

## Review of *Antietam in the Lower Forty*: An American Play on Shell Shock

Cameron Telch, Mount Saint Vincent University, Canada

*Keywords: Shell Shock, History Education, Mental Health*

### Introduction

Exploring mental health can lead to destigmatization, understanding, and breaks the perception of those experiencing mental health issues as “the other.” Revealing the perspectives of people with mental illness can provide them a platform to share their experiences, even if they lived over 100 years ago. History educators have an excellent opportunity to explore an important mental health issue, shell shock, by using plays and other forms of source material. In this review essay, I will be exploring how shell shock is presented in a play that has yet to be analyzed, providing history educators with a possible stimulus for conversations about shell shock with students. All armies who served in the Great War universally suffered from shell shock. Shell shock was a highly complicated and debated condition encompassing both psychological and physical symptoms (Cook, 2022), such as anxiety, depression, nightmares, uncontrollable crying, hallucinations, stammering, shaking, concussions, headaches, dizziness, blindness, muteness, and temporary paralysis (Clark, 2023; Glass, 2023; Holden, 1998). Soldiers and officers were subjected to the horrors of the war, including relentless artillery bombardments, machine gun fire, gas attacks, as well as environmental hardships such as mud, rain, sleet, and rats. The terrors of trench warfare led soldiers and officers to suffer nervous breakdowns, or they were diagnosed with the physical symptoms of shell shock if they were physically wounded in combat.

The Canadian and British narratives of shell shock are well-known in the current historiography (Barham, 2004; Brown, 1984; Downing, 2016; Ellis, 2023; Grogan, 2014; Humphries, 2018; Humphries & Kurschinski, 2008; Leese, 2002; Linden, 2024; Loughran, 2013; Montgomery, 2017; Reid, 2010; Robinson, 2020; Telch, 2023). 15,000 Canadians and 200,000 British soldiers and officers were diagnosed with shell shock (Cook, 2008; Summerfield, 1998). What is underrepresented in the current historiography is the American experience of shell shock due to their late entry into the war. Despite entering the war in 1917, between 15,000 to 76,000 American soldiers and officers suffered from shell shock from the conditions of the war (Stagner, 2014). Unlike their Canadian and British counterparts, who regarded shell shock as a sign of personal weakness or poor genetics, Americans understood shell shock as a war wound. They knew that combat could lead to psychological or physical distress and were committed to treating shell shock cases (Stagner, 2014).

After the war’s end, narratives of shell shock appeared in different media, including newspapers and magazines, fictional books, soldiers’ memoirs, and plays in Canada, Britain, and the United States. One American play that depicted shell shock was Edward L. Kamarck’s 1958 *Antietam in the Lower Forty* (Kamarck, 1958). Kamarck’s play was derived from the original narrative by Erma Graeber (“Madison Play,” 1958). It was performed in Wisconsin, and the cast included Kamarck himself, Eleanor Grant, Lois Dick, Julia Mailer, Professor Haskell Block, William Schereck, and Professor Sherwood Collins (“Idea Theatre,” 1958; “Will Dramatize,” 1958).

*Antietam* features Jim Erickson, an American Great War veteran and the play’s protagonist, returning to his family farm in Grant County, Wisconsin in the spring of 1919 (Kamarck, 1958). The play centred on the family’s attempt to rehabilitate Jim, who suffered from shell shock due to the war (“Madison Play,” 1958). The play focuses on the breakdown of family dynamics as Jim’s immediate family proposes different ways to treat Jim, whether through physical labour on the farm or with compassion and time (Kamarck, 1958). Other characters featured in the play include Grandma, Ma, Pa, Dr. Baker, Jim’s brother Ernie, and Jim’s love interest, Aggie. *Antietam* was framed as an anti-war play since it portrayed the lingering psychological consequences of war and how they destroyed the life of a young veteran (“Meaningful Play,” 1958).

