

The Ghost Road: Trauma, Hauntology, And The Collapse Of Imperial Masculinity In Pat Barker's Regeneration Trilogy

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ABSTRACT

Pat Barker's *The Ghost Road* (1995), the concluding volume of her Regeneration Trilogy, undertakes a sophisticated critique of British masculinity, imperialism, and the psychological devastation of World War I through the intertwined narratives of Dr. W.H.R. Rivers and his fictional patient Billy Prior. This article examines how Barker employs the dual frameworks of psychoanalysis and anthropology to expose the contradictions inherent in the British imperial project. Through Rivers's alternating recollections of his pre-war anthropological expeditions to Melanesia and his clinical work with shell-shocked soldiers, Barker combines the 'primitive' headhunting culture of Eddystone Island with the 'civilised' warfare of European civilisation, revealing their fundamental similarities. The article argues that Barker's use of haunting both as a narrative device and as a theoretical framework illuminates the interconnected traumas of colonialism and war. Rivers's relationship with the Melanesian witch doctor Njiru catalyses his gradual ethical awakening, enabling him to recognise his complicity in perpetuating the cycle of violence that sends men to their deaths. The article concludes that *The Ghost Road* offers a vision of transformed masculinity that acknowledges vulnerability and emotional expression as alternatives to the destructive codes of imperial manhood...

Keywords: Pat Barker, The Ghost Road, World War I, Shell Shock, Masculinity, Trauma, Haunting, Postcolonialism, W.H.R. Rivers, Melanesia

INTRODUCTION:

Pat Barker's *The Ghost Road* (1995), the final novel of her Regeneration Trilogy, represents a remarkable synthesis of historical fiction, psychological inquiry, and anthropological critique. Set during the final months of World War I, the novel alternates between the clinical world of Dr. Rivers at Craiglockhart War Hospital and later the Empire Hospital in London, and Rivers's haunting recollections of his pre-war anthropological expedition to Melanesia in 1908. Through this dual narrative structure, Barker constructs a powerful indictment of the ideologies that sustained the British Empire and the masculine codes that propelled millions of men to their deaths in the trenches. The geographical expansion from Britain and France to Melanesia represents a significant thematic shift, allowing Barker to explore the interconnections between British imperialism and the formation of British masculine identity.

While critics have extensively analysed the trilogy's treatment of shell shock and its challenge to conventional masculinity (Showalter 171; Hynes 186), relatively little attention has been paid to the novel's postcolonial dimensions. This article argues that *The Ghost Road* employs the concept of haunting both as a psychological symptom of trauma and as a theoretical framework to expose the foundational contradictions of the British imperial project. Through Rivers's interactions with the Melanesian witch doctor Njiru and his memories of Eddystone Island's headhunting culture, Barker demonstrates that the distinction between 'civilised' and 'savage' societies collapses under scrutiny. Both cultures engage in ritualised violence; the absence or presence of war shapes both, and both confront the decline of their masculine warrior ideals. Rivers's journey toward ethical awareness, catalysed by his cross-cultural encounters, enables him to recognise his own complicity in the machinery of war and to envision an alternative model of masculinity rooted in empathy rather than stoic detachment.

The First World War precipitated an unprecedented crisis in British masculinity. Elaine Showalter characterises the Great War as "a crisis of masculinity and a trial of the Victorian masculine ideal" (171). Prior to the war,

British men had been socialised according to a feudal code of manhood that exalted courage, emotional suppression, and willingness to sacrifice for king and country. Paul Fussell observes that soldiers “adhered to a medieval standard of manhood and warfare” that linked “obedience” to “bravery” and the capacity to “not complain” to being “manly” (22). This ideology was reinforced through public schools, imperial service, and cultural narratives that celebrated martial heroism. The notion of sacrificing one’s life for the ruler and country was a deeply ingrained belief, strengthened by a longstanding vocabulary and standards that implied suitable masculine conduct.

