

“MUCH MADNESS IS DIVINEST SENSE—”:  
MADNESS AND WAR IN PAT BARKER’S *REGENERATION*  
AND NORA OKJA KELLER’S *COMFORT WOMAN*

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Recognizing the breadth and complexity of the depiction of madness in literature, I am narrowing the focus of this paper to a study of two novels which offer stories about war and madness that are both radically different and strangely similar. An antiwar novel, *Regeneration* is the more traditional of the two, though it tells stories about the Great War that are not often told—the hysterical disorders triggered by warfare, the significance of class in therapeutic strategies, and the misuse of power on the battlefield. Set in a mental hospital in Scotland during World War I, the novel is essentially the story of two men, decorated Second Lieutenant Siegfried Sassoon and distinguished Cambridge scientist Captain W. H. R. Rivers, and their effect upon each other. The destructive imperatives of combat and the crippling outcomes of emotional repression become clear in the wisdom that emerges from the stories of the shell-shocked men in Craiglockhart, as well as in Rivers’s and Sassoon’s private dialogues. Those elements emerge especially in the story of Second Lieutenant Billy Prior whose story is as important as Sassoon’s, because it effects Rivers’s transformation directly, reveals his class bias, and addresses otherwise ignored ethical and emotional questions raised by the treatment of soldiers during World War I.

*Comfort Woman*, another novel about war and madness, juxtaposes a tragic history of World War II with a daughter’s memory story and search. Told in alternating chapters narrated by Akiko, born Soon Hyo, and Beccah, her daughter, that cut back and forth between war torn Korea and suburban Hawaii, Keller’s story reveals Akiko’s struggle to survive her experiences as a child sold into prostitution at twelve, physically abused, and forced to have an abortion. Soon Hyo has her identity erased by the men who violate her person and destroy her sense of self in a “recreational camp” for Japanese soldiers. “Saved” by missionaries who pretend to employ women, Akiko emerges torn between two worlds, the mad and the sane: the spirit world of possession and superstition and the ordinary world of the mission, her marriage, and her present life as a restaurant