Recognizing Emptiness: Denouncing War with Plot in Pirandello's "War" and Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five

J. Nicholes

Department of English, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

1. Introduction

Tammy Clewell[1], in her insightful essay about how Virginia Woolf treats mourning in Jacob's Room[2] and To the Lighthouse[3], forwards an argument important for anyone who writes about war. Specifically, Clewell warns, "…when art neutralizes the trauma of private and public loss, it obscures the very conditions that produce destructive violence." [4] For Clewell, as for Woolf, war literature must focus on the great human cost of war without offering consolation—consolation either through literary conventions (such as the 'pathetic fallacy' which likens natural processes of renewal to human loss to war) or through the forwarding, explicitly or incidentally, of either religious or secular arguments that justify war and lives lost to war. Expanding upon Clewell's argument, this paper considers how two pieces of war literature include plots that, specifically by the nature of their climaxes, allow readers to focus precisely on the human cost of war.

Within the sociopolitical context of the USA today, this paper figures as a text demanding that Americans do more to challenge popular depictions of destructive violence in general, of war in particular. Cultural texts, such as Hollywood war movies and young adult video games that simulate war, often fail to hold true to real life by glorifying war while obscuring the social conditions that allow for, and promote, war.

2. Discussion

Luigi Pirandello's[5] "War" and Kurt Vonnegut's[6] Slaughterhouse-Five emphasize the mental anguish war causes to the individual by refusing to feature fighting in their climaxes. Instead, the plots of both works involve protagonists who, at the scene of climax, realize that war has irreparably damaged their lives.

Climax, according to Brooks and Penn Warren, "…is the decisive moment [of a plot] in the purely physical sense…, [the moment that] tells us about the success or failure of [a character's] adventure at its practical level."[7] Popularly, in Hollywood movies and in war-simulating video games, the climax of the narrative includes an anticipated battle. The pieces of war literature considered here refuse to render a "Hollywood" version of war that excites an audience and makes war seem entertaining. At the climax of each narrative, protagonists realize the harm of war. What is emphasized, then, through plot is a protagonist's moving from ignorance to understanding. Moments of realization of the harm of war, naturally, disallow for glorification of warfare.

With climax clarified, consider the plot of Pirandello's "War." "War" is a story whose protagonist has lost a son to the Second World War. This protagonist, who is never named, finds consolation through the secular argument that his son died for a cause greater than himself, for country. The protagonist, however, finds himself threatened by passengers on a train who fail to find any consolation in the thought that their sons might die for country. These passengers fear the irreparable emptiness a son's death would leave in their lives.

Pirandello creates a climax in which the protagonist realizes, after arguing with passengers, that secular justification for his son's death cannot repair the emptiness in his life his son's death created. The protagonist, in the scene of climax, breaks down and cries. This theme of facing emptiness war causes, Tammy Clewell argues, is another feature of Virginia Woolf's writing which helps denounce war and consolatory mourning, mourning that tempers feelings of loss through secular and/or religious platitudes and that obscures the social conditions that allow wars to happen:

To mourn Jacob [in Virginia Woolf's Jacob's Room] is to acknowledge the absence he has become. And to sustain grief for this absence establishes the possibility for a vigilant relation to a fragile social present, an historical moment, as Woolf rightly recognized, that threatened to repeat the catastrophic violence of a war intended to end war.[8]

With "fragile social present," Clewell refers to Victorian social institutions during the First World War that promoted war and, if not checked, could (and in fact did) continue to promote destructive violence. Like characters in Woolf's novel, then, the

protagonist in "War" recognizes the emptiness his son has become. The protagonist must mourn without consolation—and must do so to ensure peoples analyze, and view as untenable, context-specific social conditions that allow for war.

While "War" focuses on the effects of wars of propaganda, wars fought at the home front, <u>Slaughterhouse-Five</u> focuses on the effects of wars fought at the military front. Nevertheless, <u>Slaughterhouse</u> also confronts, as part of its plot, the harm wars cause to human beings by placing at the climax a moment of realization for Billy Pilgrim. The novel's protagonist, Billy Pilgrim realizes the permanent mark the war, and in particular the 1945 firebombing of civilians in Dresden, left on his life.

That Vonnegut wanted to avoid making a "Hollywood" version of a war story is explicitly stated in Chapter One. In Chapter One, Vonnegut the writer appears as a character and is reproached by Mary O'Hare, the wife of his war buddy, because she believes he will glorify war in his novel:

'You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we'll have a lot more of them. And they'll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs.'[9]

Vonnegut in Chapter One promises Mary O'Hare that he will avoid writing a novel that idealizes war, and, in fact, <u>Slaughterhouse</u> is dedicated in part to Mary O'Hare and stands as one of the most widely studied antiwar novels in the English language. Most important, Vonnegut comments on the social function of literature, and the specific role popular narratives play in shaping social consciousness on the topic of war.

3. Conclusion

In "War" and <u>Slaughterhouse-Five</u>, not protagonists fighting, but protagonists realizing war's human cost after fighting, receives emphasis as part of plot. By placing realizations of the irreparable damage wars cause to a character at a narrative's climax, writers find one method of challenging secular and religious arguments that justify war and that obscure why wars are waged. Furthermore, by constructing narratives that challenge secular and religious arguments that justify war, or that offer consolation to those who mourn family members who died in war, writers of any period can raise the consciousness of readers at the home front who by their complacence or learned attraction to war contribute to the damaging of human beings at the military front.

4. References

[1] T. Clewell. Consolation Refused: Virginia Woolf, the Great War, and Modernist Mourning, in Modern Fiction Studies. Vol. 50, 2004.
[2] V. Woolf. Jacob's Room. New York: Harcourt, 1950.
[3] V. Woolf. To the Lighthouse. New York: Harcourt, 1981.
[4] Consolation Refused, 213.
[5] L. Pirandello. War, in Understanding Fiction (Editors: C. Brooks, R.P. Warren) New York: F.S. Crofts & Co., 1947.
[6] K. Vonnegut. Slaughterhouse-Five. London: Vintage, 1969.
[7] C. Brooks, R.P. Warren. Understanding Fiction, (New York: F.S. Crofts & Co, 1947), 578.
[8] Consolation Refused, 209.
[9] Slaughterhouse-Five, 11.