

Warring Disability: A Reading of Wilfred Owen's Poems

The First World War (1914–1918) unleashed an unprecedented scale of violence through modern, industrialized warfare, transforming not only the battlefield but also the social, cultural, and economic foundations of the modern world. Among its most enduring legacies was the widespread incidence of long-term disability among surviving soldiers, including post-traumatic stress disorder, limb amputations, and traumatic brain injuries. Abram Kardiner, in *The Traumatic Neuroses of War* (1941), conceptualizes these conditions as forms of “physioneurosis,” a term that underscores the inseparable physical and psychological consequences of war. Such war-induced disabilities generated a profound crisis for returning soldiers, who often found themselves unable to adapt to post-war civilian life and its normative cultural expectations. Wilfred Owen, who was killed in combat on November 4, 1918, stands as one of the most incisive poetic voices to confront this reality. His poetry bears witness to the violence engendered by war and archives the psychic, bodily, and emotional devastations experienced by soldiers. Through vivid imagery and stark realism, Owen exposes the enduring impact of war-related disability on the human psyche, challenging romanticized narratives of combat and sacrifice. This paper seeks to examine the physical and mental disabilities represented in Owen's poetry, with particular attention to how these depictions intersect with the medical model of disability and prevailing cultural ideals of martial masculinity within an ableist framework.

Disability studies as a field has critically interrogated the notion of the “normative” body, particularly the ways in which bodily standards become prescriptive during wartime through recruitment practices and military discipline. The demands placed upon soldiers' bodies during war require conformity to ideals of strength, endurance, and self-sacrificial masculinity, rendering disabled bodies as aberrant or expendable. John M. Kinder, in his essay “War and Disability Studies,” notes that “the violent transformation of bodies is an inextricable part of armed conflict, and ideas about body normalcy and difference pervade all aspects of military culture—from the selection of recruits and the design of uniforms to the distribution of military pensions” (288). Yet the violence inflicted upon bodies in war is frequently obscured by dominant rhetorics of bravery, patriotism, and heroism, wherein disabling injuries are subsumed under narratives of noble sacrifice and martial valor. This conflation effectively erases the lived realities of disability and fails to address the long-term needs of veterans struggling with physical impairment and psychological trauma. Owen's poetry resists such erasure by foregrounding images of bodily diminishment and debilitation, revealing deep anxieties surrounding the usefulness and value of post-war bodies. In poems such as “Disabled,” Owen portrays a war veteran confined to a wheelchair, observing life from a distance as “Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn, / Voices of play and pleasure after day.” The poem starkly contrasts youthful vitality with the veteran's physical immobility and emotional isolation, exposing the hollow promises of heroism and masculine fulfillment that once lured young men into military service. These idealized notions of valor ultimately give way to suppressed trauma, manifesting in long-term psychological conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder and hallucinations, which profoundly shape survivors' engagement with the world. Through such portrayals, Owen's poetry offers a powerful critique of ableist and masculinist war ideologies, depicting both the physical and mental disabilities produced by war and their fraught negotiations in post-war life. This paper, therefore, aims to analyze selected poems that foreground these themes, situating them within broader cultural discourses of idealized martial masculinity and the medicalized understanding of disability.