

The Suppressed and Overlooked Sobs of the War under the Sham Shield of Honor, Heroism and Patriotism: A Critical Study of Luigi Pirandello's *War*

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ABSTRACT

There are different excuses and pretexts to wage a war. The world has witnessed and is still witnessing various tragic and heart lacerating wars with devastating repercussions. It seems that wars are the integral elements of existence for those who like to prolong their authoritarian and privileged socio-political positions. This study strives to delve into the core of Luigi Pirandello's *War* to reveal the unnoticed and suppressed confabulations of those parents, whose sons are fighting in the war fronts to defend their country. Indeed, the study tries to uncover the real nature of the war mongers, who mostly wage wars to weaken the nation or nations in order to maintain and strengthen their own highly privileged status and status quo. They know very well that only a weak nation can be easily suppressed and dominated. The study further shows, how the fossilized and presupposed terms like honor, martyrdom, heroism and patriotism are meticulously used by the status maniac politicians to easily tame the common people to volunteer themselves for the war as their in-born duty.

KEYWORDS: Luigi Pirandello, honor, heroism, patriotism, sobs.

INTRODUCTION

Luigi Pirandello (1867-1946), the well-known Italian writer, has touched the misery of war-stricken life from a very close distance. He has witnessed the two tragic gifts of the world of modernism, namely the First and the Second World Wars. Pirandello does not stick to the conventionally determined rules and doctrines, which are passed over from one generation to another. According to Cadler (1996:4)

Pirandello was a fiery, passionate man who had reached his own particular outlook on life through adversity and years of tortured wondering at the true significance of reality. His primary concern was with the illusions and self-deceptions of mankind and the nature of identity. His works grew from his own torment, and through his genius they came to speak for all the tormented and potentially to all the tormented, that is to all men. He delighted in creating an unusual but logical situation – developing it seemingly illogically – and by continually tossing the coin until both sides had been clearly revealed, managing to convince his audience that his unconventional and not very credible treatment was in fact wholly logical and convincing.

Pirandello shows a high sense of responsibility toward the decadence and irresponsible changes of the human values in the fast moving strides of life. He yells his voice under any possible ripe contexts. He does not try to conceal the social, political, cultural and ethical facts of life, which are moving toward the world of deterioration and profligacy. Brand & Pertile (2008) give the following comments on Pirandello:

He describes the modern spirit as profoundly sick, and deplores all the contemporary materialistic explanations of the universe and the inadequacy of current modes of thought and artistic expression - determinism, symbolism, naturalism, decadentism and so on. 'Coscienza', by which he means both conscience and consciousness, is at crisis-point. 'We can have no knowledge, no precise notion of life; only a feeling, inevitably changeable and changing.' (481)

Pirandello's *War*

Pirandello in his *War* gives a vivid picture of the worries of war. He tries to divulge the hidden agony of the parents, whose sons are either shedding blood or getting killed in the battle fields. They know the futility of the war. Indeed, they are well aware of the politicized connotations of the fossilized normative terms like martyrdom, honor, heroism and patriotism, but still keep quiet and try to console themselves with these honey coated phrases. The world political figures know the weak points of the common people. They know that an emotionally fabricated

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pertinent propaganda with the predetermined brainwashed expressions, founded circumstantially calculated and in synchrony with the need of time, can easily make an aficionado army out of them to secure their privileged socio-political authority. The following opening words from Pirandello's *Guest* are the indicative of the suppressed complaints and dissatisfaction of the war phobic parents:

The passengers who had left Rome by the night express had had to stop until dawn at the small station of Fabriano in order to continue their journey by the small old-fashioned local joining the main line with Sulmona.

At dawn, in a stuffy and smoky second-class carriage in which five people had already spent the night, a bulky woman in deep mourning was hosted in—almost like a shapeless bundle. Behind her—puffing and moaning, followed her husband—a tiny man; thin and weakly, his face death-white, his eyes small and bright and looking shy and uneasy.

