

# Regeneration and birdsong essay



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The Great War stirred up many emotions during as well as after the event, which led to the expression of many attitudes born from experience, both direct and indirect.

The authors of *Regeneration* and *Birdsong*, Pat Barker and Sebastian Faulks, each explore a range of these views in their novels. In being such a complex, yet popular, topic in literature, the tendency is towards simply focussing on the negative consequences of World War One. However, by exploring a well-known topic in two unique ways Barker and Faulks reveal a deeper and more varied set of attitudes to the Great War. In the openings of both *Regeneration* and *Birdsong* Barker and Faulks reveal the protagonists' strong attitudes towards war, however the methods which they use to represent these views differ hugely. Barker chooses to open her novel with the real historical document of Sassoon's declaration and the effect of this is to firmly base the reader in the era of the First World War.

The military style language in the declaration expressed through such phrases as "wilful defiance" and "aggression and control" is direct yet poignant, as the reader can appreciate that these words would have had a real effect when they were first written by Sassoon. In contrast the romantic opening of *Birdsong* in Amiens, with "the picturesque feature of Saint Leu" and the "fishermen, slumped at their rods", is confusing, as this is not a typical opening for a novel about the First World War. The effect of starting the novel in such a unique way provokes some of the same feelings of interest and curiosity felt when reading Sassoon's declaration, without even mentioning the war. Despite the obvious differences between the openings of these two novels, they both evoke a sense of uneasiness and a feeling

that painful memories and experiences are about to be unlocked in both the characters and the reader. The notion of their being complex hidden depths to the views of the protagonists in their novels is further explored through central characters such as: Faulks' Jack Firebrace and Barker's Billy Prior.

Faulks presents Jack as one of his simplest characters but through this guise the reader is able to relate to Jack throughout the entire novel as he does not lose the sense of normality which many of the other characters do. On the arrival of the first letter from his wife Jack, "could not bring his mind to bear on the distant world her handwriting suggested", showing that Jack's character takes the attitude that his home life and the war are completely separate and should not come into contact. Billy Prior's character is presented by Barker in a slightly different way as his unresponsive approach to his interviews with Dr. William Rivers leads him to say; "you will never make me feel". This simple sentence conveys to the reader that Prior has distanced himself so much to cope with the war that he has lost the ability to feel and this technique helps Barker to show the reader that Prior's aggressive and often dislikeable temperament is his way of expressing his disgust of what is occurring on the battlefields of France.

The idea that war was often seen by new recruits as similar to the games they used to play as boys links closely with the attitudes of duty and honour which are apparent in both novels through the characters such as Ellis and Michael Weir in *Birdsong* and Sassoon's loyal friend Graves in *Regeneration*. Faulks deliberately introduces both Ellis and Weir to the readers with descriptions of their boyish looks; Weir with his "disarrayed hair" and Ellis the "red-haired subaltern". Through this technique of precise descriptions

Faulks is able to show the gradual erosion of these characters as Ellis' "gingerish hair had started to recede" and similarly Weir gradually loses his hair. Drawing the reader's focus towards the accurate descriptions of the characters looks and personalities means that Faulks can bring home to the reader that war was definitely not the heroic game in which most of the recruits believed they would be participating in. The attitude of being a good officer and gaining respect and honour is high up in the men's list of priorities at the beginning of war as Barker's character Robert Graves shows through his desire to stay in the war and fight it to the end.

However, the sense that this attitude has been thoroughly tested by the horrors of war can be seen through Graves' insistence that once you put the uniform on you "sign a contract" and when questioned by Rivers on his actual views on the war, he becomes agitated as his thoughts on Sassoon's declaration and his deeply embedded sense of duty are in conflict. Through focussing on individual characters' responses both physically and mentally to the realisation that war is not a game Barker and Faulks provide a deep insight into the conflicting attitudes to war that many of the men experienced. Ironically, although the war was not a boyhood game, Faulks and Barker are quick to show that war definitely involved young men who were little more than boys. In basing his novel during the war, Faulks is able to give a first hand account of characters' such as; Tipper "smiling madly" before he goes into battle and Goddard who "could not stop vomiting" when he goes out to recover the bodies of the dead men "He was only nineteen". To just as great effect Barker uses her setting of Craiglockart to show how the deaths of the young boys are shown through newspaper articles, and in

the mind of the shell-shocked men, like Prior who experienced the shooting of a young soldier at dawn who had tried to desert. Through expressing the distress of the men outside of the war environment Barker can strongly emphasize that boys as young as seventeen were killed, as many of them signed up early, with the impression that fighting in the war was heroic and exciting, highlighting the “deception” Sassoon discusses in his declaration.

