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Help Heal Our Heroes

by Rosanna Martinelli

(English 2820)

It is a Sunday afternoon. The sun is out, the birds are chirping, and flowers dance in the wind. Thousands of people make their way to the stadium to watch their favorite team play. A sea of red, white, and blue sprawls out into the street as fans wait for the gates to open. Fans smile and pose in front of the bronze statues that immortalize some of baseball's greatest. As the gates open, seats are claimed by fans of all ages. They eagerly await the start of the game and hope for a win. They hold their hats over their hearts as the national anthem blares through the sound system and 40,000 people sing along. After the song is over, the crowd remains standing as a man in uniform makes his way onto the field. The crowd cheers as the soldier smiles, waves, and throws out the first pitch. The words "thank you for your service" flash on the screen in centerfield. The saying "thank you for your service" is arguably the most popular response to seeing someone in uniform. Even if you do not know what that individual did, the automatic response is just to say thank you. While this is seen as a sign of respect, there is more that society can offer to show their appreciation. In many works of literature and film, some aspects of war are romanticized, and it corrupts what war actually entails. More often than not, the process of becoming a soldier, fighting in the war, and coming home is completely fabricated to make money and not convey any truths. Box office sales and award nominations take priority over creating something that sparks conversation and gives viewers a different perspective. This leads many to believe that every soldier has the same experience and they thank them for it. Few know and understand the obstacles that soldiers are faced with even when they are not on the battlefield. While this is the sad truth of mass media, there are some works of literature and film that take the image of war and convey various war experiences in the most accurate way possible. Utilizing Ernest Hemingway's "Soldier's Home", Heinrich Böll's "The Postcard", and Tim O'Brien's "Speaking of Courage", this essay will examine the truth in the struggle soldiers have to overcome in the return home, how important it is to accurately convey war in film, and how crucial it is for society to want to listen to their stories to facilitate their recovery.

One of the hardest things for people to understand is what goes through a soldier's mind when they are in combat and when they come home. The person they are before they leave is rarely the same when they come back. In Ernest Hemingway's "Soldier's Home", Harold Krebs is faced with a similar situation. His story facilitates the understanding of how war changes an individual to the point where immersing themselves back into society shocks their system like jumping into a subzero swimming pool. Krebs is faced with the challenge of conforming to his hometown's norms which is especially challenging since he just wants to live a simple life, but he thinks that everything seems so complex. Krebs wants to stay uninvolved, detached, restrained, and "he did not want to get into the intrigue and the politics. He did not want to have to do any courting. He did not want to tell any more lies" (Hemingway 99). Virtually everything about his hometown is the same as when he left but since the war has changed him so much, it is harder for Krebs to revert to the role he played. He does not have the ability to display any feeling or emotion and it has gotten to the point that the simple action of saying "I love you" to someone would be a lie and "he did not want to tell any more lies" (Hemingway 99). His parents still treat him like a child and their negligence to understand what he went through causes Krebs to push himself further and further from his family. Krebs—even though a fictional character—serves as a symbol for what many soldiers deal with in their return home. Even after all of the combat is over, soldiers still have to deal with the conflict that resides

within themselves. Krebs is a prime example as to how difficult it is for soldiers to go back to the life they left behind even though the person they are does not fit the requirements. Leaving for Kansas City is a means of catharsis for Krebs and he is finally free to live a life without any expectations from his parents or small town values.

According to Steven Trout in his critique *Where do we go from here?: Ernest Hemingway's 'Soldier's Home' and American Veterans of World War I*, Trout argues that Hemingway's presentation of the Krebs family demonstrates the "national indifference towards veterans". Even though we pay tribute to those that have fought and those that have died, what are we actually doing to facilitate an easier transition back to their former life? Trout also mentions that Harold Krebs' "indifference to non-sports-related news" demonstrates his sense of alienation from the culture that is expecting him to return to his normal life as if he never left. It is clear that Krebs is having a hard time transitioning back to his old life and the fact that he does not really have a support system is not helping his cause. Trout also argues that Hemingway's "Soldier's Home", should be a lesson that our nation should learn. He states that "a nation without a clear and honest picture of what its soldiers have endured will be incapable of understanding them when they return, and, therefore, will be incapable of insuring their successful reentry into civilian life". Taking Krebs story into consideration, the struggle of coming home is real and affects many soldiers on a daily basis. It is imperative that war is accurately conveyed so that there is a deeper understanding of how hard it is for soldiers to return to normalcy. As a society, knowledge and understanding are necessary in order to make their lives simpler since they have lost so much of themselves for us.

