

## NARRATIVES OF VIOLENCE AND HUMANITY: A RESEARCH STUDY ON THE ROLE OF ENGLISH WAR LITERATURE IN SHAPING CULTURAL MEMORY AND COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

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### Abstract

This study examines the role of English war literature in negotiating the complex interplay between violence and humanity, with particular emphasis on how such narratives shape cultural memory and collective consciousness. Drawing on texts spanning World War I, World War II, and contemporary contexts, the analysis integrates perspectives from trauma studies, cultural memory theory, and theories of collective identity. The research employed a qualitative interpretive design, combining close reading, thematic coding, and comparative analysis to uncover how war literature functions as both testimony and cultural archive. The findings reveal four interrelated thematic clusters: the representation of violence as cultural trauma, the preservation of humanity amid conflict, the function of literature as a site of memory, and the contribution of narratives to collective consciousness and moral identity. Through these dimensions, war literature emerges as more than a reflection of historical events; it actively participates in cultural processes of remembrance, healing, and identity formation. By situating literary works within broader theoretical frameworks, this study underscores the enduring significance of English war literature as a medium that preserves the memory of conflict while shaping cultural understanding across generations.

**Keywords:** English war literature, trauma studies, cultural memory, violence and humanity, collective consciousness

### 1. Introduction

War has remained one of the most devastating phenomena of human societies leaving behind not only political and territorial changes, but also deep cultural and psychological scars. The cultural production of literature will have a higher probability of appearing as a witness and commentary on conflict and will inform as to the experience which is impossible to historiograph. The English war literature in particular has contributed to the expression of the dialectic of violence and humanity as a repository of the personal and social memory which spans across time and generation. Trauma memory theorists have long believed that literary works provide unique means of reaching the hitherto unarticulate aspects of human experience of suffering and strength in war. In this respect, the war literature does not merely describe what happened but transforms what has happened into cultural texts which participate in the process of creating the collective consciousness.

The trauma studies discipline thus highlights the inability of the traumatic to be completely absorbed into narrative, but instead to reappear in a repetitive and fragmented manner in the form of culture. Caruth (2016) terms trauma an unclaimed experience in which traditional representation is impossible, but LaCapra (2002) draws the distinction between acting out and working through trauma

in literature and in cultural history. These structures help to unveil how war literature swings between first-hand accounts of suffering and imaginative re-enactments whereby communities are able to bargain about their pasts. Whitehead (2004) also stresses the importance of trauma fiction in attempting to make visible the unspeakable, and acting as a mediator between historical reality and imaginative re-creation of experience. England war literature can be understood through such lenses as both testimonial and therapeutic: witnessing the injuries of a nation as a whole, it can also be seen as a way of cultural healing.

In line with the research on trauma, the research on memory provides valuable information about the role of literature in defining and sustaining cultural identity. Halbwachs (2024) held that collective memory is social in nature, based on social groups that provide meaning to the individual recollections. His basic concepts were subsequently developed by Assmann (2011), who stressed the difference between communicative memory, based on lived experience, and cultural memory, perpetuated in symbolic forms such as texts, rituals, and monuments. Nora (1989) developed the idea of *lieux de memoire*, or "sites of memory," to describe the process by which cultural artifacts (including literature) become mnemonic anchors in societies struggling to come to terms with the memory of conflict. Taken together, these perspectives lead to the idea that English war literature not only represents trauma, but works as a site of memory where violence and humanity are being preserved for collective memory.

