Pat Barker

# Regeneration

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“I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defiance and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest […] I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed. On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practiced on them […]”

Pat Barker begins her historical WWI novel *Regeneration* (1991) with Siegfried Sassoon’s A Soldier’s Declaration (also titled *Finished with the War*). Sassoon, a disillusioned poet and war hero, had been back on leave in England for three months, recovering from a bullet wound, when, in July 1917, he wrote his anti-war protest, objecting to the senseless slaughter of war and refusing to return to the trenches. Copies of *A Soldier’s Declaration* found their way to local newspapers, the House of Commons, and *The Times*. The main reason he escaped a court-martial was his friend and fellow poet Robert Graves, who persuaded the military authorities that Sassoon was suffering from shell shock; his upper-class background also worked to his advantage. As a result, Sassoon was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital, in Edinburgh, for treatment under the care of the neurologist and psychologist Dr W. H. R. Rivers. There, he also met and mentored the young poet Wilfred Owen. Barker’s *Regeneration* recreates and reflects on the relationships among the wounded men at Craiglockhart, masterfully merging historical figures with some remarkable fictional characters as well as raw reality with her art and craft of fiction.

Rivers’ intimate father-son, doctor-patient, relationship with a number of the wounded men is at the core of *Regeneration*; the real Sassoon reported in his journals that Rivers affected him greatly during his time at Craiglockhart, immortalizing the doctor and his alternative, more humane techniques. Deeply influenced by Freud, Rivers adopted the talking cure and dream analysis with his WWI soldier patients, diverging from the typical electric shock treatments employed at the time. In the novel, Barker writes: “It was Rivers’s conviction that those who had learned to know themselves, and to accept their emotions, were less likely to break down again” (48), an approach that the real Rivers also applied to himself.

WWI permanently transformed the lives of men. The male body was tested as never before and the cherished ideal of manliness was shaken to its core. Countless WWI soldiers suffered from shell shock (widely known today as PTSD). The fact that shell shock was associated with terms such as hysteria and neurasthenia, illnesses frequently associated with women, made these soldiers feel even more emasculated. As Elaine Showalter writes, “If the essence of manliness was not to complain, then shell shock was the body language of masculine complaint, a disguised male protest not only against the war but against the concept of ‘manliness’ itself” (172). And this is what Barker has Rivers reflect on: “In leading his patients to understand that breakdown was nothing to be ashamed of, that horror and fear were inevitable responses to the trauma of war and were better

acknowledged than suppressed, that feelings of tenderness for other men were natural and right, that tears were an acceptable and helpful part of grieving, he was setting himself against the whole tenor of their upbringing. They'd been trained to identify emotional repression as the essence of manliness. Men who broke down, or cried, or admitted to feeling fear, were sissies, weaklings, failures. Not *men*" (48).

Shell shock manifested itself in different symptoms depending on its victims' class background: private soldiers suffered from paralysis, deafness, blindness and muteness, while officers suffered from stammers, nightmares and memory loss. Barker touches upon this intricate aspect of the illness through her memorable fictional character Billy Prior. Prior is one of the core characters of *Regeneration*, an officer who suffers from memory loss and muteness (yet screams during his recurrent nightmares), and who is in constant conflict between his working-class background and his temporarily assigned role as an officer during the war. The dynamic between Prior and Rivers is equally explosive and exhausting; Prior is tauntingly uncooperative with Rivers and turns their every session into a confrontation. Quoted by Sharon Monteith, Barker admits that she created Prior "purely to get up Rivers's nose: every characteristic of Prior is something that the historical Rivers would have found difficult; the working-class background, his bisexuality, and the fact that he perceives sexual ambivalence in Rivers" (72).

Gender roles also underwent a significant shift during WWI as ambiguity veiled the concepts of masculinity and femininity. While men dealt with death, maiming and battle, as well as with the domestication and disempowerment of the trenches, and suffered from psychological wounds, women experienced a newfound freedom. As Joan Montgomery Byles writes, "Most of the girls who worked in the munitions factories were from the working classes and were happy to be released from the bondage of domestic service, which imprisoned most of them before the war" (64). One of the ways Barker addresses this is through the character of Sarah Lumb, a young working-class woman who works in a munitions factory. Prior is drawn to Sarah (and the two form a relationship) due to her independence, sexual liberation, and the distinctive colors in her hair (a consequence of her being a munitionette).

As a term, regeneration is the process a living organism goes through to restore itself after damage or loss. In Barker's *Regeneration*, the spotlight is on the shell-shocked WWI soldiers, who are asked, always with Rivers' attentive guidance, to acknowledge and accept their psychological trauma in the hope of recovering from it. Barker went on to write *The Eye in the Door* in 1993 and *The Ghost Road* in 1995, turning her Regeneration world into a trilogy.

**References:**

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