Subverting Heroism: War Trauma, Masculinity, and Ideological Control in Pat Barker's *Regeneration*

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Abstract: This article examines how Pat Barker's *Regeneration* subverts the traditional war hero narrative by dismantling its ideological foundations. Instead of praising heroism, this novel shows how it is built on silence, repression, and control. Anchored in contemporary trauma theory (Luckhurst, 2021) and Foucault's insight on psychiatric institutions, this analysis frames heroism not as valor but as political compliance. Siegfried Sassoon's public denunciation of the Great War is reclassified as psychiatric sickness, enabling British state to pathologize dissent and absorb it into full institutional control. Military psychiatry materialises not as a site of healing, but as a mechanism of depoliticization.

Keywords: Military Masculinity; War Trauma; Narrative Resistance; Ideological Control; Psychiatric Discourse; Historical Memory

Résumé: Cet article examine comment Régénération de Pat Barker subvertit le récit traditionnel du héros de guerre en démantelant ses fondements idéologiques. Au lieu de louer l'héroïsme, ce roman montre comment celui-ci repose sur le silence, la répression et le contrôle. Ancrée dans la théorie contemporaine du traumatisme (Luckhurst, 2021) et la réflexion de Foucault sur les institutions psychiatriques, cette analyse présente l'héroïsme non pas comme un acte de bravoure, mais comme une obéissance politique. La dénonciation publique de la Grande Guerre par Siegfried Sassoon est requalifiée de maladie psychiatrique, permettant à l'État britannique de pathologiser la dissidence et de l'absorber dans un contrôle institutionnel total. La psychiatrie militaire apparaît non pas comme un lieu de guérison, mais comme un mécanisme de dépolitisation.

Keywords: militaire, masculinité, traumatisme de guerre, résistance narrative, control idéologique, discours psychiatrique, mémoire historique

Introduction

Pat Barker's *Regeneration*, a British novel, set during the First World War, challenges the conventions of traditional war fiction. Through the lens of contemporary trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma as an unassimilable experience, Dominick LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through (2001), and Roger Luckhurst's emphasis on trauma's cultural mediation (2017), the novel reveals how psychological suffering behind ideals of masculine heroism and patriotic purpose. In fact, it contains no battle scenes, no gunfire, and no sweeping gestures of glory. Instead, it opens behind the front lines –within the walls of Craiglochart War Hospital –where psychological wounds speak louder than physical ones. In this setting, Barker unravels the ideological scaffolding of war, exposing how trauma, masculinity, and dissent are constructed, controlled, and rewritten by British state and military institutions.

The article discusses how *Regeneration* as a fictional text actively resists the recuperative narratives of war literature. Rather than rehabilitating the myth of heroism, Barker focuses her narrative on the psychological and ideological costs of sustaining it. Through figures such as Siegfried Sassoon and Dr. Rivers, the novel dismantles the traditional heroic ideal and reimagines war trauma not as a private affliction, but as a product of class, ideology, and disciplinary power.

While many contemporary novels such as James Lloyd Carr's *A Month in the Country* (1980), Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* (1993), and Helen Dunmore's *The Lie (2014),* depict trauma as a quiet burden endured in silence, often reinforcing a stoic ideal of masculinity, Barker takes another path. In *Regeneration,* trauma speaks aloud. It resists. It disrupts. It refuses containment, within narratives of redemption or honour.

The first section traces how Barker resists recuperative war myths by showing how dissent is neutralized through psychiatry and narrative control. The second turns to the contradictory demands of wartime masculinity, through the liminal figure of Dr. Rivers, a healer caught between empathy and enforcement. Across both sections, *Regeneration* emerges as a profoundly ethical novel, one that mourns not only lives lost in war, but also the voices silenced by its myths.

By amplifying these voices, fractured, defiant, and unresolved, Barker compels us to rethink how trauma is politically remembered, how manhood is intellectually constructed, and how literature bears witness to the cost of both.

Through this gesture, Barker questions not only wartime institutions, but also the narrative frameworks through which war is memorialized. As such, *Regeneration* situates itself within the revisionist tradition. Yet, its critical force, however, lies in unveiling the subtle mechanisms of power that render forgetting therapeutic and dissent pathological. This narrative rupture begins with the dismantling of the war hero ideal and its embedded structures of silence, duty, and moral compliance.

