

The Repercussion of Violence in Brett Neveu's play *Harmless*

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Abstract

Brett Neveu (1970) is one of the distinctive voices of the contemporary American theatre. Through his plays, Brett Neveu appears to be a dramatist who is very much concerned with everything related to his country and society. Most of his works apparently deal with issues of national importance, including violence, the consequences of 2001 attacks, family disintegration, and the legacy of slavery. Neveu holds himself responsible for condemning the violence that goes through the American subconscious. Neveu not only denounces the violence that his country commits elsewhere in the world, as portrayed in the trilogy, but also the domestic violence that Americans perpetrate against one other. He wants to stress that violence has become an inseparable part of the American character, even the young, due to their violent and conflict-laden history full of wars and battles. He sees wars as sins that will inevitably keep devastating the whole world. Neveu is seemingly seeking to discuss with the audience the emotional and psychological damage that the war can inflict upon Americans. Through *Harmless* (2016) which is as an anti-war drama that generally censures the American war against Iraq and emphasizes its ugliness and savagery, Neveu's message is that war is dehumanizing, man is the victim of its absurdity, injustices, and fatal consequences, and that peace is the lasting and most convenient ideology for living. This study attempts to trace the war's dehumanizing impacts and traumatic effects on soldiers who have been misled by the alleged grandeur of war and deceived by the fake ideals of patriotism and sacrifice. In particular, it is the dramatist's means to portray and shed light on the mental suffering of the returning soldiers whose pre- and post-war lives have turned totally different and their internal war seems to come to no end.

Keywords: Violence, trauma, antiwar, marginalized American soldiers

Brett Neveu (1970) is one of the distinctive voices of the contemporary American theatre. Through his plays, Brett Neveu appears to be a dramatist who is very much concerned with everything related to his country and society. Most of his works apparently deal with issues of national importance, including violence, the consequences of 2001 attacks, family disintegration, and the legacy of slavery. More specifically, in one of his e-mails to the researcher, Neveu states, “most of my plays are in some way about the reasons, purpose, and repercussions of violence ...” (Neveu, e-mail). This is to say, Neveu holds himself responsible for condemning the violence that goes through the American subconscious. Neveu not only denounces the violence that his country commits elsewhere in the world, as portrayed in the trilogy, but also the domestic violence that Americans perpetrate against one other. He wants to stress that violence has become an inseparable part of the American character, even the young, due to their violent and conflict-laden history full of wars and battles. It seems as if “[they] have a lust for it in this society” (Betsko 285). We can note that the dramatist criticizes the fact that in the United States of America “[violence] is inherent in the individual, and underlies the relationships between a person and other members of the community; by extension, such violence proceeds from the home culture to embrace others” (Fenn 212). Brett Neveu's dramas, as he himself says, “look at how people in power, the decisions that they make, trickle down into everyday life.” They center on “families and people just struggling along, people who have to go to work, make a living and keep everything balanced. Then some arbitrary decision throws that balance off...” (qtd in Greene 2). His trilogy represents a case in point. When the American war on Iraq reared its ugly head, he intended to dedicate a complete cycle of plays as “an uphill battle against those far-off folks in power who make decisions that affect them directly” (Neveu interview).

Brett Neveu is an anti-war dramatist. He does not encourage waging wars, nor does he participate in war-propaganda. He sees wars as sins that will inevitably keep devastating the whole world. He perceives Iraq war as a big lie that has merely economic and political backgrounds, ignoring the false premise and faulty intelligence upon which George Bush has based his justifications of Iraq invasion that over time has ignited the anger, revulsion, and protest of the American society and the international community at large. When asked about his perception of the war, in an e-mail message, Brett Neveu states:

Sadly, the war is (and was) something that I felt quite distant. Our government ... seemed to try very hard to limit our knowledge of what was happening in Iraq. We were given bits and pieces and were often lied to about what was happening, the presence of weapons of mass destruction, for example. The involvement, in my mind, was a plan by greedy men who saw an opportunity to take advantage during a time America was in shock from September 11th, 2001. What happened during the war in Iraq appeared at all times like a confused operation unsure of its reasoning. (Neveu, e-mail)

As for the war's impact on him as Brett Neveu the citizen and the dramatist, he asserts that it is nothing but a new miserable experience in Americans' lives that has left him totally confused and frustrated. It strips him off his old belief in the United States as he tells:

On a personal level, the war affected my own trust in my government and my own perception of what it means to be an American. I did lose a lot of faith in my country's ability to do the right thing by the rest of the world and now feel that making money and wielding power with that money is much of my government's focus. (Neveu, e-mail)

He explains that his plays are his personal attempts to release his feelings of anguish and misery as a citizen tormented by what his government has done in Iraq. They, in other words, bear his deep resentment against such a sweeping experience and what it has left in the American society and what it has caused to American civilians not only soldiers. He states: "One of my trilogies, *Harmless*, its main purpose is to explore how the war affected those at home in the states ... and spotlight the invasion of war into the daily lives of everyday Americans ..."(Neveu, e-mail). Through his examinations, Neveu is seemingly seeking to discuss with the audience the emotional and psychological damage that the war can inflict upon Americans. He is also attempting to understand the motivations of Bush's government and question his desire to involve his country in a needless war. In an e-mail message, he says "the play is a discussion that I need to have about a war I feel did more damage than more will ever realize" (Neveu,

e-mail). Simply, through *Harmless*, Neveu's message is that war is dehumanizing, man is the victim of its absurdity, injustices, and fatal consequences, and that peace is the lasting and most convenient ideology for living.

