

# Comparing the ways

[Experience](#), [Happiness](#)



Compare the ways in which Owen powerfully portrays physical and mental consequences of war in the poems 'Disabled' and 'Mental Cases' Wilfred Owen's poems 'Disabled' and 'Mental Cases' each portray very different aspects of war and its consequences. As their names suggest, 'Mental Cases' is about the psychological effects war had on soldiers, whereas 'Disabled' focuses more on the physical consequences of war. However, in both poems the physical and mental costs are all intertwined, and although they describe very different situations, in many ways the poems are alike in their portrayal of the consequences of war overall.

The first ways in which we can compare these poems is by their content, language and tone. In the poem 'Disabled', Owen states the subject's situation in the first line of the poem: " He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark" this line bluntly highlights to the reader that the subject is disabled, and is obviously very handicapped by his injury, because he cannot do anything except 'waiting for dark'. The narrator then informs the reader of exactly what the man's injuries are, in the same direct style - " Legless, sewn short at elbow. This emphasizes how starkly and immediately obvious the man's injuries would be to somebody who saw him. In comparison, the poem 'Mental Cases' starts with the line " Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight? "; which is a far less straight forward line, and reflects how little was understood about the mental effects of war at the time. The physical consequences of war are not as prominent in 'Mental Cases', but they are still mentioned.

The most powerful example is when the narrator describes how the shell-shocked soldiers appear: " their heads wear this hilarious, hideous, awful

falseness of set-smiling corpses" and the reader comes to understand that their torment is so great they have lost control of their facial muscles. Owen uses the phrase " their faces wear" to show that their facial expressions are not a true illustration of their feelings, but like a mask covering their thoughts. He then eerily compares their expressions to that of " set-smiling corpses" to perhaps to suggest that these men are almost dead with torment.

Another powerful physical description in 'Mental Cases' is " their eyeballs shrink tormented - back into their brains" which paints a picture of how gaunt the men's faces are, and how their mental torture is so real to them, that their eyes physically shrink away from thememories. Overall, physical consequences of war provide the central problem for the subject of 'Disabled', whereas in 'Mental Cases' the subjects' poor physical condition is because of their mental state. This brings us on to the powerful portrayal of the mental consequences of war in these poems. 'Mental Cases' is set in an institute for mentally damaged soldiers, and starts with a stanza questioning how the men concerned have been reduced to such a state of insanity. One very powerful question which describes the men's mental torment is "-but what slow panic gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets? " The oxymoron " slow panic" highlights just how terrible the suffering of the men is as panic is one of the most horrible, alarmed and rushed emotions a person can feel; so to have this feeling drawn out and slow is awful.

Owens use of the verb 'gouged' is also poignant as it is a violent action, so it underlines that these men are the victims of something brutal. Another particularly moving line in the first stanza is " Ever from hair and through

their hands' palms Misery swelters" This statement is very effective at showing how all-consuming their fear and misery is as it metaphorically compares the misery to sweat; which of course comes out of every pore of one's skin, and the verb " swelters" is adds to the effect as it conveys the clammy fever which is plaguing the men along with their memories.

In comparison to 'Mental Cases', the poem 'Disabled' describes less direct mental consequences of war; as the subject of the poem is not suffering from shell-shock, but rather from the loneliness and helplessness which his disability is causing him. Before the war, the subject of the poem was a handsome and popular teenager who was excellent at football, however, his injuries have left him disfigured and completely dependent on others, which leads to a mental torment far subtler but almost as agonising as that of the subjects in 'Mental Cases' - he spends all his time thinking about the time before the war, and regretting that he signed up.

This is the main tragedy behind this poem - the fact that the whole situation could have been prevented if he hadn't. The narrator of the poem recognises this, and expresses the subject's regret with lines such as " In the old times, before he threw away his knees". The use of the phrase " threw away" shows that the subject does not think that it was worth it - he feels that he lost his limbs for nothing; it was a waste. It also suggests that he blames himself for what happened.

Another phrase which is very powerful in conveying the mental consequences of war on the subject of this poem is in the first line; when he is described as sitting and " waiting for dark". This shows how empty his life is, because he has nothing to do but wait for darkness to come, so he can

go to bed. The final phrase which powerfully portrays the mental consequences of war is when, describing how the subject was naive when he signed up for the war, the narrator writes "no fears of Fear came yet. By turning the second 'fear' into a proper noun, Owen powerfully suggests that there are a multitude of different things encompassed in this word for a soldier, and shows how central fear was to soldiers' lives when they were at war. Overall, 'Mental Cases' shows the most vicious and forceful mental consequences that war could have on a soldier, whereas 'Disabled' shows an indirect and much more subtle, yet still tormenting psychological impact of war. One thing which the poems have in common concerning the consequences of war, is that it is clear in both that war demanded great sacrifice from the soldiers, and caused great loss for them.

