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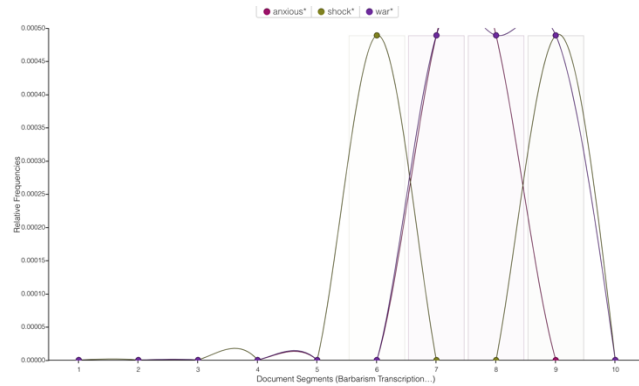
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H.M. Tomlinson's "Barbarism" as Post-War PTSD

On its surface, "Barbarism" by H.M. Tomlinson describes an English adventurer in the jungles of Malaysia. He returns to England to find it more barbaric than the uncivilized jungles he just left. However, by examining the story in light of H.M. Tomlinson's history of anti-war sentiment, I see "Barbarism" as commentary on World War I. Specifically, I believe that the short story describes the consequences of war that a soldier experiences personally—PTSD (or "shell-shock"), guilt, and isolation. In "Barbarism" Tomlinson creates a tone of anxiety through his word choice, brings to light the complications of differentiating between cowardice and shell-shock, and creates a sense of disconnect as the narrator returns home to civilization. By comparing "Barbarism" with his other anti-war literature as well as research on shell-shock after the war, these themes become clearer. True to his anti-war nature, Tomlinson's short story creates a foundation on which a conversation about the psychological effects of a soldier's return home.

Though this short story is not exclusively about the Great War and its effects, the anxious tone of the narrator as he returns home from an uncivilized and terrifying jungle is compared to the psychological effects of war. Tomlinson establishes this tone, and its implications, through word choice and patterns. By utilizing Voyant software, I noticed a trend between the words "anxious," "shock," and "war." As seen here, they follow a similar pattern, spiking around the

same time. This instance is not when the narrator is confronted by his adventures in the forest (though they are often frightening) but as he is returning home to civilization. The word “shock” is used in relation to England, recovery, and news. The news seems to trigger something



in the narrator. We are not told what exactly he sees, except a people rebuilding after a war, but clearly it disheartens and frightens him. It is the return itself that seems more important than what is actually in the pictures and headlines. The narrator is realizing he cannot re-enter society the same man he was before.

Though the big shock occurs as the narrator travels home, there are certain aspects of the Malaysian jungle adventure (before the narrator’s return) that are used to illustrate this idea. The discovery of the leeches, for example, emphasize the psychological, rather than the physical effects of the narrator’s journey. “The revulsion was psychical. I was horrified, not hurt” (577). This could be emphasizing the psychological rather than the physical effects of the war. Though they endure rain, hunger, and a little poisoning, the sense of fear foreshadows the psychological damage that will occur as the narrator returns home. “I got rather nervous about it,” he relates as they camp near the forest. “Awake at night, lying on the ground, looking at the ghosts of the nearest trees fading as the fire declined...The forest seemed hanging intently over you, waiting in silence for something it knew was going to happen.” This personification of the forest and its superior knowledge signals a fearful, overactive imagination from the narrator. But all this is only a shadow of what he will face as he returns home. But England no longer feels like home. “That may express the subtle difference in one’s mind, a difference which began about the end of

the war” (580). He admits the difference in his mind, attributing it to the press and the war. Specifically, the *end* of the war. Through these instances, Tomlinson therefore establishes the narrator as a victim of shell shock which settles in as he returns home to England.

What causes this shift? We have already discussed some of the frightening experiences the narrator has abroad. There are other factors of war to consider: the shame of cowardice on the battlefield and differentiating cowardice from fear and shell-shock. Then, when one is brave in battle, the trauma of killing and the survivor’s guilt set in. These are all made evident in “Barbarism”. One of the ways that Tomlinson exposes cowardice and fear is by giving the narrator a companion (apart from the Malay guides). He, like the other characters, has no name and is only referred to as “the other white man” (576). The companion is described as “inclined to easy surrenders” and at one point nearly gives up the journey (576). The narrator kneels in the mud to encourage his reclined companion to move onward. “In the act of persuasion and even of abuse” (577). Remembering that Tomlinson was anti-war and putting it in context the research being conducted on shell-shock, this could easily be a scene of two soldiers—one urging the unwilling other into battle. Seeing it in this light, the passage introduces important questions, questions of fear versus cowardice and where shell-shock fits in.

The narrator, in this moment, embodies the English disgust with cowardice. The Committee of Enquiry Into Shell-Shock writes “Witnesses were agreed that cowardice should be regarded as a military crime to be punished when necessary by death” (“Cowardice”). However, this committee was asking themselves the same questions about cowardice, fear, and shell-shock in 1922 (just one year before the release of Tomlinson’s “Barbarism”). “Fear is an emotion common to all and evidence was given of very brave men who frankly acknowledged to it. It is obvious then that fear alone does not constitute cowardice,” writes the committee. Dr. Farquhar

Buzzard is quoted by the council further explaining that “Cowardice is a voluntary attitude taken up by an individual; he adopts a certain attitude that he will not face a situation in which he believes certain things will take place...but the fact that my knees shake when I am looking over the side of a building is an absolute physical thing over which I have no control” (source?). In the end, the committee concludes 1) “That the military aspect of cowardice is justified.” 2) “That seeming cowardice may be beyond the individual’s control.” 3) “That experienced and specialized medical opinion is required to decide in possible cases of war neurosis of doubtful character,” and 4) “That a man who has already proved his courage should receive special consideration in case of subsequent lapse.” The committee clearly makes the distinction between the two, even accounting for shell-shock. And yet the guilt of cowardice remains imbedded in many returning soldiers. [...]

