

Sherwood's Vision of War in There Shall Be No Night

Asst. Prof. Dr. Sanaa Mohammed Mahdi

Mustansiriyah University- College of Arts

رؤية شيرود للحرب في مسرحية لن يكون هناك ليل

الاستاذ المساعد الدكتور سناء محمد مهدي

الجامعة المستنصرية-كلية الآداب

Abstract:

The history of the world is a violent one because of numerous wars dating back to the Indian war of 18th and 19th centuries' earliest colonizers up to modern wars of 20th century. Though the causes of wars are different, they have harmful and aggressive effect on both man and society as well. Obviously, war is a futile and unnecessarily destructive act in time, there may be some form of solutions for the madness of war that away from violence for the sake of living normal and peaceful life.

In fact, war is un-re-generative no matter what the justifications; war is not a choice of manly fights for being generally characterized by extreme violence, aggression, destruction, and mortality deterioration, death, using regular or irregular military forces.

War has been the focus of great many dramatists whose aim is to reveal the horrible effect of war on man and society. They portray the scientific and technical means used in war that changed after each basic one happened in the world. For them, the economic changes that causes the great depression is responsible for war as young people has no hope not only for future but in present as well. Robert Sherwood, is one of those who through this play "*There Will Be No Night*" and other ones put forth to awaken people's consciousness to avoid war and fight under any excuse.

المستخلص:

تاريخ العالم هو في الأساس تاريخ عنيف بسبب العديد من الحروب التي تعود إلى الحرب الهندية في القرنين الثامن عشر والتاسع عشر من أوائل المستعمرين حتى الحروب الحديثة في القرن العشرين. على الرغم من اختلاف أسباب الحروب، إلا أن لها تأثيرًا ضارًا وعدوانيًّا على كل من الإنسان والمجتمع أيضًا. من الواضح أن الحرب هي عمل غير مجدي ومدمر في وقت قد يكون هناك شكل من أشكال الحلول لجنون الحرب الذي يبتعد عن العنف لأجل العيش حياة طبيعية وامنة.



Article history

Received: 10/7/2023

Accepted: 11/9/2023

Published: 30/9/2023

تواريخ البحث

10/7/2023: تاريخ الاستلام

11/9/2023: تاريخ القبول

30/9/2023: تاريخ النشر

Key words: aggression, death, destruction, man, society.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العدوان، الموت، الدمار، الإنسان، المجتمع.

© 2023 THIS IS AN OPEN

ACCESS ARTICLE UNDER THE CC BY LICENSE



<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Corresponding author:

dr.sanaa_mohammed@yahoo.com

في الحقيقة ، الحرب غير متجددة مهما كانت المبررات. الحرب ليست خيارًا للمعارك الرجولية لأنها تتميز عمومًا بالعنف الشديد والعدوان والدمار وتدهور الاخلاق ، باستخدام القوات العسكرية النظامية أو غير النظامية.

كانت الحرب محور اهتمام العديد من المسرحيين الذين يهدفون إلى الكشف عن التأثير الرهيب للحرب على الإنسان والمجتمع. وتصوير الوسائل العلمية والتقنية المستخدمة في الحرب والتي تغيرت بعد حدوث كل حرب أساسية في العالم. بالنسبة لهم ، فإن التغيرات الاقتصادية التي تسبب الكساد الكبير هي المسؤولة عن الحرب ، حيث لا أمل لدى الشباب ليس فقط في المستقبل بل في الحاضر أيضًا. روبرت شيروود ، هو أحد هؤلاء الذين من خلال هذه المسرحية " لن يكون هناك ليل " ومسرحيات اخرى قدم لإيقاظ وعي الناس لتجنب الحرب والقتال تحت أي عذر.

Introduction

American dramatists of the 1930's were deeply concerned with the economic changes shaped by the Great Depression. Many plays revealed widespread difficulties during and after any war happened in the world. They focused on the frustration and impotence of man in general who faced problems too large and complex for him to be solved. The theatre of the 1930's often presented social commentary problems during the depression years, as at other times, man felt personal concern for the goals and problems of his society. The depression years were hard on young man who had never-enjoyed better times but only little hope for the future (Wecter, 1948, p.3).

