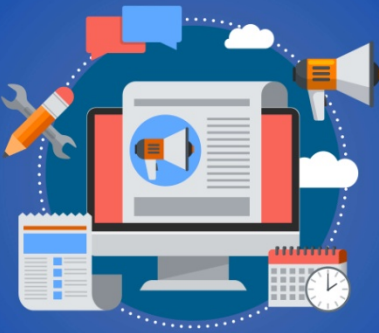


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War Literature: The Psyche of the Soldier and Re-integration into Society in *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Johnny got his Gun*

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Abstract:

The violence of war alters the human psyche and creates paranoia, trauma and other psychological issues which permanently violate their perception of reality. Even though the war ends in the geographical locale, it persists in the psyche of the soldiers which hinders their re-integration into society. Though their hearts yearns for the way things were, their broken minds are still in the limbo of war.

Erich Maria Remarque and Dalton Trumbo, through their novels, project the hindrances to a soldier's reintegration into society and throw light upon how war damages the psyche of an individual. In Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the protagonist Paul Baumer is the representative of soldiers who face the problem of re-integration into society. Disillusioned by life and society, he yearns to return to the "reality" of war which is more "real" to him than the so called "normal" nature of the society. The narrative of Trumbo's *Johnny got his Gun* is the interior monologue of a soldier who is a prisoner in his own mind whose reality is limited to his pre-war memories and is a soul-rendering narrative depicting the nihilistic undercurrent of war.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the psyche of the deployed soldiers who are faced with the violence of war and the subsequent failure of re-integration into society through the novels *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Johnny got his Gun*.

Keywords: Psyche, re-integration, prisoner, paranoia, trauma, war.

Introduction

"War does not determine who is right - only who is left". This quote by Bertrand Russell aptly portrays the madness of war. In war the cause or the morality of said cause does not matter. The only parameter of victory is the result. Human civilization has seen its fair share of wars in its millennia of existence, but none were as devastating or destructive as the World Wars. The First World War (1914-18) devastated the world in a hitherto unforeseen fashion. The

romanticism of the Great War urged scores to join the “great cause” of defending their *Motherland* or *Fatherland*. This led to a casualty count of such a magnitude that only the II World War could kill more. According to some estimates, the casualty percentage of the mobilized stands at 57%, that is out of the total deployed personnel 57% are either wounded or captured as prisoners of war or dead.¹

When an individual is exposed to such a magnitude of death, devastation and destruction, their minds shut down or adopt means to repress the trauma. This leads to the creation of various psychological issues which affects the individual’s psyche on a primary level. The two novels *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Johnny got his Gun* throw light upon two of the most important issues; that of the devastation of the human mind and the verisimilitudinal nature of memories. The novels focus on the psyche of the deployed and the way their lives change due to the traumatic experience of war. The misplaced romanticism of war is questioned and the answer that is arrived upon is not pretty. The lives of Joe and Paul are inexplicably destroyed and their beings damaged. Their psyches are plagued with the question: Is reality anything more than a figment of our consciousness? What is reality? The novels explore such psychological dilemmas faced by an individual who is deployed on the Front and their subsequent grapple with altered reality.

Romantisisation of War and Psyche of the Soldier:

Throughout history war has been seen as something noble, brave and gallant. Medieval Knights were held in high esteem by the populace and that idealization has been passed on to the modern day soldier. They are seen as selfless and brave; as someone who is willing to lay down their life for their country. This idealization of war has led to various famous literary works being written which has further romanticized war. This romanticism of war appeals to the fiery passions of young men who are searching for a cause to believe in. Such emotion is exploited and the young are enlisted to serve in the army for the “cause”. And the greatest cause in the history of human civilization was the I World War.

The I World War was one of the most brutal and devastating of wars that the human race has seen. And yet it was also one of the most romanticized. People used to throng to volunteer themselves for the country which was seen as noble. The deployed soldiers, those who were unlucky enough to return to their homes, displayed signs of *shell shock*, which the Merriam-Webster defines as “affected with shell shock or combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder”

¹ White, Matthew. *First World War Casualties*. Historical Atlas of the Twentieth Century.

and the Cambridge Dictionary as “mental illness caused by experiences of war.” Psychologists opine that shell shock is the forerunner to PTSD as both are diagnosed with the similar symptoms. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is the condition where the patient suffers from severe anxiety and depression after a shocking experience such as war. PTSD is a common condition found in soldiers who have been to war.

