

Women and War: The Western Hero Myth

Tyler Pineau

Philosophy

Supervisor: Robin Tapley

Abstract:

*The paper will be concerned with the explanation of the Western Hero Myth (WHM) as laid out by Terence De Pres in *The Survivor*. This is a book that explores the concentration camps of WW2 from a philosophical perspective. One of De Pres' main goals is to break down assumptions about persons in extremity made by those from the safety of a stable society. To this end, he exposes the erroneous sacrificial nature of the WHM that contrasts starkly with reality. The argument presented by De Pres will be applied to the nature of women's roles on the "back lines" of many wars. Contrasts will be made and connections will be drawn between the front line soldiers and the women who support them, who cannot escape but must grow, learn, and live with war as a constant presence. Counter-arguments will also be addressed. Among those will be the prima facie reaction that front-line men are lessened by giving respect to women and by shedding light on their role in war. The idea that the argument forces women in war into a cage of traditional gender roles will also be addressed.*

War is unceasing. It spans human history and the planet itself. The stories and myths surrounding war involve the men that fight and die within it. Both genders are deeply involved in war but only one side is shown and when the stories of women in war are revealed, the importance of their actions are perceived as less than those of men. One of the reasons for this centers around the Western Hero Myth. The Western Hero Myth and the belief in it dramatically undervalues the role of women in war. To understand this concept the myth itself must first be explained. From there the reality of women in war and the actions they take must be investigated. Finally, the work of women in war must be considered in relation to the Western Hero Myth.

In Terrace Des Pres' (1976) *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*, the author had set out to explore the camps of World War II from a more analytic perspective than most other authors had attempted. In doing this he challenged many long-standing theories and opinions on the makeup of humanity within the reality of the prisons. He pushed against the boundaries of what had been accepted as true in relation to the world of death camp prisoners, both during and after incarceration.

One of the first areas of concern for Des Pres was that of the Western Hero Myth (WHM). The WHM has at its foundation the idea that "while the business of living goes forward from day to day we reserve our reverence and highest praise for action which culminates in death" (Des Pres 5). We are creatures that perceive a very high value in the continuation of our lives. But out of this, we heap honour and respect upon those who choose to sacrifice their lives for a cause.

A person sacrifices their life for that which is greater than themselves. Des Pres believed that "men have always been ready to die for beliefs, sacrificing life for higher goals" (Des Pres 6). Our tallest and most powerful heroes have always voluntarily ended their lives to resolve the challenge of their circumstances. One does not have to look far for examples: historical figures that fit this archetype are well known. Jesus Christ stands largest among them. He is a figure who sacrificed his body and life for the sins of humankind. It was his willingness to give up his life that saved all of humanity.

Socrates is another example. On the morning of the day before his execution Socrates refuses to be saved by Crito. Even though Crito implores Socrates: "I beg you for the last time to listen to me and save yourself... The public will never believe that... you yourself refused to escape" (Plato 53), Socrates is unmoved. He will not compromise his beliefs to save his own life. He will not "cast aside my former arguments because this misfortune has come to me" (Plato 55). He will not be swayed from his convictions. Here then, is a man who willingly paid the ultimate price for what he believed right and true.

Modern film continues the tradition of the WHM. One of the most popular and highest grossing action movies of all time has a theme of the journey towards humanity. In *Terminator 2* Arnold Schwarzenegger's character completes this journey by sacrificing his life. Immediately after explaining "I know now why you cry, but it is something I can never do" (Terminator) he lowers himself into molten metal, ending his life. This sacrifice staved off the nuclear war that would lead to humanity's end. It also cemented his character as understanding what it means to be human. His willingness to die for a cause was the ultimate expression of his new-found humanity.

The 2005 film *Sin City* follows the same archetype. John Hartigan commits suicide to save Nancy's life. Had he continued to live she would have been hunted and harangued by those who wished to make him suffer. He trades his life for hers. All of these examples share a strong and apparent theme: the voluntary sacrifice of one's life for a cause, reason, or belief that rests upon a plateau high above that of the individual's desire for continued survival.