Having at last taken a seat he politely thanked the passengers who had helped his wife and who had made room for her; then he turned round to the woman trying to pull down the collar of her coat and politely inquired:

"Are you all right, dear?"

The wife, instead of answering, pulled up her collar again to her eyes, so as to hide her face.

"Nasty world," muttered the husband with a sad smile.

And he felt it his duty to explain to his traveling companions that the poor woman was to be pitied for the war was taking away from her only son, a boy of twenty to whom both had devoted their entire life, even breaking up their home at Sulmona to follow him to Rome, where he had to go as a student, then allowing him to volunteer for war with an assurance, however, that at least six months he would not be sent to the front and now, all of a sudden, receiving a wire saying that he was due to leave in three days' time and asking them to go and see him off. (Pirandello, 1919:1)

This text shows the intrinsically concealed and censored hatred of the complaining parents toward war; a phenomenon, which steals away their most loving and dear ones. It also displays the silent and helpless agony of the parents, who can do nothing, but simply get the excruciating and melancholic pains off their chest, just as a tranquilizer.

Indeed, the abnormally exceptional atmosphere of war imposes a new mental picture of humanity upon the soldiers and all the war involved individuals. They seem to enter a new world of existence, where humanity and justice have their own interpretations. Actually, they experience a world, where bloodshed and murder are its inevitable ingredients. As May (2007:11) asserts:

The situations of war and the institutions created during war, such as prisoner-of-war camps, change the normal moral situation. This is mainly because the circumstances of war make all of us into different people than we would be otherwise. Especially in the case of soldiers, these men and women become trained killers, when in their previous lives such behavior would have been anathema. In addition, there is the instilled hatred and anger that cloud our judgment about the actions of others and what their due is for so acting, as well as the seeming need to respond right away lest our own safety be jeopardized.

The common soldiers or the individuals in one way or the other involved in the war, may be somehow drowned in the inflated ecstasy of losing, maintaining or gaining their honor, which is somehow linked to their territorial privacy. This sense of loss and achievement makes them lose the right balance of judgment toward war and its irretrievable aftermath. But, the focal point is, do their parents think like them as well? Do they have such a fanatic and war-lulled look towards the blood covered battle field? Indeed, if we try to confide with the perturbed and apprehensive parents, we may understand the buried worries of pessimism pointed to war and its upcoming irretrievable aftermath. Actually, they are appallingly waiting for miracles to hear the end of this dreadfully melancholic term *War*. The following dialogues among the different parents during their train journey show this tragic miasma of apprehension and terror:

The woman under the big coat was twisting and wriggling, at times growling like a wild animal, feeling certain that all those explanations would not have aroused even a shadow of sympathy from those people who—most likely—were in the same plight as herself. One of them, who had been listening with particular attention, said:

"You should thank God that your son is only leaving now for the front. Mine has been sent there the first day of the war. He has already come back twice wounded and been sent back again to the front."

"What about me? I have two sons and three nephews at the front," said another passenger.

"Maybe, but in our case it is our only son," ventured the husband. "What difference can it make? You may spoil your only son by excessive attentions, but you cannot love him more than you would all your other children if you had any. Parental love is not like bread that can be broken to pieces and split amongst the children in equal shares. A father gives all his love to each one of his children without discrimination, whether it be one or ten, and if I am suffering now for my two sons, I am not suffering half for each of them but double..."

"True...true..." sighed the embarrassed husband, "but suppose (of course we all hope it will never be your case) a father has two sons at the front and he loses one of them, there is still one left to console him...while..."

