Rivers hesitated. “Taking unnecessary risks is one of the first signs of a war neurosis.”

“Is it?” Sassoon looked down at his hands. “I didn’t know that.”

“Nightmares and hallucinations come later.”

“What’s an ‘unnecessary risk’ anyway? The maddest thing I ever did was done under orders.”

—Pat Barker, Regeneration, 12

Pat Barker’s Regeneration opens a trilogy about World War I and combines both fictional and historical characters. “The Great War”—with a centennial commemoration this year—marks the outset of a radical shift into the global, technological, and at times overwhelmingly violent force of modernity. The main setting is a military hospital in Scotland where officers underwent treatment for shell shock. With remarkable economy, Barker introduces themes such as the politics of dissent in wartime; gender roles; Social Darwinism and the fear of racial and imperial “decline”; and the history of medicine and psychiatry.

Today, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a widely accepted diagnosis and cultural referent. However, in 1917, “shell shock” was controversial. The medical and military establishments, not to mention civilians, were divided on whether it existed and what caused it. When soldiers became incapacitated by hallucinations, nightmares, and psychosomatic paralysis (all of which appear in Regeneration), they were as likely to be categorized as cowards or malingerers as suffering from real illness.
In the novel, the shell shock-doctors W.H.R. Rivers and Lewis Yealland represent the two sides to this controversy. Rivers believes in the efficacy of the talking cure, what we would now call psychotherapy. On his rounds, as much a detective as a doctor, he encourages his patients to put their war experiences into words. (One source of dramatic tension in the novel is when you, as the reader, wait for the specifics of each patient’s traumatic backstory.) At the other end of the spectrum, Yealland is coercive: he applies electric shock treatments while badgering his patients into readopting a “heroic” role. However, both have the return to combat of their soldier-patients as their objective, a fact that comes to weigh heavily on Rivers’s conscience.

Rivers and Yealland, along with three celebrated Great War writers—Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and Robert Graves—were real people. Barker’s main fictional creations are working-class officer Billy Prior and factory girl Sarah Lumb, who become lovers.

This 1912 map of Edinburgh shows the hospital’s buildings and grounds. At this time, before the war, it was a spa (look for “Craiglockhart Hydropathic”). Reproduced by permission of the National Library of Scotland.
Progenitors of the War

When you arrive on campus, the hundredth anniversary of the start of World War I will have just passed. *Regeneration* keeps a tight focus on just two of the many countries engaged in battle, Scotland and England, with occasional flashbacks to the battlefields of Belgium and France. A brief overview of the larger political and social climate that spurred the onset of the war is useful to contextualize the novel:

The assassination in Sarajevo of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, on June 14, 1914 touched off World War I. The purpose of his visit was to shore up the prestige of the empire and to quell national aspirations among imperial subjects. His assassin belonged to a pan-Slavic terrorist organization called the Black Hand, which hoped to force Austria-Hungary into letting go of majority-Slav areas in the south and to create a pan-Slavic union under Serbian leadership.

The potent forces of nationalism and imperial politics led to war. Small states such as Serbia were able to challenge larger states like Austria-Hungary because they had the political support of other large states with which they shared ethnic or religious ties. In the case of Serbia, this was the Russian Empire, which cast itself as the “protector” of Slavic interests in Europe. Thus, when Austria-Hungary demanded action against the Black Hand in late July, giving Serbia two days to follow through, Russia encouraged Serbia to hold firm.

When the deadline for meeting the ultimatum had passed, Russia and Serbia called up their troops. On July 28, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.
What followed next was a chain reaction catalyzed by a network of diplomatic alliances predating the Serbian crisis. On August 1, Austria-Hungary’s ally Germany mobilized. France, allied with Russia, followed suit. On August 3, Germany—having already invaded Belgium—declared war on France. With seeming inevitability, on August 4, Britain declared war on Germany, in defense of Belgian neutrality. After overcoming internal socialist opposition, Italy entered the war on the side of Great Britain and France in 1915. The United States followed in 1917.

Note that this sort of shorthand—Britain did this, and Russia did that—occludes the fact that the belligerents were empires and not self-contained nation-states. Hundreds of thousands of colonial troops saw action on the front. Imperial possessions also factored into war strategy. The British famously fomented nationalist rebellions among the Ottoman Empire’s Arab subjects (in present-day Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia) so that the Ottoman army would have multiple conflicts to fight.

_Doughboy_ is American slang for an army private.
The Western Front: The Contested, Armed Frontier

After an initial series of offensives, the war’s European front was soon in a deadly standoff. The Belgians slowed down the German advance, buying the English and French time to rush troops to the battlefield. When the opposing armies, failing to encircle each other, dug in, the legendary trenches of the Western Front emerged. The trenches cut jaggedly from the North Sea to the Alps.

The lines of trenches were typically six-to-seven feet deep, protected by fences of barbed wire and sandbags, built to withstand the force of modern industrial warfare that included artillery bombardment, machine guns, mortar shells, and poison gas. The ground between opposing trenches was called “No Man’s Land”—one of many phrases that have come down to us from World War I. In the rainy climate of northeastern France and Belgium, the trenches filled with mud and waste; soldiers sometimes drowned in it, and bodies were often inadequately buried. Living in trenches exposed soldiers strange ailments, such as the numbness and swelling of trench foot (which sometimes resulted in amputations), and trench fever, which they contracted from lice.

