Literary Shell Shock
An analysis and comparison of the psychological elements in contemporary and modern First World War literature

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Language and detail may turn stomachs but they are only the remotest correlatives of the actuality.

Thomas Pynchon
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Introduction

John McCrae noted in his poem ‘In Flanders’ Field’ some hundred years ago: ‘In Flanders’ fields the poppies blow/Between the crosses, row on row’ (Silkin 85, 1-2). Nowadays, the British graves are marked in white slabs, but poppies still adorn the tombs and fields. Spectators might think they are watching the same image as John McCrae did over a century ago. This idea is, however, false. They are watching a repetition of a past image; these poppies are not the ones from a century ago, they are their descendents. What we see now is the modern variant of the poppies of the past.

This phenomenon also applies to the reading of literature of the First World War. The works of the War poets are still popular; many of Sassoon’s and Owen’s poems are a part of literature classes at schools. It is important to see how the views of the Great War have changed in literature. Paul Fussell, renowned literary critic and professor of English literature, wrote The Great War and Modern Memory in which he discusses how the war ‘has been remembered, conventionalized, and mythologized’ (Fussell 1). WWI had a huge impact on subsequent life, but it is its myth that still appeals to readers and writers. Fussell states that there are places ‘where literary traditions and real life notably transect’; life provides material for literature and literature returns ‘by conferring forms upon life’ (Fussell 1). There is such significance in the war and the myth that surrounds it, that this is true even in modern times. However, the war took place a little under a hundred years ago, which means that we cannot ignore the fact that First World War poetry and prose is now being read from a modern perspective. Times have changed, and we cannot place ourselves back to the circumstances of a century ago. We can, however, attempt to come closer to an awareness of the situation and conditions of life in the Great War. To research the differences between literature written at the time and modern works dealing with WWI means that we can become aware of our modern view and can attempt to read First World War literature from the perspective of a hundred years ago.

This thesis combines two different elements: poetry and prose written during the war, and modern fiction about WWI. In addition, I will discuss psychological ailments resulting from the Great War known under the header ‘shell shock’ or
'neurasthenia'. The poetry and prose from the war and the modern works are the materials which are analyzed; the psychology is a theme common to both, which I use to link the primary texts. At first the term shell shock was ‘used to refer to the acute psychiatric condition which followed exposure to exploding shells’ (Van der Hart 2), but nowadays it encompasses the full range of mental ailments due to warfare. Normally books are written on one of these topics; take for instance Jon Silkin and his *Out of Battle* which analyses the poetry of the Great War, or Sharon Monteith who researched modern fiction in *Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker*. I chose to combine the three fields. The advantages of this are that you get a comparison between work written during the war and modern fiction concerning WWI in one overview, which enables you to see the immediate connections easier. The psychological viewpoint proves to be a very important part of poetry and prose dealing with WWI. The focus on psychology shows how prominent psychological illnesses were and still are in literature. Neurasthenia (nowadays known as PTSD) is an integrated part of society in our modern times and is acknowledged as an ailment, which was not the case when the Great War started. This fact influenced literature of the time, and still influences modern fiction. As mentioned before, by comparing and contrasting works written during the war and modern literature, it is possible to move closer to a better understanding of the authors of the time, and subsequently their works. Trying to comprehend an entire era is, however, as good as impossible. The period of the Great War contains so many facets and areas that trying to research them all would take more than a life time. Therefore, I have chosen to restrict this area and only take the psychological point of view; it is more rewarding to move deeply into small details than try to capture huge chunks of history and stay only at the surface of matters. I want to establish how much the War poets incorporated elements in their works that have a link with psychological illnesses; this is to show how important a part these ailments played in their time at the front and after. Furthermore, I will set up a comparison between these works and a modern author, Pat Barker, who used the psychological environment of the time in her works, to see which techniques she used and to what extent.

This thesis focuses on a historicized reading of First World War literature. I will place the poetry of War poets I selected in the context of the war, and do the
same for Barker’s modern fiction. I wish to explore the relationship between the reader and the author in the light of their historical context. Individuals are shaped by their experiences and background; therefore, all people will see the world using their own personal intrinsic values and meanings. By engaging in a dialogue with another person—or their creative works—the information exchanged is coloured by both parties’ personal values. It is rewarding to see how the War poets and Pat Barker employ certain methods to interact with their readers.

The works discussed in this thesis were chosen on the basis of psychological issues connected to the war. For the works written at the time of the Great War, the authors who were most engaged with psychology were Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, and their work is therefore prominent. In addition, C.H. Sorley, Edmund Blunden, Richard Aldington and Ivor Gurney are other poets whose works are analyzed. Names such as Edward Thomas, Rupert Brooke or Isaac Rosenberg are not included; their works focus on items which are not relevant to this thesis.

Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy (1993, 1994, 1996) was chosen as modern fiction based on the same reasons as the works written during the war. Her works are focused on the psychological aspect of the war; she based her fictional characters on well-known historic figures such as the psychologist William H. Rivers and Siegfried Sassoon. She has done extensive research and used the social climate of the Great War as the setting for her story. What is perhaps even more interesting is that she comes from our modern time, yet chose to write from the viewpoint on psychology of the time of the Great War. She does not approach the illnesses from a modern PTSD perspective, but from a neurasthenic one. This is why it is rewarding to compare and contrast WWI works with Barker’s modern works: she tried to work with the views on psychology of the time and used historical facts and personalities in her novels. This is a feature other modern fiction on the topic lacks. There is a wide array of modern fiction on the Great War, but only Barker focuses on the psychology; other books such as Sebastian Faulks’ *Birdsong* (1993) focus more on the sentimental elements to appeal to the emotions of the reader, and Susan Hill’s *Strange Meeting* (1971) is an engaging tale of an unlikely friendship but has little to offer in terms of
psychology. The same goes for *Bury Him Among Kings* (Trevor 1970), *The First Casualty* (Elton 2005) or *Brothers in War* (Walsh 2006).

The method I employed in all three chapters is virtually the same. I have analyzed the literary works based on the characteristics of psychological illnesses belonging to shell shock. Since there are a large variety of these, I selected some for each chapter to discuss. In chapter one I will analyze poetry from the time of the war, linking the poems to sensory ailments such as the loss of hearing and smell. Furthermore, I will discuss memory triggers and the reliving of the past. In chapter two I will analyze modern fiction and links with the views on repression and suppression during the war. In chapter three I will analyze both WWI poetry and modern fiction in relation to war dreams. In each chapter I use actual case files of patients of the time to illustrate the connection between the literary themes and neurasthenic conditions. The emphasis is on the literature; therefore I also compared the elements of psychological illnesses in Barker’s novels with works and data from the time of the Great War.
Chapter I - Poetry and the Senses

The theme of psychology can be found throughout the poetry of the Great War; a close reading of their works shows how the poets handle different aspects of psychological trauma in several ways. Charles Hamilton Sorley demonstrates this in his poem 'When you see millions of the mouthless dead', where the shutting down of senses is a prominent theme. The title of the poem has a haunting quality which immediately draws the reader's attention by its use of figurative language; it instantly plants an image in its reader's mental eye. This image will be different for each reader. Word association is mostly a private matter; conjured up images draw upon personal past experiences. Still, in our Western culture we share ideas which shape and connect the mental images experienced through this poem. These images planted by Sorley will all share one characteristic: a pervasive unpleasant feeling. Sorley added a hint of alliteration in his title to strengthen his imagery even more, and to instill a resonance which makes the title memorable. 'Thousands' would not have had the same effect as 'millions of the mouthless dead' (Silkin 89). It is not the increase of sheer quantity that makes this title more effective; had 'millions' been replaced by 'billions' the effect would still be lost. It is the easy flow of the 'm' and 's' of 'millions' that seems to weld an inseparable connection with 'mouthless dead'. This alliterative phrase, which gives the title such an unnerving air, is so graphic that, even though an image will automatically appear, it is hard to exactly describe this picture, for, what are the mouthless dead? Perhaps a soldier in a war could elaborate on the physical characteristics of someone who had his mouth blown off; but to an outsider this image has its home in the realm of the abstract, especially during the time of the Great War where people did not have the resources of information of the 21st century, such as photos or television. This duality of creating an image, but not quite being able to explain the image, is what makes the poem so interesting. Sorley depicts a horrific, visual scene with just two words, but with the intention of reaching something deeper than just the membrane of the mental eye. 'Mouthless dead', in its context of the horrors of the Great War, could refer to an actual happening, but it is more likely that Sorley uses this image metaphorically to convey the feelings he
experienced at the front. His use of synecdoche is a powerful means to stress the feeling of depersonalization he portrays in his poem. The soldiers have no individual identity, but as a whole symbolize all soldiers at the front, of any age and of any rank.

Eric J. Leed researched the connection between identity, industrialization and war. He stated that, from a psychological point of view, the reason many men fell prey to illnesses of the mind was not the actual witnessing or experiencing of gruesome occurrences, but it was the feeling of being immobilized which was so strenuous on the psyche (Leed 164). This is illustrated by Richard Aldington’s ‘In the Trenches’. He writes that it is not the fatigue or fear that tears them apart, ‘but that each rush and crash / Of mortar and shell’ (Silkin 142, 6-7) hurts and severs ‘the fine fabric / Of the wings of our frail souls’ (13-14). The men in the trenches were confined to a small space, had their vision and hearing impaired, and could not move a muscle without a direct order. Should the enemy decide to attack there was little they could do but hope and pray that the shells overhead would be either dummies or strike out of range. Fleeing was not an option; there was no space to flee to and even if there was, the result of the flight would be a bullet to the brain which read ‘deserter’ (Hynes 59). Modern warfare had turned into ‘will-less, passive suffering’ (Hynes 59). This utter feeling of helplessness is what drove the men into the realm of shell shock, and it is this feeling that Sorley is describing in his poem. One by one he is shutting down the senses of the soldiers, the same senses they could not rely on while in a trench: they were lost to them. He tells the reader to ‘say not soft things’ (3) to the soldiers because ‘or, deaf, how should they know’ (5). This is multi-layered: on one hand, he uses ‘soft’ to indicate volume. If words are spoken softly, they cannot be heard by others. On the other hand, he uses ‘soft’ to project a sense of kindness; these words are meant to console. Either way, the soldiers can neither hear, nor can tell kindness apart from cruelty. This is indicated when he then continues the poem by linking a visual image to this loss of hearing by stating ‘it is not curses heaped on each gashed head?’ (6). The ‘gashed head’ could indicate that ears had been blown off, rendering the soldiers deaf, but the damaged face is used as a metaphor to not only remind the reader of the physical brutality of war, but also to express a feeling of powerlessness. Sorley then takes out another primary sense: sight. Feelings of compassion cannot be heard by the soldiers; tears of grief cannot be seen: ‘heir
blind eyes see not your tears flow’ (7). Again, this is a reference to the senses lost in the trenches. Soldiers could not rely on their sight to be able to defend themselves. Between them and the enemy were countless walls of mud, rendering them as good as blind. The gravest indication of a lost sense can be found when we return to the title. The ‘mouthless dead’ is not only devastatingly graphic; it also illustrates the gravity of not having a voice. This could reflect two things. One: the soldiers could not convey their feeling of hopelessness in their battalions. Complaining would bring down morale and critique would make them look like a coward. Should they attempt to anyway, they were shut up by authorities. Two: the atrocities of the war are so immensely incomprehensible and brutal; they could simply not speak of them.

