

# Embodied Existence: Interwar Poetics and Disability

Embodiment, as a critical concept, foregrounds the idea that human experience is fundamentally rooted in the body and in the body's continuous interaction with the world. Within disability discourse, embodiment draws attention to how bodily difference, impairment, injury, and illness shape perception, identity, and lived reality, challenging abstract or idealised notions of the human subject. The interwar period, broadly spanning from 1918 to 1939, marks a profoundly transformative phase in world literary history, particularly in poetry, as it emerged from the devastation of the First World War and moved toward an uncertain modern future. Poets writing during this period responded to widespread physical injury, psychological trauma, and social dislocation, moving away from the glorified romanticism, nationalist nostalgia, and heroic idealism that had characterised much earlier poetic tradition. Instead, interwar poetry articulated fractured bodies, damaged minds, and altered modes of being, often resisting sentimental or patronising portrayals of disability. Modernist experimentation in form and language—evident in the works of figures such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, W. H. Auden, and Stephen Spender—allowed poets to represent fragmentation, illness, and trauma as intrinsic to modern existence. The bodily injuries and psychological scars borne by soldiers and civilians alike found complex poetic expression, updating and complicating contemporary discourse on disability by situating it within broader concerns of alienation, mechanised warfare, and the breakdown of coherent subjectivity. Alongside canonical modernists, war poets such as Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, Ivor Gurney, and Edward Thomas, as well as writers like Langston Hughes, Mina Loy, and Djuna Barnes, engaged deeply with disability in its diverse manifestations on both the battlefield and the home front. Their poetry documents not only physical impairment and mental trauma but also the humanitarian crises that war inevitably produces, thereby expanding disability beyond individual pathology to a collective social condition. These representations contributed to a growing cultural awareness of disability as a social and political issue, indirectly influencing emerging conversations around accessibility, recognition, and rights, even as formal policy developments would come much later. Through innovation in poetic form and technique, interwar poets paved the way for later twentieth-century literature concerned with disability, embodiment, and marginalised identities. Although these poetic representations were not without limitations and contradictions, they nonetheless helped shift cultural attitudes by recognising disability as a natural aspect of human diversity rather than an aberration. Poetry, however, remains an understudied genre within disability studies, which has traditionally prioritised prose narratives, memoirs, and theoretical texts. This paper therefore examines the intersection of poetry and disability in the interwar period, focusing on poets' preoccupation with textual bodies as both corporeal entities and embodied subjects, the role of disability in identity formation, and the complex ways lived experiences are negotiated through verse. It further explores how interwar poetry employs disability both as material reality and as metaphor, while also reflecting on its transformative possibilities in reshaping understandings of embodiment, representation, accessibility, and inclusivity.