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**Shell shock, war poetry and psychological trauma**

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**ABSTRACT**

Shell shock is a psychological disturbance whose first description appeared during World War I. As a medical condition, it was characterized by severe symptoms such as fatigue, tremor, confusion, nightmares and impaired sight and hearing. It took some time before the disorder could be related to the atrocities and brutalities that the soldiers experienced during the combats, especially during the bombings. While the genesis of the disorder was becoming clear to clinicians and governors, soldiers and civilians started to describe with memoirs, editorials, letters and particularly poetry, the suffering and the agony of the battlefields and the impact of the conflict on the casualties. The aim of the present article is to investigate the relationship between the clinical manifestations of this new mental disorder and the description that two war poets, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, made of the mental effects of war in their poems.

**Keywords:** *Shell shock, World War I, war poetry, Sassoon, Owen, psychological trauma*

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**Introduction:**

World War I, also known as *The Great War*, determined significant changes in many aspects of human life. It was the worst conflict in the history of humankind because of the great number of victims and the use of advanced military technology but, at the same time, it had a great influence on literary production, medical research and psychological studies [1]. In literature there was a transition from the literary style of the Victorian period towards a more realistic and crude representation of the atrocities of the trenches whereas in medicine a new syndrome was discovered, called *shell shock*, which was strongly related to warfare. Shell shock is a mental disorder whose clinical manifestations are discussed [2] in order to comprehend the literary style used by two war poets, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. These composers were also soldiers, they suffered themselves from this form of mental breakdown and represented with their own words and language the traumas and the dreadful realities they experienced. Before discussing the methodology used in this investigation, it is important to expose the facts and circumstances that first come to the attention of clinicians and officers, that is the insurgence of mental problems.

**The problem of mental breakdown related to Shell shock:**

Shell shock was first described by Dr. Charles Myers of the Royal Army Medical Corps [3] who, in the first months after the onset of the conflict, stated to treat soldiers who were unable to fight because they were suffering from symptoms such as confusion, loss of memory, dizziness and disorders of sleep. Other signs that were commonly observed in the comrades were loss of speech and smell, alterations of consciousness, flashbacks, paralysis of movements, visual problems and nightmares. In the beginning, this condition generated great astonishment and confusion among clinicians and commanders because the first impression was that the clinical manifestations were a physical consequence of the explosion of shells. Only in a second time, experts estimated that the symptoms were similar to those of a hysterical patient; also an overlapping with the clinical signs of neuroasthenia was observed. Hysteria [4] is considered, since the late nineteenth century, a medical disorder that usually affects women and caused by the traumas a patient might have experienced in childhood which, inexplicably, reemerge in the adult's life. Neuroasthenia is a term that has been coined many years before the conflict to define a neurotic condition characterized by lack of energy and a peculiar weakness of the nervous system. It took some time to understand that Shell Shock had a different medical etiology and that it was in a causal relationship with the explosion of a shell or bomb. The severity of such an event could determine what Dr. Myers and other mental health experts argued as an emotional trauma, that is an offense concerning the psyche rather than the body. These findings and considerations, although being challenging for researchers and doctors, were not accepted with pleasure by governors and people at home as well as the higher officials. In the first years of the Great War, skepticism towards shell shock among members of the Army was very common since the traumatized soldiers were frequently considered as cowards, weak people or even simulators of an imaginary disease [5] with the purpose of avoiding the conflict or obtaining some benefit from the state, likely a pension. Even at home, public opinion was divided between those who were compassionate and willing to help the poor soldiers and those who, similarly to the members of the Army, were critical towards the disturbing effects of war on men and could not accept the idea of a weak and feeble nation. Despite all the skepticism that surrounded the issue of Shell Shock, this new condition became a grim reality and a persistent issue that had to be tackled immediately and without hesitation. The treatment of the disorder was appointed to physicians in appropriate healing contexts, usually local hospitals that progressively became specialized centers for the treatment of shell shock and war traumas. One of the most important was Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh.