This review essay will serve as the play's first critique in over 60 years and will argue that Jim embodied the universal suffering of all shell-shocked veterans of the Great War. Jim's experiences break the historical perspective of "the other" by bringing attention to an underrated group of Great War combat veterans, who have been historically persecuted due to their mental trauma.

## The American Great War Veteran Experience of Shell Shock

*Antietam* portrayed the return of a traumatized veteran from the European battlefields of the Great War. While combat ended before 1919, the war stayed very much alive in Jim's mind according to Ernie: "We drove up to town in the buggy to meet Jim's train, and the minute he got off I felt there was something wrong/ Ma saw in him too... a kind of farawayness" (Kamarck, 1958, Act 1, Scene 1, p. 6). Although Jim physically survived the war, he was left with haunting, internal scars. Jim was an empty vessel, devoid of life, because of his combat experiences. The inner battles within Jim's mind explicitly demonstrated the Great War's power; the daily physical and psychological casualties from trench warfare and combat, the militarization of entire countries committed to a war of attrition, and the day-to-day hardships that all soldiers endured (Holden, 1998). The fact that Jim's mind was still fixated on the war while at home demonstrated that he relived his horrors daily and could not forget the dreadful memories that haunted his psyche.

*Antietam* showcased that mental health was not well understood among Americans. According to the character Dr. Baker, mental health is: "so hard to put your finger on!/ Not like measles or mumps that you can confidently prescribe for, an' know where you're at/ We just don't know much about sicknesses of the min[d]" (Kamarck, 1958, Act 1, Scene 5, p. 26). *Antietam* drew upon universal themes of psychiatric medicine from the Great War, in that most doctors were not mental health specialists. Many Great War doctors understood psychiatry through Victorian and Edwardian lenses, as mental health issues were associated with hysteria and insanity (Downing, 2016; Grogan, 2014; Humphries, 2018). There was no universal census among Western Front doctors regarding the treatment of shell-shocked victims as they debated the origins and causes of shell shock (Cook, 2022; Downing, 2016). Despite the advancement of physical medicine during the war, it was clear that despite the suffering of many shell-shocked soldiers and officers on the front lines, psychiatry still did not advance in the Western medical community after the war due to the stigma (Cook, 2022; Telch, 2024). Kamarck's play implied that many shell-shocked veterans were left without medical support.

Kamarck's play showed that attending to a shell-shocked family member could lead to the breakdown of the family unit. The author illustrated that Jim's family almost collapsed as his relatives disagreed about how to care for Jim's mental health (Kamarck, 1958). Kamarck revealed that many families after the Great War struggled to care for their traumatized loved ones (Grogan, 2014). The stress experienced by Jim's family is a testament to the ways in which all military families were intertwined with the war and its consequences, whether through participating directly on the home front or attending to an injured loved one. Although Jim's family barely managed to care for him, the reality was that many families gave up on their shell-shocked loved ones, due to challenges related to drinking and violence (Downing, 2016). Some families confined their veterans to mental institutions where some of these veterans would spend the rest of their lives (Downing, 2016; Grogan, 2014).

The play also explored themes surrounding masculinity and what it meant to be a man at the time. Jim showed that the U.S. Army did not tolerate cowardice from its soldiers: "I didn't want to die like Bobby!/ How could they expect me to fight!/ The segreant, he 'Ain't you a man, Erickson!... Yellowed-bellied coward!" (Kamarck, 1958, Act 3, Scene 2, p. 18). *Antietam* showed that expecting soldiers to die fighting for their country served as the supreme test of masculinity and courage, regardless of the characters' individual beliefs. The play implies that soldiers who displayed cowardice during hostilities were subjected to persecution, their masculinity was questioned, and they could even be court-martialed for cowardice and desertion. The fact that Jim refused to fight underlines the destructive precedent set forth by the war in that soldiers were expected to achieve total victory for the glory of their country. As the protagonist learned and observed firsthand, there was no glory to be achieved in the Great War, only grisly, gruesome death.

