

# **Antidote for the Dehumanizing Effects Of War: A Reading Of Neil Simon's *Biloxi Blues* And *Lost In Yonkers***

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Man is the crown of God's creation predestined for an exuberant, glorious and fulfilling life. By his unique nature and unusual skills, he was meant to be the uncrowned king of all creation having sovereign power and authority to reign supreme and unchallenged. True to his nature, man did amaze the world with his discoveries and inventions. He took the world in his stride by his progress and developments measured in terms of leaps and bounds. From being a wanderer to a settler, he reached the pinnacle of success. Sadly, though the wheel of life has reached its full cycle. Knowledge and wisdom that helped him achieve heights of success and gratification have also become the reasons for his downfall. Indeed what a great fall it has been! The inventions of weapons and tools aid in mass annihilation threatening the very foundation of humanity and survival. The word 'war' sends cold shivers down the spine and the fear and the subsequent alarming aftermath of war have been well pictured in Neil Simon's plays *Lost in Yonkers* and *Biloxi Blues*. Writing social or political plays is not his cup of tea. Repeatedly he returns to the dynamics of marriage, family and human relationships about which he is concerned the most and he deals with the problem quite prevalent in these spheres. Taking a retreat from his usual trodden path he writes extensively about war and its horrifying consequences in the two plays taken up for reference. After graduating from high school, he signed up with the Army Air Force Reserve at New York University from where he was sent as a corporal to Colorado and the fact that his relatives in Europe suffered from Nazi persecution left indelible marks in Neil Simon.

Marvin Neil Simon was born on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1927 in The Bronx, New York, to Jewish parents – Irving Simon, a garment sales representative and Mamie (Levy) Simon, a homemaker. He is an American playwright, screenwriter and author. He grew up with Danny Simon, his elder brother, in Washington Heights, Manhattan during the period of the Great

Depression and graduated from DeWitt Clinton High School. The uncertainties, insecurity, instability and unhappiness which were the resultant consequences of his parents' tumultuous marriage and financial hardship caused by the Depression made him what he is today. Irrefutable is the fact that he was an accomplished comedy writer in American drama and the rate of his success was phenomenal. He entertained his audiences with strings of comedies year after year. His comedies that were thin and fragile suited audiences perfectly and completely and so he was the success story – the Clyde Fitch – of the sixties and the seventies.

Joost Meerloo, Dutch psychoanalyst, in his book *The Rape of the Mind* says of war: "War is often ... a mass discharge of accumulated internal rage (where) ... the inner fears of mankind are discharged in mass destruction" (134). The most deadliest and destructive wars in modern times have been the Second World War (1939-1945) with 60–85 million deaths, followed by the Mongol conquests with greater than 41 million deaths and the War of the Triple Alliance, which destroyed over 60% of Paraguay's population. Wars have been fought in the name of religion, race, geography, culture, politics, ideology and resources and generate indeterminable confusion, fear, destruction and loss. Since wars are fought for very absurd reasons, sometimes totally unreasonable, it is beyond man's power to challenge. Nevertheless, man is wholly responsible and accountable for wars arise out of his greed, lust for power and authority, hatred and prejudice. Robert Firth in his book, *Beat the Drum Slowly* records Plato's view on war which says that it is man's greed and lust that overcome his reasoning capacity resulting in moral and political degeneration. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson in his book, *Beasts: What Animals Can Teach Us about Human Nature* quotes:

It's just their defenselessness that tempts the tormentor, just the angelic confidence of the child who has no refuge and no appeal that sets his vile blood on fire. In every man, of course, a beast lies hidden-the beast of rage, the beast of lustful heat at the screams of the tortured victim, the beast of lawlessness let off the chain, the beast of diseases that follow on vice, gout, kidney disease, and so on. (37)

War has featured as one of the literary themes of English literature since the time of *Iliad*. American literature is no exception; it reflects and challenges America's attitude towards war. Wars and war like situations are appallingly dehumanizing that they result in sowing seeds of distrust, misconception, bitterness, resentment, fear and uncertainty and greatly

distorts the perception of life and survival in general. This is what Eugene Jerome of *Biloxi Blues* learns the hard way. He has joined the army and is shipped to Biloxi, Mississippi. Though, initially happy, very soon he is thrust into the inhuman world that confounds him leaving him grappling for answers and making him determined to “become a writer, not get killed ...” (603). Retrospection enlightens him and he finds that man being the king of creation is destined to seek fulfillment and happiness in this world. Man has at his disposal immense resources and infinite faculties to achieve the end. However, with the progress of human civilization, man has become humankind’s worst enemy. Human progress is peppered with sordid tales of greed for money, lust for power, insatiable thirst for authority and ambition to control things and people. The chronicles of human progress strike us with the ingenuity of a few people who have used every available resource to deprive and dominate the minority, the help, the defenceless and the weak to their own advantage and gain.

