

The red convertible essay



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Casualties of war continue to happen long after the individuals time in combat has come to an end. To the public's eye, veterans returning home must be overwhelmed with joy to be out of danger and put back into the world they once knew. But are they? Veterans returning home from combat experience are faced with the difficult task of coping with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and its side effects, because of their experiences in combat.

In Lousie Erdrich's, " The Red Convertible" and Wilfred Owen's, " Dulce et Decorum Est" we can see how and why a returning veteran, such as Henry, would have trouble readapting to his former environment and handling the symptoms of PTSD. First, in order for us to see what Henry was suffering from, we must first analyze what post-traumatic stress disorder actually is, and how it can affect both the combatants, and their families. PTSD can best be described as war-related anxiety. The residual effects of the war experience for ex-soldiers are manifested in a variation of behaviors (Brown 372).

These behaviors faced by returning veterans can vary widely in each individual case. Some constant behaviors or symptoms in many cases are, " reexperiencing the traumatic event; numbing of responsiveness to, or reduced involvement with, the external world; and a variety of autonomic, dysphoric, or cognitive symptoms"(Brown 372). These behaviors do not necessarily show themselves immediately when a veteran returns home from war. They can be delayed for a number of months before they are known to the family or friends.

If they are delayed for at least six months then they are categorized as, “delayed post-traumatic stress disorder or delayed stress response” (Brown 372). Nevertheless, whether delayed or immediately recognized, this disorder can severely effect the veterans experience adjusting back to the life of a civilian. Delayed stress response can be displayed through intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, sleep disturbances, vivid nightmares, alienation and isolation from persons and social experiences and finally, depression (Brown 372). PTSD does not solely extend to the veteran himself.

Charles C. Hendrix and Lisa M. Anelli write that, “ The effects of PTSD also extend to the family members of affected veterans”(Hendrix / Anelli 87). They go on to say that, “ For many families of U. S. military veterans, Vietnam was, and continues to be, a traumatic experience (Hendrix / Anelli 87). This tells us that the effects of the war on the veteran can make it very difficult to integrate back into a normal lifestyle. They continue with some consequences that the family may suffer because they are living with someone who suffers from PTSD.

They include, “... emotional emptiness (from the veteran’s learned numbing response to stress), loss of the father or husband from stage specific tasks and routines of family life (often due to the veteran’s withdrawal or fear of getting close), and the emergence of family patterns, such as distance or violence (from the Vietnam experience where violence was necessary for survival)... ” (Hendrix / Anelli 87). These experiences make it very difficult for either the veteran or the family to resume where they left off.

These symptoms and behavior patterns can cause a significant rift within the family. Many of the returning veterans may not struggle with every symptom of PTSD or delayed PTSD, but many may struggle with multiple symptoms.

Jenkins 3 Secondly, because returning veterans have experienced the horrors of war, they are left changed forever. The effects of war on returning veterans minds has psychologically altered their perception of normal experiences; compared to that of an individual who has not experienced combat.

As the reader of, "The Red Convertible", we are not given a glimpse into what Henry experienced in the jungles of Vietnam and Southeast Asia. But, if we take a look back into history and review the poem, "Dulce et Decorum Est", by Wilfred Owen we may be able, for a moment, to try and envision the horrors of war. Within his poem he describes some of the struggles of war. He states, "Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots But limped on, blood shod. All went lame; all blind; Drunk with fatigue"(709). He describes the overwhelming exhaustion that war takes on the human body.

The body continues to fight on and survive. He continues with, "Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! -An ecstasy of fumbling, Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time"(709). This description allows us to realize that even when the body was at complete exhaustion, as described earlier, the men stay vigilant at all times in order to stay alive. At any moment death could be at their doorstep and they must be ready to combat it. Not all men were able to react as quickly as need be in wartime, as described by, "As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight, He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning. "(709). He is unable to do anything for his dying brother, friend and fellow soldier. This is the most important glimpse into what soldiers face in the field of battle that stays with them for the rest of their lives. At points within the war, many were faced with the realization that somebody very close was dying right in front of them and there was nothing they could do to assist them. This poem can serve as the missing link for the reader to, attempt, to imagine what veryday life could be like during wartime for Henry.

