

The long the short and the tall essay sample



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The Long and the Short and the Tall is a play set in the Malayan jungle in 1942 during the Second World War. The play focuses on a small British patrol group who were sent north into the jungle to check for signs of Japanese advance. The playwright is Willis Hall who was first a regular soldier serving in Singapore. The play was written for amateur actors in Edinburgh as they had regional accents, which suited the roles for 1950's characters. The title "The Long the Short and the Tall" came from an anti-war song, which was popular during the Second World War.

The Long and the Short and the Tall offers the reader a new perspective of war, responsibility, and isolation while also entertaining. The author Willis Hall makes use of his first hand experience as a soldier to give the impression that the realities of war were off-putting. The play raises many issues mainly one being "war," which is addressed in the whole first act. The five patrol members have no awareness of battle and are unable to come to terms with their situation. However, until the Japanese prisoner came, none of the inexperienced soldiers have been faced with the possibility of cold murder in war.

When the Japanese soldier first enters the reality clicks in, but just for a moment. It demonstrates the military sensibility towards the prisoner that murder is only the safe option. But, through MacLeish, it brings up human ethics, questioning the sensibility of the military and the proper treatment of POWs (at that time through the Geneva Convention). It also deals with human compassion, and how the human heart can change in a short period of time when faced near their likely disasters. Responsibility is shown

throughout the play, especially from one member of the patrol " Mitchem," who is known as " Sergeant Mitchem" in the play.

He is the leader of the patrol who thinks of his duty to his men first and then his obligations as a " non-commissioned officer. " Because of his high standards he is treated with total respect from the other characters. This means his sense of responsibility is more demanding than compared to the other members of the patrol as he displays more authority over them. For instance when Mitchem says, " I'm wearing these (stripes)' cause I'm the one who makes the decisions. " Straightaway this shows us again his responsibility over the other men is in his command, he orders the other members.

Unlike, Corporal Johnstone who is the opposite of Mitchem, as he shows no authority and responsibility over the others in any way what so ever. Johnstone sees the Japanese prisoner as a threat and feels the need of killing him. For example, " Come on! Come on! I can't hold onto him forever! Will you ram it in! " This shows us that Johnstone is willing to kill the prisoner in cold blood and is prepared to do his job himself, but not to answer for his actions. This also gives the impression that his responsibility is senseless, as he doesn't think of the consequences, which it could lead to.

His attitude towards the prisoner is very heartless and shows no sympathy. This is ironic because at the end of the play Johnstone reveals himself to be the " coward at heart". This is linked to responsibility as it shows us that he was selfish and his attempt of responsibility was nowhere as near as Mitchem's. MacLeish's responsibility is enclosed beneath his own problems

and doesn't focus much on his responsibility to the other men. Willis Hall tries to show the audience that different responsibilities are taken however; only certain characters are in complete control with their duty.

Isolation occurs in the play and involves different situations, for example the Japanese soldier is in a state of isolation because of his inability to know what is being said and because of his importance as a prisoner. Macleish has never killed a man and because he does not act like an experienced soldier he is isolated. So Mitchem and Johnstone feel he is not worthy of their respect and confidence. Furthermore the fact of Macleish being a Scot means his pride in the nation and upbringing is complex, which therefore the other members of the patrol don't understand. This leaves Macleish isolated with no one to talk to or comfort him.

The invisible fourth wall is used to add a realistic setting to the play and helps you to visualise the hut in your mind. It makes us feel as if we were actually in the Malayan jungle and aware of the problems soldiers faced in the war. All of this creates a major impact on us as it draws us to the play and closer to the characters. This allows you to get involved and lets you decide for yourself what you want to believe. The play is entertaining because the realistic setting and language all play a part in the decision. Humor is used to bring you into the play and helps you to bond with the characters.

An example of this is shown when the Japanese prisoner is asked a question he puts his hands on his head and looks completely lost and misunderstood. This suggests that he doesn't understand and is funny however; it gradually makes you feel empathy towards the characters when they are in tense

situations. All of these devices are used to educate an audience too, because Willis Hall uses realistic soldiers to show us the overview of War and what the soldiers went through. For example the soldiers all come from all over the United Kingdom, Bamforth: London, Macleish: Scotland, Whitaker: England, Evans: Cardiff, Smith: Newcastle.

