

"the generals die in bed" by charles harrison essay sample

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Introduction

The novel "The generals die in Battle" was written by Charles Yale Harrison perhaps in 1926 although there seemed to have no exact date as to when the novel was written. James Doyle (2002), noted that excerpts from the *Generals Die in Bed* appeared in a literary left wing magazine, the *New Masses* in 1929, but the novel was first published in England in 1930 as powerful demonstration of how the ruling elite capitalist manipulated and oppressed the working class. The novel is very interesting as the author used his own war experience to dramatize the condition in which this poor working class was reduced to, in the words of the author, "a dead farmer."

The novel was full of actions, and it portrayed the miseries of those young men in the trenches amidst the bombardment from their formidable enemies sending each one of them crawling in their trenches cowering against their most dreaded enemy, death. The novel is also full of suspense that further reveals the authors intention in writing the novel. This suspense highlighted the dangers of death for each of the men whose lives were reduced to something of little value. In the author's demonstration of this, he noted the foolish birds "who come to look for food" in that highly deadly ground.

Those foolish birds find pleasure and happily explored the field even in the enemy camp without fear of worrying for their own safety. In contrast, the soldiers were restless, shaking in fear of the enemy, hungry, and dying at any moment and their life were difficult and lonely. Indeed the soldiers were facing not only the crises of war, that is, their miserable condition not as a direct result of war but as a result of the conditioning that soldiers are to risk

their lives for the war and they should accept that miseries and death are part of the soldiers' lives. This feelings are manifested in the following lines " It would be better it seems, to dash into no man's land and chance death" the author goes on to say that they " disciplined" and their months of training have stiffened or have conditioned them to carry on as it has been " drilled into our heads a thousand ways."

Thus the novel, despite of its realistic war experiences content, was also a novel that portrays the struggle of the proletariat or the working class against the exploitation and manipulation of the elite ruling class.

What Type of Social Divisions Did the Author see as Important, and which Divisions never Received Attention

The author's use of the novel to convey his views about the severity of the gap between two social classes dominating the society during this period was very striking as he had successfully established that while these mostly poor, sons of farmers and peasants soldiers were enduring the shelling of the enemy, their officers and their instructors are at the base " safe and comfortable.

The social division that the author sees it as important is the division of human misery on the part of the soldiers. With full of emotions, the author narrated " Endlessly in and out, different sectors, different names of trenches, different trenches, but always the same trenches, the same yellow, infested earth, the same screaming shells, the same lice and rats, fat and sleek with their corps-filled bellies, the same gleaming gimlet eyes, the same

lice which we carry with us with us wherever we go." The author uniquely had woven his political ideas into the pages of his narration of war experiences as if they were simply his experience. However, such narration above powerfully demonstrates how these young bunches of working class were thrown into inferno that war created. They were like animals whose lives were of little value as they were oriented time and time that death may come any time and it is one of their duties to avoid it. They were conditioned to face death, to accept the futility of war, to suppress their instincts and conduct in the manner according to the war's artificial sense of order. The soldiers become passive objects easily, being easily manipulated. Doyle, pointed out that the opening chapter of the of the novel,

" makes clear that the young working-class Canadians who enlist at the outbreak of war are incited by their own innocent courage and the enthusiasm of male camaraderie, by an artificially created militarism of marching bands of fire works displays and—as other critics of the war were to suggest, by the provocation of women" (Doyle, p. 87).

According to Doyle, this commitment to " automatic behavior is virtually independent of the soldiers' knowledge" (p 87), as they soon learn that behind the evils of war are the cynical motives and " manipulations of capitalism" (p. 87). This social division according to the novel never received any attention as Harrison keeps repeating such words as " it goes on and on and on..." Harrison further emphasized their neglected condition in the trenches through the following lines " We do not know what day it is, we have lost count, and it makes no difference whether it is a Sunday or a

Monday. It is merely another day—a day on which one may die." The author reflects his feelings of hopelessness as well as helplessness in their situation as though they were just awaiting their turn to die in the guns of the enemy. The author depicts that the situation of the soldiers' were at the mercy of their fate if they survived each day, as, aside from the shelling of German bombardment, were the snipers ready to pull the trigger at any moment they become exposed to the sniper's view.

Their extremely dreadful condition never received attention as they were conditioned to face death and endure the "mad fury" and the "maniacal hatred that pours down on our heads." The author also emphasized that aside from the dangers of death in the hands of the enemy, they were also restless due to the lice that robbed them of the opportunity to sleep for a while to recover their strength. This lice, which infected their trenches, depicts oppression that beyond their struggle for survival is the oppression and manipulation of the capitalist of the working classes of the society, this too, never received attention. Doyle noted, "While billeted in the town of Bethune, the narrator learns from a French man that the area is free from artillery damage because the local mines are owned by a German corporation" (p. 87) Doyle further noted that soldiers while out of the line on rest speculate among themselves about the financial side of the war but despite of their knowledge that some body is making profit out of the war, "the soldiers continue to do their duty, killing enemy soldiers and trying to avoid death themselves.

Briton Cooper (2003) pointed out that Harrison's novel "used the literary device of an anonymous narrator to demonstrate dehumanizing nature of war" (p. 14). According to him the novel dwelt upon the piece of combat and made it clear that "Canadian soldiers were often terrified in battle and regarded many of their officers with contempt..." These soldiers being trained to obey orders and to accept the realities of war as well as the dehumanizing condition in the trenches in exchange of salaries which they spent on wines and cognac during their off line duty in the trenches, salaries which they earned through their blood and through their dreadful duties in the trenches.

