, calling attention to certain words and often linking them together to suggest some kind of connection. Take, for instance, the alliteration of the /w/ sound in line 1:

> He sat in a **w**heeled chair, **w**aiting for dark.

This spotlights both "**w**heeled" and "**w**aiting," subtly linking the man's wheelchair (and, thus, the injury that *put* him in that wheelchair) to stillness and "waiting" around. The poem implies that he has lost his independence, so things only happen *to* him.

Most of his time, then, is spent sitting in his chair trying to tolerate the monotony of doing nothing.

In line 2, the alliterative /g/ sound is quite noticeable:

> And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,

This adds intensity to the language, underlining the idea that the soldier dislikes his hospital-issued "suit," which he thinks is "ghastly." In this way, this moment of alliteration helps readers sense the young man's frustration and unhappiness with his current circumstances.

The sibilance in line 33 in the phrase "smart salutes" helps highlight the soldier's romanticized ideas about going to war. The hissing /s/ draws attention to the image of a disciplined and good-looking soldier giving a superior a strong, sharp salute—and this, in turn, hints that the young man only really thought about how he would *look* as a soldier, not necessarily what it would feel like to be on the battlefield.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "wheeled," "waiting"
- **Line 2:** "ghastly," "grey"
- **Line 5:** "play," "pleasure"
- **Line 7:** "time Town," "swing so"
- **Line 8:** "light"
- **Line 9:** "girls glanced," "lovelier"
- **Line 12:** "waists," "warm"
- **Line 15:** "younger," "youth," "year"
- **Line 16:** "back," "brace"
- **Line 17:** "far from"
- **Line 18:** "down," "dry"
- **Line 19:** "lifetime lapsed"
- **Line 21:** "liked," "leg"
- **Line 24:** "wonders why"
- **Line 25:** "Someone," "said"
- **Line 27:** "jilts"
- **Line 28:** "join"
- **Line 33:** "smart salutes"
- **Line 36:** "drafted," "drums"
- **Line 37:** "him home"
- **Line 41:** "what," "wise"
- **Line 42:** "whatever"
- **Line 45:** "cold," "come"

ASSONANCE

Like alliteration, assonance tends to either evoke particular noises or link words together. For example, consider the first stanza, which depicts the young man—back from the war—enduring a miserable existence indoors. He hears the sounds of other people's joy outside, but can do nothing to actually participate in this happiness himself. The assonant /oy/ and /ay/ sounds call attention to this heartbreaking moment:

> Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,
> Voices of play and pleasure after day,

These lines are poetically noisy in order to evoke the noise outside. The assonance between "voices" and "boys" stresses the fact that the soldier is forced to listen to sounds of joy that are distinctly *youthful*. And all the while, he feels cut off from his own youth.

The /ay/ sound in "play" and "day" also draws attention to the juxtaposition between the soldier, who spends all of his time indoors waiting for darkness to fall, and the children outside, who "play" outside all "day."

We've marked a few other examples of assonance throughout the poem, but on the whole, assonance adds emphasis to the language while calling attention to important moments—like, of course, when the soldier sits wistfully by the window and hears the tormenting sound of care-free happiness.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "grey"
- **Line 3:** "Legless"
- **Line 4:** "Voices," "boys"
- **Line 5:** "play," "day"
- **Line 18:** "Poured," "holes," "dry"
- **Line 19:** "lifetime"
- **Line 20:** "purple spurted"
- **Line 27:** "giddy jilts"
- **Line 29:** "Smiling," "lie," "nineteen"
- **Line 33:** "daggers," "plaid"
- **Line 34:** "leave," "arrears"
- **Line 40:** "sick," "in institutes"

CAESURA

"Disabled" is full of caesuras, many of which dramatize a particular idea or image. This is especially noticeable in the first stanza, in which caesuras capture the young man's frustration at his own immobility:

> 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

The caesuras here frustrate the poem's rhythm, keeping the metrical flow from building momentum. The first comma slows the pace—just like the injuries slow down the man himself—while the isolation of "legless" has an abrupt, shorn-off quality. This is even more pronounced in the caesura that comes after "elbow," which is dramatic and sudden in a way that perhaps represents the loss of the man's limbs.