The dramas of thirties mainly aimed at educating and influencing the people on matters of direct importance. Hence, the dramatists' concerns are to reflect the man's feeling and society's bad condition in a realistic way in order to stimulate and force the people to change their horrible situation and find solutions for the problems away from wars that have an profound impact on society which "continuous to influence the present concept of war and its nature"(Lundberg, 1984, p.373). Obviously, the theatre of war reflects the economic, political, social, psychological, and moral attitudes of the depression years due to the aggression and the violence of war.

1. *Sherwood and the Theory of War*

In his well-known book *Regeneration Through Violence*, Richard Slotkin describes Indian wars as the "distinctive event of American history, the unique national experience"(1973, p.78). This proves that the Indian wars, the Civil war, WW1, WW 2 and American wars have created many literary works that concentrate on revealing the causes and effects of war on both man and society. In his book *The Mourner's Song*, James Tatum (2004) offers perceptive discussion of physical and literary statues built in the wake of war, stating that

“the one impulse that has proved as ending as human beings' urge to make wars is their need to make sense of them”(p. ix).

James Dawes' book *The Language of War* (2002) describes the development of violence starting with the American Civil War and ongoing through both WW1 and WW2 stating:

First, the multiplication of violence in the Civil War.... Second, the industrialization of violence in World War , with its starting innovations in weapons technology and its subsequent destabilization of basic moral categories...and third, the rationalized organization of violence in World War II (pp.22-23).

He examines the relationship between language and violence, emphasizing that war is violence maximized and universalized, hence American literature's portraying of war and violence has changed after each main war to show that war is of no purpose and its results are only death, destruction, deterioration of morals and ethics mainly does not lead to any form of regeneration. Therefore, violence in war is considered as worthless and meaningless.

In fact, war's violence distorts the limit between reality/unreality, and reality/ appearance. The distortion is consistent with existential philosophy in which existence of reality itself is called into question. To reveal the war's horrible reality, the war dramas focus on using elements of aggression, alienation and suffering, "there is no more horrible degrading experience than combat...war indeed is hell"(Meredith, 2007, p.3). Morris Dickstein (2009) states that the experience of war created "instinctive existentialists, young men caught between adventure and dread that suddenly became aware of the fragility of life and their own vulnerability" (p.21).

As a matter of fact, in all ages war has been an important topic of analysis as many dramatists wrote about it specifically in the second half of 20th century; in the aftermath of Two World Wars and in the shadow of nuclear, biological and chemical holocaust. Through their writings, they reveal the nature of war, its causes, and prevention in order to form man's expectations and control his behaviors. One of them is Robert Emmet Sherwood (1896- 1955) as an advanced writer is a critic, editor, biographer, historian, soldier and pacifist, always supports the liberal points of view, and yet one of the most diffident dramatists for sacrificing his works for his country. Through his plays, he seeks to awake the consciousness of his fellow citizens that makes him the speechwriter for President Franklin Roosevelt. Later on he joins the Roosevelt administration as head of the Office of War Information. Sherwood's success as a dramatist and his quite simple personal life concealed his inner conflicts. The enduring physical pain from war wounds is aggravated by his own self-

insecurity and sense of disappointment. He also suffers from depression and his war service has caused him severe mental marks than the shrapnel he has in his legs. Obviously, his sense of frustration and anger associated with the WW1. Hence, with all these concerns in his mind, *There Shall be no Night* (1940), one of his most well-known plays is regarded as the result of his ambitions.

2. *Changing from being Pacifist to Interventionist*

Sherwood is a prominent American playwright of the mid-20th century who received the Pulitzer Prize for his dramas not once but three times; one of them is *There Shall Be No Night* in which Sherwood focuses on how man can face with dignity the darkness of war and never give up any effort to achieve peace and democracy. His concern on showing the war's dreadful effect is not only in this play only but in most of his plays.

There Shall Be No Night is the first play really depicts the war and through it Sherwood gives the profit to the American Red Cross and the Finnish War Relief Fund to continue their fighting to Soviet. This play sets in Helsinki which is about a Finnish family's promises to their country and their fight in war. It dramatizes the collapse of Finland between 1938 and 1940 and its story is about the main protagonist, Dr. Kaarlo Valkonen, a well-known pacifist and Nobel Prize winning psychiatrist and his American wife Miranda. The familiar life of those people and their family in a small independent country has swiftly been endangered by Soviet invasion of Finland.