It is unambiguously amplified in the background and field of action of World War II as represented in *Biloxi Blues*. Eugene and the other recruits are seen in a training camp to be trained for war. Nevertheless, the despicable experiences undergone by Eugene make him hate the very concept of war: “It was my fourth day in the army and so far I hated everyone” (599). Histories have gloried war, whereas, the ground reality is that it only causes damage and destruction to life and property threatening the very existence of humankind. World War II divided the world into two groups and those responsible for the war were safe while the ordinary people suffered as observed by Toomey, the Sergeant: “... returning to your mommas and poppas ... is highly improbably ... one way to come out of a war ...606). It brings to surface the cruelty of war that results in suspicion and fear prevailing in the minds of the rulers and their unwillingness to seek peaceful means of ending mutual differences. Once again Toomey observes: “When we do battle, we are sometimes called upon to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of others” (613). But, sad to say, nations, because of their preoccupations with many things, during wars do not protect its civilians and Epstein, a recruit says: “... I will not be treated like dirt, ... I’m not going to help defend a country that won’t even defend its own citizens” (624). The most ironic thing that happens is that the victor nation glorifies its soldiers after winning the battle and so Eugene says: “... I’m going to get mine wiping out a whole battalion of Japanese marines. They’ll put up a statue of me at Brighton Beach. May be name a junior high school after me, or a swimming pool” (633).

A soldier's prized sacrifice becomes ironic because liberty comes through sacrifices. Moreover, the liberty is enjoyed without the realization of what has been endured to make it a reality and hence taken for granted. Wykowski was honoured for his act of courage but not before paying a high price for it and we see it through the eyes of Eugene: "... Wykowski was wounded at Arnheim by a mortal shell. He lost his right leg straight up to the hip ... he was cited for outstanding courage in battle" (690). Furthermore, the concept of war and victory is ironical for the precious resources meant for the improvement of life standards of people are battered away. In spite of the seemingly convincing justification, war is a horrifying experience resulting in irreplaceable loss. In war, men get killed and it is humanity that suffers and when humanity is at stake, it becomes the indisputable truth in war that there are no victors.

In the absence of cordial relationships among countries and the willingness to smoothen out differences the progress towards better living and fulfillment remains a dream. It also leads to the inevitable defeat and destruction of humanity. Simon through *Biloxi Blues* emphasizes that human beings are varied and come in different myriad hues and so the differences are to be tolerated, respected and admired. To win the war the soldiers are subjected to callous subjugation and training in the name of discipline. Sergeant Toomey believes that only discipline help win the war: "... you don't understand the benefits of discipline. It is discipline that will win this war for us" (613). Though Eugene endorses the view, he knows the dangers of any principle being carried out to its extreme. The principle of discipline becomes a kind of ideology or doctrine and tried to be instilled in the soldiers through force. Eugene is painfully aware that it strips one of his identity and personality denying the basic rights of human beings like dignity, honour and self-respect. He says in his memoirs: "... he is winning the game. Each day we drop a little of our own personalities and become more obedient, more robot like ... an intelligent, thinking human being is now nothing but a khaki idiot ..." (657).

For a sensitive soul like Eugene everything in the war training camp is foolish and redundant. Rather than solving differences amicably, world leaders seek military solutions to problems and thus, in their arrogance, egotism and obstinacy forget that people need bread and not arms and peace and development and not wars that predictably lead to stagnation and destruction. War is a crime against humanity that cruelly denies self-respect and dignity, the basic rights of every human being. Eugene says: "... I am fighting hard to retain my identity,

and the only time I am able to hold on to who I am, is in the still, still of the night” (657). It makes him yearn to go home: “It was then I decided I had to get out of the army ...” (615). The training camp smells foul with hatred, hostility, bitterness, prejudice and strife. With the amalgamation of so many ill feelings, the army recruits resemble Old Stone Age barbarians. Virtues like love, compassion, sympathy, solidarity, humanity and care that distinguish them other species are stifled and dies an unnatural death. Such decadence will result the loss the whole world just as the Egyptian kings lost their kingdom. The conversation between Toomey and Epstein reveals this:

Toomey: ... Men do not face enemy machine guns because they have been treated with kindness ... I don't want them human. I want them obedient.