The realities of trench warfare shattered this ideal. The enforced passivity of trench life, the constant threat of death, and the inability to exercise agency created conditions that Rivers himself identified as conducive to hysteria. Rivers argued that shell shock resulted not from sudden shock or exposure to violence, but from “the prolonged state of immobility, powerlessness, and inactivity experienced by the soldiers” (Barker 173). This condition effectively “feminised the conscripts by taking away their sense of control” (Showalter 173). Men who had been trained to suppress their emotions found themselves experiencing symptoms traditionally associated with female hysteria: mutism, paralysis, nightmares, depression, dizziness, and blindness. Catherine Lanone notes that “Barker focuses on the symptoms of shell shock such as paralysis, aphasia and nightmares, which were traditionally associated with the ‘feminine’ disorder of hysteria, and thereby explores the way masculine identity too is distorted by patriarchal, phallogocentric demands” (259).

Rivers’s therapeutic approach both challenged and reinforced conventional ideas of masculinity. He insisted that his patients must consciously acknowledge their emotions, encouraging them to articulate their “unmanly” feelings within the confidential confines of their psychiatric appointments. As Samuel Hynes states, “Rivers helped his young patients to accept feelings that traditional notions of war had suppressed and to redefine what it meant to be a man” (186). However, the paradox of Rivers’s position remained: after successfully treating shell-shocked soldiers, he was compelled to return them to the front lines where they faced certain death. Rivers maintained this contradiction throughout the war due to his profound dedication to the noble British ideal of manly obligation to safeguard England through armed defence. Yet by 1918, as the war’s relentless machinery showed no sign of relenting, Rivers’s dreams, much like those of his patients, began to haunt him.

Barker’s incorporation of Rivers’s anthropological past serves to destabilise the Eurocentric assumptions that underpin British civilisation. During his 1908 expedition to Eddystone Island, Rivers observed a culture undergoing profound transformation due to British colonial intervention. The prohibition of headhunting, while seemingly a humanitarian gesture, had devastating consequences for the indigenous population. As Rivers reflects, “Head-hunting had to be banned, and yet the effects of banning it were everywhere apparent in the listlessness and lethargy of the people’s lives. Head-hunting was what they had lived for” (Barker 207). The decline in birth rates and the emasculation of young warriors, who were now confined to the island like “elderly women,” demonstrated that this was “a people perishing from the absence of war” (207).

This juxtaposition between Melanesian and British culture cuts in multiple directions. If Melanesia suffers from the absence of war, Britain suffers from the devastating presence of war. Headhunting, for the Melanesians, served as a fertility ritual and a source of cultural vitality; its prohibition left a void that colonial civilisation could not fill. Conversely, British civilisation, which prides itself on its moral superiority, has unleashed destruction on a scale that dwarfs the ritual violence of the ‘savages’ it claims to civilise. The novel highlights the striking resemblance between the two cultures: both preserve the memory of their war dead (skulls in Melanesian skull houses, photographs on British mantelpieces), both practice forms of ritual sacrifice (the Melanesian adoptive father sacrificing his son, Abraham and Isaac in Rivers’s father’s church), and both are shaped by their relationship to violence.

Rivers’s encounter with Njiru, the Melanesian witch doctor, represents the most profound cross-cultural connection in the trilogy. As Shaddock observes, both men share significant characteristics: Both Rivers and Njiru are middle-aged; both are accomplished healers... both have disabilities that have shaped their adult identities (Njiru has a severe spinal curvature and Rivers a paralytic stammer), and both, finally, hold positions of great respect and authority within their own cultures. (656)

Neither participates directly in the military pursuits that define virility in their respective cultural contexts, creating a bond that transcends their cultural differences. The cave experience, in which Rivers follows Njiru into a sacred space atop the mountain, represents a pivotal moment of psychological initiation. Here, Rivers abandons his

guarded position as controlled observer and authoritative scientist, experiencing a transformative growth through physical and emotional connection with Njiru. The handclasp between them symbolises an intimate bond that, despite the imperial patterns inherent in their relationship, achieves a surprising equality. As Rivers reflects on his encounter with displaced indigenous islanders, he realises that “their view of his society was neither more nor less valid than his of theirs” (Barker 119-20). This moment of cultural relativism initiates Rivers’s gradual movement away from the certainties of British imperial thought.

