

A comparison of the presentation of trauma in the *Poetry* of Wilfred Owen and
Regeneration by Pat Barker

In order to explore the presentation of trauma in Owen's poetry and *Regeneration* by Pat Barker a definition of the word 'trauma' must be determined. Trauma is both physical and psychological illness, in the Physical sense trauma refers to a physical injury such as a wound, broken bones or loss of limb which can change the outlook and actions of a soldiers such as having "sleeve sewn"¹ to cover up the ghastly injury, whereas in the psychological sense it can be displayed through a loss of control of bodily functions like "a tortured alimentary canal"² causing irregularities in digestion leading to vomiting or diarrhoea. Barker's Novel looks at individual case studies away from the trenches using the technique of flashback, she describes the true horror that the soldiers faced and also the psychological after effects they have to deal with, "dead minds revisited"³, psychological difficulties were not often considered in Owen's time and therefore a different view appears.

"The old lie: Dulce et Decorum est Pro patria mori", translates to 'it is sweet and right to die for your country' is ironically placed at the end of the poem *Dulce et Decorum est*. Here Owen is mocking the patriotic perception of war, showing how it has now changed into modern trench warfare. Rivers also describes the war as "the Great Adventure" however Barker feels that it is

¹ *Disabled* By Wilfred Owen

² *Regeneration* by Pat Barker

³ *Regeneration* by Pat Barker

necessary to develop this statement and says “ —the real life equivalent of all the adventure stories they'd devoured as boys —consisted of crouching in a dugout, waiting to be killed”. The poem also describes the absence of heroism in the new form of combat by using words like “fumble” and “stumbling” when describing the men’s desperate attempts to fit their gas masks in order to save their lives, however the failure of one man to fit his mask leads to Owen seeing him “guttering, choking, drowning”, which would symbolise the absence of a dignified death , as was seen in previous wars, where it may have been seen as an honour to die for your country as it was often through an act of bravery due to the code of chivalry meaning the soldiers would die in a fair battle, obviously not evident in this war due to “blind” and “deaf” status of the men when they received the “GAS!” alert. The choice of the phrase “adventure stories” by Barker shows us how previous wars were more honourable and suitable to retell events, however Owen describes how “you would not tell...to children ar dent for some desperate glory” showing just how traumatic the experience was and the change from the chivalric methods, which would have had described to Owen’s generation throughout their childhood, wars of “defence and liberation”⁴ to the mass slaughter of many men in the most undignified manner in a war of “aggression and conquest”⁵ as described by both Owen and Barker.

Both of the authors use animals in order to emphasise the trauma of war, in *Anthem for Doomed Youth* Owen describes the men dying “as cattle”, this

⁴ *Regeneration* by Pat Barker

⁵ *Regeneration* by Pat Barker

emphasises the sheer quantity of men who are dying at one point, how the tactics are leading the men to blind slaughter. Barker on the other hand describes how Prior arranges the corpses of animals in a circle and lies in the middle. Barker explains how "his clothes separated him" from being at one with the animals and therefore he took his clothes off and placed them outside of the circle, the uniform is used by Barker to symbolise the Soldier that is Prior, without his uniform he is a normal man. The fact that Prior could not be at one with the animals in his uniform may have been because he had committed many moral sins as a soldier, he potentially could have killed many men, therefore by removing his uniform he sees himself as a separate person and therefore can be at one with the purity of nature. Prior removing his uniform could be seen as unusual to the reader, further emphasising how the experience of war can lead to a disturbed mind and signs of trauma can develop. The oddity of his behaviour is clearly a sign of trauma due to his war experiences, it could also be argued that Owen's war experiences have made him bitter, before the war he was training to become a priest, in this poem he describes how there are "no prayers nor bells" as there is no time for the niceties and God is no longer an essential part of his life.

Both Owen and Barker use sound in order to emphasise the men's unnerved disposition. In *Regeneration* Barker describes a bus journey, she uses this everyday occurrence to emphasise how noises that a person who hadn't experienced war would class as normal are a reminder to the horror they suffered in the trenches "a branch rattled

along the windows with a sound like machine gun fire, and he had to bite his lips to stop himself crying out.” This is similar to Anthem for Doomed Youth where Owen uses juxtaposition to describe the “demented choirs of wailing shells” this again brings into light Owen’s attitude of the effect of war on religion the “demented choir” would symbolise a traumatic experience on his spiritual being. “Wailing shells” is used to emphasise the desecration of something that was once held Holy, to praise God and rejoice for the gifts given to them. However the war has left Owen with little to rejoice about. However I believe that Owen’s use of sound is more effective than Barker’s due to his personal experience, pararhyme is used to mimic the battlefield, the juddering of the guns and therefore places the reader in the trenches, whereas Barker simply reminds the reader of the trench experience.

The poem *Exposure* is a condemnation of nationalism, this is similar to “A soldier’s declaration” in *Regeneration* talks of how the “war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.” In the declaration Sassoon explains that he is convinced he is that he is “acting on behalf of soldiers” which is reemphasised by Owen in *Exposure* when he questions “What are we doing here?” Barker’s inclusion of the declaration sets the scene for how the soldiers are feeling at the time, in mid 1917, the same sort of time that Owen wrote *Exposure*, the war seemed endless, the men were despondent

and had little to look forward to. This could be seen as a reason for many of the experiences leading to the psychological trauma they did, the men thought by this point there was no way out and due to their haunting experiences they became increasingly bitter towards the ruling classes. Both of the authors are reflecting on the new pessimism of war, as opposed to the patriotic rhetoric of a successful empire, as experienced previously.

The poem *Dr. Sadeau* highlights both the physical and psychological trauma experienced throughout the war, Barker also touches upon the physical trauma in *Regeneration* when Sarah walks into the conservatory to discover limbless men, and a “row of figures in wheelchairs” not only have the men lost the ability to walk they have become dehumanised, the word “figure” makes this all the more poignant. This is similar to Owen describing “He’s lost his colour” and how he had “lost...half his lifetime” through fighting in the war, this highlights how one generation has felt a combined loss, the loss of life and also the loss of masculinity of the whole generation.

“Why speak they not of comrades that went under?” is the poignant end to Owen’s poem *Spring Offensive* here Owen is exploring the traditional stereotype of men, they had been seen for centuries as strong and have been forbidden from expressing their emotions for the risk of being seen as weak or feeble. Whereas here Owen recognises

the need to express their feelings in order to heal. This could be due to his experiences in Craiglockhart under Dr Rivers, which are roughly recorder in ~~Regeneration~~ Pat Barker recognises Rivers' work with mutism during her Novel and shows the paternal nature of Rivers, compared to the shock therapy offered by Yelland. This helps to emphasise the different methods used to treat trauma during the First World War. Yelland chose to treat trauma, displayed through mutism with "force" insisting "you must talk before you leave me." And applying an "electrode" to the spine. Whereas Rivers feels guilty after applying a "tongue depressor" into Prior's mouth. Showing the two extremities of treatment. Owen instead explores the inability of people to talk about the problem as in the Edwardian society there was a sense of male pride where medical matters had a stigma attached to them therefore medical treatment was not discussed.

In conclusion the two writers have a very different approach in displaying the trauma of war, Barker tries to explore their re-integration to society their traumatic experiences, her factual researched based approach producing a text of clinical detachment whereas Owen focuses all of his poetry in the trenches, poetry presenting their horror and poetry born out of trauma and suffering that creates a vivid portrayal of the effects on the soldiers minds.

Sir....conclusion=rubbish! HELP!!