

How de bernires explores the cruelty of war essay sample

War



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Arguably the main theme of “ Captain Corelli’s mandolin” is that of foreign occupation through war and its dehumanising effects on the characters of the novel. De Bernires explores the psychological and emotional development of characters as they are exposed to the extremities of war and how this affects not only their relationships, but their personality as a whole. Mandras, it can be suggested, is most adversely affected by the war, although we do not realise how severely until his violent attack on Pelagia and his resultant suicide.

At the beginning of the novel, Mandras appears to be a well-adjusted individual, although upon his acquaintance with Dr. Iannis (Pelagia’s father), he begins to form somewhat of a complex over his education. Pelagia is one of the most highly educated women on the island as her father, the doctor has passed on all his knowledge to her; Mandras has not had this luxury. He has been brought up in a single parent family and his mother, like most of the islanders, is uneducated and as such is unable to teach her son even the basics of reading and writing, we are made aware of this fact when he does not reply to Pelagia’s letters “ Mandras looked up wearily, and said, as though it were he that pitied her ‘ I can’t write’.” He is rightly aware that Pelagia will be surprised at his illiteracy, and has hidden it from her for all this time because of this fear.

Mandras is aware that he is socially inferior to Pelagia, Dr. Iannis disapproves of the match because of this “ he isn’t your equal, and he would expect to be better than his wife.” In the novel Dr Iannis is portrayed as the head of the community, he observes the island, settles disputes and gives advice to the

inhabitants. He is aware of public feeling on the social order, especially on how people should marry. This is very much an odd conundrum, because although he is alerting Pelagia to societies expectation, he is not conforming to it as he refuses to provide a dowry; although he feels that this is an outdated belief, in saying this to Pelagia he is contradicting himself.

Dr. Iannis ironically comments, " I have often thought that you would only be able to marry happily with a foreigner, a dentist from Norway or something." He seems to be unhappy in any of Pelagia's choice of a husband, in this way he portrays the stereotypical father, of which the belief is that no man is good enough for his little girl. He disapproves of Mandras because he is uneducated, Captain Corelli however is Handsome, brave and thoughtful, he also fulfils the doctors set criteria of being foreign. The only reason that Dr. Iannis seems able to give at the beginning of the novel against his relationship with his daughter is the fact that he is fighting for a fascist country.

At the beginning of her acquaintance with the Captain, Pelagia fights her attraction for him, much of this opposition of which has been encouraged by her father. The two steadily grow closer however, and they begin a strictly celibate relationship. Pelagia and Corelli are the epitome on love overcoming the boundaries of racial hatred and social opposition. Both are aware that there relationship during the time of the war would not be looked kindly upon by either side, both would be branded traitors, and Pelagia possibly could be seen as an Italian spy; compared to this her relationship with Mandras would be much more acceptable.

Perhaps the most touching plutonic relationship in the novel is that between Carlo Guercio and Captain Corelli. Carlo has previously lost the one person he loved, Francesco, in the war, and idealises Corelli as a perfect man. He looks up to Corelli and loves him, although he is aware that this love will never be returned due to the captain's relationship with Pelagia. He is the main character who urges this relationship to develop and flourish under the harsh conditions of war, he comforts both characters at their times of need and is the ultimate human embodiment of goodness and kindness.

Although he has not the courage to confess his true sexual orientation until he dies, he is brave enough to sacrifice his own life for that of his friend.

Carlo, whether out of love for Corelli or through the feeling that his life was worth less than Corelli's performs this act which is the pinnacle of love for his friend " Corelli lay beneath him....stupefied by an act of love so incomprehensible and ineffable". De Bernires writes " Captain Corelli's mandolin" in such a way as to inspire readers to look for the good in people, and to make us aware that we should not judge people by face value. The novel also presents us with the realisation that we ourselves have the power to choose between right and wrong; Carlo displays the good that can be accomplished by humanity while Mandras displays all that is corrupt and dishonourable. To say that Mandras' downfall is all his own doing would be wrong; there are many factors that contribute to his fall from grace.

Mandras enlists in the Greek army in hopes that he can earn the respect of the community but more importantly to increase Pelagia's love for him " that's Mandras who fought in the war. We owe everything to people like

him.' And not to Pelagia and not to her father". Mandras is representative of a generation of young men who wished to prove themselves in by taking part in the war in order to have a more respected position in society. Those like Mandras who were uneducated, would have realised that there was little other way of furthering their social status then voluntarily serving in the war.

It is this bitterness about education that makes him a prime target for the communist party. Mandras is young and foolish and is not aware of quite what he is becoming. Mandras returns from war scarred and driven near mad by the reality of war, as he was not fully mature enough to realise the full gravitation of his decisions. Although this experience leaves him more aware of his own mortality and also the cruelty of others, it does little to enhance his understandings of the workings of the real world, these are reveal to him during his time with the EAS, a communist group. Hector, the head of the movement uses Mandras' lust for knowledge to bind him to the group, and instruct him in the ways of the group. Mandras begins his downward spiral into corruption and unhappiness at this point. He watches and begins to join in on beating, murdering and raping his own people. In depicting this, De Bernires shows the pettiness of the political world, a lesson that is still relevant today; political parties like that of the communist party would rather fight in there own fractions then pull together and fight the enemy, in essence they are joining the enemy in persecuting their own people.

