
**FROM BATTLEFIELD TO BROKEN CONSCIOUSNESS: WAR,
TRAUMA, AND MODERN ALIENATION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY
ENGLISH LITERATURE**

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DOI: <https://doi-org/101555/ijarp.7762>**ABSTRACT:**

The theme of war has contributed massively in English Literature. The World Wars have created intense transformations in human lives. The violence and destructive nature of wars can never bring productive scenario into lives. The devastation and destruction of wars have brutally snatched peace from human existence. After the devastation of World War I human existence becomes purposeless, aimless and there was no grandeur in human lives. The people are alienated; they are struggling with their loneliness and emptiness. They are completely lost in the chaotic World. These frustrated, isolated and frustrated people after the decay and destruction after World War I are termed as Lost Generation by Gertrude Stein. After the World War II, human existence has again experienced the severe existential crisis in the destructed world. They experienced a repetitive, circular and monotonous life without any progress. They have no individual identity and they acquire a herd mentality. They live in isolation, purposelessness but they carry on working. Absurdism is a prominent literary form after the World War II. Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and Romanian-French dramatist Eugene Ionesco *Rhinoceros* (1959) are some of the crucial absurdist literary works which project the existential crisis and emptiness of alienated people who are living in the collective identity like the rhinoceros and carrying on the incessant toil like Sisyphus and experiencing a defiant happiness like him in this repetitive and endless loop.

KEYWORDS: destruction, devastation, alienated, lost, purposeless, aimless, trauma, repression, trench, frontline.

METHODOLOGY: This paper uses qualitative, descriptive and interpretative research methodology for the better understanding of the subject matter and severity of wars and their direct impact on humanity. It goes through close textual analysis and descriptive- analytical approach which help to comprehend the unique features of the modern people after the devastating wars. This paper uses Existential, Modernism, Trauma theory, Psychoanalytic theory, Feminist Theory, Marxism and New Historicism theoretical approaches which help in the deeper analysis of the topic. The secondary sources like critical essays and scholarly writings on Hemingway add more enrichment and profundity of this research work.

- **Some Major Post war Literary Works:**

Trench poets are the poets who have enriched English Literature and worldwide readers about the reality of World War I with their firsthand experiences in the warfare. They express their disillusionment about the war and the romantic notion of heroism in the warfare. Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Robert Graves, Edward Thomas, David Jones et. al. are the prominent soldier- poets or trench poets witnessing the horrible and real nature of war.

- **Dulce Et Decorum Est** is a revolutionary poem written by Wilfred Owen. It is written during the World War I. The title is an extraction of the classical Roman poet Horace which means "it is sweet and proper to die for one's country". The poem is a severe condemnation of war. The poem vividly portrays the pathetic condition of the soldiers in the frontline. The soldiers while marching have experienced the poisonous chlorine gas. The poet describes the explosion of the Chlorine gas artillery on the British soldiers. They are horrified, panicked and puzzled. One of the soldiers takes too much time to open his helmet or to unmask himself. He is in absolute pain and agony. Those who have actually experienced the gruesome spectacle of the warfront Dulce ET Decorum EST Pro patria mori is a perfect sarcasm for them. The poem exposes the hellish, horrific and devilish nature of the war and urges that the romantic notion of war, heroism, glorification of the war and soldiers must not be taught to the children. There is no romantic notion hidden in war. It is terrible and deadly.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him

drowning. In all my dreams before my helpless sight, He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

- **The General (1917): Siegfried Sassoon-** This is a famous anti-heroic poem by Siegfried Sassoon. He served as the frontline soldier during the World War I. The poem is written while Sassoon was severely wounded in the shoulders due to serving in the frontline of the war and experienced the bomb explosion. The poem is another sarcastic and anti-war poem. The poem exposes the frontline soldiers are mercilessly killed by the incompetent war plan or battle strategy of the undeserving and incompetent General. Though he greets the soldiers cheerfully but in actuality his inept, ineffectual and flawed action plans cause their pathetic and untimely death. The battle of Arras is mentioned in the poem.

And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine. 'He's a cheery old card,' grunted Harry to Jack As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack. But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

- **Break Day in the Trenches (1916): Isaac Rosenberg-** The poem is a vivid portrait of the futility of war. It is written during World War I. The setting of the poem is the dawn of a new day. The poet while taking the poppy, a rat touches his hand. The poet expresses that the rat is free to move to the enemy side also. It is not restricted like the trench soldiers. The poet is fighting for the British War against the German side. The rat is a 'cosmopolitan' creature free to touch both the British and German soldiers. The nature is still and indifferent to human affairs. The Jewish poet was killed in the year 1918 while fighting for the British army.

