

# Senselessness and brutality of war in generals die in bed

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In Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed*, violence plays a major role in demonstrating the reality of bloody battles and life in the trenches. The inclusion of such graphic imagery serves to deglamorize and unromanticise the idea of war. It is through the book's violence and imagery that the theme of the senselessness and brutality of war is revealed, and that the true cost of war reaches much further than just the body count.

Harrison's depiction of what it's like to live in the trenches is exceptionally horrid - constantly surrounded by vermin, lice, disease, and rotting corpses. This serves to contradict any misconceptions the reader may have about the true nature of war. Through the first portion of the novel, the enemy has revealed itself in an assortment of forms and remains mostly invisible. The moment wherein the sniper is somewhere in the nearby woods looking through his telescopic lens, he is not to be seen. The soldiers can only look to their imagination to believe what they would do to him, " we will bayonet him like a...trench rat". Although it appears that one of the main enemies is the lice, " we are going insane with scratching". This incessant need to scratch along with the continual pains of hunger paints a grim picture of trench life, only further amplifying Harrison's notion of the senselessness and brutality of war.

Throughout the novel Harrison continually notes the harshness of war, specifically with his language choice. As the novel progresses it can be seen that the soldiers are losing their free will, and instead turning into mindless robots programmed to follow the orders given by generals. Throughout the text Harrison juxtaposes the soldiers to ordinary citizens to reinforce his

point that the soldiers are not naturally savage, but have become so over time. In example, once the narrator and the men return from the rest the differences in their humanity become much more evident: “ Out on rest we behaved like human beings; here we are merely soldiers”(CITE). The “ merely soldiers” even eludes to the fact that these men are simply victims of the war itself. Harrison’s sentences are stark and to the point, which reflects the similar behaviour of the seemingly now robotic soldiers who follow orders mindlessly. The concise phrases such as “ there is talk of an offensive” and “ it is in constant turmoil” suggest that the soldiers have no input and must simply endure whatever form of destruction is awaiting them. They follow orders, seemingly without thinking; “ We are back in line”. The blunt tone captures their sense of helplessness as well as their fear: “ we live in perpetual fear of raids”.

Although the message of this novel is that war is without meaning, vile, and dehumanizing, and only serves to manipulate young men, we are occasionally met with brief moments of relief. Such as when the soldiers come to rest in a French village where they come across a stream to swim in. “ During the long winter months in the line, bodies did not exist for us. We were men in uniform; clumsy, bundled, heavy uniforms. It is amazing now to see that we have slim, hard, graceful bodies. Our faces are tanned and weather-beaten and that aged look which the trench gives us still lingers a bit, but our bodies are the bodies of boys” (Harrison, p. 127). Moments such as these humanize the soldiers and create a sense of relief and serenity, which only amplifies the brutality of the violence that ensues throughout the

rest of the novel. In addition, Harrison tends to personify the war itself as its own living entity, stating that it “ shrieks and catcalls” or “ howls like an insane woman”, creating the image of a monster which proceeds to override any sense of humanity the soldiers may have and reduces them to primitive actions as the fight for survival consumes them. They have countless orders drilled into them and respond robotically. “ A thousand thundering orders! A thousand trivial rules, each with a penalty for an infraction, has made will-less robots of us all.”. Furthermore, they demonstrate a desensitization to death. This is made most evident when Karl begins to plead for his life due to the fact that he has three children. As Harrison expresses, “ who can care for us, we who are set loose at each other and tear at each other’s entrails with silent gleaming bayonets?”

Another note which showcases the level of senseless desensitization is how the Generals constantly refer to the pickings of the war as “ souvenirs”. This is not only immensely offensive but belittles the memory of the soldiers who did not survive. It only serves to mock those who have given their lives for their country. The Generals simply give out the orders and do not become involved in the savagery, therefore are detached from the experiences of the common soldier. During one of the most bloody charges, the colonel offers the narrator a drink of rum upon his return from killing Karl. However, although the narrator becomes decorated for his bravery he still reflects upon the senseless encounter, dozens of men have died and all the colonel can offer is a drink of rum.

Through his concise and unembellished narrative style, the various juxtapositions and dreary imagery, Harrison is able to expose the numerous costs of war; perhaps the ultimate cost of war is the humanity of the soldiers themselves. They repeatedly must endure one tribulation after another and are met with little to no reward for it. All that they have to show for it is the death and destruction around them. Harrison conveys time and time again through his stark and violent scenes the senseless brutality of war.