Here, the scholars have viewed literary works as a mirror and a shaping of the mass consciousness of societies that are born out of conflict. Durkheim (2014) imagined collective consciousness as the moral and cognitive system in the society and which unites them. This is also reflected in the hermeneutics of memory by Ricoeur (2004) which emphasizes the concept of narrative as a primary tool in reconciling the past suffering with the present identity. Literature as War Narrative is a tool of ethical introspection and identity formation, which influences how communities recount their history and visualize their future. Erll (2004) continued on this argument by viewing literature as a collective text, where literary works are products of the cultural memory and actors in the circulation of this memory. War literature, therefore, is, on the one hand, a document of antagonism, and, on the other hand, a way in which societies seek to bargain over shared values and shared identities. War literature is very significant in the creation of memory and identity, which is well demonstrated by both past and present analysis. The work of Fussell *The Great War and Modern Memory* (2009) demonstrated how poetry and prose about the World War I transformed cultural perceptions about war and wrote about disillusionment and irony in the contemporary memory of war. Later scholarship still stresses this dynamic. Milevski and Wetenkamp (2022) indicate the increasing overlap of literary studies and memory studies, and the methodological possibilities of viewing literature as a cultural archive. Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Literature is a history of the evolution of the study of trauma and memory and their utility as models of how literature can be of significant use in collective memory, whereas Hanif and Ullah (2018) use these ideas to analyse conflict zones like Kashmir and their relevance to mediate between trauma and collective identity. In current interactions with English war stories, the insights of these theories are additionally revealed as relevant. The example of Sekar (2025) discusses how the contemporary fiction of the English language wrestles with silence and witness and reveals that the connection between the traumas and the narrative remains one of the main determinants of the cultural perception of war. With such works, we are able to appreciate that, although decades have gone by since the world wars of the twentieth century, they still form a major part of how societies narrate violence and how they keep the memory of humanity. In such a manner, war literature represents a cultural continuum that connects the discussion on memory, trauma, and identity in the present time to past wars. Together, the theoretical approaches of trauma, cultural memory and collective consciousness provide a strong structure of analysis of English war literature. They show that those texts are not passively responding to historical violence but objects of the fabrication of cultural memories of endurance and healing. War literature is one of the important sites

of constructing collective identities, their fight and reproduction negotiating the unspeakable suffering and the survival of humanity.

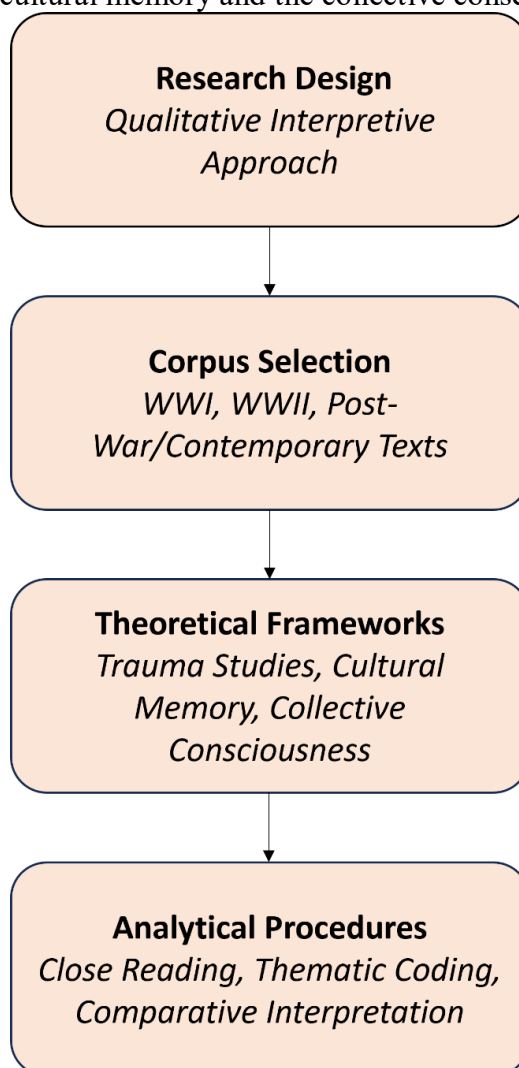
## Research Objectives

1. To comment on how English war literature represents the violence and humanity on the theoretical level of the trauma studies, cultural memory, and collective consciousness
2. To examine the contribution of English war literature to creation of cultural memory and collective consciousness in different historical frames, beginning with World War I and further on the contemporary accounts

## 2. Methods

The way the study was done was well considered to facilitate both the academic rigour and the interpretative depth. It is a combination of a qualitative research design, systematic selection of corpus, interdisciplinary theoretical backgrounds and a systematic analytical procedure.