The darkness crumbles away.
It is the same old druid Time as ever,
Only a live thing leaps my hand,
A queer sardonic rat,
As I pull the parapet's poppy
To stick behind my ear.
Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew
Your cosmopolitan sympathies.
Now you have touched this English hand
You will do the same to a German

Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
To cross the sleeping green between.

- **Goodbye to All That (1929): Robert Graves-** this an autobiographical account of Robert Graves. This literary piece shows the vivid and real picture of the warfare. The author is disillusioned by the notion of war, the corruption and incompetence of the higher authorities and his grave trauma by participating actively in the battlefield. The warfare can only provide the universe with motionless corpses of the innocent soldiers. The brutality of war is celebrated with false romanticism and heroic glorification. There is no heroism in war it is only pervaded with devastation, trauma, brutality, death and genocide. Massacre and devastation cannot be peaceful at all .It can only bring sorrow, angst, agony and despair. The shell shocks and the consequent long lasting trauma are intolerable and terrible. The author has condemned the rigid class systems of British society and the culture of the private schools. He is completely against the harsh class discriminations of British society. The inadequacies of the higher authorities, the commanding officers and the military leadership are brutally exposed by the author. The soldiers are not properly treated. The wretched condition of the trench soldiers "squalor, suffering, and pain" of are laid bare by him. The Battle of Loos is mentioned in the text. The after war trauma creates an isolated condition of the soldiers. They are compelled to stay isolated, grave and disgusted with the war experiences. The agitated writer bid Good bye to the British culture and traditions as the devastation and violation of the war has enforced him too cut the tie with his childhood, his family, his lifelong education and experiences. He is completely exhausted and disenchanted now he cut all the ties with his previous self, beliefs and his own country, England. There is no productivity in the notion of war it is meaningless and hollow. It can only bring frustration in lives. The World War I is not at all heroic, it is terrific.

- **The Sun Also Rises (1926): Ernest Hemingway-** This is the debut novel of Hemingway. The roman – a – clef novel pivots around the life of Jake Barnes, a Roman Catholic. The novel is focused on the theme of the Lost Generation. The term was first coined by Gertrude Stein by which she refers to a disillusioned and directionless frustrated generation. This Lost Generation people are the direct aftermath of World War I. They are alienated, unable to communicate and addicted to unrestrained drinking to escape from the crude reality. They have no faith in religion. The epigraph sun also rises has been extracted from *Ecclesiastes* "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for

ever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose."(Ecclesiastes 1:3–5, King James Version.) *Jke Barnes* is the typical Hemingwayian code hero and the potent representative of the Lost Generation. The novel borrows multiple autobiographical allusions of the novelist who himself served as ambulance driver of the Italian front on behalf of the American Red Cross Motor Cops voluntarily during the World War I. He was fatally wounded in the warfare and got severe leg injury. Jake has become physically feeble and impotent. He is deeply in love with Brett Ashley who represents the seductive, enigmatic, independent 20th C. woman. She also served in the World War I as a nurse and is well aware of Jake's physical disability but does not want to sacrifice her physical urge for him. She is the Modern woman and is open about her physical gratification and is economically and emotionally independent. The generation is excessively attracted towards drinking, travelling and sensuality. Physical proximity distracts them from the dread of being lost, alienated in the purposeless, aimless Modern world. "You're an expatriate. You've lost touch with the soil. You get precious. Fake European standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all your time talking, not working." Jake Barnes shows grace under pressure. He has accepted his physical limitations dignifiedly. His impotence suggests the emasculation of the World War I. Hemingway has opinionated- "When you go to war as a boy you have a great illusion of immortality. Other people get killed; not you ... Then when you are badly wounded the first time you lose that illusion and you know it can happen to you."

- **The Heart of the Matter (1948): Graham Greene-** Graham Greene himself was a British Intelligence during World War II. The novel describes the serious and anti-social activities, diamond smuggling on the West Coast of Africa during the World War II. Major Scobie is a devout Catholic and the situation of the African West Coast is highly tensed. The novel exposes the criminal activities, murder, blackmailing. Major Scobie is a loyal officer. His married life is filled up with grave despair, loss, unhappiness and an unspeakable void and barrenness. His wife Louise is fond of poetry and Literature. They have lack of communication, love and emotional attachment. They stay together but lack genuine feelings for each other. The World War has impacted on human lives greatly. The people remain alienated, solitary and are living lives with mechanical type which is devoid of affection and genuine interest. They have lost their girl child Catherine years ago. Scobie has sympathy and pity for his wife. Major Scobie falls in love with the skinny and feeble nineteen year old widow Helen whom he discovered among rescued survivors of a devastating shipwreck.

