How Appropriate Is The Title "Regeneration" Essay, Research Paper

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what basis does an author choose a title for a novel?? Is it simply that it must bear some relation to the story? It

must, surely, be far more than this, and here is where the title

"Regeneration" succeeds; it works well on so many different levels.

It not only refers to the story, but it also suggests the themes, structure,

development and shifting narrative viewpoint of Barker’s book. It is this last

aspect on which I will principally concentrate because it is a device which is

not immediately obvious. ??????????????? Pat

Barker chooses very carefully through which character she narrates the story in

each passage. Towards the beginning of the novel, there is a clearly

identifiable rule which she follows, however, this changes and develops along

with her characters. The primary example of this concerns Rivers. In almost

every passage in which he appears along with a patient, the narrative is

invariably told through him. Barker does this for two reasons. The first is to

quickly develop and define River’s characterisation, so almost as soon as we

meet him we know what kind of a man he is. The second is that in relating the

scene through him, she is reinforcing the role he plays as a doctor and a

guiding force for the men under his care. He is generally the strongest

character in the passages in which he appears and so the story is told through

him. Even in the first scene with Rivers and Sassoon, clearly the most forceful

of his patients, with the possible exception of Prior, it is all related

through Rivers. It is from Rivers that we learn Sassoon’s "hands, doing

complicated things with cup, saucer, plate, sandwiches, cake, sugar, tongs and

spoon, were perfectly steady". This shows that the men over whom he

presides are damaged creatures, who have been stripped of their manhood and

strength by their experiences. One would expect that Rivers, being double most

of his patient’s age, would be the weaker in any confrontation. With a young

man’s tendency to "sweep away his father’s life work in a single

minute", Rivers, as an older man should bow under the generalisation and

belligerence of a "bright sixth former", but instead his superior

strength is clearly defined by his narrative. ??????????????? However,

this style of narrative shifts and develops throughout the course of the novel,

as Rivers succeeds in "curing" the men. As they are regenerated, so

the narrative emphasis regenerates. As Sassoon and Prior, the only two real successes

we come across, regain confidence and heal themselves, the narrative becomes

more balanced, until at the end, the emphasis is far more equal between the

two. This shows that, as the characters are regenerated, so the narrative develops,

from being one sided, to being far more equal. This is supported by the fact

that, once officially passed fit, Prior takes the lead and actually admits that

he "was an absolute pig", quite an achievement given his bitter

temperament. ??????????????? Rivers

is not the only example of this imbalance of narrative point of view. Billy

Prior, when he appears with a member of the public, namely Sarah, generally

commands the majority of the narrative. It is through him that we discover

things about other characters he appears with. It is through his eyes we find

out Sarah’s attitude to the war. "She might not know much about the war,

but what she did know, she faced honestly. He admired her for that."

Barker tends to narrate things from Prior’s point of view in order to keep the

emphasis of the story on the soldiers. She writes about the men and their

experiences, not about civilians. In this way, she also keeps soldiers and

civilians segregated. This reflects Prior’s, and many of the other soldier’s

including Sassoon’s, opinion about the civilians. The men feel that they cannot

possibly understand them and that they cannot ever feel comfortable with

"normal people" again, due to the extreme changes that war has

brought about. They feel alienated and can feel only contempt for non service

members. Thus, with her narrative emphasis on Prior, Barker reminds us of this

theme. ??????????????? However,

again as the novel progresses, we can see a gradual change in narrative point

of view. As Prior slowly begins to be healed and "regenerated", his

view of Sarah changes. At the beginning, all he wished was to have a quick

liaison with her and had no respect for her at all; "?he didn’t want her

to talk, he didn’t want her to tell him things. He would have preferred not

even to know her name. Just flesh against flesh in the darkness, and then

nothing." However, as the story moves on and Prior starts to come out of

himself, he begins to realise that he does like her and perhaps reconciliation

between civilian and soldier is possible. As their relationship progresses, the

narrative becomes more balanced and Sarah ceases to be Prior’s girl, but

becomes a developed and likeable character. Therefore, as Prior’s view of her

is regenerated and healed, so the narrative emphasis is balanced. Things

improve more and more until it reaches absolute equilibrium. This is heralded

by Prior’s being passed fit and discharged from the hospital. In the last scene

in which he and Sarah appear the narrative is finally balanced and is thus

completely equal. "They looked at each other, not finding anything to

say?Their imminent nakedness made them shy of each other." ??????????????? The

term "regeneration" is very well suited to the role that the book

itself plays today. Generally, up until recently, war literature was concerned

only with either the soldiers on the front, or the war’s effects on the

civilians. It was not nearly as common for the two to be brought together in

the way in which they are in "Regeneration". Also, with a few notable

exceptions such as Virginia Woolf, the subject matter of mental illness in

relation to the war was a much rarer one than the actual events of the war and

for it to be treated in such a compassionate way is astounding. Even a few

years ago, the MOD refused to clear the names of those men who were executed

for desertion prompted by "shell shock". This shows how attitudes to

that condition now are in need of "regeneration" as much as they were

in 1914. In writing her novel, Pat Barker is contributing to that regeneration.

In doing this, she is also changing the way in which we see the war. Up until

her novel came out, the general public were well aware that it was a terrible

and bloody conflict on the front, but we were not so conscious of the

psychological effects. Barker is regenerating the received view of the Great

War. ??????????????? We

can see that "Regeneration" as a title works very well. It has many

more qualities to it than may first meet the eye. Apart from the obvious

references to the themes and story, it holds suggestions that are far less

immediate. It is only after one has read the novel and thought about it that

such references in the title to structure and point of view emerge. The fact that

the chosen title is so subtle in its reference to the text shows that it is

very appropriate.