Loss of faith due to the atrocities of the war is another attitude explored by Faulks and Barker. The hypocrisy of religion is scrutinized by Faulks in Part 1 of *Birdsong*, showing how even before the war, religion was still a contested issue. The character of Aunt Elsie, whose reputation of being religious is “based on her long widowhood and the large collection of missals, crucifixes and mementoes of pilgrimage”, is portrayed in stark contrast to the simple Christian character of Jack Firebrace. He is introduced to us with his back “supported by a wooden cross” and expresses his religion through his kindness and humanity as he feels: “I should at least do my duty as a Christian” when he thinks that Stephen is dead and consequently saves his life. In choosing to show religion in both peace and wartime Faulks can accurately portray how war tore apart the notion of strict traditional Christianity as not even Jack’s simple spirituality survives the whole test of war.

Barker’s distressing characterisation David Burns is a harsh example of the conflict between war and religion as even the more positive position of Rivers is swayed as he can see no regeneration in this man since “nothing justifies this”. Through the character of Burns, Barker is able to explore the concept of how Jesus Christ’s suffering on the cross was as horrific a death

as some of the men experienced. The confusion many of the men in war felt about religion stems from the idea of questioning how God could allow such suffering yet Burns is able to make some sense of his own suffering through considering Christ's death. This is a more complex issue concerning religion expressed by Barker, as through Burns she shows the reader that somebody "imagined" Christ's method of execution, linking to the view that the suffering in war time was perpetrated by men whom God gave the debatable gift of free-choice. This concept of the purpose of sacrifice is tackled by Faulks through the emotive, incredibly crafted, account of Brennan's need to give the mutilated body of his brother a proper burial.

Brennan's collected explanation to Stephen of how he feels "better" after facing the horrendous task of recovering the body, is not dissimilar to Burns' calm explanation to River's as to how he can take comfort in the notion of Christ's sacrifice. This hints at the idea that religion could offer the men some comfort as Brennan, despite the horrors he has faced, is content that he did not let his brother "lie there" as now "he'll have a proper burial. Despite expressing the admirably strong sense of hope for the survival of the souls of the soldiers, through Brennan's character, Faulks' ending to the chapter really brings home to the reader the immense courage of the men in the face of war as "All night (Brennan) sung for his brother, whom he had brought home in his hands". The idea of having a proper burial is also touched on by Barker through her use of Wilfred Owen's poetry in her novel in which the attitudes expressed in 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' are scrutinised. Sassoon's character questions Owen saying there is a

contradiction in the poem, as Owen appears to claim "there is no consolation" in the soldier's death yet ends the poem hinting there is.

Barker uses this exchange between these two real, turned literary, characters to express the attitude that the men could take "pride in sacrifice" as that was the only thing left to them. The insistence of Brennan's character that his brother should have a proper burial links in with the notion that the men should be remembered for what they achieved during the war, even if the war was being "prolonged by those who had the power to stop it". Poetry structural technique) The culmination of Faulks' views on the idea of burial and faith can be seen in his construction of Stephen's rescue from the tunnel. Faulks chooses for Stephen to be rescued by Lieutenant Levi, a Jewish German, and this rescue concludes with a complete change of faith in Stephen's character. The reader sees a little hope for the survival of humanity as "the two men fell into each other's arms", despite all the fighting that had occurred a short while ago between them.

The choice of Faulks to end the chapter with the phrase "the bitter strangeness of their human lives" shows the attitude that views on war are so varied and complex and not just as simple as the Christian notions of right and wrong. The fact that Stephen's character finds it in himself to forgive the German's shows that, in escaping his burial, Stephen can regenerate and that some sort of faith remained dormant in his character. However, a premonition can be read through Faulks' choice of a Jewish German as 'the war to end all wars' was to be repeated again in history and suffering was not to be given a proper burial. Attitudes towards the enemy are explored by both Barker and Faulks through their protagonists; Siegfried Sassoon and <https://assignbuster.com/regeneration-and-birdsong-essay/>

Stephen Wraysford. Both of these characters start out hating the enemy, as Sassoon went out on regular patrols with the sole intention of killing German's and Stephen only entered the war because of his unexplainable hatred of the Germans'.

