

Colonel Lanser as a Victim in *The Moon Is Down*

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1. Introduction

John Steinbeck (1902-68) explains in 1953 what he wrote in *The Moon Is down* (1942): “The war came on, and I wrote *The Moon Is Down* as a kind of celebration of the durability of the democracy” (*My Short Novels* 159). This viewpoint represents townspeople who fight against invaders. Because of his words, the townspeople’s action have attracted readers’ attention and view is favorably. However, the invaders also deserve special attention. They were well-drawn and the novel devotes over half of its pages to description of the invaders. This paper, focusing on Colonel Lanser, a leader of the invader troops, examines how conflicts between townspeople and the invaders arose, and what effect the outcome of the conflict had.

2. Differences between Colonel Lanser and some other soldiers

In this novella, the portrayal of Colonel Lanser is interestingly presented through the unique viewpoint of other soldiers. He is a soldier who is tied to old memories of the past war which he experienced in France and Belgium. The fierce confrontation there had a great impact on him. He speaks about what happened in Belgium to Mr. Corell, who is a storekeeper in the town, and who becomes a traitor to help the enemy’s invasion. Lanser mentions an old woman in Belgium who killed twelve soldiers of his corps with a hatpin. He says “I have it [her hatpin] yet at home. It has an enamel button with a bird over it, red and blue” (Steinbeck, “*The Moon Is Down*” 340). He still keeps the hatpin and clearly remember the detail of what led up to her killing. Therefore, the hatpin conjures a reminiscence of his painful experience, which has disturbed Lanser until now. Furthermore, he does not talk about the incident to his own men. The reason for this is not clearly stated, but it is most probable that he fears demoralizing the soldiers by doing so. As nobody knows his mental suffering, he is a lonely officer among the invader troops.

Unlike Lanser, five officers did not experiences of war or a real invasion. Captain Loft appears as an officer with soldierly virtues. He always keeps strict military rules and is always concerned about his promotion. Moreover, Loft does not like negative words or implications. When Lanser admonishes a young lieutenant who suffers mental illness, he uses the word “defeat” in the speech. Loft immediately reacts and questions the use of that

word. In conversation with Corell, Lanser explains “Defeat is momentary thing. A defeat doesn’t last. We were defeated and now we [invaders] attack. Defeat means nothing” (340). Later Lanser sees something beyond “defeat” based on his memories of the previous war. Loft does not understand what Lanser has in mind, because he values the military mind and would never accept being beaten. Thus, differences between the two men grow from their careers.

When Lanser hears an officer was killed by a townsman called Alexander, Lanser whispers “So it starts again. We shoot this man [Alexander] and make twenty enemies. It’s the only things we know, the only things we know” (342). He knows what will happen and thinks that the murder is the beginning of the rebellion.

Major Hunter, as a second-commander of the invasion troops, saw the outcome of the invasion in a different light. After the invasion, Hunter states “I wonder whether the man who wrote it was ever in an occupied country. These people [townspeople] are harmless enough. They seem to be good, obedient people” (332). In addition, he might think right of the operation. Regardless of the mission, he designs a bridge for a model train in the backyard of his house. Hence, Hunter thinks this invasion is easy, but when the revolt begins, he reveals his real feeling for his subordinate. When the subordinate asks, “Major, wouldn’t you like to go home for a rest?,” Hunter replies “Yes, of course” (361). It is conceivable that his war experience hints that this invasion would be wrong.

Two other young officers, Tonder and Prackle appear in the story. They are much less experienced because they have vacantly finished their military education and training and have just started their career in the military. Consequently, they did not actually know war or invasion. Accordingly, both of them become mentally ill; Tonder is killed by Molly, a wife to Alexander who was executed for killing Captain Bentick. By contrast, Prackle goes mad as the rebellion grows. Like Major Hunter, both of them think the invasion is easy, talking about girls and what to do after the war. Unfortunately, their wishes will not be fulfilled. In fact, Lanser says,

I might be a major-general if I hadn’t talked about it so much. We trained our young men for victory and you’ve got to admit they’re glorious in victory, but they don’t quite know how to act in defeat. We told them they were brighter and braver than other young men. It was a kind of shock to them to find out that they aren’t a bit braver or brighter than other young men” (388-389).

Lanser understands that Tonder and Prackle are not ready for fighting an enemy.

3. Relationships between Colonel Lanser and Mayor Orden

Colonel Lanser and Mayor Orden share some views and human emotions. Since he

first met Orden, Lanser has always respected for Orden, and has told him that he would not control the townspeople through military power. Furthermore, he believes that Mayor's cooperation would help him avoid conflict.