Kamarck's work revealed the inner workings of a shell-shocked veteran's mind. Despite the family's commitment to saving Jim, they could not save him from being haunted by the ghost of a deceased comrade who died horrifically on the Western Front: "Bobby!/You all right, Bobby?! There's somebody there/ Over behind that barn!/That was close!/ Bobby, watch yourself.../Bobby!!!" (Kamarck, 1958, Act 3, Scene 2, p. 17). Bobby's gruesome death imprinted itself on Jim's psyche. For Jim, Bobby's violent death was too traumatizing for the protagonist to forget.

The experience of Bobby's death revealed that Jim is haunted by his friend's deathly screams. This theme resonates with research on military personnel experiencing shell shock. For example, Holden (1998), showed in a case study of Private NV, a hospitalized British shell-shocked soldier, that he was haunted by "the ghosts of Germans he had bayoneted come to take revenge on him" (p. 23-24). Hipp (2005) also illustrated in a similar case study that nights were the worst for British shell-shocked officers because they were haunted by the ghosts of their dead friends. Indeed, the play highlighted that witnessing the brutal death of a fellow friend or comrade was enough to drive some veterans to the brink of insanity.

## Conclusion

Kamarck's *Antietam* is a heart-wrenching play about the return of a shell-shocked veteran and his psychological struggles in post-war America. It is a gripping tale that explores family relations and the challenges of connecting to an absent-minded loved one. I highly recommend that anyone interested in the history of shell shock and the Great War read this play. What makes *Antietam* incredibly unique is that it was recently discovered by the author and his American copartner in the archives in Wisconsin. Alongside American playwright Eugene O'Neill's *Shell Shock*, written in 1918, *Antietam* is the second American play, unless another is discovered in the archives, about shell shock (Cox, 2001). *Antietam* is also unique because it shows the perspectives of every character and how each one was personally affected by Jim's shell shock. Jim and his family's experiences with shell shock reflected the reality that some shell-shocked families "endured decades of misery, [from their shell-shocked loved ones] while others left, unable to reconcile themselves to a life with a man they no longer knew" (Grogan, 2014, p. 179). In some cases, some shell-shocked veterans died by suicide to save their families from "the trouble" (p. 179).

*Antietam*'s recent discovery will no doubt capture the public's attention as everyone has experienced or will experience mental health struggles at some time in their lives (Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division, 2015). Utilizing the play to teach history to contemporary audiences will expose them to historical social justice issues, the violence and the long-term consequences of the Great War, and the ongoing stigmatization of mental health in the military. *Antietam* will no doubt contribute to the American historiography of shell shock. Kamarck's play brings attention to a group of marginalized combat soldiers from the Great War to demonstrate the psychological suffering of shell shock that gripped so many lives.

