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Survivorship Bias in World War I Poetry: How the Voices of the Living Shape The Historical Record

Edward R. Raupp, Ph.D.
Professor of Humanities
Gori State University
Gori, Georgia
+995 599 11 66 56
edwardraupp@gu.edu.ge
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5147-7835

Abstract

Survivorship bias, a selection bias resulting from placing analytic attention solely on individuals or works that have survived (leaving aside those who were lost or never recorded), has serious ramifications for cultural histories about wartime. In the field of World War I poetry analysis, survivorship bias is evident when literary scholarship pays significant attention to the testimony of poets who survived the war to write and publish their poetic witness but diminishes the recorded voices of poets who died or whose work was lost. Survivor testimony develops into a more nuanced historical record of the war's collective memory, relegating it less weight than it might have if poetry makes the survivor's trauma, suffering, and disillusionment more apparent. This paper uses rigorous textual analysis to revisit and interrogate canonized poems from and about World War I, both in the selected or received text and in the literary scholarship, to the degree that it has helped produce an overwhelming testimony of survivors' historical view of the war and its consequences. By fostering an intersection of literary criticism and testimonies of survivors, the current study helps highlight how survivor testimony can shape knowledge of the common cultural record, thereby emphasizing specific themes while silencing or diminishing others, and reinforcing form as a contributor to literary history.

Keywords: Siegfried Sassoon, survivorship bias, Wilfred Owen, World War I poetry

Introduction

Survivorship bias is a prevalent methodological flaw in which historical narratives and literary canons disproportionately emphasize the experiences and works of individuals who survived significant events, while neglecting those who perished or whose contributions have been lost to history (Stewart, 1972). The poetry of World War I, particularly that of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, exemplifies this phenomenon. Their surviving writings represent only a fraction of the multitude of voices silenced by the war's devastation or excluded due to institutional barriers that privilege survivor testimony over other forms of evidence (Mahmud, 2008; Bouali, 2022).

Literature generated from trench experience, which Bouali (2022) views as cultural memory, shapes the existence of the conflict for public and scholarly aggregate memory. The intellectual and ethical implications of this dominance are worthy of particular consideration, as the way in which some voices and works are distinctively privileged (as well as uniquely preserved) is determinative about how the war is to be remembered, or not remembered (Karsten, 2012; McPhail, 2000).

Methods

This study used close reading qualitative text analysis from the poems of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, and as reference, critical essays, historical monographs, and psycho-literary analyses (Mahmud, 2008; Bouali, 2022; Karsten, 2012). Principal focus texts are Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" and "Mental Cases," and Sassoon's "The General" and two key poems. They are analyzed pre- and post-publication as to their themes of trauma and survivors' guilt, and psychological consequences (Eubanks, 2024). Studies about

scholarship (McPhail, 2000) and original scholarship (Karsten, 2012) contribute to the study of reception and canon-formation that uses Stewart's (1972) comparative literary history as an outline for conclusions counter to generalizations of experiences in war literature. Interdisciplinary examinations provide context for survivor testimony in historical, psychological, and institutional fields.

Results

As a result of our examination, we found that poetry from World War I came from survivor experiences that had diverse immediate consequences for trauma, cultural memory, and canon-formation (Bouali, 2022; Mahmud, 2008; Stewart, 1972; Karsten, 2012; McPhail, 2000; Eubanks, 2024).

Dominance of Trauma and Disillusionment

Sassoon and Owen reframed the poetic discourse that identified patriotic optimism present in early war poetry like Rupert Brooke and opened new counter memorials focusing on psychological trauma and the violence of war (Bouali, 2022; Mahmud, 2008). Bouali (2022) establishes Sassoon's use of motifs like 'death's gray land' in "Dreamers" to establish a British identity of collective loss. Sassoon's poems "How to Die" and "Memorial Tablet" critique sacrificial patriotism and finally develop death as the highest, yet most hardened form of national or religious obligation.