* For complete access to Bobst’s WWI database visit: [http://library.nyu.edu/](http://library.nyu.edu/). Click the “Databases A-Z” tab and type “First World War” in the search bar [NetID and password required].
During periodic infantry offensives, commanding officers—steeped in traditions of warfare from an earlier time—ordered the attacking soldiers to “go over the top” to capture territory from the enemy. Early in Regeneration, Sassoon has a flashback at a train station: “The whistle blew. Immediately, he saw lines of men with grey muttering faces clambering up the ladders to face the guns” (5). Here’s Billy Prior’s laconic description:

You blow the whistle. You climb the ladder. Then you double through a gap in the wire, lie flat, wait for everybody else to get out—those that are left, there’s already quite a heavy toll—and then you stand up. And you start walking. Not at the double. Normal walking speed. . . . In a straight line. Across open country. In broad daylight. Towards a line of machine-guns (78).

Already by the end of 1915, it was clear that neither the Central Powers nor the Allies had a military edge. Not even the use of chlorine- and mustard-gas changed the equation; men “adapted” with special gear—the now familiar (though still unsettling) gas mask.

The disorientation and panic of a gas attack finds terrifying expression in Wilfred Owen’s poem “Dulce et Decorum Est.” In Regeneration, Owen is learning poetic technique at the knee of his hero Sassoon. His title alludes to a maxim of the Roman poet Horace: It is sweet and fitting [dulce et decorum] to die for one’s country. From behind his goggles, the poem’s speaker is watching a fellow soldier die, “drowning” from the effect of the gas.
GAS! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime.—
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light.
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

Not only were the battlefields of the Western Front weirdly aqueous, but war technology killed in ways that were “unnatural” for the setting and unimaginably hideous. Owen’s poem concludes, like much Great War literature, with a combination of protest at the futility of the war effort, compassion for soldiers on both sides, and anger at a seemingly indifferent civilian home front.

The Home Front: Civilians and the “War Effort”

All the women were yellow-skinned, and all, whatever their colouring, had a frizz of ginger hair peeping out from under the green cap. We don’t look human, Sarah thought, not knowing whether to be dismayed or amused. They looked like machines, whose sole function was to make other machines.

—Pat Barker, Regeneration, 201

Historians call World War I a total war, in which governments funneled all human, industrial, and agricultural resources into the “war effort” (another World War I phrase). Sentimental and sometimes crudely xenophobic propaganda posters were deployed to inculcate esprit de corps among civilians. The poster [right] in the collection of the British Imperial War Museums, showing a German nurse taunting a wounded English soldier, with the Kaiser and a German officer in the background, is just one example. National citizenship was supposed to cancel out all other possible allegiances (the French spoke of a “Sacred Union”), particularly transnational allegiances based on class. The
definition of treasonous speech or activity was broadened. The British Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) and the US Espionage Act of 1917 (still in force) come out of this context. The infiltration and entrapment of socialists, pacifists, and others, such as conscientious objectors, is the subject of the second book in Barker’s trilogy, *The Eye in the Door*.

Women’s labor in the munitions factories, where they manufactured shells, grenades, mines, and bullets, was crucial to the war. The work was often exhausting and dangerous; the skin of women who worked filling shells with high explosive turned yellow from sulfur, earning them the nickname “canaries.” Middle-class Victorian notions of women’s dependency were challenged as women left home and moved into rooming houses with each other and earned their own money. Billy Prior, on a date with Sarah, thinks “[t]hey seemed to have changed so much during the war, to have expanded in all kinds of ways, whereas men over the same period had shrunk into a smaller and smaller space” (90).

The Great War marked a new era in the movement of women from the home into the public sphere. Simultaneously, they were exhorted to put their traditional skills as cultivators of kitchen gardens to use by helping alleviate food shortages with “victory gardens.”

Soldiers imagined noncombatants at home—men too old to serve, men with civilian jobs, and women—going out on the town while they were contending with rats, shells, and barbed wire, or else callously pontificating about war strategy. Pat Barker explores the truths that underlay this hostility. Sarah and her fellow factory girls do not have it easy: they struggle to meet high production quotas and are spied on by forewomen and landlords, and the risk of unintended pregnancy hangs over their lives. (One question you might consider is why perhaps the goriest moment in this novel is of an abortion.) At the same time, the women do socialize, and some experience the absence of men as freedom. One factory worker says of an abusive husband, away at the front: “As far as I’m concerned the Kaiser can keep him” (110). These domestic and labor divisions would be further complicated when veterans returned at the war’s end.
On August 25, you’ll come together with the entire class of 2018 for Convocation with Dean G. Gabrielle Starr. Professor Patrick Deer, associate professor of English and a scholar of modern British literature and war culture, will offer his thoughts on the novel and its relevance today. Right after, you’ll meet the other students in your cohort, a smaller community with whom you’ll experience much of College life, and will be able to discuss your reactions to this complex novel with them and a faculty member.

Each of your discussion leaders will approach the book from a unique angle; faculty from history, French, biology, computer science, and expository writing—to name a few disciplines—have volunteered to participate. No two Freshman Dialogue groups will be alike. However, you should be prepared to discuss some basic questions:

- What are the limits of language in describing trauma? At what points in the novel are characters silent, and when do they speak?
- Do you ever learn what soldiers are fighting for?
- How does the war affect characters’ understanding of their sex and sexuality?
- What are the characters’ relationships to military technology? What is yours?
- What difference does Barker’s use of real life, historical characters make to your reading?
- What kinds of connections can you see to our current historical situation?
- How would you respond to the ethical dilemmas Barker raises for us in her novel, such as Rivers’s position as a doctor whose duty is healing soldiers so they can return to combat, or Sassoon’s balancing of patriotism with his critique of the war effort?
- What are your thoughts on the meaning of the title *Regeneration*?
We encourage you to see the Freshman Dialogue as an opportunity to start practicing the habits that will serve you well throughout your NYU career, especially attentive reading and arming yourself with specific passages (and page numbers!) that support what you want to say.

Lastly, we hope that you will keep your eye out for activities being planned on campus to commemorate the centenary of World War I.