

ANALYSIS

From Here to Eternity (1951)



James Jones

(1921-1977)

“Illinois-born author, served in the Pacific with the army (1939-44), his experiences furnishing background for *From Here to Eternity* (1951), a Naturalistic novel about army life in Hawaii on the eve of the Pearl Harbor attack. His later fiction includes *Some Came Running* (1957), a long, panoramic novel set in a Midwestern town between World War II and the Korean War; *The Pistol* (1959), a novella about an army private who accidentally obtains a pistol that comes to be his symbol of safety in war; *The Thin Red Line* (1962), a novel about a U.S. infantry company on Guadalcanal in 1942-43, a sequel to his first novel; *Go to the Widow-Maker* (1967), presenting a successful playwright’s quest for manhood through his experiences in learning to skin-dive; *The Merry Month of May* (1971), depicting crises, personal and political, of an American family in Paris during the riots of May 1968; *A Touch of Danger* (1973), a detective tale set on a Greek island; and *Whistle* (1978), the final volume of Jones’s World War II trilogy, depicting the difficulties four wounded soldiers have in adjusting to civilian life. *The Ice-Cream Headache* (1968) collects stories and a novella, and *Viet Journal* (1974) describes his trip to Vietnam in 1973....

From Here to Eternity... Private Robert E. Lee Prewitt reports to a U.S. army base in Hawaii in 1941 and is subjected to psychological and physical harassment because, though known as a boxer in civilian life, he refuses to fight in the division championship since he had once accidentally blinded a friend in the ring. He breaks under ‘the treatment’ and hits a noncom, for which he is sent to the stockade; there he experiences the brutality of Fatso Judson, the sergeant in charge, a sadist responsible for the death of his fellow prisoner Blues Berry, but from whom his friend Angelo had escaped by discharge after feigning madness. Prewitt kills Judson in a knife fight and runs off to hide with Lorene, a prostitute he loves. When the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor, Prewitt is killed by an M.P. as he tries to return to his company.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 387, 268

“As author of the most successful war novel of the period after 1945, Jones is *de facto* leader of what might be termed the Neo-Hemingway school of fiction among the younger generation of American writers.

This is not to say that his style consistently imitates Hemingway's (although it sometimes does) or that he consciously took Hemingway as his model. He has admitted a debt to Thomas Wolfe, and actually *From Here to Eternity* outwardly resembles *Three Soldiers* and *What Price Glory* more than it does *A Farewell to Arms* or *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Jones' novel nevertheless stands in the line of development in modern fiction that is commonly associated with Hemingway, and which owes a great deal to Hemingway as innovator and pathfinder. The qualities Jones shares with the older writer are those which the general public associates with the name of Hemingway: the understated and laconic dialogue, the violence presented without emotional comment, the stoic and hard-boiled view of character...

A comparison of *From Here to Eternity* with *A Farewell to Arms* or even *Across the River and into the Trees*, however, will demonstrate the differences between the two writers. Hemingway is concerned chiefly with personal and internal reactions; Jones, in spite of his subjectivity, views his characters mainly from the outside. Hemingway...usually writes his entire novel from the point of view of a semi-autobiographical protagonist; Jones switches point of view frequently, so that each of his characters is seen in succession from the standpoint of the others. Finally, Hemingway generally uses coarse language and shocking incident in implied contrast to the higher human values in his story; Jones seems to show an adolescent fascination with vulgarity for its own sake. He does not even tacitly indicate disapproval of the premeditated murder which the hero of *From Here to Eternity* commits to revenge himself on a stockade guard. It is true that Prewitt himself is eventually destroyed through this act and that his victim is a brute and a sadist, yet Jones to the end apparently considers Prewitt merely an unfortunate victim of destiny who was ridden to the breaking point and who struck back in the way a man must if he is cornered. Hemingway's ethics are consistent...but Jones' ethics seem confused, poorly thought out, and in the end damaging to the integrity of his own hero.

It is not the ethical content of *From Here to Eternity*, however, which is its most important quality. Jones has a precise memory, a masterful eye for detail, and an acute ear for dialogue; his narrative style creates the illusion of reality—of 'being there'—as well as the style of any contemporary writer. His characters instantly come to life as soon as they begin to speak; their language, monotonously and conventionally obscene, nevertheless has the interest which always attaches to unmistakable authenticity. His slang is convincing, never artificial or contrived, never 'cute' or ingenious. In short, his skill in characterization is based mainly on dialogue.

