
The Theme of Returning Home from War in Short Stories of Hemingway and O'Brien

Sometimes the hardest part of going to war is coming home. In the two short stories, "Soldiers Home" by Ernest Hemingway and "Speaking of Courage" by Tim O'Brien, each of the characters Krebs and Berlin show the difficulties it has on a soldier returning home from war. Both characters illustrate how hard it can be to adjust to a normal lifestyle compared to the life that they had overseas or the one that they had before they left for war. However, each story differs when looking at how they deal with the aftereffects and who they confide in about the difficulties of war. In a "Soldier's Home" when Krebs returns home he has this need to talk to someone but doesn't know how to approach people about it. Whereas in "Speaking of Courage" Berlin has the choice to speak of the difficulties and hardships of war honestly, but he chooses not to because he doesn't want to bother anyone. Each of the characters exhibit forms of PTSD and how the war put many hardships in their lives when they returned home. Although, the stories have many differences they also share many similarities about the effects of war.

In a "Soldier's Home" by Ernest Hemingway before Krebs became a soldier he had a pretty normal life, he was in a fraternity where all the men involved wore the same kind of shirt in the same style. With this, it showed that he had friends who accepted him and a healthy social life. When Krebs was away in war it is discussed that the fellows soldiers "look too big for their uniforms". The idea of "outgrowing" a uniform is a pattern that we consecutively see throughout the short story. Krebs eventually hypothetically speaking outgrew his uniform in the fraternity when he went away to war. Where we see this pattern again is when Krebs is away in war and he eventually begins to outgrow his uniform and returns home from war. In the article "Where Do We Go From Here?" by Trout, Steven he discusses how "it turned out, many former soldiers, including some of the most decorated of the war, were not up to the challenge of reentering civilian life without support, economic, or otherwise". Krebs realized that once he did return to the civilian world that he was on his own, he wouldn't be able to truly discuss the causality of the war and the experiences that he went through. When Krebs returned home from war this is when we began to see how he was more isolated with those around him, it shows that he was impacted by war and what he saw.

When he came home from war it was about late summer, he would sleep late in bed, he would walk to the library, eat lunch at home, he'd walk around town by himself, and then he'd spend the remainder of the night in the pool room. He spends most of his days alone with the exemptions of the times he sees his family. He also is constantly reminding himself of the things that he saw while he was at war. PTSD has the effect of returning military members to disregard

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their previous social lives to try and narrow the psychological effects of war. We also see this when Krebs wants to be associated with people, but he does not want to have to deal with the stress that comes with it because “here at home it was all too complicated”(Hemingway 168). After looking into articles based on how Krebs felt when returning home from war it came across the article that further discussed his need to talk about war. Krebs feelings about the war are constantly changing, in the article Soldiers’ Voices in In Our Time: Hemingway’s Ventriloquism by Milton A. Cohen, it goes into talk about how “his compulsive need to talk to someone”. Krebs is constantly looking for someone to listen to the stories of war that he encountered, but since it was so late when he returned home everyone thought they had heard it all.

As the story continues we see a change in the way that Krebs talks to his sister compared to how he talks to his mother. Krebs has a new view on the world after being in the war for so long he has a hard time adjusting to his life back home and has a hard time controlling what he says because he has a fear of losing those he loves. At the time these scenes take place it is painful to hear how hurt he is to the point he has to tell his own mother that he doesn’t love her. In the article Performative Patterns in Hemingway’s “Soldier’s Home” by Ruben De Baerdemaeker it goes into discuss how “Krebs disavows being in God’s Kingdom, and emotionally distances himself from his mother and the world she represents”. When Krebs tells his mother that he does not love her, he quickly realizes that what he said was an accident. Krebs knew that what he has said was wrong, and after saying this, he tries to give reasons for himself but could not seem to come up with an exact answer. He then tries to say that what he said was a mistake and that it came out the wrong way. He couldn’t explain that he didn’t want to lose her, so he was trying to express himself to seek to keep her away from his life because he feels he is damaged. Psychologically Krebs has been changed because of the war, and he tries to get used to his social surroundings, which is now different and complicated to him.