At Craiglockhart soldiers were admitted when on the front-line the first psychological manifestations were evident and their capacity to fight was severely invalidated. Patients were treated generally with occupational therapy but the recovery was not successful in all cases. It is worth mentioning two patients who were admitted at the hospital and who were both affected by shell shock. These two soldiers were Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, both capable of recollecting the memories of the horrors of the conflict and of expressing their personal experiences in a written form. Sassoon was already a famous poet before his hospitalization and the first to be admitted at Craiglockhart while Owen arrived in a second time. They both wrote significant compositions concerning the facts occurred in the trenches like the noise of bombings, the use of gas by the enemies and the fact that they witnessed the death of other comrades whose corpses were frequently blown up into pieces. Many of their works are emblematic of the traumatic effects of war on the human psyche and their representations of the symptoms are truly appalling.

### **Methodology:**

In this paper, three poems for each war poet have been analysed in depth to search the words and phrases as well as the figurative language used by the authors which clearly refer to the symptoms of shell shock. For the purpose of this investigation, it was important to detect terms, expressions or literary devices which refer to:

- physical conditions, typically injured bodies or dismembered limbs, that emphasize the idea of trauma;
- strong emotional reactions such as fear and terror, frequently associated with body responses or facial expressions;
- visual perceptions in the form of memories or mental images, which can be considered as representations of flashbacks;
- disorders of smell, typically the description of disgusting and repugnant odours, which commonly resemble hallucinatory states;
- problems of speech such as stammering or other language defects which are frequently observed in traumatized subjects;
- sleep disorders, typically in the form of nightmares which are related to anxiety and dismay.

All the above aspects related to shell-shocked soldiers can be considered as precursors of a clinical condition which was initially referred as to war neurosis and, later, to post-traumatic stress disorder, hereafter PTSD [6]. As a matter of fact, the term PTSD appears for the first time in 1980 in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) to describe the signs and symptoms typically associated with the veterans from the Vietnam War. A list of symptoms of the disorder adapted from Mayo Clinic is provided in Appendix 1 [7]. In addition, a list of literary devices is provided in Appendix 2 [8] for reference.

### **Discussion:**

In this section, the poems are discussed in two separate paragraphs: firstly, Sassoon's compositions, and, secondly, Owen's representations of shell shock. The full texts of the poems are available at [poemhunter.com](http://poemhunter.com).

#### ***Siegfried Sassoon***

An interesting representation of shell shock is given by Sassoon in the poem *The Rank Stench of Those Bodies Haunts Me Still*, a long composition of fifty-seven lines that provides a clear description of the psychological traumas of warfare. In fact, he recalls mental images of dead and wounded bodies, sounds of bombs and rifles as well as screams and laments, and even the smells of the battlefield. A scholar from Marian University, U.S.A. [9], suggests in her article about shell shock in WWI that the opening lines of the poem already express the memories of these tragic experiences, the will of the author to forget, as well as olfactory perceptions, especially when the bad and persistent smell of dead bodies is described (“The rank stench of those bodies.....And I remember things I’d best forget”). Other lines also refer to the symptoms of shell shock: in example, line 18 “Terror and ruin lurk behind his gaze” which represents the fear any soldier could have expressed with the eyes, which is typical of a terrified person. Moreover, lines 28-29: “Then I remembered someone that I’d seen / Dead in a squalid, miserable ditch”, recall the problem of flashbacks, the mental visions of the traumatizing experiences. The poem ends with a scenario that recalls death: in the last lines of the poem the author depicts a gray and gloomy day at the front-line where the body of a dead man is found, apparently dismembered and dishonored: “...one arm flung out....his sturdy legs were bent beneath bis trunk; heels to the skye”.

Another poem from Sassoon that should be taken into consideration is *Survivors*, a short poem of ten lines. The First World War Poetry Digital Archive [10] gives an interesting analysis of the poem in which the psychological traumas affecting the soldiers are clearly discussed. In the opening lines it is clearly stated that “..the shock and strain / Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk” and again in lines 5 to 7 the poet highlights the issue of “haunted nights”, “...the ghosts of friends who died” and of “the dreams that drip with murder” with a clear reference to the symptoms of nightmares and visions that typically affect the disturbed individuals. In the last line, the word “Children” metaphorically refers to the condition of the soldier who has eventually become like an infant, an age at which mental capacities are limited and the support of other people is fundamental for life. This last aspect is in clear contrast with the hope

expressed in the first line of the text and with the belief that the soldiers will fight again or even wish to re-engage in the conflict: “No doubt they’ll soon get well..”.