There are also quite a few caesuras in the fourth stanza. By segmenting the language so frequently, the caesuras help

illustrate the young man's fast thought process as he goes through all the possible reasons he was initially inspired to sign up for the war. Short, abortive clauses capture the wandering nature of his thought process in this moment: "That's why; || and maybe, || too, || to please his Meg." This creates a somewhat restless rhythm, as if the man is anxious to figure out why he put himself in this situation.

Caesuras also help accentuate the poem's juxtaposition between the soldier's pre-war and post-war lives. In line 37, a caesura divides the man's existence into two different types of cheering:

> Some cheered him home, || but not as crowds cheer Goal.

The present sits on one side, and the past teeters on the other: "some" people cheer for him when he gets back from the war, but not like they did when he used to score a goal in soccer matches before he joined the military. The caesura highlights the stark difference between these two moments in time.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "chair, waiting"
- **Line 3:** "Legless, sewn," "elbow. Through"
- **Line 10:** "times, before"
- **Line 12:** "are, or"
- **Line 15:** "youth, last"
- **Line 16:** "Now, he," "old; his"
- **Line 23:** "football, when"
- **Line 24:** "join. He"
- **Line 26:** "why; and," "maybe, too, to"
- **Line 27:** "Aye, that," "it, to"
- **Line 28:** "join. He"
- **Line 29:** "lie: aged"
- **Line 30:** "of, all"
- **Line 31:** "Austria's, did," "him. And"
- **Line 32:** "yet. He"
- **Line 33:** "socks; of"
- **Line 34:** "arms; and," "leave; and"
- **Line 35:** "corps; and"
- **Line 36:** "soon, he"
- **Line 37:** "home, but"
- **Line 39:** "him; and"
- **Line 40:** "Now, he"
- **Line 45:** "is! Why"
- **Line 46:** "bed? Why"

CONSONANCE

Like alliteration, consonance occurs throughout the poem, often bringing moments to life on the page. For example, the consonant /m/ sounds in line 6 call attention to how the soldier longs for the comfort of sleep while sitting by the window:

> Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.

The /m/ sound appears in four consecutive words, creating a lulling effect similar to a mother humming her baby to sleep. This makes the entire idea of falling asleep feel appealing even to readers, meaning that the poem's use of consonance makes it easier for readers to understand the soldier's state of mind. Simply put, sleeping seems more tolerable to this tormented man than being awake to hear others enjoy their lives.

Elsewhere in the poem, consonance makes the man's recollections stand out so that they seem more vivid. In lines 7 to 9, for example, they capture the joy with which he used to approach life:

> 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,—

The /t/, /s/, /g/, /l/, and /b/ sounds work their way through this section, elevating the language and giving it an especially poetic sound that evokes the soldier's nostalgia for his pre-war life. Consonance thus enriches the language and spotlights particularly important moments. This happens throughout the entire poem, so we've marked other notable examples.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "wheeled," "chair," "waiting," "dark"
- **Line 2:** "ghastly suit," "grey"
- **Line 3:** "Legless, sewn," "short," "elbow," "park"
- **Line 4:** "Voices," "boys"
- **Line 5:** "play," "pleasure," "after"
- **Line 6:** "Till," "gathering," "sleep," "mothered them from him"
- **Line 7:** "time Town," "used," "swing s," "o," "gay"
- **Line 8:** "glow-lamps," "budded," "light-blue"
- **Line 9:** "girls glanced lovelier," "grew"
- **Line 11:** "will," "feel," "slim"
- **Line 12:** "Girls'," "waists," "warm"
- **Line 13:** "like," "queer"
- **Line 18:** "shell-holes till," "veins ran"
- **Line 19:** "lifetime lapsed"
- **Line 20:** "leap," "purple spurted"
- **Line 32:** "jewelled hilts"
- **Line 33:** "socks," "smart salutes"
- **Line 36:** "drafted," "drums," "cheers"
- **Line 40:** "spend," "sick," "institutes"
- **Line 43:** "Tonight," "noticed," "women's"
- **Line 45:** "cold," "late," "come"