Even though this could be used as a link it still does not completely bridge the gap between non-combatants and combatants. Also, a major psychological problem that faced the men fighting during Vietnam was the change in warfare style. That is the way in which the war was fought. In Owen's poem, the war is fought in a more conventional manner during the period of World War One. Conventional meaning, you can usually see where the enemy is or where they are coming from.

This was the so called " standard" of warfare in the western world. Brown addresses this problem in her article by stating that, " Although it is questionable if even conventional warfare is tolerable stress, the unpredictable nature of guerrilla warfare, which challenged the soldiers' ideologies or fight and wrong, posed an especially constant and life-threatening stress"(Brown 373). She goes on to say that, " Enemy combatants often fought without uniforms and frequently included women and children"(Brown 373).

This complete change in warfare style coupled with the everyday horrors of war affected the veterans in a different and more complex way than had ever been seen. These experiences are what lead the combatant to develop PTSD and help us to visualize and attempt to imagine, if we dare, what Henry experienced during Vietnam. Finally, we will now be able to see that Henry was suffering from PTSD upon returning home from the Vietnam war. The very first instance that we see of Henry returning differently than the way he left is when his brother Lyman tells us so.

He says, " When he came home, though, Henry was very different, and I'll say this: the change was not good"(438). One may assume that the return of a family member from war would bring about change; but preferably, the change would have been better than described by Lyman. Next, Lyman tells us that Henry was "... quiet, so quiet, and never comfortable sitting still anywhere but always up and moving around"(438). Also, Lyman says that "... you couldn't get him to laugh"(438) and that, " It was a fact : Henry was jumpy and mean"(438).

All three of the described instances fall directly in line with the previously stated symptoms of PTSD, that include violence, anxiety and difficulty connecting to others. These actions by Henry, told to us by Lyman, allows us to realize that they are living with a veteran who is suffering from PTSD. The reader can now see that Henry is in pain. Not necessarily physical pain but emotional and psychological pain. He is not able to readjust to his previous life. It gradually gets worse and the symptoms continue and become much more apparent.

When Lyman and Henry are watching television, Lyman notices that Henry had bitten through his lip and blood was running down his chin (439). In response to this bizarre action Lyman goes to turn off the television but Henry rushed over to him and shoved him out of the way, against the wall(439). Lyman was attempting to refocus Henry by turning off the television so that he realized what was going on around him. Henry wanted none of it though. His sharp reaction with force by throwing Lyman against the wall displays an uncontrolled outburst of anger, synonymous with PTSD.

Following this incident they sit down at the dinner table to eat and Henry still has blood coming off of his chin. It is now mixing with his food but continues to eat unaware of what he is doing(439). Nobody in the family says anything, but now they all realize what is going on. This instance is where the mother and Lyman both know that something is wrong with Henry. This is an example of how PTSD can affect an entire household. Neither one knows what to do, but both are forced to just let it go and live with it.

It is a difficult task for all members involved. After restoring the red convertible it seemed that Henry could be changing and gradually getting better. Lyman tells us that, " It was easier for him to do the things the rest of us did. He ate more slowly and didn't jump up and down during the meal to get this or that or look out the window"(440) We can see that, maybe, Henry is improving and now is slowly re-integrating himself back into normal civilian life. This thought comes crashing to a halt by the end of the story.

While at the river relaxing, Henry goes into the water to cool off. The current is taking him out further away from the bank but he does seem to care. Then

casually he says, " My boots are filling"(440). The manner in which this is said allows us to see that Henry is ready to go. He lets the river take him down and drowns himself. Ultimately he has been consumed by post-traumatic stress disorder. He was not able to complete the transition from war back to civilian lifestyle.

He has not necessarily taken his own life, but rather, has allowed himself to die without any struggle. Ultimately, the experiences and horrors that veterans are exposed to during times of war have a lasting effect on them for the rest of their lives. Henry was able to physically survive the Vietnam War, but was unable to leave those experiences in Vietnam. In essence, he was taken out of the war, but the war was not taken out of him. The lasting effects and symptoms of PTSD on the veteran and his family can forever change the scope of their relationship.