Both these elements were tied into a theory on the origins of shell shock by a neurologist called Ernst Simmel, who served as chief of a military hospital during the Great War. Muteness was an affliction which predominantly hit privates, not officers (Myers 461). Simmel attributed this to the fact that they were ‘the result of internal resistance to officers’ orders against which no protest was permitted’ (Van Bergen 237). However, there are several reports of cases in which there is an evident link between muteness and a terrible visual occurrence which happened while in a trench. This is the same link Sorley explores as a poet in ‘When you see millions of the mouthless dead’, only now it is confirmed by medical officers in the field. Colonel Tom Salmon, a psychiatrist at the time of the Great War, documented a case in which a soldier was in a dug-out when a shell hit, killing two and wounding several others. He worked hard to dig out the wounded but ‘became tremulous and mute a few minutes later when he saw his Lieutenant eviscerated by another shell’ (Shephard 128). Psychologist Charles Myers documented a similar case. A man was subjected to heavy shelling in his trenches; it wounded several, and blew up a dug-out. Afterwards, he was taken to his billet and while in an adjacent courtyard, a shell exploded, injuring several in front of him. The man proceeded to another company’s billets where he was ‘quite dazed, would answer no questions, and if any one came near him he would either jump at them or draw away’ (Myers 461). Muteness ensued. The internal struggle suggested by Simmel is supported by a sergeant, one of Myers’ patients, who reported that on his path of recovery he was doing fine, just ‘when someone of authority speaks to me I seem to lose control of myself’ and ... start to
stammer’ (Myers 463). All the men in these cases suffered from muteness after a traumatic—visual—event and were in no state to communicate; these are the men Sorley is describing in his poem.

Sorley’s emphasis on the shutting down of senses pushes the poem into an area dominated by paradoxes. He argues that the dead cannot speak: they are ‘mouthless’ and have no voice. Yet by writing this poem he is speaking for them; by instilling horrific imagery into the minds of readers, he is trying to convey some of the feelings they experienced and at least, to some degree, make them see what they saw. Yet he claims he does not want to, because ‘[t]hey are dead’ (9) and there is no use trying to communicate with them. This springs from both a sense of futility on the side of the soldiers, and from a wish for repression. William H. Rivers, a psychotherapist renowned mostly for his work at Craiglockhart hospital, describes in ‘An Address on the Repression of War Experience’ how ‘[n]othing annoys a nervous patient more than the continual inquiries of his relatives and friends about his experiences of the front’ for the simple fact that ‘the obvious futility of most of the questions and the hopelessness of bringing the realities home to his hearers’ is too much to bear (Rivers 173). Sorley portrays this idea of futility by stating that the soldiers in his poem have ceased to live, and therefore ceased to exist. There is no point in trying to communicate with them; it is futile. Here another paradox presents itself. His use of the imperative shows his zest for the matter; he is almost commanding the reader to forget and give up. Yet at the same time he documented his feelings and thoughts in this poem, granting it an immortality which was noted in ancient Greece when Hippocrates asserted ‘ars longa, vita brevis’. Rivers believed that a proper treatment of war neurosis meant moving away from repression. Repression seemed to be the most logical response to trauma and had been encouraged as a method to cure neurasthenia. Rivers, however, argued that continuous exposure to painful memories would grant the memories a status of normality, thus eliminating the painful associations attached to them (Rivers 173). By writing this poem, Sorley essentially did the same as Rivers’ suggested treatment of trauma: Sorley’s subject matter seems like an attempt to repress and express the futility of communication, but by writing it all down he immortalized his thoughts and feelings, rendering them available for continuous exposure.
Exposure to hostile memories means that the person is voluntarily reliving gruesome occurrences in repetition. This could be done by choosing to read a painful poem continuously or actively remembering horrible events. However, one of the characteristics of shell shock is the involuntary reliving of painful happenings and is usually accompanied and sometimes instigated by a sensory stimulus. Siegfried Sassoon’s ‘The Rank Stench of Those Bodies Haunts Me Still’\(^1\) demonstrates this. As with Sorley’s title, Sassoon’s has an equally harrowing effect; it is, however, achieved in a different way. Sassoon did not use abstract visual imagery to create a title which plays on the reader’s nerves; instead he used an experience of another sense — smell—in addition to some very crude diction which, together, forms such a strong alliance that through the description of this intense smell, an image emerges. ‘[R]ank stench’ is such strong language that readers can immediately conjure up an idea of how foul-smelling this must have been. The language signifies a culturally understood sensation which is achieved with a minimum of words. Other poets have made use of this device; Robert Graves tried to convey the smell of ‘gas-blood-lyddite-latrine’ haunting the trenches in *Goodbye to All That* (1929, wr. 1920). The gruesome feeling lingering in Sassoon’s title is due to the source of the stench, which Sassoon describes with a fairly neutral term: ‘bodies’. The initial terms ‘rank’ and ‘stench’ suggest that the source of this smell has to be something immensely powerful, indicating that ‘bodies’ refers to the decaying corpses of soldiers. The unsettling feeling is completed when Sassoon makes the reader not only aware of their presence, but also the effect they have on him: they ‘haunt’ him. The interesting thing is that he is addressing the sense of smell, but it is the sense of vision that is affected in the reader. He describes how this affects his sense of vision as well: ‘[a]nd I remember things I’d best forget’ (2). Here he is implying that the lingering stench of corpses initiated a sequence of memories so haunting he had rather blocked them from his mind.

Shell shock was noted for needing only a slight trigger to elicit a ‘traumatic response overreaction’ (Knafo 30). This trigger could pertain to any of the senses and could be as small as the whiff of a scent or a tune hummed by a patrolling guard.

\(^{1}\) All quotation from the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon is taken from Sassoon (1983).
Sassoon refers to similar events in his poem. The opposite could also happen: there are documented cases where privates are recorded to have either lost or to have a diminished sense of smell after surviving a life threatening situation. Charles S. Myers documented three cases of soldiers under his care in The Duchess of Westminster’s War Hospital who had a diminished sense of smell after being shelled and support the events Sassoon describes in ‘The Rank Stench of Those Bodies Haunts Me Still’. The first had a slight augmentation of the olfactory system; he could faintly smell ‘ether’, ‘strong peppermint’ and ‘tincture of iodine’ (Myers 317). The second soldier was diagnosed with ‘total anosmia [the loss of smell]’ (Myers 316). He had been close to a shell impact in a trench and was rendered unconscious by the blast. There was no evidence of physical trauma, yet he seemed to have completely lost his ability to smell. He failed to recognize any of the aforementioned components. The third case was believed to suffer from ‘unilateral anosmia and parosmia’ (Myers 316). He retained a faint sense of smell in his right nostril, but none in the other. The parosmia is the most interesting part: it is a condition in which there is a distorted sense of olfaction. It can produce the sensation of smell when none is around, a phantom smell. It can also distort existing scents; formerly pleasant scents might now be registered as foul. The subject complained ‘of a subjective sensation of the odour of cordite’ (Myers 320). Cordite is a propellant which was used in rifle cartridges; the smell was obviously linked to his life at the front. Myers commented on these cases that the shelling which shocked these men was ‘not attended by the production of odour’ and it seemed, therefore, strange that their sense of smell was affected (Myers 320). He was, however, certain of a connection with hysteria. His opinion was formed from a medical point of view; it is therefore striking to see that poets such as Sorley and Sassoon showed a certain awareness of these links between trauma and the senses.

In Sassoon’s poem, another thing that stands out is that his relapses into the past seem to occur when he is safe and in relatively comfortable conditions, as in line three where he states: ‘...or now we’ve marched to a green, trenchless land/ Twelve miles from battering guns’ (2-3). It was very common for symptoms of shell shock to occur when in safe conditions (Leed 185). The mind goes into a type of survival mode when in extreme life threatening conditions; it is only when the situation ceases that
it starts to process the happenings. There are shocking figures which prove this; the
number of veterans who developed a psychological illness saw a steep increase after
the war:

\[
\text{From 1916 to 1920 four percent of the 1,043,653 British casualties were psychiatric}
\\text{cases. Little more than a decade after the war, in 1932, a full thirty-six percent of the}
\\text{veterans receiving disability pensions from the British government were listed as}
\\text{psychiatric casualties of the war (Leed 185).}
\]

War neurosis was commonly regarded as a mental escape from an intolerable
situation in reality. Simmel argued that the soldiers idealized their homes as a means
to cope with the intolerable happenings surrounding them. Coming home could
shatter the soldier’s only idea of safety. When he returned he found that things were
not as he had imagined them, which destroyed his sense of identity and added an
element of confusion which ultimately attributed to a feeling of detachment: the
soldier had no place where he belonged. This explains the increase of mental patients
after the war had ended. Sassoon was known to focus his thoughts of home on the
elements of nature which surrounded him and perhaps that is why his memory is
triggered by the beauty of the landscape.

Sassoon juxtaposes the serenity and visual beauty of his surroundings with the
oppressive atmosphere of impending battle. He describes the ‘wide, radiant water’
which ‘sways the floating sky’ (6) only to start the next stanza with ‘to-night I
smell the battle’ (9). His smell is, however, one of imagination, for he states that this
battle is taking place ‘miles away’ (9). But he knows the scent too well, since he has
spent ample time in its vicinity himself. The knowledge of the battle transpiring in
the distance, combined with the sensory memories of combat, creates the opposite of
a memory trigger. In this case, the memory triggers the sense.

