

# Soldier's home essay sample

War



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Hemingway's short story "Soldier's Home" shows how irony works in fiction and how the use of irony functions to show the story's themes. From the opening line of the story, Hemingway's intention to craft a story rich with sarcasm, irony, and biting social commentary shines clear. "Krebs went to the war from a Methodist college in Kansas." The impact of the words shocks the reader: who ever heard of a war story starting out like that? The combination of religion and warfare, made in the opening line, resounds continuously throughout the story, comprising one of the story's central ironic themes: that of the narrator, Krebs', "hard pragmatism" as it conflicts with the "hypocritical mendacity" of polite society and the church.

"Soldiers Home" is a variation on the coming of age story. The story might most fittingly be termed a "post coming of age" story, a black comedy of manners revolving around the story's central ironic theme: that a boy "coming of age" in World War One Europe becomes *ill suited* for a man's life in post-war middle-America. This theme is indicated in the second line of the story: "There is a picture which shows him among his fraternity brothers, all of them wearing exactly the same height and style of collar." He, Krebs, and his brothers are old-fashioned in America at the precise time he, Krebs, becomes man, ready to embark on his adult life. The collars indicate social conformity and the ephemerality of social fashions and customs and darkly indicate the disposability of the individual. Later in the story when Krebs observes that young girls of his home town all "grown up" he notes that "They all wore sweaters and shirt waists with round Dutch collars."

The parallel with the earlier collars worn by his fraternity brothers demonstrates Krebs' own "post coming of age" vision as outsider, and the

evolution from his naive vision of romance and sexual attraction into something much more world-wise and, perhaps, cynical. " That was all a lie. It was a lie both ways. You did not need a girl unless you thought about them. He learned that in the army. Then sooner or later you always got one. When you were really ripe for a girl you always got one."

Krebs, unlike his uninitiated peers, knows, or believes he knows, what sexual intimacy and mere sexual intercourse really amount to in the living world, rather than in fantasy. By proffering his own worldly experience with front-line brothels and European trysts, Krebs' capacity for a " normal" middle-class, middle-American romance emerges " shell shocked" and amputated; he no longer feels the urge for intimacy and closeness with women. " Now he would have liked a girl if she had come to him and not wanted to talk. But here at home it was all too complicated." Coming from the war in Europe where urgency soared past verbal expression and where he was likely not fluent in many of the languages, Krebs maturity beyond " small talk" indicates a further disruption of his ability to readjust to " normal" life and also how poorly an initiation in the " Old World" prepared a young man for life in the " New World" of his birth.

Hemingway's suggestion that Krebs' true " birth" took place during the war is further reinforced by the antagonistic relationship between Krebs and his mother throughout the story. The two characters function as an ironic variation of the " hero" and " villain" roles of a traditional story. Merely positing a mother and son as antagonists in his short story increases the depth and breadth of Hemingway's use of irony. Most war stories of the time depicted brave sons and doting, courageous mother; after-all, it is the <https://assignbuster.com/soldiers-home-essay-sample/>

American family and the American way of life that all the soldiers, including Krebs, were supposed to be fighting and killing to preserve. By confronting familial alienation head-on in "Soldier's Home," Hemingway inverts the concept of "returning normal" from war, and, in doing so, casts a disparaging light on many social conventions of America, which in the story are only thinly veiled as childish diversions, steeped in naivete and material excess.

When Krebs' mother seeks to bring him back into "normalcy," Krebs is, himself, far beyond what he views as the childish conventions of American middle-class life:

"I had a talk with your father last night, Harold," she said, "and he is willing for you to take the car out in the evenings."

"Yeah," said Krebs, who was not fully awake. "Take the car out? Yeah?"

"Yes. Your father has felt for some time that you should be able to take the car out in the evenings whenever you wished but we only talked it over last night."

"I'll bet you made him," Krebs said.

The emasculation of Krebs' father (completely absent from the discussion) is Hemingway's final ironic observation on what initiation into the American way of life leads to for the American man. Already initiated, he is able to brush aside his mother's feeble attempts to *grant* him mobility and autonomy; he has already found his manhood. He asserts to her that "I'm not in His Kingdom" refuting Christianity and, in effect, his mother's entire philosophy

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and her authority over him. Krebs may have gone to war in Europe but the *real* war was between himself and his mother, and this war, though apparently bloodless, was in every way as dire as the Great War.

In this way "Soldiers Home" offers a ray of light amid all the black comedy and sarcastic observation on American middle-class life. Krebs, empowered, though alienated, by his "Old World" initiation is not only able to resist and refute his mother's domination, but he reaches out to his younger sister and in this gesture we read his intentions to carry on as an autonomous person. At the story's close there is a sense of reluctant, but adequate, closure. "Well, that was all over anyway. He would go over to the schoolyard and watch Helen play indoor baseball."