

Luigi pirandello war essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

World War I was known as “ The Great War;” in which countries all around the globe participated in an extensive stalemate that lasted longer than any leader or countryman had ever anticipated. WWI had initially been thought to last through the Christmas of 1914; however, the world war persisted for 1500 days. During this time, nine million people lost their lives in battle and millions of families’ lives, back at home, had changed forever. Luigi Pirandello was no stranger to the harsh realities introduced by World War I. Pirandello’s son was sent to battle and, unlike most other soldiers, fortunately survived having only been wounded.

The short story “ War” takes place during 1919; the year the official Armistice was called over WWI. “ War” brings to light the internal struggles provoked by the loss of a child to one’s country. Readers are introduced to the seven characters in this short story during a train ride to bid their loved ones farewell, to fight on the front. The setting is stuffy, smoky, and cramped, as the passengers have been on this journey for three long months. This second-class carriage sets the tone for the heartache and sacrifice that envelops each passenger.

Pirandello describes these characters in great detail to illustrate to the reader their intensity and discontent. Although these passengers’ stories differ, they each share a common thread of emotion that sparks a debate causing unrealized personal tragedy to bubble from below the surface. An immense amount of detail is privileged to the woman overcome with emotion and grief under her bulky exterior. She does not speak until the very end of the story, nor show her face in the least. Her opposing character, the

watery gray-eyed monster of a man, also receives much detail from Pirandello.

These characters are balanced by the woman's tiny, small and bright-eyed husband who shares his distressing story with the other five passengers. Pirandello portrays a woman under the utmost of suffering who believes that no other person could possibly share her feelings of sadness and despair. The author describes this woman as hiding behind the collar of her coat and unspeaking. She shields herself, overcome with grief, from the other passengers and takes it upon herself to carry the torch of the tortured mother of a WWI soldier.

However, she learns that these other passengers share in her heartache and may too, possibly even more than she, feel the pain of losing their child to the war. After her husband tried to rationalize her emotional state, she felt she deserved compassion and sympathy from the other passengers; however, she received the opposite. The other passengers did not share in her pessimism about the possibility of losing her one child, for they believed their grief to be greater than hers. With multiple family members away at war, the other passengers began their case against her.

Having believed she would suffer the most if she were to lose her only child, the wife quickly learned the power of paternal love. The other passengers explained that “paternal love is not like bread that can be broken into pieces and split amongst the children in equal shares [...] a father gives all his love to each one of his children without discrimination, whether it be one or ten” (Pirandello 539). Love is a main underlying theme throughout this story.

Each of the passengers feels differing degrees of pain for the love that they lost or may lose to this great war.

The power of that love has little to do with how it is dispensed; but has everything to do with the challenges of navigating through the changes of that love. As explained in the story, each situation is different, yet the same. Without a known outcome, each passenger bids farewell to one or many of their children and feels equal pain for each. Without considering that the pain of other parents in comparison to her own, the wife wallows in despair for she believes she will have nothing if she lost her only son.

She is unable to see past her grief, but wills herself to find a way to come to terms with sending her son to war. However, she remains pessimistic for she understands the weight of the ultimate outcome: death. As her counterpart, the watery gray-eyed man chooses optimism in the depths of his sorrow after his son was taken by the war. He chooses to believe that his son died a heroic and satisfying death stating, “[n]ow, if one dies young and happy, without having the ugly sides of life, the boredom of it, the pettiness, the bitterness of disillusion...

what more can we ask of him” (Pirandello 540)? Optimism can be hugely powerful in shaping a person’s perception of a situation. To the gray-eyed man, his son had not died in vain; but instead, had died as his father would have wanted to die at his age: fighting valiantly for his country. Love of country is the primary reason for the collection of these passengers in this stuffy, smoky second-class carriage. Had it not been for their patriotism,

these young men would not be putting themselves and their families through such distress.

It is ironic that the parents of these soldiers would gladly put themselves in their son's place knowing how much their sons want to serve their country, because truly loving another means putting their wants and needs before your own. One traveler states that their children "belong to the country;" however, the gray-eyed fat man retorts proclaiming, "we belong to them but they never belong to us [...] and our sons go, when they are twenty, and they don't want tears, because if they die, they die inflamed and happy" (Pirandello 540).

These expressions of suffering and the debate between whether these parents should be rejoicing for their children or mourning for them, all lead up to the turning point in the story. For almost the entirety of the narrative, the sorrowful mother with the bulky coat is in such despair that she cannot even bring herself to speak. However, when the watery gray-eyed man expresses his joy for his son's "happy" death, this strikes a deep chord within the woman. She sees his optimism and is able to reflect upon her own feelings, having been so moved by his powerful statement.

Upon reflection, she is able to think clearly, for the first time, about herself and the other passengers' situations. She "wakes up from a dream" and asks the gray-eyed man the climactic question, "[t]hen... is your son really dead" (Pirandello 541)? Suddenly, the man's optimism, joy and gratitude for his son's sacrifice dissolves before him. Up until now, his own patriotism and true love for his son masked his deeper feelings of sorrow. Only after being

asked that simple question, did he come to realize the depths of his own monumental grief.

The character that truly understood the most important element of their situation was the mother in mourning, who hid behind the collar of her coat. Not only was she hiding her face from the other passengers, she was justly shielding herself from the ultimate and definite outcome: death. The discussion between the passengers about who has the most sorrowful situation and who loses the most in this war, become futile after the climax of the story. Any situation can be perceived multiple ways and can be shaped by those perceptions.

Pessimism versus optimism in this story creates a cloud of confusion, which envelops the characters affected by this war and the loss of their sons. Dwelling on grief or choosing to rejoice in one's death does not change the fact that a person has died. Death is the definitive end; greater is it than love for one's son or pride for one's country. The overall theme of the short story "War" is the power of death and its effects on those left living. Each passenger in the stuffy, smoky second-class carriage carries the weight of the imminent death of their sons, on their shoulders.

Instead of focusing on the actual definition of death, the passengers choose to distract themselves with reasons why they should be proud of their children. Given the time-frame, individuals during the early 1900's had great pride in their countries and took great pride in those who defended them. However true this distraction may be, it does not soften the harsh reality that is war. Death found nine million people during World War I. It did not choose

individuals based on whether or not they had one son or seven. Despite the gray-eyed man's efforts to optimize his situation, he does not truly accept the fact that his son is gone.

His epiphany occurs in an instant; completing the story by trumping all other emotions, in comparison. " He looked and looked at her, almost as if only then—at that silly, incongruous question—had he suddenly realized that his son was really dead—gone forever—forever" (Pirandello 541). Luigi Pirandello's " War" is a complicated story with complex characters that require the reader to reflect upon their own emotions to navigate the situation. To relate to each character's position, the reader must understand the mindset of the generation of individuals living during World War I.

These characters struggle between their love for their country and their unflinching love for their sons. No matter how inspiring and powerful that love may be, it will not defend a son from the dangers of war. As the gray-eyed man realized, even an optimistic attitude cannot bring a person back. Until one comes to recognize the finality that is death, he or she cannot truly continue living his or her life. Pirandello, fortunately, did not have to experience the death of his son at war. However, he understood the profound conclusiveness of death well enough to convey its power to his readers.