

**PEACE WITHIN THE TRAUMATIC NARRATIVE: THE CYCLIC
PROCESS TO THE SILENCE OF SHELL SHOCK**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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Submitted to the Undergraduate Research Scholars program at
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as an

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

Approved by Research Advisor:

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May 2018

Major: English

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ABSTRACT

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Literature Review

In his novel *A Farewell to Arms*, Ernest Hemingway asserts that the experience of war “breaks down time, language, and the perceived unity of the subjective self in the face of incomprehensible violence” (Hemingway 83). His quote offers an ample description for the process of self fragmentation triggered by traumatic wartime experiences, which results in shell shock. In his novel, *Shell Shock, Memory, and the Novel in the Wake of World War I*, Trevor Dodman, an Associate Professor of English at Hood College, describes war narratives as an attempt to reconstruct this fragmented self through processes of writing and narrating, which succeeds as a form of meditation. Through this process, the soldier attempts to communicate or share distressing wartime descriptions between himself and others by actualizing and/or coming to terms with their tragedies. Yet, this was more complicated or nonexistent for a myriad of WWI soldiers. During the early 20th century, there was little to no understanding about how these traumatic experiences affected the mind psychologically; therefore, the concept and experience of WWI was distressing to many soldiers and civilians since there was no language available to describe its horrors. For soldiers, this lack of accessible words inhibited and

complicated any ability to describe, comprehend, or deal with the war. Furthermore, due to this limitation a language barrier between themselves and others, as well as between the soldier and his own reality, was created. This language barrier was noted by Paul Fussell in his novel, *The Great War and Modern Memory*. In *The Great War*, he attempts to give a general explanation to this concept: “That is why some men, when they think about war, fall silent. Language seems to falsify physical life and to betray those who have experienced it absolutely— the dead” (Fussell 184). This falsification and betrayal by language constitutes a deeper form of shell shock, language not only becomes a barrier but it limits the soldiers’ reconstruction: the soldier is compelled to mentally repeat such experiences in order to come to terms with such, yet this repetition further forces distressing experiences on the soldier. It is within this problem that silence becomes a common motif in WWI literature. Silence is found where soldiers uses narratives to attempt to recreate so as to reconstruct, but discover they are unable to and fall short.

INTRODUCTION

“No written word can convey the horror of war and its futility. Just think of all the mental and physical suffering in one little man’s tale, multiply that by around twenty million, add to that the anguish of countless millions of civilians and use what influence you have against such a thing happening again.”

– Henry Milner (Milner 47)

Through poetry and prose, the war narrative was a popular way of attempting to reconstruct the fragmented self. The form of speaking or communicating war time experiences by means of language not only actualizes their experiences, but offers them a way to come to terms with their tragedies. A main factor of this meditation is derived from the physical action of speaking, it forces the ego to map out their experiences and pin them down in the past instead of the present; however, it is this process that also limits and constricts their understanding, unaware or able to discern the difference between their body and mind, the ego and superego, they lack the terms to describe or communicate their memories. Additionally, they are forcing their ego to come to terms with a reality they are not able to cope with, causing an extension of their trauma instead of a resolve. It is in this format and within this context the language barrier is produced, inhibiting the full expression of traumatized. Due to this problem, some instead resolve their problem by means of other physical constructs not bounded by language. By comparing the aspects of the traumatic narrative of Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* with Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, Rebecca West’s *The Return of the Soldier*, war poetry by

Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, *The Fly* by Katherine Mansfield, Freudian and prosthetic ideas, a cyclic process to restore the body and mind as well as the struggles between language, memory, and shell shock are revealed.

CHAPTER I

SELF-INFLICTED WOUNDS

A Farewell to Arms can be classified as a traumatic narrative in which Frederic revisits his wartime memories. Hemingway only lightly hints at this factor by means of the use of his ‘iceberg principle’, such as tense changes, narratives describing the war’s effect on nature, commenting on past events (“I was afraid of cramps,” “I hoped we would,” “In the late summer of that year we lived in a house”) (Hemingway 195, 3). Additionally, Hemingway also subtly hints at Frederic’s shell shock, however, this concept is a realistic one since the narrative is Frederic’s and he does not have the language available, or is at least is unaware of such, to comprehend his mental illness by any means but physically. Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, states this is because the war is “almost entirely physical [to a foot-soldier]. That is why some men, when they think about war, fall silent. Language seems to falsify physical life and to betray those who have experienced it absolutely— the dead” (Fussell 184); however, this problem occurs also due to the lack of scientific and medical understanding of such, since psychology and the study of the mind was still new, and there was no knowledge about a difference between the body and the psyche. Shell shock was understood as strain of the nerves – “public conception of the disorder hinged on an understanding of shell shock as a physical ailment...the bruised, frayed, bulged...and even severed nerves,” “organic lesions of the nervous system brought about by mechanical force (Dodman 8, Freud 12)–, meaning the illness was framed by means of physical context, which was how Frederic understood such. To Frederic, the head was considered a physical aspect of the human, there was no concept of mind, and no separate entities of the physical and the mental; thus, Frederic’s attempts to comprehend