END-STOPPED LINE

The vast majority of the lines in "Disabled" are end-stopped, giving the poem a self-contained, controlled feel. Take, for

instance, lines 4 through 6, all of which come to a clear pause at the end:

> Voices of boys rang saddening like a **hymn,**
> Voices of play and pleasure after **day,**
> Till gathering sleep had mothered them from **him.**

The end-stop after "hymn" gives this section a feeling of consistency, since it allows the speaker to neatly begin the next line with an anaphora by repeating the phrase "voices of." Similarly, the fact that line 6 culminates in a full-stop gives the line a conclusive feel, as the speaker brings the first stanza to a decisive end before transitioning to a new section.

Because most of the lines are end-stopped in this way, it's especially noticeable when a line is enjambed. For example, when the soldier mourns the loss of his love life in line 11, the language spills over onto the next line:

> Now he will never feel again how **slim**
> Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands,

This instance of enjambment is striking because all the lines surrounding it are end-stopped. In a way, it's like the mere thought of a romantic embrace makes the poem's language rush forward, perhaps illustrating how eager the soldier is to go back to his old, flirtatious life—something that is, at least according to the poem, impossible.

Elsewhere, end-stops simply give the poem a straightforward, matter-of-fact sound. This is the case in lines 40 through 42:

> 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.**

Each of these lines contains its own clause, giving this section a clipped, declarative sound. This leads to a somewhat disenchanted tone, as the poem pessimistically lists off aspects of the soldier's grim future: he will wile away in hospitals, he will follow the relevant medical advice, and he will take whatever he can get in terms of pity or support. The tone here is so to-the-point that it seems dejected and jaded, and this reflects the soldier's dim view of the future. The use of end-stop, then, helps convey a certain mood that matches the soldier's state of mind.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dark,"
- **Line 2:** "grey,"
- **Line 4:** "hymn,"
- **Line 5:** "day,"
- **Line 6:** "him."
- **Line 7:** "gay"
- **Line 8:** "trees,"
- **Line 9:** "dim,—"
- **Line 10:** "knees."
- **Line 12:** "hands,"
- **Line 13:** "disease."
- **Line 14:** "face,"
- **Line 15:** "year."
- **Line 16:** "brace;"
- **Line 17:** "here,"
- **Line 18:** "dry,"
- **Line 19:** "race"
- **Line 20:** "thigh."
- **Line 21:** "leg,"
- **Line 22:** "high."
- **Line 23:** "peg,"
- **Line 24:** "why."
- **Line 25:** "kilts."
- **Line 26:** "Meg,"
- **Line 27:** "jilts,"
- **Line 28:** "beg;"
- **Line 29:** "years."
- **Line 30:** "guilt,"
- **Line 33:** "salutes;"
- **Line 34:** "arrears;"
- **Line 35:** "recruits."
- **Line 36:** "cheers."
- **Line 37:** "Goal."
- **Line 39:** "soul."
- **Line 40:** "institutes,"
- **Line 41:** "wise,"
- **Line 42:** "dole."
- **Line 44:** "whole."
- **Line 46:** "come?"

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition is embedded in the poem, creating a contrast between the young man's life before the war and his life *after* the war. This shows just how much has changed, even though relatively little time has actually passed. The poem constantly flicks back and forth between *then* and *now*, giving the reader a sense of what has been lost.

In his pre-war days, the poem's central character was a typical young man who was full of life, admired by his peers, and fancied by the opposite sex. He was good-looking, too, with an artist going "silly" with the desire to paint his face. He feared very little and just wanted—and expected—a good time.

The poem often refers to these moments using phrases related to time. For example, line 7 opens with: "About this time [...]," as the soldier thinks back to what it was like to be a young man at this time of day before he went to war. Similarly, line 10 begins with, "In the old times[...]," and line 21 opens with, "One time

[...]." These phrases situate the good times firmly in the past, implying that the joy the soldier experienced in his youth has vanished for good.