## REFERENCES

- Barham, P. (2004). *Forgotten lunatics of the Great War*. Yale University Press.
- Brown, T. (1984). "Shell shock in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918." In C. Roland (Ed.), *Health, disease, and medicine: Essays in Canadian history*. The Hannah Institute for the History of Medicine.
- Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division. (2015). What's the difference between mental health and mental illness? <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/q-and-a/whats-the-difference-between-mental-health-and-mental-illness#:~:text=As%20the%20World%20Health%20Organization,all%20have%20challenges%20with%20our>
- Clark, R.J. (2023). *Fiendish crime: A true story of shell shock and murder*. [eBook edition] FriesenPress.
- Cook, T. (2022). *Lifesavers and body snatchers: Medical care and the struggle for survival in the Great War*. [eBook edition]. Allen Lane.
- Cook, T. (2008). *Shock troops: Canadians fighting the Great War, 1917-1918 (Vol 2.)*. [eBook edition]. Penguin Canada.
- Cox, C. (2001). Invisible wounds: The American Legion, shell-shocked veterans, and American society, 1919-1924. In M.S. Micale., & P. Lerner (Eds.), *Traumatic pasts: History, psychiatry and trauma in the modern age, 1870-1930*. [eBook edition]. Cambridge University Press.
- Downing, T. (2016). *Breakdown: The crisis of shell shock on the Somme, 1916*. [eBook edition] Little, Brown.
- Ellis, H. (2023). 'Anxious to be restored': Managing war neuroses in interwar Canada. *Canadian Military History* 32,(1), 1-20.
- Glass, C. (2023). *Soldiers don't go mad: A story of brotherhood, poetry, and mental illness during the First World War*. [eBook edition]. Penguin Press.
- Grogan, S. (2014). *Shell shocked Britain: The First World War's legacy for Britain's mental health*. [eBook edition]. Pen & Sword History.
- Hipp, D. (2005). *The poetry of shell shock: Wartime trauma and healing in Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney, and Siegfried Sassoon*. [eBook edition]. McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- Holden, W. (1998). *Shell shock: The psychological impact of war*. [eBook edition]. WHINC.
- Humphries, M.O. (2018). *A weary road: Shell shock in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918*. [eBook edition]. University of Toronto Press.
- Humphries, M. O., & Kurchinski, K. (2008). Rest, Relax and Get Well: A Re-Conceptualisation of Great War Shell Shock Treatment. *War & Society*, 27(2), 89–110. <https://doi.org/10.1179/war.2008.27.2.89>
- Idea Theatre will present new play. (1958, January 16). *The Capital Times*, p. 10. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/518618670/?terms=%20Antietam%20in%20the%20Lower%20Forty&match=1>
- Kamarck, E.L (1958). *Antietam in the lower forty*. The Wisconsin Theatre Idea. University of Wisconsin-Extension. Theatre Library: Research Files, Box 11 Folder 3, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research.
- Leese, P. (2002). *Shell shock: Traumatic neurosis and the British soldiers of the First World War*. Palgrave.
- Linden, S. (2024). *Beyond the great silence: The legacy of shell shock in Britain and Germany 1918-1924*. Helion & Company.
- Loughran, T. (2013). A crisis of masculinity? Re-writing the history of shell-shock and gender in first world war Britain. *History Compass*, 11(9), 727–738. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.120>
- Madison play featured here on May 14. (1958, April 30). *Wausau Daily Herald*, p.6. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/272031233/?terms=Madison%20play%20featured%20here&match=1>
- Meaningful play grips audience. (1958, 15 May). *Wausau Daily Record Herald*.
- Montgomery, A. (2017). *The invisible injured: Psychological trauma in the Canadian military from the First World War to Afghanistan*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Reid, F. (2010). *Broken men: Shell shock, treatment, and recovery in Britain, 1914-1930*. [eBook edition]. Continuum.
- Robinson, M. (2020). *Shell-shocked British Army veterans in Ireland, 1918-39: A difficult homecoming*. Manchester University Press.

- Stagner, A. C. (2014). Healing the soldier, restoring the nation: representations of shell shock in the USA during and after the First World War. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 49(2), 255–274.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4369729>
- Summerfield, D. (1998). Shell shock patients: from cowards to victims. *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, 317(7169), 1394.
- Telch, C. (2024). He suffered for nothing in the Great War: The aftermath of the shell-shocked soldier in the post-war Western World. *RCMI SITREP: The Journal of the Royal Canadian Military Institute*, 84(1), 15-18.
- Telch, C. (2023). Advancing the dialogue of mental health in military museums: A review of *shell shocked: The long road to recovery*. *Regimes Museum Journal*, 10(4), 5-9.
- Will dramatize rural writers winning story. (1958, February 5.) *Janesville Daily Gazette*. p. 5.  
<https://www.newspapers.com/image/10361888/?terms=Will%20dramatize%20rural%20writers%20winning%20story&match=1>

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Cameron Telch:** Cameron Telch is a doctoral candidate in Educational Studies at Mount Saint Vincent University. He has written articles on shell shock. Cameron's research is on the underrepresentation of shell shock in Canadian military museums within the framework of difficult knowledge.