

## Beasts of War

“This book is neither to be an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. I will try to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped the shells, were destroyed by the war” (Remarque).

WWI was a turning point in the history of warfare. The worldwide fighting and fear of annihilation spurred new inventions to increase the efficiency of killing and destruction. Inventions like machine guns, airplanes, and weaponized gas made traditional battle strategies obsolete. The new kind of battle was fought in trenches. Their purpose and functionality aided and abetted the bloodiest war up to that point in human history.

But WWI wasn't only a battle of machinery and strategies, it was a battle of human psyche. In the winter of 1914-15, Shell Shock, or what we know now as, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, hit all parties in the war hard. The British appointed Charles S. Meyers to try to make sense of the confusion. “The first cases Myers described exhibited a range of perceptual abnormalities, such as loss of or impaired hearing, sight and sensation, along with other common physical symptoms, such as tremor, loss of balance, headache and fatigue” (Jones). Obviously, the effects of Shell Shock on a soldier weren't only mental, but a great deal physical manifestations of intense stress and trauma. Often soldiers would be unable to carry out orders because of their mental condition. At the time there was no sympathy or understanding for men experiencing Shell Shock. So when they were unable to comply, men were labeled as cowards,

deserters, and malingers. Though, later in the war it was accepted that men did, in fact, suffer from mental ailments, it was still owed to weakness in character.

In the article *More than a Man could Bear...*, Andrew Scragg explores the opinion of war officials in WWI. “While recognizing that shell shock was no respecter of rank or social class, the report fails to define cowardice, but makes it clear that shell shock should not be seen as a “soft option”—reinforcing the official view that shell shock was a matter of “character” (Scragg). But the government leaders away from the fighting wouldn’t... couldn’t have known what was truly happening to the young men fighting for their lives. They couldn’t have known about the despair, the death, and the hopelessness experienced by the soldiers fighting the cage that held them.

In Erich Remarque’s Novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, young men fight in a battle they know nothing about. All they know is life and death. They live under the terror of “Chance”, never knowing what, and when will be their end.

Marianne Szegedy-Maszak, the author of *The War of Emotions*, said “No one is prepared to handle body parts, peer into mass graves, confront the threat of chemical and biological weapons, or see friends killed or wounded” (Szegedy-Maszak). War is intense on the mind, one might say we weren’t ever meant to expose ourselves to those kinds of experiences. For those who are worn down in the battle against an anonymous foe, who is there to blame but the man on the other side?

In WWI it was common to take prisoners of war when a battle was won. In the case of the British Armies, these prisoners didn’t always make it home. British soldiers would not only humiliate and steal from their German prisoners but would also “accidentally” lose them, or

make the excuse that they had died in transport away from the front due to an enemy shell. The truth? They were killed by resentful soldiers. In an article about wartime laws, Brian Feltman wrote, “A belief in enemy atrocities against their own countrymen also allowed soldiers to rationalize the decision to show the enemy no mercy” (Feltman). It was easy to think of a lost friend and take the lives of prisoners as recompense. But these killings weren’t always just a shot in the head. With the enemy in hand, beasts were awakened in regular men. This element of the war showed that there was no hope in surrender, and there was no kindness left in the heart of any man who looked death in the eyes. The men who endured the horrors of the First World War became so ruined in combat that they could no longer return to normal society. Soldiers in WWI became wired for combat: they ate, lived, and fought fear and death. This trauma was inescapable even after the war was over. Those who experienced the horrors of WWI became beasts of war, rendering them unfit for domestic society.

### **The Cage**

Paul Baumer is the main protagonist of the story *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Throughout the book, Paul experiences death, pain, misery, and animal instinct like never seen in the suburban world. In October of 1918, a matter of days before the end of the war, Paul is killed. Is this an injustice or mercy? After the war, could Paul return home to a normal society? No, he couldn’t. “We have become wild beasts” (Remarque 113). Paul says this to describe the feeling after a days-long bombardment. A feeling of relief, and the animalistic urge to live flooded over the men. Paul admits that if it had been his own father bearing down on him, he wouldn’t hesitate to throw a bomb at him. This makes one wonder, are these men safe for society? Where is this savagery coming from?