These men represent the typical United Kingdom army of the time. Willis Hall did this again to bring you closer to the play, so that you feel more and more involved as the play goes along not only to entertain an audience but also to educate them at the same time. Willis Hall had a political motive for naming the play after an anti-war song. This makes the title ironic because it's taken from a song, which was popular during the Second World War. However, to fit in with the play it was turned into a cruder version with the word " bless" throughout the song in favour of a four-letter obscenity.

This changed version of the song expressed the bitterness of the fighting men, risking their lives daily in a battle zone. The tune of The Long and the Short and the Tall is emotional and slow, which creates the impression of how miserable and hard life was during the Second World War and all the stressful measures the soldiers were going through. The language that is used in the song is informal and contains a lot of repeats with the replacing word of " Bless em," emphasizing how much these men struggled and coped during the war. The words in the song are very anti-military and illustrate what Willis Hall was trying to say.

It does not matter how good a soldier you are, like Mitchem for example, you will not progress but be given the " unwanted" jobs to do and added to that

faulty equipment which could cost your life. The message being simple, the lives of the ordinary soldiers in the British army were soon as cheap.

Therefore, Willis Hall is stating the facts and educating the audience by sending messages to them through the characters. Dramatic devices such as sound effects at the ending, which are excitingly dramatic, help the audience to receive the message of war.

The sound effects at the beginning of the play are very similar to those at the end. We hear a gun shot in the distance, the chirping of the crickets and the song of a bird in the jungle. At the beginning of the first act " the door is kicked open and Johnstone stands framed in the doorway, (holding a sten at his hip in the doorway) (holding a sten at his hip when the door) was kicked open the crickets and the birds ceased their song. " Then at the end of the play we hear the sound of a gunshot again the screams of dying men.

Johnstone has a bullet wound in his side and he slams the door shut and leans upon it to regain his breath. The fact that the sound effects at the beginning of the play are similar to those at the end has an intention of showing that the situations in war stay the same. No scene changes to distract the audience, each act ends with dramatic excitement because it has significant impact on us. It makes the audience feel closer and deeply connected with the characters in the play which builds up tension to show them how the soldiers felt then.

The conflict, which dominates the play, is when the Japanese soldier enters, and disagreements with the patrol members are made on whether he should be killed or not. The issue of the Japanese soldier is a conflict between

considerations of civilization and inevitability. Bamforth's attitude towards the Japanese prisoner is in two minds, and his authority represents a constant disagreement between "us and them." The POW starts off as Bamforth's pet: "Hey Tojo! Flingers off blonce. Flingers off blonce... He's coming on. He knows his flingers already.

Good old Tojo. Now lets them dlop. He picks up quick. He's a glutton for knowledge." But by the end of the play it is Bamforth who defends him. It is ironic that it is the one anti-army soldier who actually has no problems with killing the POW at the start who defends him and his own right to a life at the end of the play. The Geneva Convention was important to Macleish at the start of the play, he thinks all the soldiers should be treated with dignity but when he starts to think about fate that his brother may have faced he changes ideas about the Japanese POW.

On discovering the cigarettes that the POW is smoking are British Macleish attacks him, when Bamforth admits he gave them to the POW Macleish replies: "How was I to know... How was I to feel... I could have chocked you know ... I've got a brother who's up country... I thought he'd looted them." This shows that Macleish forgot all of his ideas of fairness once the reality of war hit him. The play *The Long and the Short and the Tall* is entertaining, but Willis Hall has certainly made a number of points which serve to make the audience think about war, its consequences and all the situations involved in it too.

Although some humor was put in the play for example, when the soldiers were making fun of women's magazine and when the Japanese soldier is

asked questions he puts his hands on his head and looks completely lost. This suggests that the play is realistic, which is entertaining because humor plays an important role for the audience, as that is what brings the play to real life. However, the play is to educate an audience because the play introduces realistic characters, which represent the typical United Kingdom army of the time.

Willis Hall emphasizes on the situation rather than the plot or people, which suggests that he wants to show the audience what the soldiers faced, the hard work, which was distressing and extremely painful to live through. The purpose of producing this play for an audience was to give them an idea of how things would have been if they were in the war surrounded by these characters and in these similar situations. So therefore, Willis Hall did have a motive and hidden agenda behind the play as it was done purely to entertain an audience as well as educating them at the same time.