

ANALYSIS

“Soldier’s Home” (1925)



Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

The vignette preceding “Soldier’s Home” dramatizes the terror of coming under heavy bombardment in a trench during World War I. The Expressionistic style is stream of consciousness in short bursts retaining periods. Hemingway showed the influence of James Joyce before Faulkner did. The unnamed soldier in the trench is so terrified he begs Christ for his life, but his “foxhole conversion” lasts only as long as the bombardment. Out of danger he tells no one about how terrified he was and the tone at the end of the vignette turns satirical: “The next night back at Mestre he did not tell the girl he went upstairs with at the Villa Rossa about Jesus. And he never told anybody.” The vignette is an example of *synecdoche*, a summarizing metaphor representing common effects of war on religious faith. The fragment, like a piece of shrapnel from a shell burst, concentrates the experience and evokes the consciousness of a common unknown soldier like Harold Krebs in the story that follows.

The title “Soldier’s Home” refers to the home of a returning soldier and also, ironically, connotes a peaceful retirement home for old soldiers, introducing the themes of a longing for peace, reticence in aftershock, and accelerated maturation through experiences in a war. The story derives from Hemingway’s own feelings upon his return from the war in 1919, but Harold is not Ernest Hemingway. In the tradition of Realism, Krebs is a representative type, one of many thousands of combat veterans returning home from war. Many veterans of World Wars I and II and of the Korean and Vietnam and later wars have taken this story personally and appreciated Hemingway for writing it. That veterans of all wars recognize themselves in the story is proof that Hemingway expressed typical or “universal feelings.”

Harold Krebs is a common sort of name. Krebs is German for crab, an apparent allusion to lines in T. S. Eliot’s very influential poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1916): “I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.” Though he was brave in combat, in his aftershock Krebs resembles Prufrock. Deep down he is shy in society and does not feel like approaching women or speaking up. Avoiding conflict, he moves “sideways.” His home is middle class in Oklahoma, the middle of the country, and he went to a Methodist college in Kansas, a denomination in the middle of the

Protestant spectrum. Krebs is as common as can be. His conformity to middle-class values is imaged in the picture described in the first paragraph: “among his fraternity brothers, all of them wearing exactly the same height and style collar.” As if they are wearing uniforms and shackles around their necks.

The second paragraph contrasts a later picture of Krebs, “which shows him on the Rhine with two German girls and another corporal. Krebs and the corporal look too big for their uniforms.” This conveys that Krebs has outgrown the uniform, representing conformity, even while he was still in the military. He has learned, like Henry Fleming in Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, that war is not romantic, not even on the Rhine: “The German girls are not beautiful. The Rhine does not show in the picture.” The tone of honest realism is attained with simple, blunt, short, declarative sentences. Romanticism as represented by postcard shots of the Rhine is not in the picture for Krebs any more.

The aesthetics of Realism are traditionally Neoclassical, as exemplified by William Dean Howells’ love of Jane Austen and in particular by the fiction of Edith Wharton. Hemingway’s Neoclassicism is most extensive in *A Farewell to Arms* and is evident here in the symmetry of the first two paragraphs contrasting the two photographs, in the verbatim repetition—also symmetrical—of “There is a picture which shows him,” and in the simplicity and clarity of the objective declarative sentences.

The anti-heroic tone is set by anti-climax: “the greeting of heroes was over.” Krebs gets home too late. “Now the reaction had set in. People seemed to think it was rather ridiculous for Krebs to be getting back so late, years after the war was over.” There is a famous passage in *A Farewell to Arms* declaring that politicians had corrupted language so much that after World War I only place names where battles were fought had any true meaning or dignity anymore. Krebs “had been at Belleau Wood, Soissons, the Champagne, St. Mihiel and in the Argonne”—places where major battles had been fought. To say that he “had been at” rather than he fought at is modest and reticent, an understatement. People had heard “too many atrocity stories to be thrilled by actualities.” When he begins to feel like talking “Krebs found that to be listened to he had to lie.” By exaggerating he lost his satisfaction in having “done the one thing, the only thing for a man to do, easily and naturally, when he might have done something else, now lost their cool, valuable quality and then were lost themselves.” Krebs was brave. Since he represents the common man, this amounts to affirming that the average man does his duty under fire and is not cowardly, as the bitterly disillusioned Mark Twain came to believe.