The concept of haunting operates on multiple levels within *The Ghost Road*. Barker’s characters are haunted by literal ghosts, by memories, and by the spectral presence of cultural others. Rivers’s patients experience hallucinations of German soldiers they have killed; the ghost of a German prisoner gradually appears and decays with each visit to one patient. While Rivers firmly believes these ghosts do not exist, he cannot deny that his patients are indeed plagued by them. His encounters with the supernatural in Melanesia challenge his efforts to provide logical interpretations and disrupt the certainty of his categorisations of what is seen versus what is genuine, sickness versus sanity, and irrational belief versus logical thinking.

Derrida’s notion of hauntology provides a theoretical framework for understanding this phenomenon. The spectre exists in a state of neither presence nor absence; “its spectrality signifies a state of being in between” (100). Ghosts and spectres exist outside the realm of existence, yet they persist in returning to disturb and haunt. This repetitive occurrence of hauntology is additionally associated with the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, which repeatedly resurface and consequently haunt the traumatised person.

In *The Ghost Road*, trauma and haunting are mutually reinforcing concepts. Rivers’s traumatic upbringing under his tyrannical father, who intimidated him with photographs of his resilient grandfather, continues to affect his paternal connection with his patients. The death of Billy Prior, which takes place outside the main story, parallels the passing of Hallet, whom Rivers witnesses in the Empire Hospital. Both represent the sacrificial sons that Rivers has been complicit in sending to their deaths.

The novel’s ending scene, in which Rivers hallucinates Njiru walking down the corridors of the Empire Hospital performing the exorcism of the spirit Ave, collapses the boundaries between coloniser and colonised, rationality and spirituality, presence and absence. Njiru appears “not in any way ghostly” (Barker 276), challenging the legitimacy of the entire imperial project. The exorcism prayer “There is an end of men, an end of chiefs, an end of chieftains’ wives, an end of chiefs’ children; then go down and depart. Do not yearn for us, the fingerless, the crippled, the broken” (276) equates the decline of Melanesian headhunting culture with the devastation of British civilisation. This vision represents Rivers’s subconscious resolution of his internal struggle regarding the war and the duties of men to the state. The dead soldiers Prior and Hallet serve as the ultimate motivation for Rivers’s spiritual insight and ethical conclusion regarding the war.

The Ghost Road concludes with a powerful indictment of the masculine codes that sustained the British Empire. The novel’s final scenes, depicting Wilfred Owen and Billy Prior meeting their deaths on the battlefield and Hallet dying amidst his fellow patients’ haunting chant, represent the culmination of Barker’s critique. Rivers’s translation of Hallet’s incomprehensible cry “Shotvarfet” as “It’s not worth it” (Barker 274) speaks to the senselessness of the sacrifice that the war demands. When the other patients join in the cry, Rivers himself feels “a pressure building in his own throat” and cannot be sure that he “had succeeded in keeping silent” (Barker 274-75). This moment marks Rivers’s emotional liberation from the stoic detachment that his professional and social position demands.

Barker’s achievement lies in her ability to interweave psychological, anthropological, and historical perspectives without reducing any to the others. By juxtaposing the ‘primitive’ headhunting culture of Melanesia with the ‘civilised’ warfare of Europe, she exposes the arbitrary nature of such distinctions and the violence that underlies both. Rivers’s journey from clinical detachment to emotional engagement represents the possibility of a transformed masculinity one that acknowledges vulnerability, values empathy over stoicism, and rejects the sacrificial logic that sends sons to their deaths in the name of imperial glory.

The novel’s vision of Njiru performing the exorcism in the Empire Hospital, attended by his ‘shadowy retinue,’ suggests that the ghosts of colonialism will continue to haunt the British consciousness long after the war has ended. Rivers’s final realisation that the dead make a significant impact on the living through their appearance as ghosts acknowledges the enduring power of traumatic memory and the impossibility of returning to pre-war

certainties. *The Ghost Road* thus emerges not only as a powerful anti-war novel but also as a profound meditation on the costs of empire and the possibilities for ethical transformation in the aftermath of trauma

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