The schematic representation of this framework (figure 1) identifies the study stages which are interdependent and sequential. It begins with a qualitative interpretive research design construction, extends to corpus selection, theoretical background, and analysis. Such a structure will create a feeling of coherence and transparency to make sure that a rigorous study of the process in which the English war literature is constructing cultural memory and the collective consciousness can be done.



**Figure 1. Framework of Study**

## 2.1 Research Design

The research is based on the qualitative and interpretive design with the textual and thematic analysis applied to the exploration of the representation of violence and humanity in English war literature. The design is especially appropriate to the cultural and literary studies, as there is pre-empted meaning-making rather than quantification. It enables the researcher to not only explore aesthetic practises used by the authors, but also the role of literary texts as memory banks in culture. The interpretive approach thus serves as a way of filling the gap between the literary criticism and cultural theory and positioning the war narratives as the artistic artifacts and the socio-cultural testimony.

## 2.2 Corpus Selection Criteria

The corpus was selected in three significant periods of war to provide breadth of history and the thematic variety:

1. **World War I:** The poems of Wilfred Owen, Dulce et Decorum Est and Siegfried Sassoon, The poems that show the brutality of the trench warfare and the psychological disillusionment of the soldiers.
2. **World War II:** The poetry of Keith Douglas, so nakedly real, and the prose of Graham Greene, in which the ambiguities of the human soul are set in the context of the world war.
3. **Post-War/Contemporary Literature:** The Regeneration Trilogy written in 1992 by Pat Barker and The Things They Carried written in 2008 by Tim O'Brien both which re-write war memory to the later generations and connect the past trauma with present awareness.

It was chosen according to the three criteria: (i) the explicitness of the text in its interaction with war and the aftermath, (ii) the literary and cultural importance of the text, and (iii) the theme of the text regarding violence and humanity. It is this balance that holds a comparative conversation between times and that which keeps English war literature representative of its richness in general.

## 2.3 Theoretical Frameworks

Three overlapping theoretical traditions on which the methodological framework is based are:

- **Cultural Memory Theory** (Halbwachs, 2024); Assmann (2011): The literature is also addressed as the repository that preserves, and transmits, collective memory, as a cultural trauma and resilience archive.
- **Trauma Studies** (Caruth, 2016; LaCapra, 2002): Literary texts are understood as testimonies that navigate silence, fragmentation, and the difficulty of representing traumatic experiences.
- **Collective Consciousness** (Durkheim, 2014; Ricoeur, 2004): The discourses of war are put into the broader perspective of the creation of shared cultural and moral identity, how societies remember war and view human suffering.

By making these systems work together, the analysis transcends the description of the text to a speculatively hypothetical explanation of how literature may be a component of the cultural memory and identity formation.

## 2.4 Analytical Procedure

The multi-step analytical process of the study included:

1. **Close Reading:** Primary texts were read through in terms of imagery, diction, narrative scheme and symbolic motifs.
2. **Thematic Coding:** Thematic strands were coded on four recurrent thematic strands- violence, trauma, humanity, and remembrance.

**3. Comparative Interpretation:** Comparison of the results was carried out intra-textually (between single works) and inter-textually (between works and history). This enabled the determination of the similarities and differences in the description of violence and humanity.

This analytical multi-layered procedure ensured that the results were not strictly textual but culturally located as well as to demonstrate the role of English war literature in the shaping of collective consciousness.

### 3. Results

The textual reading presented four major theme clusters that denote the mediation of the violence and humanity in the English war literature. These results are rooted in theoretical frameworks of Trauma Studies, Cultural Memory Theory and Collective Consciousness Theory, which predetermines the rigorous treatment of the corpus.