Alongside these ruminations, though, the poem also shifts back to the present, often signalling this jump with the word "now" (like in lines 16 and 40). In the poem's present, the man sits immobile. Unable to push himself around, he hears the happy sounds of young boys outside—sounds that torment him because they accentuate the difference between his new lifestyle and his former care-free existence.

Even though only a year has passed, the man is now described as "old," mostly because his injuries seem to have shortened his lifespan. Women avoid him as if he has a "disease," and nobody comes to talk to him, let alone thank him for his war efforts (apart from one man). The active life of the past, then, has been transformed into the passive existence of the present—an existence that starkly juxtaposes the glory days of his youth.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 7-13
- Lines 14-20
- Lines 21-28
- Lines 32-35
- Line 36
- Line 37
- Lines 40-42
- Lines 43-44

METAPHOR

The metaphors in "Disabled" make the descriptions of the soldier's circumstances feel more vivid and impactful. In the first stanza, for instance, the poem metaphorically compares the relief of sleep to the soothing care of a nurturing mother, personifying sleep and saying that it "mothered" the tormenting sound of the boys' voices away from him.

The use of "mothered" as a verb suggests that sleep actively takes care of the soldier, perhaps by protecting him from the rest of the world. In this case, though, sleep isn't protecting him from some kind of imminent danger, but from the torment of listening to "voices" that remind him of all that he has lost. Simply put, falling asleep is the closest thing this man has to comfort or relief from his sorrows. And this, in turn, adds to the sense of loneliness and despair at the beginning of the poem.

Soon enough, the young man starts drifting down memory lane, remembering what this time of evening *used* to feel like during his pre-war life:

> About this time Town used to swing so gay
> When glow-lamps budded in the light-blue trees,

There are two metaphors at work here. The town used to "swing so gay" around this time of evening, suggesting that the air was so charged with excitement, fun, and happiness that it felt full of movement—as if it were swinging back and forth. This feeling of activity contrasts the soldier's stillness. There's also the metaphor of "glow-lamps budd[ing]" in the trees, comparing lamps to new flowers. This suggests that the poem takes place during spring, a time of fertility and new life—things that also arguably juxtapose the soldier's current state, since he feels cut off from the world of romance and youthfulness.

The third stanza shows how the young man's life changed in one brief moment when he sustained his injuries:

> He's lost his colour very far from here,
> Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,

His "colour" is both literal and metaphorical. He *did* lose a lot of blood, suggesting that the color drained from his face. And that color itself represents his youthful vigor and lust for life, which spilled into the craters created by enemy fire. This indicates that he left his vitality on the battlefield; now that his "colour" has seeped out on the battlefield, he has returned to everyday life a changed man.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him."
- **Line 7:** "About this time Town used to swing so gay"
- **Line 8:** "When glow-lamps budded in the light-blue trees,"
- **Line 10:** "In the old times, before he threw away his knees."
- **Lines 17-20:** "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."

POLYSYNDETON

Polysyndeton at the end of the fourth stanza helps highlight the lofty fantasies the soldier had before going to war. Repeating the word "and" multiple times, the poem lists off all the things the young man romanticized when he considered enlisting in the military:

> And care of arms; and leave; and pay arrears;
> Esprit de corps; and hints for young recruits.

By repeating "and" so many times in the space of just a couple lines, the poem hints at the young man's excessive and unrealistic expectations, which just kept coming and coming! He didn't just think about carrying bejeweled knives, but also fantasized about saluting his superiors, and caring for his

weapon, and taking time off from the war, and receiving back-pay, and giving younger soldiers advice.

Polysyndeton here makes it seem like the young man thought there would be endless things to look forward to once he joined the military—and this calls attention to just how much he idealized the idea of going to war. Although he may have experienced *some* of these things, it's far more likely that his experience was defined by troubling things like trench foot, disease, terrible insomnia, ongoing trauma, the constant threat of death, and, of course, his life-changing injury.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 34:** "And," "and," "and"
- **Line 35:** "and"
- **Line 36:** "And"

REPETITION

There are several different kinds of repetition in "Disabled." Perhaps the most prominent is the poem's use of anaphora. In the first stanza, for example, the repetition of the phrase "voices of" calls attention to the sounds reaching the soldier from outside the window:

> Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,
> Voices of play and pleasure after day,

People outside are enjoying life, but the wounded soldier can only sit inside and listen. The anaphora here accentuates the presence of these voices, illustrating that these otherwise joyous sounds are inescapable and "saddening" to the soldier.