Epstein: Egyptian kings made their slaves obedient. Eventually they lost their slaves and their kingdom. (642)

The ideology of war does not include humanity, love for fellow human beings and does not strengthen human bond and such a boorish ideology is “Neanderthal in its conception” (641) and it makes Epstein, the sensitive soul, comment: “... but it will take me the rest of my life to wash off my humiliation. I was degraded. I lost my dignity” (625). War bounds man to economic, social, political and materialistic bonds thereby denying him the freedom to grow and live free becoming his dignity. The thudding impact of war on the human psyche cultivates a society devoid of love and filled with immorality and promiscuity, ultimately resulting in devaluation and annihilation of life.

Above all the impact of war on the mental, psychological and emotional health of people is unspeakable and unfathomable. Particularly, the impact on women, the elderly and children is irrevocable. Wars destroy communities and families and greatly affect the social and economic well-being of families in particular and nations in general. Grandma Kurnitz in Neil Simon's *Lost in Yonkers* has unforgettable experiences of World War II that have a left a bitter after taste in her mouth. The war has emotionally and psychologically scarred her. These scars wield greater power over her and cripple her. Grandma Kurnitz' psychological scars of anti-Semitism do not allow her to live in the present and enjoy life to the fullest. She escapes the Holocaust but the scars remain with her. Her past bitter and nightmarish experiences form a part of her present blinding her to the pleasures and happiness of her family in the present. Being a victim of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism in the past she

becomes a victimizer in the present. She is more of a cold unapproachable German matron and less of a Jewish mother. It reveals the Nazi's success in destroying her Jewish culture, her love of family and children and in transforming her into their own ideal. Carrying the reflection and image of Hitler she makes her grandchildren feel unsafe. Arty tells her: "You just want me to be miserable because somebody made you miserable in Germany. Even Pop said it ... Well, that's not my fault. Take it out on Hitler, not on me" (126).

Grandma Kurnitz' emotions and perceptions formed by her past experiences do not allow her to reach out to her children. Bella craves for love and to receive love as much as she is willing to give. She tells her mother what hinders her from showing love to her children: "Thieves and sick little girls, that's what you have, Momma ... Only God didn't make them that way. You did. We're alive, Momma, but that's all we are ... Aaron and Rose are the lucky ones" (151). War clouds her perception and comprehension blinding her to what is natural, proper and needed. With this approach she makes her family dysfunctional. In a dysfunctional family the relationships within the family are strained and unnatural and it becomes the cause of emotional dishonesty, conflict, misbehaviour, shame based relationships and abuse. Children reared in such a hostile environment grow up believing it to be the natural arrangement.

Grandma Kurnitz in her attempt to protect her children, instill steel like hardness within them and control, becomes loveless, cruel and calculating. Abusing her children physically and psychologically she makes them sick, vulnerable and abnormal. Her children do not exactly love her but admire her courage and strength and also understand the source of her problems and over vaulting reactions to her children. Louie inherits the same characteristics from his mother. Being a henchman for a mobster, he is fearless and is vulnerable to death. His involvement with organized crime suggests that he does not really value his life and in danger finds fun and excitement. Like his mother he values tough exterior and values it more than life itself. Praising the courage of his mother he says: "You're terrific, Ma. One hundred percent steel, finest grade made. Eddie's out there lookin' for scrap iron and the chump doesn't know he's got a whole battleship right here ... Nah. You can't get me down, Ma. I'm too tough. You taught me good. And whatever I've accomplished in this life, just remember – you're my partner" (137).

In her overzealous attempt to protect her children, Grandma Kurnitz has wrought irrevocable damages in them. In the absence of love at home, her children look for substitutes outside home which are spurious and inadequate. It is children's prerogative to receive parents' unconditional and unbounded love in a world where steelier emotions normally prevail. Bella's heart wrenching plea is unavoidable and blood curdling. The play becomes a fine example of a dysfunctional family where the relationship between Grandma Kurnitz and her children is strained and unnatural. It stems from Grandma Kurnitz's misconception of protecting her children from hurt. Having experienced cruelty as a Jew in World War II she wants to protect her children from those emotional scars. She wants them to be strong and in the process of making them strong she loses their affection. Though there is love within her, her steely exterior wreaks havoc. She tells Arty, her grandson, "It's not so important dat you hate me, Arthur ... It's only important that you live" (126). Grandma through her authoritative rule and dominance would have liked her children to take after her. The reverse happens when Louie becomes a part of organized crime where he finds solace. It is a kind of escape from the emotional turmoil at home. His attempt at crime is a counterfeit to Grandma's reign of terror at home. The boys' father, Eddie though tyrannized becomes meek and subservient. Wars have adverse effects on one's emotional wellbeing. Grandma Kurnitz the survivor of war blocks herself from love with far-reaching consequences. She becomes emotionally hard and in the process of moulding her children hard she makes them emotional wrecks. She tells her children, "you don't survive in this world without being like steel" (108). With this steely approach she ends up making her family dysfunctional. Wars that disrupt normal life and human relationships also make families dysfunctional.