“Krebs acquired the nausea in regard to experience that is the result of untruth or exaggeration.” He swings from one extreme to the other, from “unimportant lies” that he had been more heroic than he was to lies that he had not been brave at all and was “sickeningly frightened all the time. In this way he lost everything.” The one thing he loves is the honest game of pool. In both war and pool you take shots and try to win, but war is hot, pool is cool—calm and peaceful—the opposite of war. War is chaotic, pool is orderly. In pool, everything is out on the table, you do not have to depend on others, you can take control, you can move at your own pace, there is justice and skill is rewarded.

Harold lives a simple life, enjoying peace. His mother “often came in when he was in bed and asked him to tell her about the war, but her attention always wandered.” Always. You tell someone who ought to care more than anyone about the most important thing that ever happened to you and her attention wanders. She does not even try to fake an interest. His father is even worse: “His father was non-committal.” Harold committed himself to the world war and his father cannot even commit himself to a supportive remark. His parents show as little interest in him now as before he left home. They represent the self-absorbed complacent middle class who do not want to think about the war.

“Nothing had changed in the town except that the young girls had grown up.” But they lived in “a complicated world of defined alliances and shifting feuds.” This describes Europe and the relations that caused the war. Ironically, though Krebs fought with bravery at the front in Europe, he does not have the courage to get involved in courtship politics on the home front. Courting would require more lying. He merely sits on his front porch and watches the girls from a distance. Many girls now wear their hair cut short, they are faster now and more complicated. The repetition of “He liked” conveys Harold’s desire for simplicity and his war fatigue. He is so tired and numb he can barely think in complete sentences, let alone vary his syntax. The parallel of courtship to diplomacy in Europe that led to war is extended: “He did not

want to get into the intrigue and the politics. He did not want to have to do any courting. He did not want to tell any more lies. It wasn't worth it."

Krebs does not like the girls when he sees them in the Greek's ice cream parlor because they are immature. Throughout the story he is mature enough to be honest with himself, as when he admits that he is seeing the girls merely as attractive sex objects: "He did not want them themselves really. They were too complicated." He wants peace. "He wanted to live along without consequences." His need for simplicity and truth is emphasized by repetition of the word "consequences." Besides, he has learned in the army that, "You did not need a girl." Again there is a contrast of before and after: "First a fellow boasted how girls mean nothing to him, that he never thought of them, that they could not touch him. Then a fellow boasted that he could not get along without girls, that he had to have them all the time... That was a lie. It was all a lie both ways. You did not need a girl unless you thought about them."

His combat fatigue is expressed with extreme simplicity of thought and style, in sentences so short he seems barely able to think at all. In the aftershock of war, his feelings too are muted. As Emily Dickinson said, "After great pain a formal feeling comes." Avoiding contractions and internal punctuation gives the style a formality of tone that expresses the humility of Krebs and endows him with dignity. "When you were really ripe for a girl you always got one." He has had some experiences with women and has matured enough to be patient and go with the flow of Nature, as in Taoism. "Sooner or later it would come." This pantheistic faith in Nature is a major theme in Hemingway, as in his title rebutting Gertrude Stein and T. S. Eliot, *The Sun Also Rises*, even though sometimes Nature plays "dirty tricks," as in Catherine's death in childbirth in *A Farewell to Arms*. The verbatim repetition of "He had learned that in the army" emphasizes how much his war experience in the army has educated Krebs and changed him.