His best characters are those closest to his own personality; his women, for example, are two-dimensional and unconvincing. Most of all he fails in his presentation of officers; here his literary skill is hampered by his obvious subjective antagonism, his 'enlisted man's complex' that makes it impossible for him to view officers with any objectivity. Thus his scenes in the Schofield officers' club are mere caricature, sometimes amusing but never convincing. Jones, a soldier, wrote about soldiers and even in a certain sense wrote for soldiers; this is the limitation of his method. Yet within these limits he has produced an important book, one of the most important American war novels to be written by a member of the post-1945 generation.

From Here to Eternity (1951) begins as Robert E. Lee ('Prew') Prewitt, a soldier in Schofield Barracks in Hawaii, is transferred from a bugle corps to an infantry line company at his own request. The time is late 1940, approximately a year before the Japanese attack on the Hawaiian Islands. Prewitt, a tough uneducated boy from the coal-mining town of Harlan, Kentucky, has the character to make a good soldier, but he soon finds himself in trouble. A skilled boxer, he has previously blinded an opponent in an Army tournament and has made up his mind never to box again. Unfortunately the outfit into which he transfers is one in which favor and promotion go only to athletes.

Captain Holmes, the company commander, is brow-beaten by his athletic-minded colonel to win victory for his company in the Post athletic competition at all costs, and he determines to force Prewitt to box or break him in the attempt. For months Prewitt undergoes the 'treatment'—he is given dirty and unpleasant tasks to do, mistreated by non-coms, punished for minor infractions, and ostracized by other members of the company. He stands this as long as he can, but finally he is forced into a corner: Ike Galovitch, an illiterate and incompetent drillmaster, pulls a knife on him, and Prewitt knocks the non-commissioned

officer down. For this he is sent to the post stockade, a virtual concentration camp where prisoners are tortured by sadistic guards and in some cases mutilated or murdered.

Prewitt resolves to have revenge on S/Sgt. Judson ('Fatso'), and after he serves his term he waylays Fat so in a Honolulu alley, challenges him to a knife duel, and kills him. Prewitt, badly cut himself, goes A.W.O.L. and takes shelter in the house of Alma Schmidt, called Lorene, a prostitute with whom he fell in love before he went to the stockade. While he is convalescing the Japanese attack of December 7, 1941 takes place, and the war is on; after several days of restless brooding Prewitt, still ill, leaves the house to try to regain his outfit and is shot by a sentry who takes him for a deserter or a spy.

Around Prewitt's story are woven the stories of several other characters: Angelo Maggio, a likable Italian-American who dislikes authority, bests up two Military Police single-handed, and is eventually killed by sadistic guards in the stockade; Sergeant Milton Warden, a hard-boiled but competent professional soldier who has a dangerous affair with Captain Holmes's wife Karen; Colonel Delbert, a bull-headed and anti-democratic personification of the military mind; Isaac Bloom, a Jewish soldier who commits suicide when his long efforts to win the esteem of his fellow soldiers come to nothing; and Jack Malloy, a tough and unbreakable prisoner Prewitt meets in the stockade, a philosopher and natural leader of men who gives Prewitt the courage he needs to stand up under the inhuman punishment."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 284-88

"The writer who carried naturalism as far as it would go in the postwar period was James Jones, and his use of this mode is both his glory and the source of some of his weaknesses. In *From Here to Eternity* (1951), he decided to meet the problems raised by naturalism head-on. Using the peacetime army not as a metaphor for society but as society itself—life does not extend for Jones beyond army life on Hawaii before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor—he attempted to fight through the old Dreiser, Farrell, Dos Passos, Hemingway battle.

This is a quintessentially American novel, full of the difficulties the American writer must face squarely. Aside from the achievement of the work, whether one finds for or against, the reader must marvel at Jones's courage in taking up such old forms and giving them vitality. For ideologically, the confrontation between doom and the individual is a trap; there is no fictional escape. Jones does not try to parry the blow, by making Prewitt's problems inherent. That is, rather than succumbing to the 'fate versus individual' format of traditional tragedy, he has shifted his ground and made Prewitt the architect of his own demise, more Elizabethan than classically conceived. Consciousness and self join with coercive forces.

It is a trap, nevertheless. For all Jones's ingenuity and Prewitt's dogged refusal to succumb, the peacetime army circumvents maneuverability. Jones attempts a large-scale presentation by catching Prewitt between Art (the bugle), which he gives up, and War (boxing), which he withdraws from formally while remaining a fighter. The conception here is ambiguous, although we can see, through Jones's eyes, as an effort to thrust Prewitt into the larger world which his lowly role in the army negates. He is, in this larger sense, a young man moving between Art and War...a small man who defies the army after he has moved in regions unknown to those who imprison and punish him. He has had his moments of greatness, as bugler and as boxer, and now he comes to us as a legend. Jones's aim was to make him lifesize, but to provide an immortal past, from Kentucky coal fields to the worlds of Art and War.

