

Sterling's rift: perception in the yellow birds



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In his novel *The Yellow Birds*, Kevin Powers takes the reader into the mind of a soldier. This work evokes not only the physical duress of fatigue and fighting, but also the emotional stress and the long-lasting trauma that remains with a soldier even after he's come home from the war. Powers teaches the reader about the struggles when a young soldier leaves his home, and his family, to serve his country, through the many different types of characters he introduces the reader to throughout the novel. For some of those characters, the life of a soldier is a source of disconnect and even downfall.

Among the central themes in *The Yellow Birds* is the sensation of exile. The circumstances in this form of exile would be the war and the need for soldiers, and the young boys in this novel enlist themselves for the good of their country. Exile is "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (Said). Soldiers who are separated from their families, and especially for the younger ones it leaves them with traumatic experiences that no one else can relate to, forcing these young men and women to distance themselves from society. Most notably in this novel, Sergeant Sterling forms a rift, not necessarily from his home, but within himself. Powers teaches us that this separation formed from the exile Sergeant Sterling experiences amounts to the overbearing sadness he experiences when trying to repair this unamendable rift.

Sergeant Sterling is first introduced to the reader when Powers describes Bartle's platoon patrolling on top of a roof for many hours on end. Sterling is in position with rifle in hand and, to stay awake, he puts Tabasco sauce into

his eyes, as he smiles at Bartle. This simple gesture shows the unnerving desensitization of Sterling. He wants to appear to the rest of his platoon as stronger and a better soldier than the rest of them, and his mental stability is affected because of this. He distances his conscience from the fighting and uses this to motivate the rest of the young men to do the same. His hard attitude affects how the other men feel while fighting. Bartle describes the way he yells during a shooting and how it puts him into the focus of killing and makes him forget what he is actually doing because his adrenaline takes over control. Bartle says, " I hated him, I hated the way he excelled in death and brutality and domination. But more than that, I hated the way he was necessary, how I needed him to jar me into action even when they were trying to kill me, how I felt like a coward until he screamed into my ear, ' Shoot these hajji fucks!' I hated the way I loved him when I inched up out of the terror and returned fire, seeing him shooting too, smiling the whole time, screaming, the whole rage and hate of these few acres, alive and spreading in and through him" Sterling's exile from his conscience creates an emotional rift helps him excel as a soldier, but it soon becomes evident that this particular skill, to be unaffected by this trauma, is not useful in any other application of life and can cause a certain distance between others in society when Sterling returns to normal civilization.

Sterling's ability to blindly follow orders gives him an advantage over the other soldiers during the war, but he also has no regard of the outcome of his actions affecting other people around him. He is so separated from his morals while fighting that in non-war situation it becomes hard for him to realize the difference between right and wrong. This is most evident when

the platoon is awaiting a flight back to the US in Germany and they have a night out at a popular bar. Sterling is approaching the bargirl after he had come stumbling down the stairs. “ He squeezed her elbow, forcing her arm straight. ‘ Get back over there.’ She was crying softly to herself now and the red marks along her cheeks looked like a sad painted-on clown smile and her mascara ran in black streaks below her eyes. He sat down next to me and slapped me on the back and grabbed me by the scruff of the neck. ‘ Living the fucking dream, Private,’ he bellowed,” They way that Bartle describes Sterling harsh actions towards a bargirl that he has never met before, is astonishing. And as Sterling sits down to join him for a drink, he brushes it off as if nothing happened. It is taken into account that Sterling is intoxicated and under stress, but this is no excuse for the way he treats a stranger, especially a young woman.

Sterling is so used to the extreme violence that fighting just seems normal to him, and he doesn't recognize what effect his actions have on other people. The army finds this quality of exile to be enriching when involved in the career of a soldier, but there is little that a soldier can do, once he must enter society again, with those skills that the military presses into them. This unique form of exile that a soldier experiences is different from most because the re-adjustment into society proceeds much quicker than say, a citizen who is exiled from their country for treason. It is different because when the soldiers from the wars come back, they are celebrated. They are not treated as exiles; they are treated as heroes.

Many people look up to soldiers as a figure of bravery to aspire to be. This is hard for soldiers such as those depicted in *The Yellow Birds*, because in their

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own consciences they realize how morally wrong a lot of the actions they took to protect our country were, and when they are celebrated for those actions it makes it hard for them to repent in their own minds and repair the rift they have created in order to survive. Sergeant Sterling's detachment from reality is helpful in his career as a soldier, but as the reader sees when the novel develops, it ultimately leads to his unfortunate death. By showing the reader his emotional disconnect, his willingness to follow orders blindly, and his desensitization towards death, Powers illuminates the havoc that ensues when a soldier is distanced from his past self.

Works Cited

Powers, Kevin. *The Yellow Birds*. New York: Little Brown and Company, 2012.

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