"Now he would have liked a girl if she had come to him and not wanted to talk. But here at home it was all too complicated." He prefers French and German girls because "You couldn't talk much and you did not need to talk. It was simple and you were friends." American girls are too complicated. "He did not want to leave Germany." Krebs is so alienated from his homeland that he would rather have stayed with the enemy. "He did not want to come home. Still, he had come home. He sat on the front porch." As the only internal punctuation mark in the paragraph the comma after "Still," has the effect of a heavy sigh. The paragraph is analogous to a periodic sentence with a comma for a climax. Through simplicity, brevity, repetition, sentence rhythms, formality of tone and artful punctuation Hemingway gives the sensitive reader a vicarious experience of the alienation and paralysis felt by a war veteran.

After a month at home, his simple routine helps him recover enough that "things were getting good again." He is able to face the war again by reading about it. "He had been a good soldier. That made a difference." Just when he is feeling better, his mother comes into his room and disturbs his peace. She tells him he will be permitted to drive the family car. "I had a talk with your father...and he is willing for you to take the car out in the evenings." Krebs is "not fully awake" to his position in the home but he knows his mother dominates his father: "I'll bet you made him." In denial, his mother is being a diplomat, an ambassador parallel to those whose dishonesty started the war in Europe. "'Yeah. I'll bet you made him,' Krebs sat up in bed"—now awake to domestic politics on the home front.

At breakfast while he is reading the newspaper his mother comes in and again treats him like a child. "Your father can't read his *Star* if it's been mussed." Apparently his father is a fastidious prig. Harold has just returned from fighting in the biggest "muss" in the history of western civilization but his father cannot tolerate a mussed newspaper. The middle class has no sense of proportion and is preoccupied with trivia. His father is interested in news of the world but not in the son at his breakfast table. Throughout the story it is ironic that Harold has become more mature than his parents. "'I won't muss it,' Krebs said." He tries to maintain the peace by conforming, losing the freedom he risked his life fighting for.

His sister Helen brings Harold the newspaper and sits down with him at the table and does not disturb his peace "while he read." She loves him. "He liked her. She was his best sister." Liked, not loved. He is honest. He is so burned out by the war—like the landscape in "Big Two-Hearted River"—he cannot respond with love or much feeling of any kind. "Like" is as deep as he can feel about anyone right now. He can love pool as the opposite of war, whereas loving a person takes something out of you that Harold no

longer has. Loving a person gets complicated. Being with Helen is simple, however, and when she talks she is giving rather than taking emotionally. He is clearly her hero. "I can pitch better than lots of the boys. I tell them all you taught me." She even tells them that Harold is her beau. Helen is so innocent she expresses her love for Harold by pretending to be his girl. Her pattern of life is so simple it is easy for him to simply accommodate her and answer Yes he loves her and will love her always.

It is only when Helen asks him to come out into society and watch her play indoor ball that he balks: "Maybe." Helen has been natural, spontaneous and unconditionally loving. But then she shows the influence of her mother by becoming coercive, making her belief in his love contingent upon his doing what she wants: "Aw, Hare, you don't love me. If you loved me, you'd want to come over and watch me play indoor." She calls him Hare, evoking the fable. Hare has been shelled in the war, matured fast and outdistanced his parents, yet they win in the end--like turtles crawling along in their shells. Their name Krebs extends their resemblance to crabs moving sideways rather than forward, gaining nothing. *Winner Take Nothing* is the title of Hemingway's next collection of stories in 1933.

