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The Futility of War: As Described in Five Modern Novels

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THE FUTILITY OF WAR:
AS DESCRIBED IN FIVE MODERN NOVELS

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The Futility of War:
As Described in Five Modern Novels

The problem of war has perplexed men's minds since the beginnings of civilization. The general concensus today is that war is a method used by a nation to retain its rights and interests. However, several books have appeared that offer different views of the subject of war. This paper is concerned with five such "anti-war" books.

The Honor in War

War in an ancient and well-established institution, with its roots deeply fixed in the past. For centuries it has been accepted and glorified. It is connected in our thoughts with such terms, glorious in their connotation, as honor, and defense, and patriotism, and the maintenance of rights.¹

The Red Badge of Courage, by Stephen Crane, is a war novel which speaks of the idealistic view that people often have of war. The story is about a young man who enlisted in the Union Army during the American Civil War. He had the belief that real war was a series of "death struggles with small time in between for sleep and meals!"² After he joined he found that his regiment had come to a field and had done little

¹Clyde Eagleton, Analysis of the Problem of War (New York, 1937), p. 12.

²Stephen Crane, The Red Badge of Courage (New York, 1952), p. 17.

but sit still and try to keep warm. Earlier in his life he had dreamed and read of marches, sieges, conflicts, and he had longed to see it all. His mind had drawn for him large pictures extravagant in color, full with breathless deeds. He had long despaired of witnessing a Greeklike struggle.

William Dean Howells also described war as being glorious in his novel: Editha.³ This story is about a young lady who consistently tries to convince her young lover to join in "the fight to preserve American from the evil of the world." Wanting him to enlist he said: ". . . I call any war glorious that is for the liberation of people who have been struggling for years against the cruelest oppression." When her young lover finally decided to enlist, he made this remark which is probably very popular with narrow-minded war enthusiasts: "What a thing it is to have a country that can't be wrong, but if it is, is right anyway!" Perhaps this is what prompted Theodore Roosevelt to say that: "Uncle Sam's only friend is Uncle Sam."⁴

Perhaps all of the world's thoughts concerning the glorious and patriotic aspects of war were culminated when General George Patton remarked: "War is the supreme test of man in which he rises to heights never approached in any other activity."⁵

³William Dean Howells, "Editha," in The American Tradition in Literature, ed. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Beatty, and E. Hudson Long (New York, 1956), II, 573-585.

⁴Theodore Roosevelt, Fear God and Take Your Own Part (New York, 1914), p. 199.

⁵"A Case of War," Time, XCV (March 9, 1970), 46.

The Brutality of War

Since 1900, almost 100 million men have died in 100 wars--compared with 3,845,000 in the 19th century.⁶ No one can dispute the fact that war is brutal. An editorial written in 1945 had this to say: "In civilian life, we call it 'murder.' In International life, we call it 'war.'"⁷ It would seem hard for the world to adjust to this double standard.

All Quiet on the Western Front is a book that speaks of some of the brutal aspects of war.⁸ It is a story of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by the war. Those same men had become hard, cruel, and indifferent to the human axioms and moral laws of the universe. They have been made or forced to comply to such standards, mainly because their lives depend on it.

World War I, as presented in All Quiet on the Western Front, proved to be terribly costly for the German Army. In fact, one might be correct in saying that World War I was one of the most costly wars that history has ever recorded. Several factors can be presented to support this idea.

First of all, most of the world's armies were only partially prepared for the new weapons that would be introduced in this war. Never before had poisonous gas, trench warfare, flame throwers, flotillas of tanks, or heavy bombardment by field artillery been used. Starvation, dysentery, influenza, typhus--all these things were combined to spell out murder, burning, and death.

⁶"A Case of War," 46.

⁷David Lawrence, "The Right to Kill," U.S. News & World Report, LXVII (December 15, 1969), 104.

⁸Erich Maria Remarque, All Quiet on the Western Front (New York, 1930).

The hospitals during World War I were a despicable sight for the soldiers of this era. Doctors were scarce, and beds often consisted of "water-proof sheets on the floor." Body limbs were amputated at the slightest inclination of the doctors. Undoubtedly, the lack of knowledge at this time made the war a playground for medical atrocities. If some of the same wounded soldiers were able to be admitted to the modern hospitals of today, no doubt thousands of them could be saved.

The German Army, according to this book, was certainly lacking in morale, which probably led to their eventual defeat. To be outnumbered was one thing for the Germans, but to hear accounts of the abundant food, ammunition and field-artillery support of the French and English armies only made the situation worse. No doubt any army meeting such odds would tend to be lacking esprit de corps. The mind as well as the body can suffer punishment during wartime.

Kurt Vonnegut described some of the horror of war in his book: Slaughterhouse-Five.⁹ All of the sequences in the book are related to one outstanding event: Mr. Vonnegut's actual experience of the fire-bombing of Dresden, Germany, during the closing months of World War II.

Dresden, now in the Eastern Sector of Germany, was relatively untouched throughout most of the war. But relatively close to the end of the war, British and United States' Bombers killed 135,000 people there. The bombing of Dresden was indeed a great tragedy, and few people today can understand why it was a military necessity to destroy it.

⁹Kurt Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five (New York, 1969).

