

Unseen extract 8: Regeneration

Read the extract carefully. It is taken from *Regeneration* by Pat Barker, first published in 1991, which explores the treatment of shell-shocked war victims. In this extract, Sarah, a munitions worker, visits the hospital with the girlfriend of one of the shell-shocked soldiers. At this point Sarah finds herself alone and tries to find her friend again.

Sample question

Read the extract carefully. Explore the significance of the attitudes of non-combatants in this extract.

Remember to include in your answer relevant detailed analysis of the ways that Barker shapes meanings.

Extract

Obviously she ought to stop and ask somebody, but then everybody seemed to be in such a hurry, and so grim-faced. At last she found a door that led out to the grounds at the back of the hospital, where the tall chimney of an incinerator dribbled brownish-yellow smoke. Here, a huge tent had been erected and this served as another ward. She glanced into the interior, which was golden in the sunlight filtered through the roof, but the atmosphere was close, stifling, a humming darkness in which the clumsiness of bandages and the itch of healing skin must be almost intolerable.

A constant traffic of nurses and orderlies passed between the tent and the main building, and, feeling herself to be in the way, Sarah looked around for somewhere she could find temporary refuge and not bother anybody. There was a conservatory along the side of the hospital, facing east so that at that moment it caught the full warmth of the sun. Shadowy figures sat inside, and the door was open so she thought she might perhaps sit there.

Once across the threshold she became aware of a silence, a silence caused, she suspected, by her entrance. She was still dazzled by the brightness of the light outside and the relative dimness of the interior, and so she had to blink several times before she saw them, a row of figures in wheelchairs, but figures that were no longer the size and shape of adult men. Trousers legs sewn short; empty sleeves pinned to jackets. One man had lost all his limbs, and his face was so drained, so pale, he seemed to have left his blood in France as well. The blue of the hospital uniform looked garish against the skin. They'd been pushed out here to get the sun, but not right outside, and not at the front of the hospital where

their mutilations might have been seen by passers-by. They stared at her, but not as the men had stared on the other ward, smiling, trying to catch her eye. This was a totally blank stare. If it contained anything at all, it was fear. Fear of her looking at the empty trouser legs. Fear of her not looking at them. She stood there, unable to go forward, and unable, for a few crucial moments, to turn back, until a nurse bustled up to her and said, 'Who is it you want to see?'

'I'm just waiting for a friend. If it's alright, I'll wait outside.'

She backed out, walking away in the sunlight, feeling their eyes on her, thinking that perhaps if she'd been prepared, if she'd managed to smile, to look normal, it might have been better. But no, she thought, there was nothing she could have done that would have made it better. Simply by being there, by being that inconsequential, infinitely powerful creature: a pretty girl, she had made everything worse. Her sense of her own helplessness, her being forced to play the role of Medusa when she meant no harm, merged with the anger she was beginning to feel at their being hidden away like that. If the country demanded that price, then it should bloody well be prepared to look at the result. She strode on through the heat, not caring where she was going, furious with herself, the war...Everything.

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