In *All Quiet on the Western Front* we see how the cheerful and lively protagonist Paul becomes a depressed and defeated individual. He says “*my companions at the Front are the only truth I know*”. His life has lost all its meaning as he believes, “*My knowledge of life is limited to Death*”. His blind belief in the *Fatherland* has now been destroyed. He understands the futility of war yet his life is but that barrage of gunfire. His reality has become the war. He says “*There is no argument about the meaning of life because there is no meaning*”. His notions of war have undergone a drastic change and now he sees the devastation and futility. When Paul goes home, his mother asks him, “*Was it very bad out there Paul?*” Paul states “*Mother what should I answer to that! You would not understand, you could never realize it. And you never shall realize it*”.²

In *Johnny got his Gun*, the protagonist Joe says “*Nobody but the dead know whether all these things people talk about are worth dying for or not. And the dead can’t talk. So the words about noble deaths and sacred blood and honor and such are all put into dead lips by grave robbers and fakes who have no right to speak for the dead*”.³ He is very straightforward in his views that the romanticizing of war is nothing more than propaganda. Joe further questions,

“Did anybody ever come back from the dead any single one of the millions who got killed did any one of them ever come back and say by god i’m glad i’m dead because death is always better than dishonor? Did they say i’m glad i died to make the world safe for democracy? Did they say i like death better than losing liberty? Did any of them ever say it’s good to think i got my guts blown out for the honor of my country? Did any of them ever say look at me i’m dead but i died for decency and that’s better than being alive? Did any of them ever say here i am i’ve been rotting for two years in a foreign grave but it’s wonderful to die for your native land? Did any of them say hurray i died

² Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Trans, Brian Murdoch. London:Vintage,1996.

³Trumbo, Dalton. *Johnny Got His Gun* (pp. 119-120). Kensington. Kindle Edition.

*for womanhood and i'm happy see how i sing even though my mouth is choked
with worms?"*⁴

Experiences where the deployed face death and devastation of unfathomable horror leaves a mark on the psyche of the individual creating scars on the psychological fabric of the individual. In the two novels we see how the protagonists Joe and Paul, though of differing physical capabilities, experience the same psychological prison; that is both of them become prisoners in their own mind. In Remarque we see how Paul becomes increasingly defeatist and at the end says,

"I am very quiet. Let the months and years come, they can take nothing from me, they can take nothing more. I am so alone, and so without hope that I can confront them without fear. The life that has borne me through these years is still in my hands and my eyes. Whether I have subdued it, I know not. But so long as it is there it will seek its own way out, heedless of the will that is within me."

Psyche and Trauma:

Psyche is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as the mind, or the deepest thoughts, feelings, or beliefs of a person or group⁵ and any event which damages or scars it is traumatic. When faced with such an event the human body experiences PTSD – a disorder in which people persistently re-experience the traumatic event in their thoughts and dreams.⁶ Other researches show that exposure to bombardment and artillery fire also leads to shell shock and PTSD. Another trauma related psychological issue is *hypervigilance*. It is characterized by increased sensitivity to sounds, lights and other seemingly “normal” environmental stimuli and is doubled with a constant phobia of danger. The patients generally are aware of their *hypervigilant* senses unlike individuals with paranoia. They are constantly on their guard, show extremes reactions to unexpected noises, and are generally insomniacs.

In the novels we see the protagonists battling their psyches which have succumbed to such trauma. In *Johnny got his Gun* we can see Joe’s battle with the natural order of things as he tries to overcome the hand he is dealt with. One interpretation of the narrative is that Joe’s stream of consciousness is his consciousness trying to come out of the shackles of the trauma which he faced. His near impossible state of being is a metaphor for the prison in which his psyche is

⁴ Trumbo, Dalton. *Johnny Got His Gun* (pp. 118-119). Kensington. Kindle Edition.

