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### The Insane Truth: Normalizing Shell Shock through Two Women's Novels in Interwar Great Britain

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# THE INSANE TRUTH: NORMALIZING SHELL SHOCK THROUGH TWO WOMEN'S NOVELS IN INTERWAR GREAT BRITAIN

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In Interwar Great Britain, the societal conception of shell shock, and subsequently mental illness, changed drastically. Although the returning afflicted veterans were commonly ostracized from mainstream society, the literature from this time often paints a different picture. This thesis works to show how two specific representations of the disease helped in the easing of understanding, otherwise known as the naturalization, of it. First contextualized with medical and political texts from the Interwar period, close readings of *The Return of the Soldier* by Rebecca West and *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf serve as the focus for this thesis. These analyses are intertwined with letters from British nurses on the front lines, demonstrating the process in which the image of the shell-shocked soldier was not only preserved, but also manipulated, into an unexpectedly sympathetic character. In the case of West, the titular soldier steps away from the spotlight, and the non-combatant women in the narrative are given a more direct role in the act of understanding his shell shock. In Woolf's text, the shell-shocked veteran Septimus Smith's disease is made more palatable for the reader because of his intense connections with other characters. Due in part to these texts, mental illness as a whole became understood in a different way in Great Britain; for instance, the laws which defined a mentally-ill person as either sane or insane were challenged. This assertion is not to say that every person's mind was changed on the topic, but rather, that these two texts played a small role in a far greater process.