

Understanding rejection in "disabled" and "refugee blues"



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As poets responding to the turmoil of war, authors Wilfred Owen and W. H. Auden both explore the causes and consequences of rejection. The two men in particular emphasise the psychological impact that war has on human beings who are unjustly cast aside from society for their physical appearance or their religious beliefs. It is essential to take a close look at language, literary devices, and linguistic features to truly understand the ultimately humanistic message and emotions the authors are trying to convey through their writing.

In "Disabled", a soldier from World War I is rejected for his physical disability. Right from the first stanza, it is said that his suit is "legless, sewn short at elbow". This effective beginning informs the reader that the soldier has lost body members and is as a result physically disabled, but it also sets a gloomy, pessimistic tone; the use of caesura emphasises the soldier's disability by interrupting the flow of the poem in order to let the image sink into the reader's mind. Indeed, the poem opens with a dismal image of the soldier sitting alone in a "wheeled chair", "shiver[ing]", which immediately evokes pathos. We especially empathise with the soldier's heartache at being rejected by women, who "touch him like some queer disease". This dehumanisation, comparing him to a disease, highlights the effect that his disability has on women who can't look past his physical appearance. The soldier's sexual longing and sorrow facing women's rejection is repeated several times throughout the poem for emphasis. The soldier is unjustly cast aside and has become a "disease" in society's eyes: this metaphor underlines the fact that he is no longer treated like a human being and women don't consider him worthy of affection. As Mother Theresa once said,

“ The most terrible poverty is loneliness, and the feeling of being unloved”. Indeed, the soldier is forlorn and feels almost betrayed by women, whose “ eyes / Passed from him to the strong men that were whole”: this cruelty and lack of love are the cause of his misery. Furthermore, the fact that the soldier is not named gives the poem a universal dimension. After World War I, tens of thousands of soldiers were severely injured and sent to hospitals. Even those who had surgery and recuperated from their wounds never fully managed to integrate themselves back into society. Disfigured men (the 15, 000 “ gueules cassées” in France, for instance) were feared and even regarded as monsters. This social exclusion led to more serious injuries: psychological trauma. Many did not only go insane because of the horrors they had witnessed at war, but also because of the loneliness and isolation that followed. Indeed, the unnamed soldier in Wilfred Owen’s poem certainly represents these outcasts of society who were destined to lead a life of solitude and despair.

In “ Refugee Blues”, Jewish refugees are also cast aside, but for their religious beliefs and ethnicity. In the 1930s, anti-Semitism and persecution were rising: the Jewish were progressively deprived of their basic human rights (particularly with the Nuremberg laws of 1935). As a result, thousands of Jewish people started leaving Germany, fleeing to other nations that would welcome them. However, countries were reluctant to welcome them and sent many away. Just as in “ Disabled”, the characters in “ Refugee Blues” are universal: the couple that is going from place to place represents this entire Jewish community who was strongly persecuted and rejected in those times. Indeed, wherever they go, the couple is sent away. Each stanza

mentions a different location (" city", " country", " village", " committee", " harbour", etc.), highlighting the many places the refugees have to travel to in order to find somewhere they will be accepted and taken care of.

However, this effort is in vain for " there's no place for [them]" in an entire city of " ten million souls": this hyperbole underlines to what extent the refugees are completely on their own. What is truly poignant, is that out of " ten million" people, not even a single one is there to help. The reader understands that the cause of the refugees' exclusion is the hypocrisy and cruelty of human beings. This is shown when the " committee" " asked [the refugees] politely to return next year": this " polite[ness]" and the fact that " they offered [them] a chair" is purely hypocritical and ironic, for the committee does nothing but send the refugees away. The hostility towards them is further shown when " the consul banged the table and said, / " If you've got no passport you're officially dead" ": the verb " banged" has connotations of violence and brutality, and the use of direct speech emphasises the refugees' grim situation. Indeed, they are stripped of their rights and identity: it is explicitly said that without a passport, they are " dead", meaning that they have absolutely no importance and are completely excluded from society. This bitter dehumanisation is also suggested when a " poodle in a jacket" and a " cat" were " let in[to]" people's homes, whereas the " German Jews" were sent away: they aren't perceived as human beings, but as creatures inferior to animals. In fact, one could view the refugees as animals who are hunted down and persecuted, constantly moving from place to place, fearing for their lives.