Brett Neveu intends in his play *Harmless* (2016) to investigate how America's senseless war against Iraq has torn the fabric of the American society, and generally denounce such a hurting experience in the American history. He, in addition, intentionally directs the whole play to refute people's thought of war especially because he has a personal, not only national, connection to this war as his brother-in-law was one of the American veterans on the front. He thinks, as he clarifies many times in his e-mails to the researcher, that Americans are “interested in simplifications, in the debate about the war rather than the experience of the war itself” (Savran 193). They merely get their information about the war from exciting TV programs and newspapers. Furthermore, their understanding of the war is negatively affected by Hollywood movies most of which turn any war America initiated from a disastrous event in the American history into profitable industry and a source of storytelling. This is why, Neveu, one of the U.S. new dramatic voices, has decided to open the wound and bring the war home through his three plays that strip away the allure of the war, uncover its ugly core, “translate the psychological horror of war experience into a form that can be comprehended both emotionally and intellectually by himself and his society” (Fenn 224), and so force the whole nation to comprehend what this experience is like.

This study handles the first installment of Brett Neveu's war trilogy, *Harmless* (2016). It is an anti-war drama that generally censures the American war against Iraq and emphasizes its ugliness and savagery. Mainly, the play traces the war's dehumanizing impacts on soldiers who have been misled by the alleged grandeur of war and deceived by the fake ideals of patriotism and sacrifice. In particular, it is the dramatist's means to portray and focus light on the mental suffering of the returning soldiers whose pre- and post-war lives have turned totally different and their internal war seems to come to no end. It is, in addition, a vivid investigation into “the responsibility the public has toward [those] veterans and how they are viewed when they come back ...” (qtd. in Behrens, *chicagotribune.com*). In a word, *Harmless* seems to be a highly expressive approach to the war experience and its far-reaching traumatic influences and so it has grabbed the public's attention to the other two plays of the trilogy.

Harmless is a play in two acts concerning American soldiers' reactions and responses to their war experiences in Iraq after returning home. It opened at TimeLine Theatre in Chicago on January 20, 2007 and later had been published as a book on July 19, 2016. It was directed by Edward Sobel who has collaborated with Neveu in other plays over the past ten years, including *American Dead* (2004) and *Heritage* (2006). It has grabbed the attention of audience and critics alike. Gabriel Greene, for instance, describes it as

a sharp, pointed play. It's like a stiletto: You're walking along, and suddenly you feel a pain in your side and the blood is beginning to blossom on your shirt. And before you even know it, you've been hit. (4)

Tom Williams, Chicago Theatre critic, also expresses his admiration of the play that enlightens people's awareness to the awful states of American soldiers in the aftermath of wartimes. He says:

This troubling play will leave [audience] debating the issues presented especially as thousands of war-scared soldiers return from Iraq and Afghanistan. Director Edward Sobel lets Neveu's intelligent script unfold with its stinging subtlety the complexity of [soldiers'] fears ... This play is a wakeup call for all of us. It is also a chilling theatre work. ("Harmless Reviews", *timelinetheatre.com*)

Harmless is a tragedy of a young life lost to the consequent awful tragedies of the American war against Iraq. It revolves around a 22-year-old student in a small college of arts who is a veteran just coming back from the battlefield in Iraq, Ben Navarro. Though he never appears on stage, he goes through the play as a loud cry of pain and agony. Upon returning home, Ben has difficulty in coming to terms with the nightmarish experiences of the war and in adjusting himself to the post-war civilian life especially after realizing that everything he believes in, and everything he thinks he has achieved is futile and meaningless. His response to this utter nonsense is a violent first-person short story that seems to be an evident confession of war brutalities. He submits this story as an assignment to his writing professor, Jim Mcfehen, who distributes it to other students without reading it as he usually does with all submissions.

As it is not like other submitted writings, Daniel Wesson, president of the college and the grandson of its founder, has soon heard about that war-related

story and summoned Jim to his office, where the whole play is set, to ask him about it and its writer, and to try to control the damage that may hit the college. Then, an army psychologist, Lieutenant Mindy Ergenbright, turns up to investigate the issue and find out their soldier's motives behind writing such a piece. So, the whole drama is based on conversations between the three characters attempting to interpret the situation of Ben who has never been granted a chance to come to stage to externalize his suffering and defend himself. It is to be noted that the play's plot is not a traditional one. Brett Neveu has seemingly freed his work from any restrictions that may suspend the flow of his ideas and feelings. The play has no climax, no female characters, except Mindy who stands for the American military institution, and no love stories. There are neither heroes who are rewarded at the end for doing noble deeds nor villains who are punished and defeated.