I. The Heroic Ideal Dismantled: Trauma and the Collapse of Military Mythology

Pat Barker's *Regeneration* opens at a moment of ideological rupture, where the psychological toll of war becomes irreconcilable with its nationalistic justifications. By centring the narrative on Siegfried Sassoon's public denunciation of the war, Barker subverts the traditional war narrative: she dismantles the myth of willing sacrifice, and refigures war as an ideological construct designed to be sustained through coercion and historical revisionism.

In contrast to the stoic heroism of earlier British war literature, Sassoon's resistance disrupts the war's self-legitimizing logic. The narrative exemplifies the apparatus through which dissent is not silenced, but anthologized–absorbed into the cultural memory in ways that ultimately reinforce the very ideologies it opposes.

> I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust. 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 practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacence with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize. (P. Barker, 2007, pp. 5-6)

While not an outright anti-war statement fundamentally resonates as a conscientious and ethical protest destabilising political leadership and the legitimacy of the war. Through these well-chosen words, Barker indicates that the military does not yet engage with Sassoon's critical insight as a political argument. Instead, it reconfigures his dissent as a psychiatric disorder, reframing ideological opposition as a symptom of mental instability. This is very significant with regard to Michel Foucault's theory of the medicalisation of deviance, wherein institutions define and regulate behaviours that threaten prevailing power structures (Foucault, 1961, 101). By institutionalising Sassoon, the military ensures that his

opposition is depoliticised and contained, preventing his protest from catalysing broader resistance.

Building on this Foucauldian perspective, Lisa Blackman (2019) offers a powerful reminder that psychology is never a neutral science. It does not simply map the mind as it is. It actively shapes our very understanding of what it means to be human. “Through what she calls “veridical practices”, psychology produces “‘fictions which-function-in-truth’”, narratives that may not be factually accurate. Yet, they are treated as truths with real consequences. These fictions determine which forms of suffering are granted recognition and compassion, and which are denied, ignored, or pathologized (L. Blackman, 2019, 12)

Worse, once there, his dissent is not engaged with but instead reclassified as psychiatric distress, allowing the military to neutralize his protest without having to address its political validity.

In that vein, Barker does not merely expose how war neutralises dissent; she also deconstructs the broader myth of war as a crucible for masculine self-actualization. Unlike conventional war narratives that depict trauma as a step toward personal transformation, *Regeneration* does not depict healing as inevitable. At first glance, this corroborates Cathy Caruth’s model of trauma as an inassimilable rupture –a disruption that remains trapped in the unconscious, returning in unpredictable ways (C. Caruth, 2001, 153). This is particularly evident in Billy Prior’s intrusive hallucinations, which collapse temporal boundaries between past and present*:* ‘When I woke up, the pavement was covered in corpses. Old ones, new ones, black, green.’ […] ‘People were treading on their faces*.’* (Barker, 14). Here, Barker’s prose is deliberately stark, compressing past and present into a single, fragmenting and fragmented moment. The matter-of-fact tone underscores the persistent nature of the memory’s return,

reinforcing Caruth's claim that trauma disrupts temporal order. Billy Prior does not simply recall the war; he rather relives it involuntarily: his body and mind continue to register and manifest its violence.

Still, *Regeneration* resists being fully understood through Caruth's framework alone. While the novel certainly portrays trauma as repetitive and disruptive, it does not suggest that trauma is wholly inexpressible. Caruth's model assumes that trauma defies historical contextualization, but Barker instead shows how trauma is shaped by class, military psychiatry, and ideology. This adheres more closely to Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting-out" and "working-through", where trauma is not merely a rupture in consciousness but a socially mediated condition (D. LaCapra, 2001, 143).

Post-2015 trauma studies further make the distinction more puzzling. An outstanding example is Roger Luckhurst (2017) who challenges Caruth's universalising trauma framework. He argues that trauma must be understood through its institutional and cultural mediation, rather than as an abstract psychological rupture (R. Luckhurst, 2017, 89.)

Regeneration reinforces this argument by depicting trauma not merely as battlefield wounds - whether internal or external –but as a state regulated by medical and military institutions.