This is very powerfully portrayed in 'Disabled' when the narrator writes "He's lost his colour very far from here, poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry" these two lines are particularly poignant due to Owens use of the verb "poured" which emphasizes the excessiveness of the young man's loss of blood. The word "colour" here could be interpreted to mean the man's happiness and natural blush; which reminds the reader again of how handsome and popular he had been.

The final point which makes this line so powerful is the phrase "till his veins ran dry" which conveys to the reader that the subject gave everything he had to the war - his limbs and with them his successful life -, yet got nothing back. In comparison, the subjects of 'Mental Cases' lost their minds to the war; because of the unimaginable horrors they experienced. The narrator sums this up in the lines "Carnage incomparable, and human squander

rucked too thick for these men's extrication" this shows that the men experienced too many horrors and too much slaughter for them to endure.

Another point which both poems express is that the consequences of war, both physical and mental, are irreversible. This is obvious in 'Disabled', as there is no way he can get his legs back; but the narrator emphasizes this throughout the poem by using the word 'never' frequently. For example " Now, he is old; his back will never brace". By describing the man, who cannot be more than nineteen years old, as old, Owen shows the reader just how much of an effect the war had on the subject, as age is one of the few indisputably irreversible things in life.

In comparison, the narrator of ' Mental Cases', when describing the soldiers' memories, says " Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander. Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter" by describing them as 'helpless' the narrator shows he considers the men beyond help. After all, how can you help someone if the source of all their problems is their own memories? The lines are made particularly powerful as they describe the soldiers remembering when they trod on lungs which " had loved laughter".

This shows that the soldiers had known and laughed with the men whose lungs they were forced to step on because the ground was covered with so many bodies. Another line where we get the sense that the shell-shocked men are beyond help is when the narrator says " on their sense sunlight seems a blood-smear"... " Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh": if something as beautiful and pure as sunlight and sunrise reminds these men of blood and wounds, then we feel that nothing will ever calm

them, and bring them back to sanity. Another way in which we can compare these poems is by their structure.

Most noticeably, 'Disabled' is considerably longer than 'Mental Cases'. This reflects how the subject of 'Disabled' is in a state of thoughtfulness and pondering, whereas the narrator of 'Mental Cases' is simply explaining the subjects to somebody, and therefore does not spend as much time contemplating. The two poems are similar in structure in the sense that they both fluctuate between past and present, but 'Disabled' does so far more often than 'Mental Cases' and this again could reflect the contemplation of the subject. Finally, 'Mental Cases' does not rhyme at all, whereas 'Disabled' has a constant, although not regular, rhyme scheme.

The lack of rhyme in 'Mental Cases' could reflect how harsh the realities of war are, and the raw pain and horror that is shell-shock; perhaps Owen did not want to dampen the brutality of the truth in this piece by smoothing it over with rhymes. The final way in which we can compare how Owen powerfully portrays the consequences of war in these poems is by looking at their tone. The first and last stanza of 'Disabled' have a melancholy tone, which Owen achieves by using language such as 'ghastly', 'saddening', 'pity' and 'cold'. He also juxtaposes the words 'dark' and 'grey', to create a general tone of gloom.

The rest of the stanza's fluctuate between a tone of regret and despair, and one of bittersweet reminiscence, as the subject contemplates the past and present. In comparison, 'Mental Cases' has a brutally honest tone all the way through, although it changes from questioning at the beginning to guilty towards the end. Owen achieves this guilty tone with the line " Snatching

after us who smote them , brother," in which the narrator accepts that he and his companion are partly to blame for the tragic ending the men in front of them have, and the word 'brother' suggests that he feels closer to his companion because of this shared guilt.

In conclusion, although each poem powerfully portrays a different kind of consequence that war could have on a soldier, they both seem to agree that the losses the subjects of each poem endured were a great sacrifice to them, and one which is irreversible. Another point which the poems seem to recognize, is that their losses were a mistake - it was not worth it. This is shown in disabled by the subjects regret and in 'Mental Cases' by the narrators guilt at sending the subjects to war.