In an article by the New York Times Editorial Board called *Is Warfare In Our Bones?*, an analysis is made of an ancient violent battle on the shores of an African lake Trukana.

What scientists found at a place called Nataruk on what was once the shore of a lagoon on Lake Turkana in Kenya were skeletons showing unmistakable evidence of violent deaths — crushed skulls, embedded arrow or spear points, and the like. According to a report of the find in the journal *Nature*, one man had been hit in the front of the head and stabbed in the neck; the skeleton of a pregnant woman looked like she had been tied up before she was killed. It was obviously a terribly violent encounter (Board).

The article is investigating the question: Is Warfare in Our Bones? This evidence from the article and from *All Quiet on the Western Front* points to the affirmative. Not only is conflict programmed into our very being, but once conflict begins, humanity is warped into something ugly and animal. For this reason, men who experience these evils and inflict them on others cannot live in a harmonious society.

To Paul, the battlefield is a cage. Of course, there are no literal bars or restraints in the German trenches. It could be called a cage because the soldiers on the front can't do anything to govern their own fate. There is always the merciless character of Chance hanging over them. Paul remarks, "The front is a cage in which we must await fearfully whatever may happen. [...] Over us Chance hovers. If a shot comes, we can duck, that is all; we neither know nor can determine where it will fall" (Remarque 101). But then, later in chapter VI, the cage is opened.

In chapter six Death finally shows its grinning face when the opponent storms Paul's line. But he isn't scared, he is wild and excited. This is the first time Paul has been able to fight for his life instead of waiting for Chance to take him.

[...]what do we know of men in this moment when Death is hunting us down--now, for the first time in three days we can see his face, now for the first time in three days we can oppose him; we feel a mad anger. No longer do we lie helpless, waiting on the scaffold, we can destroy and kill, to save ourselves, to save ourselves and to be revenged (Remarque 113).

This excerpt from the book is a masterful example of the fear and anger that lives in the hearts of the soldiers fighting WWI. All they have is their lives, in the moment when Death is charging forward, there are no feelings of familial care or comradeship. This is the life-ending effect of war: the fear of Death that poisons the men who see his eyes. That feeling stays with them for life. That is the solitary reason why Paul can't return to his home. He will never escape Death and therefore he cannot cherish his life.

To sweeten the deal so to say, Paul experiences his first personal murder while hiding from Death in a shell hole. As bullets create a steel net over his head, a French soldier stumbles into Paul's hiding place. Without hesitation, Paul stabs the man thrice in the chest. But the printer named Gerard Duval did not die. Through the night and for most of the next day Paul sits with his dying charge. Of course, this is war, but Paul feels as though this man whose life he's taken is his comrade and he realizes that the pair are no different from each other. That instead of the frenchman being an idea with grenades and rifles, he is a man. A man named Gerard Duval.

It was that abstraction I stabbed. But now, for the first time, I see you are a man like me.

[...] Why do they never tell us that you are poor devils like us, [...] that we have the same fear of death, and the same dying and the same agony--Forgive me, comrade; how could

you be my enemy? [...] Take twenty years of my life, comrade, and stand up--take more, for I do not know what I can even attempt to do with it now (Remarque 223).

Paul is forever changed by this harrowing experience. He finally knows Death and pain like it truly is: Hard and Cold. After this, what can he do but die? When Duval is dead he pleads with him to take his life because he doesn't know what he could do with his life. There is no life for Paul but one overshadowed by the Printer named Gerard Duval.

### **Death of the Beast**

Shell Shock impacted millions around the world, and it all started with WWI. Veterans experience terrifying symptoms during battle as well as years after the cease-fire. No man who saw death could live in a normal society. At least, not until the advancement of awareness surrounding PTSD. But back in World War I, there was no sympathy or knowledge about the effects war could have on the human psyche. So for our main character, there was nothing to do but live, and die.

Paul Baumer could never have a life outside of war. The Chance and Death that reined over his life destroyed the man who could love his family, be a productive member of society, and live free of the macabre experiences that had lodged in his brain. But contrary to all the evidence, it seems maybe Paul has some sort of hope for the future, cynical though it may be. "Let the months and years come, they can take nothing from me, they can take nothing more" (Remarque 295). So maybe, just maybe he could've lived. But Erich Maria Remarque never gave him that chance. For Paul, it seems the only answer was death.

