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THE CASE OF THE DISILLUSIONED SOLDIER: AN ANALYSIS OF DALTON TRUMBO'S
JOHNNY GOT HIS GUN

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ABSTRACT

The last century witnessed two major global conflicts which caused death and destruction on an unprecedented scale. The countries of Europe and North America, along with Japan, dragged the entire world into two of the greatest conflicts in human history. Although the wars did cause the death of people of all categories, none were so affected as the soldiers were. In case of USA, the end of the Second World War did not bring any peace for soldiers. Many of them were deployed to Vietnam to deal with her hostile jungles and relentless guerrillas. While many people see patriotic sentiments, bravery and machismo as the main features of military, the actual soldiers only can see the realities associated with war. While those who wage wars live safe, these common men and women try to survive every second in the battlefield. In America, many books on war, both fictional and non-fiction were published during the war days and even after the days were over. Perhaps none of them can leave an impression upon the reader in the manner of Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* [1939]. This novel dealt with a common American soldier, who became trapped in the remaining stump of his body after he lost all his limbs and all his senses in an injury on the battlefield. The novel has often been used by anti-war communities as a tool for implementing their views on the futility and horrors of armed conflicts. The present paper will try look at all the aspects that led to Trumbo's writing of this great work, its relevance in the turbulent times we live in and finally, its efficiency in dealing with the disillusionment of soldiers and commoners regarding war.

Keywords: War, Soldiers, Disillusionment, Dalton Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*

"When the rich wage war, it's the poor who die."

- Jean Paul Sartre

The history of mankind is a tale of conflicts. Throughout the ages, humans have been witness to many bloody conflicts. The human desire for power and wealth has given form to many wars, most of which have ended in destruction of properties and loss of lives. From the ancient civilisations of Egypt, Greece, Rome and Indus to the modern times of nuclear technology, humans have always lived in fear of wars. People fear battles for the effects they present in their ongoing stage and aftermath. For most part, the fears of the general population are realised in the post war times. The end of the Anglo-Saxon rule in England after the defeat of

Harold II in the hands of William the Conqueror in 1066, the destruction of Vijayanagara immediately after its defeat in the Battle of Talikota in 1565 and France's loss of territories after her defeat in the hands of Germany in Franco-Prussian War [1870-71] are some instances where people got to see the immediate negative consequences of war upon the common population. The defeated land and its citizens are put to the mercy of the victors and their future becomes entirely dependent upon the goodwill or the hatred of those people. This is perhaps the reason that war came to be condemned in various pieces of literature produced throughout the ages. But what one must never forget is the fact that the worst sufferers of war and its vices are the soldiers who take part in them. The soldiers who are put to fight and die for reasons only clear and understandable to the leaders, are those people whose plight has to be discussed in the present discussion. We can clearly see that the young men and women who fight for their lands are regarded by humanity as symbolic figures of human bravery. On the other hand, the risks they take and the sufferings they face are beyond language. In order to illustrate the plight of military men, one particular work has been selected here, which is the 1939 novel by Dalton Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*.

The First World War [1914-18] has been described as one of the deadliest wars in the history of mankind. At the time, it was the first ever large global conflict and the death and destruction which resulted from it can only be surpassed by the Second World War, which started two decades after it ended. Condemnation of the war had started during its ongoing stages. It reached its zenith in the post war era. Many writers and poets from all over the globe came forward to prepare poetic and prose narratives dealing with the brutality and futility of war, pointing to this major global conflict. Perhaps none of them is as scary and thought provoking as the 1939 anti-war novel by Dalton Trumbo called *Johnny Got His Gun*. This novel deals with a common soldier who after losing everything he ever had in combat, looks back at his life and regrets his decision of ever becoming a soldier, finally being able to understand what battles really bring about.

American screenwriter and novelist Dalton Trumbo [1905-76] is known both in the fields of literature and cinema. While he was ultimately blacklisted from the world of cinema, his unaccredited works won two Oscars. In the world of literature, he is chiefly remembered for his anti-war novel, *Johnny Got His Gun*, which he later adapted into a remarkable, albeit unsuccessful motion picture in 1971 starring Timothy Bottoms, Kathy Fields, Diane Varsi and Hollywood legend, Donald Sutherland.

Johnny Got His Gun deals with the life of a common American soldier named Joe Bonham who awakes in a hospital room after being hit by an artillery shell in the battlefield during WWI. He slowly realises that both his arms and both his legs have been amputated. Along with it, most of his face is missing and he has lost his senses of hearing, taste, sight and smell. On the other hand, his brain is functioning which now has rendered him a prisoner in his own body. Most of the incidents take place in the mind of Joe and are narrated by an omniscient narrator. He starts to remember his parents, his father's death, and his breakup with his first girlfriend and his love and affection for a girl named Kareen. Joe at first wants to die but later contemplates upon living and helping others understand what war is really about. He attempts to communicate via Morse code. After months of unsuccessful tapping of his head on his pillow, he finally succeeds in communicating with the military. He asks them to be put in a glass coffin and toured around the country as a part of a freak show. When he realises that the army cannot give him that, he simply requests to be euthanized. The military could fulfil none of Joe's wishes and the story ends leaving Joe in that condition waiting for death.