A third poem which is worth to be discussed is *Bombardment*, a short poem made of fifteen lines divided in three stanzas. In this work, the author describes the bomb attacks and the effects of the explosions on the soldiers who became sleepless, exhausted, close to death and to a nervous breakdown. Bombardments were eventually a stressful event that involved all soldiers as shown in lines 7 and 8: “The fourth night every man, Nerve-tortured, racked to exhaustion”. The condition of prolonged stress is a key factor for the onset of psychological and traumatic symptoms. There are similarities with the previous poem, *Survivors*, since the last lines of the composition may appear as a glimmer of hope, a positive attitude toward the conflict but it is rather an illusion since the truth is that there is little or no hope at all. In the end, it seems a false belief or, in medical terms, a psychological defense towards the stressful situations experienced by the combatants.

### Wilfred Owen

Owen was another soldier to be deeply disturbed by the conflict and, similarly to Sassoon, wrote many compositions about the atrocities of the Great War. There is a strong connection between Owen and his comrade Sassoon [12]. As a matter of fact, the influence of the latter was intense and positive and helped Owen to describe with sharpness and precision the uselessness of the conflict and the inhumane atrocities that eventually occurred during his service on the battlefields. The most important aspect was that Owen “... wrote to tell the truth: the honest, vivid, horrific truth about modern warfare”. Indeed, this poet was able to compose many poems on war events among which *Mental cases*, *Strange meeting* and *Dulce and Decorum Est* will be here discussed.

An outstanding representation of shell shock is undoubtedly given by *Mental cases* since the use of metaphors, similes and personification is relevant to the description of the effects of war on the mental stability of the soldiers [12]. The title of the poem already introduces the problem of psychological disorders while in the text there are several metaphorical expressions such as in line 2, “purgatorial shadows”, in line 9 “Sleeping, walk hell...these hellish?” and, in the last one, “Pawing us?”. The Purgatory is commonly known as a place of mental and physical pain and it is often represented as a gray and dark environment. It can also be considered as a sort of passage between hell and heaven in which tormented souls dwell waiting for their fate. In popular imagination, hell is the worst condition a person could ever experience since it evokes a mental idea of extreme sufferance and agony, like that of a severe mental breakdown. “Pawing us” refers to the effect of the conflict on all men who turn into beasts because the traumas endured have likely facilitated the expression of animal and primary instincts. The simile in line 4 “..like skulls’ tongues..” used by the poet to create a scaring, suffering facial expression similar to that of a shocked and frightened soldier. This form of expression is similar to the one described in line 18, “eyeballs shrink tormented” that, in the same way, gives the image of terror, panic as well as visual impairment. Personification used by the poet give further support to the distressing situation of the soldiers. It is worth mentioning two examples: line 7, “Misery shelters”, a strong expression that likely refers to the desolation of war and its effects on the human psyche and again line 10, “Memory fingers”, which eventually refers to one of the symptoms of shell shock, flashbacks, consisting in the recurring and tormenting memories of the traumatic events.

In *Strange meeting* the situation illustrated is that of a vision, a sort of dream in which Owen encounters a dead soldier in a place that is timeless and outside any objective reality, probably in France in the year 1918 [12]. The words used in the text are metaphorically indicators of the horrors of the conflict like “fixed eyes”, line 7 which represents the absence of life, the use of the word “blood” which is repeated several times likely to underline the massacres and the deaths. In addition, the confrontation with the enemy as shown in the last lines of the poem: “I am the enemy you killed, my friend.....Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed”. The technique used to express the war context by means of a dream-like state can also be considered as an indicator of shell shock since one of the symptoms of the disease is, in fact, the occurrence of nightmares, that is unpleasant and terrifying dreams that concern images of severe discomfort and panic. Even the dull, dark tunnel described in the text reflects the descent into a metaphorical hell and represent the poet’s own experience of the conflict which evidently included living in dug-outs and witnessing burials.