Another memory is triggered by a conversation between his men pertaining to
the eradication of the Germans. One speaks: ‘we’ve got the beggars on the run at
last!’ (27) and Sassoon immediately follows with ‘then I remembered someone that
I’d seen’ (28). He wants his audience to join him in his remembrance and share his
mental image; he notes in equally strong diction as in the title that the man was
‘dead in a squalid, miserable ditch’ (29). Again, terms as these possess such
strength and carry universal notions which the audience will immediately pick up and
make their own. This event was something Siegfried Sassoon had actually witnessed. In his semi-autobiographical *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) he mentions the occurrence described in his poem in the aftermath of the battle of Mametz Wood (1916). The fact that he zooms in on the event in his novel and in addition felt the urge to write a poem about it suggests that this was something of importance to him. In the poem he mentions events he remembered but wished he had forgotten twice: this is reminiscent of Sorley who stated that communication is futile, yet he wrote a poem for millions to read so he could impart his feelings. Sassoon, too, is basically reliving the event by writing his memories down for all eternity to read. Through this poem it is clear that the senses play a role in the poetic devices used by the poets to appeal to the public. After all, we are all acquainted with sensory stimuli, which makes it easier to relate to.

The shutting down or activation of the senses is connected to the reliving of traumatic memories. As can be seen in Sorley’s poem, the shutting down of senses can be seen as a defense mechanism of the brain, safeguarding the vulnerable mind from horrible images. Sassoon shows how sensory activity can not only brand memories; memories can also invoke the senses. These memories linked to the senses are part of the reliving of occurrences. Sometimes grand, sometimes small, but gestures can be so powerful that they leave a permanent mark on the mind. Edmund Blunden’s ‘Two Voices’ demonstrates this. The speaker describes how two men have left an imprint on his memory by leaving behind two simple sentences as their legacy. ‘There’s something in the air’ and ‘[w]e’re going South, man’ (Silkin 102, 7) are still echoing in his mind because they are linked to events which signified impending danger. The first phrase is ominous in its prediction; the second phrase a confirmation of the first. And now, in the face of the impending danger, the speaker hears those two phrases as an echo of the past, reliving the moments when his fears became a reality.

The reliving of insufferable traumatic experiences can become such a problem that the mind as a whole becomes affected and impedes the daily life of its victims. The men whose minds were destroyed—to such an extent that they can no longer function in everyday life—are the ones who suffer from ghastly images that pop up in their minds without any real stimulant or trigger. They relive their experiences
involuntarily and are rendered incapacitated because of it. These are the men Wilfred Owen\(^2\) describes in his ‘Mental Cases’. He starts with the visual characteristics of people perceived as mental cases; he gives the reader all the classical signs of the Western image of mental cripples. They ‘rock’ back and forth, they have ‘drooping tongues’ and they are ‘baring teeth’ at times (2-4). The seriousness of the situation becomes imminent when he states the nature of their disposition: from the pores of their skin and the follicles of their hair ‘[m]isery swelters’ (8). They are not just figures dismissed from society because their minds are perceived to be defective, no, these men have transformed into these unearthly creatures because of the suffering they endured.

Owen uses fierce imagery to affect the reader and draws parallels between culturally understood notions and the gravity of the situation of the soldiers. In the first line he places them in the ‘twilight’, indicating that they no longer belong to any specific realm; they appear to be physically alive but mentally they suffer a fate worse than death. They seem to be imprisoned in a ghastly state between life and death, which he stresses when he calls them ‘purgatorial shadows’ (2): they are in the place between heaven and hell. Just like Sassoon, his diction is strong and frank when he describes the appearance of the men; this technique hits the reader with a certain rawness which instils a feeling of discomfort. The images Owen presents are so vivid and clear that the poem almost becomes painful to read, and subsequently watch since the diction is translated into images in our own mental eye. Phrases such as ‘jaws that slob their relish’ (3) and ‘chasms round fretted sockets’ (6) leave nothing to the imagination and these grisly images appear instantly when reading the phrases. They gain even more of a haunting quality because Owen links them to an image of death: ‘[b]aring teeth that leer like skull’s teeth wicked’ (4), and then subsequently gives the men the worst fate possible: to spend eternity in hell. At first this seems like a paradox, after all, he just stated the soldiers are in purgatory. However, their purgatorial state refers to the contrast between being physically alive and well but mentally incapable of functioning in life. When Owen refers to the mental state alone, that is where the comparison with hell comes in.

\(^2\) All quotation from the poetry of Wilfred Owen is taken from Owen (2004).
Hell is used as a metaphor for the conditions and occurrences soldiers have to endure in the war, but also for the state of reliving the afflicted soldiers in the poem find themselves in. It is clear that the carnage of fellow men is what occupies these lost souls, as Owen states ‘these are the men whose minds the Dead have ravished’ (10). One of the hallmark symptoms of shell shock is ‘the report of involuntary and highly intrusive, distressing memories’ (Mace 69). These intrusions ‘typically take the form of sensory images, can be experienced as if they were happening in the present’ and ‘are associated with high levels of emotion’ (Mace 69). These are all present in Owen’s description of the shell shocked soldiers. He makes clear it is the memory of something terrible that is the tormentor of these men as he states ‘memory fingers in their hair of murders’ (11). Like Sorley and Sassoon, Owen uses sensory imagery to reach the reader and to show the symptoms of shell shock. He personifies the memory which then touches the soldiers’ hair with their fingers. He continues with a reference to sight ‘multitudinous murders they once witnessed’ (12) only to move to the sense of hearing: ‘hear them/atter of guns’ (15-16). His diction continues to be direct and crude; he flings all sorts of violent images towards the reader who will be faced with the question of how to deal with this visual attack, just as the afflicted soldiers. He creates a battlefield away from the actual battlefield which can be accessed through the mind’s eye, and it is this battlefield where the afflicted men dwell. The reason these violent images hit hard is because of Owen’s carefully chosen diction and his continued use of alliteration. As Sorley did with ‘millions of the mouthless dead’, Owen too uses alliteration to emphasize the gravity and horror of the images and to stress the misery the soldiers went through: ‘murders/multitudinous murders’ (11-12). They have to wade through ‘sloughs of flesh’, step on ‘lungs that had loved laughter’ (14-15) and witness the ‘carnage incomparable’ (17). The alliteration makes the phrases linger in the mind, enabling the reader to experience them over and over again, and to share an equal fate with the afflicted soldiers. Owen then sums up the sensory essence of reliving trauma quite clearly: ‘always they must see these things and hear them’ (15). By distorting the syntax Owen emphasizes the fact that these men are also in some way distorted.

As stated earlier in connection to Sorley’s poem, psychotherapists such as W.H. Rivers believed that exposure to traumatic memories was the key to a
successful recovery. However, some events are just too terrible to recover from, as he states in his ‘Address’. He discusses a case of a young officer who, thrown by the impact of a shell, struck the abdomen of a dead German soldier with his face. The German had been deceased several days and was in a state of decomposition. Upon impact, the abdomen ruptured and the young officer passed out, ‘and knew that the substance which filled his mouth and produced the most horrible sensations of taste and smell was derived from the decomposed entrails of an enemy’ (Rivers 174). Afterwards, the officer vomited continuously and was haunted by vivid and persistent memories of the stench and smell. This man was in a constant state of reliving his traumatic experience, yet he did not recover. In the end there was nothing that could be done for him, and he was allowed to retreat from the army and to seek refuge in the countryside, the only place he found some solace (Rivers 174). He is the type of man Owen is describing in ‘Mental Cases’. No matter where he went or what he did, he was haunted by the memory of this horrific experience. As Owen states in ‘Mental Cases’, the experience was ‘[r]ucked too thick for’ his ‘extrication’ (18). This shows that Owen was no stranger to psychological issues and knew what he was describing. As an officer he had seen the psychological torment that befell his men; he had even been exposed to it himself, shell shock being the reason for his stay at Craiglockhart War Hospital. He must have been aware that to some extent therapists and doctors might have been able to relieve the psychological pain soldiers endured, but for some it was in vain. Just as the men who went on reconnaissance in the fields and were never seen again, these men too were lost.

Psychological trauma can leave nothing but a barely visible scar, but it can also completely debilitate a person, as we saw in Sorley’s poem where men were rendered deaf and mute. Sassoon showed other somatic problems in his works, such as the loss of smell, but also the workings of trauma on the brain and how memories might involuntarily emerge, haunting the victim. Owen showed how trauma can render men absolutely incapacitated and incapable of escaping the misery of their mental recreated hell. William Brown, psychologist at the time of the Great War, calls this a ‘Trance-like State: Petrifaction of Terror’ (Brown 833). In his ‘War Neurosis’, in case A he describes a patient who is motionless, ‘except for a slow rhythmical rolling of the head from side to side’ (Brown 833). He gazed fixedly in
front of him; his gaze followed the movements of his head. He was completely unaware of his surroundings and failed to respond to questions or sounds. This man suffered from a complete mental shutdown; the horrific occurrences were too much to take and in order to prevent any more disturbing images from entering the brain, it refused to take an active part in the world around him. This shows that trauma can deliver such a blow to the mind that it simply becomes so overwhelmed that it halts emotional reactions altogether. It is striking to note that Brown uses poetic language to convey the meaning of this affliction to the reader. He states that ‘[t]his is the very petrifaction of fright, such as the Greeks knew and portrayed in the Gorgon myth’ (Brown 833). In his capacity as a man of medicine, he is doing exactly what the poets do: appeal to the visual senses to reach his audience.

The blow of trauma Brown is referring to could result in the trance-like state both Owen and Brown are describing; it could also result in a state of indifference, an emotional numbness. Ivor Gurney’s ‘Daily’ illustrates how this might come to pass. He states that if the mind is exposed to terrible occurrences frequently, it develops a sort of armour, an insensibility which serves to protect: ‘[i]f one’s heart is broken twenty times a day,/what easier thing than to fling the bits away’ (Kavanagh 82, 1-2). In fact, he is wishing for a numbness to shield his mind; a shield which might filter the horror of his surroundings, leaving grey, dull images to reach the brain which have a lot less emotional impact. He is not yet fully desensitized though, because he still ‘gathers fragments, and looks for wire’ (3) to patch up his heart. However, his wish is clear when he compares the heart to the work of bicycle tires. As ‘lumbering and slow’ as the sheath of a cart of iron his ‘mind must be made’ (7) in order for him to survive the carnage of war.