His mother comes in and tells Helen to go away. She coaxes Harold to get a job. "Don't you think it's about time?" He has been home recovering from the war for just over a month and his mother wants to kick him out, much as Hemingway's mother did to him. She treats him like a lazy adolescent and will not even give him a summer off. She preaches at him, saying to the war veteran, "There can be no idle hands in His Kingdom'." Krebs feels like an unappreciated subject in his mother's Kingdom. "I'm not in His Kingdom'." Nor is he in his father's Kingdom, as his mother rules the home. This scene recalls the soldier in the vignette preceding this story, who got so terrorized under heavy bombardment that he became religious, but afterward associated faith with his fear and felt reluctant to revive it or to talk about it. Harold is under heavy bombardment from his mother. Rather than "lying flat" like the soldier in the vignette, Harold confesses honestly that he feels no faith anymore in her conventional religion. His mother continues to talk down to him without respecting him as an adult with a mind of his own.

Mrs. Krebs gives her son a speech that through her reference to the Civil War contrasts her with the mother of Henry Fleming in Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. Mrs. Fleming is a Realist who cautions Henry before he goes away to war, whereas Mrs. Krebs is as naïve as a child and lectures Harold after he has returned from the war: "I know the temptations you men have been exposed to. I know how weak men are." He has fought bravely in a war and she calls him weak. "I pray for you all day long, Harold." This is an obvious lie. Her attention wanders after a few moments of conversation with him. She is totally self-absorbed and is only posing as a devoted mother. "Krebs looked at the bacon fat hardening on his plate." This is a perfect example of the *objective correlative*: the congealing pig fat is an image of his feelings hardening against his mother's pretentious sentimentality.

Then she gives him another speech that amounts to saying he wasted his time serving his country and that his need to recover from the war means he has lost his ambition. "Charlie Simmons, who is just your age, has a good job and is going to be married... You can see that boys like Charlie Simmons are on their way to being really a credit to the community." His own mother is telling Harold he is not a credit to the community. "Krebs said nothing." He keeps the peace, as his mother criticizes even his facial expression. "Don't look that way, Harold," his mother said."

Harold helped win the war in Europe, but he is losing on the home front. His mother rules: "I want to tell you for your own good how matters stand. Your father does not want to hamper your freedom. He thinks you should be allowed to drive the car." His mother even gives him permission to go on a date: "If you want to take some of the nice girls out riding with you, we are only too pleased." Clearly she will determine who is a nice girl and who is not. "But you are going to have to settle down to work, Harold. Your father doesn't care what you start in at. All work is honorable as he says." Mr. Krebs recalls the father of Jay Gatsby who is proud of his son becoming a success without caring how he made his money, a corruption of the American Dream.

When his mother asks "Don't you love your mother, dear boy?" his honest answer makes her cry. "I don't love anybody," Krebs said." He is too numb to feel much of anything, as expressed by the monotonal style of the story. He has to apologize for being honest and lie to stop her crying. Ironically, he would not

apologize and lie unless he actually *does* love his mother. He just does not feel that way at the moment because of the way she has treated him. Ironically, she is the one who fails to love truly. She does not even respect him enough to pay attention when he speaks. He is diplomatic and her sentimentality prevails again: "I held you next to my heart when you were a tiny baby." Krebs felt sick and vaguely nauseated. 'I know, Mummy,' he said. 'I'll try to be a good boy for you'." She will not recognize that he has grown up. The pun on "mummy" identifies his mother with the mummies of ancient Egypt, remote from his modern world. The culture she embodies is dead to him. When she asks if he wants her to pray with him he lies, but he cannot pray. "You can't pray a lie," as Huck Finn said. He lies again when she asks if he wants her to pray *for* him: "He had felt sorry for his mother and she had made him lie."

His father is implicitly worse than his mother, so remote from Harold that he does not even appear in the story. He personifies all that drove expatriates out of the country. "He would not go down to his father's office. He would miss that one." We do not miss that scene because his father is so predictable by now that it is unnecessary. Hemingway's "omission theory" applies here. Ironically, Harold must leave his old "Soldier's Home" to attain peace. He will move away and get a job so his life can "go smoothly." At the end of the story his decision to go and watch his sister Helen play indoor ball is a hopeful sign that he can respond to true love. Helen is not yet mummified.

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