Wilfred Owen's poem shows that being an outsider leads to despair and a life of hardships. Being rejected and alone, the soldier's life has become monotonous and dull. This is suggested with the contrast between his past and the present: the "voices of boys" trigger the soldier's memories and flashbacks which take him back in time, made clear to the reader with time connectives such as "About this time" and "In the old times". In the past, the soldier's life was filled with joy and bliss, emphasised by the alliteration "glow-lamps budded on the light-blue trees, /And girls glanced lovelier as the air grew dim": everything seemed perfect, ideal. This strongly contrasts with his present life, which is "dark", "grey" and "cold": these monosyllabic words effectively bring out the absence of colour and vitality. Indeed, the exterior world reflects the soldier's emotions and feelings of loneliness and solitude. The short independent clause and the use of caesura in "Now, he is old;" also highlights the desolate reality of the soldier's life and the contrast with his past. Emotive phrases such as "waiting for dark" convey a sense of hopelessness: the present participle "waiting" doesn't have connotations of impatience, but rather of despair and passiveness. Indeed, there are two interpretations to this: either the soldier is simply waiting for nightfall to go to sleep, either he is waiting for death, which would alleviate him from his dismal life and his physical and emotional pain.

The theme of rejection in "Refugee Blues" is accompanied by a melancholic and hopeless tone, which mirrors the title of the poem: "Blues" is an African American music genre, dating back to the slave trade of the 19th century, a genre that often laments injustice with lyrics that evoke feelings such as a longing for a better life and a home. Blues is characterised by three-line

stanzas, many repetitions and the AAB rhyme schema. Indeed, W. H. Auden's poem mimics this musical genre and its ternary rhythm. The fact that the third line of each stanza doesn't rhyme with the other two could reflect the refugees' isolation, for the line is set aside, just like the refugees. The lack of hope in the refugees' life is implied when it is said that "there grows an old yew, / Every spring it blossoms anew" yet "old passports can't do that". A yew is a big tree with solid wood, a symbol of death and renewal: it represents nature's cyclical rhythm, suggesting that there is hope for nature, since wildlife can renew. This highlights how different the Jewish refugees' situation is: unlike nature, they cannot start over and don't have a fresh start. "Old passports" don't renew by themselves, and as a result, the refugees are destined to a life of broken dreams and false hope, a life without opportunities, preventing them from getting a shot at a new life in another country.

In both poems, the combination of being rejected by society and other factors such as physical disability plays an important role in an individual's fate. In "Disabled", the soldier "will spend a few sick years in institutes": the modal verb "will" conveys certainty, suggesting that he has no other choice than to remain alone in institutes and hospitals for the rest of his life. The same modal verb "will" and the plosive 'b' in "his back will never brace" also emphasises and implies that the soldier's life is already set up for him and there's nothing he can do to change it. He will never be able to "brace", to support himself physically and emotionally. The soldier can't be anything but a passive observer. Likewise, in "Refugee Blues", the Jewish refugees are victims of a grim fate, sealed by people's dismissal of them and

by the monstrous German dictator, Hitler. His words “ They must die” are powerful and monosyllabic: the spondaic rhythm, where every syllable is stressed for emphasis, hammers in Hitler’s message and creates a sense of doom as “ the thunder rumbl[es] in the sky”. Pathetic fallacy indicates how the atmosphere grows progressively darker: at the beginning of the poem it is “ spring”, whereas at the end it seems to be winter with “ falling snow” and imminent “ thunder”, foreshadowing the holocaust and the tragic events that will follow, further underlining a sense of inevitable and gruesome fate.

Though both poems are written in two different contexts and circumstances, they share a common universal message about rejection. Social exclusion is still relevant today; one could argue that it is human nature to be afraid and unaccepting of differences, whether it is a difference of culture, ethnicity, religion or physical appearance. However, as the poems point out, this dismissive side of human beings emotionally destroys the victims of discrimination. Our acts can have a profound impact on others, and in order to avoid the psychological damages and feelings of loneliness that both poems underline, we should think twice before shutting people out. Today, with new forms of historical trauma such as the Syrian refugee crisis, we should be careful not to let history repeat itself.