But even that attempt runs into ideological problems. For Prewitt's forsaking of Art and War in order to carry on his own kind of war has diminished him. His past may be glorious, but his present is small-scaled. And Jones is never clear how Prewitt's struggle to remain an individual can make sense when he has volunteered for an organization that punishes individuality. Prewitt is in the army by free choice—it is peacetime—because it is somehow preferable to coal mining or other demeaning work; and yet once within that organization, he insists on antithetical forms of behavior. The terms of the army are clear: forgo individuality, except when drunk, submit to discipline dictated by the organization, show mechanical obedience to superiors. Prewitt has accepted this insofar as he thinks of himself as a 'thirty-year soldier.'

He has limited his area of maneuverability by virtue of his choices, and yet he insists on his choices, even when he has divested himself of those skills which would have enlarged his ability to move.

The three sides, Prewitt, the army, and skills, do not add up to a triangle. They are, in fact, three sides seeking a structure they can form. Jones's admirable desire to search out Prewitt's individuality in an organization that stifles it cannot ideologically sustain the novel. Only Maggio has found a means, by seeking a Section 8 discharge, as a crazy; but then he leaves the army and enters civilian life a marked man, decisions Prewitt rejects. With the ideological underpinning so shaky, seven untenable, the novel succumbs to naturalistic traps... Jones finds his measure in individuals: Prewitt to some extent, Karen Holmes, and Warden (the Sergeant appears to be a type American writers are most at home with)... It is Jones's point that whatever good feeling or honesty derives from army life, derives from the lower-class soldier, and more so from the dog soldier. Like his American Indian namesake, an outcast of sorts who became a kamikaze in action, the dog soldier moves along the margins of the army, but is useful during combat or other crucial situations. He is, to some degree, sacrificial, a scapegoat, allowed his eccentricities and marginality as long as he does his combat job.

There is, of course, a good deal of Wobblyism and romanticism here, such as we find in Dos Passos's biographical insets in *U.S.A.* Jones brings to the army this sense of the outsider socially, economically, and politically who, somehow, expresses something valuable. Unlike Mailer, who was clinical in his treatment of these men, Jones is sympathetic and yet honest in the face of their terrible flaws and self-destructiveness. Among the 'other' class, the officers, only Karen Holmes—the wife of a captain—is presented sympathetically, a strange turnabout which has not drawn much attention... Karen Holmes is such a remarkable portrait of a woman for a male novelist in the 1940s... Warden faces Holmes with the terrible fact that his wife had had an affair with Stark, not the mess sergeant, in the earlier days of her marriage. She then goes into her then famous discourse on hysterectomy, but the clinical details—and Jones's awkwardness in handling them—are subsumed in her passion for expressing her rights.

What is most important, novelistically, is that Jones can cross class lines, so that the woman who expresses and defines herself is of a class Jones and Warden detest and is, further, married to a man who embodies a caste structure that is also anathema. Thus, in the depiction of Karen Holmes, we have a threshold fictional experience which is almost unique: the wife of an officer, a woman herself not lower class, and a woman who insists on her priorities, understands her victimization, and resents what she is expected to accept. When Captain Holmes gives gonorrhea, like a gift, to his young wife, he imposes upon her not only a social disease but a multilevel experience: she is to accept, she is the receiver of whatever the male offers, she must assume inferiority (he is, after all, the captain), and she must make believe nothing is wrong. All this she rebels against, first with Stark and then with Warden, in the sole way she has of breaking even, by cuckolding her husband with men in his company. The wife who cuckolds is ordinarily in war novels a woman of the lowest sensibility, where here she is not only understandable but sympathetic. The modulations of class and sex in Karen are, in a sense, freakish in a war novel, only possible because most of *From Here to Eternity* occurs during peacetime. Once the war novel involves combat, then all sexual contact will be on the run or on the road...

In any event, Karen has not only to present her case, which Jones justifies, but to win over Warden to her point of view, a task made all the more difficult because of their class and rank differences. This is not a situation Jones stumbled into—he is far too conscious of every nuance—and we can only say he has described in detail the kind of male-female relationship that we do not associate with a male American novelist. And when female novelists of the 1960s and 1970s began to present a woman like Karen Holmes, they tended to declass her and make her experiences sexual; freedom starts there, or in her finances. Jones has Karen use her sex—it is, after all, her sole weapon—but ultimately it is marginal to her need to define herself and what has happened to her. Although Warden may not completely accept this, he does understand it; and if it does not change all his attitudes about women, it changes his attitude toward one woman and toward himself in relationship to her....