Annotated List of Works Cited

Board, The Editorial. *Opinion | Is Warfare in Our Bones?* The New York Times, 23 Jan. 2016,

[www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/opinion/sunday/is-warfare-in-our-bones.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/opinion/sunday/is-warfare-in-our-bones.html).

The article *Is Warfare in our Bones?* was written by the New York Times Editorial Board.

The article gives insight into the human urge to fight and kill. It gives an unbiased view into whether war is a necessity or human nature. This document gives evidence to my point that after the trauma of battle, soldiers are unable to return to regular society.

Feltman, Brian K. "Tolerance As A Crime? The British Treatment Of German Prisoners Of War On The Western Front, 1914-1918." *War In History* 17.4 (2010): 435-458. *Academic Search Premier*. Web.

Brian Feltman is the author of "Tolerance as a Crime". Feltman is a professor at Ohio State University. The article "Tolerance as a Crime" shows the brutal, unforgiving, and animal side of the war. During WWI British soldiers would take German prisoners and then kill them ruthlessly for convenience or for their own selfish reasons. This is a good source because it shows another angle of the conflict.

Jones, Edgar. "Shell Shocked." *American Psychological Association* 43.6 (2012): 18. *APA*. Web

Dr. Edgar Jones is a professor of history at the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College, London. He is the Author of the article "Shell Shocked". "Shell Shocked" is an article about the discovery, psychology, and causes of Shell Shock. In World War I, the British



Armies were caught off guard by the increasing numbers of soldiers unable to fight because of an unseen cause. They appointed a medically trained psychologist, Charles S. Myers, to investigate the issue. Myers diagnosed shell shock when a soldier was unable to function. Symptoms were commonly manifested as fatigue, tremors, confusion, nightmares, impaired sight, and impaired hearing. Often, no cause for the effects could be identified. Some doctors argued that the only cure for shell shock was a complete rest away from the fighting, while others believed that effective treatment required individual attention, ideally one doctor to 50 patients. This source shows the investigation and the scientific discovery of Shell Shock, or as we now know it, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It is incredibly helpful to my research because it shows the very technical side of the horrendous effects of the First World War.

Remarque, Erich Maria, et al. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Little, Brown, 1996.

Erich Maria Remarque is the Author of the book *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The book is the story of a young German Soldier named Paul in WWI. Paul experiences first-hand the horrors of trench warfare, and Shell Shock. This source is useful to my paper because it eloquently shows a man and his inner thoughts going through these horrible experiences. I like this source because the reader can relate to Paul.

Shell Shock: "More Than A Man Could Bear." *English Literature In Transition, 1880-1920* 59.2

(2016): 175-190. *Academic Search Premier*. Web

Andrew Scragg is the Author of Shell Shock: "More Than a Man Could Bear". Scragg is a full-time political operative and has made a life study on the subject of Shell Shock and its political consequences. Shell Shock: "More Than a Man" is an analysis of the discovery of the effects of shell shock and what the respective world governments did to accommodate the change. In 1915 at the emergence of shell shock, there were many investigations on the bodies of those experiencing the change. Some hypothesized that there would be a visible effect on the organs of soldiers being too close to an explosion. But the theory didn't make it far. Through further investigation, the cause of Shell Shock was found to be purely mental trauma. Then was the issue of the management of shell shock on the battlefield. The government acknowledged that the trauma was a real issue, but they didn't want the excuse of shell shock to impede the fighting force. They dismissed it as a flaw in character, even after visible signs of fundamental changes in even the bravest men. This article is useful because it shows evidence of the administration's role in the First World War.

Szegedy-Maszak, Marianne. "The War of Emotions." *The War of Emotions: "Soldiers' Mental Disorders Were Once Dismissed as 'shell Shock.' No Longer..."*. Web. 4 Jan. 1965.

Marianne Szegedy-Maszak is the author of *The War of Emotions*.

The article is a modern dissertation on Shell Shock and its effect on retired soldiers who fought in Afghanistan. It gives a great explanation of the stigma surrounding the treatment of PTSD and soldiers' thoughts on emerging programs that try to prevent the life-altering effects of Shell Shock. This is a good source because it shows a modern representation of shell shock in the world today.

