

# "captain corelli's mandolin" by louis de berni essay sample

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



War stories have been written for centuries by authors to captivate their readers. It is the most extreme situation that someone could possibly come across in life. Authors have used this genre as a catalyst for testing the hearts, minds and souls of their characters. It would be imprudent to predict how someone will react in such circumstances or how their character will be shaped or changed. For this reason an author can use a war setting to help show a character's inner-self or their self-discovery. War itself is a conflict between two or more armies, however there will also be conflicts between characters and of feelings. In *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, Louis de Bernieres puts the unsuspecting Carlo, a man full of personal conflicts, into the midst of a war<sup>1</sup> he never, truly wanted to be part of. Carlo's individual struggle with his sexuality and what feelings to hide or show is drawn out by the war. He is there at its start on Greek territory and is there at its collapse, so why has Louis de Bernieres used this character and for what purpose? More importantly how has he portrayed Carlo?

Carlo's physical appearance is very symbolic and important in reflecting his feelings. On his (Italian) side of the line he was the "biggest man that anyone had ever seen". Louis de Bernieres exploits Carlo's appearance to provide the reader with a sense of Carlo's feelings of isolation. Carlo's immense size asserts that he is not only different to look at, stands out in the crowd, but also symbolic of how alone he feels. Carlo, "l'omosessuale", is gay. In order to be accepted in the army, a world without women, Carlo is forced to continue<sup>2</sup> his heterosexual 'act' in distressing ways such as brothel visits, in doing so cutting himself off from his closest of friends, giving him an irrepressible sense of loneliness. As a "Titan" he had "become

accustomed to the saddening suspicion... that [he was a] freak". The burden of size to Carlo was one that he couldn't possibly share or explain to a normal person - no different from his sexuality.

Louis de Bernires used Carlo's physique as an inspiration in times of hardship. At the end of his time in Cephallonia, whilst the Germans were murdering their Italian ' allies' his frame was rigid and un-faltering. As the truck drove Corelli, his fellow comrades and him to their deaths Carlo sat bolt upright

" his massive chest thrust forward as though no bullet in the world could break it."

As a song trickled from his lips his comrades were silenced, listening to its beauty until they joined in on the " Humming Chorus" from Madama Butterfly. In that time of darkness Carlo gave everyone's hearts an easier thing to do than dwell on death. Through Carlo's actions Louis de Bernires shows Carlo's unselfishness as well as allowing the reader to seek beauty in the midst of disaster. Not once did Carlo think of himself on that journey. It was his responsibility to cheer the men enough to enable them to face death respectably. It is terribly sad that the only time he thinks of himself is that he is " glad to die at last" and to do so as a soldier standing to attention. He is a pillar of strength and an example to all until the bitter end.

Finally, a cause of unhappiness is put to a profound use. In such an act Carlo became the " inspired hero" he wished to become when he initially joined the army.

" At the order to fire Carlo had stepped smartly sideways like a soldier forming ranks. Antonio Corelli, in a haze of nostalgia and forgetfulness, had found in front of him the titanic bulk of Carlo Guercio, had found his wrists gripped painfully in those mighty fists, had found himself unable to move."

No doubt Carlo thought his life was a waste. His sexuality meant he was never fulfilled like a man with a woman whom he loves. He had never been able to express his most personal feelings, receive forgiveness or be understood about his sexuality. But in such an " act of love so incomprehensible and ineffable" de Bernires shows that his was not a wasted life. In saving Corelli's life at the time of death he showed complete selflessness. His soul priority was saving Corelli, the man on whom he had poured his love. It was an act of such heroism that under no circumstances could Pelagia, knowing this, when later reading his memoirs, think of him as anything but a man carrying a great sadness who saved the life of the man she loved.

