

# Damaging impacts: the importance of internal conflicts in "war"



It is a widespread belief that war brings peace through destruction, however, in certain circumstances, the destruction is so great that no amount of peace can reconcile the lives and emotion lost. In the short story “ War”, Timothy Findley writes about Neil, an innocent, coming-of-age boy who is enjoying his summer when suddenly he is stricken by the news of his father is going to war. This unexpected truth takes him by surprise and he falls into a state of shock. Ultimately, this leads to many complications that arise within the story. Although Neil is depicted as a naïve child who has experienced very little about the world, his feelings of envy, unworthiness and distrust cause him to take unexpected actions that reveal the alarming impacts of war upon an individual and their family. Despite war being an external affair between conflicting countries, Neil’s actions highlight the internal conflict within families.

Firstly, the war overseas causes Neil’s father to leave their family unexpectedly causing them to become distant from each other. Secondly, the emptiness of separation has a detrimental effect on a child’s psychological and emotional well-being. Finally, the raging war spreads fear within the heart of Neil’s character as he is afraid of what is to come in the near future regarding himself as well as his father. When analyzing the short story “ War” by Timothy Findley, it can be determined that war has many negative effects on the characters within the story. This ultimately leads to changing the lives of many characters within the story and exceeds at highlighting the many complications that characters must face because of the war. To begin with, the war causes families to separate and become distant. When Neil finds out that his father is going to war, he feels a sense

of betrayal causing their father and son bond to be tainted. Neil feels as though he has been betrayed by his own father because “[his father] [does not] even [tell him]. He [does not] even write it in his letter that [he] sent [Neil] at Arthur Robertson’s. But he told Bud—he told Bud” (4). This makes him feel as though “[he] just [can not] forgive him” (4). When Neil first finds out that his father is going to war, he is initially in disbelief but once he realizes that his father decides to hide the truth from him, the disbelief develops into emotions of anger and pain. Neil disagrees with his father’s actions and this causes him to think that he cannot trust his own father anymore. Also, feelings of jealousy and envy towards Bud arise because Bud knows that their father is going to war long before Neil does. Even when Neil’s father comes to meet him at the barn, he shows up wearing an old blazer and some grey pants. This makes Neil think that his father is still trying to hide the truth from him so when his father comes to meet him, he runs away instead of confronting him. All the negative feelings developing in Neil’s mind are released in the form of anger when his father comes to look for him. Due to the fact that Neil is only a child, he is not able to understand why his father chooses to hide his decision from him and this causes Neil to act impulsively.

Furthermore, war not only affects Neil, but it also affects his father because his father must leave his family and go fight for his country. As a father, the most disheartening thing about having to go fight a war is that he will not be able to watch his children grow up. Neil realizes this when he remembers that “[His father] had promised to show [him] how to skate. [He] had it all planned how [he would] really surprise [his] dad and turn out to be a skating

champion and everything, and now he [could not] even be there to see [it]. All because he had to go and sit in some trench” (4). The fact that his father must leave has a significant impact on him as well because he remembers all the promises that his father made him and now he would not be able to fulfill them. To any child, the thought of growing up without a father seems dreadful but for Neil, the war is stealing his father away from him. Moreover, a war can have a significant impact on a child’s emotional and psychological health. Children whose parents are going to war tend to restrict their emotional expression. Eventually, this self-restriction causes the build-up of feelings within the individual leading to an explosive release of them. Neil’s inability to express his own emotions causes him to think that “...that maybe if [he stays] hidden for too long enough, then [his father will not] join the army... Maybe it would be because [his father would] stay looking for [him]” (4). Due to his lack of emotional expression, Neil chooses to run away and hide in a barn instead of confronting his father and communicating with him about his problems. Contrary to his opinion that if he runs away things will get better, things in fact only seem to get worse. His night in the barn causes further damaging on Neil’s emotional well-being as he starts to have thoughts of loneliness. The negative consequences of his choice make him feel as though no one will understand what he is going through and instead of supporting him, they will criticize him. However, this is not the case but due to his lack of communication, his situation continues to worsen to the extent that he feels forced to lie to his family members about why he chooses to run away.