Fighting in war has different effects on people. Sometimes the changes are physical like weight loss, a haircut, a wound, etc. while other changes—emotional and intellectual—are not as easy to detect. Similar to Harold Krebs, Bruno Schneider, a German World War II veteran, in Heinrich Böll's "The Postcard" also experiences a difficult time returning to his normal life. Schneider—however—does return to his normal life, unlike Krebs, who decides to retreat to Kansas City. Even though Schneider returned to his normal life, it is clear that there is a disconnect. There is not one instance in the story that Schneider mentions any combat which can imply that it was just too horrible to talk about and all of the horrors he has experienced are repressed. Keeping the postcard of his draft order just continues to remind Schneider of the experience and just by looking at it, it is clear that it is too painful to completely share and process everything. Schneider makes it seem as if he is settling for his old life and his emotions have gone numb; his lost capacity for love demonstrates that the hardest part for him about coming home was the fact that nothing mattered anymore. Schneider is just going through the motions and even though he is doing incredibly well at his job, he still has resentment towards the war and he cannot completely return to the things that made him happy. He can no longer "look at a beach without a pang" (Böll 450) because it reminds him of the last time that he was genuinely happy which is an emotion he is no longer capable of. Schneider tearing up the postcard is cathartic for him; he is finally free from the burden that the postcard represents, and he is able to take control over his life after he had to put his life on the line for six years. Schneider's story is another perspective as to how coming home is different for everyone and there are different methods of coping. It is necessary that these experiences are accurately told to completely understand the struggles that soldiers still have to deal with even though they are no longer fighting. It is more effective and considerate to understand the situation instead of just saying 'thank you for your service'.

People cope with trauma in different ways. Some choose to talk to people about what they went through while others choose to bottle their emotions out of fear that people will judge them for it. Similar to Krebs and Schneider, Vietnam veteran Norman Bowker struggles to return to his old life. Even though he is no longer fighting, "Bowker finds that even though he is in the World, he cannot escape the reality of war" (Timmerman). His dissatisfaction with his efforts causes him to refrain from actually confiding in anyone and he "attempts to reconstruct his present in the World by

conflating past realities and imaginary time—what might have been” (Timmerman) to overcome his survivor’s guilt. Like Krebs and Schneider, Bowker is not presented with an opportunity to talk about the war since “the world to which he has returned is deaf to his war experience” (Timmerman) and he does not want to be vulnerable or seem weak because he did not get the Silver Star. Unlike Krebs and Schneider, Bowker does not have a cathartic moment; he goes through the motions hoping he will get by and there is nothing he can do to release himself from the burden of not saving Kiowa. It is evident that Bowker is suffering from PTSD and the fact that there is no one for him to talk to, makes his recovery harder to achieve. Tough conversations need to happen in order to start the healing process and having an individual struggle alone makes the process almost impossible. It is imperative that war and all of the aftermath is accurately conveyed and talked about. It seems as if war is taboo but why is it taboo when it affects so many on many different levels? War is taboo due to the lack of knowledge throughout society. More often than not, the only time an individual is educated about war, is through history class. War should be talked about beyond the classroom to bring awareness to what is happening overseas and once the soldier returns.

These stories by Hemingway, Böll, and O’Brien shed light on the difficulty of coming home that many soldiers struggle with every day. These stories do not romanticize war in any way and they demonstrate the painful truth about society’s lack of receptiveness to the hardships that soldiers have to endure and continue to endure after the war is over. It is critical that we become educated about their experiences to understand and not just say ‘thank you’ and move on.

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