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A Glimpse Into The Past

Step back into the past, where the mortifying experiences of injured soldiers reveal a tale of medical knowledge and practices. The short story “The Case of George Dedlow,” written by S. Weir Mitchell, shows the readers the dreadful and distressing time in the American Civil War. During the Civil War era, where medical knowledge and practices were heavily undergoing transformations. A story emerges of a soldier named George Dedlow, who undergoes numerous severe injuries during his fight in the war. Embroiled by the conflict, leads Dedlow to examination of the physical and psychological consequences. While the story is a work of fiction it offers a different lens that we can look through to explore the medical knowledge and practices of that era. With the masterful, S. Weir Mitchell who illustrates the medical knowledge and practices of the American Civil War era, offering important insights into the limitations and advancements of surgical techniques, wound treatments, and the emerging understanding of the mind-body connection. Plus a thorough and deep analysis, this essay endeavors to argue that “Case of George Dedlow” sheds significant light on the limitations, advancements, and enduring psychological impact of Civil War-era medical practices.

In the American Civil War era, medical practices and knowledge were confronted by unbearable challenges and evolutions. A theme that we see discussed in the short story. As the story unfolds, we get introduced to the main character of Geroge Dedlow, who is a soldier and has gone through an amputation. Which leaves him questioning his own existence and identity. This short story takes a look into the realities of the medical field, in which surgeons are low on resources and medical knowledge is in its very early stages. Mitchell's representation of George's experience shows the medical way of doing things back in the Civil War era, as he states, "All the great central ganglia, which give rise to movements in the limbs, were also eternally at rest. Thus one half of me was absent or functionally dead" (Mitchell). Employing a first-person narrative immensely shows Dedlow's situation and makes it well known of the deep consequences of the interventions of the medics on the soldier's character and identity. This reflection serves as testament in showing us the challenges and limitations that were faced by the medical staff during this period.

In "The Case of George Dedlow," Mitchell goes more into the complexities and difficulties of Civil War medicine, showing us the use of amputations to prevent infection from the wounds the soldier had inherited. During the war, amputations became a very common type of operation, just to not have the patient get any type of infection. George, having lost both his legs, reflects on the treatment and how it makes him feel as he utters, "It is needless to add, that I am not a happy fraction of a man; and that I am eager for the day when I shall rejoin the lost members of my corporeal family in another and a happier world" (Mitchell). Mitchell's representation puts a spotlight on the toll that

such actions by the medical staff took on the injured soldiers in both the emotional and physical state. The amputations that the soldiers were faced with not only permanently changed their physical being but also had a tremendous amount of impact on the mental's well-being, which left them feeling disconnected. With Dedlow's sorrow, this short story emphasizes the severity of the medical decisions and the life lasting effect on the soldiers. On top of the amputations, "The Case of George Dedlow" gives a look on the inside of nervous disorders. Dedlow's condition of "spinal disease" takes away his ability to move or feel the lower part of his body. In the era of the Civil War, the knowledge and medicine was very limited for neurological conditions. The treatments were no better and just relied on a cautious approach. This is noticeable in the short story as we see Dedlow gaze and observe the loss of movement and sensation, realizing "all the great central ganglia, which give rise to movements in the limbs, were also eternally at rest" (Mitchell). The story very well illustrates the limited options that patients like Dedlow received, showing the struggle of the medical section to understand and effectively treat any type of neurological condition. These surroundings just further emphasizes the need for more knowledge and advancement needed in neurology by the practitioners back in that era.

Lastly, "The Case of George Dedlow", sheds it light on and portrays the strength and resilience shown by the soldiers dealing with the byproduct of the medical treatments during the Civil War. After the loss of his legs, Dedlow's journey and his search to find his identity shows the readers the determination and persistence to find a semblance of any emotional and physical distress. Mitchell in the words of Dedlow

states, "I have little surety of being myself... I doubt my own honesty in drawing my pension, and feel absolved from gratitude to those who are kind to a being who is uncertain of being enough himself to be conscientiously responsible" (Mitchell). This statement shows the struggles Dedlow has come to terms with in his altered state. Highlighting soldiers' sense of responsibility and the emotional toll of the medical procedures they went through. This journey of Dedlow screams the resilience that was shown by all the soldiers who had to come face to face with lifelong medical altercations. Serving as a testament of the soldiers strength, and the misery of the medical limitations.

In conclusion, "The Case of George Dedlow" offers a deeply insightful and enlightening exploration of American Civil War medicine and its tremendous impact it has on the soldiers. "Case of George Dedlow" sheds significant light on the limitations, advancements, and enduring psychological impact of Civil War-era medical practices. Through the vivid illustration of Dedlow's experience, the short story sheds light on the somber nature of the medicine during the Civil War era. The use of first-person narrative allows the readers to fully grasp Dedlow's predicament and hardships that he faced by the medical altercation. Additionally, the narrative's portrayal of strength and resilience amidst the difficult medical circumstances highlights the unbeatable spirit of the soldiers. As we look back on "The Case of George Dedlow," we gain insight into the medical knowledge and the practices of the past. This story reminds us of the sacrifices of the soldiers and how the medical communities dealt with such sacrifices. This story emphasizes how important advancements in medicine are to help reduce human

suffering. While the story shows us the distress and sorrow in the unsettling past, it also does serve as a reminder of the progress that the medical community has made and the impact it has had on the patients. "The Case of George Dedlow " causes us to value the strides that have been made in medical knowledge and in its practices. It not only encourages us to continue our understanding of the medicine but also gives a priority to give compassionate care for those that come face to face with medical challenges. By taking a glimpse into the past, we can honor the strength and resilience of those soldiers that underwent the medical trails of the Civil War era.

Work Cited

Mitchell, Silas Weir. "The Case of George Dedlow." July 1866 Issue.