Wilfred Owen extends Gurney’s line of thought in his poem ‘Insensibility’, where the title alone is an indication of its subject matter. However, in contrast to Gurney, his poem portrays a wish for emotional numbness, but at the same time it critically comments on it. Owen starts his poem with ‘[h]appy are men’ (1), a reference to William Wordsworth, who in his work ‘Character of the Happy Warrior’ asks: ‘[w]ho is the happy warrior? Who is he’ (Appelbaum 65, 1). Herbert Read provided an answer to this question as well in his ‘The Happy Warrior’ (Silkin 160), where a soldier is so mentally deranged through the war that stricken with blood
thirst he keeps stabbing a corpse in order to kill it. Owen answers Wordsworth’s question differently; he does not discuss the deranged aspect of mental anxiety, but the aspect of blocking emotions altogether: ‘[h]appy are men who yet before they are killed/Can let their veins run cold’ (1-2). The unnerving start of the poem already poses a contrast in Owen’s sentiments. He sympathizes with them since they are about to be killed, yet critiques them since in the following lines he states ‘[w]hom no compassion fleers/Or makes their feet/Sore on alleys cobbled with their brothers’ (2-5). The dulling of emotions is advantageous since negative feelings can no longer interfere with the mind, but the positive, such as compassion for their comrades, disappears as well. His metaphoric speech is so powerful that the images he paints unfold while reading the line ‘[t]he front line withers’ (6). ‘[W]ithers’ is so well-chosen; with just one word Owen compares the soldiers to fragile flowers who are torn apart at the slightest form of aggression, but he also shows the mental processes taking place in their minds. It is almost tangible, this image of soldiers who, once happy and vibrant, now lose their colour and move into a dull grey, losing all emotions and passions they once possessed. The first stanza ends with ‘but no one bothers’ (11), conveying a sense of apathy, which leads into the second stanza ‘[a]nd some cease feeling/Even themselves or for themselves’ (12-13). There is a sense of duality here; Owen might be addressing the soldier whose emotions have been so eroded by war that he cares not for his comrades or even his own safety, but he might also be addressing the civilian at home, incapable of imagining what a soldier endures (Silkin 244). His approval of emotional numbness as a device of coping with the war is apparent when he states ‘[d]ullness best solves/The tease and doubt of shelling’ (14-15); it is as if apathy takes away all cares, no frantic concerns of the drop place of shells and no frustrated worries whether luck is on their side or not.

The following stanza provides a paradox for Owen as a poet; he states in the opening lines: ‘[h]appy are these who lose imagination’ (19). Instead of bothering with the eternal ‘what if?’ question, these soldiers just carry their ammunition and are not burdened by past images or imaginings of the future. They have lost the ability to envision, which nullifies the anxiety that comes with visions of warfare. Red is the colour of blood, but it is also associated with any form of aggression, and Owen states that these men have been exposed to aggression, blood and trauma to such an extent
that emotions do not linger on these memories anymore. They have ‘seen all things red’ and by having seen so ‘[t]heir eyes are rid/Of the hurt of the colour of blood for ever’ (23-25). Owen’s tone is almost of admiration when he states: ‘[d]ullness best solves/The tease and doubt of shelling’ (14-15). This poses a paradox. After all, if imagination flees from the poet, what is left of his creativity? How then will he voice what others cannot? This can be answered with the fact that Owen is not so much wishing for this state, but is merely describing what he observed in the soldiers in his vicinity. In stanzas one through three he continuously refers to others: ‘their veins’, ‘their brothers’, ‘his days’; yet halfway through stanza four he suddenly shifts focus and places himself in a group in contrast with the desensitized others: ‘[h]e sings along the march/Which we march taciturn’ (36-37). He is trying to fathom the apathy of the soldiers he described, because he is still very much affected by the war and its horrors. One thought, one memory of what was and one vision of what is to come is enough to smear ‘[b]lood over all our soul’ (41) and because he is still feeling overly much, it is hard to imagine how a man of numbed emotion operates: ‘[h]ow should we see our task’ he asks, ‘[b]ut through his blunt and lashless eyes?’ (42-43). His tone then changes and moves away from the one of admiration in stanza two; it now conveys a feeling of regret and pity. Unlike the men Owen describes in ‘Mental Cases’, who are trapped between life and death, for the men in ‘Insensibility’ there is no distinction between the two: they feel equally in both states. It appears that Owen understands the benefits of apathy, but laments the accompanying results: the soldier is not ‘vital’, nor ‘sad’, nor ‘proud’, nor ‘curious’ (44-47). He lost everything that made him human.

This results into the true paradox of the poem, which lies in stanza six where Owen’s tone suddenly turns angry, and he starts refuting all he said before: ‘[b]ut cursed are dullards whom no cannon stuns,/That they should be as stones’ (50-51). His tone of admiration is gone and has transformed into one which sounds accusatory. They are ‘[w]retched’ for they ‘made themselves immune’ by choice (52). Here, Owen states that these men chose to stop feeling anything which seems strange, especially when we move back to stanza three: ‘[h]aving seen seen all things red,/Their eyes are rid/Of the hurt of the colour blood for ever’ (23-25). Here Owen implies that the exposure to trauma induced the numbness and apathy of the soldiers;
there was no choice in the matter. This could indicate that this last stanza is not so much a complaint of the apathetic soldiers, but one of the indifference of the people at home. They do not suffer from traumatic events experienced in warfare; they do not share the experiences of the men at the front. Owen states this in his final lines, where he uses the word ‘whatever’ to signify the innate ability of empathy. These people ‘made themselves immune’ to ‘whatever moans’ (55-56) and ‘[w]hatever mourns’ (58), and ‘[w]hatever shares/The eternal reciprocity of tears’ (59-60). What the anaphora emphasizes is clear: they do not know or do not wish to know. With this poem, Owen shows the opposite end of the illnesses addressed in the other works discussed in this chapter. Their focus is on the gravity of emotional pain; ‘Insensibility’ numbs emotions completely. Together the poems represent the diversity of psychological ailments in the war.
Chapter II - Fiction and Repression

Psychology as a theme is prevalent in WWI poetry, but it is equally common in modern fiction about the Great War. In her *Regeneration* trilogy, Pat Barker mimics the methods of the War poets discussed in the previous chapter in terms of using visual imagery, referring to memory and denoting psychological illnesses while using characters based on actual historical figures such as Siegfried Sassoon and W.H. Rivers, who was renowned for his treatments and views on the subject of repression. Repression is one of the most prominent features of neurasthenia in WWI; all the psychological ailments discussed in chapter one have a foundation in repression. As Rivers wrote in ‘An Address’, repression in itself is not so much harmful, but it is ‘repression under conditions in which it fails to adapt the individual to his environment’ (173) which can inflict a significant amount of damage. He states that soldiers are trained to adapt to situations which are emotionally strenuous; they are taught how to channel the generated negative energy and ‘split’ their personality for a short period. However, at the time adequate training was not possible, which resulted in men failing to adapt. According to Rivers, the energy generated was not sufficiently channelled; the soldiers internalized it and repressed the frightful memories in order to be able to function. This repression caused symptoms of shell shock to arise because the soldiers simply did not allow themselves to reflect on their experiences and thus halted the processing of their trauma. In his ‘Address’, Rivers noted not only his suggestion in which direction treatment should be developed, as I discussed in chapter one, he also states that he sees an ambiguity in the term ‘repression’. It indicates both the process whereby a patient tries to—voluntary or involuntary—remove specific content from his memory, and the state which then follows whereby the patient cannot consciously access this specific content. He distinguishes the process from the state, and argues that the process should be called ‘repression’, and the state which ensues ‘suppression’.

Barker follows Rivers’ views by using this distinction in her novel. In *Regeneration*, she used one of the cases Rivers describes in his ‘Address’ (see chapter one) to show the negative effects of repression. In the novel, David Burns’s
experience was so severely stressful on the mind that he wants to rid himself of any contact with the war altogether. Barker states that he ‘loathed wet weather because then everybody stayed indoors’ (37) which meant he would be surrounded by people who talked about ‘the war the war the war’ (37). Burns represses all thoughts and memories of his life in the trenches, and in particular of that one fateful day. However, he cannot escape them; the memories haunt him at night, and execute a heavy toll on his body since he vomits whenever something reminds him of the war. Barker shows that even though he is actively trying to remove himself from his past, he is looking for ways to deal with his trauma. When the weather is at its worst, he ventures outside for the first time, intent on going on a journey but unsure of his destination. Burns’ voyage starts with a shaky ride on a bus, a scene where Barker uses small details to slowly guide the reader into Burns’ state of mind and shows that his journey is intertwined with the war: ‘[a] branch rattled along the windows with a sound like machine-gun fire, and the had to bite his lips to stop himself crying out’ (37). Just as Sorley did in ‘When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead’, Barker relies on sensory details to convey the feeling of discomfort which accompany memories of war. After stepping off the bus, he heads into the country where he passes some barbed wire, yet another visual reference used by Barker to remind the reader that this outing is in fact a mental situation of war for Burns. She describes his walk through the field as a passing through the trenches: ‘slipping and stumbling’ across the wet mud, feeling ‘cold inside the stiff khaki’ and being weighted down by ‘his mud-clogged boots’ (38). Barker then confirms this comparison by stating: ‘[h]is mind was incapable of making comparisons, but his aching thighs remembered, and he listened for the whine of shells’ (p.38). Barker continues to draw parallels between this field and the trenches at the front when Burns meets a tree laden with corpses. Unlike the ones in the trenches, these belong to small animals who have been tied to the tree as a rural custom. His initial reaction is to flee, but he is halted by the imaginary voice of Rivers which tells him ‘[i]f you run now, you’ll never stop’ (39). This is how Barker connects the poetic techniques used by the War poets discussed in chapter 1 and Rivers’ view of the treatment of repression. She immerses the reader in visual references to the war to make the reader feel the hardships of dealing with trauma, and then brings in Rivers who comes with the solution. Hearing his
imaginary voice proves vital in Burns’s attempt to deal with his trauma. Rivers had been trying hard to find some consolidating factor in the gruesome experience of Burns to stop him from repressing, but he was not successful. The fact that Barker uses Rivers’ voice to guide Burns into an attempt to come to terms with his trauma, stresses that Burns is subconsciously trying to integrate Rivers’ therapy.