These persons and characters are the stuff of the WHM. Their actions are the "dramatic defiance of superior individuals" (Des Pres 6). Their actions elevate them to the level of heroes. But there is a rotten tooth to be uncovered within the WHM. It reveals itself when the WHM is considered in relation to survivors. The WHM reduces and ultimately rejects those for whom survival itself is heroism. It has a blind spot towards those who occupy the extreme situation.

The extreme situation is typified as a scenario where there is no end in sight and one's life is not guaranteed from one moment to the next. A literary example of this can be found in Albert Camus' *The Plague*. It is the story of how "week in, week out, the prisoners of the plague struggled along as best they could" (Camus 129) as their friends and family die around them at random. As people died, there was no end to the nightmare in sight. This is not screaming passionately as you fall upon the enemies' sword. Or a scenario where the hero "controls the conditions for his fulfillment" (Des Pres 7) of personal death. It is the never-ending grind of fighting for survival without knowing what the next week, day, hour, or moment will bring.

The WHM wrinkles its nose at these persons, as if "life is justified only by things which negate it" (Des Pres 5). It is as if life can only be worthy retroactively, only after death has been achieved. The "struggle to survive... is felt to be suspect" (Des Pres 5). Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim who became a camp prisoner early in World War II typifies this mentality. He used a psychoanalytic approach to interpret camp behaviour.

Bettelheim argued that "'manhood' requires dramatic self-confirmation, and in the camps this could only be achieved through some moment of open confrontation with death" (Des Pres 161). He argued that to remain covert in rebellion and focused on survival was to act as an infant with the SS as the patriarch. He praised and argued for actions that based heroism upon death. This argument is rooted deeply in the WHM. His "critique of camp behaviour is rooted in old heroic ethic. Heroism, for him, is an isolated act of defiance" (Des Pres 161) that ends in death. For Bettelheim and his proponents, life is only as valuable as the act that brings its end.

General Patrick Cammaert is a Dutch general and a United Nations Force Commander for the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and consequently he is a man who has seen much of war. In 2008 he was quoted as saying "It is now more dangerous to be a woman than to be a soldier in modern wars" (Chemaly). During the fighting in Iraq from 2003 to the present there were approximately 216 000 casualties and civilians make up an estimated 73 percent of these deaths (Iraq). It is estimated that the two Chechen wars killed 160 000 people and 75 000 of these were civilians (Russia). The United Nations estimates that 7 out of 10 Palestinians killed in Gaza are civilians (Booth). Generally speaking, "75 percent of modern war casualties are women and children" (Salbi).

For those who are not killed in war, "half of all refugees are women" (Global) and "children and women make up an estimated 80 percent of displaced populations" (Patterns). More than 500 000 civilians were displaced from their homes in the first Chechen war (First). While these numbers are only estimates owing to the absolute chaos of warfare, they reveal a stark reality: civilians pay a

high price for warfare. This is especially true for women. These numbers speak of only death and displacement. They reveal nothing of the sexual assaults, disfigurements, starvation, disease and all other manner of devastating horror that make war a nightmare reality. It is estimated that "more than 20 000 women have been raped since the Balkan war began in 1992" (Patterns). Conflict in the Congo has caused "the rape of hundreds of thousands of Congolese women" (Salbi).

Men in areas of war are on the front lines. Women on the front lines of war are a rarity as war is, in general, the domain of men. So where are these women? Are they hiding, doing all they can to preserve their lives? Secreted away in hidden bunkers, waiting for the end of the conflict? Are they frozen in place until such time as the normal rhythm of life can resume? Absolutely not.

