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Johnny Got His Gun is a strong anti-war novel of immense impact. It is an outstanding work, not because it presents the reader with any new argument against war, but rather because throughout it reminds us unrelentingly of what we've known all along: that war cripples and destroys human life.

Johnny Got His Gun is not an enjoyable book to read. In fact, it is a stinging experience of pain and mental anguish. Dalton Trumbo beckons the reader to temporarily abandon his preconceptions of war and share the experience of an imaginary individual who has been mutilated in World War I.. Utilizing an unconventional style of writing that runs together thoughts and emotions in disorderly fashion to inspire fear and confusion, Trumbo relates a horrifying experience as felt by the recipient. His protagonist, Joe Bonham, is presented to us in the opening chapter on the operating table of an army hospital, shortly after having been blown apart by a war missile. From this focal point, the plot proceeds with the life of the wounded soldier, and periodic interjections of his past up to that point.

Trumbo centers his entire story around this single individual, who is representative of all those slain and wounded in combat. Surprisingly, there are very few gruesome descriptions of war, yet Trumbo's ability through sensory language to project the life of a solitary war victim upon ourselves is extremely effective. He relates to the reader the thoughts and emotions of the soldier as he lies upon the operating table, first discovering that he has lost his hearing ability, then his thoughts as both his arms and legs are amputated. Finally, the soldier reaches the horrid discovery that his face and neck have been blown apart, leaving him without his eyes, nose, mouth and throat, to be sustained alive by tubes and machines. If the reader can remain yet unmoved at this point by the effect of war upon this individual, he is challenged by Trumbo throughout the remainder of the book, as the young soldier is forced to live out the entirety of his life in a world of dark desolation and anguish. We view Joe Bonham as nothing but a mangled piece of living flesh, with a brain that is fully conscious of his state, seeking complete death to end his torment and that of the absorbed reader.

Trumbo reserves a middle segment of the book, chapter ten, to pronounce through his character a fierce anti-war statement. At this point in the novel, we are made to feel the full extent of Joe Bonham's state and are intrinsically aligned to his anti-war sentiment--after all, what person would argue for the justice of war against one who has actually been the recipient of war's destruction, and perhaps this is Trumbo's best grounds for airing his views. The constant intervals of Joe Bonham's early life only serve to reinforce Trumbo's theme. These interjections focus upon a sensual description of the protagonist's boyhood in Colorado, emphasizing the richness of life as perceived through the senses--senses which

Joe Bonham no longer possesses.

The character's later life, just predating his entrance into the war, provides Trumbo with momentous ammunition against war. Joe Bonham left behind him a fatherless family consisting of his mother and two sisters, all of whom were dependent upon him financially as well as morally. Trumbo portrays his character as one who drifted in society, being pursued and pulled by the establishment. Allowed seemingly little freedom by society, he is ironically forced to enter a war for the preservation of democracy.

Trumbo adds further fuel to his anti-war argument by questioning the value of laying down one's life for the establishment's definition of democracy and native land: "Did anybody ever come back from the dead any single one of the millions who got killed did any one of them ever come back and say by god I'm glad I died to make the world safe for democracy? Did they say I like death better than losing liberty? Did any of them ever say it's good to think I got my guts blown out for the honor of my country?" He further charges that family ties are of more value to the soldiers of war than any ideology their country is upholding: "And all the guys who died all the five million or seven million or ten million who went out and died to make the world safe for democracy to make the world safe for words without meaning how did they feel about it just before they died? How did they feel as they watched their blood pump out into the mud? . . . If the thing they were fighting for was important enough to die for then it was also important enough for them to be thinking about it in the last minutes of their lives. . . (Instead) they died crying in their minds like little babies. They forgot the thing they were fighting for the things they were dying for. They thought about things a man can understand. They died yearning for the face of a friend. They died whimpering for the voice of a mother a father a wife a child. . ."

Trumbo's final anti-war dig portrays a merciless, cruel society that shuts off those crippled from war who serve as a remembrance of what war can do. Several years of total isolation from society ended as Joe Bonham's nurse discovered that he was tapping with his head a message in code. The coded response returned to him was that his request to leave the hospital room and communicate in this way with society was 'against regulations'. His frenzied efforts at further communication were discontinued as they drugged him.

After nearly 250 pages, the helplessness of the protagonist is indeed unbearable. The only possible satisfactory ending--that of Joe Bonham's death, is refused to us by Trumbo. If the book's message is so unbearable, or if you do not agree with Bonham's anti-war sentiments, then why read it? Because its mind-expanding! This book will serve to challenge or strengthen your previous beliefs. The imaginary pain that we are made to feel through the experience of the protagonist moves us to appreciate life with all of our senses, and to pray that some day there may never be need again for war. . .