
"Regeneration" and "Private Peaceful": Correlations in Portrayal of Gender Question

Both *Regeneration* and *Private Peaceful* are set in the First World War, and are strongly shaped by time and memory. *Private Peaceful* shadows young Private Tommo Peaceful and his older brother Charlie, and is told in a simple yet eloquent style. It follows the brothers through the internal and external journey of war; in particular exploring the theme of attempting to come to terms with "living two separate lives in two separate worlds." Morpurgo not only portrays the atrocities of war for two young men, but also rural English life; one that is idyllic yet highly hierarchical. *Regeneration* displays the lives of soldiers in Craiglockhart psychiatric hospital and the staff who delivered their treatment. Barker stated in an interview with Wera Resch that "The trilogy is trying to tell something about the parts of war that don't get into the official accounts"; *Private Peaceful* is itself an account the private side of war, but like *Regeneration* places its characters' struggles in historically well-developed social and gender contexts.

Regeneration was written with a mixed tone of irony and anger; both of which are missing from history books. This novel is especially known for showing the disillusionment, horror and turmoil that came after the Great War rather than in it. The theme of emasculation is undoubtedly one of the main themes in *Regeneration*; although less so in *Private Peaceful* as it is displayed particularly through the relationship the two brothers have with Molly, and the maternal role that is to be either taken on or rejected by the two boys regarding Big Joe. In *Regeneration*, the prominence of this theme is shown through a variety of different ways. The character of Prior in particular epitomises the conflicts felt by soldiers at that time. Prior is more of a complicated character than perhaps others in the novel, as the aforementioned conflicts were not only felt during and after his time as a soldier, they were also present on his childhood; hence the brief glimpse that the reader is allowed of Prior's past when his parents visit Craiglockhart. Prior's parents have two completely conflicting goals for their son, which may suffice as part of the explanation for his conflicted nature: shown in the stammering and confusion of language such as "thinking that perhaps if.." followed closely by "but no". Prior's mother protected him to such an extent that it made him grow up sensitive, whilst his father preferred that he be brought up in a more independent fashion, allowing him to solve his own dilemmas. His parent's perspectives are highly likely to have affected their son's attitude toward his life at the hospital, and his beliefs about the War.

Social class was also influential on Prior's state of inner turmoil; the label of "temporary gentlemen" being added due to his lower class birth. When Prior was asked by Rivers how he fitted in on the front, his "face shut tight" and he responded that it was "immediately clear who

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was accepted on the front and who was not.” Prior stated how he was aware he could never meet the expectations of high-class qualifications such as wearing “the right shirt”, or having been to “the right school”. Barker's inclusion of these Prior's experience and his social standing within British society reinforce the injustice of class distinctions and their damaging effects on a soldier's personal sense of masculinity during World War I. Similarly, the “snobbery” that would be inherent if a soldier did not fit in by wearing the right “khaki costume” is present. Tommo and Charlie Peaceful's experience on the war front not only inform readers of the prevalent nature of hierarchy within British culture in the early twentieth century, but Morpurgo also highlights the absurdity of such distinctions; the pettiness of concern behind which particular shade of khaki someone is wearing epitomising this. The value that is placed on officers of a higher rank (both on and off the battlefield) is a direct contrast to the disregard given for soldiers of lower social standing: it displays the "snobbery" within the British social structure that leads to the unjust and suspect view of soldiers as being purely expendable. Therefore, both Billy Prior and Thomas Peaceful's personal experiences directly contribute to our understanding of emasculation, and the strong presence of class discrimination on the war front.

Peter Hitchcock presents the idea that Barker “displaces the scene of Englishness not by attacking what is remembered but by exploring the process of memory itself.” Rivers was a close reader of Freud, and believed that the “war neurosis” that was apparent in the officers he treated was not necessarily the result of war alone. Hitchcock states that instead, it was “part of an ongoing psychological struggle between an officer's desire to forget the horrors of war and his memory's insistence that these events are actually the substance of what the war represents.” As a social realist, Barker portrays the hysteria and nightmares immediately shown as direct after-effects of war to be already present; perhaps a solid part of the cultural and social values that existed at that time. I believe this notion to be valid for both novels, and places different meanings over the idea of “regeneration”; in particular Barker's notion that unrealistic ideals of masculinity that existed prior to the war were a significant factor in causing breakdowns in so many men. For something to be regenerated, it must have already been generated, conditioned and produced; inferring that it was society that pre-empted the widespread neurosis in high-ranking officers, rather than the war itself. Emasculation is a recurrent theme throughout both books. All characters presented, be they Generals or low-ranking Privates, have a fear of emasculation, both in the context of the battle field in *Private Peaceful* and the war-hospital in *Regeneration*. For the latter, the dilemma can very easily be placed on the treatment itself. As patients, the men must turn over all power to the doctors and nurses who care for them. This aside, although Rivers is presented to worry about the effect this lack of control has on his patients, there are also concerns over whether the treatment itself is emasculating or not. The treatment method is to cure by talking, something which is said to go against the very “tenor of their upbringing”. As Rivers openly acknowledges that “they had been trained to identify emotional repression as the essence of manliness”, they may begin to associate with the

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concept of being twice emasculated. It is interesting to note that as Prior was encouraged to be as manly as possible in his childhood, he would rather undergo a physical submission as hypnosis rather than releasing his feelings in what he considers to be an emotional submission.

