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Regeneration Essay

“How far and in what ways is failure a main concern in this novel?”

“Regeneration” by Pat Barker is a book set during the 1st World War, concentrated on the patients of the Craiglockhart War Hospital. All of these patients show different symptoms, each being ill in their own way, but they share a common cause of their illness: they all have been attained by war-neurosis. All of these patients are in fact reacting in some way or another to their traumatic experiences from the front, they are trying to heal the mental scars left by the French trenches. Some of these patients are Siegfried Sassoon, a poet on a protest against the war, Prior, a second-lieutenant suffering from mutism and partial amnesia, and Burns, a soldier so scarred that his condition is considered “beyond treatable”, all of them treated by William Rivers, an army psychiatrist working at Craiglockhart. All of them want to succeed in their treatment, face their traumas and learn how to live with them. But they are followed by the eventuality of failure, they all fear that they might not succeed to fully recover from their neurosis, or accomplish their goals.

Prior begins in the novel mute, unable to speak, only capable of communicating through written word, and after some kind of traumatising event. Throughout the story Prior tries to discover the cause of his breakdown with Rivers' assistance, as well as he tries to somehow reintegrate into the civilian society. His whole story is this struggle, powered by his will and ambition to see him marked as “sane”. That's why the prospect of failure touches him so much: not only he would remain secluded, apart from the society, but also he would end up in the same spot as in the beginning, unable to speak and not knowing what horrible thing happened to him. Even when he knows of the dangers that this knowledge could bring, as Rivers suggested it by saying “I imagine... Mutism seems to spring from a conflict between wanting to say something, and knowing that if you do say it the consequences will be disastrous. So you resolve it by making it physically impossible for yourself to speak.”. That is why, seeing all of these consequences of failure, the reader can be somewhat surprised to see where Prior ended up in the end: he managed to create some links with the society by creating a relationship with Sarah, and he finally discovers the cause of his breakdown. That's why the reader can say that Prior has been overall the most successful character in the novel, which could be true considering Prior's disappointment with the treatment: “I've actually woken up once or twice and wondered whether there was any point going on.”. On the other hand, on the discovery of the reason behind his breakdown, Prior treats it as a sign of personal failure: “Is that all?” he says after waking up from hypnosis, suggesting his unwillingness and how unprepared he was to see the real reason, and even more, accept it.

Another patient in the novel is Sassoon, the poet that the reader meets at the very beginning of the book. He goes on a protest against the aims of the war, and is placed in the Craiglockhart hospital to be “cured” from his rebellion. Sassoon's goal is to convince as much people that the war should be brought to an end as soon as possible, and as he says: “I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest.”. Throughout the novel, he keeps on showing the reader and the other characters the horrors of the war and his particularly sane view on the war. But the society, as presented in the book, will have none of it. At first his declaration is largely ignored at the House of Commons, and then he is discouraged more and more from the continuation of his protest. Eventually, Sassoon admits defeat and acknowledges that he will not persuade anyone that way. Then he returns to the front, back to the men he has left, driven by guilt that he abandoned his men just to do some fancy protest that he knew that will fail. The reader could interpret Sassoon's journey largely as a failure, but his protest didn't go by without an echo: throughout the novel many characters talk about the horrors of the war, and that it should stop as soon as possible, as well as Rivers is converted to Sassoon's opinions, showing his protest still as a failure to rise up and stand up to human decency, aggravated by the fact that a lot of people feel the same, but decide to stay put, like Graves. But Sassoon has achieved something through his protest, that being the conversion of Rivers' beliefs.

The other big patient of the novel is Burns. The soldier catapulted by the shock-wave into the stomach of a decomposing German corpse is depicted from the start as someone without hope to recover. His condition during the novel only deteriorates, however hard Rivers tries. “There's no redeeming feature” in Burns' accident, there's nothing on what Burns could get a grip on to start his recovery. In fact, despise Burns and Rivers' efforts, Burns just keeps on going down the spiral of war-neurosis, just barely managing to stay near the top. From regular nightmares in Craiglockhart, Burns moved nowhere: when Rivers visits him at a late stage in the novel, it is said that “He'd heard part of Burns's night. Obviously, however hard Burns tried to thrust memories of the war behind him, the nightmare followed.”. Symbolising a typical patient struck by war-neurosis that cannot be cured, Burns effectively shows how much of a failure a therapy can be, how it can lead nowhere.

In the end, seeing all of the Craiglockhart War Hospital's patients, the reader can really see that failure is a real concern for them: it reminds them of what will happen if they do not succeed in their recovery, but many are indeed doomed to fail, or at least fail majorly but achieve a tiny bit of success. And standing next to them stands Rivers, their doctor, trying his best to help them succeed, yet coming out powerless against failure.