The hero, Dr. Valkonen is a pacifist who not only refuses to believe that war will overtake his country but all kinds of war whether justified or not; meaning he is against war completely. He and his wife refuse to believe that war will pass their country, later, it became true and the invasion happened. The coming of war makes him decide never to leave his country and help his people who fight to defend their country. But, on the contrary, their only son, Erik chooses to fight and joins the Finnish army in which he dies, leaving behind his fiancée and unborn child. After knowing his son's death, Dr. Valkonen decides to go to war and joins the medical corps hoping that not only this war but all wars in the entire world must be stopped (Brown, 1970, p. 16). As a scientist, Dr. Valkonen's philosophy revealed the world's infuriated is due to many technological achievements that rarely failed; arguing that humankind has developed self-satisfied. His son's death incites Dr. Valkonen to fight as he believes that man can have meaningful life if he sacrifices it for the sake of others.

In his preface to *There Shall Be No Night* (1941), Sherwood summarizes the impact of his previous dramas. He wisely hints the play's origin, and his overview is a release of his change from pacifist to interventionist. Despite of that, Sherwood is not a war-monger; on the contrary his aim is to end any kind of war. This is enhanced by making Dr. Valkonen's doubt about man's

mechanical resistance and his hopeful belief is to justify the events. He gives an image of liberated European man who is crushed because of Russian assaults. Unfortunately, the invasion that happened encouraged Dr. Valkonen to join the medical group but his son's death makes him change his mind and decides to be with the supporters of war; tear off his Red Cross armband and take his handgun. This play exposes the importance of fighting in order to achieve freedom and existence. Therefore, we should look to this play not only as a truthful portrayal of wartime Finland or other country but for a recap of American outlooks towards World War II as well for Sherwood sees himself as an American committed writer from the beginning of fascism. Hence, he highly appreciates the audience's ability for liberal humanist idealism (Alonso, 2007, p.11).

Being American woman, the wife, Miranda, cannot comprehend the Finns' futile fighting in the face of nearly definite conquest. Unlike her son, Erik, 17 years old works on the Mannerheim Line and his fiancée, Kaatri, both take a contrary attitude, sacrificing themselves for the sake of their country. Erik understands the Finnish people's duty is to protect themselves and leave for fight with a sense onus. The same for Ben, an American ambulance driver and former pacifist, agreed to assist them after he comprehends that he has to "put the murderers out of business before my children grow up and have to fight themselves"(scene I, p.13).

On the other hand, the old generation who lived under the Tsars' tyranny, represented by Dr. Valkonen, the father, who after the 1917 Revolution, attended medical school in America and his brother, Uncle Waldemar, studied music in Germany. The two different skills shape their views about the war and the history of their own country's foes. Here, Sherwood makes his characters clarify every reason for fighting or not fighting.

Before going to war, Erik tells his mother:

When life becomes too easy for people, something changes in their character, something is lost. Americans now are too lucky. In your blood is the water of those oceans that have made your country safe. But—don't try to persuade Erik that life here is as easy as it is in America. He's a Finn, and the time has come when he must behave like one (scene II, p. 47).

Without doubt, after seeing the horrible outcome of war, Miranda has changed her American feelings of indifference to a vigorous participation in the Finnish fighting. This mirrors the identical change from pacifism to interventionism that Sherwood has completed after the beginning of Russia-Finnish War "I never believed it could happen,"(scene II, p. 49) said Miranda in a moment of intense fear but Dr. Valkonen convinces her that the northern city of Viipuri is safe, since the Americans have sent Dave Corween to newscast from there.

Unfortunately, Dr. Valkonen died in the city's fight. This confirms that no one or place can be in safe during war regardless who the defender is:

and there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God gives them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever (scene II, p. 52).

Here, Sherwood clearly seeks using biblical meaning. Despite of his elevated consciousness, Sherwood feels mainly disagreed since he crises.

Being an injured soldier in war and staying many days in England's hospital, Sherwood's hate to war begins to increase; recognizing himself as incompetent soldier who determined to fight for a warless world. Although, he becomes a confirmed pacifist, his hate to war turns him to war again that affects most of his writings and thoughts. His participation in the WW1 left him restless, saying:

Doctor Valkonen's pessimism concerning man's mechanical defenses and his optimistic faith in man himself has been justified by events. The Mannerheim and Maginot Lines have gone. But the individual human spirit still lives and resists in the tortured streets of London (Sherwood, 1941, p. xxix).