As the narrator urges his companion on, he takes a look at his own body. “I noticed my clothes were bloodstained, and found hanging from my ribs some leeches, which were already bloated” (577). I believe this bloodstained narrator recognizes the blood on his hands as he encourages his companion onward into battle (though this a battle against jungles, rain, and tigers). More than simply differentiating between the cowardice and shell-shock, which, at this point, the narrator’s companion could be embodying, Tomlinson points out the greater consequence of bravery—having blood on one’s hands. The companion eventually “pulled himself together, good man, and on we went” (577). Is the narrator a hero in this instance for urging his companion onward? Or is he guilty of perpetuating the same sin of killing and killing? As the narrator notes after his first encounter with the leeches, “Other leeches, as I then noticed and pointed out to my friend, were attached to him” (577). Tomlinson may not be making an

excuse for cowardice, but he *is* making clear what this kind of bravery does. It seems the more the soldiers get up and carry on, the more blood they have on their hands.

“Barbarism” further examines the guilt soldiers feel as they kill and outlive others who die. The narrator carries a rifle, but the rifle is quite useless against the dangers they face. “The rifle therefore was no more to me than a burden which was already as heavy and unaccommodating as a load of sin” (575-76). This simile struck me as odd in a piece about travel and nature. In the light of the first reading of “Barbarism” as a man who is unsatisfied with his civilized country, this line does not fit in very well. But, looking at the rifle as a “load of sin” in war is much more telling. Tomlinson clearly links war with sin. This plays into the psychological burden that the narrator will have as he returns home. His awareness of his “load of sin” in the form of his weapon of war will continue to disconnect him from others.

In another narrative by Tomlinson, his Great War novel *Old Junk*, there are also traces of survivor’s guilt. Putting “Barbarism” in conversation with this other text tells us more of Tomlinson’s attitude toward war and his realistic retelling of the soldier’s experience. One passage powerfully relays a soldier’s interaction with a younger soldier positioned, alone, to stand watch:

“I then noticed a muffled youngster beside me, who might have been your son, alone, gripping a rifle with a fixed bayonet, his thoughts Heaven knows where...As we crawled away, leaving him there, I turned to look at that boy of yours, and his eyes met mine...”

The haunting eyes and the sinful rifle both signify a weight that soldiers carry with them as they kill, as they leave others behind, as they outlive their fellow soldiers. The narrator of “Barbarism”, too, has outlived his adventure. Though he does not witness death, he urges on a

hopeless companion, is bloodstained, and carries a burden with him. In all these small symbols lie the survivor's guilt only a soldier would know.

The shell-shock (or PTSD) and guilt the narrator feels are made clearer in his disconnect with civilization. There are several examples of this disconnect as the adventurous narrator returns to a disappointing society. He admits, "I was as much at home in the Ludgate Circus as I was a short while ago on the island of Ternate...there was a mind about me in Fleet Street which I found harder to enter than, say, the natives of Kota Bharu" (580). He admits not only his affinity with the distant land he has visited, but a disconnect with his own people—even an anxiety about his civilization. "I am not at all sure to-day whether I understand the English, and that black doubt can be credited to the illustrated paper...I have not recovered from the shock" (579). In the Committee of Enquiry's report, a Dr. Mapother states, "'shell-shock' was, to my mind, persistent and chronic 'fear.'" If the narrator has not "recovered from the shock," we can conclude, along with this disconnect, that the narrator suffers from PTSD or shell-shock. This reminder of the *shock* and the disconnect that the narrator feels becomes a gloomy hopelessness as he struggles to return to a civilian life.

The gloominess also comes from the actions of his "civilization." He expresses his despair at the sight of the news. "Were these the pictures of a people which was going to rebuild a civilization that had been wrecked by war? Then there was little hope" (579). The narrator's despair in the story comes from comparing his "civilized" countrymen to the Malay people (whom they snubbed as savage), and the jungles they traversed through. Here his people were supposed to be advanced. Similarly, "civilized" and "advanced" societies went against each other in trenches in the Great War, and the results were horrifying. The narrator struggles with the thought of how a society could simultaneously be so advanced and do such horrible things.

“News from England! Then what a country! The blood-sucking worms, the jungle bugs which raised weals, the fevers, the dark forest and the cataracts, and the rhinoceroses—if all of that was savagery, then what was this?” (578). Looking at it as a post-war narrative, the narrator’s dissatisfaction with civilization must have been similar to a soldier’s. In this dissatisfaction and the experiences that bring about disconnection, one can see a soldier returning home with mixed feelings about where he truly belongs.

Tomlinson conveys his anti-war sentiment by displaying the consequences of the war in the form of an adventurous narrator. In all ways he is a stalwart and brave man, but he suffers. He suffers because of his cultural embarrassment of cowardice that drives him and his companion to be bloodstained. He suffers shock, isolation, and despair. The first line of the short story reads, “It looked to me a definite check. There was no bridge.” And so the tale begins with the lack of a bridge and ends with the lack of a bridge. The narrator is home in civilization but because of all he has done and experienced he can no longer connect with it because of his psychical trauma. The physical war is over; the psychological war has begun.

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