Dr. Rivers' psychiatric treatment clarifies this historically contingent model of trauma. Unlike Caruth, who suggests that trauma remains beyond speech, Rivers actively encourages articulation, negotiation, and critical engagement. His work with Sassoon does not just reaffirm that trauma exists in an endless, repetitive loop; rather, it suggests that while war psychological wounds do not fully heal, they can at least be examined and partially processed.

While Sassoon's case supports Rivers' more dialogic model of treatment, Prior complicates this framework. Unlike Sassoon, whose elite status affords him a degree of institutional protection, Prior's traumatic state is not only psychological but also a class-based struggle. One of Rivers' analyses confirms it:

> Mutism seems to spring from a conflict between wanting to say something, and knowing that if you do say it the consequences will be disastrous. So you resolve it by making it physically impossible for yourself to speak. And for the private soldier the consequences of speaking his mind are always going to be far worse than they would be for an officer. (P. Barker, 2007, 96)

Through Rivers' response to trauma and repression in wartime setting, underscoring the unequal consequences of speech for soldiers based on ranks, Barker highlights that trauma is not equally experienced. It is stratified by institutional power. Characters such as Officer Sassoon are afforded a controlled space to articulate their distress, whereas working-class soldiers such as Prior, a working-class Officer encounter a psychiatric system far less sympathetic. Rivers gives voice to that distinction in a deep personal observation, as he reflects on how trauma manifests differently across class lines:

> What you tend to get in officers is stammering. And it's not just mutism. All the physical symptoms: paralysis, blindness, deafness. They're all common in private soldiers and rare in officers. It's almost as if for the… the labouring classes illness has to be physical. They can't take their

> condition seriously unless there's a physical symptom. And there are other differences as well. Officers' dreams tend to be more elaborate. The men's dreams are much more a matter of simple wish fulfilment. (P. Barker, 2007, 96)

River's clam and objective observation underscores how psychological suffering is filtered through British institutional class hierarchies. For working-class soldiers, trauma must often be made visible. Thus, it is translated into mutism, paralysis, or other-physical symptoms, to be acknowledged at all. This asymmetric recognition of suffering is not simply a narrative choice; it highlights deeper structures of power embedded in the logics of British psychiatry and military authority.

Regeneration overtly challenges the idea –central to Cathy Caruth's trauma theory –that trauma is universally unspeakable. According to her formulation, trauma is not immediately accessible to consciousness, but only reveals itself belatedly, through symptoms or indirect expressions. As Caruth writes,

> trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an indi vidual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on. (C. Caruth, 1996, 4)

Even in cases where trauma ties to 'speak', its message remains fragmented and elusive: "it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available." (C. Caruth, 1996, 4)

And yet, if trauma were truly beyond articulation, then class differences should not shape whose pain is recognized and whose is denied, or overlooked. But in Barker's novel, trauma is not a solitary, inexpressible inside wound sealed within the individual. It is a socially defined condition, one shaped by a tryptic power: rank, privilege, and institutional response. In other words, suffering, here, is never neutral. It is filtered, judged, and wilfully silenced, depending on who suffers, and how.

Beyond the depiction of war as a mere event that inflicts trauma, Barker exposes it as a self-sustaining ideological system, one that justifies its own existence by reshaping suffering into sacrifice. Mark Rawlinson, in a seminal article entitled "The Motif of Sacrifice in Literature and Culture of the Second World War*"* in *Sacrifice and Modern War Literature*: *From the Battle of Waterloo to the War on Terror* (2018), points out:

> Sacrifice, considered as a conceptual and figurative tool, does not make it easy for us to distinguish between an individual exchanging his life for another's by a voluntary act, and an individual who has been sacrificed by the issue of an order, or indeed by the decision of a state to go to war in the first place, though the cases are clearly distinguishable when set out in this way (M. Rawlinson, 2018, 162)

In addition, Barker does not just show war as something that causes pain; she reveals how it works as a system that justifies itself by turning that pain into something it calls noble—into sacrifice. In her view, war literature often plays a role in this process by giving suffering a meaning it might not naturally have. The ideological function of war literature, then, often lies not in the glorification of combat, but in regulating whose trauma deserves to be granted

meaning, and whose is dismissed. As these authors further emphatically notes, without hesitation, “It matters whether, in making a sacrifice, you are exchanging at a profit or a loss, but it matters more whether or not you are the something that is being exchanged.” They make visible the classed, gendered, and institutional asymmetries behind state-sanctioned narrative of heroism – where the pain of the privileged may be enshrined as noble sacrifice, while the suffering of the working class is often depersonalized, pathologized, or erased altogether.

