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A Critical Analysis of *The Killer Angels*

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The Killer Angels is a narrative historical fiction novel about the Battle of Gettysburg during the American Civil War. This novel was written by Michael Shaara and first published in 1975. Shaara takes the reader on a journey of heroism, heartbreak, and determination through the eyes of major characters present at the Battle of Gettysburg. This novel is recommended for anyone wanting to learn more about the Battle of Gettysburg. Michael Shaara does a beautiful job at humanizing characters on both sides of the battlefield; however, he skirts the issues of food shortages in the Confederate Army and the significance of slavery in the Civil War.

Shaara (1975) tells the story of the Battle of Gettysburg by alternating the point of view between major characters in the Union and the Confederate armies. The story begins two days before the battle begins, on Monday, June 29, 1863. On this day, the Army of Northern Virginia is continuing their journey through Maryland and getting ready to enter Pennsylvania. Harrison, (General Longstreet's spy) alerts Longstreet and General Lee the main body of the Union Army is moving quickly close by. General Lee decides to converge almost the entire force of his army in Gettysburg, a city in Pennsylvania where all roads meet. The same day, General Chamberlain of the Union Army is preparing to march his soldiers to Pennsylvania. In the town of Gettysburg, Union cavalry General Buford spots Confederate Lieutenant Hill's corps begin to surround Gettysburg. The story continues to the first day of battle, July 1, 1863. The battle begins by Confederate Commander Heth engaging Buford's troops, and ends with Confederate victory (Shaara, 1975).

On the second day of battle the course of victory changes in favor of the Union. General Lee wants to take the Rocky Hill (Little Round Top) away from Union control, but fails to do so. The third and last day of battle is the most deadly for both sides. After failing to seize Little Round Top, General Lee is desperate to break the Union hold on Cemetery Ridge. The

commander of the Union army, General Meade, focuses his soldiers in the center of Cemetery Ridge, knowing Lee will strike there. In the end, the Army of Northern Virginia is decimated and General Lee decides to withdraw back across the Potomac River (Shaara, 1975).

General Lee had various motivations to move his army to the North. First, Lee wanted to force the Union Army to withdraw from Virginia. Second, Lee wished the Union Army would abandon Tennessee and Vicksburg so the Confederacy could save these areas from falling to the Union. Finally, Lee wanted to invade the North to push the Union to agree to a peace treaty and end the Civil War. The Battle of Gettysburg was not planned by Lee or by Meade, it was sparked by a skirmish between Heth's infantry division and Buford's cavalry because General Hill wanted to obtain shoes for his men. General Buford requested backup from the nearby First Corps (General Reynold's corps), the battle escalated, and whole corps from both sides were drawn to Gettysburg. In the end, the Confederates lost mainly due to lack of coordination. Lee also struggled during the Battle of Gettysburg because he went in blind, since General Stuart's cavalry never reported the lay of the land. General Meade also received criticism for letting the Confederates withdraw without pursuing them for a counterattack, which could have possibly ended the war sooner. The Union's victory at Gettysburg, along with the fall of Vicksburg and Chattanooga shortly thereafter, changed the tide of the Civil War in favor of the Union (Roland, 2004).

Michael Shaara succeeds in humanizing the men, particularly officers, in the Confederate and the Union armies. It is important that the author does this because it reminds the reader that the hundreds of thousands of men who fought and died during the Civil War were all humans with feelings, thoughts, and emotions. It is easier to see these human qualities in the movie adaptation of Shaara's novel, *Gettysburg*. For example, General Lee is portrayed throughout the

movie as exhausted and desperate for the war to be over. Lee experiences an internal struggle each time he sends men into battle. The greatest example of Lee's struggles is on the third day of battle, he is so determined to end the war in order for them to all go home that he orders a major attack, which he knows will sacrifice many of his soldiers, in hopes they will break the Union line (*Gettysburg*, 1993). This makes all readers sympathize with Lee because it shows he was not a horrible person who ordered thousands of men to march to their deaths for nothing, and southern readers remember that Lee was not an invincible hero (Shaara, 1975).

