



Regeneration

by Pat Barker

Regeneration (1991), based on true events at Craiglockhart War Hospital outside Edinburgh in 1917, is the first in a trilogy of novels that explore the psychological and social impacts of the First World War. The sequels, *The Eye in the Door* (1993) and Booker Prize-winning *The Ghost Road* (1995), follow the characters to the war's conclusion in November 1918

Biographical context

Born into a working-class Yorkshire family in 1943, Pat Barker never knew her father and was brought up by her maternal grandparents. Her first three novels depicted the lives of women, dominated by poverty and domestic violence. Barker notes, 'I had got myself into a box where I was strongly typecast as a northern, regional, working class, feminist — label, label, label — novelist' (Nixon 2004, p. 21).

Barker wanted to escape from that box. As a child she had been fascinated by her step-grandfather's First World War bayonet wound, but he never spoke of his wartime experiences: 'So there was a wound, and there was silence. But that kind of silence becomes compelling. It's a space which invites imaginative exploration.' She realised she needed a particular perspective for this — that of 'a character who was intelligent, compassionate and well informed but who, like me and like the reader, had no direct experience of the fighting in France'. She found this in Dr William Rivers, whose relationship with his patient, Siegfried Sassoon, became what Barker called 'the spine of the book' (Barker 2012).

Historical and cultural context

The combination of trench warfare and high explosives led inevitably not only to physical but psychological injury on a previously unheard-of scale. 'In December 1914... Britain's armed forces lost 10 percent of all frontline officers and 4 percent of enlisted men... to "nervous and mental shock"' (Glass 2023, p. xiii). By December 1915, nearly a third of all admissions to medical wards were for mental illness.

From November 1914, the British Army began opening new psychiatric hospitals, including Craiglockhart War Hospital. Its role was to treat officers suffering from what had, by 1915, been termed 'shell shock'. Dr Rivers, pioneering psychologist, neurologist and social anthropologist, used methods strongly influenced by Sigmund Freud, especially his ideas on dreams and the unconscious mind.

Stephen Boxer as Captain Rivers and Tim Delap as Siegfried Sassoon in a stage adaptation of *Regeneration*, 2014

Sociocultural context

Conflicted gender roles

The model of masculinity in Edwardian Britain was founded on the 'manly' virtues of courage, mental rigour and emotional strength. Barker explores the tension between this traditional template for masculinity — an 'unrealistic militaristic-masculine ideal' (Harris 1998) — and the experiences of the soldiers on the Western Front. Rivers' innovative 'talking therapy' is based on unlocking repression of painful memories — Barker used his *Repression of War Experience* (1918) and *Conflict and Dreams* (1923) in her fictional recreations of conversations between Rivers and Sassoon. Rivers offered soldiers an opportunity to rethink their models of masculinity; Barker makes this a central strand in her imaginative recreation of shell-shocked soldiers' experience.

Soldiering, that most 'manly' of activities, became, in trench warfare, 'feminine' passivity — and the rigid gender roles of the time made this a deeply uncomfortable psychological position for men to occupy. Rivers identified these conflicted gender roles as one of the main pressures that led to breakdown.

Homosexuality

Unacknowledged homosexual feelings are prevalent throughout *Regeneration*. Sassoon discusses his homosexuality in a covert way with Rivers in their conversation in Chapter 6 about Edward Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex* (1907). Sassoon's trust in Rivers is revealed in this conversation — contemporary hostile public attitudes to homosexuality were shown in the trial and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde (1895) and the fear created in 1918 by MP Noel Pemberton Billing's threat to release a 'Black Book' containing names of 47,000 eminent gay people who had been blackmailed by the Germans into committing treason.

Female voices

'In a lot of books about war by men women's voices are totally silenced. The men go off and fight and the women stay at home and cry...[T]he women in the trilogy are always deeply significant' (Barker in Reusch 2001). The 'munitionettes' illustrate the liberating impact of the war on working-class women's lives, in terms of their earning power (Sarah earns five times more in the armaments factory than as a domestic servant), their greater sexual freedom and their escape from domestic abuse while their husbands are away at war.

It is rare to get the female perspective in war fiction. *Regeneration* and its sequels are some of the first novels since Rebecca's West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) or Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) to focus on the domestic effects of shell shock.

Literary context

Barker creates a richly textured novel through referencing a range of other writing, from fleeting allusion (the conversation of the 'munitionettes' in the pub is based on Part II, 'The Game of Chess', in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, 1922) to quoting in full, most significantly the poems of Sassoon and Owen. Barker alters Wilfred Owen's poems so that the reader witnesses Owen and Sassoon editing them; this **metatextual** move allows Barker to draw the reader's attention to how meaning is constructed in texts.

The poems reinforce key elements. For example, Rivers describes Sassoon as 'the hammer', beating him into confronting the ethical minefield of his job — to cure men of madness to send them back into the madness of the war. Rivers' initial response is detached — '[the poems had] been given to him as a therapist... and from that point of view they were certainly interesting' (Ch. 3) — but his later tearful reaction to 'Sick Leave' ('Rivers was not capable of saying anything' [Ch. 16]) shows Sassoon's poetry is integral to this process.

GLOSSARY

Metatextuality A form of intertextual discourse in which a text makes critical commentary on itself or on another text.

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RESOURCES

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