

HOW IS THE THEME OF SUFFERING PRESENTED THROUGH LANGUAGE, FORM AND STRUCTURE IN STORY OF AN HOUR, DISABLED, AND STILL I RISE

ZhiHao Zhu

Kings' School Al Barsha, Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Corresponding Email: ray.zhuzhihao@gmail.com

Abstract: This essay explores how the theme of suffering is presented through language, form, and structure in Wilfred Owen's *Disabled*, Maya Angelou's *Still I Rise*, and Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour*. While all three texts centre on characters experiencing suffering, they diverge significantly in tone, form, and thematic resolution. Owen employs irregular stanza lengths, disjointed syntax, and bleak imagery to depict the psychological and physical trauma of a disabled war veteran, using poetic techniques to convey the soldier's alienation and regret. In contrast, Angelou's structured rhyme and meter in *Still I Rise* reflect a rhythm of resistance and resilience, transforming suffering into a source of empowerment and dignity for the historically oppressed. Chopin, using prose, subtly captures the suffocating domestic suffering of a woman trapped in a restrictive marriage, highlighting a momentary psychological liberation that ends abruptly. Through varied narrative voices and structural choices, the three texts present suffering as either irreversible tragedy, a force for emancipation, or a fleeting experience shaped by social constraints. This comparative analysis highlights how literary techniques shape and differentiate responses to suffering across gender, historical, and cultural contexts.

Keywords: Suffering in literature; Form and structure; Trauma and resilience; War and disability; Feminist perspectives

1 INTRODUCTION

Suffering is a universal human experience that has been explored extensively in literature. Different authors approach the theme from diverse perspectives, reflecting varying social contexts, personal struggles, and emotional responses. This essay examines the portrayal of suffering in three distinct works: Wilfred Owen's poem *Disabled*, Maya Angelou's *Still I Rise*, and Kate Chopin's short story *The Story of an Hour*. Each piece presents suffering through unique lenses—war, racial oppression, and gender roles—revealing how characters endure, resist, and transform through their pain. By analyzing the form, language, and structure of these texts, this essay will explore how suffering shapes identity and resilience in the face of adversity[1].

2 EXPLORING SUFFERING AND RESISTANCE IN POETRY

Suffering is the predominant mental state of characters in '*Disabled*', '*Still I Rise*', and '*The Story of an Hour*'. However, the response from characters to it is different in each and the theme is also explored under different forms. Owen uses a poetic form to portray suffering through the physical and psychological trauma experienced endured by an injured war veteran. Conversely, Angelou also uses a poetic form but presents the theme as a source of strength that empowers the marginalised to respond with dignity against oppression. Chopin though uses prose to explore suffering by portraying a woman trapped within a conventional bourgeois marriage.

In the poem '*Disabled*', Wilfred Owen portrays a once young soldier who after losing his two legs and an arm in the war regrets enlisting in the army and reminisces the time before the war when he didn't depend on others for assistance and had a youthful body that attracted women. Hence, Owen presents suffering as a warning to young men at the time about the destructive impacts of war[2-4].

Owen's use of seven stanzas of alternating lengths rejects a regular traditional poetic form. This irregular form implies that the soldier is unable to relate to the norms of society, underlining the soldier's physical state which makes him an outcast from normal people. Additionally, Owen uses iambic pentameter to create a feeling of the monotony of the soldier's life.

("There was an artist silly for his face")

The inconsistent ABAB rhyme creates an uncomfortable, disjointed feeling that mirrors the soldier's impaired state of doing the same tedious things whilst waiting to die.

("He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark, And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey, Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn, Voices of play and pleasure after day, Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.")

He also uses incomplete syntaxes, like the line "After the matches, carried shoulder-high.", to suggest the lack of coherence in his thoughts which indicates the soldier's confusion to the extent of disbelief in his own stupidity as he

tries to desperately put logical sense in his decision. Owen's careful use of form and structure emphasises the soldier's suffering which arises from the contrast between his pre-war life and his disability, evoking a tragic pathos in the reader. Owen's choice of the third-person omniscient narrative voice, that's represented through the word "He", isolates and distances the soldier who represents many similar victims of war. This reflects society's attitude to disabled ex-soldiers, pointing out the damaging impact war has on them. The soldier is described as being "sewn short at the elbow". The metaphor "sewn short" gives an image of clothing being crudely altered, suggesting the soldier's physical imperfection. This deepens the sense of loss and highlights the profound impact of war that left him in this harsh reality. This is emphasised with the use of caesura which creates a sense of disjointedness in the poem which reflects his physical state ("elbow. Through"). Therefore Owen presents suffering by presenting a soldier who is condemned to endure life in the pitiable physical form war has left him with.