The play discusses the war's trauma through depicting its impact on Ben Navarro. In fact, Neveu's non-existent main character never stands for one person but for the whole war generation whose society has mercilessly sharpened their pains, worsened their life, and caused them a shock that creates unbearable internal sufferings that cannot be easily overcome. As an example, one soldier says:

I really felt the society was so apathetic and so stupid to allow this to happen; to allow this war to go on, when it was so wrong ... And yet nobody cared. And I think coming back home, dealing with the apathy was very hard. That's what made me most mad ... It took about a couple of years after getting out of the military before I finally ... was married and having my wife there to help tone me down a little bit and keep me a little bit more under control. So, that helped a lot. Like – yeah, I was just very angry. A lot of people didn't understand what I had gone through. (qtd. in Flores 138)

As the play reveals, Ben has fallen a prey to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of his service in the war. **PTSD** is considered an emotional disease which develops as a consequence of witnessing or experiencing some traumatic events that have the power "to evoke panic, terror, dread, grief, or despair" (Friedman 102). War comes at the top of the list of traumatic stressors that lead to such an

ailment, including rape, terrorist attacks, kidnapping, accident, a sudden loss of a beloved... etc. The symptoms of that disorder include “re-experiencing the trauma in dreams, recurrent thoughts and images, ... psychological numbness with an accompanying lessening of feeling of involvement with the world ...” (Reber 584)

Actually, several factors interact to cause this disorder to American soldiers returning from the war theatre in Iraq. It not only results from facing unsafe experiences and doubting the real cause of sending them miles away just to kill innocent people with no acceptable justifications, but also it is attributed to the feeling of being rejected and unappreciated in their home country despite their sacrifices on the battlefield. On leaving Iraq back to home, an American veteran is left in a world of ignorance and unconcern where most people cannot identify with him, and know very little about him, his concerns, and worries. American soldier is lost in "a dark night of soul" (Paulson 60), and haunted by a feeling that "the business-as-usual reality has no room for what he carries inside" (Egendrof 6) in a country which is completely different from that he has left behind. As with their Vietnam counterparts, one can note, Iraq warriors "returning one by one or in shifts, drew no dramatic acclaim to mark the end of sacrifice for God or country. The most wrenching experience of their young lives went unmarked" (Lewis 151). This is, in fact, what Aaron Glantz stresses in his book *The War Comes Home*:

It is not an easy thing to come home from war.
Even if you're lucky enough to have survived
... physically, you still have to get used to the
fact that Americans can't relate to what you've
been, what you think, what you've seen, how
you feel, and what you have done. (1)

It is in this context that the dilemma of Ben Navarro can be understood. Being one of the soldiers the United States has sent to fight a war against unknown enemies, Ben, according to the play, is deeply hurt by the cold reception that neither he nor his counterparts have ever expected. He is shocked by the scornful looks of his fellow citizens who see him as a murderer and warmonger with no real fault except following Bush's government's orders. In other words, instead of appreciating his efforts for the country's sake, the young man finds himself in face of unjust stereotypes he has never one day thought of, including “ruthless baby-killer [and] drug addict” (Neal 101). He, as a result, gets overwhelmed by the negative feelings that his counterparts' and his own

“sacrifices ... had been wasted; their pain meant nothing [and] worse than nothing ... being tagged as losers ...” (Gill 265). This has involved him in a new kind of war different from and even more severe than the one he has undergone in the battlefield as well as the one he still fights with his memories. This is to say, the American public's response to Ben's war experiences has turned his homeland into a new battleground (Roudané 238).

In fact, survivor guilt is one of the symptoms of PTSD that constitutes the real agony that torments the life of returning soldiers as war participants. It results from the feeling of responsibility for the decease of civilians and soldiers and regret of remaining alive while witnessing others' death. Ben who carries “the special taint of his war within himself” (Lifton 99) has inescapable feelings of guilt and shame of taking part in murdering and injuring innocent people. He comes to be aware of the distinction between “freedom fighters” and “terrorists” (Kamalipour 24) and also becomes sure of which group he and his country belong to. As the play tells, “Ben ... felt he had made a mistake” (Act.2, 53) when going to participate in Iraq destruction. This really adds much to his confusion. Furthermore, his guilt enhances his feelings of self-contempt and rage against self that clash with the idealized image of the self he yearns for. In fact, the effect of such an internal tension is damaging as it has caused his feelings of alienation and seclusion and made him, as Mindy tells, “something of an introvert ... and shy” (Act. 2, 51-52), falling a prey to the feeling that others despise and look down upon him.

