

Captain Shannon's character: the question of the dehumanizing effects of war



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Arguably, *The First Casualty* by Ben Elton presents the character of Captain Shannon as depraved and dehumanised by the effects of WW1, but perhaps the savage nature of war simply brought out a barbarous side to him that had always been there. The novel is based on the proverb 'the first casualty of war is truth', and this is depicted through society's perception of Shannon as a stereotypical brave and selfless soldier, when the truth is that he often behaves in a callous and ruthless manner towards those he encounters, demonstrating that the true nature of war was not always obvious to those who were not in the midst of it. Arguably, one of the key purposes of Shannon's character is to portray how the war could imbrute a man, as well as to juxtapose the sentimentality of the other renowned soldier in the text, Abercrombie, as the two men respond completely differently when faced with the hostility of war. Contextually, soldiers had many different ways that they would cope with the emotional trauma they faced, often turning to alcohol, humour, or in Shannon's case, an extremely narcissistic and *carpe diem* attitude. This could interestingly be perceived as his own vile nature coming out of its shell, or the harrowing effects of the war that have warped his mind, opening up the debate of whether his dehumanisation is utterly involuntary, or whether the war has given him an excuse to show his true colours without much repercussion.

As Elton initially introduces Shannon, it is apparent that he has a strong disregard for others and a lack of empathy, dehumanising those around him and enjoying his own brutal sarcasm and cocky attitude. He straight away takes pride in the fact that he designed his own rubber bullet to harm, but not seriously injure Kingsley to get him out of prison, and shows no remorse

in the fact that he “ tested it on stray dogs”, figures who are innocent, just like the men he fights alongside in the trenches, portraying how he is utterly desensitised to death as an effect of living on the front line. Furthermore, he seems amused as he describes how Kingsley “ went down like a sack of coal” after he shot him, showing an eerie confidence in himself and is indifferent to the effect that his actions had on Kingsley - physically harming him, as well as telling his family that he is dead, throwing away his chance of imminent reconciliation with them. Shannon begins to provoke Kingsley further, perhaps without even realising he's doing it, saying how his son, George, won't mind believing his father is dead, telling him “ he'd have felt quite the odd one out with you above ground.” Contextually, this may have been true as an estimated 37 million people died during WW1, both in combat, disease, and bombing of civilian areas, and so a majority of children will have grown up without fathers, and so we Shannon can't really be condemned for his honesty, even if it is brutally to the point.

The shame of a father like George's being known as both alive and a conscientious objector during this period would often have resulted in being socially shunned, and sometimes physically and verbally assaulted for being associated with a ' traitorous' CO. However, he does demonstrate inexcusable cruelty towards Kingsley when he states “ quite frankly, you make my skin crawl. Agnes Beaumont could've done so much better, and perhaps she will”, a very apathetic quip to assert dominance over Kingsley and to make him feel inferior, giving Shannon himself a boost to his ego. However, he is simply reflecting similar sentiments every other character in the novel so far, and so may just be a byproduct of the jingoistic society of

the time, partially excusing his hatred towards Kingsley as a conscientious objector as he has come to expect to be treated in such a derogatory manner and is therefore unsurprised. Interestingly, Elton comments that “beneath that smooth exterior, Kingsley sensed the soul of a violent man”, and as a perceptive man and an ex-detective, we can trust Kingsley's innate perception and sense of the destruction that is to follow.

Shannon's conceited manner increases at their visit to Folkestone pier as he speaks disparagingly of the older men performing there for not openly contributing to the war effort and for not being on the front line instead of him. He suggests that their lives have far less value than his own, asking rhetorically “it doesn't take a lot of youth and vigour to stroll ten yards then get shot to bits by the Boche, does it?”, demonstrating his selfish and egotistical manner. Although, perhaps he is so forward with this statement out of fear of returning to the front line, willing to volunteer anyone at all to take his place if he could get away with it. Arguably, this does not excuse his horrible treatment of anyone he encounters, claiming “I'd kill him for a thruppence”, devaluing the man's life and exposing Shannon's violent nature, and suggesting he enjoys such sadistic acts. These are likely to be effects that the war has had on his character, bringing out the worst in him, but surely these sentiments must've been present to begin with and then amplified by his experiences at war? Else we could expect all soldiers to be similarly as devoid of sentimentality as he is, which we can clearly see through Abercrombie's character that this is not the case. Interestingly, Elton provides an explanation to why Shannon behaves so egocentrically, stating that “the sun will not shine for long. I am bound soon to die.” This arguably

justifies his *carpe diem* attitude as he wants to make the most of the limited time he has left, disregarding the emotions of those who are not on the battlefield as he feels they already have the privilege of not constantly fearing for their lives or watching their friends be "shot to bits". His tone appears confident as though he does not fear death, he simply wishes to focus on nobody's satisfaction but his own for the remainder of his life. This statement evokes a little sympathy from the reader as he is so resigned to his fate and he has nothing else to live for other than himself, but even most other soldiers in a similar position would have a little more regard for the feelings of those around them and more of a conscience. Elton also describes how Shannon "pushed his way through the afternoon strollers without apology" further exemplifying his ruthlessly robotised character, a lasting effect that the war has had on his mental state, warping his perception of what is socially acceptable and what is not.

The fact that "Shannon turned many female heads" by "looking splendid in his uniform" exemplifies how society would often judge soldiers on their smart exterior, assuming the typicality of soldiers being fearless, courageous, and strong. Arguably, Shannon is all three of these things, but what society did not always expect was the chance of a soldier like him also being narcissistic, lecherous, and a rapist. This portrays how Shannon uses his uniform as a mask for the reality of his awful persona and how he takes advantage of his privileged position as an officer, continuing the theme of truth versus deception throughout the novel. Shannon shows a grossly lascivious side to his character as he refers to young women as "little teases" and comments on how they "know the score", suggesting he views

them as purely sexual objects there to satisfy his lustful needs and to visually please soldiers such as himself. He even mentions his own "credo" being "any drink. Any meal. Any girl. Any time." The fact that "any girl" is only third on his list implies how he perceives women to be of lesser importance than material goods, and suggests that he feels they at his disposal at "any time" he wishes. This quote demonstrates his fearlessness and how lucky he feels to be alive after all he's faced at war, and so he takes advantage of the time he has left, even though he is undoubtedly a lecherous character, perhaps enhanced by his experiences at war.

Even Kingsley, arguably a very moral individual, cannot fault his logic, admitting that "it does make a lot of sense". However, saying "any" girl shows his misogynistic views how he does not value each woman individually and simply wants to use them for their bodies, clearly exemplified when he leads on Violet, pretending to be a perfect gentleman and taking her on a date before violently assaulting her. Elton's description of Shannon at this point is ominous and uncomfortable - "his easy smile had become a cross between a leer and a snarl. He was on the hunt." This animalistic language portrays him as predatory and extremely unnerving, a clear example of the lengths he will go to to achieve what he wants. Perhaps this desensitisation is useful whilst at war as he is able to kill the opposition without guilt or resentment, but when he is outside of a war setting, this behaviour becomes extremely unsettling and completely socially unacceptable, showing how the war has moulded him to become a vicious character that he struggles to break away from, portraying how the war has dehumanised and demoralised him.

Overall, Elton portrays Shannon's lack of humanity and compassion, perhaps partially due to the war, but the extremity of his savage manner must have roots residing in who he is as a person, with the war contribution to his horrid manner by bringing out the worst in him, or perhaps giving him the excuse to show the worst in himself.