

Is *Regeneration* an 'anti-war' novel?

“Opposition gives definition” said Heraclitus in 6<sup>th</sup> century BC (Graham). If that was true, in 21<sup>st</sup> century people are given “definition” by the usage of the prefix “anti-”. Therefore, an “anti-war” novel is one, which *opposes* any form of aggressive competition. *Regeneration* by Pat Barker is one of the plentiful novels inspired by the atrocious events of the First World War. Barker’s book does not focus on depicting combats and stratagems. On the contrary, it portrays in detail the mental and physical consequences of the war. *Regeneration* is an “anti-war” novel, which touches upon the appalling harm done by warfare and the following recovery process. Barker condemns war and her negative attitude is displayed by her complex, credible characters and hard emphasis on consequences.

Description of both mental and physical war injuries tags every chapter of the novel, thus provoking the reader’s sympathy. Barker aims to create a picture of the real circumstances during that period. Both by imaginary and real characters she succeeds in creating the solemn and discouraging mood in Craiglockheart. The introduction of the patients of the hospital (Prior, Anderson, Burns and Campbell) arises sympathy in the reader. Each of them has his own misfortune caused by war, which would probably mark his life forever. They would never be able to continue their ordinary lives and would have to get used to new habits. The tragic fates of these patients make the reader indeed sympathetic. Barker uses the fates of her character to express in a hidden voice her negative attitude towards the war, thus provoking “anti-war” feelings in the reader. In addition, Barker uses other very interesting techniques to represent the awful effects of war on human psychology – representation of nightmares, dreams and hallucinations. For example, such a moment is the imaginary meeting, which Sassoon has with his friend Orme in Chapter 13 from part two. Sassoon

wakes up “to find Orme standing immediately inside the door”, but then „he remembered that Orme was dead” (Barker 143). This episode represents another aspect of the war effect – grief for all the lost friends, relatives and comrades. In that particular episode, Barker also implies the idea that Orme’s visitation is a wake-up call from the dead, delivered by one of them and reminding silently of what Sassoon is delicately trying to forget. With its emotional shade the scene once again makes the reader sympathetic. As a whole, the description of the damage caused to patients, both mental and physical, makes the reader sympathetic. That sympathy in turn, promotes another attitude – “anti-war” attitude.

In the novel not only physical and mental injuries are depicted, but also social ones. The social conditions are curved by war. Society puts restrictions on the individual. Any form of protest is forbidden and all those who dare object are condemned – “‘conchies’, cowards, shirkers, scrimshankers and degenerates” (Barker 4). The novel begins with Sassoon’s bold *Declaration*. As the plot unfolds, it becomes evident that his ideas are entirely justified but rejected. The government pronounces him mentally ill and silences him in a mental hospital. By censoring Sassoon’s protest, the country prevents another upcoming remonstrance. Also, expression of sexuality is confined in the society. At that time homosexuals would not be accepted in the army. When Sassoon implies his homosexuality during one of his séances with Rivers, the doctor warns him. Even though Rivers really feels sympathy for Sassoon’s unfortunate situation in the prejudiced society, he tells him that he must face the reality he lives in. The doctor explains that society could become more accepting in the future, but it is not likely “that any movement towards greater tolerance would persist in wartime” (Barker 204). He implies that it is not possible for a single man to change the world and make it look from another angle. Rivers also states its time for Sassoon to grow up and start “living in the real world”, whether or not he agrees (Barker 205). The purpose of his words is to convince Sassoon that if he admits his sexuality this would worsen his present situation even more.

Moreover, through Prior's character another social restriction that is denounced - censorship. During wartime there is no privacy at all: "I censored it every week. We read all their letters...." (Barker 131). Also, soldiers are never told if their letters have arrived. They are kept like prisoners on the front with their homes and loved ones far away. By depicting all of these social restrictions from the war time Barker maintains the "anti-war" mood throughout the novel.

Furthermore, by the end of the novel Rivers' convictions shift and he realizes how unjust the war is, how awful and long-lasting the consequences are, thus contributing to the peak of the reader's anti-war certainty. The idea of unjust war is implied through River's change. In the beginning his ultimate goal is to see all of his patients return to the front in good health, prepared to fight once again for their country. However, because of some events Rivers starts to question war's justification and realizes that he sends his patients to an almost certain death. The culmination of his "anti-war" conviction is when he witnesses Burns' dire condition: "Nothing justifies this. Nothing nothing nothing..." (Barker 180). Furthermore, the doctor confirms his fears when he goes to observe Yealland's methods. As he watches Callan's treatment Rivers is horrified: "He couldn't bare to go on watching. He looked down at the backs of his clasped hands..." (Barker 232). After that episode Rivers considers the differences between himself and Yealland and for his horror realizes that they are the same. In Chapter 14 his thoughts are released: "Obviously he and Yealland were both in the business of controlling people. Each of them fitted young men back into role of warrior ..." (Barker 238). At that point Rivers understands that instead of curing his patients he actually breaks them down. Even though his methods are less severe than Yealland's, the effect is the same. To a certain extent Rivers is violating his patients' rights because of war. All of these examples portray how Barker gradually, but effectively builds the "anti-war" suggestion in *Regeneration*.

Barker's novel *Regeneration* is an "anti-war" book because it provides a unique possibility to the contemporary reader to dive into the depths of a war that had irrevocable effects on soldiers' mentality. The author's personal attitude is expressed by her characters' behavior and destiny in the society. She aims to remind people of what effects the war had on previous generations and warn them, so that the same mistake does not occur. Will it?

*Word Count: 1111*