

Ruptured Minds, Fractured Verses: The Psychodynamics of Madness in War Poetry

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Abstract

The poetry of the First World War represents a unique confluence of aesthetic expression and psychological trauma, capturing the profound mental disintegration experienced by combatants subjected to the relentless horrors of modern warfare. This paper examines the psychodynamics of madness in war poetry, focusing on the works of Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Ivor Gurney. Drawing upon the psychoanalytic frameworks of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, this study interrogates how these poets not only depict psychological rupture but also formally encode trauma within the linguistic and structural fabric of their verse. Freud's theories of repression, melancholia, and the return of the repressed provide a foundational lens through which to interpret the compulsive recurrence of traumatic imagery in war poetry. Simultaneously, Lacan's tripartite model of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic offers insight into the ineffability of war trauma and its manifestation in poetic disruptions, such as fractured syntax and hallucinatory imagery. This paper contends that war poetry does not merely document trauma but enacts it through its very form, rendering the psychological breakdown of the soldier as an intrinsic feature of its aesthetic and linguistic composition. Through an in-depth analysis of “Repression of War Experience”, “Mental Cases”, “Dead Man's Dump”, and “The Silent One”, this study elucidates how war poetry functions as both an artistic representation of psychological distress and a textual embodiment of the disintegration of the wartime psyche.

Keywords: War trauma, Psychoanalysis, Madness, World War I Poetry, Freudian and Lacanian Theory

Introduction

The horrors of World War I ushered in a profound literary and psychological reckoning, as poets sought to articulate the inexpressible trauma inflicted upon soldiers who endured trench warfare, ceaseless bombardments, and the omnipresent specter of death. Among those who bore witness, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Ivor Gurney transfigured their suffering into verse, crafting poetry that not only records the brutalities of war but also encapsulates the psychological fragmentation that follows prolonged exposure to violence. Their poetry serves as a visceral engagement with war-induced madness, wherein hallucination, paranoia, and dissociation manifest as central themes.

The representation of war trauma in literature has been extensively studied in relation to psychological theories of the time. Freud's early work on hysteria and shell shock (Freud Beyond the Pleasure

Principle 1920) provides a foundational framework for understanding how trauma imprints itself upon the psyche, often resurfacing through repetition compulsion and nightmares. Freud's contemporary, W. H. R. Rivers, who treated Sassoon and Owen at Craiglockhart War Hospital, further developed ideas on repression and the war neuroses suffered by soldiers. More recently, literary scholars such as Santanu Das (Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature, 2006) and Trudi Tate (Modernism, History, and the First World War, 1998) have illuminated how war poetry operates as a literary expression of post-traumatic stress disorder, long before the term was formally coined.

Despite these significant contributions, scholarship on war poetry has largely privileged historical and biographical readings over psychoanalytic interpretations of textual fragmentation. While critics have recognized war poetry's disruptions in meter, syntax, and narrative coherence, few have connected these formal elements to the theoretical constructs of Freudian repression or Lacanian psychosis. This paper addresses this gap by integrating psychoanalysis with close readings of Sassoon's, Owen's, Rosenberg's, and Gurney's works, arguing that these poets not only depict madness but structurally embody psychological disintegration through the breakdown of language itself.

By foregrounding the psychodynamics of war poetry, this study advances a central argument: war poetry does not merely reflect trauma; it enacts it. The textual ruptures—shattered syntax, erratic enjambment, and grotesque imagery—mirror the fractured consciousness of soldiers whose minds have been irrevocably altered by war. Drawing from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, this paper explores how war poetry functions as both a symptom and a mode of articulation for the madness of war. This study employs psychoanalytic literary criticism, particularly Freudian and Lacanian perspectives, to analyze the representation of war-induced madness in poetry.

Freudian psychoanalysis frames trauma as an experience that cannot be fully assimilated into consciousness, leading to repetition compulsion and the return of the repressed. Freud's work on hysteria and war neurosis (1920) provides insight into how war poetry stages psychological breakdown, where memory is fractured and returns involuntarily through imagery and metaphor. Freud's *The Uncanny* (1919) further elucidates the ghostly presence of trauma, which manifests in the surreal, nightmarish landscapes of war poetry.