Barker’s insistence on this erasure of working-class suffering is fully evident in the above contrast between Sassoon’s well-documented protest and Prior’s marginalization struggle. Sassoon’s dissent is archived, debated, and remembered through institutional control. Prior, by contrast, exists at the periphery of historical memory; his suffering scrutinised but never fully legitimised.

Such stratification of suffering, and the silencing of dissent are also portrayed as consequences of war mechanisms through which military masculinity is erected, enforced, and weaponised.

However, psychiatry was not the only institution enforcing ideological control within the military. Beyond the medicalization of dissent, the very definition of masculinity was manufactured to sustain the war effort. If psychiatry ensured soldiers’ obedience, military culture itself dictates who could be recognised as a ‘man’ in wartime. These two mechanisms –medical and ideological –worked in tandem to reinforce emotional suppression, hierarchical discipline, the marginalization of alternative masculinities, ensuring that only a specific, state-sanctioned model of masculinity could survive within the military structure. This transition from psychiatric coercion to the ideological construction of masculinity is crucial to understanding how military power operates at both an institutional and personal level.

II. The Construction and Enforcement of Military Masculinity

Rather than rather than glorifying wartime masculinity, *Regeneration* exposes the British military's contradictory and unrealistic construction of manhood. It reveals how the very forces that uphold it –stoicism, obedience, and emotional repression – also accelerate its collapse. The psychological toll of war gradually exposes masculinity not as a natural trait, but as an ideological fabrication. As Ní Aoláin, et al. (2011) explain "Military cultures are intimately correlated with practices and cultures of masculinity." In wartimes, that misogynistic perception reinforces gendered discourses that elevate men to "a world of arms and glory" and relegate women to passive roles of "birthing and mourning (F. Ní Aoláin et al, 2011, 109). These masculinity perceptions persists even in peacekeeping, which remains "a deeply masculine and masculinized affair", shaped by the figure of the male saviour (F. Ní Aoláin et al, 2011, 110).

This perspective, advanced by Ní Aoláin, illustrates how militaries remain predominately male institutions, that embed soldiers in a cultural of masculinity coined by toughness, control, and dominance.

In *Regeneration*, military masculinity functions as a disciplinary mechanism. Thus, it aligns with R. W. Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity –the idea that dominant gender ideologies reinforce both patriarchal and military power structures through emotional suppression, behavioural conditioning, and the marginalisation of alternative masculinities (Sasson-Levy, Orna, 2016, 111). This illogicality is most powerfully revealed in Dr Rivers' realisation that the very ideals he enforces –emotional repression, discipline, and endurance – inflict deep psychological damage through the war –not only on his patients but on himself.

> 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. And yet he himself was a product of the same system, even perhaps a rather extreme product. Certainly the rigorous repression of emotion and desire had been the constant theme of his adult life. In advising his young patients to abandon the attempt at repression and to let themselves feel the pity and terror their war experience inevitably evoked, he was excavating the ground he stood on. (P. Barker, 2007, 50)

Emotional repression, as emphasised in this quotation, is ingrained as the foundation of armed conflicts, shaping men's identities while simultaneously destabilizing and disfiguring them. The rigid expectations of manhood are reinforced through blunt, staccato phrasing: "Men who broke down, or cried, or admitted to feeling fear, were sissies, weaklings, failures. Not men." (Barker, 2007, 50). This harsh structure cements the belief that masculinity is defined by the absence of vulnerability. Yet Rivers' self-awareness –"And yet he himself was a product of the same system, even perhaps a rather extreme product."–reveals his internal conflict, acknowledging that he both upholds and is shaped by these ideals. His psychiatric role intensifies this contradiction, as he urges soldiers to "abandon the attempt at repression and to let themselves feel the pity and terror their war experience inevitably evoked" thereby destabilising the very ideology he was trained to uphold.

The phrase *"excavating the ground he stood on"* evokes a form of self-destruction, as if uncovering his own suppressed emotions while guiding others through theirs. The repeated references to "repression*"* reinforce the militant discipline with which these ideals are enforced, in order to suppress not only fear but also intimacy and self-expression. His hesitation –*'even*

perhaps'–signals an internal struggle, and reveals how profoundly repression has shaped his own identity.

