Critical Analysis Of Soldier’s Home Before, During, And After The War Essay, Research Paper

Many of the titles of Ernest Hemingway’s stories are ironic, and can be read on a number of levels; Soldier’s Home is no exception. Our first impression, having read the title only, is that this story will be about a old soldier living out the remainder of his life in an institution where veterans go to die. We soon find out that the story has nothing to do with the elderly, or institutions; rather, it tells the story of a young man, Harold Krebs, only recently returned from World War I, who has moved back into his parents’ house while he figures out what he wants to do with the rest of his life. And yet our first impression lingers, and with good reason; despite the fact that his parents’ comfortable, middle-class lifestyle used to feel like home to Harold Krebs, it no longer does. Harold is not home; he has no home at all.

This is actually not an uncommon scenario among young people (such as college students) returning into the womb of their childhood again. But with Harold, the situation is more dramatic because he has not only lived on his own, but has dealt with — and been traumatized by — life-and-death situations his parents could not possibly understand.

Hemingway does not divulge why Krebs was the last person in his home town to return home from the war; according to the Kansas City Star, Hemingway himself “left Kansas City in the spring of 1918 and did not return for 10 years, [becoming] ‘the first of 132 former Star employees to be wounded in World War I,’ according to a Star article at the time of his death” (Kansas City Star, hem6.htm). Wherever he was in the intervening time, by the time Harold gets home, the novelty of the returning soldier has long since worn off. All the other former soldiers have found a niche for themselves in the community, but Harold needs a while longer to get his bearings; he plays pool, “practiced on his clarinet, strolled down town, read, and went to bed” (Hemingway, 146). What he is doing, of course, is killing time.

The problem, of course, has to do with Harold’s definition of who he has become. He recognizes he has changed, and this change is played out dramatically against the backdrop of a town where nothing else has changed since he was in high school. His father parks his car in the same place; it’s still the same car; the girls walking down the street look like the same girls, except more of them have short hair now. Imamura comments, “Krebs admires them, yet he protects himself from the danger of sexual involvement as if he were still suffering from a previous affair” (Imamura, 102). And Daniel Slaughter observes that “One gets the sense while reading ‘A Soldier’s Home’ that watching the girls was a healing process” (Slaughter, hemingway\_1.html).

What has happened here, really? Why is Krebs unable to adjust to life back in Oklahoma? Why can’t he talk to girls, or manage to do anything productive with his time? These answers can be found in a careful examination of what Krebs was doing before the war and what happened while he was in Europe.

Prior to the war, Hemingway tells us in the very first paragraph, Krebs attended a Methodist school in Kansas. He was not out of place then; Hemingway says “There is a picture which shows him among his fraternity brothers, all of them wearing exactly the same height and style collar” (Hemingway, 145). There is a tremendous poignancy in this detail; at least one of these young men, so concerned about his appearance, would soon be shipped overseas to the most horrific war the world had ever known. The fact that his college was a religious institution is also significant, for it shows that he was, at that time, in synch with his mother’s religious values. At least, he did not have any reason to doubt them, or not enough strength to resist them (or her).

Hemingway tells us before the first paragraph is over that Krebs “enlisted in the Marines in 1917″ (Hemingway, 145). The Marines are an elite fighting force who today advertise they are looking for “a few good men” — indicating that if the prospective soldier is not out of the ordinary, he need not apply.

However, was Krebs a good Marine? J.F. Kobler observes that there is at least some indication in “Soldier’s Home” “that Krebs did not fight bravely in the war. . . . Krebs admits to himself that he has lied in public about his military experiences, but he cannot stop lying to himself about the real extent and the psychological effect of his lying” (Kobler, 377). We know for sure that he was “badly, sickeningly frightened all the time” (Hemingway, 146).

Certainly his war experiences were not glamorous, and he brings home quite a collection of battle-scarred baggage, not the least of which is his guilt over having to live a lie. Krebs even connects the politics of courting with “lying”, which he has already told us makes him feel “nauseated”. As Lamb points out, “The shadow that renders Krebs incapable of action and that lies at the crux of the story is stated in three sentences that follow immediately after his first statement that young women are not worth it: ‘He did not want any consequences. He did not want any consequences ever again. He wanted to live along without consequences.’ . . . His desire to avoid consequences is his single overriding motivation. He fondly recalls the French and German women because relationships with them were uncomplicated and without consequence; there was no need even to talk. He wants the hometown women but does not act on these desires because they are too complicated and not worth the consequences. He is attracted to his little sister because he can shrug off her demands and she will still love him. But his mother repels him because her demands are complex and unavoidable” (Lamb, 18).

But it is not until his mother confronts him over breakfast about his future that he realizes that he cannot continue to live at home any more. Robert Paul Lamb observes that before Harold’s mother begins her lecture, she takes off her glasses; “this gesture seems to imply that she either can not, or does not want to ’see’ him” (Lamb, 18). His mother, in other words, does not want to be distracted by Harold’s point of view while she is expounding on hers. This somewhat echoes his earlier observation that “Later he felt the need to talk but no one wanted to hear about it” (Hemingway, 145). Essentially, no one wants to recognize Harold’s unique identity.

His mother pressures him to get a job by arguing that “There are no idle hands in [God's] Kingdom,” to which Harold significantly observes, “I’m not in His Kingdom” (Hemingway, 151). And he’s not. The world he discovered during World War I had no hand of God in it.

His mother then observes that all the other boys “just your age” are settling down and becoming “really a credit to the community”. This hearkens back to the first paragraph of the story, in which Harold observes a picture of himself with his fraternity brothers, all sporting identical haircuts and collars. Harold is no longer like everybody else; he’s not sure who he is, but he’s sure of that.

Finally, his mother asks whether he loves her. He replies quite truthfully that he does not. We know that this is because his entire worldview has been turned upside down by his traumatic experiences in the war, and the ability to genuinely love requires an emotional balance he does not have right now. But his mother does not understand this, because she cannot identify with his experiences; as Tateo Imamura observes, “Krebs’ small-town mother cannot comprehend her son’s struggles and sufferings caused by the war. She devotes herself to her religion and never questions her own values” (Imamura, 102). So he lies to please her, and kneels down as she prays to please her — and then he knows he has to go away.

Harold lies out of an inability to force a painful issue and take a stand. He may feel that he acquiesces out of compassion, but in fact he is not secure enough in his own self to risk a confrontation that could be painful or guilt-inducing. Harold veers onto the edge of self-revelation with his straight-forward answers about the Kingdom of God and his lack of ability to love, but when his mother begins to cry he waffles; she will never see that he isn’t the boy he was in high school — or perhaps, the boy she thought he was.

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