Since puberty Carlo had been living a life of secrecy. He found himself driven to find his sexuality mentioned and in doing so he became inspired by philosophers to join the army<sup>3</sup>. He joined because " the men are young and beautiful" and, there, he would find someone to love who would make him an " inspired hero". This highlights two points. In yet another situation Carlo is different, " probably the only soldier in history who has taken up arms because of philosophers", accentuating even more his isolation as a sexual outsider and giant. It also suggests a desperation for love, could he have chosen a more extreme situation than war, if indeed I came to that?

" In the army there would be those he could love, albeit never touch."

Love would be deemed unfulfilling, because Carlo had no wish to publicise his feelings, love could not be returned. In joining the army Carlo did so navely. He had no comprehension of the sadness it would bring him, so full of optimism was he that his plan would work.

Louis de Bernires, throughout the novel, portrays Carlo as a man with a huge capacity to love and to be greatly affected by it. The most powerful effect on Carlo's behaviour is most likely love, noticeably in the Albanian war. While the war seems to drain him of optimism it appears to increase his importance for loving others. A prominent example of the effect love has on Carlo is in relation to Francesco, the man with whom Carlo fell in love shortly after joining the army. Together they were part of many dishonourable scenarios and the devastation of war. Love for Francesco had a profound effect on Carlo and the way he behaved. Carlo became protective over Francesco. Carlo " thanked God that [he] had been wounded and not Francesco" when fighting in Greece and even when Francesco became mad, Carlo continued to care for him, making gloves from any remains of mule hides, giving him the best of any rations, generally trying to prevent him from being killed. Carlo selflessly gave Francesco all that he had.

Francesco was his means to becoming a hero. In times when Carlo questioned desertion, it was his love for Francesco and intense commitment to doing something worthwhile, which made such an idea implausible and so he kept fighting. This also demonstrates a rather different approach to war -

as a means to be heroic. In the end it was all thrown back in his face. Francesco discovered that the white death had 'got him' and in giving himself up to the Greeks was blown-up by a shell. Willingly Carlo risked his own life in an attempt to try and save Francesco's life, writing in his memoirs " I was offering myself to their guns".

Love of Francesco blinded Carlo to the reality of war, what seemed to him at the beginning to be more " like a game, a challenge of manhood, a matter of honour..." became " an appalling reality" as Francesco died and he realised his mistake. Carlo's whole intent was to be ennobled by his love and become a hero. Although the Greeks gave him a hero's cheer when he clambered out of his trench to retrieve Francesco's body, it was not enough. Carlo had almost been acting selfishly - he was too focused in becoming a hero that he had not calculated the risks. He had not been able to see past love to the horrific realism of war. Looking back he admitted that the wound he received in that war was self-inflicted.

When later going to Cephallonia Carlo's capacity to love is shown in all its' honesty. In his farewell letter to Corelli he expresses his heart-felt feelings but without any bitterness. He thanks Corelli for removing the sorrow from his heart and making him smile again and as his final wish hopes that Corelli and Pelagia find their future together. I believe that Carlo learnt the sad but vital truth in the war. He became certain that if he told the truth about his sexuality he would become subject to prejudice. All he could do is never expect anything from anyone in return for his love, but still having everything to give, in loving unconditionally he could act without being

selfish in any form. Because of this, in times of danger, he always thought of others because he had nothing to lose and no one to lose him. It therefore enrages Carlo when those he cares about are put in the line of fire - literally. At his end Carlo hates the German Leutnant Weber's cowardice and falsity, not for his sake, but for Corelli's and the other men's, what they will lose and who will lose them.

" ' Don't give us a cold,' said Carlo.

Weber's face trembled with suppressed tears and desperation, and at last he said suddenly, ' Forgive me.'