While Dalton Trumbo's novel deals with incidents of the First World War, it was published in the year the Second War had broken out. It has often been used as a tool of condemnation of war during the Vietnam Era and even in the 21st century during the post 9/11 days. It was more or less influenced by the visions which Trumbo himself witnessed during his earliest years. While the Great War was presented by the representatives of the people as something which is chivalric as well as glamorous in nature, Trumbo and other Americans realised what the global conflict was really about when they saw wounded and exhausted soldiers returning home after the war was over. The title of the novel is derived from the phrase, "Johnny get your gun", which has historically been used in North America as an encouraging call to the young men to join the military. While the novel itself, the situations depicted in it and Joe Bonham are all fictional, the tale was inspired by a real life soldier who was wounded more or less in a similar manner Joe was. The Prince of Wales had visited this particular soldier and Trumbo had read an article about it. It became one of most widely read books during

and after WWII and has often been discussed and analysed because of its brutal attack on war as well as the military, despite written in a pacifist manner. It has often been considered more horrifying than any Gothic novel ever written and many consider it one of the scariest books ever because of the horrifying situation the protagonist is put in by the author.

The condemnation of war is not something which came into prominence in the twentieth century during the two global conflicts. All of us have read in our schooldays about the great Maurya emperor Ashoka [rule c. 268 - c. 232 BCE], who after seeing the destruction the Kalinga War, which he himself had waged had caused, gave up the comfortable and luxurious life of royalty and dedicated himself to the preaching of Buddhism. When we read the short stories of the French writer Guy De Maupassant [1850-93], we realise how much he was affected by the Franco-Prussian War as many of his stories are full of sad reflections of wartime misery. However, the advancement in weaponry and a worldwide platform turned WWI into the most shocking, thought provoking and literally discussed conflicts of the century. Here we can talk about some of those poetical works which were produced by a group of young soldiers of the war, categorised as 'War poetry'. The group included English poets like Siegfried Sassoon [1886-1967], Rupert Brooke [1887-1915], Isaac Rosenberg [1890-1918] and Wilfred Owen [1893-1918]. These young soldiers were gifted with marvellous poetic abilities and they opted to use this gift to portray what a soldier feels and deals with in a battlefield. The sad realities of war coupled with the mysterious and scary nature of death, the futility of the manslaughter war results in and empathy with the slain adversary are some of the noteworthy features of 'war poetry.' To illustrate this, let us quote from the poem 'Dreamers' by Siegfried Sassoon

"Soldiers are citizens of death's grey land,
Drawing no dividend from time's to-morrows.
In the great hour of destiny they stand,
Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.
Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win
Some flaming, fatal climax with their lives.
Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
They think of firelit homes, clean beds and wives."

In the poem, Sassoon laments for soldiers who are treated as fighting machines devoid of any emotions other than slaughter. The pain and agony related to being separated from their wives and children and the prospect of victory even at the face of destruction and doom are the sad realities a fighter must deal with. We here get a glimpse of the disillusionment with war. Another great poet in this vogue was Wilfred Owen who died in action in 1918. He is generally considered as having more merit and talent than most of the other war poets. One of his poems, 'Strange Meeting', presents with a supernatural arena where a soldier has a rendezvous with another soldier he had killed. The poem deals with the horrors of war and how it turns man against man. War is described here as an entity which at first draws young men towards it by luring them through its external coating which is of machismo and bravery, only to reveal its horrifying insides later. War is evil and humanity can never thrive in peace as long as hatred and megalomania of our leaders throw us into conflicts. In order to illustrate this point, let us quote from Owens 'Strange Meeting'

"Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here."

The meeting in hell between the two soldiers allows the other soldier to tell the poet how he was as cheerful and hopeful as he currently is. He went running after the wildest beauty on earth and paid heavily for it.

From the above examples of war poets, we can understand how the war was beginning to cast its ugliness not only upon the common public but upon the soldiers as well. This disillusionment which these poets dealt with was faced by many other soldiers as well. Having fought for their country for reasons not fully comprehended by them, they were slowly beginning to question the values and moralities of the

manslaughter of combat. While poetry was used to shock and baffle the wartime public, Dalton Trumbo decided to use fiction for a similar purpose. Joe Bonham's character serves to teach every man of what the risks and realities of war are. But the authorities seek to hide the truth of war from the public, for people won't join the military again if they begin to realize the truth. It becomes clear to us when we read that part of the novel where Joe uses Morse code to ask the military personnel for a favor. He asks to be put in a transparent, glass box and toured around the country as a part of a freak show, showing people what war is really about. He is immediately denied this favor, as they cannot allow the public to see Joe and loathe the army. In the end Joe is left in that ghastly state, waiting his end. The end of the novel is sadder and shocking than anything created by man could ever be.

In the conclusion, it would be wise to state that Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* has always been and will always be, one of the most shocking pieces of anti-war literature which did not deal with those who died but with one who survived in a valueless stump of his former self only in order to repent his decisions and the novel presents to the public a picture of war which the prospects of chivalry and heroism have long hidden from them.

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