Psychological Repercussions and Shell Shock

Owen's poetry, much of which was written during treatment for shell shock at Craiglockhart War Hospital, is replete with stories of traumatic memory and haunting (Mahmud, 2008). Through "Mental Cases" and "Dulce et Decorum Est," we see representations of the psychological casualties of war, which are quite close to the work Eubanks (2024) confronts.

Concerning shell shock, it is not only an individual ailment, but it metaphorically speaks to a generation's trauma. Owen gives access to the very common psychological wreckage through his poetry. Owen's verse, shaped by clinical experience and in a position that is supported by the institution, comes to act as a representation of psychological wreckage more generally. Sassoon also runs the danger of being flattened by official rhetoric when bearing witness to survivor's guilt and horror (Bouali, 2022).

The Collective Memory

The trauma, violence, and tragedy in the experiences of Owen, Sassoon, and Graves facilitated new historicist literary accounts of World War I (Bouali, 2022; Karsten, 2012). The poems and autobiography of Graves serve as evidence of Karsten's (2012) suggestions, where he argues that trauma occupies a principal place in the structure of social knowledge. The operationalized documentaries discussed by McPhail (2000) have cemented thematically the ideas of horror, uselessness, and mental suffering as the core of what constituted popular and literary memory.

Critical Reception and Public Response

Mahmud (2008), in concert with McPhail (2000) and seeking to give an account of the critical reception, reviews, and public response to literature by survivor poets, posits that there was no substantial difference in focus and attention placed on poetry and prose identifying former survivor poets and their work. Their significance placed author or survivor poets in the dominant, if not sole, category by which attitudes shifted from blind patriotism to skepticism, and even reverence for suffering (Karsten, 2012).

Survivorship Bias in Canon Formation

Stewart (1972) illustrates the way the concept of survivorship bias manifests in the canon being created: any "war writing" done by poets is certainly done in subjective relation to and status of being one of the survivors, and the writing doesn't consider the voices that were extinguished, Owen being the notable exception. Hence, all the expansive range of wartime opinions, especially the opinions that diverged from the narrative of trauma, are left unexamined and unrepresented.

Discussion

The evidence confirms that survivorship bias has operational effects on the literary and historical record of World War I. Survivorship testimony thus shifts the narrative of the war from one of heroic patriotism and victory towards one of pessimism around futility, trauma, and disillusionment, situating the veteran and survivor experience at the center of our cultural memory (Bouali, 2022; Mahmud, 2008; Karsten, 2012; Stewart, 1972). Even with the plausible retention of objects, it might be argued that the terms single out the limits and the experience of war as little more than repetitive experiences of loss and grief.

Taking the perspective of intellectual integrity, the selection of survivor testimony raises questions of representation (McPhail, 2000; Stewart, 1972). The voices of the dead that were never published or whose voices were lost to the editor or regimes of editing and institutions remain mute in the account of literary memory. The same selectivity of knowledge, as McPhail (2000) and Karsten (2012) suggest, can skew historical knowledge and dull or silence the diversity of experience of war. Beyond the cases and ideas of trauma, there might have been acknowledgment of heroism and camaraderie.

Canon formation, in this sense, is a work of institutions and critical reception that, either directly or indirectly, perpetuates survivorship bias and narrows the literary heritage field (Bouali, 2022; Stewart, 1972). Further research efforts should be directed at retrieving the apparent marginalized texts (letters, diaries, theses, and unpublished poems) and, once in possession, dissect with further inquiry the practical application of institutions and what evidence pervades a canon. More importantly, Bouali (2022) and Karsten (2012) suggest that the emergence of a more expansive and inclusive archive would incentivize survivor poetry to be at least contextualized along with the other voices previously noted and ignored. The ethics and call situating itself in collective memory theory to transfer war literature into memory or silence of testimony — to survival and loss, and the multiplicity of human experience (Stewart, 1972; Bouali, 2022).

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