The scene which follows shows how Burns is actively recreating his life in the trenches without actually realizing it. His repression is released by physically acting out his memories. He starts to untie the animals, which are symbolic of his fallen comrades, and lays them in a circle, with the tree as its centre. This is his way of paying tribute to his friends, by giving them a proper burial as Barker states: ‘[n]ow they could dissolve into the earth as they were meant to do’ (39). In the trenches some men were obliterated by shells or left decaying in no man’s land, rendering it impossible for survivors to pay them their final respects. By using the animal corpses as symbols of his fallen colleagues, Burns found a way to mentally process that horrific aspect of the war.

This scene in *Regeneration* shows that even though the patient actively removed himself from all influences of the war, his symptoms would not cease and he was forced to find some way to deal with his trauma. How persistent these symptoms are, Barker shows in the later part of the novel. Burns no longer resides in the hospital but has returned to a cottage at the sea, where he invites Rivers to join him for a few days. He refuses to narrate any information on his experiences at the front, and even though he passes objects which are likely to invoke some disturbing mental images of the war—Barker made him pass wire and sandbags—Burns seems unaffected. The turning point comes, however, in a disturbing scene where both men are on a walk in the country. Their boots ‘squelched on something soft’ (176). They were surrounded by cods’ heads, dumped after the fishermen had gutted their catch. Burns is obviously disturbed by the image, since he had ‘stopped dead in his tracks and was staring at the heads, with his mouth working’ (176). That night there is a heavy storm, and Rivers notices Burns is missing. He finds him in an old moat, surrounded by muddy walls, in a state of catatonia. Again, Barker draws a parallel between the moat and the trenches, and shows via Burns that repressing trauma is no use; it keeps returning no matter the effort to repress. After this episode, Burns
finally opens up to Rivers, lets go of his repression and starts talking about his life in
the trenches. Rivers is happy with this turn of events and finally sees a path towards
recovery open up. What Barker already hinted at in the first scene with Burns, she
now states clearly: Rivers’ treatment works.

In the previous scene, Barker demonstrates the negative consequences of
repression, but also follows Rivers’ ideas of treatment and their accompanying
results. Rivers documented a case in his ‘Address’ in which he shows the effects of
repression. A young officer was sent home from France after he was wounded, but on
arrival was found to be very nervous and ‘suffered from disturbed sleep and loss of
appetite’ (173). As a remedy, he was advised by both medical and lay men to try and
block out all thoughts of the war and its disturbing images. He ardently pursued this
method and ‘succeeded in restraining his memories and anxieties during the day’
(174) but as soon as he laid his head to rest they came like a whirlwind and pervaded
his mind continuously. After Rivers had advised him to allow the thoughts, memories
and images to surface, he recovered swiftly. This is exactly what Barker did in her
novel; after an excruciating time trying to banish the war from his thoughts and
suffering from rebounds at night, Burns only finds some release from this strain after
he allowed himself to think and talk about the war.

In line with Rivers’ distinction between repression and suppression, Barker
uses Burns’ case as an example of the former, and Billy Prior’s case as an example of
the latter. At first it appears that Prior is actively and voluntarily repressing his bad
experiences at the front. He is a textbook case of a man who feels that his masculinity
is blemished by his mental issues. As Rivers states in Regeneration, the psychologists
had ‘been trained to identify emotional repression as the essence of manliness’ (p.48).
Because of this strain, Prior refuses to disclose the nature of his nightmares, but at
the same time tries to crawl through the wall at night, which is yet another
demonstration by Barker of Rivers’ theory how trauma will surface despite attempts
to repress. In contrast with Burns, Prior does talk about his experiences at the front,
but he seems very detached and void of emotion. Rivers comments on this by stating
that he is describing an event as if it were a ‘ridiculous event - in somebody else’s life’
(78). This is reminiscent of Owen’s ‘Insensibility’; Prior displays the same detachment
as the soldiers in the poem. There is, however, a difference. In a scene where Prior
goes into town, Barker emphasizes how Prior is pressing hard to block visual images initiated by triggers. His senses are not so dulled out as that of the men in Owen’s poem where horrible images cannot hurt their minds anymore; Prior simply halts the memories from surfacing. When he meets Sarah in a pub, she discloses that she works at a factory, assembling detonators to be sent to the front. Barker uses this trigger to display Prior’s mental efforts: ‘[H]e thought what the detonators she made could do to flesh and bone, and his mind bulged as a memory threatened to surface’ (89). Her use of diction and imagery shows the extreme effort Prior has to make to block out the images. His mind ‘bulged’ and we can almost see how his brain is swelling and sweating to banish the image of a body blown to pieces. It is clear he was successful because the memory ‘threatened to surface’, which indicates that it did not succeed. This mental prowess enables Prior to detach himself from the war during the day; his mind is not rendered insensible enough to withstand the painful memories automatically.

However, even though there is ample evidence of Prior trying to repress, the main issue in the novel is his suppression. Suppression, as determined by W.H. Rivers in his ‘Address’, is the state which can ensue after the process of repression. This means that certain memories cannot be accessed voluntarily anymore, whereas repression enables memories to be retrieved at will but are halted at the desire of the patient. Suppression can also be seen as amnesia: memories or periods of time seem to be missing from the mind of the patient. Billy Prior was so shocked by a certain occurrence that he has blocked it out of his mind altogether. The first six months of his service is comparatively clear, but the period prior to his admission to hospital is blurred. According to Dr William Brown, contemporary of Rivers, ‘[i]n 15 per cent of all the cases seen [...] in the field there was pronounced loss of memory’ (Brown 835). He argues that physical functional symptoms are related to the suppressed event, and he states that this is best treated by means of hypnosis. Barker uses these facts; in Regeneration, Prior knows of hypnosis and urges Rivers, who, after some coercing, agrees to subject him to it.

Barker uses hypnosis in keeping with the prescribed treatments of amnesia in that era which gives her story a value of historical accuracy. In this scene with Rivers and Prior, she takes the hypnosis and turns it into a bridge to a trench setting. Just as
the War poets discussed in chapter 1, by using vivid imagery and appealing to the senses, the reader can visually see the trenches unfold. Barker first addresses smell; Prior wakes up to ‘a dugout smell of wet sandbags and stale farts’ (101). She then continues with touch: ‘[h]e curled his toes inside his wet boots and felt the creak and sag of chicken wire’ (101) and then moves on to vision, as he looks to see ‘[t]he usual jumble’ (101) of guns, candles and papers surrounding him. Barker is intent on conveying the feeling of being in between damp, muddy walls and the impact it has on the human psyche. She continues to construct the environment of this scene with ample descriptions of the setting: the steps were a ‘muddy slide’, and the atmosphere reeked of decomposition (102). To strengthen this image of a trench and to connect it to the brutality of the war, she uses some metaphorical language to work on the reader’s imagination even more. She states that the rotten scent smelled ‘green’ and ‘ratty’ (102). These adjectives are obviously normally not applicable to smells, but by using them here the reader immediately knows how vile the air must have been and, because of these synesthetic adjectives, the air almost materializes into an image. Another clear reference to the horrible events that pass in a war zone is her mention of ‘dugouts with gagged mouths’ (102). The bombardment of the previous night had damaged parapets and debris was now clogging up the dugouts. By the comparison of this vision to ‘gagged mouths’, Barker’s visual elements are reminiscent of Sorley’s images in ‘When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead’, where the central theme was the helplessness of the soldiers in the trenches. After she delivers these images to the reader, the nature of Prior’s repression becomes clear. It was the shock of seeing men fry bacon one second, and seeing them obliterated by a shell the next. He tries to clean up the mess, but small details show how he is affected tremendously. He is ‘retching’, ‘shaking’ and when he holds out the recovered eyeball in his hand he is inwardly so detached from the situation that he casually asks: ‘[w]hat am I supposed to do with this gob-stopper?’ (103). Outwardly he must have looked a wreck since his subordinate tries to send him away. His face had gone numb and his speech disappeared; the ‘gob-stopper’ actually functions as such (Whitehead 688). When he reached the clearing station, his mind had already suppressed the event to such an extent that his memory was faltering and could not recall what had just happened.
Prior’s case is representative of actual cases in the field, which shows that Barker follows historically accurate documents to keep her novel authentic. Charles S. Myers was an avid proponent of using hypnosis to recall suppressed memories. In ‘A Contribution to the Study of Shell Shock’ (1915) he describes the case of a corporal who was interred due to a shell bursting and could not remember anything until he found himself in a dressing station. Myers subjected him to suggestive light hypnosis at first, which improved the man’s sleep. Later he continued with heavier hypnosis during which the man could suddenly disclose the nature of his interment, and after a few sessions he was able to relay the story of how he reached the dressing station. He describes how he saw the position of the trenches, ‘their shallowness and covering’ and then how ‘[t]he explosion lifted us up and dropped us again’ (p.318). Barker’s description of Prior’s memory is similar to this story. First she focuses on the visual details of the trench and then moves to disclosing the actual event by means of hypnosis. In addition to his idea of curing amnesia as a necessary step to start working on processing trauma, Myers argued that a sudden emotional shock could disrupt the personality of the soldier. Ann Whitehead, who researched Myers’ works and specifically his views of hypnosis, states that:

With the return of the "normal" personality after the shock had subsided, the affective and cognitive experiences undergone by the "traumatized" self were repressed and were no longer available to the conscious awareness of the patient (675). Myers attempted to revive the emotional repressed occurrence in order to recreate the full personality again by means of hypnosis. This is where Barker deviates from Myers’ views; Prior’s personality does not change positively after his discovery. In fact, when his story continues in part two of Barker’s trilogy, The Eye in the Door, it appears that his personality has found another way of dealing with trauma.

The eye from the title is a fitting symbol for the visual techniques employed both by the War poets discussed in this thesis and by Barker herself, and the attempts they make to recreate images of the war in the mind of their readers. In the book, it refers to a painted eye on the inside of a prison door; one Prior encounters when he visits a woman from his past. The connection with his previously suppressed trauma is immediately clear because ‘[t]or a moment he was back in France, looking
at Towers’ eyeball in his hand’ (36). His memory may have been retrieved by means of hypnosis, but the trauma has not been processed well enough. This shows when he has a lucid dream, one in which the eyeball plays a prominent part. Barker initiates this scene by bringing Prior back to his life in the trenches during the winter time, and then using the cold as a bridge to a dream where she places him in the prison cell where the eye was painted on the door. When he looked up, he saw the eye, ‘not painted but very much alive’ (58). His response is demonstrative of an attempt to deal with his psychological issues. He grabs a paper-knife and stabs the eye until he was splattered with blood and a ‘thick whitish fluid’ (58) after which he starts crying and wakes up. The scene is wrought with strong imagery, especially through the addition of the white fluid which leaves a harrowing impression. The eye plays a prominent role in the book since it keeps resurfacing; it is representative of the workings of trauma. Barker shows that it is always looming in the background. Prior’s detailed description of the eye to Rivers—both the one in his dreams and the one painted on the door—indicates that the visual aspect of his traumatic experience in the trenches had a great impact on him. Rivers calls it an ‘intense visualization’ (68), and this is illustrated further when Prior mimics the movement he made when he held out the eye of his comrade. The impact is so heavy that he starts retching and dashes for the toilet. When he returns, he makes an insightful observation about his dream, indicating he knows that he is still haunted by the event in the past: ‘“eye” was stabbing myself in the “I”’ (75).