#### 3.1 Violence as Cultural Trauma

Using the concept of trauma as the “unclaimed experience” proposed by Cathy Caruth’s (2016), the texts indicate how the war transforms the violence into a cultural trauma that is not limited to the individual testimony. Dulce et Decorum Est by Wilfred Owen transforms gas warfare into a transgenerational trauma haunting, which fits the description of a transgenerational trauma, as suggested by Dominick LaCapra’s (2002) in his idea of “acting out”. Keith Douglas’s poetry of World War II shows the desubjectification of modern mechanized war, how trauma changes with the historical context. In the Regeneration Trilogy Pat Barker illustrates Aleida Assmann’s (2011) concept of cultural memory, the way trauma is relived decades after the fact and perpetuated in collective memory. The thematic results for this cluster are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1. Violence as Cultural Trauma in English War Literature**

Author/Text	Historical Context	Representation of Violence	Theoretical Lens
Wilfred Owen, <i>Dulce et Decorum Est</i>	WWI	Gas warfare as haunting, transgenerational trauma	Caruth (2016): Trauma as “unclaimed experience”
Siegfried Sassoon, War Poems	WWI	Brutality and disillusionment in trench conditions	LaCapra (2002): Acting out
Keith Douglas, WWII Poetry	WWII	Mechanized war, desubjectivization of soldiers	LaCapra (2002): Trauma and subjectivity
Pat Barker, <i>Regeneration Trilogy</i>	Post-War/Contemporary	Resurfacing of trauma across generations	Assmann (2011): Cultural memory

#### 3.2 Humanity Amid Conflict

Despite the overwhelming violence, the literature gives the foreground to Durkheim’s, (2014) concept of social solidarity, suggesting that war also creates fleeting moments of shared humanity. Sassoon’s satirical poems attack authority while retaining sympathy among the comrades. Barker’s description of psychiatric care echoes LaCapra’s (2002) “working-through” trauma, in which healing and testimony is a collective act. Tim O’ Brien’s, (2008) *The Things They Carried* provides an example of Ricoeur’s, (2004) hermeneutics of memory in which the act of storytelling becomes an ethical act of saving humanity from annihilation. Key representations of humanity in conflict are structured in table 2.



**Table 2. Humanity Amid Conflict**

Author/Text	Historical Context	Depiction of Humanity	Theoretical Lens
Siegfried Sassoon, <i>Satirical Poems</i>	WWI	Satire against authority, camaraderie among soldiers	Durkheim (2014): Social solidarity
Pat Barker, <i>Regeneration Trilogy</i>	Post-War/Contemporary	Psychiatric care as collective healing	LaCapra (2002): Working-through trauma
Tim O'Brien, <i>The Things They Carried</i>	Post-War/Contemporary	Storytelling and testimony as ethical survival	Ricoeur (2004): Hermeneutics of memory

### 3.3 Literature as Sites of Memory

Following Maurice Halbwachs's (2024) theory of collective frameworks of memory, literature is a kind of mnemonic structure. WWI trench poetry functions as lieux de memoire (Nora, 1989), a symbol of modern warfare itself. Graham Greene's narratives on WW2 dramatise moral ambiguities, which also relate to Paul Ricoeur's notion of narrative memory in year 2004. Barker opens archival silences again, turning individual testimonies into lasting cultural memory - an example of Assmann's, (2011) communicative vs. cultural memory. The thematic role of literature as sites of memory are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3. Literature as Sites of Memory**

Author/Text	Historical Context	Memory Function	Theoretical Lens
Wilfred Owen & Sassoon, <i>Trench Poetry</i>	WWI	Poetry as lieux de memoire	Nora (1989), Halbwachs (2024): Collective memory
Graham Greene, <i>WWII Novels</i>	WWII	Ethical dilemmas, moral ambiguity	Ricoeur (2004): Narrative memory
Pat Barker, <i>Regeneration Trilogy</i>	Post-War/Contemporary	Reopening silences, cultural transmission of trauma	Assmann (2011): Communicative vs. cultural memory