Carlo sneered, ' You will never be forgiven' "

These final words of Carlo's are not much, but they convey everything with the intensity de Bernires portrays of his character: his disdain of weakness and a strange sense of sadness for his friends. The " cold" of Weber's symbolises all that Carlo hates in what is about to be done and de Bernires' use of, " sneered", language loaded in meaning, summarises Carlo's attitude beautifully showing disgust and contempt of a form of dishonour never undertaken by him. It shows how Carlo can not comprehend how a man can be so weak that he will not act morally. It is ironic that Carlo's final statement is so true of how the German's will later be treated; they never will be truly forgiven.

There are many other references to the intensity of Carlo's character. It is most noticeably Carlo's actions and writing which speak volumes, he usually

says it best himself. Louis de Bernieres shows it clearly in Carlo's lack of speech. In dialogue Carlo is often very sombre which is hardly surprising with the pain he has suffered. He does not speak often but when he does, he does so with a great intensity, not saying a great deal, but often very meaningfully. It is as though he only speaks when it is necessary. Carlo's speech is not arduous but directly to the point. In Cephallonia " Fuck the war" becomes his greeting. The fact that many of the greeted are Greeks and so have not the faintest idea what he is saying, and also the cheeriness of it, conceals its deeper meaning. To the reader it conjures up images of previous tragedies and although Carlo keeps a merry exterior, sums up his hatred of the war and the irreplaceable loss of life it has caused, of which he has seen.

It is intriguing that de Bernieres does not define Carlo as a fixed nationality. Although he is an " Italian soldier", by the end of the novel Carlo has lost much resemblance of being Italian except in speech. The war causes Carlo to lose all patriotic faith in his country and its leaders. The lunacy of the Duce's4 war provoking plans and commanders' foolishness in refusing reinforcements because more credit would be gained in the case of a victory without them, with hindsight, infuriate Carlo. He became subject to " the kind of abject depression that comes to soldiers who have realised that they have been fighting on the wrong side".

It is ironic that Carlo was fighting the only people whose ancestors bestowed any kindness upon people of his sexuality and in so realising, and with the



effects of the war, he loses any pride previously held for his country. Having "lost [his] patriotic faith" Carlo becomes without nationality, highlighting his differences, for everyone has a nationality. Carlo's dislike and disrespect for what Italy and Mussolini have caused, is showed to the reader in the sarcasm of the pamphlet he secretly co-writes and distributes with Dr. Iannis, for it is written at the end "every nation gets the leader it deserves." Carlo's disillusionment with Italy is clearly shown in writing the pamphlet because he has not only been forsaken in the death of Carlo but in the irresponsibility of Italian leaders.

The portrayal of Carlo, without 'origin', is vital. At his death Doctor Iannis spoke of him,

"He was one who could have said, 'I am a citizen, not of Athens or Rome, but of the world.'"

For "Nothing can harm a good man, either in life or after death". In Carlo, de Bernires keeps the traits of a hero but breaks free from the stereotypical 'macho', womaniser, with his homosexual, lonely character. He shows that heroism is not an act but something that happens on the spur of the moment, Carlo's finest hour is not when he is trying to be heroic but when his heart takes over, saving Corelli becomes a reflex and he becomes a hero.

Carlo's character has permanence to it, his humility, selflessness and compassion, which spur him on to great deeds and are the traits of a hero; it will reappear in the future and can be traced in the past. It therefore seems appropriate that he was buried "in the soil of Odysseus' time, as though he

had belonged there from the first." In many ways his permanence is like that of the Island Cephallonia; having survived many times of hardship the island still pokes out of the Ionian sea; even after death Carlo's character has not disappeared because there will always be heroes for however great or well-known deeds. Louis de Bernieres also portrays this because there is not a sense of finality about Carlo's death. It is as though, in the earthquake, Carlo's character says ' I'm still here and I'm not going anywhere' to the Italian fireman who sees the skeleton of Carlo in one of the few fissures opened in the earth.

If de Bernieres' ideas of heroism are in fact a reality then I find it as a great comfort that there are people inhabiting the same planet as interesting, kind and undemanding, as Carlo; if not real, a beautiful piece of literature.