Lacanian psychoanalysis refines this framework by delineating trauma's interaction with language and the unconscious. Lacan's concept of the Real—representing the unassimilable horror of war—illuminates the ineffability that pervades war poetry, where words falter in capturing the full weight of battlefield atrocities. The Symbolic order, governed by language and societal structures, attempts to contain trauma, yet in war poetry, this containment fails, resulting in linguistic rupture. Finally, Lacan's notion of the fragmented self (mirror stage) is crucial for understanding how war poetry reflects the soldier's fractured psyche, where identity dissolves into spectral remnants.

War poetry has long served as a crucial medium for articulating the psychological turmoil of combatants, particularly in relation to trauma, madness, and the fragmentation of the self. The intersection of war-induced psychosis and poetic expression has been the subject of extensive literary and psychoanalytic inquiry, particularly through the lens of Freudian and Lacanian criticism. This literature review examines critical perspectives on war poetry's depiction of psychological breakdown, drawing upon scholarly monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, and primary literary sources.

The psychological consequences of war have been extensively studied in relation to literary expression. Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) provides a foundational analysis of World War I poetry, illustrating how combatants translated their trauma into verse. Fussell argues that war poetry's paradoxical structure—simultaneously aesthetic and horrifying—

reflects the psychological dissonance experienced by soldiers (Fussell 135). He particularly highlights the works of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Isaac Rosenberg as emblematic of what he terms “ironic memory,” where poets deploy poetic irony to convey their fractured psyches.

Santanu Das, in *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (2005), expands upon Fussell’s work by focusing on the somatic and sensory dimensions of war poetry. Das argues that poets such as Sassoon and Rosenberg employ tactile imagery to externalize psychological trauma, creating an embodied representation of madness (Das 74). This aligns with Elaine Scarry’s theory in *The Body in Pain* (1985), which posits that extreme suffering often resists linguistic representation, thereby leading poets to experiment with fragmented poetic forms as a means of articulating psychological distress (Scarry 41).

Jon Silkin’s *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War* (1972) offers another crucial contribution, particularly regarding the therapeutic dimensions of war poetry. Silkin contends that war poetry functions as a form of catharsis, allowing poets to externalize their trauma and, in some cases, reconstruct a fractured sense of self (Silkin 102). His psychoanalytic approach to Owen and Sassoon demonstrates how their verse oscillates between lucidity and incoherence, mirroring the oscillations of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The relationship between madness and poetic form has been a major area of scholarly investigation, particularly regarding its psychoanalytic implications. Edna Longley, in *Poetry in the Wars* (1987), examines how the structural instability of war poetry—its reliance on ellipses, irregular meter, and disrupted syntax—parallels the poet’s psychological fragmentation (Longley 86). She focuses on Isaac Rosenberg’s “Break of Day in the Trenches”, arguing that the poem’s oscillation between grotesque realism and surreal imagery embodies the poet’s descent into existential instability.

Adrian Caesar, in *Taking It Like a Man: Suffering, Sexuality, and War Poetry* (1993), addresses the gendered dimensions of war-induced madness. He asserts that traditional conceptions of masculinity collapse under the weight of war trauma, leading to a crisis of identity that manifests in poetic discourse (Caesar 59). His analysis of Sassoon’s “Repression of War Experience” suggests that the poem’s surreal hallucinations—such as ghostly voices and animate objects—represent repressed trauma breaking into consciousness.

Complementing these perspectives, Tim Kendall’s *Modern English War Poetry* (2006) argues that war poetry often engages in self-reflexive madness, where the poet becomes aware of his own psychological disintegration and encodes this realization within the poem’s structure (Kendall 94). His reading of Rosenberg’s “Dead Man’s Dump” highlights how the poem’s fractured imagery and jarring juxtapositions mirror the poet’s own struggle with psychosis and mortality.

Psychoanalysis provides a valuable lens through which to interpret war poetry’s engagement with madness and trauma. Freud’s theories of the unconscious, repression, and the return of the repressed have been instrumental in shaping literary criticism on the subject. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud introduces the concept of trauma repetition, where individuals compulsively relive traumatic experiences through dreams and narratives (Freud 12). This framework has been applied to war poetry by several scholars.

Jahan Ramazani, in *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (1994), employs Freudian mourning theory to analyze war poetry’s depiction of loss and psychological instability. He argues that poets such as Owen and Sassoon struggle with melancholic mourning, where grief becomes pathologically internalized rather than resolved (Ramazani 57). This is particularly evident in Owen’s “Mental Cases”, where the grotesque depictions of shell-shocked soldiers illustrate a mind unable to process trauma.