"Yes," answered the other, getting cross, "a son left to console him but also a son left for whom he must survive, while in the case of the father of an only son if the son dies the father can die too and put an end to his distress. Which of the two positions is worse? Don't you see how my case would be worse than yours?" (Pirandello, 1919: 2)

Luigi Pirandello wants to show the potent secret of individuals' highly inculcated beliefs in a kind of devotion with fossilized and rusted foundations, which lack an honest and faith-bound attachment. He uncovers the absurdity of the meanings attached to the life-taking terms like honor, martyrdom and patriotism. Pirandello is not against these terms; he does not want to devalue them either, but his focal point is the sad misuse of such expressions. He brings to picture the artificiality and politicization of these words, which have kept cliff-like distance from their original birth of virginity of meaning. Vlahos (2009) has the following views on the political aspect of War:

War is political. War through this lens pretends to be "Clausewitzian," which is to say, serious and considered. War is an act of policy, a coolly rational means to an end, an objective, regrettably, that can be achieved only through violence and force. For some this act is inherently amoral. Yet for others its moral content is tied to the moral basis of society's politics. Hence terrible acts are morally mitigated by democratic politics, on the conviction that democracies are inherently more humane and altruistic, because they represent all the people, and that the whole is less likely than a powerful individual to go to war capriciously. Thus war conducted by "good" politics is at least better war. (50-51)

Indeed, even the well-decorated expressions and richly conducted rituals and ceremonies may not have the ability to efface the traumatic loss of one's lost ones. How can one turn a blind eye to the deep-pondering and dejected looks of the innocent orphans? How can one convince these orphans that their fathers have devoted themselves to gain honor and remain heroes in the upcoming history of their countries? Does such a justification succeed in feeding their hearts and minds? Who is responsible for the mid-night sobs of the helpless widows, who are left in the lurch in this world of funky and luxurious zoo, where human-like brutal animals seize each and every opportunity to swallow them up? Can the terms *heroism* and *honor* wipe their heart lacerating tears? It might be tried hard to lessen the tragic and appalling memories and experience of war, but overall, it does not seem to be more than a sedative consolation. Lamberti & Fortunati (2009) give a very apt picture of the post war traumas:

In the immediate after-war years, such a traumatic experience was consciously removed by all public discourses whose rhetoric ended by constructing a verbal ritual shared by families in private to give meaning to the death of their beloved ones and thereby allow them to process and survive their loss. The trauma removed from official rhetoric, stayed in the bodies and in the minds of

many veterans forced into hospitals or protected by their families – a trauma which, in time, affected also the enlarged community, families, parents, widows, brothers, sisters, or simply friends, who had to mourn the loss of a beloved one *in absentia*, the body being often lost or buried on the battlefield, far from home. (9)

Conclusion

This study was an endeavor to portray the hidden and censored relationship between war and the ones involved in it. It tried to bring to surface the suppressed anguish of the intrinsically brooding and grumbling families, who find themselves helplessly drowned in the oozy swamp of the traumatic games of the world superpowers. It showed the decadent and drab exuberance of the war waging terms, which serve to stabilize, toughen and reinforce the authoritative status of the privileged figures of the world societies. It finally displayed the dissatisfaction and complaints of the families, who are the victims of a war, which swallows numerous lives of innocent people.

The study finally wants to point out to the most tragic layer of war, which highlights the deep gap between the common people and the safe untouched authorities. It avers that it is a pity to see the flowing blood of the innocent victims of the war run as vitalizing vitamins in the veins of the smiling ruling authorities, while the same blood changes into everlasting tears in the eyes of the sorrow-stricken parents, orphans and widows.

May (2007) gives the following suggestions to get away from the brutality of war and its harrowing aftermath:

When the world is a blur of emotions and violence, the best thing is to get people to stop and think, to shake them out of their normal ways of reacting. And one of the best methods here is to get people to stop reacting to each other as evil enemies and instead see each other as just fellow humans. Torture and other forms of physical coercion are to be condemned, even in most situations of emergency. Military necessity will rarely, if ever, be sufficient to justify these most inhumane ways of treating prisoners of war. Grotius followed Seneca in thinking that prisoners of war were like slaves. We can do to them what we want, and nearly with impunity, because they are controlled by us. But for war to be something other than morally repugnant forms of slaughter and slavery, prisoners of war should be treated with restraint. (11)

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