

World war i and siegfried sassoon



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A look at character connections in *Regeneration* by Pat Barker Throughout *Regeneration* by Pat Barker there are intricate connections being made between the characters. The relationships between patients, doctors, and soldiers cross over many lines forming complicated bonds that go beyond those of friendships and father figures. The gender roles in this wartime tale do not follow normal social rules. There are strong, dominant females that compensate for the effeminate males.

There are doctors and patient relationships that even today could be considered taboo as well as patient and patient partnerships. While some of these relationships are merely implied and not spelled out, they are definitely present throughout the novel. There are four relationships that seem to be most predominant, involving the following five characters. Dr. W. H. R. Rivers is a psychiatrist at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh. He treats soldiers during World War I for “shell-shock”. There are two patients that he sees regularly who he develops close bonds with.

The first, 2nd Lt. Siegfried Sassoon, is a poet and an anti-war protestor who has been sent to Rivers because his ideas of the war oppose those of the Royal British Army. The second patient that Dr. Rivers attends to is Lt. Billy Prior, an asthmatic who rose through the ranks from the working class. There are two more characters whose paths intertwine with these men. Wilfred Owen is also a poet and in 1917, only 24 years old when he meets Sassoon for the first time and becomes his number one fan. Lastly, there is Prior’s love interest, Sarah Lumb.

Going against the social norms of the early 1900's, Lumb is a working girl in a munitions factory near the hospital and meets Prior initially, in a bar. The two relationships that Dr. Rivers has are familial. Both Billy Prior and Siegfried Sassoon see him as a mentor, advisor and role model to a certain extent. Sassoon more so than Prior, but they both see Rivers as a father figure. Actually Prior compares Rivers to his mother, " She wanted me in the house away from all the nasty rough boys. And then suddenly here you are... He raised his hands. ' Doing exactly the same thing. '... ' Probably why I never wanted you to be Daddy. I'd got you lined up for a worse fate. " (p 210) In Prior's case, Dr. Rivers is more protective. He is concerned for Prior's physical health - the asthma, but also concerned that he is hiding from his fears. Prior uses sarcastic, sexual humor to deflect what he really needs to be talking about and Rivers learns to be patient with him and read between the lines. Throughout the book, Prior makes these little quips that push Dr. River's buttons just enough so that he gets frustrated but not enough to give up on Prior. The bond progresses though, as Prior really comes to trust Rivers and feel comfortable with him, enough so to finally talk about why he was sent to Craiglockhart in the first place. There is a definite level of respect that Prior develops for Dr. Rivers. Prior is aware that his asthma could kill him in the trenches, but he so desperately wants to go back and fight. He feels like less of a man because he is stuck at Craiglockhart and Dr. Rivers, like a worried father is concerned about sending him back.

On the other hand, Sassoon is an older, more experienced soldier and Rivers is placed in the role of therapist and mentor of Sassoon. From the moment Dr. Rivers first meets with Sassoon, there is a level of admiration for him.

Rivers can tell right away that Sassoon is not suffering from war neurosis. He tells him as much in their first meeting. " Do you think I'm mad? '... ' I'm quite sure you're not. As a matter of fact I don't even think you've got war neurosis. ' Sassoon digested this. ' What have I got then? ' ' You seem to have a powerful anti-war neurosis. They looked at each other and laughed. " (p 15). As this particular storyline plays out, Dr. Rivers assumes the role of the proud father. Their relationship becomes less formal and Rivers begins to see Sassoon, not as a patient but as just a man with strong opinions and a kind, caring heart. He doesn't think Sassoon is sick, he believes in Sassoon's convictions to a point and he seems to occasionally play favorites with him; referring to him as Siegfried in a tone that only an exasperated father would have and giving him a pass to his club so that he can work on his poetry.

There is an underlying message of admiration that Rivers feels towards Sassoon. The interesting thing about Sassoon is that, he himself can be seen as a father figure to his men back in France. He wants to keep them safe, protect them. He says at one point that they are the reason he is standing up against this war. Sassoon truly believes that his men will respect him more for his activism. " I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. " (A Soldier's Declaration, p 3). Sassoon forms another strong bond while at Craiglockhart. Along with being a high-ranking soldier, Sassoon is also a published poet.

This passion of his is shared with another in the hospital, an aspiring poet, Wilfred Owen hero-worships Sassoon. This relationship has strong homosexual overtones. At first, Sassoon is merely amused by Owen's admiration but as the novel unfolds, the two are seen spending quite a bit of

time together, sharing their poetry and getting to know one another.

Sassoon is really an advisor to Owen. He helps him hone his writing skills and gain confidence in not only his writing but for life in general. It's not until after Owen's been deemed fit for war and sent back the trenches that Sassoon admits to missing him.

In 1917, homosexuality was not acceptable anywhere. During wartime, it was called comradeship amongst men, although, even this was socially deplorable. Sassoon was not openly gay, but he also didn't hide his feelings about love from Rivers. Sassoon struggles with his feelings as a leader and as a man, " After all you've got this enormous emphasis on love between men - comradeship - and everybody approves. But at the same time there's always this little niggle of anxiety. Is it the right kind of love? " (p 204).

Another love story in *Regeneration* is the relationship of Billy Prior and Sarah Lumb.

Sarah proves a unique type of woman. Working in the munitions factory, she is a fiercely independent woman who takes Prior by surprise. " She held out her hand to him in a direct, almost boyish way. It intrigued him, since nothing else about her was boyish. " (p 89). While women during the war worked, it was not a normal social habit. During the world wars women were needed to fill the positions that men left behind but when the men came home, women were expected to fall back into the social roles they had been in for decades - homemaker, wife, baby maker.

The author, Pat Barker said something interesting in an interview, " In a lot of books about war by men the women are totally silenced. The men go off

and the women stay at home and cry; basically this is the typical feature'... ' Women in the munitions factories were expected to produce weapons to kill thousands, but a woman who attempts to abort her unborn child is criticized. " (Barker, from her website). With Prior, his relationship with Sarah is a rollercoaster. He wants to be the man in the relationship, but struggles with this because he is condemned to a mental hospital and crippled by his asthma.

His feelings for her are real but on one particular outing to the beach, he feels absolute envy and anger towards her because everyone at the shore is so happy and carefree. They are all able to forget that there is a war going on, Sarah included. Prior on the other hand is living his experiences over and over again in his head. He'll never be able to forget, never be able to be carefree. On the opposite end, Prior realizes he needs her. She is his safe place his rock. " She would never know, because he would never tell her.

Somehow if she'd known the worst parts, she couldn't have gone on being a haven for him... He needed her ignorance to hide in. " (p 216). All of these interactions twist and reshape over and over again throughout *Regeneration*. Some of the connections end with the last page of the book, some of them may continue on through the rest of Pat Barker's trilogy. One thing that can be said for these characters is that they are relatable, we all know a Siegfried Sassoon, a Billy Prior, a Sarah Lumb and a Dr. Rivers. Some of us may be these people.

There is a war going on today, and there are men being broken down and torn apart just as Owen, Sassoon, Prior and even Dr. Rivers are. There is still

a policy of no gays in the military and mental illness in the war is still controversial. The only difference is that women are over there fighting alongside the men. In some cases, the women are at war and the men are staying home. This book takes place in 1917, these characters are part of a different era, but really it could have been set in any year, in any town, in the middle of any battle.