Trenches are symbolic in *Private Peaceful*, similarly to how they are in much of Wilfred Owen's poetry. They are linked, whether figuratively or literally, to graves. The trenches (and the death linked to them) are portrayed also to be a kind of allegorical 'saviour', for example how Sergeant Hanley barks orders to the brothers on how they should be digging; ".....dig, you lazy beggars, dig, 'cos when you get out there, that's all you got to hide in, God's good earth" implies that the act of digging as succumbing to the safety of the Earth is worth more as safety than any other measure. It is possible that the message Morpurgo is trying to portray is that death itself is the most peaceful conclusion. In comparison, trenches are displayed in a far more stifling and morbid fashion in *Regeneration*. Many of the patients at Craiglockhart have terrible memories and experiences of the trenches. Most notably Prior, who rediscovered a memory of himself waking up in a trench one morning, only to turn around and find two of his fellow soldiers killed by an explosive shell. Prior was forced to mix their remains with lime in order to reinforce the walls of the trench; implying that trenches were simply another place of horror instead of the refuge they were intended to be. Rivers' thoughts on trenches also equate to them being symbolic of graves: "they'd been mobilized into holes in the ground so constricting they could hardly move. And the Great Adventure—the real life equivalent of all the adventure stories they'd devoured as boys—consisted of crouching in a dugout, waiting to be killed." This implies the trenches to be the things "devouring" the men; symbolically as vaginas that emasculate the soldiers.

Another reading of this could be that Barker portraying the trenches as living graves could be to show how soldiers viewed death and the trenches alike as an escape from the atrocities they had to endure whilst still living. Elaine Showalter underlines the War as being "a crisis of masculinity and a trial of the Victorian masculine ideal." It was an intense crisis not only on this front, but in class relations that threw the previously established hierarchies by the Industrial Revolution into complete turmoil, but ironically it was the working-class ideal of masculinity that took the greatest toll. Also, Paul Fussell in his "*The Great War and Modern Memory*" states that "every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends." For example, within the first day of the Battle of the Somme, the British had suffered over 60,000 casualties, and by the end of the War had an almost non-existent proportion of their population being men under the age of thirty. Ironically, the industrialists would have gained financially, whilst the working classes had only patriotism and the promise of "a land fit for heroes" as their recompense. The after effects of "The Great Adventure" were not only that there was a greater urgency in individuals to prove their masculinity, but an old-school masculine "adventure" which actually destroyed masculinity altogether. For one, soldiers

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suffering from shell shock were considered effeminate and weak, and the atrocious conditions of trench shattered pre-war notions of “being a man.” Stoic courage could hardly be expected when under enemy fire in the trenches; a powerless state could never conform to the “Victorian ideal.” Following through the notion of mutism, it is a symbolic manifestation of the disempowerment and helplessness that the men feel.

In the novel, both Prior and Callan are affected by mutism after witnessing their own individual horrific events. It is interesting to note that as Rivers reasons mutism to be an effect of not voicing dissent or opinion over any part of one’s life, it occurs primarily in regular soldiers, not the officers; men who are totally at the mercy of their commanders. Another way of looking at mutism as a lack of communication is that it could possibly be an assertion of power in itself. Through the silence that they keep, these men are regaining power over those that are their commanders. Amanda Thursfield states presents this idea in the form of Rivers, who appears to the reader as “a sensitive and moral person”, yet who “protest[ed] little despite his obvious unease when he sits in on a nightmare therapy session with his colleague Dr. Yealland.” Thursfield implies that Rivers is a passive person, and this will inadvertently have an effect on his manner of treatment; namely the treatment of neurosis. Also, the drastically different ways in which Rivers and Yealland handle mutism displays some of their need to have control over their own patients. Also, Rivers’ method of treatment involves unmanly actions as patients are forced to discuss their feelings and discuss their emotions. For example, Willard was so opposed to the unmanliness of his condition that he refused to believe his paralysis was “anything other than a physical problem”. Yet, Rivers’ results are achieved in a sympathetic manner; therefore through further "emasculatation" the patients are able to improve.

Edwardian gender roles are briefly glimpsed in both novels; in *Private Peaceful*, it is shown in particular through the character of Molly, who epitomises what was considered right and proper in the early twentieth century. When Molly falls pregnant with Charlie’s child, Morpurgo portrays it to be “natural” and good. However, there is a noticeable change when referring to any older female characters in the situation of love or sexuality. The two main female characters are shown to block off any notion of sexuality; the two boys’ mother is completely asexual and accepts her proactive, caring role. Also the great-aunt is displayed to be passionate (particularly in her relationship with the Colonel) yet that passion is perhaps more vindictive and evil a passion than a genuine one. It is evident that the message society sent out to children was that passion and sexuality were exclusively for the younger generation. In comparison, the ideas for male sexuality and love between men presented in *Regeneration* have just as much potency as the previously mentioned ideas.

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