Anaphora also captures the frightening moment when the man sustained his wartime injuries in the first place:

> And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race
> And leap of purple spurted from his thigh.

The repetition of "and" at the beginning of these two lines creates the sense that this memory is overwhelming and troubling—thoughts of it just keep assaulting readers (and, of course, the soldier himself).

Elsewhere, the poem uses polyptoton, like in line 15 when the word "younger" transforms into "youth": "For it was younger than his youth, last year." This emphasizes just how young the man was when he signed up to go off to war—something that helps make sense of his naivety surrounding what to expect from violent combat.

The last two lines of the poem also feature repetition:

> How cold and late it is! Why don't they come
> And put him into bed? Why don't they come?

This ends the poem on a mournful note, stressing the soldier's desperation and—moreover—his feeling of complete and utter isolation.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Voices of"
- **Line 5:** "Voices of"
- **Line 7:** "time"
- **Line 10:** "times"
- **Line 11:** "Now"
- **Line 15:** "younger," "youth"
- **Line 16:** "Now"
- **Line 19:** "And"
- **Line 20:** "And"
- **Line 21:** "time"
- **Line 26:** "to please"
- **Line 27:** "to please"
- **Line 31:** "fears"
- **Line 32:** "Fear"
- **Line 34:** "And," "and," "and"
- **Line 35:** "and"
- **Line 36:** "And," "cheers"
- **Line 37:** "cheered," "cheer"
- **Line 40:** "Now"
- **Line 41:** "And"
- **Line 42:** "And"
- **Line 45:** "Why don't they come"
- **Line 46:** "Why don't they come?"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem ends with two rhetorical questions, both of which make the same overall point—namely, that nobody is giving the soldier the kind of attentive care he yearns for. As he sits by the open window feeling cold and depressed, the poem asks:

> [...] Why don't they come
> And put him into bed? Why don't they come?

These questions connect to the poem's opening, in which the soldier longs for darkness and the comfort of sleep. In other words, waking life is such a tormenting, monotonous slog that he'd rather be unconscious, and the idea that he wants to be "put" to bed reminds readers that he can't bear to be awake. The questions also emphasize how much his life has changed. Whereas once he was a fit, active young man, now he is immobile: he needs someone to help him to bed.

Unfortunately for him, though, nobody has come to offer assistance. His sudden desperation could just be a sign of his eagerness to be wheeled away from the window, but it's also possible that his caretakers are genuinely neglecting him. Either way, there's a palpable sense of loneliness and alienation here, especially in contrast with the noises coming from

outside. These rhetorical questions also make the ending feel a little uncertain, as though the young man is looking for answers that will never come. The repetition of the question only heightens this sense of desperation.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 45-46:** "Why don't they come / And put him into bed? Why don't they come?"

SIMILE

Two similes appear in the poem, both of them relatively early on. Though they're different from each other, they both give readers a sense of the young man's feelings of neglect and depression. Sitting in his chair, he hears sounds coming from the park:

> Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,

Normally, the sound of children playing is associated with joy and freedom. Here, though, the sounds have the opposite effect. The noise outside only reminds the young man that he's cut off from the rest of society. These voices, then, ring with "sadness," calling out in the same kind of solemn tone as a hymn (religious songs often sung in churches).

However, this is an interesting simile because hymns aren't always depressing—in fact, many hymns are *celebratory*. Although it's common to sing hymns at a funeral, it's also common to sing hymns in a spirit of praise or worship. The implication that a hymn sounds "saddening" thus emphasizes just how much youthful happiness depresses the soldier. To him, these sounds mark the death of his youthful, energetic lifestyle.

