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Publication Date

2009-02-01

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Recovering the Masculine Hero: Post-World War I Shell Shock in American Culture

In a February 1915 article in the *Lancet*, British psychologist Charles S. Myers gave definition to an increasingly used war-front medical term, shell shock. Myers described shell shock as the physical injuries that resulted from the impact of an exploding shell.¹ By the end of World War I, however, shell shock's definition had become so malleable it could describe nearly any physical or mental ailment. Shell shock, with its seemingly elusive definition, came to carry cultural meaning that extended far beyond the wounds of the soldier. As historian Jay Winter's provocative work points out, for example, soldiers' "shell shock" in Europe became a metaphor for deep national wounds in the civic body.²

Inspired by the questions raised in the large historiography on World War I-era "shell shock" in Europe, this paper turns to the United States to examine representations of shell shock in a selection of American films, novels and magazines. American popular interpretations of shell shock took a different shape from those in Europe and were quite specific to the American experience. American representations uniquely characterized shell shock as a short-term, curable injury of war. Such definition not only allowed for continued visions of heroic manliness in war, but also made women essential to male recovery, delineated male and female gender roles, and advanced often unrealistic social and cultural expectations for both men and women.

¹ Charles S. Myers, "A Contribution to the Study of Shell Shock," *The Lancet* (13 Feb. 1915) : 316-320.

² Jay Winter, "Shell-Shock and the Cultural History of the Great War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 1 (January 2000). Also see, for example, Eric Leed, "Fateful Memories: Industrialized War and Traumatic Neuroses," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 1 (Jan. 2000).

Kathleen Wallace's novel, *Madam, I'll Give You*, captures many of the popular notions regarding shell shock in U.S. films and novels after World War I.³ As the novel opens, Jenny, the main character, doesn't recognize the man sitting across from her who was shell-shocked and blinded from the War. As a volunteer at Crossways, a private care home for the "physically or mentally shattered," she watches over this man, Michael Kennedy, as he recovers. As the man's shell shock begins to diminish, Jenny discovers he is a world renowned archeologist, and a perfect lover and friend. Jenny finds true happiness for the first time in being with Michael. As the story draws to an end, she marries Michael and begins a new story book life with him in the country. Just like Jenny's lover Michael, the shell-shocked soldier often represented a prince charming in disguise. Underneath his strange habits and disabilities lay a war hero, and a man of upstanding social character.

Men like Michael were prevalent in silent films in the years following World War I. In fact, 15 total silent films between 1918 and 1930 portrayed the shell shocked soldier as an honorable, heroic man temporarily disabled by war.⁴ In film the veteran's noble character was often not immediately obvious but became so as the veteran recovered. A silent film entitled *Shootin' for Love* (1923), for example, opens with a father who considers his shell-shocked son as a coward. As the son begins to heal and regain his senses, however, the father slowly discovers that his son is in fact a war hero and worthy of much respect. In a similar fashion,

³ Kathleen Wallace, *Madam, I'll Give You* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co, 1935).

⁴ The following films are available for view through UCLA Motion Picture Collection: *Three Live Ghosts* (1922) ; *The Stolen Ranch* (1926) ; *The Unknown Soldier* (1926). The following silent films are no longer available but their plot summaries are available through the American Film Institute's online Silent Film Database at <http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/silentHome.aspx?s=1&bhcp=1>: *Missing* (1918) ; *Vive La France!* (1918) ; *The Trembling Hour* (1919) ; *Shattered Dreams* (2 1922) ; *Shell Shocked Sammy* (1923) *Shootin' for Love* (1923) ; *Wandering Fires* (1925) ; *Puppets* (1926) ; *Vanishing Hoofs* (1926) ; *Closed Gates* (1927) ; *Absent* (1928) *Burning Bridges* (1928).

local townspeople in *The Trembling Hour* (1919) accuse a shell-shocked veteran of committing a murder. Despite his strange habits, however, he is cleared of the crime as he slowly recovers, and ultimately regains his fellow citizens' trust while being reunited with his love. On screen, just as in print, the shell-shocked veteran became the fairy tale hero. He was the character that no one expected to be great. Oftentimes he provided comic relief, acted strange, or garnered the attention and repulse of others. Yet underneath this outer appearance, that inevitably faded away, lay a man of upstanding quality.

On one hand, stories representing shell shock as an ailment of the heroic soldier invoked a sense of moral duty in the post World War I era regarding respect towards shell-shocked men. The number of titles concerning this ailment is indicative of the popular empathy for these individuals who had been both physically and psychologically damaged by war. Yet the notion that shell shock was temporary – and not permanent – also allowed for a certain optimism about veteran recovery. Moreover, films and novels suggested that it was in recovery that the veteran fully regained his status as a respected, exemplar male citizen, demonstrating the every day laudable qualities of generosity, love, confidence, and sound judgment.

