

Explore barker's representation of women in barker's regeneration essay sample

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Regeneration is a novel largely based upon the male experience of war , however Barker's use of predominantly confident and modern women represents the seismic effects the war had on the female population, while also exploring how the war was an emasculating experience for men. As the jingoistic illusions of what war was like were weakened by the harsh realities of war for the men who signed up to fight, they began taking on more maternal roles, whereas, some women transformed into independent strong-minded individuals, taking on traditional male roles such as working in munitions. Barker has chosen to focus strongly on the roles of women, as she wants to show how they experienced World War One, as their role is sometimes obscured in literature because they did not have direct contact with the enemy. The fact that Barker has used very dominant women suggests that they are important to her, and she certainly explores deeper than ' girls' as entertainers for soldiers, sweethearts and those who handed out white feathers to young men who had not enlisted.

However contrasting with the rest of the female characters the VADs are the only women who are in traditional domestic roles and have typical female attributes. Initially we are introduced to the VAD'S (Voluntary Aid Detachment) when they rush over to Burns who is being violently sick. This is at the very beginning of the novel, Barker uses this structure to show how the roles of women changed, by later in the novel devolping other characters who have dramatically changed lifestyles since the war began.

' A Couple of VADs ran across to him, clucking, fussing, flapping ineffectually at his tunic with a napkin, until eventually they had the sense to get him out of the room.'

Barker uses figurative language to compare the VADs to chickens, as if they were useless creatures, simply placed to make a fuss over people and unnecessarily panic. This imagery is used to provide the reader with a picture of these bustling women, feebly attempting to do all they can to help Burns. Barker portrays the women as inadequate with the men as it is only the superior male, Rivers who can offer comfort to Burns. Although this could be conveyed as womanly attitudes being the most important as Rivers acts in a motherly manner towards Rivers. This challenges traditional notions of manliness when the men choose to sign up, however the men must face societies judgement that it is decidedly unmanly to suffer a breakdown, thus Rivers taking on a maternal role to cure Burns.

Similarly Barker uses Rivers narrative viewpoint to demonstrate the changing roles of men, towards more feminine attributes.

'...relationship between officers and men that was...domestic...caring. As Layard would have undoubtedly said, maternal.'

Barker uses Layards opinion to show the emasculation of the men over the period of war. This shows a massive irony that the war was not what the men believed it to be, full of pride and patriotism they walked into a living hell, only to result in a 'feminine' breakdown. These lines are important because they highlight the immense ironies of World War 1: the ultimate act of male

sacrifice ends in domesticity. Barker uses lexis such as 'domestic' and 'caring' to emphasise this feeling of femininity. Here they are seen as being inferior, as to a man it is shameful to be compared to a woman. As during World War One men who were feminine may be judged as being homosexual were ostracised and punished under homosexuality laws.

One of the central female characters, Sarah Lumb is first introduced when she is in the Cafe with her friends Lizzie, Madge, and Betty. All four of the women have a 'slightly yellow tinge to their skin,' showing they were 'munitionettes.' This was the name given to women who worked in munitions during the war. Mmunitionettes during World War One took the places of their husbands, fathers, and brothers in order for the men to take up positions in the armed services. Women working in munitions factories were mainly of the lower class; yet, roughly 9 percent of women working in the factories came from the middle to upper. Barker has chosen to convey Sarah and her friends as lower class. The girls speak colloquially and use vernacular such as 'Eeh' and 'Pro' short for prostitute, as oppose to possibly 'pardon' that people such as Prior may have used.

Barker has chosen to do this to represent the common experience of war that the majority of women will have felt, rather than the stereotypical upper class male opinion as trumpeted by the press at the time, which even as women were sustaining Britain's industry while the men were fighting, continued to represent primarily male experience. Other female accounts of women's experience during the war, whether fictional or otherwise, tend to reflect the remembrances of upper class women part of the literary circle at

the time, most notably Vera Brittain. Barker embellishes the fictional characters portrayed with the use of factual detail to illustrate the experience of women during the war.

Women are represented as self-assured and independent in their relationships with other male characters in the novel. Sarah's confident approach to Prior conflicts with the more traditional opinions of women during the time such as Ada Lumb's. From the beginning of Sarah and Prior's relationship, Sarah dominates their conversation. Her domination over communication proves she gained independence and strength while working in the factory because males do not oppress her.

' He didn't know what to make of her, but then he was out of touch with women. They seemed to have changed so much during the war, to have expanded in all kinds of ways, whereas men over the same period had shrunk into a smaller and smaller space.'

By contrast, Prior's experience in the army restricted him from opening up to a woman with whom he eventually falls in love. Prior's inability to open up to Sarah results from his restrictions. This shows that women had become freed by the war and felt liberated whereas Prior is repressed by his feelings towards the war and towards women. Barker uses Sarah's modernised character to articulate society's concerns about the changing role of women, through Prior's narrative viewpoint. Barker has deliberately used Sarah as a foil to describe men's attitudes towards women, throughout the war.

Another way Barker presents women is through their newly found sexual freedom. Previously, as presented in Ada Lumb's old fashioned opinions, it would have been frowned upon to have any relations with men if you were unmarried. Similarly represented by Sarah's Landlady 'she's a dragon, almost as bad as me ma.' These women struggle to cope with the changing attitudes. However Sarah shows that she fully understands and takes control of the situation with Prior.

'I know what you want,' she said pulling away from him.'

Sarah is completely in control of the situation instead of typically, the male dominating the relationship. Although Sarah does later in the novel have sexual encounters with Prior such as at the seaside, she knows that now she has a job, and her own money she has been granted independence and therefore takes care of Prior. However it is still evident what societal disapproval the women must face through their sexual freedom. Ada Lumb warns her daughter that 'no man likes to think he's sliding in on another man's leavings.' Hinting that Sarah is risking her reputation of ever getting married and despite their newly found liberation, unmarried pregnancy would be the worst thing that would happen to them, therefore Ada Lumb sells 'the Sovereign Remedy for Female Blockages and Obstructions,' and Lizzie talks about a botched abortion using a wire coat hanger - this shows that sexual freedom is not facilitated or supported by the law, or universal progression in social attitudes.

Sarah is also used to represent Prior's opinion that women, as civilians don't understand the harsh realities of war.

' She belonged with the pleasure-seeking crowds. He both envied and despised her.'

Prior uses Sarah as a ' safe haven' from the war, to camouflage his true feelings as her subconscious innocence provides him with shelter from the horrors of war and his guilt of leaving his men and fearing the war, although simultaneously he blames Sarah for her ignorance, Barker has deliberately used Sarah as a foil to show Prior's true feelings. She also consciously represents the civilians, defending them from Prior's perceived attack, ' I suppose nobody else's got a sense of honour.' Denying Prior's opinion that everyone else is inferior as they don't understand. This outlines her feisty characterisation and the changing attitudes of women, as she talks back to Prior, contrasting with previous submissive women, taking orders. She is also used to illustrate that the male experience is no more noble and comes with no less poignancy, confusion and upheaval than experienced by those on the front line.

Overall I feel that Barker's representation of women is very realistic and unveils opinions which are not usually portrayed in war literature. The reader may have been surprised by how the women are portrayed because today you presume that women ' still had their place,' when World War One was happening. The way in which she describes the ongoing changing roles of both men and women is shown through the structure of the novel, providing

the reader with characters such as VADs at the beginning, whom develop into characters such as Sarah.