### 3.4 Collective Consciousness and Identity Formation

Through Durkheim's (2014) theory of collective consciousness, the use of war literature is demonstrated in relation to the development of shared cultural identities. WWI poets destroyed the myths of heroism, promoting a disillusioned yet united consciousness. WW2 writers produced an identity which was based on responsibility and ethical reflection. Contemporary texts are globalizing remembrance, serving as the connection between Ricoeur's, (2004) concept of narrative identity where literature mediates between past and present to create moral communities. A summary of this cluster and the theoretical linkages is given in Table 4.

**Table 4. Collective Consciousness and Identity Formation**

Author/Text	Historical Context	Identity Construction	Theoretical Lens
Owen & Sassoon, <i>War Poetry</i>	WWI	Collapse of heroic myths, collective disillusionment	Durkheim (2014): Collective consciousness
Graham Greene, <i>WWII Narratives</i>	WWII	Ethical reflection, moral responsibility	Alexander et al. (2004): Cultural trauma & identity
Tim O'Brien & Barker	Post-War/Contemporary	Globalized remembrance, moral communities	Ricoeur (2004): Narrative identity

#### 4. Discussion

These findings of this study shed light on how English war literature engages in combating on both sides of the twin forces of violence and humanity, and at the same time, it establishes a cultural memory and a shared consciousness. These conclusions can be reconstituted in the framework of trauma studies and memory studies to assist in locating war literature within theoretical debates about representation, testimony, and identity. The trauma and memory studies suggest that literature is often a privileged medium of working through experiences that are not easily described through a historical prism so that war stories can be transformed into archives of cultural memory of suffering and survival as Ball (2021) posits.

The key to this debate lies in the knowledge of trauma as a phenomenon of the individual and the collective. Brewin et al. (1996) draw attention to the fact that traumatic memories are stored in dual representational systems - situationally accessible and verbally accessible memory - which explains the broken and repetitive nature of war literature. This theoretical understanding can be seen in English war narratives where the disjointed structures and haunting images resemble the invasive return of traumatic experiences. Herman (2015) adds that trauma so often generates cycles of silence and speech, with the role of literature being that of a critical space in which to negotiate this tension. Similarly, Felman and Laub (1992) conceptualise testimony as a crisis of witnessing, in which the act of narrating war is both necessary and insufficient and simultaneously preserves memory while emphasising its limits.

Beyond the individual, the idea of cultural trauma widens the analysis to collective dimensions of the representation of war. Alexander et al. (2004) defines cultural trauma as an event that leaves an indelible mark upon a community's collective identity, reconfiguring its self-understanding and values. War literature, by its recurring motifs of violence, disillusionment and solidarity, is an expression of this process, turning private pain into cultural meaning. Hirsch (2012) develops the idea of postmemory which postulates that later generations, although not directly experiencing the war, receive and reinterpret the traumas of war through cultural media such as literature and visual representation. This intergenerational transmission guarantees that war literature remains a link between the past and the present to perpetuate the memory of violence and humanity across time.

The intersection of trauma and culture also means attention to the politics of representation. Kaplan (2005) stresses that cultural texts place trauma in wider ideological and political contexts, and this is particularly true of post-war texts which question the ethics of remembering and responsibility. Luckhurst (2018) goes further to emphasise the mediation of trauma paradigms through popular culture, highlighting the significance of literary texts in reflecting, and thus, influencing popular perceptions of conflict. In this context, English war literature illustrates its power not only to preserve memory, but also to disrupt cultural silences, reframe the identities of collectivity, and complicate narratives of heroism and sacrifice.