Lanser sometimes reveals his true feelings, showing his other kinder self. It is reinforced by the conversation between Lanser and Orden. In the first meeting after the invasion at the mayor's residence, they each have a different idea about the control of the town. Lanser insists Orden should rule the town because he is the authority, but Orden does not think so. He says "Some people accept appointed leaders and obey them. But my people have elected me. They made me and unmake me" (325). He sees that people do what they want and in addition, he thinks that he does not have right to choose how he behaves. Furthermore, Orden makes Lanser an offer to resign, but Lanser refuses the offer. Orden's comment that "The people will not like it," irritates Lanser, who speaks out with emotion "Always people! The people are disarmed. The people have no say" (327). Lanser thinks that if Orden remains in authority, Lanser and his troops avoid the bloodshed. However, Orden replies, "You [Lanser] want to believe this, but it is true: authority is in the town. I don't know why, but it is so" (327). This exchange of views implies a difference in ideas of ruling between the military leader and the town's leader. In the military, subordinates do not have the right to choose what they will do, but in the town, people have. Thus, the first meeting shows that they do not know each other yet.

The second conversation between Lanser and Orden occurs after the one of the officers is killed by a townsman. Talking about the man who kills the officer, Lanser says "I like you, sir, and I respect you, but I have a job to do. You surely recognize that" (349). He reveals his feelings and expects that Orden can understand his situation or his feelings. Thus, he reveals his true feelings:

"personally, I have respect for you and your office, and ... you see, what I think, sir, I, a man of certain age and certain memories, is of no importance. I might agree with you, but that would change nothing. The military, the political pattern I work in has certain tendencies and practices which are invariable" (350).

Dangerously enough, he criticizes the own government and military.

The third conversation comes after the execution of a townsman. When he hears the sudden sound of gunshot, Laser speaks to Orden "You, sir, ... are placed in protective custody. And understand this, please: we will shoot, five, ten, a hundred for one." Orden replies "A man of certain memories.", and after th Lanser responds "A man of no memories!" (356). Orden understands what Lanser does; he has certain memories and is

caught in emotional turmoil between being a soldier and a man.

After headquarters was ordered to execute Orden because of Mr. Corell's betrayals again; Orden and Doctor Winter, Orden's best friend, play with the words of Socrates' speech. Lanser at first watches the discussion in silence but suddenly joins in. He offers to Orden "I will carry out my orders no matter what they are, but I do not think, sir, a proclamation from you might save many lives" (400). He suggests that if Orden will stop the rebellion, avoid the more bloodshed can avoided, but he refuses the offer. Then finally it is expected that Orden will be executed. That is ironic, because Lanser believes that Orden understands everything and even after the confrontation, he keeps his belief that Orden has authority.

4. Lanser as a "free man"

In the novel, two important phrases are delivered by Orden: "Free men cannot start a war, but once it is started, they can fight on in defeat. Herd men, follows a leader, cannot do that, and so it is always the herd men who wins battles and the free men who win war" (400). Both "free men" and "herd men" are phrases of identity. Obviously, "free men" represents the townspeople and "herd men" represents the invaders. Moreover, townspeople are those who defend democracy. For instance, they raise the rebellion without awaiting instruction and they believe that freedom is important. The idea of "free men" is also delivered by one of the townsmen, who is named Alex, at his trial: he says "I am a free man" (354). On the other hand, invaders must follow the orders from headquarters, or from their superiors, even if these orders are not right. However, Lanser could become a "free man." He has his own idea as the townspeople do, he explains "I, an individual man with certain memories, might agree with you [Orden], might even add that one of the tendencies of the military mind and pattern is an inability to learn, an inability to see beyond the killing which is its job" (350-351). Lanser knows and feels that his government policy and military plan were wrong.

Despite his full realization of the government's inhuman treatment in the act of invasion, he faces the hopeless dilemma between a military mind and a man human mind. Throughout the invasion he cannot reconcile his conduct with his idea. His old memories about a previous war performing influence his idea. In the end, he makes a decision about performing his duty as a military leader.

5. Conclusion

As described in the introduction, Steinbeck opposes critics who attack his sympathetic attitude toward Germans. In his counterargument, he adds some comments on

human nature: “I had written of Germans as men, not supermen, and this was considered a very weak attitude to take. I couldn’t make much sense out of this, and it seems absurd now that we know the Germans were men, and thus failible, even defeatable” (160). The novel was published just after the US participates in the WWII. For that reason, readers might think that the invader troops embody evil, but they are not shaped like that. Against readers’ expectation, Lanser, as a humane leader, understands the feelings of pain that townspeople are feeling. Steinbeck writes “freedom” in presenting townspeople as “free men” in the novel, but he also silently describes another from of “freedom” when he creates Lanser as a man who, deprived of “free will,” suffers from the gap between his vision of peace and order in a time of war and the current reality of performing his military leadership.

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