

The Necessity of Irony (Part 1)

This guy came in my parents' grocery store from time to time: Flap Pancake. Pancake was a common name around those parts, but Flap? He had this habit of slapping himself all over as he talked, and the more excited he got, the more he slapped. Still, none of the other men standing around the pop cooler laughed when he slapped.

Later, my dad told me, "The war did that to him," meaning World War II. Battle fatigue, shell shock, PTSD, we've had a number of names for it. What that "it" did to Flap Pancake was to turn him into a spastic in the true medical sense of the word.

What's that got to do with irony? Nothing and everything. Let's begin with Good-Bye to All That, a memoir by the British poet, translator, novelist and World War I veteran, Robert Graves. In this volume, he covers his life from his public school (private prep) school days through university through World War I. Good bye, then? Not by a long shot. In fact, it may be that we never truly say good bye to deeply traumatic events.

Recently, my pal Joe told me of his father's dying days when his thoughts had returned to his time in World War II. Shot down in his bomber where he was navigator, Joe's father was one of two survivors pulled from the sea after 30 hours adrift in their life vests. My own father's nightmares when he was deathly ill were similar: being strafed on the deck of his ship by a Japanese airplane.

For Robert Graves, an upper class Brit, expected to lead as working class Brits were expected to follow, trauma meant taking his men "over the top," leading them out of their trenches and across no man's land as the Germans laid down machinegun fire. A crazy act, we might all agree. Graves' friend and fellow British poet, Siegfried Sassoon, thought so, and refused to return to the front. To save Sassoon from court martial, Graves intervened, saying Sassoon was crazy. Years later, an American World War II vet would give this contradiction a name: Catch-22.

The Iliad, Beowulf, The Song of Roland: you won't find a lot of irony here. Epics tend to reinforce the values of the cultures they represent. To that end, British soldiers were sent into combat with pocket books of inspiration verse. "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers," Shakespeare's Henry V exults as he prepares to lead his undermanned force into the Battle of Agincourt.

Graves and Sassoon would survive World War I; their fellow poet Wilfred Owen would not. The effect of warfare on their poetry was immediate and lasting. You can read a detailed account of this transformation in Paul Fussell's The Great War and Modern Memory. It's all about irony, a bitter irony designed to expose "The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est/Pro patria mori." Fussell, a World War II veteran, is a fine essayist himself, and has addressed this issue of irony head-on in "My War: How I

got Irony in the Infantry.” Irony: the protective coloration a soldier adopts to survive.

What irony requires of us as readers and writers is that we achieve a distance between what is written and what is truly meant (whether felt or thought). What irony meant to Graves, Sassoon and Owen was that they were obliged to execute and to expect the men under their commands to obey orders they couldn't believe in.

Pat Barker, the British novelist, has written her Regeneration Trilogy of novels centered on these three poets and other men suffering from the effects of combat, an attempt, perhaps to cut through their irony and get at its causes. It's noteworthy that Barker's novels before the Regeneration Trilogy dealt with women in abusive relationships (Union Street and Blow Your House Down). The similarities are clear.

What Paul Fussell argues is that for the people who experienced war there would always be an ironic distance between what they'd experienced, what they thought and felt, and the way they presented themselves to the world. Our best American example might be Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises. For Jake Barnes and his ex-pat friends, every act, every word is coated with a protective irony. As for Jake's mysterious wound, we can only guess. Whatever it is, it lingers behind the scar tissue that is his irony.

For these British poets, for the young Hemingway before he slid into a sentimental version of himself, the distance irony afforded them was a way to mediate the world, to keep the horrors they had experienced at a sufficient distance to effectively write about them. Irony became necessary and useful.

Any literary tool can be overused and misused. When irony becomes less about the struggle to maintain equilibrium, and lapses into the clichéd, out the corner of the mouth voice of a hard-boiled detective, it has lost its power. When irony lapses into mere posture as critiqued by the X-Raves in “Too Hip to be Happy,” the tool has lost its purpose.

Having said that, having noted how easy it can be to misuse irony, I have to say that no writer of any form can write effectively without a sense of irony. More on this to come.