Then, in the second stanza, the poem juxtaposes how girls treated the man before and after the war. Whereas once he was attractive and enjoyed the company of girls his age, now they "touch him like some queer disease." He feels like an outcast who has been alienated from the rest of society, as if he embodies something terrible and off-putting. This simile just highlights the extent to which war has reduced the young man's quality of life, calling attention to the fact that nobody seems to value him or give him the kind of care and support he used to enjoy.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,"
- **Line 13:** "All of them touch him like some queer disease."

VOCABULARY

Gay (Line 7) - Happily.

Glow-lamps (Line 8) - Probably lanterns or candles.

Queer (Line 13) - In this context, "queer" means strange or odd.

Silly For (Line 14) - Very enthusiastic and admiring.

Brace (Line 16) - Hold strong.

Peg (Line 23) - A measurement of liquid (60 milliliters) used in reference to alcohol (and used colloquially to mean "a fair amount").

Kilts (Line 25) - Knee-length skirts traditional among men in the Scottish Highlands.

Giddy Jilts (Line 27) - Flirtatious young women who often reject suitors.

His Lie (Line 29) - Namely, that he was under the age of 18 (the legal age requirement for enlisting in the military).

Hilts (Line 32) - The handle of a weapon.

Plaid (Line 33) - A pattern of criss-crossing lines with varying widths and colors. Often associated with Scottish tartans.

Care of Arms (Line 34) - The maintenance of a weapon.

Leave (Line 34) - Time off from service.

Pay Arrears (Line 34) - Backdated payments.

Esprit de Corps (Line 35) - Team spirit.

Hints (Line 35) - Wisdom or suggestions.

Drafted Out (Line 36) - Signed up and sent to war.

Solemn (Line 38) - Quiet and serious.

Institutes (Line 40) - Hospitals or other medical facilities.

Dole (Line 42) - Give out. The word (in noun form) also sometimes refers to welfare payments.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Disabled" has six stanzas of varying length. For instance, stanza 5 only has three lines, whereas stanza 4 is made up of 16. As such, although some of the stanzas *are* the same length (like stanzas 2, 3, and 6), the poem as a whole doesn't correspond to a traditional form.

This adds a feeling of fluidity that matches the man's state of mind; in the same way that the poem shifts, his thoughts expand and contract as he comes in and out of sleep while longing for his pre-war life. The man feels that his body and life have been broken forever, and the disjointed form of the poem reflects this. The shifting nature of this structure also mirrors the way that the man's thoughts bounce back and forth between the present and the past.

There is a circularity to the form, too. The opening stanza depicts the young man as alone and on the margins of society. The last stanza does the exact same thing: he wishes someone

would come and put him to bed, but nobody comes. The poem thus ends with the same sense of isolation with which it began.

METER

Generally speaking, "Disabled" sticks to iambic pentameter throughout. This means the lines are made up of five feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (five da-DUMs). Line 2 is a good example of this:

> And shiv-| ered in | his ghast-| ly suit | of grey,

This gives the poem a gentle, almost monotonous feeling of momentum that evokes the slow passage of time. All the young man can do is wait for something to happen, and the sheer length of the poem—and its meter—helps the reader imagine this feeling of boredom and stillness.

But the poem is also full of metrical variation. For instance, there are some lines in which there are six stresses instead of five, which is the case in line 10:

> In the old times, before he threw away his knees.

This extra stress—along with the clunky rhythm it creates—might be a deliberate strategy to make the poem feel stilted and stuck, representing the young man's own immobility. On an even more basic level, longer lines like this one *feel* slower because they quite literally take longer to read!

Other variations have more tangible effects. The two "Voices" at the start of lines 4 and 5 are both trochees (stressed-unstressed), inverting the iambic rhythm and, in doing so, calling attention to the sound of the boys having fun outside. Or, as another example, the use of a spondee (stressed-stressed) in line 19 adds extra emphasis to the man's intense memory of getting injured:

> And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race

The doubly-stressed "hot race" helps convey the terrifying urgency of this moment, when the young man's wound opened up and the blood gushed out as if in a "race." The poem's use of meter thus helps accentuate important images while also simply controlling the rhythm and pacing of the language.

