



GCSE

# English Literature

## ‘Disabled’ (Wilfred Owen)

### The poet – Contextual information about the poet relevant to the poem (AO3)

- Wilfred Owen was born in Shropshire, England in 1893 and is considered to be one of the greatest World War I poets.
- World War I began in 1914, and in 1915 Owen enlisted in the Artists Rifles, before becoming a second lieutenant in the Manchester Regiment.
- After being blasted by a mortar shell attack, Owen was diagnosed with neurasthenia (shell shock) and sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh to recover.
- At Craiglockhart, Owen met fellow war poet and soldier Siegfried Sassoon, who helped to inspire his war poetry.
- Owen returned to active service in France on the front line in 1918 as he believed it was his duty.
- Owen was killed whilst leading his regiment to take an enemy stronghold on 4 November 1918, just one week before the war ended.

### Connections and contrasts (AO3)

- **‘Cousin Kate’ by Christina Rossetti**  
Both poems depict characters who are isolated and marginalised by society.
- **‘Drummer Hodge’ by Thomas Hardy**  
Both poems explore ideas about the grim reality of war. They depict the suffering and dehumanisation caused by warfare.
- **‘Decomposition’ by Zulfikar Ghose**  
Both poems focus on the indifference of society towards marginalised individuals. These poems consider the characters’ loss of identity.
- **‘Catrin’ by Gillian Clarke**  
Both poems focus on the presentation of conflict – either physical or emotional.
- **‘Kamikaze’ by Beatrice Garland**  
Both poems detail the effects of war on an individual and the sacrifices they make. Ideas of loss and nostalgia are depicted, as is the treatment of soldiers on their return home.
- **‘War Photographer’ by Carol Ann Duffy**  
Both poems consider the themes of war, death, trauma and memories. They also both illustrate the indifference of society.
- **‘Remains’ by Simon Armitage**  
Both poems depict the themes of war and the trauma caused by it. Both poems present the ideas of lack of power and memories.

### The poem

#### Content (AO1)

The poem is about the experiences of a young man who enlists to fight as a soldier in World War I without thinking about the consequences.

The poem moves between the past and present, and we see how enjoyable, carefree, energetic and good his life used to be. The boy had never given much thought to the details of the war, but he had been playing football, was a bit drunk and had been told that he would look good in the uniform and so decided to enlist.

He is severely injured in the war, losing limbs, and on his return home, he realises how much his life has changed. He will have to spend time in institutes, following rules and having little control over his life and future.

#### Deeper meaning

The poem explores the true horrors of war and the harsh, brutal realities of the battlefields, in sharp contrast to the propaganda and jingoism used to persuade young men to enlist. The poem considers ideas about loss, sacrifice and trauma (physical and emotional) as the soldier realises he has lost his identity as well as his limbs.

#### Context (AO3)

Wilfred Owen wrote ‘Disabled’ as an anti-war poem in 1917 while convalescing at Craiglockhart. He wrote several poems, such as ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ and ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ depicting the horrors of trench warfare and gas attacks.

Owen felt it was his duty to inform people back home about what war was really like and to redress the balance because of the jingoistic, motivational war poems from the poet Jesse Pope. Pope’s poem ‘Who’s for the Game’ showed the excitement and glory of war, while Owen, as a soldier, wanted to present an honest picture of the agony and suffering that the soldiers experienced in dreadful conditions.

### Structure and form (AO2)

- ‘Disabled’ has five stanzas of different lengths.
- Time moves from past to present so we can contrast the soldier’s life before he enlisted with his current situation after returning home.
- There is a cyclical structure, as the poem begins and ends with the soldier alone in hospital.
- The poem is written in iambic pentameter, which creates a feeling of repetitiveness and monotony to reflect the soldier’s current life.
- The rhyme scheme is inconsistent which suggests the lack of certainty surrounding the soldier’s future.



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### Language and imagery (AO2)

- Owen deliberately leaves the soldier unnamed, referring to him as '*he*' or '*him*' to create a sense of universal significance and how the soldier could be representative of any soldier who has fought in any conflict.
- The verbs 'sat' and 'waiting' suggest how passive the soldier has become because of his injuries as now he is dependent on other people. These verbs also slow the pace of the stanza and create the feeling that his life is now monotonous and lifeless.
- Owen uses more active, energetic verbs when he is describing the soldier's life before the army. Verbs such as 'swing' suggest excitement, pleasure and the fun-filled life he once had. The word 'budded' compares the lamps to flowers bursting into life and creates the potential of new life and hope. The adjective 'light-blue' creates an atmosphere that is full of energy and colour – a contrast with his present situation.
- The simile '*saddening like a hymn*' is associated with funerals and mourning and suggests that even sounds that should sound happy now sound morbid and depressing to the soldier as his life is one of gloom and despondency.
- The repetition of the rhetorical question '*Why don't they come*' at the end of the poem creates a desperate tone as if the soldier is almost pleading for help.

### Key quotations (AO1)

- '*He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,*'
- '*Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.*'
- '*When glow-lamps budded in the light-blue trees*'
- '*All of them touch him like some queer disease.*'
- '*Now he is old; his back will never brace;*'
- '*Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,*'
- '*One time he liked a bloodsmear down his leg,*'
- '*Germans he scarcely thought of;*'
- '*Some cheered him home, but not as crowds cheer Goal.*'
- '*And take whatever pity they may dole.*'
- '*How cold and late it is! Why don't they come*'

### Key questions

1. What mood is created in the first stanza by the use of colour? (AO1)
2. Why does the poet set some stanzas in the present and some in the past? (AO1)
3. What is the significance of the words 'he' and 'him' and the fact the soldier is left unnamed? (AO2)
4. What does the line '*There was an artist silly for his face*' suggest? (AO1)
5. What is the effect of the contrast between the lines  
Line 1: "*And leap of purple spurted from his thigh.*"  
Line 2: "*One time he liked a bloodsmear down his leg,*"? (AO2)
6. What impression of the war does the soldier have before he goes to fight? How do you know? (AO1)
7. What is the difference between the way people treat the soldier when he leaves for war and when he returns home? Justify your answer. (AO1/AO2)
8. Who do you think the 'solemn man' is? (AO1)
9. Why does the poem end with the repetition of questions? (AO2)
10. Does the poem present being a soldier in a positive or negative way? Give reasons for your opinion. (AO3)

### Links for further research

- A short video about how soldiers who returned from WW1 were treated:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZ-OgzIRG9c>
- An article about Wilfred Owen's life and other poems:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wilfred-owen>
- A BBC documentary presented by Jeremy Paxman about Wilfred Owen, titled *Wilfred Owen: A Remembrance Tale*:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsPdEgC0wdk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsPdEgC0wdk)