*Dulce et Decorum Est* is the most famous war poem [12] that represents the psychological distress that the poet himself experienced. Owen describes here a situation which was very common in the trenches: the use of gas that created severe physical effects on the soldiers’ lungs, skin and, most of all, on their mental functions as it is described in line 9: “...An ecstasy of fumbling”. The choice of these two words, ‘ecstasy’ and ‘fumbling’, gives the idea of an illusion or hallucination, thus an altered perception of the senses (also ‘blind’ and ‘deaf’), along with a condition of lack of energy (‘fatigue’ and ‘lame’) and gait instability (‘stumbling’). It is clearly a picture of the agony of the soldiers during the combats. The use of verbs in the gerund form, “guttering, choking, drowning”, line 16, describes the respiratory distress and creates in the reader the effect that the scene depicted is happening in the exact moment while reading. Expressions

that clearly refer to the symptoms of shell shock are in line 11, “..yelling out and stumbling”, line 7, “Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots” and the reference to nightmares in line 15: “In all my dreams, before my helpless sight”.

**Conclusion:**

To conclude, the analysis of these six poems provide a remarkable insight into the psychological trauma that affected the soldiers during WWI. Sassoon and Owen make both use of language that clearly refers to emotions and feelings, to anatomy and biology and also to sensations and perceptions. After all, the representation of mental distress is like a guiding thread that links the poets’ literary production. Sassoon is apparently less pessimistic than Owen who, by contrast, is more realistic and practical even in the choice of the titles of his poem. *Mental cases*, for example, is a sharp and brilliant reference to the problem of psychological trauma and of mental suffering.

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**Appendix 1 - List of PTSD symptoms**

<b>Intrusive memories</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recurrent, unwanted distressing memories of the traumatic event</li> <li>• Reliving the traumatic event as if it were happening again (flashbacks)</li> <li>• Upsetting dreams or nightmares about the traumatic event</li> <li>• Severe emotional distress or physical reactions to something that reminds you of the traumatic event</li> </ul>
<b>Avoidance</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trying to avoid thinking or talking about the traumatic event             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoiding places, activities or people that remind you of the traumatic event</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Negative changes in thinking and mood</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative thoughts about yourself, other people or the world</li> <li>• Hopelessness about the future</li> <li>• Memory problems, including not remembering important aspects of the traumatic event</li> <li>• Difficulty maintaining close relationships</li> <li>• Feeling detached from family and friends</li> <li>• Lack of interest in activities you once enjoyed</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty experiencing positive emotions</li> <li>• Feeling emotionally numb</li> </ul>
<b>Changes in physical and emotional reactions</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being easily startled or frightened</li> <li>• Always being on guard for danger</li> <li>• Self-destructive behavior, such as drinking too much or driving too fast</li> <li>• Trouble sleeping</li> <li>• Trouble concentrating</li> <li>• Irritability, angry outbursts or aggressive behavior</li> <li>• Overwhelming guilt or shame</li> </ul>

#### **Appendix 2 – List of literary terms**

<b>Figurative language</b>	A conspicuous departure from what competent users of a language apprehend as the standard meaning of words, or else the standard order of words, in order to achieve some special meaning or effect. Figures are sometimes described as primarily poetic.
<b>Simile</b>	A comparison between two distinctly different things is explicitly indicated by the word “like” or “as.” A simple example is Robert Burns, <i>“O my love’s like a red, red rose”</i> .
<b>Metaphor</b>	A word or expression that in literal usage denotes one kind of thing is applied to a distinctly different kind of thing, without asserting a comparison. For example, if Burns had said “ <i>O my love is a red, red rose</i> ” he would have uttered, technically speaking, a metaphor instead of a simile.
<b>Personification</b>	Another figure related to metaphor is personification, or in the Greek term, <i>prosopopeia</i> , in which either an inanimate object or an abstract concept is spoken of as though it were endowed with life or with human attributes or feelings. Milton wrote in <i>Paradise Lost</i> (IX. 1002–3), as Adam bit into the fatal apple, <i>Sky lowered, and muttering thunder, some sad drops Wept at completing of the mortal sin.</i>
<b>Victorian Period</b>	The beginning of the Victorian Period is frequently dated 1830, or alternatively 1832 (the passage of the first Reform Bill), and sometimes 1837 (the accession of Queen Victoria); it extends to the death of Victoria in 1901.
<b>Modern Period</b>	The application of the term “modern,” of course, varies with the passage of time, but it is frequently applied specifically to the literature written since the beginning of World War I in 1914.