Suffering is further explored in the fourth stanza when Owen describes how "After the matches, carried shoulder-high.", the young man is presented as a hero. This image of heroism shows how the young man naively confused the euphoria of being the victorious hero in football with war. This is made clearer by the sentence "he wonders why" which adds a sense of simplicity to his thoughts, proposing that he is regretfully thinking solely about his unwise decision on joining the army. The soldier stating that "someone had said he'd look a God", with the metaphor "God" having connotations of having exceptional qualities that deserve admiration and worship, implies the disenchantment of glorious pride and honour within young men when enlisting in the army. Hence, suffering is shown by the soldier's regret and the retrospective realisation that enlisting into the army because of personal vanity has now resulted him in this devastating physical condition.

Owen deepens the theme in the last stanza where he presents suffering as the hopelessness experienced by the soldier. The dark diction in the first line "Now, he will spend a few sick years in Institutes" presents a bleak image of the soldier's circumstances. The word "now" directly highlights the immediacy of the speaker's experience. Suffering is seen more intense and overwhelming when dealt in the present moment, hence accentuating the soldier's hopelessness. The phrase "a few" indicates that the soldier's time in hospital doesn't have a discernible endpoint and thus adds onto the hopelessness by stating that there isn't a visible end to the soldier's suffering. The poem ends with the use of interrogative sentences "Why don't they come And put him into bed? Why don't they come?". The repeated rhetorical questions creates a sense of desperation and frustration within the soldier as he pleads for attention. The enjambment enhances this emotional outpouring: the soldier's questioning cut off by the end of the line, which could represent the soldier hesitating in his cry for help. This underscores his hopelessness and neglect indicated in the cry as he stops believing that help would ever arrive. Therefore, Owen presents suffering as the hopelessness felt by the soldier.

Owen uses form, language, and structure to portray the deplorable physical state and the regret soldiers feel of the decision to join the army; and the hopelessness soldiers feel in a post-war world. This is to act as a warning for young men who want to join the army in that time as Owen himself has first-hand seen the horrors war brings to people as he was a soldier on the front line.

Maya Angelou makes her presentation of suffering contrasts strongly with Owen's presentation as the sense of irreversibility to the soldier's suffering in 'Disabled' is quite distinct to the speaker being undeterred by suffering and believes it's possible to overcome it. Angelou achieves this by addressing imagined oppressors that, despite oppression and adversity, she is still able to show spirit and resilience to challenge the societal, racial, and gender stereotypes. She continuously asserts of her will to rise out of the shame of slavery and the painful past of fear and terror to honour her ancestors' legacy. Thus, Angelou presents suffering as a series of obstacles in which she resolves to overcome.

Angelou constructs the poem using seven quatrains with a strict rhyme scheme of ABCB. This provides a sense of steadiness as well as repetitiveness that can be mirrored with the poet's resilience as she tries to repeatedly rise above her suffering to defy societal norms. This sense of consistency is further enforced with the constant alternating meters of iambic tetrameter in the first line and iambic trimeter in the following line in the first seven stanzas.

("You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,")

Though Angelou's steady use of meter does additionally capture the speaker's perseverance in rising above her suffering, it also reflects the tension of the struggle and strength in the speaker as she tries to deal with the sufferings. This implies her suffering as the incentive for her resilience as it pushes her to repeatedly confront and transcend societal oppression. However, the last two stanzas are written in free verse with no strict rhyme scheme as opposed to the earlier stanzas. This creates a sense of unpredictability within the poem which could be seen as deliberate to subvert the reader's expectations. This corresponds to the speaker's efforts of subverting societal expectations as she tries to rise above her suffering. Hence, suffering, being society's racist views, is seen as the obstacle for the speaker's resilience to defy against[5].