We also see these similarities in “Speaking of Courage” where the main character Norman Bowker has a hard time adjusting to a normal life after returning home from the war too. We can see this when he “followed the tar road on its seven-mile loop around the lake, then he started all over again, driving slowly” (Tim O’Brien). Norman realizes that he has nowhere to go at this point and turns to driving and reminiscing about his days before war. Bowker wants to talk to someone about what happened to him at war, but he has no one to talk to about anything. He also thinks about conversations that he would have with people about what happened, about the medals that he got awarded to him, but he also wanted to tell those the he was a coward, that he wasn’t brave. In the article Tim O’Brien and the Art of the True War Story by Timmerman, John H. goes into detail about how if people would have listened to Bowker “people would have heard, if only they had listened, was Norman Bowker’s story of he had courage, of how he almost saved his friend Kiowa, except for the terrible sink in the field. His father was the appropriate one to initiate the hearing, for his father also knew the truth of war”. Norman has a hard time accepting what happened to him, about all the changes in the town

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that happened to him. He can't accept the fact that what happened to his friend was purely an accident and that if he would have stayed he would have been gone too, that he deserved all of the medals that he received in war.

Bowker is clearly in a state of stress that is causing to constantly revisit the incident that happened with his friend, this is otherwise known as PTSD. There was a study produced, published online Sept. 17 in JAMA Psychiatry, that conducted the theory that PTSD can cause listlessness and emotional detachment. Which we see in both of the characters in the two short stories. Krebs and Bowker each have a difficult time adjusting to life outside of war; they have a hard time adjusting to the lifestyle that they knew before which results in them wanting to be alone a lot of the time. Although these characters have a lot of similarities, they also have differences such as the type of war they fought in and how they can talk about it and who they have to talk about it when they return home.

The differences of these two short stories were when they soldiers returned home and how the circumstances where. When Krebs returned home from war, it wasn't right for him to talk about the war and his experiences. He returned home from war so late compared to the other soldiers they thought they had heard everything that had happened and they thought it was weird that Krebs was returning so late after the war was over. Krebs eventually started lying about his experiences to get the attention of those around him, but this resulted in becoming sick whenever he told a lie. In an article posted by the Perelman School of Medicine, it is said that one of the most common side effects of PTSD is changes in mood and cognition, where the person affected by this has exaggerated negative beliefs, and self blame for the traumatic event, detachment from others loss of interest persistent negative emotional state, reduced ability to feel positives emotions.

Krebs has a hard accepting what has changed and his inability to find satisfaction in what is around him, especially women whom he finds necessary to get close to because it is far too complicated. As much as Krebs believes in the truth, people around him force him to lie. The story precisely manifests the conflict between Krebs value, which has dramatically changed after his war experience and society expectation toward him to conform to its traditional values. Eventually to maintain his existence Krebs has to choose isolation by detaching himself from social relations, love, religion and ambition. Harold Krebs returned from the war with an inability to love and determined to avoid complications which include lying. But his life is getting complicated already, when he was welcomed by the society people to be listened to at all he had to lie. As the story goes Krebs has to lie again while trying to be attached to his family. Krebs still has some relationship with his family as he is still in touch with his sister, but otherwise he has distanced himself from almost anyone and anything around him. Whereas Bowker has a hard time adjusting to his new lifestyle and talking to those around him, he has started losing those relationships that he once had because he has a hard time adjusting to his

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new life.

Norman Bowker wanted to have conversations with people, but instead of talking he had imaginary conversations with people because he doesn't know how to actually have them. Bowker had these conversations with people because he doesn't know how to actually have them. He is afraid of what people might say and do because now that he has returned home from war his life is diverse. He feels as though all the people he wants to have these conversations with are wrapped up in their own lives, and he feels that his issues aren't important enough to bother them or that they wouldn't understand them. He has this whole imaginary conversations with his father, whose approval is significant to him, he thinks about how they'd talk about all the medals that he had received in the war. He thinks about how he believes his father would celebrate how courageous and brave that he was in the war, although he feels he was not he thinks of himself as a coward because he "almost" won the silver star for valor. He has repeatedly thought about this conversation that h would have because he has thought about how his father would react and what he would say to him.

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