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Turn the Channel

Guns up and loaded — eyes honed onto the target, ready for anything, everything. Such is the expectation of a soldier on the battlefield, but it fails to encompass the entirety of a soldier's character during war. *Regeneration* by Pat Barker focuses on the deterioration of a soldier's mentality on and off the front line whereas the script of *M.A.S.H.*'s "The Korean Surgeon" written by Bill Idelson creates more stable and comedic soldiers. I investigated the difference of mentalities between the soldiers and concluded that the media and audience largely influence the portrayal of these characters.

To best understand my conclusion, I established a timeline and my thought process through it. World War I (WWI), which *Regeneration* takes place in, occurred from 1914 to 1918. The Korean War *M.A.S.H.* focuses on ran from 1950 until 1953. The Vietnam War began in 1955. The US became involved in 1965 which also marked when the war was nationally televised. The US left in 1973, two years before its the official end. The TV series began in 1972 while the script I investigated was written in 1976, and *Regeneration* was written in 1991. Both pieces of work, in part due to their formats, hold very different tones — the novel tenses and the series more comedic. *Regeneration* revolves around recovery from trauma and the theory of it whereas "The Korean Surgeon" points towards racial discrimination. *Regeneration*'s enemy stems from one's self whereas the script's enemy was more clearly defined through societal

issues. With this, a thought came across my mind; What about the perception of one's self in the face of the enemy?

The WWI flashbacks within the novel portray little about the faces of the enemies such as with how Prior recounted "And you start walking. *Not* at the double. Normal walking speed [. . .] Towards a line of machine guns [. . .] Oh, and of course you're being shelled all the way" (Barker 78). All the characters identify in their flashbacks are shells, dead corpses, and themselves trying to survive in the war. With the Korean War in *M.A.S.H.*, there is a self-righteousness to the characters and a belief they can handle anything the North Koreans toss. In a way, Frank embodies this mindset with his discriminative comments like "They're [the Koreans] diabolical . . . you don't understand the Oriental mind like I do" and his arrogance in believing he can do or get anything with his charm and skills (Idelson 13). He is easily influenced by the two Korean infiltrators, being flattered by their comments that he is a renowned doctor they would love to hear a presentation from (Idelson 24). Both pieces' tones vastly differ, and I think it may be due to the media and the intended audience of the writings which cause it.

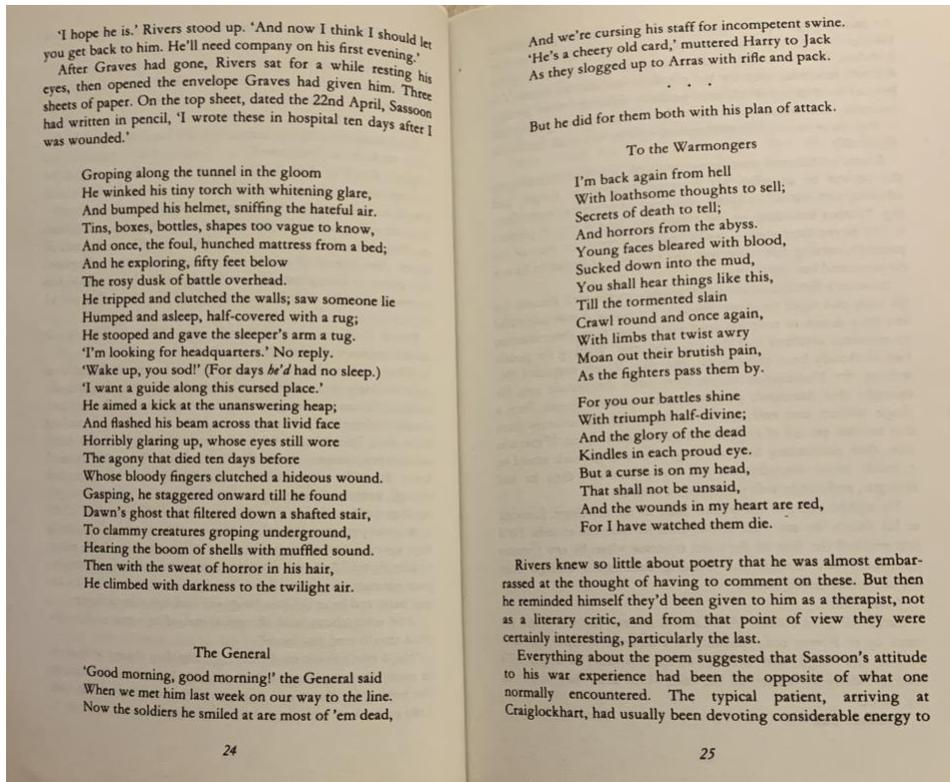
| | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 13 | 13 |
| 10 | 10 |
| INT. POTTER'S TENT - NIGHT | INT. POTTER'S TENT - NIGHT |
| Hot Lips, Frank, POTTER. | Hot Lips, Frank, POTTER. |
| HOT LIPS | HOT LIPS |
| If you want to know what I think... | If you want to know what I think... |
| I think he's a spy! | I think he's a spy! |
| FRANK | FRANK |
| Margaret! That makes a lot of | Margaret! That makes a lot of |
| sense! | sense! |
| POTTER | POTTER |
| Sure. He shot himself in the chest, | Sure. He shot himself in the chest, |
| collapsed a lung, just to get in | collapsed a lung, just to get in |
| here, huh? | here, huh? |
| FRANK | FRANK |
| Why not? They're diabolical! | Why not? They're diabolical! |
| Forgive me, Colonel, but you don't | Forgive me, Colonel, but you don't |
| understand the Oriental mind like | understand the Oriental mind like |
| I do. | I do. |
| POTTER | POTTER |
| I'll buy that. What information | I'll buy that. What information |
| could he get here? How many Q-tips | could he get here? How many Q-tips |
| we've got? How many suppositories? | we've got? How many suppositories? |

(Left: October 5, 1976 Revised Final Script Right: August 12, 1976 Final Script — Frank's lines remained unchanged despite numerous revisions done to his discriminatory dialogue between these two scripts.)