3 SYMBOLISM AND TRANSFORMATION IN ANGELOU'S WORK

Angelou's perspective on suffering is elucidated through symbolism. In the line "You may trod upon me in the dirt", Angelou establishes her audience as society in general with the word "you" but also creates an accusatory tone. The verb "trod", connotating with something physically small being deliberately stepped on, signifies her insignificance and shows society's discrimination against her. Furthermore, the word "dirt" symbolizes the dehumanizing conditions of slavery, highlighting the speaker's lowly status due to her enslaved, black identity. Therefore the line introduces the speaker's situation of enduring societal oppression due to her black, enslaved identity[6,7].

However, the speaker is resilient and determined to rise above society's racist discriminations. By mentioning that she is "Just like moons and like suns", she invokes powers beyond petty humans judgement through her use of celestial images, showing that her assertion is a force on its own that can't be stopped by oppression. Her rise is like "hopes springing high", suggesting she is inspired by the sudden, renewing quality of hope, that refuses to be crushed. The anaphora "Just like" emphasizes the consistency and inevitability of the speaker's resilience. Hence Angelou presents suffering as an obstacle the speaker's unyielding nature of resilience allows her to overcome.

To conclude it, Maya Angelou use of literary devices in form, language, and structure, presents suffering as an obstacle yet she is still able to rise through her resilience.

Whereas Owen presents suffering through the perspective of a disabled ex-soldier, Angelou presents the theme through the view of a Black woman. However, Kate Chopin's presentation differs from the previous two as she shows suffering through the lens of a woman, who is trapped in a conventional bourgeois marriage and struggles with conflicting emotions of relief and grief after hearing the unexpected news of her husband's passing. Hence, Chopin presents suffering as the internal conflict between Mrs Mallard's desire for freedom and her love for her husbandp[8].

The reduced short story form is significant by conveying Mrs Mallard's suffering in her internal struggle. By mirroring the time frame of the title, Chopin creates a tightly wound story that allows the reader to witness the extremes of Mrs. Mallard's contrasting emotions in real time. This also gives an underlying sense of her suffering as her internal conflict is heightened as she only has a limited amount of time to deal with it. In addition, the shortness of the prose reflects societal norms of women being confined by conventional marital values and expectations in which woman's thoughts and passions are greatly restricted. Hence, the author's choice in form effectively adds onto Mrs Mallard's suffering.

The story is divided into distinct stages that show Mrs. Mallard's emotional journey. At first, she reacts with what seems to be grief at the news of her husband's death given that "she wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment". However, when closely examined, what the reasons for her "storm of grief" are is unclear. The ambiguity is cleared up when Chopin subtly makes it clear that her public grief is also her personal relief. When Mrs. Mallard retreats to her room where she is alone, the structure shifts to focus to her inner thoughts. Chopin's use of images like "delicious breath or rain" and "the notes of a distant song" gives a sense of vitality that reflect Mrs Mallard's sense of relief and hope for a new independent future[9].

This moment of solitude is the turning point where Mrs. Mallard's feelings of entrapment are exposed, and her growing sense of freedom begins to emerge from being "too subtle and elusive to name" to turning into "a monstrous joy". However, Mrs. Mallard's guilt accompanies her newfound appreciation of her freedom. This is clear in when "she knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death". This implies her internal conflict between her desire for freedom and her love for her loving husband, and hence establishes her suffering. The final twist when her husband unexpectedly reappears led to her ironic death from shock. This ending and the cyclical structure indicates the inescapable nature of Mrs Mallard's suffering from her emotional conflict. Chopin uses the narrative arc to clearly show Mrs Mallard's conflicting emotions and her silent suffering that is clear none of her close ones are ever aware of.

In conclusion, Chopin uses form, structure, and language in *The Story of an Hour* to present suffering as the internal conflict between Mrs. Mallard's desire for freedom and her love for her husband.

4 CONCLUSION

The theme of suffering is explored in *Disabled*, *Still I Rise*, and *The Story of an Hour* through varied forms and perspectives. Wilfred Owen presents suffering as the physical and psychological trauma of a disabled soldier, emphasizing regret and hopelessness. Maya Angelou contrasts this with a powerful portrayal of resilience and defiance against societal oppression. Meanwhile, Kate Chopin reveals the internal conflict of a woman constrained by marriage, highlighting the emotional complexities of freedom and love. Together, these works demonstrate that suffering, while universal, is experienced and responded to in diverse ways, reflecting broader social and individual struggles. Through their distinct artistic approaches, the authors offer profound insights into human endurance and the quest for dignity.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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