

A look at Ernest Hemingway's "Soldier's Home" compared to WWI and shell shock etc...

War



A Look at Ernest Hemingway's "Soldier's Home" Compared to WWI and Shell Shock Essay Sample

World War One (WWI) was arguably the most costly conflict in human history. With over "one third of men returning home" with serious mental ailments, this war had effects long after the armistice treaty (World War I Document Archive 18). This war lasted well past the signing of the treaty and went on to spark the beginning of the Second World War in 1939. Veterans were plagued with sickness long after the effects of the gas wore off and long after the guns fell silent, and to this day photographs of the trenches send chills down the spine of any man. WWI conjures up images of a no man's land strewn with dead bodies; their faces concealed with primitive gas masks. It was one of the only conflicts where the tactics failed to keep up with technology and, as a result, had a devastating effect on human life. The elements of WWI including chemical warfare and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are illustrated in Ernest Hemingway's "Soldier's Home".

Soldiers were exposed too much during the war, but chemical weapons were most likely the most horrifying and remembered. Despite the Hague Convention of 1907, which forbade the use of "poison or poisonous weapons", the French were the first to violate this Convention with the wide spread use of tear gas to soften up enemy defenses (Wilmot 35). However, this process often left French troops feeling the effects because they were ordered to charge to quickly for the tear gas to dissipate. The Germans responded with full-scale deployment of chemical warfare agents in the Second Battle of Ypres, April 22, 1915; here the Germans attacked French, Canadian and Algerian troops with chlorine gas. However, both sides

<https://assignbuster.com/a-look-at-ernest-hemingways-soldiers-home-compared-to-wwi-and-shell-shock-essay-sample/>

experienced difficulty when deciding how to use chemical agents and often gassed an enemy position without an advance to exploit weakness for fear of poisoning their own men.

This massive use of chemical agents could not be kept up without assistance from the home front's ability to produce. Factories that had previously been producing civilian products along the lines of industrial cleaners or wood stains were converted to produce deadly chemical agents. As a result, more than 124, 000 tons of gas were produced by the end of WWI. Official figures claim about " 1, 176, 500 non-fatal casualties and 85, 000 fatalities" caused by chemical warfare agents during the course of the war (Wilmot 57).

Chemical weapons were relatively new to the battle field and were not fully understood by the generals of each side. This resulted in primitive and often dangerous use of chemical weapons. They were released in several different ways, with the most common being compressed gas canisters opened from one trench and blown by the wind to another. They were also sealed into shells that were bombarded upon the enemy. The issue with both major methods of distribution was that it was extremely dependant on the wind, if the wind were to shift for even a few minutes the gas would be upon the friendly trenches causing massive friendly fire damage.

When a man breathed in the gasses there was a vast amount of reactions he could have, because generally each person had slightly unique reflexes. The most common and widespread affect of chemical agents was the blistering of the skin as though it was on fire. Chemical agents are generally irritants, acidic substances on the skin; that would eat away at any exposed soft

tissue and eventually work its way into the clothing of a soldier. Once inhaled the chemical would wreak havoc on the victim's entire physiological being. When in the lungs the agent would cause massive bleeding and inhibit the lung's ability to accept oxygen. This bleeding caused the victim to drown in his own blood. If the gas managed to infiltrate a man's stomach it would eat away at the inner lining until the contents spilled out into the man's body cavity, resulting in a very painful death.

Ironically the main impact of chemical weapons was not the men they killed but the men they spared. Unlike bullet wounds that healed, leaving a person looking relatively the same, chemical weapons left long lasting cosmetic effects on its victims. Soldiers who were exposed suffered grizzly burns on every body part that was exposed leaving the victim looking almost sub-human for his entire life. Indeed the outward effects of the gas were extremely present, however the larger consequence of the gas attacks were mental. This mental consequence, often referred to as " Shell Shock" by the men in the trenches, is known today as PTSD.

PTSD in WWI was a direct result of the intense fighting and horrid death that the average soldier was exposed to on a regular basis. Symptoms often did not manifest until weeks or sometimes months after the event and could be triggered by seemingly benign occurrences. Mustard gas with its signature yellow color, for instance, would emotionally scar the troops, prompting men to relive the gassing upon walking into a yellow room. WWI veterans often reported sleep disorders and night horrors that persisted until the end of their lives. This drove many veterans to alcohol, tobacco, and drug abuse to

cope with the disorder (Newton 2). Upon having an attack PTSD patients would tremble violently and shriek in horror, to people, or of things that were not there. Often they became physically aggressive towards others and in extreme cases even kill. PTSD patients are often miserable, and find it hard to enjoy the things in life they once did. They carry on through life leading an existence that is without joy, patients say they are empty and easy to grief.