Shaara also chose to incorporate the story of Confederate General Louis Armistead and Union General Winfield Hancock into *The Killer Angels*. This is very important to his goal of humanizing the soldiers who fought in the Civil War because it hits home that brothers and best friends were fighting each other. Armistead told Hancock before the war began, "If I lift a hand against you, friend, may God strike me dead," (Shaara, 1975). Armistead and Hancock's storyline humanizes soldiers because it lets the reader know the war pained soldiers to fight their brothers and fellow comrades from previous wars. Shaara's theme of fighting brother versus brother matches with the political issues of the time. In Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*, he could have celebrated the South's first real crushing loss and boosted morale for the Union. Instead, he honored men who died on both sides as heroes and said there was hope to unite the country to its former glory (Lincoln, 1863). Lincoln's political agenda was to enable a smooth transition for the southern states to re-enter the Union after the war was over, which he could not have done if he vilified the Confederate soldiers. Shaara's agenda in his novel was to remember the Civil War soldiers as Americans with different beliefs, which he could not have done if he portrayed the officers as evil men. Both Lincoln and Shaara had to humanize the Civil War soldiers on both sides in order to match their political agendas of unity (Lincoln, 1863; Shaara, 1975).

Food shortages in the Confederate army was a major issue in the Civil War, and Shaara does not address this issue in great detail. Shaara does briefly mention the men were desperate for food when a soldier offers Lee a grand breakfast of foods they never get to eat because they confiscated it from the citizens of Pennsylvania (Shaara, 1975). One of the reasons why the Confederate army had a food shortage was because the Union navy had blockaded Southern ports from receiving imports and exports (Roland, 2004). This is mentioned very briefly when General Kemper asks Arthur Fremantle (an English liaison), “When [is England] going to do something about that damned Yankee blockade out there on the water?” (*Gettysburg*, 1993). One of the reasons Lee chose to follow the Blue Ridge Mountains and invade the North was so the Confederate troops could feed themselves off the land, have access to crops, and stock up on supplies (Roland, 2004). Shaara could have gone into much more detail about the Confederate food and supply shortage and explained the toll it had on the soldiers. The author also could have mentioned whether or not weakness from hunger affected their defeat at Gettysburg (Roland, 2004; Shaara, 1975).

Slavery was arguably the most important issue surrounding the Civil War. *The Killer Angels* and *Gettysburg* rarely mention slavery directly. From the Confederate perspective, the characters say “the cause” of the war is corrupt government, not slavery (Shaara, 1975). The *Secession Acts of the Thirteen Confederate States* paints a very different picture. Alabama directly cites Lincoln as the reason for secession because his actions are “hostile to the domestic institutions and to the peace and security of the people of the State of Alabama,” (Secession Acts of the Thirteen Confederate States, 1861). The “domestic institutions” and “states’ rights” all thirteen Confederate states mention are a reference to slavery (Secession Acts of the Thirteen Confederate States, 1861). Perhaps Shaara indicates the Confederate cause was not slavery

because it does not fit his goal to humanize the soldiers on both sides. It is difficult for readers to sympathize with characters who fought for the right to own other people. However, it is important to note Shaara mentioned England would not join the Confederate campaign because slavery was legal in the South and had been outlawed in the British Empire (Shaara, 1975)

Slavery is also briefly mentioned from the Union perspective. In order to persuade the troops of the Second Maine Regiment to join his command, General Chamberlain says they are fighting to “set other men free,” (Shaara, 1975, p. 30). By including this statement, Shaara hints that since the Emancipation Proclamation, instead of fighting for nationalism the Union army is fighting to end slavery (Roland, 2004). The most slavery is mentioned in the whole story is when Union soldiers find a wounded and escaped slave (*Gettysburg*, 1993). Chamberlain and Sergeant Kilrain have a conversation about slavery in broad and indirect terms of freedom and liberty for all (*Gettysburg*, 1993). The way the injured slave is treated humanizes and dehumanizes him at the same time. The slave is humanized when the surgeon says he “looks just like anyone else inside,” (Shaara, 1975). The slave is dehumanized when some of the Union soldiers discuss how much they could sell him to the Confederacy for (Shaara, 1975). Union cavalry did actually capture African Americans in the North to sell them to the South for profit (Roland, 2004). This could mean some of the Union soldiers were fighting for monetary gain instead of the freedom of slaves. Also, this moment means racism was an issue in the North. Shaara more accurately depicts the issue of slavery from the Union perspective instead of the Confederate perspective (Shaara, 1975).

The Killer Angels is recommended for anyone who would like to learn more about the Battle of Gettysburg and the men who were willing to lay down their lives for what they believed in. Michael Shaara brilliantly offered the points of view from both the Union and the

Confederacy in a way that was not confusing. He also made the characters relatable and reminds the reader of the heartbreak both sides of the Civil War endured. It is important to keep in mind the other social and political issues that were going on at the same time, such as food shortages and slavery. The story does not go into as much detail as it should have on these issues. It is crucial for the reader to recognize Shaara sacrificed the importance of slavery during the Civil War for his overall theme of humanizing the Confederacy and the Union. Overall, *The Killer Angels* is a very good novel to read to gain more knowledge about the Battle of Gettysburg.

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