his ailments are described through strictly physical constructs. When Frederic is expressing the effects of war on other people, such as Rinaldi, the priest, his first doctor, he describes them as “disturbed by the war” (82). On page 74, Frederic arrives at a hospital in Milan and discusses his injuries with Miss Walker, his answer to her question of, “what’s wrong with you anyway” is concrete, external, and specific, “I’m wounded. In the legs and feet and my head is hurt” (Hemingway 73-74). When the doctors and nurses treated him for his wounds, the narrator emphasizes they only worked on his body, the “bump” on his head did not seem to “mean anything” (Hemingway 84). Later on in the novel, Frederic’s erratic behavior causes his men to express their concern for his wellbeing, saying, “You don’t feel funny, Tenente? You haven’t got strange feelings in the head?” (211). As Frederic registers his pain, he feels it coming from his exterior, his body, therefore, believes it to be a physical wound, however, he is compulsive about discerning between his wounds, showing existing anxieties to find the source of his pain: as a nurse fusses over him, calling him a “sick boy,” he corrects her “I am not sick...I am wounded,” declaring a difference between these pains (75). Unable to use language to accurately place these pains, he pushes these anxieties into his subconscious, or the superego, which come out in the form of self-injury.

In Virginia Woolf’s novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, another literary soldier suffering from shell shock, Septimus Warren Smith, struggles to reconcile his past experiences with his present reality after returning from war. His doctor, Dr. Bradshaw, diagnosis Septimus with “complete physical and nervous breakdown,” which meant deferred shell shock. This struggle is evident within his inability to communicate with others, such as his wife or doctors. His struggle is emphasized in Septimus’ dependence on a the physical or concepts beyond language and other character’s realities (“Not indeed in actual words; that is, he could not read the language yet,”

“But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive,” “A sparrow perched on the railing opposite chirped Septimus, Septimus, four or five times over”) (Woolf 20-22). Suffering from severe shell shock, Septimus is forced to face a constant bleeding of the past into his present, therefore, unable to manage his own reality. He fights to juggle his realities, which is represented by his stammering and fragmentary sentences (“I--I—‘ Septimus stammered”) (Woolf #). Furthermore, although he desires to convey the direct and full meaning of his traumatic experiences and his fragmented and beautiful present reality; language, for Septimus, is unable to contain these meanings. Woolf uses Septimus’ visions of his dead friend, Evans, to express the true location of his reality – stuck within the tragedies of his past. Ultimately stuck in a life he is unable to reach out or communicate to others, Septimus revolts against his society’s ways by sending his message by means of his suicide. Although this was a drastic and tragic gesture, Septimus revolted in the only way presently realistic to Septimus - committing his action by a physical form, bypassing the language which had once constricted him. The rebellion was meant to shock, acting against the treatment he received by society, which endeavored to shove soldiers and wartime experiences behind and away from them. Structuring their society, language, and treatment of such in attempts to forget men like Septimus who makes the war seem too realistic. This is the context that Woolf uses Septimus for: a representation of how the war disrupted society, the slow leaking of more realistic wartime experiences, and a look at the treatment of the war, and its victims, during peacetime.

Continuing, Frederic shows an anxiety over self-inflicted wounds – the “turning of the self on the self, undoing the self’s power of containment...control” (Dodman 93). His narration not only takes extreme notice of such wounds (describing an example of self-inflicted injury within the first few chapters of Book One), yet frequently inflicts pain upon himself