From a Lacanian perspective, Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) expands upon Freud’s trauma theory, emphasizing how war poetry often conveys

trauma through linguistic disjunction and gaps in representation (Caruth 24). Drawing from Lacan's concept of the Real, she argues that war poetry frequently gestures toward experiences that exceed symbolic articulation, leaving behind fragments, silences, and disruptive imagery.

Jean-Michel Rabaté, in *The Pathos of Distance: Affects of the Moderns* (2016), employs Lacan's mirror stage to interpret how war poets construct fragmented identities. He contends that war poetry frequently presents the self as shattered, mirroring the experience of shell shock and dissociative disorder (Rabaté 78). This aligns with Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), where she discusses how traumatized individuals often experience discontinuities in self-perception, a theme that recurs in the poetry of Sassoon and Rosenberg (Herman 43).

While much scholarship has focused on World War I poets, recent studies have expanded the discussion to include contemporary war poetry. Mark Rawlinson's *British Writing of the Second World War* (2000) examines how the psychological toll of combat persisted into World War II poetry, with poets such as Keith Douglas continuing the tradition of fragmented, trauma-laden verse (Rawlinson 62). Similarly, Adam Piette's *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939-1945* (1995) argues that poetic representations of madness evolved in response to new forms of warfare and ideological conflicts (Piette 88).

Contemporary poets such as Brian Turner, whose *Here, Bullet* (2005) addresses trauma from the Iraq War, demonstrate how war poetry remains a vital space for exploring psychological disintegration. Jennifer Good's *The Poetry of Trauma: War and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* (2019) discusses how modern war poetry engages with PTSD in a manner similar to its World War I predecessors, using surreal imagery and fragmented structures to depict psychic instability (Good 103).

Madness and Psychological Fragmentation in War Poetry

The poetry of the First World War stands as a testament to the profound disintegration experienced by soldiers subjected to relentless violence, death, and uncertainty. In the works of Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Ivor Gurney, the effects of war trauma are not merely chronicled but embedded in the very fabric of their poetic structure. These poets employ linguistic fragmentation, disrupted syntax, surreal imagery, and spectral voices to encapsulate the psychodynamics of madness. Through the lens of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, this paper explores how their poetry enacts the psychosis and neurosis induced by war, where the rupture of language mirrors the rupture of the self.

Sassoon's "Repression of War Experience" (1918) offers a striking depiction of a soldier struggling with intrusive war memories, unable to repress the trauma that pervades his consciousness. Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, argues that trauma manifests through the compulsive repetition of repressed experiences, particularly in dreams and hallucinations (15). This notion is central to Sassoon's poem, where the speaker's attempt to engage in mundane activities is persistently interrupted by spectral war imagery. The poem begins with an imperative reassurance to the self:

"Now light the candles; one; two; there's a moth;
What silly beggars they are to blunder in
And scorch their wings with glory, liquid flame-
No, no, not that, - it's bad to think of war;" (Sassoon, lines 1-4).

The act of lighting candles, an ostensibly ordinary task, triggers a cascade of intrusive thoughts. The moth, symbolic of soldiers drawn to the "glory" of war, evokes imagery of self-destruction. The speaker's immediate interjection- "No, no, not that", exemplifies the Freudian defense mechanism of repression, wherein the mind attempts to suppress traumatic memories (Freud 25). However, the very structure of the poem betrays the inefficacy of this repression; enjambment and abrupt syntactic shifts mirror the speaker's fragmented consciousness.

Freud's concept of "return of the repressed" is further evident in the poem's hallucinatory visions:

"And you're a man of action-you've been warned.

So put the thought away that's in your mind,

And go on hearing them and being brave." (Sassoon, lines 19-21).

Her, the speaker's internal monologue is marked by dissociation, as he adopts an external voice instructing himself to suppress his memories. Yet, the phrase "*hearing them*" suggests an auditory hallucination, a hallmark of trauma-induced psychosis, aligning with Lacan's concept of the Real, which signifies experiences that exceed linguistic articulation (Lacan 55). The failure of repression underscores how war trauma resists containment within the Symbolic order, forcing itself into consciousness through intrusive recollections.

