

Blood Shaking My Heart: *War* Response and Diagnostic

What have we given?

My friend, blood shaking my heart,

The awful daring of a moment's surrender

Which an age of prudence can never retract

By this, and this only, we have existed

Which is not to be found in our obituaries

Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider...

This has always been true, even if we rarely realize it: in every war, one man dies last.

Someone has to be the last one to die – someone's son or daughter, someone's brother or sister, someone's father or mother, someone's husband or wife, someone's lover, someone's friend. The war – no matter which it is – always ends **just** a little too late for one person.

It's uncomfortable to look unflinchingly at war, just as it's uncomfortable to stare at the sun. In both cases, when you close your eyes, you still see what you'd been watching...and when you open them again, you still feel blind.

I read Pirandello's story for the first time as an eighth-grader. I was supposed to write a short story, then collect four others and bind all five into an anthology. When I went home, I found a book called *21 Great Stories* resting in my family's bookshelves; the project seemed to have completed itself!

War was the first tale in the book, and thus the first I read. It only took up five pages of the book, so I read it quickly...and by the end, I was sobbing. I wasn't crying because of a specific moment; in fact, I think I started before I read that last harrowing line. I remember feeling devastated and overwhelmed. But why?

Two years later, I read William Butler Yeats's *The Second Coming*, and four of the poem's first six lines caught my eye:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned...

As soon as I read that passage, I thought of *War*, and realized **that** was what had made me cry: that vision of a world succumbing to bloody anarchy, full of people desperately clinging to a crumbling center as things collapse around them. Pirandello took those people, jammed them in a train car, and let them talk.

It's been ten years since I made that connection, and I've wondered whether Pirandello wanted to evoke that reaction from his readers ever since. After all, when I read *War*, I was too

young to look between the lines Pirandello wrote; I was looking at what he had written. But I cried because of what Pirandello didn't say; none of the characters come out and say anything like what Yeats had written. (Interestingly, the husband comes closest, when he follows his initial "Are you all right, dear?" with "Nasty world." Pirandello's background lies in playwriting, where dialogue carries a ton of weight, and I think that choice of dialogue, so easily skipped, represents the whole story – a tentative search for connection, reassurance, and comfort, followed by a bitter acknowledgement of reality.)

That's why I love this story: the subtext and the subtlety, the way those beautiful, terrible lines leave echoes when they end. In them, I see love, honor, family, sacrifice, selfishness, patriotism, loyalty, courage, wisdom, grief, and so much more. I see so many things in the words the characters speak, in the subtle dynamics of their conversation and situation, and in the things they never say: the unvoiced thoughts, silent acknowledgements, and, in the moment before that final agonizing shot, the realization that shook my heart: that one man is always the last to go.

I've grappled with this tale for years, and I'd like to ask you about it now. I'm not at all convinced that my reaction was what Pirandello was looking to inspire in his readers; I'd like you to analyze what he was trying to get out of his readers. What sort of response is he trying to evoke? How is a reader supposed to feel at the end? How can one tell? Which lines form the basis of your analysis? I'd love to hear your thoughts, and as always, I'm not just looking for what you think – I want to know why you think it.

Tips for Success

- Assert, don't opine – your words should reflect the confidence you'd feel when making factual statements. If you feel I might disagree, anticipate the points I'd raise and select the specific evidence you'd need to counter my objections or answer my questions.
- When you're using quotes, make sure they flow in the context of your paper; your evidence should be evidence, not a distraction.
- Write honestly – don't just make something up to fill space! Decide what you want to teach me about a story I already love.
- Analyze, don't summarize. I've virtually memorized this story; you don't need to tell me what it's about. Refer to events we're mutually familiar with an awareness of that familiarity; don't re-state something we both already know for its own sake.
- Good writers establish voices, even in formal works, through their diction. Choose words that sound like you could feel comfortable saying them. If you're not comfortable reading the sentences you write aloud, you usually need to edit them.
- Make sure you finish the thoughts you start!

Good luck, children of mine.