Meeting the expectations of manliness after the War thus required a full recovery, a recovery that American discourse suggested was dependent on the efforts and capabilities of American women. Before Michael became Jenny's valiant lover and friend, for example, Jenny spent every day helping him dress and nurturing him emotionally. Films often associated the rejoining of a veteran and his lover and her persistent dedication as the key factor in healing the soldier. In *The Unknown Soldier* (1926), a victim of shell shock regains his wellbeing when he is reunited with his young wife. In *Three Live Ghosts* (1921), one shell-shocked man finally begins to heal when his wife finds him and takes him under her care. *Missing* (1918) tells a

similar story of a young wife whose determination allows her to find her missing husband and help heal him. In *Closed Gates* (1927) a nurse's persistent commitment and love helps a veteran overcome his illness. One article addressed to women in *Touchstone* magazine illustrates this motif of veteran recovery even more clearly. "In the reconstruction of soldiers suffering from shell shock," the article asserted, "*everything may depend upon the intelligent understanding of his trouble by his family* [sic]." The "wife, or mother, or sister" the article explained, needed to appreciate the soldier's suffering, stand by him with patience and maintain a "cheerful expectation" that he would recover.⁵ Such stories reinstated the belief that through patient love and dedication a woman could nurture a veteran back to health.

Failure to provide the proper environment for the veteran could be depicted as a failure of the wife, mother or sister. In *Madam I'll Give You*, for example, Jenny meets several shell shocked soldiers who had been abandoned by their wives. One mother explains of her daughter in law's failure to help cure her son by saying, "Alison never understood. She never cared. ...He went on, killing himself by inches, to give her the things she wanted."⁶ Unable to survive without the support of his wife, Barry Emery, the shell-shocked veteran, dies in the care home. An article in *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* put the blame for shell shock blatantly on the shoulders of American mothers. They had failed to raise their sons in such a way that they learned to deal with mental trauma. The mothers' failure had made their sons more susceptible to shell shock and made recovery from it much more difficult.⁷ The inability of the shell shocked

⁵ "Home Treatment of Shell Shock," *Touchstone* 4 (1918) : 227-230. See also "Children, Blighted by War's Savagery," *NYT*, 20 June 1917; "Must have Home Letters" *NYT*, 10 January 1918 ; See, for example, "Rufus Gaynor to Wed Girl Who Nursed Him" *NYT* 17 March 1918.

⁶ Wallace, 43.

⁷ Hannah Moore Creasy, "Psychopathology of Speech Defects," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 5 (1919) : 266-278.

veteran to recover was not only a failure of masculine ideal, but also the failure of his wife, mother or sister to fulfill her own role as a mother.

Yet a woman's success in healing her husband could also mean success and happiness for her as it meant fulfilling her own feminine ideal of domesticity. Jenny, for example, chooses to give up her life long desire to own and operate a prosperous dress shop in the city to be with Michael. Her decision to fulfill the role of domesticity and care for Michael the rest of her life gave her true happiness. As the author wrote, "Now, instead of wearing armour at all, she appeared as though lit from within, or as though some inner well of light rose and played behind her eyes."⁸

As Kathleen Wallace's story of Jenny and Michael suggests, gendered depictions of shell shock sharply delineated male and female gender roles. Contrary to popular notions of weakness often associated with mental illness, popular images of shell shocked men as war heroes excused behaviors of mental illness that were often associated with and feminine hysteria, and represented their behavior as symptomatic of a true war hero. In talking about the home and creating a positive environment for male recovery, film and magazines simultaneously reinforced notions of female domesticity, as caretaker over the children and also the husband. Thus as women were made essential to male recovery, the veteran's healing was made to be as much about recovering the masculine hero as it was restoring the feminine domesticity ideal of nurturing the home and family.

It is only obvious that American discourse surrounding shell shock as a temporary wound of war advanced often unrealistic social and cultural expectations for both men and women. As time passed and American newspapers began to highlight the increasing numbers of veteran

⁸ Wallace, 280.

suicides and crimes, this would become ever more obvious. Clearly, as psychologists would later point out, shell shock was much more difficult to “cure” than what popular discourse had suggested.⁹

Examining shell shock when optimism still reigned in terms of veteran recovery provides a window into post World War I culture in the United States, particularly into perceptions of masculinity, femininity, and mental illness. Moreover, of U.S. optimism regarding the recovery of shell shock, the European notion of shell shock as a metaphor for the wound of the nation bears reexamination. Such analysis is persuasive, especially in the case of Great Britain where the British themselves articulated a sense of loss and shock after the War. Yet according to American film and magazines, American understandings of shell shock were quite different. Just as shell shock had become symbolic of a much larger public wound in Great Britain, scientific treatment and recovery of shell shock in the United States symbolized that wound’s very absence.¹⁰ It symbolized optimism not just about the recovery of the soldier, but the recovery of masculinity, of scientific certainty, and ultimately the recovery of the nation.

⁹ See, for example, Stewart Paton, *Education in War and Peace* (New York: Hoeber, 1920); “400 ex-soldiers in New York Suicides,” *NYT*, 7 July 1921; “Veterans’ Suicides Average Two a Day; Legion Official Declares Worst Casualties of World War Are Just Appearing,” *NYT*, 2 June 1922. The number of articles dealing with suicide continued to increase throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s. See, for example, “Art Captain Ends Life by Shooting,” *NYT*, 3 December 1920; “Enoch Arden,” *LAT*, 18 July 1930; “Shell-Shocked Redlands Man Takes his Life,” *LAT*, 23 September 1931; “War Hero Ends Life over 1918 Tragedy,” *NYT*, 2 January 1932 ; “Veteran Suicide Traced to War Shock Illness,” *LAT*, 1 April 1935.

¹⁰ Grafton Elliot Smith, *Shell Shock and Its Lessons*(Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1917).

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