The second scene exposes the Soviet-Finnish argument in which Erik shows his point of view about fighting that man should sacrifice himself for the sake of his country and its people. For, Dr. Valkonen intellectual thinking is the weapon with which man shall challenge the antagonists. Erik and his father' speech make Dr. Ziemssen, the German consul respected the brilliance of the Finnish fighting, saying "that no one will dare to cross them" (scene II, p. 31).

In Scene III Helsinki has been attacked by many bombs, and Dr. Valkonen, the man who supports the brainy thinking, is helping the injured people in the hospital. Mr. Corween, the American, provokes Dr. Valkonen to leave Helsinki and go to America, where he can finish his vital scientific labor, but Dr. Valkonen refuses saying that his country needs him even if he serves in the war. The violence, destruction and death from which his country and innocent people suffer create changing in Dr. Valkonen's thoughts and attitude towards war. So by scene IV, we see him in the Army Medical Corps. Dr. Valkonen, a man of knowledge and peace, is enforced into war, fighting and death; sacrificing his life for the sake of his country's freedom.

In his two lectures, Dr. Valkonen talks about the human mind that establish the collapse of civilization back into war, fear, and decay as a psychological widespread and in which he associates "Hitlerism and the Nazis to lunatics practicing co-ordinated barbarism.....under leadership of a megalomaniac who belongs in a psychopathic ward" (Scene IV, p.151). Sherwood uses the term megalomaniac several times in his earlier plays as a central antagonistic

concept, but here, in this play he expands the word to pose an ideological threat, as well as threaten medical infection. In fact, Dr. Valkonen understands the worth of the world affairs, saying, "This is a war for everybody—yes—even for the scientists who thought themselves immune behind their test tubes....."(Scene III, p. 71). Then he adds:

I've been a pacifist myself, in any time. I used to think. I'll never let my children grow up to get into this mass murder. But now I've got to the stage of figuring I ought to help put the murderers out of business before my children grow up and have to fight themselves. (Scene III, p. 87).

Dr. Valkonen's own change from a dreamt man of peace is revealed at the end of the play through his words that he is changed for both his country's sake and man's salvation. In answering one of the soldiers about the importance of concluding his book, Dr. Valkonen said:

And there shall be no night there. That is the basis of all the work I have done!..... before we shall hear the sound of the Seventh Angel of the Apocalypse?Have you forgotten the promise of St. John? 'And they shall see his face, and his name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord giveth them light; and they shall reign forever and ever (Scene III, p. 90).

Being an optimistic man, he affirms:

Listen! What you hear now—this terrible sound that fills the earth—it is the death rattle. One may say easily and dramatically that it is the death rattle of civilization. But—I choose to believe differently. I believe it is the long deferred death rattle of the primordial beast. We have within ourselves the power to conquer bestiality, not with our muscles and our swords, but with the power of the light that is in our minds. What a thrilling challenge this is to all Science (Scene III, p. 95).

From his speech, we notice that sacrificing oneself is a noble act since it is for the sake of saving one's country and people from the war's awful consequences.

In the end, the Soviets suppress the curing effects of both medicine and pacifism. Dave Corween warns Dr. Valkonen that he has "seen too many men of intellectual distinction forced into uniform, forced to pick up guns and shoot because they had discovered that their intelligence was impotent to cope with brutal reality" (Sahu, 1988, p. 5). This encourages Dr. Valkonen to take the same way Corween cautions from it that leaving his mental sickness research and be a doctor in army hospital ; accepting "blind, dogged, desperate resistance as the one form of work that matters now" (Sahu, 1988, p. 8). He keeps his confidence in man's intelligent capability of treatment ultimately, nonetheless eliminates himself from leading the way. In his final minutes, he decides to

partake in war, leaving his Red Cross armband and taking a rifle as Soviets army breakdown through the Finnish resistance at Viipuri. To Dr. Valkonen, put on a soldier's uniform symbolizes his recognition that he must choose either to murder or to cure. This reveals that when the fascist's defeat brings war, man has no other choice but to fight.