Faulks' regularly adds reminders throughout the novel of this attitude through Stephen using taunts such as " They've killed your friends" to spur his men onto fight. This mind-set opens up the view that hating the Germans was what made many of the men fight as, without this passion, many of them would have given up. However, through the gradual wearing down of the characters in ' Birdsong', and the shrinking of the characters in Regeneration to; " the stammers" and " the stumbling walks" of men who had gone mad, the novelists depict how the endurance of the men was tested so far that they often forgot the reason they were fighting, in the face of the fact that the German's were in a frighteningly similar position to them. This view is revealed through Sassoon's focus changing to challenging the government through the declaration, and Stephen eventually finding a replacement for his anger through his rescue by Levi.

Through these two complex and pivotal characters' Barker and Faulks illustrate the view that the typical conventions of war were destroyed in The Great War as the heroic victor and the cowering losers of epic battles were one and the same at the end of World War One. The desperate desire of both of the authors to prove to the reader that the cruelty of war should not be taken lightly is expressed through their representation of civilians' views on war. In basing her book back home, Barker is able to show clearly some direct civilian reaction to war, especially through the character of Prior. Prior, <https://assignbuster.com/regeneration-and-birdsong-essay/>



like many of the other characters', has an intense hatred for civilians, sharing Sassoon's view that; civilians didn't have " sufficient imagination to realize" what was occurring throughout the war.

However, Barker juxtaposes this typical opinion of civilians with the views of Sarah Lumb, who challenges Priors' sardonic approach to his suffering by questioning " I suppose nobody else has got a sense of honour". Through introducing a female perspective to the horrors of war, Barker is able to show that women suffered greatly having to adapt to the former shadows of men their husbands and lovers became, as Sarah has already suffered the death of her fianci?? before meeting Prior. Through Sarah's fresh perspective on life Prior is able to regenerate, linking closely to Faulks' representation of Stephen's flourishing relationship with Jeanne, who makes him see that " There is a God" and Stephen's character is consequently regenerated through Elizabeth's baby. Faulks' choice of using time shift in his novel allows him to hold up a mirror to the reader as Elizabeth's outburst of " nobody told me..

. My God nobody told me" after he visit to the battlefields scrutinises the readers' own conscience and their own views on war. During war time, the only link between the civilians and the soldiers was through letters and both Barker and Faulks explore how far these misled civilians as to the true nature of the how the war was being fought. Faulks uses this structural device of letters throughout his novel to show the home lives of his characters. The letters of the characters before the Somme seem ironic as Tipper tells his parents he is going to " let Fritz have it! " and Jack lies to Margaret that he thinks they " will win a big victory", which hints that the men used their

letters as a way of trying to instil hope in themselves that the war would not claim them.

This suggests that it was not entirely the civilians' fault that they knew little about the war, and Barker uses similar example of Prior having to censor the letters the men sent home, which Sarah believes to be "disgusting", to stress this view. Despite this, Faulks makes sure he does not relieve all civilians of their duty to remember those soldiers who gave their lives, as the notion that war is "too large, too fraught and too remote" does not stop the character of Elizabeth from finding out about her grandfather, as without his survival, she would not be alive. Through using her character to read Stephen's diary Faulks provides the all important notion of posterity, as Faulks uses the idea of time shifts to remind all civilians of their duty to remember. Posterity is an important issue in the context of creative attitudes to war which are shown by both Barker and Faulks to be a positive outcome of war. Sassoon jokes to Owen that at least going back to the front will "help your poetry", and Stephen's character provides the poignant outlook that "the war proves us all with a daily lesson in anatomy", which fuelled his character's drawings and carvings.

These creative outlets not only provided links to the past for further generations to be able to experience the war, but also stopped the characters from going mad, as creating something from the destruction stopped them from going mad. Ultimately Faulks expresses this notion of creation through the ending of his novel and the birth of the new life of baby John which brings the circle of a regenerated life to a close. War destroyed lives but it also had the ability to create new ways of thinking. The

continuation of love and humanity in both of the novels, be it through the creation of new life or Sassoon's continuing love for his men, represents how humankind can regenerate after the dire events of World War One.

Through writing novels about this event, Barker and Faulks are able to present varying views of war but also offer their own interpretations of them, and in creating these novels from the devastation of the war they provide a lasting reminder to everyone of the sacrifice and bravery of the soldiers, 'Lest we forget'.