Up to this point, Barker followed the ideas of Rivers on repression and suppression, and drew on recorded case files to give her story an air of authenticity. However, she continues her story with a notion which is hardly mentioned in case files, or discussed by the prominent doctors of that era, which makes the book more modern. Prior’s inability to deal with his trauma leads to a condition which is usually the result of exposure to extreme stress: dissociative fugue. This state ‘is often marked by a physical as well mental “flight”’ (Elkin 136), which applies perfectly to the character of Prior. In certain situations he suffers from a black-out and appears to operate as a different person altogether. When the bout is over, he is left with a gap in his memory of the time he spent in that other state. This fugue state happens for the first time when he reads the casualty list in a pub, and sees a familiar name. This
name brings back a memory of a shared amusing moment, but also a feeling of helplessness and grief, a feeling which he translates into a wish for a tank come crashing in to crush all the people in the bar. This image is so violent he immediately falls into terrible visual imaginings where he remembered how the tanks sometimes ‘crushed the wounded who couldn’t get off the track in time’ and now ‘he saw severed limbs [and] heard screams’ (122). The next thing he remembers is sitting at his desk at the Munitions Depot. A second bout of fugue happens when he is on an outing with his girlfriend Sarah; after a run-in with an enemy he cannot remember that he violently hit the man.

Barker stresses that he has another personality in his fugue state by emphasizing the discovery of cigars in his greatcoat. Prior normally smokes cigarettes, but the Prior in fugue state apparently prefers cigars. The ‘other’ Prior even leaves messages concerning this for his alter ego: ‘[w]hy don’t you leave my fucking cigars alone?’ (191). By portraying his other side as another personality, Barker does not fully keep to the fugue state. These symptoms are more reminiscent of the modern view of a dissociative personality disorder, patients who have ‘severe difficulties in dealing with normal stresses in addition to other partially formed personalities [...],’ who often have complementary emotional make-ups (Elkin 137). Prior does not fit this profile. His stress is not a normal stress but one born from war, and his alter ego is not the opposite of his usual disposition: it seems to be more of an exaggeration of his normal state. Barker moved away from historical personalities and facts, and inserted a more modern notion; the credibility of the neurasthenia in her book now wavers a bit.

In The Eye in the Door, in both cases an emotional incident instigated the fugue state which suggests that this split in personality has a function. Prior is incapable of dealing with his severe emotional trauma and therefore his personality splits into one who is left to withstand the exposure to harmful incidents. Myers called these ‘manifestations of the ‘emotional’ personality, alternating with the ‘apparently normal’ personality’ (Van der Hart et al. 40). There is a significant delay between Prior’s trauma and his dissociative state. This was very common in numerous actual cases where ‘[t]raumatic memories remained latent and inactive, and amnestic subjects appeared to function normally’ (Van der Hart et al. 41). Barker turned Prior
into a textbook case of a soldier stuck in his trauma. His split personality is symbolic of the state of mind of a man in war. Just as the War poets tried to express, Barker too wants to emphasize how deeply divided men are in war, and exposes the tremendous conflict between reason and emotions.

Barker uses the idea of a split personality throughout *Regeneration* and *The Eye in the Door*. Prior is the one who is affected mostly, having a psychological illness which results in bouts of fugue. However, more characters are described as having some sort of division in personality. Henry Head, one of Rivers’ friends and colleagues, is compared to Prior by Rivers in *The Eye in the Door*, in a scene where he is doing some tests with a patient. Head’s analytical side ‘was thinking about the technical problems of duplicating’ the patient’s trauma ‘on the skull of [a] cadaver’ (145), but his emotional side felt empathy for his patient. Rivers states that Head’s actions were ‘in some ways a benign, epicritic form of the morbid dissociation’ (146) which Prior dealt with. Head’s dissociation was perceived as healthy, since his researcher side and his physician side could access the experiences of one another, whereas Prior’s was perceived as dangerous because his sides were working independently from each other.

Siegfried Sassoon has a special status in *Regeneration*. Barker introduces him in a way which is reminiscent of his own style: as he did in ‘The Rank Stench of Those Bodies Haunts Me Still’, Barker connects sensory happenings to triggers which initiate very graphic memories. Right at the beginning of the novel, Sassoon boards a train which will take him to the war hospital Craiglockhart. When it was time to leave, ‘[t]he whistle blew. Immediately, he saw lines of men with grey muttering faces clambering up the ladders to face the guns’ (5). She turned the sound of the whistle into a memory trigger, taking Sassoon back to his time at the front. The same happens when he sits at the dinner table at Craiglockhart, sandwiched between two very bad cases of stammering. Their faltering conversation brings him back to the day before Arras, when he was supplying ammunition to an outpost trench and passed the same corpses continuously ‘until their twisted and blackened shapes began to seem like old friends’ (16). Barker uses very graphic images to contrast the safe environment Sassoon finds himself in with the brutality of his memories, again, much
like Sassoon himself did in his poem. His special status pertains to the fact that opposed to the majority of cases discussed in the novel, he is not repressing his memories. She has Rivers state that he has a ‘determination to remember’ (26); he does not want the war to be forgotten, because that would mean that all the deaths and their efforts were in vain. His split in personality is one of emotions. In *Regeneration*, Rivers discusses Sassoon’s case with Brock, another psychologist from Craiglockhart fictionalized by Barker. Brock states that Sassoon is a ‘happy warrior one minute, bitter pacifist the next’ (74). Sassoon has taken extraordinary measures to point out how the war should not be prolonged, yet he is exceptionally eager to return to France to fight alongside his men. Barker uses this paradox to emphasize Sassoon’s position as the odd one out at Craiglockhart. He already has a distinctive position due to the nature of his actions, but by portraying him as a man who does not repress in an environment in which repression is prevalent in practically all of the patients, she gives him a special status.

The greatest paradox in Barker’s trilogy is Rivers himself. Barker shows him treating case after case, dealing with men who have been exposed to horrific images which haunt them during the day and most certainly during the night. His method is to have them accept these images and try to make peace with them; he is the doctor, and he is the one with the knowledge and skills to treat others. This is why it is surprising to read that Rivers is doing exactly that which he is telling his patients not to: he is repressing. The doctor cannot follow his own advice, which should compromise his position. However, Barker portrays Rivers in such a way that it does not; in fact, it only fortifies his position. In *Regeneration*, Barker states that ‘the rigorous repression of emotion and desire had been the constant theme of his adult life’ (48). By depicting him in this fashion, Barker built a clear bridge between doctor and patient and demonstrates how the boundaries between doctor and patient become blurred. She emphasizes this further in a scene where Rivers is having physical difficulties and is being examined by his colleague Bryce. When he asks Rivers what he thinks the problem is, his answer is ‘war neurosis’ (140). He states that his heartbeat is irregular, he is starting to twitch and he mockingly adds that he has a stammer (Rivers had had a stammer since early childhood). Because Rivers is no stranger to repression, it takes little effort to empathise with his patients, and this
is the reason his position as a doctor is not compromised by his own inability to deal with his repression. In fact, he empathizes so much that, without having been at the front, he mimics the symptoms of the men who have been.

Barker reveals the most startling paradox in Rivers in *The Eye in the Door*. In a session with Billy Prior, his patient prays so much that Rivers sees no option but to disclose some personal information: Rivers admits to having no visual memory. Where she at first welded a connection between doctor and patient by having them share experiences in repressing, Barker now sets them apart again since images play the most prominent part in the trauma which haunts the soldiers. It is also striking how Barker employs a very graphic style of writing, mimicking the War poets discussed in chapter 1 in their way of visualizing the war, yet has an important protagonist who has no visual memory. As Sorley used soldiers who were blinded and deafened by the horrors of the war in his poem, she is using Rivers in a similar, symbolic way. The war and its horrors were so terrible that the misery cannot be expressed in words or images, and by mentally blinding the doctor who wanted to relieve the soldiers from their grief, she is emphasizing this point.

Rivers’ lack of visual memory is linked to a childhood drama (a heavy reprimand from his father), which is the reason of his repression. This drama is disclosed in Barker’s third novel, *The Ghost Road*, but the most important result of this loss is revealed in *The Eye in the Door*. Rivers states that

> the impact of the experience had gone beyond the loss of visual memory and had occasioned a deep split between the rational, analytical cast of his mind and his emotions (141).

He feels that the childhood drama ‘triggered an attempt at dissociation of personality’; though it was unsuccessful he still felt he had been a ‘deeply divided man’ (141) throughout his life. In addition to Prior, Sassoon and Head, Rivers too is portrayed as having a split personality, not caused by the war but certainly aggravated by it. Barker made extensive use of psychological illnesses found in the war, especially repression and suppression, showing how both soldiers and physicians were affected.
Chapter III - Literature and Dreams

The phenomenon of war dreams is one of the most common psychological ailments discussed in both WWI and modern literature. During the Great War, the medical and psychological views on dreams changed radically. As Dr F.W. Mott, Lieutenant-Colonel RAMC, stated in ‘The Psychology of Soldiers’ Dreams’ (1918): ‘[o]ne of the most striking symptoms of soldiers suffering with war psychoneuroses [...] is the terrifying dreams which disturb the mind’ (169). Before the war, psychiatrist Sigmund Freud constructed theories on the analysis of the human psyche where he stated that dreams ‘were the royal road to the unconscious’ (Hall 2). His most prominent book on this topic was The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), where ‘Freud used the interpretation of dreams as a means of discovering insight into unconscious desires’ (Hall 2). The main focus was that ‘the core of the dream [was] a dream-wish’, a subconscious desire expressed in our sleeping state (Trad 319). This view was generally adopted at the time; prominent doctors such as W.H. Rivers adhered to this theory (Damousi 40). However, when the war started and the notion of trauma began to arise, war dreams puzzled Freud and his fellow men. Army doctors found it difficult to apply Freud’s ideas to their patients; the dreams were accompanied with high levels of anxiety and they thought it inconceivable that these terrors were fulfilling subconscious wishes (Young 80). After the war, Freud conceded a little and noted that

dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. This astonishes people far too little... Anyone who accepts it as something self-evident that dreams should put them back at night into the situation that caused them to fall ill has misunderstood the nature of dreams (SE 18:13).