Warden is the sole character in the novel capable of change. One of the problems with the war novel is that characters remain static, part of that naturalistic noose the war situation tightens around the novelist's skills. Peculiarly, the peacetime army is more amenable to character change. For while Warden has

significant doubts about himself before Pearl Harbor, once the attack occurs, he reverts, not unusually, to form: a brawling, drunken tough guy. Yet whatever the immediate situation, Warden represents a center of sorts, a bellweather. The form of the novel, as with nearly all novels of the military, depends on an ideological center; with the exception of *The Gallery*, such novels are rarely experimental with point of view, narrative positioning, tone, or elements of discontinuity.... He centered on Warden, in the sense that Warden is dead center, a warden or keeper of what is, the very middle of the army. To his left (with no direct political identification) stand Prewitt, and Jack Malloy—men who while identifying with the army want the kind of movement a military organization denies. To the right stand the officers, of Fatso, and those like them, men who can carry on because Warden holds the center together. The structure of the novel lies here, not in narrative but in ideological terms.

And ideology depends on class. For every major decision made in the novel is based on class differentiation. Prewitt kills Fatso because the latter is an enlisted man and, therefore, 'a traitor against his kind.' Warden refuses the commission that would have kept him together with Karen Holmes, because he would then become bourgeois, and it is the middle class that lives by brown-nosing. 'And now I'm supposed to go on and become an officer, the very symbol of every goddamn thing I've always stood up against, and not feel anything about it.' To be honest, he must reject the commission; to be dishonest means he can claim Karen.

Warden has mastered the amount of give the army allows without ceasing to be a mechanical organization. Having tested out the potentialities of every situation, he knows that the army runs on its first sergeants, not on its officers or enlisted men. Those on either side dare the risk of self-destruction. By exploiting the center, Warden controls the vitals of the organization, while he can drink, make love to an officer's wife, and even keep the AWOL Prewitt on the company roster. If, with Warden, Jones has found his structural premise, then Prewitt is, of course, condemned; for he passes outside that central structural concept where continuity is possible. By moving beyond the center, he flirts with discontinuity, as would Warden if he had accepted the commission. Prewitt tries not to be himself: he should box and play the bugle, he should not read books; he should keep his eye on the main goal, to be a thirty-year man, his own decision. Anything that deviates from that, and he deviates in all, will prove destructive in terms of the ideological centering of the novel.

It is very easy to mock Jones's achievement, especially if we measure it against the sophisticated works that appeared in the 1950s and 1960s. The later period, with the sleeker, worldly novels of Bellow and Roth, as well as Gaddis and then Pynchon, make Jones appear in comparison as a primitive. Further, one can always point to the infelicities of phrasing. They abound. The novel will never become a primer of how the craft of fiction is carried out. But such criticism, like Leavis's of Conrad's adjectival excesses in *Heart of Darkness*, ultimately gives way to other, more significant matters. For when we think of a service culture, Jones's novel is our archetype; just as Conrad's novella becomes our archetypal vision of Africa....

Jones carried his social beliefs deeply into the makeup of the peacetime army, finding there an exact mirror of the world outside.... What gives Jones's Depression-era enlisted men such reality is their vitality in situations... Bloom, for example, the Jew who wants acceptance and who boxes to gain it, moves around the edges. Jones's handling of him (from the author's point of view) is vibrant but noxious; Bloom has almost no redeeming features, and we are always reminded that his personality derives from his Jewishness.... Although Prewitt says his struggle with Bloom has no Jewish overtones, Jones's treatment indicates it does. When the voice is Prewitt's, we are warned against a racial motive, but when the voice is Jones's, racial overtones are present.

Bloom has no business in the army; it is no place for Jews, even poor ones. Maggio, on the other hand, is presented sympathetically: the feisty, lower-class Italian who defies authority. Maggio's successful achievement in gaining a Section 8 discharge brings about a significant reordering of Prewitt's priorities. Maggio has made his mark on the company, on the army, on life. He has demonstrated that a skinny outsider can conspire to outwit the army, and succeed where others have failed. Those who share Warden's center are Stark, the mess sergeant, and Chief Choate, a romanticized Indian, a type we see later in Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Chief Choate has modeled himself on Jim Thorpe, the extraordinary Indian athlete, but drinks himself into a stupor every night because he knows what people really think of

Indians, Thorpe having been stripped of all his medals. The Chief stands as the kind of character who succeeds in the army by doing its business; like Prewitt, he has given up boxing, but he compensates in other ways.