Other manifestations of posttraumatic stress disorder include intrusive memories and more importantly “repetitive dreams” (Shephard 107) and nightmares “in which the veterans saw themselves ... encountering ambushes, watching their [or others'] bodies die, or witnessing atrocities” (Neal 101). As he lives in utter stress, Ben seems to have a difficulty in forgetting the war's unwanted memories. As he tells his professor and classmates, he is often visited by his upsetting past reminiscences, and is frequently haunted by one horrifying dream of dead men. Jim says:

...he mentioned to us...that he had seen things that had bothered him, that he had seen a number of killings. (beat) He told us that while he was in Iraq he'd witnessed a Humvee accident involving three men, all of which were killed, and that he'd also seen a fire-fight from a short distance and they'd

brought the wounded soldiers into the building he was guarding and he saw one of the soldiers that had been killed -- slaughtered, he had said--slaughtered very badly and missing half of his face and most of his lower body. He told us that lately he'd been dreaming of the dead men, that he often dreamed especially of the murdered and slaughtered soldier, the soldier missing half of his face and most of his body. (Act. 2, 61)

Ben's flashback to his unforgettable memories of the war incidents may, on the one hand, represent his inner struggles with his senses of shame of being a part and parcel of the never-ending cycle of killings and sufferings. On the other hand, in Thomas G. Plante's words in his book *Abnormal Behavior in the 21st Century*, it may be his “unsuccessful attempt to make sense of an experience that many of [his] fellow Americans considered to be pointless or wrong” (10). In this case, it can be implied that Ben has a deep sense of worthlessness that he tries to hide through jumping back to the past to counter the accusations that he has done nothing valuable or noble during his mission: he has neither died in the battlefield of glory nor has he accomplished great triumph to the United States. He wants to prove that soldiers are the real victims of what is happening. They never know what they do in Iraq and have unintentionally turned into blind killing machines that have first killed themselves. In this sense, Ben Navarro speaks for average American soldier who is

a harmless misfit [who] is transformed by the military into a murderous machine, and ultimately destroyed ... he cooperates in his own destruction by confusing his concepts of manhood and patriotism with the ethos of army discipline ... (Berkowitz 183)

It is to be stated that the gravity of the situation a returning soldier is involved in after leaving the war stage sinks deeply into his psyche. “Sudden unfamiliarity [which] is finding oneself unpredictably immersed in an unknown environment” (Wands 91) creates fierce senses of unease. According to *Harmless*, it creates Ben Navarro's feelings of hopelessness and helplessness and brings on increasing waves of despair, grief, and anxiety that pervert his

postwar life. He has difficulty in coming to terms with his surroundings. He has, in Jim Mcfehern's words, "difficult time communicating" (Act.2, 65) with people around him, including his professors, colleagues, and even his parents. He also "copes inappropriately" (Act.2, 83) as President Wesson observes, and "his modes of expression are confused" (Act.2, 54) as Lieutenant Mindy sees him, being also a result of:

the loss of a capacity for emotional expressiveness. The basic training in the army and the marine corps required recruits to extinguish the expressions of emotions. Emotionality was seen as a feminine characteristic that had no place in the macho world of the military. (Neal 103)

Therefore, as one can understand from the conversations, the young boy becomes segregated from the rest of society, living as a social outcast who is marginalized as a minor member in his society not just because such a society rejects him, but also because the war has stolen his ability to fuse himself within its layers.

Through *Harmless*, Brett Neveu tries to pay attention to the fact that "a sense of meaningful existence seems important to well-being" (Mirowsky and Ross 14). He wants to stress that American soldiers have lost meaning and so have no real well-being. The more the three characters talk about Ben, the more one becomes able to infer that the psychological disturbance this young soldier suffers from can partially be attributed to his senses of loss of meaning: meaning of world, meaning of life, and meaning of himself, a kind of loss that cannot be cured by drugs. After the war, his life has turned empty and has nothing meaningful to fill this vast emptiness with. He is overwhelmed by feelings that everything around him is purposeless and the world as a whole is unintelligible. He has a strong feeling that he is a useless essence in this world. He is certain that he is no longer the one who was someday of greater importance and higher rank than his fellow civilians. This is why Neveu takes the risk of keeping Ben, the center of the play, away from stage. He intends to say that returning soldiers are buried alive or, in other words, have turned into mere shadows that have no real existence. One has to note that such a feeling of emptiness is one of PTSD symptoms (Neal 102).

Broadly speaking, in the world of wars, the resort to stories or diaries indicates "a writer's attempt to fashion a world of meaning, a world in which he

or she, embattled by circumstances, may find coherence, if only briefly” (Gill 274). In quest of meaning of what he has been through Ben tends to write a short story full of violent images “detailing a young woman's exceedingly brutal kidnapping, rape and murder” (Act.1, 41). He may intend this story to bear witness to the war events that cannot be completely known, and to open eyes and ears to experiences that have remained unspoken and unheard about. It carries a significant irony that the political mission of the American army in Iraq is paralleled to the acts of kidnap, rape, and murder, indicating that American practices there are illegal and destructive. This is to say, Ben seeks to present a simple, clear, and also direct meaning of the American war. Additionally, the story can be considered Ben's attempt to free his mind of the war memories that follow him like his shadow and threaten to ruin his life before it really starts. For him, it is an outlet to give voice to his repressed feelings. In fact, converting feelings into language, the returning soldier, PTSD patient, with his internal struggles, exposes himself to himself and others by writing out his life-changing experiences in a way that his society may understand. It is also an easier way for “male veterans, in particular, who are not as comfortable speaking about their actions or what they witness in war” (Genovese 55).

