



The Innocence of Man

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In this ardent critical commentary, Cortni Taylor responds to literary critic Brooke Hovarth's analysis of Randall Jarrell's classic wartime poem "The Death of Ball Turret Gunner," arguing that Hovarth side-steps the inexorable social power of toxic masculinity in dictating the anonymous gunner's demise. This essay was composed for Writing about Literature with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

Randell Jarrell, 1945

AS I WRITE THIS ESSAY I am confronted with the image of our president and the rest of our country thanking our servicemen and women for their sacrifice on live television. Today is Veteran's Day, and how fitting to be writing an essay about none other than Randall Jarrell's famous anti-war poem "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner." Published in 1945 at the end of World War

II, Jarrell's poem illustrates an unavoidable reality of war in a mere five lines: death. The tone of Jarrell's speaker is one of helplessness, though critic Brooke Horvath doesn't seem to believe that this narrator is as innocent as he seems.

Horvath raises the question, "In what sense is someone manning a pair of .50 caliber machine guns a helpless victim?" (29). This is a question contingent on several factors. First of all, is a man's innocence null and void if he enlists of his own accord? To Horvath, it would appear so. At the end of his question, he provides us with a footnote that reads as follows: "More than 43,000 Americans claimed conscientious objector status during World War II, refusing to serve in combat . . . so the gunner had choices" (32n2). This is quite a compelling point; however, I believe Horvath ignores the complexity of the young man's situation. This is about as absurd an argument as asking someone who suffers from poverty why they don't just get a job that pays more money. He completely ignores the social, cultural, political, and emotional aspects of the narrator's "choice."

As Horvath himself is aware, our society tends to glorify war. He references a personal acquaintance who served in Vietnam, who felt as though "every war film he had ever seen, no matter how strenuously it attempted to forward an anti-war message, ended up . . . glamorizing and romanticizing war" (31). Despite this, Horvath holds fast in his role as victim-blamer, without considering the way young men are often treated in our culture. Toxic masculinity is a term that has been rising in popularity in recent years and is used to explain cultural norms that are forced upon boys and men demanding they act in approved-upon "manly" ways. An example of toxic masculinity is expecting young men to give their lives to protect their country, lest they be seen as cowards.

Horvath also feels as though the speaker's mother is complicit in his fate, since

it is she who delivers the gunner to the State, which delivers him to the military, which delivers him to the ball turret, which delivers him to his death. Mother here is part of the system that has engineered the gunner's death, a death he has participated in by accepting the role of gunner just as he has presumably accepted (assuming he had and made a choice) his role of small animal/citizen, dreaming his life away, hunkered down rather than acting in the world. (30)

Following this logic, Horvath makes the connection that the

peacetime State is equally horrific, deadening, dehumanizing; that what seems a happy alternative to the male world of violence, death and geopolitics — mother, the cozy safety of the womb, childhood, dreaming — colludes with the State by narcotizing, infantizing, and thereby preparing the gunner for his eventual role as (willing or unwitting) cog in the machine of war. (31)

I find this logic and argument explicitly flawed. Horvath here is blaming the mother for, again, what is an issue with our culture. A mother is not to blame for giving birth to her child, only for that child to be taken by war; rather, it's society's burden to bear for allowing it to happen in the first place. In fact, it is society that forces the gunner into the arms of "the State," which forces him to the military, which forces him into the ball turret, which inevitably leads him to his death. Next, Horvath makes the connection that peacetime is "equally horrific" because it is deadening, and the speaker is essentially wasting his life away by simply existing, in Horvath's own words, "dreaming his life away." He even goes so far as to say that only in war is the speaker able to truly live, that "death leads to life," that the "silencing of the gunner [grants him the] ability to finally speak of and for and about himself" (31).

So essentially, Horvath is saying that it is better to die at war and experience what it is like to *truly* live, if only for a moment, than to live a deadening existence in peace. That "war and violence can . . .

be liberating, enlivening, and self-revelatory, even humanizing” (31) — this argument is also operating on the assumption that the speaker had any control over his life. Again, “he has presumably accepted (assuming he had and made a choice) his role of small animal/citizen, dreaming his life away” (30). Yet we can infer that the gunner is a young man; even Horvath states that the man must be around eighteen or nineteen years old (29). The speaker hasn’t even had the chance to dream away his life if he so chooses, and Horvath has some nerve coming to this conclusion on behalf of this young man, especially considering Horvath himself has not been killed in action and washed from the belly of a plane with a hose.

Horvath makes some interesting connections throughout his deconstruction of Jarrell’s poem. In the end, however, when we consider the values of our country, the idea of nationalism, the glorification of war in media, and misinformation, I believe that makes the real victimizer here . . . us. ►►

►► WORKS CITED

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