In general, war dreams were a re-enactment of the traumatic event; patients ‘involuntarily reexperience aspects of the trauma’ in their sleep (Ehlers et al. 217). The dreams were merely a repetition of past events, throwing the soldier back in time and forcing him to relive the occurrence. F.W. Mott states in ‘The Psychology of Soldiers’ Dreams’ that dreams are exemplary for the way grave occurrences are
branded in the minds of soldiers, for they ‘continually recur in a vivid and terrifying manner in their dreams, half-waking state, and in some few cases even in the waking state, constituting hallucinations’ (169). There was no symbolic meaning attached to them; no wish fulfilment could be discovered. This is tied in with repression (see chapter 2), where during the day soldiers could actively try to repress their experiences and harrowing images, but during the night they lost control and their subconscious was free to throw these memories back at them with terrifying force.

Siegfried Sassoon is one of the few War poets who worked often with the topic of dreaming, and sometimes may have used his own dreams as the foundation for his works. ‘Sick Leave’ is one of these poems. Unlike his other poems discussed in chapter 1, he does not focus on the visual aspects of the horrors of the war in this poem (even though it must be noted that dreams in itself are manifestations based on vision). Instead, he focuses on another sense, namely hearing, to convey the oppressive atmosphere of his situation. He starts with a contrast between him, tucked in a safe and warm environment, and them, ‘the homeless ones’ (2). He calls them ‘the noiseless dead’, which is striking since from that moment the poem is dominated by sounds. The storm breakers put up to protect the windows ‘[b]ellow and drone’ (4), mimicking the roaring mayhem of shelling in a trench. In this setting, the dead gather around his bed. The visual effect is less important; nothing is said about their appearance, but the focus lies on their whispers. Their question reveals the source of their manifestation: they are symbolic of the guilt Sassoon felt for being safe and warm while his comrades were out at the front. This is indicated by ‘[i]n bitter safety I awake’ (9); safety is normally a desired situation but the addition of ‘bitter’ shows his ambiguous feelings towards it. The violence of the bellowing storm breakers is continued by the rain which is ‘slashing’ (10); the diction conveys a feeling of unease and is reminiscent of the trenches. In the closing lines the dream manifests a hallucinatory quality; he has just stated he awoke, but he continues to hear the voices of the dead. At first glance it appears he is speaking to himself, but it is the addition of the word ‘our’ which shows that the soldiers are still present: ‘[w]hen are you going out to them again?/Are they not still your brothers through our blood?’ (12-13). Sassoon’s poem is a mixture of the prevalent views on dreams during the war and the actual traumatic war dreams. It is in line with the idea that dreams are wish
fulfilments; after all, the poem is likely to be an expression of Sassoon’s guilt and he wishes to rejoin his men at the front to relinquish that guilt. However, when the poem is subjected to a close reading it becomes apparent that the dream does bear resemblance to a traumatic war dream. As stated before, Sassoon used distinct sounds which are reminiscent of those encountered in trench warfare; the rain is ‘slashing’ and he thinks of ‘the Batallion in the mud’ (11). In fact, he is describing a scene which could pass in a trench, where the ghosts in the poem are merely the dead scattered about. In that regard, this is a repetition of a traumatic event, just not a specific one.

The repetition of a past event is one of Sassoon’s interests; in ‘The Dream’ he shapes his recollection of the past as a dream. This poem in its entirety portrays a dream, and is in many ways consistent with the definition of a war nightmare. He minutely describes an event which might have actually passed when he was active at the front. The details are very precise; he wants to drag the reader into this reoccurrence and experience what he experienced. He starts the poem with an opposition between the beautiful countryside with ‘dew-drenched blossom and the scent/Of summer gardens’ (1-2) and the grave reality of his situation with ‘the rank smell’ of ‘a dream of war’ (8-9). In contrast to ‘Sick Leave’, this poem is filled with imagery described with such precision that the reader can almost feel as if it is their dream: the men ‘whistle’, ‘stretch their toes’ (25), have ‘blistered feet’ (21) and sit on ‘filthy straw’ (18) ‘while the wind chills their sweat through chinks and cracks’ (20). However, this passage is not merely a repetition of a past event, but is laden with Sassoon’s emotions. He names it ‘the secret burden which is always mine’ (29) where he feels pride for his men on one hand, but pity and bitterness on the other since he will lead them to the battlefront. Throughout the poem his diction is matter-of-fact and not very poetic, yet in the closing lines he personifies war and uses a metaphor to describe the hardships of war. This is what distinguishes the passage as a poem and not a report of a dream, although it fits the category of war dreams. There is no wish fulfilment, and it is a recollection of a specific past event, but written in such a way to engage the reader.

In one of his other poems, ‘Survivors’, Sassoon focuses more on the aftermath of war—as already indicated in the title—but links this to his own experiences at the front. He describes a set of soldiers who portray all the symptoms of shell shock.
They are ‘stammering’ and have ‘disconnected talk’ (2); some are so affected they are ‘learning to walk’ (4) all over again. Sassoon focuses especially on their dreams. He states that ‘[t]hey’ll soon forget their haunted nights’ (5), indicating that their nights are full of nightmares. The line which follows reveals the topic of those nightmares: ‘[s]ubjection to the ghosts of friends who died,...Their dreams that drip with murder’ (6-7). He talks about the dreams in which the soldiers see their friends die all over again, a repetition of a past event. ‘[T]he ghosts of friends who died’ (6) are reminiscent of ‘Sick Leave’, where Sassoon’s comrades came to his bedside at night. By inserting these lines he shows how he too suffered from these dreams and knows the gravity and empathizes with these men; in these poems the ‘supernatural figures of death [...] embody his subjective feelings about the war’ (Dollar 238).

Wilfred Owen also refers to dreams in his poetry more than once. In one poem he emphasizes the original idea of wish fulfilment in dreams: ‘Soldier’s Dream’. His poem is not a reconstruction of a past occurrence, but a wish in dream form. The wish is obvious—an end to the war—and laden with symbolic gestures, such as Jesus rusting a bayonet with his tears. In that regard, this poem fits the pre-war theories on dreams by Freud. However, in his other poems Owen acknowledges the structure and gravity of war dreams. In ‘The Sentry’ he describes an event where one of his sentries was blinded by a shell and he states ‘[e]yeballs, huge-bulged like squids’,/Watch my dreams still’ (22-23). This event happened in reality, as can be read in one of Owen’s letters to his mother (Stallworthy 176). It must have had a significant impact on Owen since he used the happening as inspiration for his poem. Whether he actually experienced nightmares because of this is uncertain; it is however clear that he was aware of the content of war dreams and the concept of traumatic repetition. He demonstrates this in ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, where a young man suffocates due to gas before Owen’s eyes. To emphasize the effects of witnessing such a brutal event he states: ‘In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,/He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning’ (15-16). ‘All’ suggests that the dream he describes is a recurrent one, repeating the harrowing event endlessly in the mind of the speaker. Owen is not as engaged with dreams as Sassoon was, but as Sassoon he too shows how traumatic events can be engraved on the mind and be repeated at night, and counters the idea of wish fulfilment in dreams.
Pat Barker also incorporated dreams into her *Regeneration* trilogy, and as with the topic of repression, she follows the War poets discussed in this thesis in their methods. However, she moves away from the actual war dream and focuses more on symbolism. Whether the dream in ‘Sick Leave’ was based on a genuine dream Sassoon once had, has never been verified. Pat Barker, however, treated it as such in *Regeneration*. She follows Sassoon in his use of the sense of hearing. During a conversation with Owen, Sassoon starts to hear a strange tapping, one only audible to him. The source of the tapping is never disclosed, but it soon merges with the roaring of a storm setting in, just as the onset of Sassoon’s poem. At first, she uses the storm as a memory trigger: ‘[h]e listened to the surge and rumble of the storm, and his mind filled with memories of his last few weeks in France’ (143). In contrast with Sassoon’s poem though, she does place emphasis on the visual aspects of these memories. In his mind’s eye, he sees his platoon and ‘recalled his horror at their physique’ to then continue to an image of them ‘sitting on bales of straw in a sun-chinked barn’ (143). After mentioning these visual memories, Barker returns to the sense of hearing: The ‘windows banged and rattled’ (p.143) and the tapping is audible again. She addresses the fact that he is safe and warm in a hospital bed, just like what Sassoon stated in the poem, and juxtaposes it to the grisly conditions of trench life: ‘[i]f he could sleep on a firestep in drenching rain, surely he could sleep now’ (143). It is on this thought that he drifts into sleep, only to wake to the image of a ghost. Here Barker starts to focus on the hallucinatory part of the poem, just as Sassoon who declared he was awake when he heard the voices of his dead comrades.

In *Regeneration*, Sassoon sees Orme, a young officer who met his end when he fought in France. Again, in contrast to Sassoon’s original poem, Barker focuses on the visual appearance of the lad. The most striking feature of Orme was his pale coat, not khaki but ‘beige’, and it is this fact which makes Sassoon realize he is looking at a dead man. Orme merely appears; he does not speak and disappears swiftly. At first glance, this passage in the novel does not seem to be directly linked to Sassoon’s poem. However, later on the book it becomes apparent that Barker did have this poem in mind when writing the passage. When Rivers returns from leave, Sassoon is the first person he sees. He begins his story with ‘[w]hat happened to me started
with a noise’ (188.) which indicates that Barker repeats the technique Sassoon applied in his poem—the focus on hearing—and which she later applied to her own writing, which provides a sense of continuity in her work. He then discloses that he had several of these dreams and hallucinations, where dead men came to visit. In this scene he reveals that they did speak, since ‘[t]hey can’t understand why [he is] here’ (188), upon which he grabs a sheet of paper and shows Rivers the poem ‘Sick Leave’ which he wrote on the subject.

