

Johnny got his gun

Literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The distinction between an antiwar novel and a pacifist novel is that an antiwar novel is opposed to any and all war, while a pacifist novel proposes a belief that disputes between nations should and can, be settled peacefully. Trumbo clearly establishes *Johnny Got His Gun* as an antiwar novel rather than a pacifist novel. He does this by illustrating the atrocities caused by war and how war only exists as a prerequisite for senseless and grotesque injury and pain.

Trumbo addresses his focus not only on combat warfare but the illegitimacy of the mentality of warfare, and the organization of modern warfare by the upper, elite classes as well. Through the character of Joe, Trumbo metaphorically captures both the physical injuries and the psychological trauma of all the men and women who risk their lives during warfare, and how this will plague them for the rest of their lives. That is only if they are lucky enough to still have their lives after senselessly risking it.

With Joe's firm belief that war and its unfathomable goals have nothing to do with him, or people like him, comes his understanding that people such as himself have nothing to gain by fighting in a war that others have started.. " It was a kind of duty you owed yourself that when anybody said come on son do this or do that you should stand up and say look mister why should I do this for who am I doing it and what am I going to get out of it in the end? But when a guy comes along and says here come with me and risk your life and maybe die or be crippled why then you've got no rights.

You haven't even the right to say yes or no or I'll think it over. There are plenty of laws to protect guy's money even in war time but there's nothing

on the books says a man's life's his own" (110). Joe understands that most men and women go to war for idealist hopes, but he is skeptical about the worth of these abstract ideals. He understands that abstract words like "democracy", "honor", and "freedom" can be interpreted in many ways and mean many things to many people.

The sad thing is, is that it works. They get away with it time and time again. "They were always fighting for something the bastards and if anyone dared say the hell with fighting it's all the same each war is like the other and nobody gets any good out of it why they hollered coward. If they weren't fighting for liberty they were fighting for independence or democracy or freedom or decency or honor or their native land or something else that didn't mean anything...

Give us a bill of sale drawn up plainly so we know in advance what we're getting killed for and give us also a first mortgage on something as security so we can be sure after we've won your war that we've got the same kind of freedom we bargained for" (112). If the words cannot be trusted to mean something - if these ideals cannot be truly promised - then it is not remotely worth risking one's life for. When approached with rhetorical words of encouragement to participate in the war, one must be wise enough to see through the empty promises.

Joe becomes somewhat of an antiwar prophet and teaches us through his experience to have the confidence and dignity to not give in. Not to agree with the warped concept of accepting death as a reward of providing democracy and freedom for others. Because Joe is closer than anyone living

to death, he has the presence to talk about death first hand and to make young, unassuming men and women stop and think about what they are really getting themselves into. It is imperative for them to reflect on the reality of the amount of men and women who have lost their lives due to war.

And all the guys who died all the five million or seven million or ten million who went out and died to make the world safe for democracy to make the world safe for words without meaning how did they feel as they watched their blood pump out into the mud?... 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... 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 goddam right they didn't" (116-117). Additionally, Joe, with his unique position of being on the brink of life and death, can affirm to the fact that dying men think only of their families, friends, and, most important, their wish to be alive - not about abstract ideals. Joe conveys a message of realism. Joe is there to say that the pain, injury, and deaths of war are not made more honorable by an abstract cause. They are still horrific and to be avoided at all costs. " There's nothing noble about dying.

Not even if you die for honor... Don't let them kid you any more. Pay no attention when they tap you on the shoulder and say come along we've got to fight for liberty or whatever their word is there's always a word. Just say mister I'm sorry I got no time to die I'm busy and then turn and run like hell.

If they say coward why don't pay any attention because it's your job to live not to die. If they talk about dying for principles that are bigger than life you say mister you're a liar... What's noble about having your legs and arms blown off?

What's noble about being an idiot? What's noble about being blind deaf and dumb. What's noble about being dead?... You're dead mister and you died for nothing" (118-119). Joe's bitterness about the circumstances of his participation in the war is clearly apparent throughout the novel. His fundamental sense of betrayal is clearly expressed in his anger over the lack of protection provided by the very people who brainwashed Joe and the millions of unsuspecting others to fight for the cause of democracy in the first place.

The extent of both the anger and fear that Joe experiences during his service becomes comprehensible when we see that his first reaction to realizing his deafness is relief - relief that he will never have to hear the sounds of warfare again. It is Trumbo's prerogative through the character of Joe to lead by example and to relay the messages of think before you act, do the ends justify the means, and know clearly what you perceive to be worth dying for.