

Roundtable discussion



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Shellshock Shellshock is a condition of a soldier freshly out of battle. The symptoms include shaking, crying, desertion, disorientation, depression, and even listlessness. Today, shellshock is known as Combat Stress Disorder, if symptoms last temporarily or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder when the symptoms last longer. In World War I, soldiers started having Shellshock, or at least it was being noticed for the first time. The British and Europeans handle this new illness, better over time, while the Americans thought these men were cowards. Today, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Combat Stress Disorder are treatable, but during World War I Shellshock victims were considered weak, not sick.

The poem chosen is “ The Unicorn” by Isaac Rosenberg. This poem is moving, describing the nature of insanity in combat. The man, a commander, is talking to a woman, Lilith. The poem describes how the commander is thinking about the women and children caught in the combat. He is delusional, imagining that a unicorn is taking them to the afterlife. The commander muses that the women dying are innocents. Rosenberg writes women are being killed “ By men misused, flying from misuse (215). All the bombs, fear of death, and horrors make the man hallucinate about the Unicorn taking away the innocents and even him in the end.

The date of “ The Unicorn” is unknown, but written after World War I. During and right after World War I, people did not understand the effects of Shellshock. Bhattacharjee reports that “ even at a distance, explosions might cause lasting damage to the brain” (206). This could have caused the commander’s delusions. Writing poetry was one way to express Shellshock to people who did not understand. Even famous American Generals, who were battle-hardened. George S. Patton called these men “ cowards”, and

even went so far as to slap one man, dragging him out of the medical tent (Axelrod and Clark, pg. 115). The commander of “ The Unicorn” probably would have preferred to ride away on a unicorn in death, than being faced with court martial and ridicule. There was no one to turn to when suffering from Shellshock, except the delusions of angels and demons.

Poetry was a way to express emotions about shellshock, no one else wanted to hear at the time. However, all of the poems are useful today. These poems can help people understand the men from World War I. They were not traitors, but heroes doing their best under the circumstances.

Work Cited

Axelrod, Alan and Wesley K. Clark. Patton: A Biography. New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2006.

Bhattacharjee, Yudhijit. “ Shell Shock Revisited: Solving the Puzzle of Blast Trauma.”

Science. 25 Jan. 2008. 319(5862) pp. 406-408.

Silkin, Jon. Ed. The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry. New York:

Penguin

Press, 1997.