On the other side, one may infer that Ben submits this story to grab the attention of the uncaring society where he is like a new immigrant. He is in a dire need for the public's help even if he has achieved nothing in order to be able to overcome the postwar life's challenges. He uses the story to gain “the sense of being someone important in the eyes of others, being cared for and loved, being esteemed and valued as a person, and having someone who will listen, understand and help when needed” (Mirowsky and Ross 14). It is to be noted that Ben Navarro seeks after some sort of social support as it is considered an effective means of reducing distress and producing a sense of security and peacefulness to which he really aspires to regain his prewar normalcy. In a word, as a child, Ben, through his story, “make[s] some pathetic and unsuccessful attempts to win sympathy, interest, or affection” (Horney 202). He tries to lean on and attach himself to people around him, and so “gains a feeling of belonging and support which makes him feel less weak and less isolated” (Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts*, 42). Such attempts turn evident not only through the story but also through his talks about what he has seen and done in the war zone, Baqubah, with his classmates. Jim relates to President Wesson what he hears from the student:

On the first day of class one of Ben's

classmates asked him what he did in Iraq and he said when he got there he and few of his fellow soldiers, right after they landed, got hold of some guns, some Iraqi policemen's guns, some old Russian AK-47's and they tried them out, they shot at some piles of old tires. (Act.1, 36)

This can be perceived as a positive approach from Ben's part to resolve the complex emotional status attributed to coming home from war. It is his struggle to "transcend ... [and] to move beyond [his] situation of unfamiliarity" (Wands 94) and share his military experiences with others to release his stress.

Undoubtedly, Mr. Navarro's story and war tales have elicited the attention of the play's three characters who stand for the whole American society: President Wesson, Professor Jim, and Lieutenant Mindy. But it is not the attention he yearns for that could grant him what he really needs. They have kept a watchful eye on him not as a victim who needs help but rather as the center of a discussion in which each one tries to defend his / her point of view regarding how he / she sees that young man. They never seek help as much as they seek after a personal triumph and self-preservation against the possible harm and disturbance that Ben may cause although he does not pose any kind of threat to anyone. He is, as Brett Neveu depicts him, a harmless young man who seeks nothing but some sort of evaluation that can facilitate his transition from life in war trenches to civilian life. The title of the play is a metaphorical reference not only to Ben Navarro but also to all American soldiers who have either died in the battlefield or returned home with deep physical and emotional injuries being unjustly accused of everything though they have really done nothing.

To compensate for his feelings of nothingness, hollowness, self-hatred, and inadequacy, Mr. Navarro resorts to violence and aggression but only in his imagination that grants him "unlimited powers" and "exalted faculties" (qtd in Paris 29). He gets preoccupied with imagining some conditions that may make things better, bearing in his mind the thought that "the more aggressive a person is, the righter and more superior he feels ... and the less likely would it be to enter his mind that others could look down upon him" (Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts*, 118). His controversial story which is full of fictionalized violent acts that he has inserted as the only means of sharing the utter aggression that he has witnessed and undergone during his service does not represent his only resort to violence in his imagination. Toward the end of the play, the army psychologist

comes to find out that a part of the violent actions that Ben has related to his professor about hurting a female student and throwing her into water out of his severe rage and anger while roaming the campus alone at night is born out of imagination.

JIM. Ben ... hurt a female student.

LIEUTENANT MINDY. What do you say?

JIM. Ben hurt a female student on campus...

PRESIDENT WESSON. When did it happen?

JIM. Two days ago. When he was out at night walking... He said he was walking and he saw a woman near the edge of the river. He said he hurt the woman then shoved her into the water and ran away...

LIEUTENANT MINDY. Ben's not capable of something like. This ...That's what happens in the story, Man's Tooth, which was given to Ben, isn't it?... Then Ben's just creating fiction. (Act.2, 75-80)

Ben imagines he commits violent actions that he is unable to take in reality. In aggression, he seeks recognition that offers a solution for his conflicts. "To be recognized promises him not only the affirmation of himself he requires but holds out the additional lure of being liked by others and of being able in turn to like them" (Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts*, 70).

In the light of what has been previously mentioned about Ben Navarro, Brett Neveu grants the readers / audience a truthful image of the postwar struggles of the U.S. distressed young soldiers returning from Iraq merely with ragged bodies and crushed souls. He registers the different psychological states they apparently pass through to sooth the feelings of rage, marginalization, and helplessness. As the play puts, Ben has gone through episodes of isolation, compliance as well as through periods of aggression. He returns from Iraq with deep desires to move away from people. He has no interest in others, feels no intimacy toward anyone, and has no ability to fuse himself into the fabric of society. We can say that a person living in such a suffocating environment like Ben's in the war trenches and also at home tends to detach himself from others, has strong needs to run away, and free himself of the pressure on his ideas and feelings. Therefore, Ben prefers to live alone in a world of his own seeking no relations with anybody, being overwhelmed by the depressing feeling that he has no place in such a world which "is an arena where, in the Darwinian sense, the fittest survive and the strong annihilate the weak" (Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts*,

64).