Owen's "Mental Cases" (1918) is perhaps one of the most harrowing representations of war-induced psychosis, presenting soldiers as spectral figures consumed by the horror they have witnessed. The poem opens with a jarring question:

"Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?" (Owen, line 1).

The interrogative structure, combined with the eerie setting of "*twilight*", immediately evokes a liminal space between sanity and madness, between life and death. In Lacanian terms, this liminality signifies the collapse of the Symbolic order, as the "*mental cases*" exist outside conventional social structures, unable to reintegrate into post-war society (Lacan 67).

Owen Intensifies the Grotesque Imagery in his Portrayal of these men

"Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,

Baring teeth that leer like skull's teeth wicked?" (Owen, lines 5-6).

The dehumanization of the soldiers is stark, as they are reduced to skeletal figures, their "*drooping tongues*" and "*slobbering jaws*" evoking the posthumous decay of corpses. This imagery aligns with Freud's concept of meloncholia, where the traumatized subject internalizes the death drive, becoming obsessed with their own disintegration (Freud *Mourning and Melancholia* 245). The excessive corporeality of Owen's Language- the emphasis on mouths, teeth, and drooling, suggests a return to the primal id, a site of unfiltered drives and suffering.

The Most Chilling Moment of The Poem Comes in its Accusatory Climax

"These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished." (Owen, line 14).

The Capitalization of "*Dead*" transforms the noun into an omnipotent entity, reinforcing Freud's argument that trauma is not merely an event but a perpetual haunting (Freud *Beyond* 32). This spectral quality aligns with Lacan's notion of the Real, where trauma exists beyond symbolic articulation, manifesting instead as a nightmarish presence that cannot be assimilated into language (Lacan 82). The soldiers are not merely victims of war; they are possessed by it, their psyches permanently fractured by their encounters with death.

Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump" (1917) presents an unflinching depiction of the battlefield as a site of both physical and psychological dismemberment. Unlike Sassoon and Owen, Rosenberg adopts a more surrealist approach, where the grotesque imagery of the battlefield merges with an almost mechanical inevitability of death:

"The wheels lurched over sprawled dead

But pained them not, through their bones crunched." (Rosenberg, lines 1-2).

The juxtaposition of violent motion ("*lurched over*") with the eerie indifference of the dead encapsulates of war trauma. Freud's theory of the uncanny suggests that what is most terrifying is not the presence of death but its inability to be fully comprehended (Freud *The Uncanny* 20). Here,

the crunching bones evoke a visceral horror, yet the dead remain unresponsive, both physically and symbolically erased.

Rosenberg further employs synesthetic imagery to heighten the surreal disjunction between sensory perception and psychological numbness:

*“A man’s brains splattered on a stretcher-bearer’s face;
His shook shoulders slipped their load,
But when they bent to look again
The drowning soul was sunk too deep
For human tenderness.” (Rosenberg, lines 21-25).*

The “drowning soul” suggests the irrevocable loss of identity, aligning with Lacan’s theory of the fragmented self (Lacan 94). The Stretcher-bearer’s initial shock, his “*shook shoulders*”- implies that a momentary break in repression, yet he quickly dissociates, mirroring the psychoanalytic mechanism of defensive detachment.

Ivor Gurney’s “The Silent One” (1917) diverges from the other war poets by focusing on the profound psychological paralysis induced by war. The poem narrates the experience of a soldier who witnesses a fellow comrade’s death remains immobilized:

*“Who died on the wires, and hung there, one of two-
Who for his hours of life had chattered through
Infinite lovely chatter of Bucks accent.” (Gurney, lines 1-3).*

The emphasis on “*chatter*” starkly contrasts with the soldier’s eventual “*silence*”, marking Freudian shift from expression to repression (Freud Beyond 41). His inability to move or react aligns with trauma-induced aphasia, where speech itself collapses in the face of the Real (Lacan 112).

Together, these poems construct a poetic cartography of war trauma, where madness is not merely represented but enacted through linguistic and structural disarray. This study demonstrates that war poetry operates as a literary enactment of psychological fragmentation, where poetic disruptions mirror the fractured minds of soldiers. By applying Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, we uncover how war poetry encodes trauma within its very structure. Future research may further explore war poetry’s intersections with disability studies, exploring shell shock as a precursor to contemporary understandings of PTSD.

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