

Student Sample

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“Soldiers Home”: Never the Same

Post-traumatic stress disorder sufferers can feel emotionally detached, withdraw from friends and family, and lose interest in everyday activities. Ernest Hemingway details how a World War 1 veteran reacts to being back in the States for the first time in the short story “Soldiers Home.” Harold Krebs, the main character, attempts to return to a life of normalcy; however, he faces an extremely daunting task, finding himself living in a world where he feels mentally and emotionally isolated. By examining Krebs’ relationship with his family and the local women, the reader can better understand how a war veteran can struggle and ultimately fail to acclimate himself after returning home.

Krebs’ inability to reacquaint himself with his family illustrates his internal strife. Hemingway uses Krebs’ mother as a catalyst for revealing Krebs’ character to the reader, not only by what he does talk to her about, but also what he does not, or cannot say to her. In the beginning, he does attempt to talk to her about the war, but while listening to some of the war stories, she would seem uninterested (Hemingway 2). Krebs does feel the need to talk about his war experiences, but does not think he can get anyone to listen unless he embellishes the stories (1). At one point, he becomes nauseous from the lies he told and no longer wants to discuss the war. One critic, J.F. Kobler, argues that the exaggeration is more of a reflection of Hemingway’s own personal coming out about the lies he told about his involvement in World War 1 (379). During an exchange with a fellow soldier, Krebs even makes it clear to a stranger how he felt,

“that he had been badly, sickeningly frightened all the time” (2). Krebs unwillingness to tell his mother these thoughts shows he is not only adversely affected physically, but mentally, in that he can tell complete stranger details he would not share with his own mother. The fact that he does not confide in her about his strong feelings during the war shows how emotionally isolated he truly is. She could not possibly understand how scared he was, but a mother’s duty is to care for her child and uplift them in the darkest of times. Roberts asserts that Krebs is not disoriented from the fear of war or death, but the “Midwestern view” of war and the “lie of life” (517). Krebs faced the tangible reality of his own mortality during war and was forced to accept it; however, once he returns home, he cannot will himself into dealing with the monotony of everyday tasks. McKenna and Raabe conversely state that Krebs’ experiences at war, as dangerous as they could have been, are an innate part of his “temperament.” Krebs is not struggling to habituate himself because his war experiences scarred him, but because he, as an “artisan,” is not meant for the “safe, orderly, unexciting life” his family wants for him (206-207). He is no longer fit for the traditional Midwestern customs his mother wants him to experience like settling down with a “nice girl” or finding traditional work (Hemingway 5). McKenna and Raabe go as far to state that Krebs’ mother denies him of his true self. Krebs is an artisan by nature, and the idea of his mother nurturing him when he is acclimating back into society, stunts that growth even more (205).

In the most poignant exchange between Krebs and his mother, she asks him if he loves her and as rigid as his emotions, he answers with a simple and harsh no (5). Krebs detached response and knowing it would only hurt his mother signifies the disconnect between someone he should genuinely love, or at least care for, and himself. Hemingway offers a different side of Krebs to the reader when he and his “favorite sister” discuss indoor baseball (4). For a brief

moment, Krebs has a playful, genuine conversation with his younger sister; one that someone would expect between siblings and yet, so very different from what is expected from Krebs.

Roberts believes this conversation shows that there is still hope for Krebs and it can be a turning point in his readjustment into society (517). However, the small light of familial bonds between him and his sister is extinguished when Krebs decides to move from his home and never attends her baseball game (Hemingway 5). Even as he is about to make a major life decision by leaving his home, he feels remorse, but not for the hurtful things he said to his mother, but for the lies he told her when trying to console her. Krebs is an artisan, a strong-willed and independent individual, and by lying to his mother to make her feel better, he betrays those “core values” (McKenna and Raabe 205).

Hemingway’s repetitive use of various phrases to describe Krebs’ feelings towards the local women further reveals Krebs’ turmoil. Krebs states multiple times that the girls are “too complicated” or in a “complicated world” (2-3). This phrase not only helps define Krebs’ being far away from the women in terms of physical distance, but also how he sees himself mentally as an outsider. Krebs enjoys observing the different women from the comfort of his front porch, he thinks they are beautiful, taking down all the details of “their pattern”:

They all wore sweaters and shirt waists with round Dutch collars. It was a pattern. He liked to look at them from the front porch as they walked on the other side of the street. He liked to watch them walking under the shade of the trees. He liked the round Dutch collars above their sweaters. He liked their silk stockings and flat shoes. He liked their bobbed hair and the way they walked. (2)

Nänny believes that the pattern is an essential characteristic of “chiastic order” that Hemingway embeds in much of his writing. And this order is what many critics point to as the thing that

gives Hemingway his effectiveness when describing Krebs (70). Krebs shows such a keen interest in these women from afar, going so far as to describe every detail of their wardrobe and likenesses. His obsession with the pattern of the young women's wardrobe shows his desire "for organization and predictability" in his unstable view of the world (Ullrich 366). As the setting shifts to town or the ice-cream parlor, where he is physically closer to the young women, their "appeal to him was not very strong" (2). He does not go into any detail, really, about how the girls look when he is in town. Instead, he simply describes them as too complicated once again. His apparent inverse attraction for the girls shows how fractured his view of himself is in this world. One they obviously share and yet, he cannot accept or believe that he has a place in it. Krebs shows unwillingness to court these women because he does not want to suffer any consequences or build the foundation of a relationship when things are "starting to get good again" (Hemingway 2). These ideas insinuate that Krebs had once held a lover or at least been romantically involved with a woman, who is now lost to him. Krebs seems to have lost someone that meant a lot to him, it is fair to question whether it was love or not, but it is evident he does not have this emotional bond any longer.

Love requires both parties to be at their most vulnerable, to absolutely trust in one another, to give oneself to another person completely. Ullrich suggests that Krebs' name is a metaphor for a crab and equates him observing the girls from the comfort of his front porch to a crab's shell. Krebs is caught in the dilemma of wanting to reenter society and his own cowardice of facing any consequences by doing so, thus he chooses the porch as his medium (367). By placing physical distance between him and anyone who could get close to him emotionally, it serves as a defense mechanism for not wanting to be hurt again as he specifically states: "he did not want consequences ever again" (Hemingway 2). He cannot betray his true feelings; he is

interested in the girls, albeit from afar, and the pain of physically being closer to them reveals the disconnect in his emotional stability.

If Krebs had any chance of truly returning home, he failed to do so emotionally and mentally. Hemingway's emphasis on his inability to reconnect with his family, especially his mother and sister, and his emotional disconnect with the local women outlined how troublesome war can be on an individual even when back home. Krebs' deepest struggles stemmed from accepting himself back into society. He harbored his own view of himself: an outsider. Krebs was ultimately forced to move on and leave his family and home in Oklahoma behind. Hemingway's "Soldiers Home" leaves the reader with the cruel reality that even if these veterans return home physically, they can, like Krebs, fail to ever return emotionally.

Works Cited

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