Ben Navarro evolves from the man who moves away from and feels “unsafe in relation to other people” (Genovese 76) to the one who moves toward them. Actually, this change “is not a matter of choice but of inner compulsion, [it] is the only possible way of living” (Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts*, 89). His compliance is manifested in his wholehearted endeavors to create for himself a friendly relation to the world around him in order to fulfill his needs to be liked, accepted, welcomed, approved of, and appreciated. Therefore, he frequently expresses his need for a friend to whom he dares to tell his war stories, expresses his pain, his rage, his despair, and his fear (Paulson 129). His professor says, “He called me at home yesterday... he asked if he and I could talk. He said he needed a friend. Someone he could trust” (Act.2, 74). He writes the story to enable him to pass the bridge between himself and society and to indirectly tell what he actually cannot. He, it is to be stated, seeks after what is called “communalization of grief” (Genovese 57) in search for sympathy and more importantly for understanding as if he says:

Positive thoughts flow like tremendously when
I'm around people. Now when I'm alone ... I
become like very depressed ... and the stress level
just kills me. So, it is good to be around people ...
that is what helps. (Wands 71)

Mr. Navarro, at last, turns to aggression as an anchor of recognition and a means to equip himself for survival in such an uncaring society where he feels others have no use for him. This indicates that Neveu's detached and then compliant character has various aggressive tendencies that are strongly repressed and he tries to release through indulging himself in violent fantasies. Violence, even if not real, is the outlet of his fears and frustration. One can infer that the violence that Ben has involved in his story or committed against the girl in his imaginary tale stands for the violence that his country has sent him to Iraq to do to other people. Thus, Brett Neveu apparently alludes to the fact that violence is deeply rooted in the American culture, and accordingly is something innate to the American psyche. This is also further clarified when his criticism of violence extends to other students who have no war experiences. Wesson tells Mindy that the college's students commit violence against themselves and their colleagues as a normal, everyday activity: “I've had students tie each other to trees. I've had students climb over the rail of the pedestrian bridge and jump fifteen feet to the river below” (Act.2, 70).

Hence, we feel that, as reflected through the play, the war experience has left its fighters with a divided psyche. Ben appears as both a submissive and self-assertive character at the same time. As we see, at some moments, he retreats from the world around him and tries to adapt himself to a new life of miseries and injuries, struggling on his own “because [he] fear[s] the stigma attached to mental illnesses” (Schmitz, *spiegel.ed*). At other moments, he is intent on conquering his worries and anxieties, overcoming the damage done by the war, giving a meaning to his life, and finding a worthy goal for living other than killing people and imposing American ideals on the outside world. But, in fact, Ben rebellion in pursuit of self-realization ends up in nothing of what he seeks after. Actually, this division weakens him, reinforces his alienation, and adds much to his psychic troubles. He no longer knows where he stands, or who he is. The war has left him as one of the veterans returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom describes “a kind of cripple” who is “unequipped to participate fully in life” and much worse a high percent of his “attention, ... being, ... inner life is dedicated to dealing with residue of [his] experience” (Powers interview, “A soldier’s Story”).

In spite of being the central character and the hero of *Harmless*, Ben Navarro is different from the archetypal hero of the pre-twentieth century American drama. He is not a man of high virtues and moral behavior that people can follow. In addition, he is not an outstanding figure who has a high position in his society nor does he have exceptional qualities that attract people's attention to him. Instead, he is an ordinary young man who falls a victim of his country's imperialistic aspirations and practices. He provides no example to anyone but rather he is in quest of an example to follow. He is also the one who deserves the sympathy of people around him and in an urgent need for help and support. So, centering his play upon a character like Ben, Brett Neveu introduces an untraditional hero different from that which overwhelmed the nineteenth century melodrama for example to fit into the idea he discusses and the emotional states he wants to highlight.

Through the other three characters, Brett Neveu discusses not the inhuman impacts of the war as they are not among its victims but rather among its mongers and are also the ones who victimize their fellow citizens as with those who have sent them to the battlefield. In the course of their conversations, the dramatist seeks to expose, as stated in the Chicago Tribune article “Neveu's Newest Play Is Anything but Harmless”, “three different authority figures with three selfish agendas” (Jones, *chicagotribune.com*), who never pay heed to the

war-stricken soldier as they do to their personal interests. This is seen “as a kind of metaphor for the many inadequate and oft-ignorant responses to the Iraq muddle, many of which leave the military with insufficient support” (Jones, *chicagotribune.com*). That is to say, Neveu designs those characters in such a way that helps him highlight and criticize the American authorities' cold and irresponsible responses to the war and its victims.