Memory is however never singular. Rothberg (2009) proposes a multidirectional model of memory that argues that remembrance of one traumatic history does not displace but instead interacts with others. This perception comes in specifically useful in the sense of how contemporary English narrations of war come to reside in an international memory system, how the horrors of World War I and II can be reconciled to the horrors of the more recent wars. Van der Kolk (2014) contributes to this discussion when she reminds us of the embodied nature of the trauma, that the traces of war do not just end with the narrative delivery but that there are also neurological and somatic traces. Through the manipulation of bodily images and fragmentation of senses, literature participates in the act of rendering visible a process that is concealed in the memory of the body of violence.

Lastly, the aspect of narrative itself, needs to be highlighted. According to Levine and Ortiz-Robles (2011), the organisation of narratives - particularly the middles of narratives - offers an effective arena of negotiation of the complexity of trauma and memory. English war literature with its tendency to languish in ambiguity and unresolved tension shows how the form of narrative parallels the lived reality of conflict where there is frequently no opportunity to close the gap. Craps (2013) demands

the extension of the frame of the study of trauma to incorporate postcolonial witnessing to remind us that the ethics of memory in war literature needs to take into consideration silences and exclusions in the literary canon.

Put collectively, these attitudes towards the theory of war literature claim the opinion that English war literature is not simply a report on the abhorrence of war but a metamorphosis of it into cultural texts, which mediate between violence and humanity, memory and forgetting, individuality and collectivity. Trauma and memory are addressed on so many levels that these works become significant locations of cultural memory and reflection that have a long-term impact on cultural memory and collective consciousness.

## 5. Future Research Directions

Although this paper has concentrated on how English war literature contributes to the building of cultural memory and collective consciousness, the future research could be broadened in several significant aspects. At first, the comparison between non-English literary traditions may reveal cultural particularity, but the international interdependence of the discourses of violence and humanity, which Rothberg refers to as multidirectional memory in 2009. Second, the digital humanities methods, including the text mining of corpora or network analysis, may provide new information about thematic patterns and intertextual connexions within more extensive collections of war literature. Third, the connexion of the narratives of war to gender, race and postcolonial perspectives may become a topic of the future scholarship that would contribute to the improvement of ethical and political dimensions of the cultural memory. Future studies can further deconstruct how societies remember, grieve, and derive meaning after conflict by extending this corpus, as well as by constructing the many alternative ways, of which literature records but does not alone constitute, the ways to do so.

## 6. Conclusion

The war literature in English has in this study explored the manner in which it negotiates the interrelated themes of violence and manhood and the manner in which it influences the cultural memory and mass consciousness in various historical settings. The analysis conducted based on theoretical insights on trauma studies, cultural memory theory, and collective consciousness revealed that the war literature can be viewed as a testament and cultural archive that preserves the experience of suffering but provides resilience and the ability to engage in moral reflection. The results support once again the idea that literature is not merely a passive observer of the violence of history but a subjective force in the creation of group histories that persist across the generations. Analysis of World War I and current texts showed the ways in which trauma is not only depicted, but also re-imagined. The discontinuous shapes and ghostlike imagery of the poems by Owen and Sassoon articulated the horror of trench warfare that could not be assimilated, and Douglas and Greene highlighted the ethical dilemmas of the Second World War. Barker and O'Brien (2008) re-read these legacies to the next generations, and narrowed the time gaps between generations using the storytelling methods that emphasise memory and solidarity and healing. These works are used to emphasise how literature is not merely the recording of trauma but also mediator of cultural transmission of trauma, and this can be heard to echo Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory, and Hirsch's postmemory. In addition, the findings described the significance of the literature on the formation of collective identity. Disproving the heroism myths and introducing cohesion to the centre, the English war literature fosters a community meditation on duty, morality and humanity. This aligns with the Durkheimian and Ricoeurian theories of a collective moral code and narrative identity, and shows how literature aided societies in the task of determining the meaning of war beyond the narratives of battlefields. Overall, English war literature can be discussed as one of the most significant media where violence and humanity collide and the memory of conflict is stored, re-evaluated and integrated in the collective consciousness. With a framing of narratives of war in the contexts of trauma, memory



and identity, this paper identifies the ongoing ability of literature to influence cultural memories and moral imagination.

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