What types of conflict arose from these divisions, and how were these conflicts resolved?

The most obvious type of conflict that arose from this division was in their subordinate relations with their officers. The initial conflict came out of the rude attitude of the officers towards men who were struggling because of the inconvenience of their uniforms, which were unfit to most of them. Harrison pointed a scene during their march towards the train station that will bring them to the battlefield wherein a certain Fry was hurting his ankle because of the unfit boots. The following lines from the novel illustrated this regrettable treatment on Fry from Captain Clark, an Imperial Englishman who glories in his authority. Harrison puts it,

" Fry, who is suffering with his feet, keeps slipping into holes, and crawling out, all the way up. I can hear him coughing and panting behind me. I hear

him slither into a water-filled hole. I can't go any further, he wheezes. Let me lie here, I'll come on later... out Captain, Clark, pushes his way through the mess...So its you again he shouts " come on get up, cold feet eh?"

Harrison emphasized that the man was really struggling because of the cut on the man's heel but the captain ignore him and subjected him to insult and shame. Thus the soldiers were full of resentment against their officers who do not only scold them in their mistakes because of extreme inconveniences but also humiliated them. Harrison cited that many of the soldiers wished their officers dead. He noted that the soldiers realized that their enemies are " the lice, some of their officers, and death." Harrison pointed out that the soldiers " never refer to the Germans as our enemy." Cooper pointed out Canadian soldiers " regarded many of their officers with contempt, went on drunken rampages, and sometimes killed German prisoners" (p. 14).

Another conflict that was evident in this division was the main political issue that the author is demonstrating, the conflict of the economic status.

Harrison revealed this conflict in his particular reference to the identities of the men. He portrayed Captain Clark as an aristocratic class who looks down on the peasants by criticizing their way of life. He cited that the aristocratic Captain " does not make life too pleasant for them" He ordered that soldiers must " shave every day" despite of the biting cold water which made their faces blue for hours after ward. This is added burden to the weary soldiers but an obvious lifestyle of the aristocracy. Obviously, the Captain was not comfortable with lifestyle of his men that he required them to conduct themselves in a manner acceptable by his own standard.

Were these conflicts solved? How

It was quite obvious that none of these conflicts was solve just as the social division that the author was demonstrating, was never given attention. Indeed, it appeared that these conflicts had even gone worse as according to Cooper; soldiers even treated their officers with content and wished them dead. In fact, many of the soldiers who died have unsettled grievances. One reason for this problem perhaps was that this soldier was never even given attention. There seemed to have no attempt to look into the situation of the soldiers as lament their seemingly never-ending predicament in the trenches. Even their officers show little concern as they too perhaps felt that they neglected. That their life is of little value, that when they die in battle, they will just like dead animals too, just like the soldier found floating in the river by his comrade. What a sense less death for that unfortunate soldier indeed.

What message, if any, did the author intend for the reader?

The message that the author convey to the reader is that war was evil and very destructive expression of man's desire for power and it reduces life to its lowest forms as soldiers' life in the trenches were no better that fat sleek rat or the foolish sparrows seeking food in the barren land of battle field. According to Linda Cardinal and David John Headon (2002), Harrison's novel " used the literary device of an anonymous narrator, to demonstrate the dehumanizing nature of war" (p. 206), as he pointed out soldiers were terrified and demoralized amidst the thunderous bombing and the shelling of

the enemy. The impact of this among the soldiers according to Cooper is that it "prompted some soldiers to act in a shocking manner" (p. 14). The message was that behind the evils of war are the elite that control the society and those men were merely instruments to carry out its purpose. The message is that the lives of thousands of young people are being wasted in war that had no clear purpose, no clear principles, and no justifiable cause, a message that war is not an acceptable form of settling dispute between courtiers.

Did the author intend for the reader

I would say the message was also intended for the reader as it was published with the interest of informing the general readers of the evils of war. The author intended the novel to awaken the sense of patriotism of the readers to gain sympathy against the existing struggle of the working class against the manipulation and exploitation of the capitalist of the working peasants or the proletariat. It can be recalled the Harrison was known to have supported the communist struggle although he himself was never a communist. He used his journalistic skills combined with his political views and his war experience to powerfully demonstrate the reality of the society during his period.

Conclusion

The novel was indeed a powerful instrument to show not only the evils of war but also the conditions of the soldiers in the battlefield. The misery that soldiers experienced in the battle was not only the loss of their lives or of

some of body parts but the emotional impact of the treatment they are getting from their officers. Soldiers are courageous, loyal and reliable defender of their country, but it is unfortunate that those in the higher echelon seemed to have little regard for the lives of these dedicated defenders.

The novel does not only open one's sense of patriotism but it opens one's mind against political manipulations of those in power. The novel is a strong reminder that men in uniform are the essential defenses of the nation and they risk their lives, they give their lives in the defense of their country. Although the novel portrays a political analysis of the society of that period yet it also clearly demonstrated that the soldiers' lives are being used to advance the interest of those who controls them. Harrison used his war experiences to effectively convey the realities that were gripping the society. I would say that the writer was successful in this endeavor.

Work Cited

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