Harmless opens with Jim McFehren, a writing professor at the college in his late thirties to early forties, waiting for President Wesson who has called him for a meeting to ask him about Ben's story. Jim is thought to have the closest contact with the student of the three concerned authorities. He is the one who is considered to have answers and interpretation of Ben's tendency to write a story like that particularly because he himself is interested in writing stories that fictionalize some violent incidents he has witnessed. For example, he tells Wesson when asking him about his new output that his new story is “Bicentennial Saucer” which is “loosely based on an incident from [his] childhood, an incident in which a wooden sled was fractured” (Act.1, 4). He is, actually, the prime suspect in Wesson and Mindy's views. Wesson thinks that he is the one who is able to encourage Ben to put his horrible experiences into words, and it is his fault to allow such a story to be submitted without looking carefully at its content. He says:

I'm beginning to understand a bit about how the dominos fall ... I'm beginning to understand Mr. Mcfehren's teaching methods coupled with the fact that, Mindy—I'm not sure if you are aware of this—but a large part of this situation rests with the fact that Mr. Mcfehren failed to read, before handing out, the stories his students have written. (Act. 1, 33)

Through her words, Mindy, a representative of the American army in her mid-thirties and early forties, has also deduced that it is Jim who has indirectly ignited the rage of his student and practiced huge stress upon him through his frequent talks and arguments about the war in his classes and stimulated him to write about such an experience as he himself does under the pretext of encouraging him and his colleagues to write something different and unconventional.

In fact, what intensifies Wesson and Mindy's suspicions of this professor aside from his own story that “is about a deadly sledding accident involving children” (Act.1, 28) is the other submitted stories that he has mentioned as examples of Ben's classmates' writings, describing them as “good illustrations of non-traditional fiction writing...” (Act.1, 27) The two stories draw on negative and depressing ideas. One of them, “The Petrified Creatures”, is about two little children who are terrified by an old neighbor who sets the fire in the house they live in. The other, “Ottoh's Coach”, revolves around the unfulfilled dreams and wishes of a high school football coach whose deteriorating health has deprived him of many things he longs for. Both the president and the lieutenant feel that the students are deeply influenced by their professor. They apparently adopt his literary trend and their ideas are extension of his. It can be noted that Neveu's indication to stories of such themes is an implied reference to “the veins of cruelty ... and despair that run through the American unconscious” (Hayford, *chicagoreader.com*).

According to *Harmless*, Jim McFehren appears to be a man who is dejected by the American never-ending violence. His story can be considered an expression of his anguish. He metaphorically condemns his country for providing its sons with arms to kill others and accordingly to kill themselves. He is seemingly baffled as to why America has reacted with no action regarding what it has caused to Americans and other innocents as a result of its war. During his talk with the lieutenant, we can take notice of his thought that the American flag is nothing but a symbol of violence. However, this point of view has never altered his selfish, irresponsible attitude toward Ben Navarro and his controversial story.

The professor is actually trying by all means possible not to help Mindy and Wesson prove their viewpoints of Ben's story as an output of his stressful teaching methods. When Mindy asks him some questions about how the student is in class, he shows no desire to offer any real responses. He denies anything he notices of Ben's attitudes that may encourage Mindy to describe him as a psychologically stressed young man. Instead, he wants to prove that Ben is not different from his other colleagues. His story is the same as theirs. It is just an expression of an idea that goes through his mind, being far from having any motivations or indications:

LIEUTENANT MINDY. How was Mr.
Navarro in class? ...

PRESIDENT WESSON. How did he behave?

LIEUTENANT MINDY. How were his involvement and attitude?

(A Pause)

PRESIDENT WESSON. Jim?

JIM. Both were fine.

LIEUTENANT MINDY. He participated?

JIM. Yes ...

LIEUTENANT MINDY. How are his academics?

JIM. His grades are actually a bit above average...You'll find nothing that reveals what you're looking for. (Act.1, 21-22)

In addition, Jim pretends not to be convinced that Ben has done something that deserves all these troubles. He is there to defend freedom of speech and his student's right to express himself and his feelings in whatever way he prefers. In this sense, one can notice that the play wonders at the American hypocrisy and duplicity: "isn't freedom of speech one of the things [Ben] was just fighting for in Iraq?" (Jones, *chicagotribune.com*). So, why now he is not granted such freedom that he was about to lose his life for its sake. He stands against President Wesson's view that the college staff should refer their students to a psychologist. He says, "I wouldn't tell a student that he or she should go get his or her mind checked just because he or she did something someone didn't like" (Act.1, 37). He insists that Ben is a normal young man and his story is not a sign of any problems:

Ben is fine. Ben is just basic, normal twenty-two-year-old kid ... With all due respect, President Wesson, every goddamn horseshit opinion you have of Ben is based solely on a few pages of idiotic nonsense written for some low-level throwaway fiction writing class! (Act.1, 38-40)

However, Jim Mcfehren has failed to keep his viewpoint and attitude consistent. After rejecting the thought that Ben Navarro has psychological problems he is being suspected to be heir top stimulus, he admits that he is really a psychologically injured man. He argues that the story is really an expression of his mental turmoil as a member of the American military in Iraq who, upon

returning home, is destined to confront a life different from that he has just left. He states: "I imagine a person's mind would turn sharply all sorts of directions when confronting the difference between battlefield and home life" (Act.2, 69). It is a release of his aggressive experiences that are strongly repressed because acting them out could violate his need to be good and endanger his attempts to be approved of. Moreover, Jim is forced into submission to the president's views that former soldiers should be psychologically checked before joining the college to, as he says, "make sure one is prepared for a changed relationship with his or her surroundings" (Act.2, 69), and generally to avoid the devastating impacts of their military services.