⁵<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/psyche>

⁶ *Psychology* Vth Edition. Baron, Robert A. and Girishwar Mishra. Pearson India. 2018

enslaved. His state of being is a symbol of his state of mind which is slowly starting to give up. Joe says, *“He had no legs and no arms and no eyes and no ears and no nose and no mouth and no tongue. What a hell of a dream. It must be a dream. Of course sweet god it’s a dream”*.⁷ His whole being boils down to just his mind which at the end of the novel he surrenders to the almighty forces - In his last moment of consciousness in his last moment of life he would still fight he would still tap.⁸ His psyche is trying to be alive in the pockets of memory, a feat which is made all the more difficult due to the fact that his memories, dreams and reality are overlapping each other thus erasing his semblance of control over his sanity. He says, *“It was bad enough to think of going on for years and years in loneliness and silence and blackness. But this latest thing this inability to tell dreams from thoughts was oblivion. It made him nothing and less than nothing. It robbed him of the only thing that distinguished a normal person from a crazy man”*.⁹ In other words it destroyed his ability to differentiate illusion from reality.

Paul Baumer in, *All Quiet on the Western Front*¹⁰, on the other hand is an individual who has witnessed firsthand the devastation and destruction of war. Due to his experiences on the Front he came to realize that his very being has been altered and he now sees the war as the only reality. When he leaves for the Front after coming home on furlough he says, *“But I feel that now I am going back to my real home”*. The Front has become his home and the War his reality. His psyche has suffered so much trauma that he no longer flinches from the war. He is troubled when he goes home and says, *“I find I do not belong here anymore, it is a foreign world. I prefer to be alone, so that no one troubles me”*. He further states, *“I ought never to have come on leave”*. He has become so accustomed to the death and destruction that peace seems foreign and unwelcome to him; combat has become his “normal”. Paul states, *“I am very quiet. Let the months and years come, they can take nothing from me, they can take nothing more. I am so alone, and so without hope that I can confront them without fear”*. His psyche has been damaged by trauma so badly that he no longer sees the need to change his reality. Paul has entrenched himself into the war. Albert, Kat and others have become his reality and he says of them, *“My companions at the Front are the only Truth I know”*. War has become the central tenet of his life.

Reintegration into Society:

When an individual has faced so many traumas how can he be re-integrated into society? Will said individual be capable of leading a “normal” life? And what is normal to such a person?

⁷Trumbo, Dalton. Johnny Got His Gun (p. 64). Kensington. Kindle Edition.

⁸ Trumbo, Dalton. Johnny Got His Gun (p. 247). Kensington. Kindle Edition.

⁹ Trumbo, Dalton. Johnny Got His Gun (p. 103). Kensington. Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ Remarque, Erich Maria. All Quiet on the Western Front. Trans, Brian Murdoch. London:Vintage,1996.

Reintegration has previously been defined as “*the resumption of age, gender, and culturally appropriate roles in the family, community, and workplace*”¹¹. But when soldiers return home after being in combat for an extended period of time they show symptoms of nightmares, anxiety, flashbacks and memories, nervousness, fear, being easily upset, feelings of rejection, guilt, and anger.¹² In Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* Paul is guilt ridden when his friend dies. He blames himself for not saving his friend’s life. And when he returns home on furlough he is astounded as he no longer recognizes the place, though it has not changed. He was no longer the young, carefree youth. He was a soldier. He says,

*“And even if these scenes from our youth were given back to us we would hardly know what to do. The tender, secret influence that passed from them into us could not rise again. We might be amongst them and move in them; we might remember and love them and be stirred by the sight of them. But it would be like gazing at the photograph of a dead comrade; those are his features, it is his face, and the days we spent together take on a mournful life in the memory; but the man himself it is not”.*¹³

No amount of memories or any such advances can stir the passions that they once felt. So when they venture into the society they feel out of touch, alienated, almost otherworldly. This leads them to realize that the world which they thought was theirs no longer exists. It ceased to exist as soon as they went into combat. They can no longer feel the same way they felt, they no longer see what they used to and they no longer function the way they are supposed to. They felt the struggle; there was a terrible emptiness inside them, sadness, a need to be a part of the world, and to be appreciated again. The things that Trumbo’s fictional character in the story, Joe Bonham, had yearned for—the smell of fresh air, the smell of a woman’s perfume, a long walk in the woods, to be with other human beings, to feel connected to others again—were things¹⁴ soldiers yearned for yet were unable to realize.