War ends the lives of millions of individuals, but it does not stop the act of living itself. People still grow, die, fall in love, fall out of love, share, and learn in war. They still do all of the things that are part of being a living breathing person. The bombs fall and the bullets find their targets meters away from people acting out the drama of their own personal lives. The violence and brutality of war can't stop the will of human life. Even in the shattered and terror stricken streets of World War II Stalingrad life went on. Mothers and fathers still held their children and told them stories. Things change irrevocably for those that experience war. They can never go back. But the stuff of life still happens during conflict.

Here are the stories of women in war. At the time Mah-Bibi was interviewed by the Red Cross she was ten years old. Her mother was dead and her father had been missing for some time. When he disappeared she was forced to sell their animals for food. She then took over the role of matriarch and provider to her five and seven year old brothers. They had no shelter and she begged for food. When there was no food they ate grass. When they "are sitting in the sun it is unbearable. But at night we shake with cold" (Mah-Bibi).

Qualam is a grandmother and a widow. Fighting started in her village and she was forced to flee with her daughter and two sons. They could not bring any of their possessions. They were

displaced to a refugee camp and had not felt rain for three years. At the camp she helped feed babies and children. She also helped teach other women about hygiene and health. When she looks forward for herself and her family, she doesn't "know about our future... and how we will survive" (Qualam).

Zakiya has four children and a husband who has been in jail for 4 years. She visits him every two weeks to share stories of how her and their children are doing. She has no money for supplies and feels lonely; there is a vacuum in her life with her husband gone. She is a woman who is "responsible for the household. I take care of the children... I believe I carry out the roles of the father and the mother" (Zakiya). She makes sure her children and other children do their homework and go to school. These women and others like them are from all over the world: places like Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Colombia, the Balkans, Israel, the Palestinian territories, Ukraine and anywhere else war breaks out.

Stories like these are everywhere. Stories like that of Fareeda, a piano teacher in Sarajevo who kept a music school open every day during a four year siege of her city. Every day meant walking through streets full of sniper fire on the way to the school (Salbi). In war there is the side "that fights, and there is the side that keeps the schools, the factories and the hospitals open. There is the side that thinks of peace as the end of fighting, and there is the side that thinks of peace as the arrival of school and jobs" (Salbi). There are those who pick up their rifle as the fighting starts, and there are those who pick up their ladle and chalk.

Zainab Salbi was a woman who grew up in the midst of the Iraq war. She experienced the role of women in war in a very profound manner: she saw one side of war as being led by men and another by women. But, "unfortunately, the world typically sees only one side of the coin" (Salbi). Women do not have guns and bombs and a popular cause to die for with a battle cry on their lips. Women are not remembered as heroes.

Women are on the front lines of their wars every minute of every day. They fight it bereft of

the hope that there is an end in sight. Fareeda in Sarajevo exemplifies this phenomenon. For four long, ceaseless years she fought her battle. Every day did not bring her closer to the end. For those steeped in the chaotic landscape of war the end only becomes an end once it has arrived. Prior to that, the days only pile onto one another. The end of a conflict is a retroactively simple thing to understand. But down on the ground in the noise and the dust, war is an eternity.

To be a soldier on the front line is to have only one goal: to kill your opponent before your opponent kills you. Nothing else matters. This creates a scenario where that dead man who killed and was killed is elevated to the status of hero without having had need to remain allied to his humanity. He can become a cold, hard killer and still be a hero. For women in war this is not the case. They must retain their humanity. Their sense of caring and concern for others must stay intact. They must remain strong and steadfast in places that constantly wear away at those things that make a person whole.

The heroic deaths of the front line are the stuff of the WHM. Soldiers have always and will always die as the myth demands. They will continue to be fired by a worthwhile cause and forfeit their lives in the pursuit of its success. These dead soldiers will continue to be held up as heroes, as people willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for a goal higher than their own life.

But the heroism of women finds its legitimacy from a different source. The WHM bestows honour through death; it legitimizes heroic actions that end in a loss of life. The heroism of women is found at the opposite end. Their war is the battle against death. They fight to sustain life. They do not have guns and bombs and a worthy cause to die for with a battle cry on their lips. Their worthy cause is the scared and starving people who suffer and die by no choice of their own, and they are also among these people.