RHYME SCHEME

"Disabled" uses rhyme throughout, but it doesn't follow a perfectly consistent rhyme scheme. Interestingly, Owen's handwritten draft of the poem shows that he was marking the scheme in the first stanza but stopped doing so soon after. The unpredictability of the rhymes perhaps represents the young man's difficulty with moving on his own—if the rhymes flowed *too* easily, this might make the poem feel too fluid and nimble.

Most words in the poem have a rhymed match, sometimes supporting the juxtaposition between the soldier's pre- and post-war life. In the first stanza, for example, the man longs for "dark" while others play in the "park"; he wears "grey," while others enjoy the sunshine of the "day," and so on. Interestingly, though, "hands" in line 12 *doesn't* have a rhymed match. Perhaps this underlines the fact that the touch of girls' hands is truly gone forever (though this draft shows that initially there was a rhyme for this line).

Elsewhere, the word "fruits" in line 38 creates a rhyme with "institutes" in line 40. This means that the rhyme reaches over the stanza break between stanzas 5 and 6. This is a perfect representation of the poem's messy, imperfect use of rhyme, giving it a cohesive yet disjointed feeling that aligns with the fact that the soldier still exists in the world but has trouble engaging with it—he can enjoy "fruits," that is, but he has to do so from the depressing and isolated environment of "institutes."

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Disabled" functions as a third-person omniscient narrator. This means the speaker can not only describe the things happening around the young man, but also shed light on how the man feels and what he thinks. The poem often delves into the man's memories of pre-war life, his trauma from the war, and his bleak reality in the present—the speaker's omniscience makes it possible for readers to completely immerse themselves in the young man's experience. This, in fact, seems to be the poem's primary aim: to shed light on a neglected point of view.

This was an important aim of Owen's poetry more generally. He wanted to tell the truth about war and its aftermath. The speaker's tone is overwhelmingly negative, portraying the way the young man has been marginalized by his injuries. The speaker's omniscience also allows the poem to show the man's thought processes, like when he tries to figure out why he went to war in the first place:

> He thought he'd better join. He wonders why.
> Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts.
> 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;

These are thoughts in motion, portraying the young man's inner monologue. The poem ends using a similar technique, highlighting the man's state of isolation:

> How cold and late it is! Why don't they come
> And put him into bed? Why don't they come?

These desperate rhetorical questions—and the preceding sentence—come straight from the disabled soldier's own

perspective. There is, then, a slight merging of the speaker and the young man's point of view, such that the speaker momentarily *becomes* the wounded soldier. And this just make it easier for readers to feel what the man himself feels.

It's worth noting that some contemporary critics question whether Owen portrays disability in an unfair light, since the poem could be seen as denying any possibility that someone like the poem's main figure could lead a valuable, fulfilling existence. This is a very valid point. Even so, though, Owen's main goal most likely wasn't to disparage people with disabilities, but to critique the horrors of war and the wider society that sent so many young men hurtling toward life-altering violence.

SETTING

The poem is set somewhere in the United Kingdom after World War I. Like the central character, the setting is kept relatively generic, giving the poem a universal quality—as though it could happen in any number of places across the country. That said, the reference to kilts and plaid socks might suggest that the soldier is Scottish, meaning that he would likely be recuperating in Scotland.

On a literal level, the poem is set in a cold, darkening room in some kind of hospital or recovery institution. This helps create multiple juxtapositions: between inside and outside the institution, between the soldier's pre- and post-war life, and between the soldier and the rest of society. He is indoors—alone—while the rest of the world carries on without him beyond the hospital walls. This builds a sense of despair and isolation that comes across in the fact that he hears children playing outside and thinks of the noise as a "saddening" "hymn" instead of a happy, joyous sound.