“Old soldiers never die; they just fade away”. said the American General Douglas MacArthur. Like Paul and Joe, soldiers who have returned home simply fade away because they have nothing to remember them by. Their achievements in the field of battle are but side notes in

¹¹ U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs [DVA] (2010). VHA Handbook 1172.04: Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Individualized Rehabilitation and Community Reintegration Care Plan. Washington, DC: Department of Veterans Affairs.

¹² Wegner, Beth (2011) *"The Difficult Reintegration of Soldiers to Society and Family After Deployment,"* ESSAI: Vol. 9, Article 41. p.151

¹³ Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Trans, Brian Murdoch. London: Vintage, 1996.

¹⁴ Trumbo, Dalton. *Johnny Got His Gun*. Kensington. Kindle Edition.

history and their ideals have been buried under artillery fire. They understood that war is futile and as Joe puts it, “*How could you believe or disbelieve anything anymore? Four maybe five million men killed and none of them wanting to die while hundreds maybe thousands were left crazy or blind or crippled and couldn't die no matter how hard they tried*”. Joe's metaphoric stream of consciousness and his inability to differentiate between illusion and reality leads one to conclude that he is no longer in command but his “reality” is. The illusion has become his “normal” and he no longer dwells in our reality. Paul, on the other hand, has become so disillusioned and bitter that he no longer believes in anything. He says, “*my thoughts stop and will not go any farther. All that meets me, all that floods over me are but feelings--greed of life, love of home, yearning for the blood, intoxication of deliverance. But no aims*”.¹⁵ Any life that he had lead before the war has ceased to exist. His beliefs and passions have long been buried under the rubble of artillery shells and his life has turned hollow. He says,

“And men will not understand us--for the generation that grew up before us, though it has passed these years with us already had a home and a calling; now it will return to its old occupations, and the war will be forgotten--and the generation that has grown up after us will be strange to us and push us aside. We will be superfluous even to ourselves, we will grow older, a few will adapt themselves, some others will merely submit, and most will be bewildered;--the years will pass by and in the end we shall fall into ruin”.¹⁶

Conclusion:

In the novels we see how war changes people and how the constant atmosphere of violence devastates the human mind. When the trauma crosses the threshold of our psyches, it creates paths to shelter its self. Paul and Joe were your average happy-go-lucky youth who, after getting enlisted, changed drastically. The illusion of the ideals for which they had enlisted slowly vanished and they were faced with the naked reality of war. They came face to face with the brutal devastation and they realized the stupidity of violence. “*We know only that in some strange and melancholy way we have become a waste land*”. says Remarque – a desolation which resonates with lost hope of life. Paul, who had found solace in his books, could no longer muster the same passion for words. The closing shot of the movie *All quiet on the Western Front* shows a shadow of Paul's former youthful hope when he spots a bird and starts to sketch it. When it flies away he stands to search for it, forgetting that he is in the trenches. Before he

¹⁵ Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Trans, Brian Murdoch. London: Vintage, 1996.

¹⁶ Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Trans, Brian Murdoch. London: Vintage, 1996. p.139.

realizes it a lone sniper shot resonated and Paul crumbles forward. War has snuffed the last hope he had.

Joe's journey, on the other hand, was drawn out and long. His consciousness had been battling against the "forces" which wanted to keep him under. He rebelled and fought yet was powerless to resist their shackles. Joe says, "*He was a dead man with a mind that could still think. He knew all the answers that the dead knew and couldn't think about. He could speak for the dead because he was one of them. He was the first of all the soldiers who had died since the beginning of time who still had a brain left to think with. Nobody could dispute with him. Nobody could prove him wrong. Because nobody knew but he*".¹⁷ His consciousness had battled long yet his life had been a battle that he lost.

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¹⁷ Trumbo, Dalton. *Johnny Got His Gun* (p. 122). Kensington. Kindle Edition.

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