Emotionally and physically scarred by war and anti-Semitism Grandma Kurnitz fights all her life to save and protect her children from the same misfortunes that took away everything from her life. She fights for the survival of her children but ironically she becomes responsible for their abnormalities. She teaches them and also demonstrates to them to be strong and in doing so she turns a dictator making her family weak and dysfunctional. Towards these objectives she works wherein authority and discipline are her overriding characteristics. In the eyes of her children and grandchildren she is a tyrant, protector, manipulator and a dictator. She becomes thus as a result of the loss of her husband and two kids early in her life. Through her courage she tries to bring everything under her control



which is the reflection of the much loss that she suffered in her life. Through her own words we see her as a tough fighter:

I buried a husband und two children und I didn't cry. I didn't haff time. Bella vas born vit scarlet fever und she didn't talk until she was five years old und I didn't cry ... Gertrude, can't talk vithout choking und I didn't cry ... Und may be one day, they'll find Louie dead in da street und I von't cry ... Dot's how I vas raised. To be strong. Vendey beat us vit sticks in Germany ven ve vere children, I didn't cry ... You don't survive in dis vorld vithout being like steel. (108)

Grandma Kurnitz in *Lost in Yonkers* rules her roost with an iron hand thereby making her children emotional wrecks. Her past bitter experiences as a Jew under the tyrannical rule of Hitler clouds her perception of the present giving her wrong notions as to how to run her family. The hatred shown by Hitler makes Grandma Kurnitz an alien cut off from the rest of the world. As a Jew Grandma Kurnitz has suffered many hardships, trials and tribulations in her life with the result that she hardens trying to instill the same in her children by denying them their due love, care and compassion.

Such dark and realistic portrayal of war and its dismaying consequences disturb and move the readers giving the feeling of loss, despair and helplessness. But Neil Simon brightens up the grim and bleak atmosphere by offering solution in the form of human relationships. A spark of hope is seen at the end of the dark tunnel when human relationships become the antidote to the complications and complexities. Eugene eagerly desires to return home having been completely repulsed by what he saw, heard and experienced. But he gains a new insight when he befriends Epstein who is equally repelled by war. Friendship brings these two people together and emotional and intellectual experiences help deepen their friendship. The deepening of their friendship makes them known to each other. To begin with, Eugene offers company to Epstein: "Hey, Arnold, I'm your friend. I'm your buddy. You can talk to me" (623). The friendship and the consolation it offers help Eugene come out of his gloom and wretchedness and it becomes a turning point in his life. Conversations with Epstein facilitate Eugene in understanding many things, seeing things clearly and gaining insights. With this new realization and awareness Eugene learns the importance of involvement in life and activities and he transforms from being a naïve observer to doer. It paves the way for Eugene to form solid plans about his future. His career as a writer takes



shape by the insistence of Epstein and he teaches Eugene the intricacies of writing. Also Eugene meets the girl of his dream, Daisy Hannigan from St. Mary's Catholic All Girls School who teaches him to cherish healthy and strong relationships. She gives a new insight into the mysteries of life. Epstein and Daisy rescue Eugene from the brink of hopelessness giving him the assurance that not all is lost.

The experiences that Eugene undergoes in the training camp bring about a paradigm shift in his sensitivity. The situation in the training camp and the atrocities of war make the environment smell foul with enmity, bitterness, hatred, prejudice, insecurity, uncertainty, dissent and volatility. It affects him greatly because Eugene comes from a family that values togetherness, love, care, principles, virtues and compassion. The great chasm between the two worlds dumbfounds him and leaves him groping in the dark. War changes his attitude and approach towards life. He is disgusted and disillusioned and reels under his broken spirit. Epstein undergoes the same experiences and it brings them together. But through the eyes of Epstein, Eugene sees the world differently and learns that life is a blend of ups and downs; virtues and vices; success and defeat; challenges and opportunities. The friendship offered by Epstein helps Eugene develop in many ways. He learns the power of words that paves the way for him to become a writer and the importance of taking sides and not being neutral like Switzerland.