They have built an adulterous relationship between each other. One of the young officers Dicky Pemberton commits suicide. Scobie's servant Ali is murdered. There is the arrival and seize of Portuguese ship Esperanca. The criminal Yusef blackmails Scobie time and again and tries to bribe him by providing gifts. Diamond smuggling is going on. The morally and mentally exhausted, the devout Catholic Scobie commits suicide- a blasphemous activity. Louise returns from South Africa, informed about her husband's illicit affair. She goes to the confessional priest after Scobie's suicide. Louise postpones her marriage with Inspector Wilson. The novel shows the post-war criminal activities, men's lust for power and monetary gain, the void in human lives and the emptiness and artificiality in human bonds.

- **The End of an Affair (1951): Graham Greene-** The novel is written just after the World War II. It is one of his best novels and the theme is Post- War effects on human lives. The novel deals with the intense and passionate love –affair between Maurice Bendrix, a rising author during World War II and his passionate love, passion and obsession for Sarah Miles and his jealousy and envy to her impotent , Civil Servant husband Henry. When Bendrix and Sarah was together in Bendrix's flat a sudden and violent bomb explosion of V-1 flying bomb took place. After this incident, Sarah stopped meeting with Bendrix. The obsessed Bendrix has appointed private detectives Mr. Parkins to investigate the matter. Bendrix goes extremely jealous of Henry. Later it is revealed that Sarah has taken a vow to God to not come in contact with Bendrix if he survives the deadly explosion. The novel shows Sarah's profound devotion and spiritual inclination which even inflicted her lover Bendrix too. Sarah dies abruptly after suffering from Pneumonia. The novel explores the theme of love, passion and divine grace after the post war era. In the backdrop of the novel there is London Blitz and the destruction of the city refers to the mental unrest of the main characters and the chaotic situation stands for the chaos amidst the lives. The relationships are filled up with the dual presence of love and hatred, faith and doubt and ultimately show the barrenness and alienation, dissatisfaction and emptiness in the lives and in the relationships.

- **The Hollow Men (1925): T.S. Eliot-** The poem expresses the hollowness of human existence in post war situation. Post war people are leading an aimless, purposeless life. They are unable to communicate properly. Life is full of emptiness and meaninglessness. Throughout the poem 'we' is used which suggests the collective identity of people who lack individual identity. The existence is hollow; they have no motive and aim in their lives. These

people are indecisive, living fragmented and disenchanting lives. They cannot pray and have no belief in religion. They are living amidst extreme hopelessness.

We are the hollow men We are the stuffed men Leaning together Headpiece filled with straw. Alas! Our dried voices, when We whisper together Are quiet and meaningless As wind in dry grass Or rats' feet over broken glass In our dry cellar Shape without form, shade without colour, Paralysed force, gesture without motion; Those who have crossed With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom Remember us-if at all-not as lost Violent souls, but only As the hollow men The stuffed men. **Mrs. Dalloway (1925): Virginia Woolf:** This vital literary text set after World War I in London where Mrs. Dalloway is preparing for party. On the other hand Septimus Smith is suffering from shell shock, trauma of war and tremendous mental and physical suffering. He is getting inadequate treatment for his disease. The writer also feels the anxiety and trauma as she herself has gone through that. Later Smith commits self-assassination after intolerable trauma. Big Ben is mentioned in the text. The novel contrast high society standards and the post war alienated and traumatized situation of the soldiers.

Theoretical Approaches:

- **Modernism-** The isolated, disillusioned, purposeless and fragmented human existence is shown in the texts.
- **Trauma Theory-** Post-war trauma, shell shock, unexpressed trauma, anxiety are pervaded in the texts.
- **Feminist theory-** Women marginalization and subjugation are demonstrated.
- **Existentialism:** Existential crisis and lack of individual identity are the immediate after effect of the Wars.
- **Marxism:** Capitalism, class struggle, ideology are the recurrent theme of these literary texts.
- **Psychoanalytic:** Repression, anxiety, death drive and depression are the common mental states of the post-war generation. Mental unrest pervaded their psyches.
- **New Historicism:** The historical contexts, prominent discourses help in the better understanding of the texts.

CONCLUSION: The paper expresses the post –war disenchantment and disillusionment in human existence. The violent and destructive nature of the war has created uncertainty and

disbelief in human beings. They are leading their fragmented and demoralized lives. They are incapable of communicate; taking decisions and even they have no faith on God or religion. The post-war human lives are purposeless and meaningless. They are suffering from individual identity and existential crisis. They have no individual self but are living the collective self. They cannot put their individual opinion. Their lives are filled with alienation and loneliness.

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