Mandras as De Bernires highlights is merely " a statistic, one more life warped and ruined by a war". Although the author encourages the belief that we are all responsible for our own actions, he also promotes her the fact that

we are only alive for a short time, and at the end of the day we are all just one single person, we have not the ability to change the world by ourselves, yet we do have the aptitude to influence the lives around us, whether for the better or for the worse.

The book also deals with the theme of occupation, and its effect on relationships between the characters. Several relationships in the book are tested by the war, notably those between Pelagia and Mandras, Pelagia and her father and Pelagia and Drosoula.

During the early stages of her relationship with Mandras, we hear very little of Drosoula, Mandras' mother. We are told only that she is extremely unattractive and rotund. It is indeed this resemblance to Mandras later in the novel that Pelagia owes her recognition of him " he looked very like Drosoula did before the war". De Bernires uses this change in physical appearance to mirror Mandras' corrupt life " three years of living in idleness upon the bounty of the British and the booty stolen from peasants had turned the fisherman into nothing if not a toad". We can however assume that the relationship between mother and son was strong however, as Mandras is her only child, he shows worry about her to Pelagia when leaving for war " I could not bear to hear her weeping". While he is on the front De Bernires often writes about the growing relationship between Pelagia and Drosoula, it begins by the fact that they both have one thing in common; their love for Mandras. While he is away they draw closer together by whispering words of comfort to each other and there relationship becomes stronger and stronger,

so much so that after Mandras' attempted rape of Pelagia, she disowns him as a son " I disown you.

I do not know you, you will not come back, never in my life do I want to see you." Drosoula is disgusted b her own son so much that any maternal feelings she had for him have been transferred to Pelagia " Mother and son stared at each other in disbelief. So much had changed". At the end of this scene De Bernires does encourage the reader to feel some sympathy towards Mandras as he makes us aware that Mandras has been lacking a father figure, in this place he has put Hector. We are left to wonder whether if it had not been for the war, Mandras may have turned out differently.

There is no question however that the relationship between him and Pelagia would have been unsuitable as De Bernires stresses that there must be more to a relationship than physical desire. Dr. Iannis comments " love itself is what is left over when being in love has burned away...imagine giving up your home and your people only to discover after six months...that the trees have no roots and have fallen over."

He uses the roots of trees as an analogy for love explaining that if the roots of two trees (people) are entwined after the leaves have fallen from the tree (the process of being in love has finished) then the love will last, however, if the roots have not grown together, then the relationship will simply collapse. This is perhaps the most powerful and thought provoking advice that De Bernires provides in the novel. It provides the reader with not only a direct comparison to relationships in their own lives, but also shows why the relationship between Pelagia lasts with Corelli and not with Mandras. We can

relate “ we had roots that grew towards each other underground, and when the pretty blossom had fallen from our branches we found that we were one tree and not two” to the relationship between Pelagia and Corelli; even through out the trying times in the war, the years spent apart, their love still lasts. The relationship between Pelagia and Mandras however is best summed up “ but sometimes the petals fall away and the roots have not entwined...the trees have no roots and have fallen over.”

We are aware earlier on in the book that the relationship between Pelagia and Mandras is somewhat superficial, both are fixated only on physical attraction, we can see this in Pelagia as she watches Mandras swimming with the dolphins “ she was transfixed by his beauty”, Mandras is the same, and often reflects on her beauty and the smell of Rosemary in her hair, this love is soon swept aside after the war when he sees visually what effect the malnourishment has had on her and is “ confused and appalled”. Pelagia feels much the same way “ she...looked at those gross and transfigured features and felt a pang of horror”. On closer inspection of the symbolism used by De Bernires to show the dissolution of her feelings for Mandras and the build up for those of Corelli we notice a more well hidden analogy; that of the crochet bedspread she is making for her wedding to Mandras.

She begins this before the war, but as Mandras is away on the front, it gets smaller and smaller “ Pelagia realised that she was tired of crochet”, we can link this to the slow diminish of her feelings for him. Her feelings for Corelli are strong, even when he is forced to leave the island “ putting the finishing touches to the blanket that she had crochet for her wedding...which had

burgeoned flawlessly from the day of Antonio's departure". The difference between the attitudes of these two suitors can also be examined on how they react to Pelagia's embroidered waistcoat. Pelagia makes the waistcoat as a gift for Mandras, but Mandras rebukes her as he feels it is not symmetrical, Corelli on the other hand, asks to purchase the waistcoat from her, and when she informs him of Mandras' opinion, he replies that it is in not being symmetrical that things are beautiful, he uses the human face as an example " it is these things that make you beautiful.... otherwise you would be a statue".

The main theme of ' Captain Corelli's mandolin' is that of the effects of occupation on the inhabitants of the island. De Bernires explores how human emotions are affected by human intolerance and cruelty and the effect this has on them. The relationships between the main characters are irrevocably altered and, in some cases, wiped out completely. De Bernires uses Dr. Iannis to impart his wisdom to the islanders, often holding them together in difficult times. He explores the effects on people on each other and the evil as well as the good that humanity can inflict.