Many PTSD patients exhibit sudden and unexplained outbursts of anger and bitterness, often accompanied by violent mood swings. This destroyed the social lives of those afflicted by PTSD, often spiraling them into a deeper depression, resulting in a domino effect making them more depressed.

Finally, because PTSD patients have had their lives changed so drastically they believe nothing will be the same (Newton 3). This presents a problem when the PTSD patient is put back into an unchanged world. If the patient is exposed to the same conditions as before the event took place it becomes very confusing and often painful, prompting a desperate past-lust. It also makes them feel as if they stand out, being so fiercely changed in soundings that totally unchanged. PTSD was a major factor in WWI and in the years following the war. Although it was not fully understood PTSD became fully associated with WWI. Even writers like Ernest Hemingway suffered from PTSD and immortalized their feelings in their literature.

Ernest Hemingway's "Soldier's Home" is a parallel to his own experiences during WWI and his suffering of PTSD as a result. The main character, Krebs fought in major battles during the American involvement in WWI, during which chemical weapons were widely used. This use of chemical weapons

prompted early symptoms of PTSD in Krebs and resulted in his ultimate full affliction with the illness. Krebs' situation is not extremely typical; most men returned home and were greeted with a hero's welcome. They were even given jobs and overall found a position in society. However, Krebs returns from the war late, being attached to an American force that was latent in Europe for some time after the war. When he returns he sees that his fellow men at arms have found a niche for themselves as contributing members of the community. However, Harold, cannot do this; instead, he plays pool, "practice[s] on his clarinet, stroll[s] down town, read[s], and [goes] to bed" every day since he has returned from war (Hemingway 2).

This unwillingness to break out of routine is a classic symptom of PTSD. He is unable to find happiness in simple things; even in things he found happiness in before the war. He is not easily excited and cannot even find motivation to talk to the women in town. Harold's experiences in Europe changed him irrevocably, and this change is dramatically played out against the backdrop of a town where nothing has changed for years, his father parks his same car in the same place he did before the war, and the girls walking down the street look like the same girls with whom Harold went to school. People want Harold to justify his existence by talking about the glories of the war, but the experience wasn't glorious for him; he is acutely aware that he was "badly, sickeningly frightened all the time", accenting his early symptoms of PTSD.

It is not until his mother confronts him about his future that he realizes that he cannot continue to live the way he is living. Over breakfast, his mother pressures him to get a job by arguing that "There are no idle hands in

[God's] Kingdom", Harold replies, "I'm not in His Kingdom" and indeed he is not (Hemingway 4). The world he discovered during WWI had no God. His mother, in despair, asks whether he loves her, and Harold responds quite truthfully that he does not. His entire worldview has been skewed by his traumatic experiences in the war, and the ability to genuinely love requires an emotional balance he lost during the war. His mother does not understand this, because she cannot identify with his experiences. The story ends with Krebs actively attempting to overcome his PTSD and forge a better life for himself.

Hemingway's "Soldier's Home" clearly accents chemical warfare's causing of PTSD and indeed PTSD as a whole. Krebs will be forever changed by what he saw and despite his efforts he may never become fully reassimilated into society. He will have to deal with his illness every day for the rest of his life. This condition is seen today, in Vietnam veterans who were treated poorly when they returned home and were not allowed to assimilate, and even in Iraqi war veterans who did not have loving families to greet them. PTSD is a staple of war; it is an unavoidable side effect of human conflict. Whether it is called "shell shock", "battle madness", or PTSD it will be a constant of war. Humans have extremely predictable tendencies and so long as there are two nations on the earth there will be war, there will be innovative deadly weapons, and there will be stories like the one told about Harold Krebs.

Works Cited

Hemingway Ernest. "Soldiers Home." Bedford Introduction to Literature. 6th ed.

<https://assignbuster.com/a-look-at-ernest-hemingways-soldiers-home-compared-to-wwi-and-shell-shock-essay-sample/>

Newton David. *Sick! diseases and disorders, injuries and infections*.
Detroit, Mich: U X L, 1999. Print.

NIMH." *NIMH*. Web. 22 Dec. 2009. .

Willmott, H. P. *The American Heritage History of World War 1*. Vol. Vol. 1.
New York, New York: American Heritage Co., 1964. Print.

World War I Document Archive. Web. 20 Dec. 2009. .