Barker’s account of Sassoon’s dream is far removed from the views on war dreams at the time of the Great War. Whereas Sassoon’s poem is a mixture of both Freudian and prevalent views during the war, Barker’s renditions seem to focus only on the idea of symbolism in dreams. The original poem mentions nothing of familiar faces, but in Regeneration the ghostly apparition is that of a young man dear to Sassoon, indicating some sort of trauma lying underneath the dream. Orme’s appearance is one of symbolism. The apparition does not speak, nor actively does anything in particular; it seems to be there only to remind Sassoon of his dead mates in the trenches and invoke some sense of guilt on him. This is decidedly different from Sassoon’s poem, where the ghosts do not imply why they have come but simply ask their question in a straightforward manner.

Throughout her Regeneration trilogy Barker insists on portraying the symbolic aspects of dreams, while focusing on the visual elements. At one point Rivers has a session with Anderson, a medic with hemophobia, who discloses a dream. The dream is riddled with visual symbols: his wife was with some ladies and ‘they were all wearing white’, Anderson suddenly lost his clothes and stood naked while his father-in-law and two orderlies beat him with a stick which ‘had a snake wound round it; eventually he was tied down with ‘[a] pair of lady’s corsets’ and was brought to Rivers in ‘a post-mortem apron and gloves’ (28). Even a layperson could hypothesize the meaning Barker tried attach to this dream (the emasculating feeling of being analyzed by a psychologist), which she uses as a method to engage the reader. Her focus on the visual aspects of dreams is in line with her general approach throughout the trilogy in mimicking the style of the War poets I discussed in previous chapters—using imagery to convey the horrors of war (see chapter 1)—, but the
symbolism is out of place when it comes to historical accuracy. In fact, she even turns matters around.

In *Regeneration*, Rivers is the one who has a dream which resembles a war dream. After a long day and a bath, Rivers awoke from a dream which he then recorded. He was back at his former work place, St John’s, and was performing the task of pricking the arm of his former colleague, Henry Head, to map the area of hypersensitivity to pain. Suddenly the situation changed, and he became the guinea pig to be cut by Head, which was the moment he woke from the dream. Rivers then states: ‘[e]xcept for the cutting of his arm, the dream was an unusually accurate reproduction of events that had actually occurred’ (46). So Barker uses symbolism to describe soldiers’ dreams, but Rivers, the physician, has a dream which is a repetition of a past event. This is another indication that Barker uses the dreams mainly to tell her story in the novel, but not to give an accurate representation of war dreams of that time; war dreams afflicted soldiers who had been at the front, not doctors. Barker’s focus lies on the fiction.

‘Sick Leave’ and Barker’s interpretation of Sassoon’s dream experience are both artistic renditions. However, Sassoon also described some of his nightmares in his autobiographical *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), in which he tried to give an accurate historical account of his time in the war. In the section on his bad dreams, he starts with a reference to sound, similar to how he started his poem ‘Sick Leave’. The munitions factory close by utilized machinery which ‘droned and crashed like giants’ and he states that ‘the noise got on [his] nerves’ (179); immediately after he mentions this he discloses how he was worried by bad dreams. He found it hard to distinguish between sleep and waking; this is reminiscent of the passage in ‘Sick Leave’ where he states he dreamt while awake. It is striking how he delivers a full-blown visual attack the second he discusses these. He describes the ward as ‘half shadow and half sinking firelight’ (180) which enables the reader to imagine Sassoon in a dimly-lit room, waiting for the images to come. His account of his dream images hits hard because of his use of diction. On the floor he saw ‘shapes of mutilated soldiers’ crawling and he states that the ground was ‘littered with fragments of mangled flesh’ (180). He describes soldiers on the verge of dying, stuck in agonizing poses of holding throats and wounds. He states that he could see their faces clearly;
one in particular was striking and he shares this moment with the reader, who is handed a startling feeling because of his detailed description: ‘a livid grinning face with bristly moustache peered at me above the edge of my bed’ (180). He refers back to the trenches by mentioning that some of the bodies looked like the dummies used to deceive snipers. He adds that some of the soldiers were looking at him ‘reproachfully’, as if they were envious of his warm and safe surroundings, something ‘they’d longed for when they shivered in the gloomy dawn’ (180). This passage reveals that this experience was most likely the basis of ‘Sick Leave’, where the apparitions invoke a sense of guilt of being safe.

Even though Sassoon tried to document his experiences in a non-fictional fashion, he could not refrain from artistic language, which almost turns this passage into a poetic one. However, even though his diction is colourful and strong, this rendition of the dream is the one most in line with the medical views at the time of the war. This is particularly shown in the next passage on his bad dreams, where he describes a harrowing event where a wounded young private is crawling towards him. He is fumbling for a letter and as he reaches to Sassoon to give it to him, he collapsed: ‘[t]here was a hole in his jaw and the blood spread across like ink spilt on blotting paper’ (180). Even though Sassoon describes this scene using a poetic device—a simile—, it is still a description of an event and has no symbolism attached to it. This could have happened to him in the trenches and this dream could merely be a repetition of that event. Just as the crawling mangled bodies he must have encountered at some point in time, the images brought to him are not symbolic and are no manifestation of a wish fulfilment. They are traumatic memories which his mind repeats because he had not processed them yet, and tried to repress them during the day.

Sassoon’s creative account of his dream affairs is strikingly similar to those found in case files on neurasthenic patients at the time. Sassoon described exactly what F.W. Mott had noted in his case files, how past images returned at night and continued after waking. According to Mott, dreams were intertwined with other neurasthenic afflictions. In chapter 1 I discussed how some War poets used the senses to stress the horrific conditions they had to live in; this is closely related to war dreams where sensory activity plays a large role in the reliving of trauma. Mott had
several soldiers write down their recurrent dreams and he noted that ‘[t]he dreams are nearly always visual and auditory representations’ (171). One of these dreams is described as follows: one patient was haunted by the stench of dead decomposing bodies as soon as his eyes dropped. This smell would then trigger dreadful images of putrified corpses, and the private would wake up in a cold sweat. His dreams were representative of a traumatic period at the front, where he was in charge of burying the dead and was obviously exposed to many decaying corpses. His dream bears striking resemblances to Sassoon’s own; this shows how Sassoon was aware of and subjected to the reality of war dreams and incorporated these experiences into his creative works.
Conclusion

The numerous medical case files written by prominent doctors and psychiatrists, such as W.H.R. Rivers and Charles S. Myers, show the reality of the consequences of the Great War. In our modern time we acknowledge the psychological illnesses that come with war, and looking back we can see the devastating effects on the minds of soldiers in the First World War. At the time of the war however, neurasthenia was a relatively new phenomenon which became very prominent; this puzzled the medical world, and they were hesitant to acknowledge this. By comparing the actual case files with poetry written during the war, it is clear that the poets discussed were exceptionally aware of the mental mayhem taking place at the front; in their works there are ample elements of virtually all categories of shell shock. They describe the ailments, the workings of psychological trauma and the results. The poets were aware in the sense of having experienced or seen the effects of shell shock; they had no background in medicine. Therefore, it is striking to see how poets and doctors independently describe the same features of shell shock. For each affliction the poets discuss, there is a case file of an actual soldier at the front. All poets focus primarily on visual elements in their works, but Sorley and Sassoon also focus on senses such as hearing and smell; Myers documented cases where soldiers went blind, deaf or lost their sense of smell. Sassoon and Blunden discuss the reliving of traumatic events through memory triggers, through which they show they were familiar with the workings of psychological trauma in the mind. Owen showed the possible results of shell shock: men could become trapped in a mental hell where they continuously relived horrible past events, or could become emotionally numb. There is much to be found in the poets’ works which is linked to psychology; it is clear that neurasthenic ailments played an important part in the world they lived in. By referring to these in their works they demonstrate the pervasiveness of shell shock.

Because shell shock dominated large parts of their lives, it is possible that through their poetry the poets discussed in this thesis tried to create more of an awareness of neurasthenia for the people outside of the war. The human psyche is a puzzling phenomenon which has interested people over centuries; the poets knew they could have a considerable impact on their audience by using this. The mind is
fragile, and the idea of it being harmed invokes fear; the authors played on this fear by inundating the reader with the horrors of mental illnesses which could shock the audience. This is also why modern readers and authors are still drawn to these works from a century ago: we are still subjected to this fear.

Compared to the work of the War poets discussed in this thesis, Pat Barker’s trilogy contains a lot of the same elements of psychological illnesses. Through analysis it is clear that she followed some of the same methods of engaging the reader that these poets used, with a special focus on visual elements. She too used the senses to affect the reader, as was apparent in the scenes with Burns which were full of references to sound and touch. In addition, like the poets she focuses on topics which were prominent at the time, such as Rivers’ theory on repression and suppression. She used these themes to show how soldiers and physicians were both affected, and like the poets she shows the results of psychological trauma: Burns is constantly reliving his terrible experience, Prior has amnesia and a split personality, and Rivers identifies so much with his patients he is slowly copying their ailments. However, there are also differences between Barker and the poets, which was particularly clear on the topic of war dreams. The poets’ works were in line with the reliving of traumatic events at night; Sassoon described in both his poetry and memoirs how several events kept haunting him in his dreams. Barker focused more on the symbolic notion of dreams. She voiced Prior’s subconscious feelings through a dream which was ridden with symbols, and Rivers’ had a dream which symbolically expressed a wish.

The *Regeneration* trilogy makes extensive use of the myth of the Great War and the neurasthenic elements in the works of the War poets discussed in this thesis. Pat Barker made a great effort in researching her topic: she chose a neurasthenic point of view instead of the modern PTSD one, based her fictional characters on historical ones, and portrayed these in the light of their historical context. However, even with this amount of research it is still virtually impossible to recreate an accurate atmosphere of the past, something of which she was undoubtedly aware. Throughout the trilogy she followed the views of shell shock at the time of the war closely. She used the psychology of the time to construct her characters, and the methods she used contributed to the creation of a WW1 setting. There are ample
links to ailments which ensued from the war in her novels; the extent in which she worked according to the views during the war shows how important neurasthenia is in her trilogy. Yet there are modern aspects in her work, such as the focus on the fugue state, which show that she also deviates from the ideas at the time. It is clear that Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy is inspired by works of other authors and based on historical events, but is also infused by modern aspects: Barker has merged elements of the past and the present, and created something new. Without at doubt, the war was a terrible event, but its literary legacy is one of such a creative quality that it still appeals to the public a hundred years later, and continues to inspire writers to create new works based on the Great War.
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