

Johnny got his gun: mortality



“ If the thing they were fighting for was important enough to die for then it was also important enough for them to be thinking about it in the last minutes of their lives. That stood to reason. Life is awfully important so if you’ve given it away you’d ought to think with all your mind in the last moments of your life about the thing you traded it for. So did all those kids die thinking of democracy and freedom and liberty and honor and the safety of the home and the stars and stripes forever? — You’re goddamn right they didn’t. — They died crying in their minds like little babies. They forgot the thing they were fighting for the things they were dying for. They thought about things a man can understand. They died yearning for the face of a friend. They died whimpering for the voice of a mother a father a wife a child. They died with their hearts sick for one more look at the place where they were born please god just one more look. They died moaning and sighing for life. They knew what was important. They knew that life was everything and they died with screams and sobs. They died with only one thought in their minds and that was I want to live I want to live I want to live. — He ought to know. He was the nearest thing to a dead man on earth.” — Dalton Trumbo, Johnny Got His Gun

Johnny Got His Gun is a harrowing narration of a man, Joe, who is held captive by the useless shell of his body. Within the first beginning chapters, the reader discovers that the story’s protagonist, a WWI soldier, has had all four limbs amputated after being hit by an artillery shell. Along with his limbs, his face is gone, and with it use of his eyes and ears, and is left with no way to communicate. His entire world is confined to a hospital room in an unknown country, where he is maintained. He receives nutrition through a

feeding tube. His bedding is changed. Nurses enter and leave his room. Through this, though silenced, blind, deaf, and immobile, Joe is conscious. He is a human paradox, both alive and dead. The book shifts between Joe's memories, sentiments, and the present, reflecting the twisted thought processes of the human mind.

Joe's situation is vital to the very core of the novel. Not only does it bring a unique perspective; it also gives him the ultimate authority to present his anti-war polemic. We assume as readers that his cognizance is why he can narrate to us, as if we'd lose that if he were dead. Many of his conclusions are based solely on his experiences predating or during the war, and in that sense, his consciousness is unnecessary. However, not having the option of death gives Joe's revealed thoughts a grim honesty. The hopelessness he feels is obvious in much of the book, especially concentrated in *The Book of the Living*. In it, Joe's relationship with Death is contradictory, desiring both death and life. As a dead man with a working mind, he frequently sees being dead (in a medical sense) as a much more attractive, impossible alternative to his present state, while also finding solace in his memories. After his attempts at communication fail, his attempt to live (through exhibiting his body to send a message) is rendered impossible as well. Trumbo successfully illustrates Joe's position as a living hell: he struggles to distinguish reality from nightmare and gradually realizes his hopeless fate.

Joe sees the power of death and physical trauma as equals, responsible for leveling the worth of person in war, reducing veterans to their injuries. He dismisses the driving themes behind war, removing the glory behind words of honor and sacrifice to one's country. Regardless of their national identity,

those who fight in war are products of the horrors they experienced, not the nationalistic themes that put them there in the first place. Joe's character captures this perfectly, and can generalize the war to all those who fought and the lasting effects by the thoughts he presents rather than by replaying battle scenes in his head.

The last two chapters of *Johnny Got His Gun* start with Joe's communication breakthrough, continue with new levels of understanding of his condition, and conclude with a direct message to society. Joe desperately wants to live in the only probable sense: by feeling air outside the hospital and being in the presence of people. He knows this is impossible and eliminates it as an option: "The government would say he is nuts who ever heard of a guy without arms legs eyes ears nose mouth getting any fun out of being around people he can't see or hear or talk to? The government would say the whole thing is a crazy idea and the hell with it he's better off where he is and besides it costs too much dough." He offers to make a profit by selling himself as an exhibit in order to show an embodiment of war. This situation, though equally impossible, would be better for Joe—or rather, better for the effect he would have. They cannot let him out; they need people to enlist. Joe is resigned himself to coding "Kill me, SOS" over and over again after his requests are ignored. The conclusions made at the end of the novel send a message that the distinction between "them" and "us" is a socioeconomic one. "It will be you—you who urge us on to battle you who incite us against ourselves you who would have one cobbler kill another cobbler you who would have one man who works kill another man who works you who would have one human being who wants only to live kill another human being who

wants only to live." Joe concludes by urging the working class to rise against the upper class.