When Prewitt moves outside the center, he, strangely enough, shares territory with the really despicable characters, men like Ike Galovitch, a Yugoslav, and Fatso, who has no meaning except as a sadist. Probably based on men whom Jones detested beyond control, or else emblematic of the peacetime army, they are lost as characters; even Bloom is redeemed by his suicide. Similarly, Jack Malloy, the Stockade philosopher, has a purity that aligns him, as a character, with those of pure evil: no give, no life. His philosophy of passive resistance in the individual's life has, finally, not more meaning for Prewitt than does passive resistance for Americans once Pearl Harbor was attacked.

The structure of the novel, then, carries down into every character whose departure from the center marks his doom. Thus, Jones has, in this intensely American work of fiction, exploited the trap or inescapable paradoxes awaiting the writer: seeking holes in the fabric, looking for ways to escape doom, then dooming any character who attempts an assertion of individuality; finally, demonstrating that the center locates salvation, whereas the margins, however interesting, romantic, nostalgic, or exploratory, prove destructive. Romance comes up against the real world: Prewitt, our man of Art and War, against Warden, our man, finally, of order growing out of personal disorder. Prewitt is our Orpheus, torn to pieces; Warden our Apollo, fun-loving but aware of the godlike powers invested in him, the man who makes things work. It is the old American paradox. Melville saw it clearly, with his Ahab our Prewitt, his Ishmael our Warden, the Pequod our peacetime army.

While we tend to think of *From Here to Eternity* as a 'war novel,' the war is incidental; it is part of the working out, not of the forward drive. When the attack on Pearl Harbor does occur, the shape of the novel has presented itself; we are only one hundred pages from the end. The war, of course, dooms Prewitt. What was possible in the peacetime army is no longer feasible in war. This, too, is part of the trap—we recall it from *A Farewell to Arms*. But heavy as the influence of that novel is, in presence, tone, even prose style, Jones has tried to keep his distance... Karen Holmes insists on her needs, and Warden does not mince words about his desire for regular sex. Jones is more tuned in to how fleeing a romantic attachment is even when it is profound and honest, how it moves in waves of sexual passion and then fades, the lovers moving out of each other's lives. For a novel that several critics have labeled immature, poorly written, and beneath literary notice, *From Here to Eternity* has maturities that few other novels have duplicated."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 101-05

"James Ramon Jones was an instantaneous success with the publication of his first novel, *From Here to Eternity*, which received wide acclaim as one of the best fictional treatments of World War II, even though it deals chiefly with the peacetime U.S. Army just prior to Pearl Harbor.... Jones was stationed in Schofield Barracks in Hawaii when the Japanese attacked on December 7, 1941. He remained in Hawaii until late in 1942, when he was shipped to Guadalcanal. Wounded in January 1943, he was sent to hospitals in California, Tennessee, and Kentucky before being discharged in July 1944....

From Here to Eternity is a thoroughly naturalistic novel about the wild, difficult, and dangerous life led by the enlisted men in the Army who were stationed in Hawaii just prior to American involvement in World War II. The men about whom Jones wrote were men of principle trying to survive in an organization run by men without principle. One of them, Robert E. Lee Prewitt, is a fine bugler and a skilled boxer, but he rejects both of his beloved skills, because of his resentment of others who are exploiting them. Prewitt is beaten, imprisoned, and eventually killed. His friend Sergeant Warden has an affair with the wife of an officer; he cannot protect Prewitt, and in the end he cannot protect his lover. *From Here to Eternity* was originally projected as the introductory section of a long novel about the war. Yet it was itself a very long novel, and other interests distracted Jones from his purpose temporarily....

Jones's narrative style is admired by his defenders and attacked as sloppy and turgid by hostile critics. The author thought of himself as working with 'colloquial forms,' as if the third-person narratives were being spoken in the language of uneducated ordinary people of limited verbal resources, the kinds of people his war novels describe. Jones's critical reputation has never regained the heights it attained with the publication of *From Here to Eternity*.... All of his books are written from a Naturalistic viewpoint, depicting a harsh and hostile world which destroys the hopes and dreams, and sometimes the lives, of the sensitive characters he portrays. Sex and violence are very much at the heart of Jones's concerns."

John M. Muste
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, Vol. 2
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 792-93

Michael Hollister (2015)