Along with feelings of loneliness, Neil also experiences thoughts that he is unwanted by his family. This has a great psychological impact on his mind as now he feels completely alone and unwanted. When Neil is hiding in the barn he sees “ Mrs. Currie holding onto Bud with one hand and Teddy Hartley with the other.” He thinks that “ If [he] was down there, how could she hold onto [him] if she’s only got two hands and Bud and Teddy Hartley to look after?” And [right then he] thinks [that Ms. Currie] must be pretty glad [he is not] around” (5). This puts Neil in an uncomfortable situation within his own mind as he starts to question the integrity of his relationship with his family. This leads up to him believing that he is unwanted by his family. Also, the psychological impact is not restricted to just family matters as his way of thinking and childhood get corrupted as well. When Neil is first informed about his father’s choice to go to war, he starts imagining images of war and death. As only a 10-year-old, Neil should not be exposed to such inappropriate ideas, however, due to the war, Neil is constantly thinking about it. In the story, it is evident that Neil despises the war because it leads to the separation of him and his father, however, when his father comes looking for him, he begins to throw rocks and golfs balls at him in rage. Neil’s irrational actions are symbolic of the war overseas, and he ends up creating a war-like situation between him and his father. Although, instead of getting mad and being aggressive in return, Neil’s father maintains his calmness showing that he understands Neil’s feelings and is willing to restore their bond. However, seeing his father’s attitude towards the situation only amplifies his feelings of anger and betrayal and instead of retreating, he continues to harm his father to the extent which his father falls to the ground in pain. This ultimately shows how much of a psychological impact the war

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has on him. Due to it, he is forced to conceal his true emotions and express them in a form of violence in which his father gets hurt.

Finally, the ongoing war causes a terrifying spread of fear within Neil. Neil extremely fears for his father well-being and his near-future. When Neil first hears about his father's decision to the join the army, he is taken by surprise that "[his father] joined the army? Joined the army! Our dad?" Once he is able to process the information, the fear establishes as Neil remembers his father's past life as "...a salesman. [As a salesman] They would let [his dad] sit and sell things over any old phone... [however, Neil knows] that in the army they [would not] let [his father] sit and sell things. ... [because] in the army [one] always [goes] in a trench and [gets] hurt or killed" (3). Learning that his father is going off to war, he fears for his father's life and cannot accept the fact that he may never come back home. This, in turn, disables Neil from forgiving his father for the fear that his father causes him.

Furthermore, Neil is only a child, one would not expect him to be so familiar with concepts such as war and death, however, the war forces him to learn about such things at an early age. Neil fears for his father so much that he is reminded of his Uncle Frank who died in the previous war and fears the same for his father. Even though his uncle comes back from the war alive, Neil is forced to see him pass away right before his eyes due to wounds that he has experienced in the war. As a negative impact of war, Neil is unable to stop thinking whether or not his father will ever come back from the war and all that his father is sacrificing in order to go to fight in the war. Although, Neil does not only fear for his father, as fear for himself and his own future strikes his heart. Neil realizes that it would be "...really ...bad because [he] suddenly

remembers that [his father] had promised to teach [him] how to skate that year. He was going to make a rink too; in the backyard. But if he had to go off to some old trench in France, then [he would] be too far away" (4). Once Neil realizes that his father is not going to be able to see him growing up, he falls into a state of depression in which all he can think about is all the promises that his father made to him, and now due to the war, he will not be able to fulfill them. This causes him to fear for his future as he starts to ponder about how his life is going to change with his father not being part of his family anymore. Neil expresses his fear which seems to be about insignificant problems, however, due to the fact that Neil is only 10 years old, what seems to be insignificant means the world to him. Any child would fear a conflict in their family, and his father not being able to be with him spreads great terror in his heart. Although one would expect Neil's fear to slowly fade away, it never truly goes away. Being a child, Neil finds it difficult to express his fear in a confident way, and so in order to convey his feelings, his fear changes to anger, which ultimately causes him to act illogically.

Timothy Findley does an excellent job at representing the negative impacts of war upon families in his short story "War." He focuses on how families involved in the war are affected due to its violent and destructive nature. In his short story, he highlights the consequences that war has on Neil's character and his personal emotions. Timothy Findley writes his short story from a naïve 10-year-old boy's perspective whose character development throughout the story dictates the future complications that are to arise within the story. Neil is overwhelmed by his father's choice to join the army which leads to emotions of betrayal, distrust, and anger to surface within

Neil. Timothy Findley reveals the negative effects of war by examining the impact that the war has on Neil's family, his emotional and psychological well-being and the fear that the war spreads within Neil. All in all, Neil's decision making, and emotional narrative perfectly work together to emphasize the negative consequences of a war.

## **Works Cited**

Findley, Timothy. " War." Viewpoints 12, edited by Sarah Swartz, Pearson Education Canada, 2002, pp. 1-14.