Perhaps people could take this figure as even more preposterous when they consider that "an air attack on Tokyo by American heavy bombers, using incendiary and high explosive bombs, caused the death of 83,793 people, and the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima killed 71,379 people."¹⁰

Perhaps William Howells was right when he said: ". . . a war is considered holy when it is ordained by the pockey Providence that blesses butchery."¹¹

In 1928, most of the nations of the world signed the Kellogg-Briand treaties which outlawed war as an instrument of national policy.¹² Efforts are still being made to control the manufacture and distribution of arms. Gradually over the years, however, weapons have come into use which not only can destroy armies and navies, but can inflict destruction on the lives and homes of noncombatants. This is well described in the book Slaughterhouse-Five.

Today, death-making instruments may be more terrible than ever before. Adlof Hitler, in those last desperate days of World War II, would probably not have hesitated to use weapons of world holocaust if they had been at his disposal. These weapons now exist.¹³

Even on the small scale war has its atrocities. First Lieutenant William L. Calley has proven that fact by his "innocent" involvement in the My Lai incident.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Howells, "Editha."

¹²David Lawrence, p. 104.

¹³"For Men Who Want to be Indignant," Saturday Review, LIII (October 3, 1970), 24.

The Absurdity of War

Catch-22, a modern novel written by Joseph Heller, depicts the futility and absurdity that accompanies war. Some of the men on the air-force base seemed to have nothing to do but " drink tepid coffee and hang around trying to screw the nurses."¹⁴

Mr. Vonnegut was very successful in expressing the absurdity of war in his book, Slaughterhouse-Five. The plot of the story is presented through a character named Billy Pilgrim. Billy was a private in the American Army during World War II. After the war, about 25 years, he was in an airplane accident which damaged his brain. The author looks back to the time of World War II through the eyes of Billy, who has now been seriously affected by chronic schizophrenia. Billy's mind is continually in different areas of time and space,--never being limited by either.

Kurt Vonnegut has been very successful in writing a novel of a different sort. Slaughterhouse-Five is truly an unconventional war novel. It brings out the facts of wartime, but manages to inject just enough relief to make the complete story one that has no trite "war pictures", or any bloody scenes that the author has had to "stretch" simply to meet the reader's demands for "more blood." This is a light hearted account of one of the world's most awesome catastrophies,--the death of thousands of civilians for an American wartime cause.

Even though war may appear to be absurd, as yet there has been nothing provided to put into its place.

¹⁴Joseph Heller; Catch-22 (New York, 1955), p. 11.

The Uselessness of War

If one were to pick a general mood from All Quiet on the Western Front, one would have to choose uselessness. The leading character made several expressions that could not only be applied to war situations, but to living in general.

Here are a few excerpts from All Quiet on the Western Front which express the futility of human participation in a "worth-less" cause:

"We are not youth any longer. We don't want to take the world by storm. We are fleeing. We fly from ourselves. From our life. We were eighteen and had begun to love life and the world; and we had to shoot it to pieces."¹⁵

"We are insensible, dead men, who through some trick, some dreadful magic, are still able to run and to kill."¹⁶

"Today we would pass through the scenes of our youth like travellers. We are forlorn like children, and experienced like old men, we are crude and sorrowful and superficial--I believe we are lost."¹⁷

The desperate condition of their lives can be conceived easily by reading these passages.

British Sociologist Stanislav Andreski has said that war is not useless, and that war produces industrialization, civil government, democracy, nationalism, and culture and the arts. He credits war with "many of civilization's most treasured fruits."¹⁸ However, the 100 million men who have died in the wars of the 20th century seem to be a terribly high cost for a few "treasured fruits."

¹⁵Remarque, p. 88.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 115.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 122-123.

¹⁸"A Case of War," pp. 46-47.

After the young man in The Red Badge of Courage had fled from a battle situation with fear, he began to wish death upon himself. He believed that he envied those men whose bodies lay strewn over the grass of the fields and on the fallen leaves of the forest.

Everything had happened to him in an incredibly short time, yet the youth felt that in them he had been made aged. New eyes were given him. The most startling thing was to learn suddenly that he was very very insignificant, as can be seen in this selection:

"The officer spoke of the regiment as if he referred to a broom. Some part of the woods needed sweeping, perhaps, and he merely indicated a broom in a tone properly indifferent to its fate. It was war, no doubt, but it appeared strange."¹⁹

In a world where there is much emphasis on living a useful and productively rich life, it is difficult for one to understand why war has grown to the proportions that it has. Nations will continually use force, or war, to protect and further their group rights and interests,-- regardless of any individual's rights and interests.

Conclusion

In 1937, Japan and Italy were arguing that they must have more reliable sources of supply for their overflowing populations, and that in the absence of any community machinery for this purpose, they must resort to the use of force.²⁰ The same has happened today in India.

War has its other uses. War is used for the settlement of disputes, for the improvement of unfair conditions, and for the enforcement of the

¹⁹Crane, p. 104

²⁰Eagleton, p. 23.

rights of its members. All of these functions have been performed within the state by an authority to which all must submit; within the community of nations they are not so well provided for. The development of the latter community has been much slower, for it only has the inadequate method of war to perform all of these functions.²¹

Perhaps someday the world can experience something very similar to what the young soldier in The Red Badge of Courage experienced. Toward the close of the story, the youth was making his way back to the safety of home and away from the atrocity of war:

"The sultry nightmare was in the past. He had been an animal blistered and sweating in the heat and pain of war. He turned now with a lover's thirst to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks--an existence of soft and eternal peace."²²

²¹Eagleton, p. 12.

²²Crane, p. 134.

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