

Human decency in a world of human waste



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Arguably, the presentation of waste is demonstrated in *Journey's End* as the futility of war and the loss of innocent soldiers. There are subtle signs of foreshadowing throughout the exposition of the play, like referring to the “foul smell of bacon”, which contextually was something that soldiers recalled smelled like decomposing bodies in the trenches, portraying the soldiers being slaughtered like animals for meat. The characters themselves contrast this, as Sherriff portrays each of their coping mechanisms and their dependence on each other to keep their sanity as they prepare for the impending attack from the opposition. Sherriff described his characters as “simple, unquestioning men who fought the war as it seemed the right and proper thing to do”, portraying the effects of propaganda on young men at the time that lead them blindly into war without proper preparation for what they would have to face, and being unable to leave once they had arrived, else they'd be shot for desertion. The ways in which each character handles their emotional stress whilst at war portrays their humanity in an inhumane situation.

One instance where humanity in war is showcased is in Act 2, when Osborne describes to Raleigh how the German soldiers allowed the British to go into no man's land to rescue one of their men who had been shot in battle and screaming in pain for over a day, and shone a torch for them to find their way back to the trenches in the darkness. This signified the decency and respect the oppositions had for each other, recognizing the humanity in one another and the futility of the situation both sides had been placed in by their governments, demonstrating true camaraderie between soldiers, no matter the side they were fighting for . Even Raleigh, who had only been in

the trenches for a day, recognized the concept of war as 'silly', showing his perceptive nature and how quickly the horror and hollow constitution of war would take effect on soldiers, especially young and impressionable ones like Raleigh. This camaraderie was exemplified many times throughout the war, the most famous of which being the football match in no man's land on Christmas Day 1914, where both sides called a day-long truce for the celebration. The fact that after making friends with the opposition, they had to go back to bombing each other shows how war was a waste of innocent lives and the overcoming of differences to form friendships, again demonstrating how the soldiers were only at war because of societal expectation and the power of the government.

Arguably, the character of Osborne is vital to the play as his main, self assigned duty is to protect the sanity of his comrades as they wait for weeks on end for the huge attack they have been anticipating, taking on an avuncular role to nurture and comfort those around him. His nickname among other officers, 'Uncle', show how this character does anything he can to help his peers feel less afraid and to provide them with reasons to stay motivated, usually reminding them of life back home, demonstrating how Osborne goes far beyond showing human decency, but showing compassion for those he is at war with. One of his strongest emotional connections is with Stanhope, who trust him with the harsh reality of his alcoholism, demonstrating what a trustworthy and unjudging character he is. In Act 1, Osborne assists the very drunk Stanhope to his bed whilst reassuring him that his responsibilities could wait until the next day. The stage directions read that he 'takes the blanket and puts it over him', tucking Stanhope into

bed like a father to his son, showing the strong bond between the two characters. Osborne also takes Raleigh under his wing, conversing with him about rugby as it is the only interest they have in common with Raleigh having so little military experience and being so young. Osborne makes himself relatable to Raleigh by telling him he played for the English rugby team, which astonishes Raleigh and makes him idolize Osborne. His claim of playing for England may or may not be true, but it definitely distracted Raleigh from his worries of the upcoming attack, which perhaps was Osborne taking advantage of his schoolmaster's experience to be empathetic towards Raleigh.

Another key feature of Osborne's character was helping everyone around him keep perspective and not be overcome by the horrors due to take place in the attack. When speaking of the war itself, he tells Raleigh to "think of it as – as romantic, it helps", implicating that beneath his strong exterior, he too has faced the intense fear the war placed upon soldiers, which could be portrayed as weakness, or perhaps a portrayal of his humanity, as he is not robotic enough to escape the emotional pressure of war – something that it appears Stanhope attempts to do through his excessive drinking of whisky. Osborne's gentle and reassuring nature are a stark contrast to the brutality of war, making his character feel very out of place in such an environment, but perhaps Sherriff chose to do this to profoundly affect the audience when Osborne is killed during the raid. This may have been Sherriff's portrayal of the reality of war, emphasizing how nobody was safe from the tragedies that occurred, no matter how good or kind the soldiers in question were. This could make the audience connect with the idea that names on war

memorials are not just names, but connected to real people like Osborne who did not deserve to be killed, reviving history and respect for those who were lost. It was Sherriff's intention to force his audiences of the time to remember the loved ones they had lost and to face the emotional turmoil that the war had left everyone in.

Interestingly, audience's are divided when it comes to the decency of Stanhope's character, as his level of self control fluctuates depending on who he is addressing and how much alcohol he has consumed. His hard exterior and inner sentiment demonstrate his humanity being broken down by the war, causing the contrast between his cruel outbursts and hysterical laughter. His ever growing dependence on alcohol show his life going to waste, when so many soldiers in his company look up to him. Osborne tells Stanhope, who shows his fright through anger, that Raleigh's idolization of him is a good thing, to which Stanhope replies only "as long as the hero's a hero", demonstrating his self doubt and deprecation, and lack of self worth, not seeing himself as a heroic figure, even after receiving the Victoria Cross for his contributions to the army. The audience understand that this doubtful reaction implies Stanhope's fear that Raleigh will one day end up in his position of rapidly deteriorating mental health and dependence on alcohol, which also shows his deep affection and care for Raleigh in a brotherly manner, which even he will not admit to himself.

Stanhope admits to Osborne, his closest confidant that "without being doped up on whisky – I'd go mad with fright!" showing a far more sensitive and humane side to himself that if he shared with more people, they would be far better friends with him and more than just comrades; for example in <https://assignbuster.com/human-decency-in-a-world-of-human-waste/>

the exposition when Hardy shows minimal empathy for Stanhope's drinking problems, calling him "a freak", not demonstrating a relationship based on mutual respect like strong friendships are. Contextually, soldiers drank whisky to numb physical and emotional pain, to pass the time, and to give them 'Dutch courage' to stay brave enough to participate in the worst of battles, explaining why Stanhope depends on it so much to keep himself and his company motivated. Alcohol can, however, make Stanhope mellow, as it leads to him saying "kiss me, Uncle" to Osborne during Act 1, bringing out an affectionate and humorous side to his character, something the audience may imagine to be comforting whilst living in a war zone, the bond between the characters chosen by Sherriff to highlight the importance of camaraderie and soldiers' dependence on each other to make it through the war, as well as to make the audience far more heartbroken when Osborne is killed, leaving Stanhope to continue surviving alone.

However, Stanhope's sinister and cruel treatment of Hibbert during Act 2 shows how the fear corrupting his mental health is making him unstable and unreasonable, as he tells Hibbert "I'd have you shot", showing a vicious lack of compassion towards the officer as he refuses to let him go on leave to receive treatment for his neuralgia, calling him a "swine". Although it is clear to the audience that here Stanhope is inexcusably menacing with questionable morals, they can perhaps understand why he acts out in such a way. Stanhope had been in the front line for over three years, with every man he started with been killed, making him feel isolated and perhaps a sense of survivors guilt that they all died yet he didn't, explaining why he finds desertion from the army so outrageously disrespectful. Contextually,

people were shot for trying to leave the army as it was perceived as such a shameful act that they did not deserve to live, and would often send home telegrams telling families that the soldier was shot in action rather than for desertion to spare bringing shame upon the grieving family. This is an example of Sherriff portraying the decency of soldiers helping each other uphold their honor, even though Stanhope's technique could be perceived as rather inhumane.

In conclusion, Sherriff successfully manages to create the sense that his characters in the war contrast the terrible acts taking place around them, and that the loss of a soldier's life is a waste, and the concept of war itself is futile.