Stay Where You Are And Then Leave, John Boyne

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LCE

Topic: World War I
Brief summary
On the day of Alfie Summerfield’s fifth birthday party, the war begins. The next day, Georgie Summerfield leaves his son and his wife, as he joins the army. Alfie and his mother are struggling with poverty, that’s why she has to work as a nurse. The little boy wants to find out the truth about his father, because he knows that his mother won’t tell him why he stopped writing letters to his family. By chance, he discovers where his father is staying and decides to embark on a secret mission.

- Setting
  - Time
    On 28th July 1914, Alfie Summerfield’s fifth birthday, which takes place in the beginning of the story, World War I begins. The reader learns about the boy’s life from the start of the fighting in July 1914 until the end in November 1918.
  - Place
    Alfie’s family lives in Damley Road in London, a street with twelve small houses on either side. The reader also learns about the hospitals during World War I and Kings Cross station in the capital.

- Characters
  John Boyne created all the characters in the book and none of them actually lived in real life. Alfie, a young civilian who lives in London, has to accept the fact that his father goes to war and decides to shine shoes to help his mother earn money. He’s very brave and knows what’s important in life, despite his age. The war completely changes everything and everyone in Alfie’s life, he even says: “It had never been like this before the war began” (page 71). He is still a small child at the beginning of the war and doesn’t understand what’s going on around him. He says: “...something that all the adults were talking about, but it seemed boring and he wasn’t really interested anyway” (page 7). He doesn’t really get to experience his childhood the way he should, because from a young age he has to be able to take responsibility and take care of himself when his mother is working. The people he’s surrounded by are mostly depressed and afraid of what’s going to happen next. Alfie loses hope at one point in the book and says: “the war will never come to an end” (page 60). He’s exasperated like everyone else of his family members and even believes that his father is dead. Later in the story, the young boy has to see the wounded soldiers lying in their hospital beds and his own father suffering from Shell Shock, which changes his mind about war.
Alfie realizes that war does terrible things to these young men. It completely destroys them physically and emotionally.

- **The First World War in the novel**
  John Boyne writes about the problem of conscientious objectors (“conchies”), which was very common during this war. Joe Patience refuses to fight in the war, that’s why people who once were his friends abuse him. Women hand out white flowers in public places to these men to humiliate them and show their disrespect. The author also writes about the treatment of the so-called aliens. Mr Janacek for instance is interned on the Isle of Man like many other citizens of a foreign nation with which England is in a state of declared war. People are deported to work camps because they don’t have English roots.

- **Perspective**
  John Boyne chose to tell the story in the perspective of an omniscient narrator. Although the story isn’t told by Alfie, you read it from his (at times) slightly childish yet mature perspective. This enables the author to leave the reality of war in the background and focus on the heart-warming and emotional story of Alfie and his father.

- **My personal opinion**
  One thing that’s very interesting about the story is that it’s not your typical war-book. You see the world through the eyes of a young child, which is fascinating. You can feel what children in the war go through. The story plays during the time of the fighting but you don’t really read about it, because the book mainly tells the story of the young boy during wartime. Like the people at the time, the reader is oblivious of what’s happening on the battlefield. One can learn about the life in the capital of England as well as how the people, whose family members are fighting, cope with the tough changes and the constant fear that something happens to their loved ones. The book doesn’t shy away from the brutality of wartime and shows you the aftermath and the effect it has on the soldiers. In conclusion, the main topics are the events in the young boy’s life during the four years of misery and not the war itself.

- **Passage**
  “‘Yes!’ said Joe, leaning forward and looking the boy directly in the eyes. ‘Of course I was afraid. What kind of fool wouldn’t be afraid, going over to some foreign country to dig out trenches and to kill as many strangers as you could before some stranger could kill you? Only a lunatic wouldn’t be afraid. But it wasn’t fear that kept me from going, Alfie. It wasn’t because I knew I’d be injured or killed. It was
the opposite of that. It was the fact that I didn’t want to kill anyone. I wasn’t put on this earth to murder my fellow man…” (page 175)

This passage of the book sums up what I think must be going through a young man’s mind when he’s forced to go to war but doesn’t want to kill others, like Joe Patience. It really describes the fear and the hopelessness of the conscientious objectors who refuse to fight in the war and who are displayed as cowards and even sent to jail. Joe doesn’t use the word enemies to describe the adversaries, but instead he calls them strangers. Finding the reason why they kill each other is hard for these people. Their opponents aren’t any different from them; they are just as afraid and just as desperate as the British soldiers.

Like Joe says, human beings aren’t made to hurt one another. One order can transform two people into enemies; one order could transform two people back into friends.

Resources:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I
http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/nov/01/stay-where-you-are-leave-review