But the poem also takes place in the young man's mind (despite the third-person perspective). Flitting back and forth between visions of pre-war life and the reality of the present, the setting showcases just how much he feels he has lost. The past, in this case, is a kind of distant land.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

As with many of his poems, Wilfred Owen wrote "Disabled" while convalescing at the Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1917. At the time, Owen was being treated for shell shock, which is now referred to as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The importance of Owen's stay in Craiglockhart with regard to his poetry can hardly be overstated. It was here that he met Siegfried Sassoon, probably Owen's only equal in terms of World War I poetry fame.

The elder Sassoon had an encouraging and nurturing influence on Owen's writing. Both poets were committed to using poetry as a vehicle for truth, exposing the realities of life on the front line, and undoing the empty, jingoistic ideas found in the work of poets like Jessie Pope ("Who's For the Game?") and Rupert Brooke ("The Soldier").

"Disabled" is not as well-known as Owen's poems "Anthem for Doomed Youth" or "Dulce et Decorum Est," but it's just as unflinching in its portrayal of war and its traumatizing effects. It was this poem that another fellow war poet, Robert Graves, saw as evidence of Owen's immense poetic talent—though he also said the poem was full of metrical "outrages," too (Owen was relatively inexperienced compared to Graves). Beyond his immediate contemporaries, Owen was also heavily influenced by the Romantic poets—John Keats in particular. "Disabled" poem was published posthumously in his 1920 collection; Owen died during active service shortly before the end of the war, after having recovered in Scotland in 1916 and returning to the battlefield in 1918.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem was written during (and is *about*) World War I, the so-called "war to end all wars." Unlike World War II, it's not quite as easy to identify the "villain" in this conflict, with events having a tragic domino effect across the European continent. The start of the war is generally agreed to be the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire (which ruled a large section of central and Eastern Europe at the time). Ferdinand's assassin, Gavrilo Princip, wanted to put an end to Austro-Hungarian rule in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Alliances between different countries pulled in many other European nations to fight on one side or the other.

As the poem makes clear, World War I was initially met with a sense of excitement in Britain (and across Europe). Europe had been through a period of relative stability, so people had oddly romanticized ideas about going to war, thinking of it as a form of adventure. Vast numbers of young men signed up to fight—recruitment strategies even included using young, attractive women to create peer pressure; these women would give out white feathers to men still at home as a symbol of cowardice. This kind of societal pressure is most likely why the central character of "Disabled" was so eager to join the military.

But the reality of war was terrifying and deadly, and the poor conditions of the trenches caused sickness and disease. Wilfred Owen himself fought in France, part of what was called the Western Front. Having been discharged from the Craiglockhart Hospital where he wrote this—and many other—poems, he returned to the war (much to Siegfried Sassoon's disapproval). He was killed one week before the Armistice (the truce) that was signed on November 11th, 1918. The news of his death reached his parents on the very same day that church bells rang out to signal the end of the war.

Having lived through the nightmare of the conflict itself, returning soldiers came back to a challenging new world. The economic landscape had changed considerably, and many were out of work. This poem's story is not uncommon; thousands of men returned with life-changing injuries. And many other young men, of course, didn't come home at all.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Poems in Response to Owen — A BBC show in which three contemporary poets respond to Wilfred Owen's poetry. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000117l)
- Learn More About War Poetry — A series of podcast documentaries from the University of Oxford about various aspects of World War I poetry, including some excellent material specifically about Wilfred Owen. (http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/british-world-war-one-poetry-introduction)
- More Poems and Bio — A valuable resource of Owen's other poetry, and a look at his life. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wilfred-owen)
- The Poem Out Loud — A reading by Youtuber Tom O'Bedlam. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2aMIMeJ0S4)
- Bringing WWI to Life — In this clip, director Peter Jackson discusses his recent WWI film, They Shall Not Grow Old. Though technology, Jackson brings old war footage to vivid life, restoring a sense of the soldiers as actual people. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cSXfKSRKz4)
- Post-War Life — A short clip examining the treatment of returning WW1 soldiers. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZ-OgzIRG9c)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILFRED OWEN POEMS

- Anthem for Doomed Youth
- Dulce et Decorum Est
- Exposure
- Futility
- Mental Cases
- Strange Meeting
- The Next War

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