Neil Simon's love and compassion for humanity are boundless and quite evident in his plays wherein he seeks solutions to problems through human relationships. What is endearing about Neil Simon and his works is that no individual ultimately shows his thumb down on society and his plays do not end in demolishing the society and breakdown of the system. Rather, like the phoenix rising again from the ashes, the characters in Simon's plays rise again to take the world in their stride. His plays are always set within the sphere of human relationships. A new world is built again and the system restructured and amidst the renewal is human relationship. As seen in *Biloxi Blues* and *Lost in Yonkers*, war has ravaging effects and the wounds run deep. But a new perception that forging of human relationships fosters has a healing effect. Simon knows that problems, like war, occur because of human nature and relationships but the solutions to the problems are also provided through human relationships.

*Lost in Yonkers* upholds the importance of human relationships during difficult and traumatic times. The redemptive qualities of instinct and human spirit prevail against oppression and authority and dominate making Grandma Kurnitz realize her mistake. Bella represents the redemptive qualities of instinct and human empathy and Grandma for hatred and reasoning which stand no chance of prevailing for it is humane qualities that ultimately rule over the world. It is Bella comes as a waft of fresh air and stands in direct contrast to all that is represented by her mother. Despite having gone through the same experiences as that of her other siblings, it is only Bella who visualizes a world completely different from that of her home. It is a beautiful world dominated by love, innocence, free expression and will and care: "My babies will be happier than we were because I'll teach them to be happy ... Let me have my babies, Momma, because I have to love somebody. I have to love someone who'll love me back before I die" (145). The two sons of Grandma's son, Eddie, and her mentally stunted daughter, Bella, make her realize the importance of the warmth that love and compassion bring. The Kurnitz children amuse but ache to be loved and so there is happy ending in sight. Even Bella and Grandma Kurnitz are set right.

The revelations brought about by Bella's innocence, love, perseverance and grit instill new life in Grandma. He discovers the importance of family and role of parents in shaping the future and career of their children. Bella, through her child like faith and hope, and Arty and Jay, through their world of sunshine, break through the wall that Grandma has erected around her. Through them and their values Grandma comes to appreciate her family, children and above, the indispensability of love, care and compassion. Bella, Arty and Jay pave the way for Grandma's psychological and emotional healing and recovery. The relationship forms the keystone for the process of healing to begin. Fidelity, patience and fortitude shown by them make Grandma analyze herself and realize her failings.

*Biloxi Blues* and *Lost in Yonkers* prove that human relationships make possible an individual's social and biological maturations. Human relationships are unique and serve as an ideal for a private autonomous retreat. Through the relationships an individual is given economic, psychological, intellectual and emotional support, providing the means whereby a human being relates himself to others. The achievement of a harmonious development of human culture and civilization needs a strong societal foundation for which men and women are expected to work together. The world needs people like Daisy Hannigan, Eugene, Epstein and Bella to make it beautiful and life meaningful. People like Daisy, Eugene, Epstein and

Bella with their touch of love, care and understanding add colour, zest and life to the world filled with hatred, bitterness, envy and strife. Eugene and Bella, who have been tested and moulded in the furnace of life experiences, have something to offer to the growth, development and progress of the future generation and the world at large. Having seen the disastrous effects of depressing experiences they will be able to create a new world without troubles, conflicts and wars. These characters extol the fact that with the right attitude and rightly placed perceptions there is hope for happiness, joy, prosperity and peace and that there never need be tears, pain, poverty and misery. They are the creators of a new world and history. They can work together to create a new order where men will grow and live forever free – free from moral corruption, wars, suffering, annihilation, etc.

Man is a social animal who greatly depends on human relationships for survival and spiritual, psychological, physical and mental welfare and growth. Relationships are essential to instill a sense of belonging, being rooted, to love and to be loved which in turn combats rejection, loneliness and disapproval. Since it involves mutuality and reciprocity, it possesses healing power. Realization of the importance and need for human relationships makes people not judgmental, but accepting and accommodating. Having well understood and experienced the undercurrents of human relationships Simon seldom writes about anything outside the domain of human relationships. And when he does write it is only to highlight the beauty and security of human relationships. It is the reason why Simon has written *Biloxi Blues* as a sequel to the domestic plays *Brighton Beach Memoirs* and *Broadway Bound*. The striking contrast between the world that Eugene Jerome encounters at home and the decadent world of the army camp Simon drives home the fact that the only possible solution is provided through human relationships that offer love, security and stability.

War has irreversible consequences taking the world to the brink of obliteration. What war does to man and his personality can never be comprehended and articulated fully. The dreary pictures of war and its aftermath painted in *Biloxi Blues* and *Lost in Yonkers* are sufficient to wreak havoc on man's mental stability. But Neil Simon through the strength of human relationships gives the assurance that such a world can be redeemed.

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