

Traumatic Memories of War

World War I had a dramatic impact on the world in multiple aspects including mental, emotional, and physical damage that affected everyone in some capacity either directly or through someone they knew. Many soldiers would come home to their loved ones not whole as human beings, with lost limbs or lost hope or spirits after seeing friends die on the battlefield. The damage of these effects can be seen in the works of poetry that were written at the time by British writers such as Wilfred Owen and Vera Brittain. They related their own experiences and put them into their work so that others could get a sense of the worldwide effects that war had. One clear effect of war is the traumatic memories and nightmares that soldiers and nurses had once they returned home, and its impact can be seen by comparing the experiences of World War I and modern soldiers.

Many of the poems coming out at the time of World War I were written with the memory of terrible things that poets had seen. They relived the experience of seeing so much death or hearing shells and gunfire surround them. Wilfred Owen's famous poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" describes a dream he had where he sees a man choking and drowning from poison gas. The vivid detail and brutality of word choice was common at the time for poems describing memories. They sought to draw the reader in to the terror that they witnessed both in person and in their sleep repeatedly. This type of extreme horror would often haunt the writers and make them relive things that they were trying to repress forever. Matters only got worse when it was taken into account that their sleep was being disrupted. Instead of dreaming peacefully, they were forced to see gruesome acts by their own brain, and had no way to shut the dreams off. Some of the horrifying imagery can be seen when he writes, "In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,/He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning." These two lines, 15 and 16 of the poem,

1 are a perfect representation of the dreams that Owen and others were seeing nightly. When he
2 talks about his sight being helpless, he is describing how the gas had already reached the man
3 before he could put his mask on, and also his sight in his dreams that he cannot wake up from.

4 The memories brought up in these nightmares were a symbol of helplessness in the
5 war that soldiers and even nurses felt since there was no way they could possibly end all of
6 the death and pain on their own. The feeling of helplessness is one that those who are
7 depressed feel. This depression is only amplified because there was no way to avoid it, all of
8 the past was brought back through horrible nightmares that signified the stress, pain, fear
9 and lost will that they faced.

10 Owen used many techniques to try to relay to the reader what it was like for him to see
11 such brutal things. In lines 21 and 22 he says, "If you could hear, at every jolt, the
12 blood/Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs," this phrase shows how violent the gas
13 was and speaks to those who were not at the war and were sitting back at home urging others
14 to do the fighting for them. There were people talking about how Great War was, and
15 Owen's poetry used haunting, scary imagery to show them what war was really like. His
16 poetry was used to put the images that were engraved into his brain so deeply that they came
17 out in his subconscious, into the mind of the reader.

18 Vera Brittain was another poet who wrote of memory and how it had played a part in
19 her life. In the poem "The German Ward" she writes that the memories of the ward in which
20 she worked would still be etched into her memory even when she was so old that her
21 recollection faded away. This idea that the memories of war were seared into the people's
22 brains came up often in World War I poetry, especially Brittain's. One memory of hers was
23 that "I shall hear the bitter groans and laboured / breath." This sound could be heard

1 throughout her life and echoed in her head. The sights and sounds of war had undoubtedly
2 affected everyone who went through it at this time. The memories the veterans had played a
3 part in their mental state and even affected their dreams. A reflection of this can be seen
4 through these two poems and the ways they described to the reader what was going on in
5 their mind.

6 We have much more knowledge about what causes fear memories and trauma now
7 than we had during the First World War. The article "Nightmares and PTSD" from the
8 National Institution of Mental Health states that 71-96% of soldiers suffering from post-
9 traumatic stress disorder have nightmares. Only 2-8% of the general population has
10 nightmare disorder according to the article "Nightmares and other Disturbing Parasomnias,"
11 which is having frequent nightmares. Soldiers suffering from PTSD have nightmares much
12 more than just occasionally, so that large rate of them suffering from nightmares shows
13 how traumatic war can be. In the "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Research Fact Sheet",
14 they look for possible risk factors attributed to PTSD and memories of fear. One of these
15 risks factors is a protein called stathmin, which is needed in order to create fear memories.
16 More knowledge about this protein is still needed to understand exactly what makes it and
17 the fear memories it helps create so prevalent, but its importance can be seen in a study
18 that was done. The study had mice that were genetically altered to not have stathmin go
19 through training that mice with stathmin went through as well. Mice without stathmin did
20 not freeze during dangerous acts as much as regular mice and they also explored open areas
21 much more. By learning that memories of fear are a result of a genetic protein, we are able
22 to understand why they show up in over 70% of war veterans, as they are controlled by

1 more important factors than regular memories. The majority of the population has high
2 enough stathmin levels to create fear memories, but there needs to be a trigger in order for
3 the genetic process to take effect. Seeing friends die and suffer is an extreme trigger that
4 makes these experiences stand out and recur over and over.

5 Comparing the effect of war on memories and nightmares shows that they are
6 prevalent in war at any period. The poets of World War I wrote about their nightmares
7 and memories to show that they were engrained into them and that they were helpless in
8 their attempts to get rid of them. The genetic knowledge that we are still gaining in
9 modern times lets us know why so many people experience traumatic or "fear" memories
10 and nightmares. The protein in our body that creates them has a much stronger effect than
11 proteins needed for regular memories, since stathmin literally alters how we react to
12 certain situations. High rates of trauma and nightmares are something that people in any
13 war can relate to, whether they are British or not.

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