unconsciously. Within the novel, Frederic goes through a cyclic process, the first stage is subconsciously self-harming physically and emotionally. In this stage Frederic repeatedly either uses outside circumstances to harm himself, meaning putting himself in the area of danger without being careful, or commits the act himself. In chapter three, after previously stating that he “had wanted to go to Abruzzi” to his friend, the priest, and himself, Frederic instead visited other places, “to the smoke of cafés and...nights in bed, drunk, when you knew that that was all there was, and the strange excitement of waking and not knowing who it was with you” (12). Later on, Frederic insists on getting his surgery quickly so that he can “get back to the front” (86). In chapter 22, when he is diagnosed with jaundice by nurse Miss Cage, the head nurse in Milan, Miss Van Campen, finds Frederic’s load of empty brandy bottles in his room, and accuses him of “producing jaundice with alcoholism” (125). Although Frederic denies doing so, he agrees to having drunk much of those bottles, and full responsibility for bringing them. Additionally, though at first doubtful, Frederic complies with his fiancée’s wishes to increase the gas that helps relieve pain to dangerous doses. During this, he blames his actions and attempts to fight for love and contentment, for her unbearable labor pains: “and this is the price you paid for sleeping together...this is what people got for loving each other” (274). Furthermore, these examples showcase Frederic’s cyclic process of self-inflicted pain.

The repetition of self-harming is another crucial motif in traumatic narratives. In his article, *Prosthetic Gods*, Hal Foster describes such repetition by means of Freudian theory: “the response to this breaching is a binding, a binding that develops through repetition” (#). When the ego is shocked or threatened it undergoes a process called binding, storing up or hiding away such experience in the superego, “submitted for control” (#); however, it is important to note that the binding process “becomes the primary agent of further binding” (#). In his article, *Beyond the*

Pleasure Principle, Freud states the repetition process to be “transference neurosis”: the memories slide between the ego and superego because of the ego’s resistance to both come to terms and forget these experiences, seeking “to avoid the unpleasure which would be produced by the liberation of the repressed”; therefore, when these memories flow back into the ego, the victim is shocked as “the mind tries to recognize that what appears to be reality,” and is unable to discern them as, instead, just a “reflection of a forgotten past” (Freud 18-21). The compulsion to repeat and the distress resulting from such are attributed to this ‘transference neurosis’, therefore, as Frederic internalizes, or binds, these self-inflicted tragedies to his superego, he is doomed to continue to this pattern of repetition.

CHAPTER II

REPETITION

Repetition is the next stage of this cyclic process, created the ebb and flow of the memories in and out of the ego forcing the victim to recall or revisit these bound memories. As mentioned earlier, this revisiting, or another factor of repetition, comes from the agitation of the ego confronted with the memories entering into consciousness. This factor is not just common in soldiers, but to all trauma victims. In war poetry, it is seen a lot within dreams, coming out when the superego is in a relaxed state (in circumstances when outside factors have “loosened the repression”), allowing images or realities of war time experience to ease their way into the unaware ego: “In all my dreams before my helpless sight/ He plunges at me,” “If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace/ Behind the wagon that we flung him in,” “When thoughts you've gagged all day come back to scare you” (Owen 15-16, 17-18; Sassoon 5). This regurgitation of images is depicted by guttural, violent words (gagged, plunges, smothering), portraying an ugliness to this process, however, this experience is not isolated to the soldiers.

In *The Fly*, by Katherine Mansfield, the boss suffers from the traumatic process caused by his son's death in WWI. During a casual meeting with Woodfield, his employee, Woodfield suddenly brings his son into the conversation, creating a shock within the boss allowing, and forcing, the memory of his son into his ego: “It had been a terrible shock to him when old Woodfield sprang that remark upon him about the boy's grave.” Like Frederic, the boss also forces himself through emotional pain in this story: the boss arranged for himself to weep, yet not having been able to reach the emotional release he wanted, he “decided to get up and have a look at the boy's photograph,” and is instead distracted by a fly (25). It is at this time that the

process of repetition occurs. After having rescued a fly from the ink, he dips the fly back in and analyzes the fly's response, repeating this three times and eventually killing the fly. This action can be seen as a metaphor, or an echo, of the boss's own trauma. The fly, representing his emotions, is constantly being brought back into the ink, representing his ego, until the fly dies from the repeated dipping, symbolizing the numbing of the trauma, or recovery from such, by means of repeated exposure. It is important to note that this numbing comes about through the physical, mourning physically, externally, instead of internalizing the trauma, such as Frederic does.