In his letter to his wife, Miranda, Dr. Valkonen avers, ".....but Erik and the others who give their lives are also giving to mankind a symbol, a little symbol, to be sure, but a clear one—of man's a sight of God!" (scene VI, p. 150). At that time, he echoes St. Paul's words, "We glory in tribulation,.....There Shall Be No Night was greeted for the most part with enthusiasm"(scene VI, p. 155). When she knows the death of both son/husband, she becomes so stronger, deciding never to surrender. In fact, the people sympathize and admire Miranda's courage in bearing the death of both her husband and her son. Moreover, they appreciate her bravery for not leaving Finland. Miranda remains alone with a horrible fact that her son and husband will never return again. Because of war, she lost every beautiful things in her life, her family, home, dreams, ambitions, security; nothing remains except death and damages.

Dr. Valkonen last words before dying "Then you won't die believing if hopeless. That's the point. My friend, you have lived in faith -the light is in you -and the light which gives the strength that defeats death" (scene VI, p. 268). His words are to those who face war's darkness, emphasizing that when light inside man, darkness will never be existed. This confirms that his participation in war is only "to adjust myself, to find in all this tragedy some imitation of hope for the future"(Deats and etal, 2004, p. 22). In spite of Dr. Valkonen's doubt about man's scientific and technological capability of damaging, destroying and killing, he shows an internal hopefulness and confidence in man's intelligence development for realization and invention new ways of his own improvement. In this play, Sherwood shows clearly man's faith for survival as Joki Ilkka and etal believe (1989, p. 12).

Conclusion

As a well-known dramatist, Sherwood's plays are considered a mirror that reflects the extremes of his time, offering no solutions to the problems he discusses. He struggles with his own philosophy of life and trying to convey his forceful messages to all peace-loving people in the entire world that war is lifeless, worthless and useless. He portrays the violence of war upon the lives of people for being closely in touch with the insecurity and the doubts of free man all over the world. As a realistic writer of no exhausted hope, he focuses on the vigorous issues that frustrate this age through revealing man's irrationality in

terms of war, asking rationality against barbarism, disapproving Moscow and Berlin assaulted Finland and hoping man' salvation.

It is evident that in most of his plays, Sherwood discusses the question of pacifism and man's conflict in the face of war. So, the most reliable element on which this play based is pacifism as Sherwood is persuaded of the war's futility. Despite, *There Shall be no Night* is a war play struggles with the question of pacifism rather significantly as in it, Sherwood is led to abandon his idealism and call for action against any kind of violence and hostility that cause genocide. Therefore, in his other plays, Sherwood suggests the choices obtainable to man in order to avoid war.

War is responsible for changing the attitude of Dr. Valkonen from being a pacifist into interventionist. Here, Sherwood emphasizes that man must face with confidence the darkness of war and never to yield. At the same time, he seeks peace and democracy for the welfare of humanity, confirming that in modern world, there shall be no night in man's life; meaning no war.

References:

- Alonso, Harriet Hyman. (2007). *Robert E. Sherwood: The Playwright in Peace and War*. Detroit : Wayne State University Press.
- Brown, John Mason. (1970). *The Ordeal of a Playwright: Robert E. Sherwood and the Challenge of War*. New York. Harper & Row. Publishers.
- Dawes, James. (2002) *The Language of War: Literature and Culture in the U.S from the Civil War through World War II*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Deats, Sara M., and etals. (2004). *War and Words: Horror and Heroism in the Literature of Warfare*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Dickstein, Morris. (2009). *Dancing in the Dark*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Ilkka, Joki. and Roger D. Sell. (1989). "Robert E. Sherwood and the Finnish Winter War: Drama, Propaganda and Context 50 Years Ago." in *American Studies in Scandinavia*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Vol. 21.
- Lundberg, David. (1984). *The American Literature of War: The Civil War, World War I and World War II*. *American Quarterly* 36.3 <http://www.jstor.org>>
- Meredith, Martin. (2007). *Diamonds, Gold and War*. USA: University of Oxford Press.
- Sahu, N.S. (1988). *Theatre of Protest and Anger: Studies in Dramatic Works of Maxwell Anderson and Robert E. Sherwood*. New Delhi.
- Sherwood, Robert Emmet. (1940). *There Shall Be No Night*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
-(1941). "Preface," *There Shall Be No Night*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Slotkin, Richard. (1973). *Regeneration through Violence*. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Tatum, James. (2004). *In the Morning Song*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wecter, Dixon. (1948). *Age of Great Depression 1929 - 1941*. New York. Stein and Day Press.