They provide nourishment of two kinds. One is of the more functional nature. They feed and help those who need it. People need to eat. There can be no argument that this is absolutely fundamental to the survival of people. This is so obvious as to be instantly redundant. But women in

conflict provide so much more than just the basic needs of the physical body.

Women in conflict provide those things that colour in the various parts of human experience. They both create these things and create the settings for them to continue, regardless of warfare. Stories like that of Fareeda in Sarajevo illustrate this. It takes so much more than the basic necessities of survival for life to be continued. These can be nearly as important as food and water, and a life without them may not be worth much. Stories shared, a squeeze of the shoulder, a sharing of knowledge, a motherly figure, a lesson taught, a familial tie, a shared experience, or any other human connection: these go beyond that which fuels the body. These are the things women of war support and maintain. They are so far removed from the masculine world of war. They are the things that sustain life as more than a mere physical existence.

These women have little to defend themselves with. They fight their war with the ever present danger of rape, robbery, and death for themselves and those they care for. They fight for their cause with precious little. A soldier can fight back. A soldier has the tools at his disposal to kill those that kill him. A woman in a war zone, most likely, does not. She must take on the burden of her own defenseless suffering and find the courage and will to help those around her.

Women wage war for life. They wage war against the insidious, ever present risk of losing that which makes life worth living. They keep alive that which stands as the center of us all. People are not automatons kept in cold storage until a conflict arises. We are living, breathing, feeling creatures with all the potential and need for growth entailed by these qualities. Women of war fight every day for the things that make life so precious and important.

This is where the WHM fails. It creates the illusion that it is only through the removal of life that it becomes worthwhile. It demands that an individual's life be made forfeit in order for that person to be held in the highest regard. We honour those that fall, and we should. However, those that live are worth the same esteem. Those that stand for life no matter the bullets and bombs must also be recognized.

No one would call these women cowards. But their untold stories go beyond the passive role of a witness to war. "It is time to see the other side of the war. It is time to understand war and peace as women see it and feel it" (Salbi). There is a whole other reality to war that is rarely witnessed. It does not hold the enchanting glamour of traditional warfare. Instead it is the core of life and what life is when the guns stop firing.

Women in conflict are the bright warm center of life surrounded by the vicious darkness of war. They are absolutely heroes in every sense of the word. To look at heroism as the WHM depicts it is to miss their contribution and status. They contribute more to that which truly counts than any trigger pulled or bomb set off ever could.

A possible criticism to what has been argued here is that increasing the visibility of heroism by women in war may reduce the heroism attached to combatants. This claim holds no weight when closely examined. It assumes that holding one thing in higher esteem will reduce the esteem of something else. This indicates a belief that people have only a finite amount of respect to go around. Respect is not a precious resource. It is not like a fossil fuel; one doesn't have to worry about it running low or disappearing completely from over use.

As well, it does not work like a full glass of water and an empty glass. Where pouring water from the full glass to the empty one empties the original. Respecting something does not reduce the level of esteem for something else. Women and men in war, and the different sacrifices they make, can be equally respected.

There is no adversarial nature between these two sides of war. Their experiences and actions in war are very different. There needs be no struggle over who should be held in higher esteem. Both sides can be held evenly as capable of great heroism.

But the important point is that one side isn't held in high esteem. One side is largely ignored. Women in war are an unknown entity. Their actions are not those that are traditionally held in high regard by the populace. Their stories are perceived as small and unimportant next to the cannons

and guns of warfare. A belief in the story of the Western Hero Myth is a cause of this. It causes a dramatic undervaluing of the roles women take in warfare. Exploring the nature of the WHM and understanding how it rejects the importance of what women do in war reveals the damage done to women. The story of women in war must be told. The horror and constant adversity they face must be revealed. To know of their stories is to allow for respect. From that respect, understanding and support can flow.

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