Within *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway demonstrates Frederic's own repetition of wartime memories in effort to "repair and augment his past" (Dodman 84). Frederic's trauma is emphasized by means of a subtle "inner" level of consciousness, one which is hinted in the "breaking down time, language, and the perceived unity of the subjective self in the face of incomprehensible violence" (83) – composing a form of prosthetic thinking. Prosthetic theory, the concept, or fantasy, of the intertwining connection between the machine and human body, appears in Frederic's narrative by means of "the repair and augmentation of bodies in the face of radical disruption in warfare" (84). As Frederic progresses through his narrative, reconstructing his memories, he attempts to "stave off a sense of the self as a disarticulated scar" (Dodman 84). His prosthetic anxieties can also be shown in his anxiety over his knee, physical proof of his incomplete or fragmented self: "I had done half the retreat on foot and swum part of the Tagliamento with his knee. It was his knee all right. The other knee was mine. Doctors did things to you and then it was not your body any more. The head was mine, and the inside of the belly" (Hemingway 199). Again, unable to discern between the physical and the psychological, he compares his prosthetic knee, his exterior, to his head and stomach, his interior. Although he

states that his interior, in this case his head, is his, he points out an extent to his use of it – “The head was mine, but not to use, not to think with, only to remember and not too much remember” –, displaying an anxiety over his lack of control over even his own thoughts (Hemingway 199).

In these attempts, he strives to pacify his past and present trauma wounds in two ways: by attempting to present himself as a complete character, which explains his compulsion to account for every detail and his anxieties of self inflicted harm, and endeavoring to build a new internal wholesomeness through his retelling; however, using language as a technique to rebuild himself presents a problem, he is inflicting pain upon himself by revisiting these memories; language is not adequate to fully heal Frederic, his narration acts as both the “scar and the wound” (Dodman). It is his compulsion to control his own healing that continues his unbreakable cycle: challenging his past memories, while dealing with his present shell shock in order to confront a traumatic rupture of the self. Due to this, Frederic’s prosthetic anxieties arise, displaying a greater anxiety for the control over his own self and recovery – a concern perpetuated by the lack of control over his fate during the war. This control that Frederic seeks is “his prosthetic reconstitution of painful and traumatic events and experiences...Frederic’s prosthetics interventions his efforts at control underscore collapsing distinctions between the mind and the body between the artificial and the natural, between the past and the present” (Dodman).

CHAPTER III

GHOSTS

This physical process can also be noted in another traumatic narrative, Rebecca West's *Return of the Soldier*. The name itself suggests a form of repetition: the soldier, Chris, returning to his old love, to his past, to his home and nation, to his memories, an internal return of the man to the soldier once more (becoming "every inch a soldier"), and the eventual return back to the front (West 90). His loss of memory of fifteen years, due to a head injury on the front, makes him lose memory of his current wife and son's death, remembering only his first love, Margaret; however, his loss of memory, his unrealistic and wounded self, is regarded by the narrator as whole and sane: "he attained something saner than sanity" (West 65). In addition to creating an emotional barrier between his wife, cousin, and him, there is now a language barrier: he is unable to describe this experience or wound, which has produced a chasm between this present reality and self, and unable to communicate with the people who seem like strangers to him. This exposed the problem with language, seen as "limited," it was not able to break this barrier, it only extends it. Chris's relationship with Margaret was linked by a spiritual bond, unlike his wife, Kitty, which was bonded by physical means such as jewelry and physical appearances – the result of "a woman gathering the soul of the man into her soul" (West 70). Within her novel, the only way such a bond or the "internal thing that guided Chris to forgetfulness" could be broken is by a physical means, showing Chris the realities of his trauma, the clothes of his dead infant son, again a motif of forcing the body through the experience of the traumatic is deemed as the healing or numbing process (West 71). It is here that West suggests the present and past physical

realities have a larger sway over the mind, which at the time was deemed by existing theory to be a single entity with the body, since it has a decisive control over the body.

CONCLUSION

The cyclic process of fighting against the language barrier, self-inflicting wounds, forced retelling, and compulsive anxiety over the physical results in attempts to restructure and rebuild themselves different ways, however, each of these accounts possess an alarming similarity. For Frederic, this means the lack of reaching any type of closure. This can be concluded by means of the novel's end, Frederic simply walking away from the hospital without turning back, indicating a continuation, and addition, of unresolved wounds. Moreover, Hemingway's ending was meant to be unsatisfying to the reader because it alluded to Frederic's incapability to allow himself to grasp any form of resolution or extended contentment within his life. Contrasting this, Frederic's lack of closure is not a similar end for other traumatic narratives: Septimus, Wilfred Owen, and Siegfried Sassoon reach closure by death, Chris's closure is by the means of his return to present reality, Mansfield's character, The Boss, attains closure from the death or numbing of his emotion. Each of their resolutions indicate a finality of this cycle, portraying the ability to reach recovery and restoration is not held through language, but by means of other physical action unbounded by restriction of language, meaning death or the return to reality.

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