During the creation of *M.A.S.H.*, the Vietnam War had been televised and exposed the atrocities of war to the public. At that time, there was no need to replicate the tragedies to make it known. Thus when *M.A.S.H.* created their cast, the soldiers unconsciously became aware of what they were to face on the battleground due to the creators and the audience knowing and then influencing these characters. I liken it to how I would visualize myself in a dangerous situation. I would say I would do one thing which would prove contrary to what I would do if I was under those circumstances because of an assumed sense of knowledge. This very thing occurs in *M.A.S.H.* due to the media's influence on the writers and the audience who develop the characters, making them more mentally prepared to face the trauma of the Korean War. On the other hand, with *Regeneration*, the audience vastly differs. The novel targets society in the past,

the society that failed to recognize the soldiers' traumas. Due to this, *Regeneration* orientates around revealing the war's atrocities and its impact on the soldiers, going in-depth with the straining mentality of these men. The Vietnam War prepared the cast and its viewers to somewhat understand what they may encounter and place a comedic spin on it. Society during WWI and the characters within the novel had nothing. The media and the audiences of both works may be the reason why the trauma and personalities of the soldiers were so vastly different in *Regeneration* and "The Korean Surgeon" in *M.A.S.H.*

Within *Regeneration*, Sassoon's poems about the war reveal how propaganda and the media disillusioned innocent men about the battlefield and made the trauma and reality worse, more exacerbated. He specifically points to the General where "Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead, / And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine" (Barker 25). The line derives from bitterness toward the leaders from failing to better prepare soldiers for the battlefield, instead leaving them vulnerable and untrained to carelessly die. The propaganda of "triumph half-divine; / And the glory of the dead" emphasize methods the leaders and the media used to encourage young men to enlist and force them into a battle to the death where they are mowed down by machines (Barker 25). The soldiers are given false pretenses on what they are fighting for, of what glory they are attaining by remaining in trenches and running through No-Man's-Land. Sassoon rips away the blindfold to a land of corpses. The leaders and the media created a glorious battle and fame that neither Sassoon or the other veterans truly experience due to the trauma they faced and the reality of trench warfare.



(Excerpt from *Regeneration* of Sassoon's poems of which I derive my conclusions of the lack of the soldier's preparedness from.)

On the other hand, "The Korean Surgeon" is more aware of the infiltration and guerilla warfare utilized and know the reality of the battlefield. I think of Syng Paik almost nonchalantly revealing "They're imposters, you know [. . .] It is common practice to change uniforms and get supplies from units like this" (Idelson 25). Although true that being Korean, he has a better idea of Korean tactics, but the easy acceptance on the US side of the plausibility of this happening showcases how better prepared the soldiers are. They acknowledge the subterfuge shown by the two unnamed Koreans is possible and commonplace on the field. A part of this can stem from media and the airing of the Vietnam War. Such "underhanded" schemes cannot be blamed to be the writers merely attempting to create drama in the episode, but actual happenings in war as shown through the Vietnam broadcasting and the subterfuge within it. The idea of this escapade

happening during the Korean War is not farfetched to the audience who have seen supposed civilians explode US camps through suicide bombings. In turn, the soldiers in *M.A.S.H.* have a better mentality facing their trauma because both the writers and the audience have a better mentality and understanding of the tragedies of war. Rather than the episode putting a comedic spin on a horrid imaginary event that no one experienced, they are attempting to put a comedic twist to a horrific event people understand happened and wish to make lighter. I think of how certain comedians say comedy takes the darkest elements in life, the most uncomfortable topics in society to discuss and makes a joke out of it to help deal with the trauma of it happening and to cope with it. I imagine it to be this idea that resonates with the audience after the media showcased the Vietnam War that allows for “The Korean Surgeon” to have better-prepared soldiers capable of coping with the trauma they face — even expecting it.

I liken the media helping its audience cope with and in a way “normalize” the tragedies it reveals to society’s perceptions of shootings today. So often have shootings been shown in the media it has become a “normal” occurrence in our lives. Although tragic and an event that should never happen, we have come to see it as a problem we are now facing and something happening with increasing numbers. Though tragic, we still regard it as “another shooting happened” rather than the initial panic and condemnation which occurred initially. I do not quite mean to make it sound as if we are becoming apathetic, but rather to reveal how the media greatly affects our coping mechanism with tragic events such as the Vietnam War and even the *M.A.S.H.*’s Korean War.

The media holds a great influence on how we, as an audience, cope with traumatic events. *Regeneration* portrays the greatly traumatized soldiers from WWI and Sassoon’s belief of how unprepared the soldiers are going into the war. “The Korean Surgeon” of *M.A.S.H.*,

however, reveals soldiers with a stronger fortitude, creating comedy out of their experiences, due to better understanding the problems they will face in the Korean War. The media of both eras and the audiences of the pieces influence the portrayal of the soldiers who either break underneath their trauma or push through it.

Works Cited

Barker, Pat. *Regeneration*. Penguin Group, 1991.

Idelson, Bill. "The Korean Surgeon" *M.A.S.H.* Twentieth Century – Fox Television, 5 Oct. 1976.