War-era masculinity appears in *Regeneration* as a paradox*:* constructed through emotional suppression and rigid discipline, enforced as the standard of manhood under military conditions. Yet this mode ultimately collapse, with any surprise, under the psychological strain it imposes –fracturing figures like Sassoon and Prior, not as individual failures, but as embodiment of the contradictions embedded in the ideal itself.

As a liminal figure, Rivers oscillates between enforcer and dissenter of wartime ideals, completely destabilising the traditional hero archetype. His character aligns with modernist antiheroes who grapple with conflicting identities, exposing masculinity not as a static condition but as a site of internal conflict.

This reading of River's inner conflict resonates with Joanna Bourke's argument that military institutions were not merely reflected but strategically fabricated during wartime to sustain obedience and discipline (Bourke, 1996, 112). *Regeneration* thus reveals masculinity not as a fixed trait but a state-manufactured performance, one designed to produce obedience, emotionally repressed soldiers rather than autonomous individuals. As Orna Sasson-Levy points out, this model of military masculinity is inherently unstable:

> Militaries have been identified as masculine institutions not only because they are populated by men, but also because they constitute a major arena for constructing masculine identities in society at large. […] Hegemonic definitions of the military often conflate with hegemonic masculine culture, which is based upon the exclusion—and sometimes

> oppression—of women. (Sasson-Levy, Orna, 2016, 109-110)

This blatant contradiction between hyper-masculine toughness and passive submission to authority is also another problematic paradigm that Barker unpacks throughout *Regeneration.*

Contemporary scholarly analysis, including Woodward and Jenkings (2018) further explores this instability, arguing that modern war narratives often highlight the "fragility and performative nature of military masculinity," emphasizing that it is not an innate biological trait but an ideology imposed through rigorous discipline and psychological manipulation (Military Identities in the 21st Century, 102).

One clear parallel in non-conflicted states is the persistent presence of hyper-masculinity which often arises through the military's cultural influence across diverse societies. This suggests that the militarisation of masculinity is not limited to wartime conditions but is actively cultivated in peacetime as well. Such political management strongly reinforces rigid gender norms and institutional discipline.

Even outside the battlefield, militarized masculinity influences political rhetoric, national identity, and the ways in which societies conceptualise strength and authority. Barker's *Regeneration* ultimately exposes how these constructs remain embedded in the very institutions that sustain war, ensuring that masculinity remains an ideological vehicle for both control and systemic violence.

However, psychiatry was not the only institution enforcing ideological control within the military. Beyond the medicalization of dissent, the very definition of masculinity was manufactured to sustain the war effort. If psychiatry ensured soldiers' obedience, military

culture itself dictated who could be recognized as a 'man' in wartime, reinforcing emotional suppression, hierarchical discipline, and the marginalization of alternative masculinities. This transition from psychiatric coercion to the ideological construction of masculinity is crucial to understanding how military power operates at both an institutional and personal level.

Yet, the reinforcement of military masculinity was not applied equally across all ranks. Officers, positioned at the upper echelons of military hierarchy, were afforded controlled spaces to process trauma, while working-class soldiers faced far harsher consequences for psychological distress. The ideological construction of masculinity was not just about performance; it was also about privilege. Understanding how class shaped the recognition of war trauma reveals yet another level of systemic control within the military.

Conclusion

Pat Barker's *Regeneration* is not just a novel about war; it a novel on the war within men. Beneath the surface of heroism, it uncovers the fault lines of ideology, class, and psychological ruin. The stoic soldier, the patriotic hero, the obedient man, each is unmade through Barker's pages.

Sassoon's protest and Rivers' doubt speak to a deeper truth: war does not merely wound bodies: it manufactures silence, distorts identity, and rewards repression. Masculinity in this world, is less a birth right than a burden, shaped by institutions, and broken under their weight.

What Baker offers, through her novel's complex polyphonic structure, is not healing, but reckoning. She does not glorify suffering; she interrogates the ideological machinery that demands it. And in doing so, *Regeneration becomes a* literary act of resistance, against myth, against forgetting, and against the quite silence of normalization.

In Barker's hands, war literature becomes memory's battlefield. And every voice she revives becomes a refusal to let the past fall silent, and war false ideals eternalize.

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