JIM. ...soldiers need some kind of evaluation before returning to civilian life.

PRESIDENT WESSON. Yes, war can create psychic damage, that is a clear fact.

JIM. And the trauma of returning home takes toll. (Act. 2, 68)

He expresses strong opposition to Lieutenant Mindy's accusations of him as the real stimulus of the student to write such a story. He tries by all means possible to refute her assumptions, arguing that he has no relation with what Ben has intended to get across about what he has seen in the battlefield. He frequently mentions that he treats him as any other student in his class and has no intention to prompt him to write something special:

LIEUTENANT MINDY. My opinion, I suppose, is that I don't think that Ben would have written that story if Mr. Mcfehren hadn't been his professor...

JIM. How did I prompt him?

LIEUTENANT MINDY. He said you encouraged him.

JIM. So, you're saying that his entire story was my idea?... You are saying this whole thing; the blood, the screams, the electrical wires, the forced oral sex, he got all that from me?

LIEUTENANT MINDY. I'm not saying that at all.

JIM. Because you never hear about anything

that happening with the army—nothing like that going on Uncle Sam's Regiment, never, never! ... you've no idea of what's going on with Ben. (Act.2, 65-66)

Likewise, he strives to make President Wesson believe that that he has never hold discussions with his students about anything that may cause any sort of trouble. He attempts to convince the president that Professor Bovenkamp, an artistic critic at the college, after reading the piece, has recommended that Ben has read a short story entitled "Man's Tooth" that takes place around the 1970s in Vietnam. So, Jim suggests that it is the student's firsthand experience as well as this story that may give him the power to do the same regarding the war in Iraq. He seeks to disavow the claims of Mindy and also of Wesson who has no one else to hold responsible for this incident that could, in his own view, destroy his college.

It is not surprising in a society where materialistic interests are the most important to say that Jim's defense of Ben, his story, and his freedom of speech is not in fact for Ben's sake as much as it is for his own sake. That is to say, he actually defends himself against Mindy's indictment and seeks to keep himself safe from the consequences. What he really cares about most is not Ben and his trauma but his teaching post that he fears to lose if Mindy succeeds to prove that he has motivated Ben to write the story. So, he strives to hold himself irresponsible for any trouble Ben has intentionally or unintentionally caused to the college that stands for the national society as a whole. He is seemingly trying hard to satisfy President Wesson to make sure that his contract will be renewed for other more years at Phral College. This is why, during the course of the play, Jim is engaged in both, in the first half, denying that he caused the student any kind of psychic stress and, later on, in attributing his tendency to bring such a story into being to nothing but the unbearable war experiences and their resulting sufferings.

As a deliberate attack against those in power, Brett Neveu presents President Wesson as a superficial person who cares only about the trivialities of life. He appears to be a man who is not qualified to be in authority in reference to many of American officials who have done their country dangerous harm. He spends most of the time dedicated to the talk about Ben Navarro and his problem in chatting about nothing important. For instance, when he enters his office to meet Mr. Jim, he embarks on a purely absurd conversation unrelated to the main problem about some traffic cones that are placed at the main entrance of the

college. Such a needless talk is nothing but a clear confession of the absurdity and meaninglessness of what is going on in Iraq and of what America seeks after. Similarly, when Lieutenant Mindy arrives, Wesson goes on introducing himself and Jim to her and asking her about her job and stay. He frequently initiates talks about needless issues including the history of The Highlander hotel where she has checked into, the college campus, and again the traffic cones. He wastes much of his and others' time talking proudly about himself, his family, and his college. He says:

The founder was my grandfather,
Ronald Prah. He was what one
might call an intellectual
entrepreneur. Personally, I've been
here now for, let's see, fourteen
years. Yes. Wow. Fourteen years.
(Act.1, 14)

Also, not a short part of the time is wasted during the trivial president's talk about the college's professors. In particular, he enthusiastically mentions the history professor who refused to retire and has been in the college for forty years. Brett Neveu's special reference to this professor is dramatically significant. He wonders what history such a professor is insistent on teaching his students. In a country like the United States, teaching history is not an easy task. What he would tell the students about what America has been doing outside, and how he could justify such practices that never brought anything of what Americans have long been promised to get. Neveu may see his country's history as unworthy of the honor of being taught and commented on as it is nothing but a never-ending series of wars.

It comes clear that not only Jim but also President Wesson himself worries only about his personal interests though he is, as revealed through his talk with Jim, sure that war causes deep psychological wounds to its participants. He merely seeks to guard his college's image and his presidency. He thinks that they are both at stake as a result of Ben's attitudes as a former soldier in the American Army. This is to say, he wrongly feels that this student represents a danger to the reputation of this ancient college when submitting a disturbing assignment related to what his country has involved him in while serving in Iraq. He nervously tells Jim "... this kind of writing shouldn't be happening in the rate you are describing" (Act.1, 32). This is why, throughout the play, he is only engaged in revealing not what Ben means by his story or what the message he wants to

deliver is, but rather who has encouraged him to write it. He tries hard to elicit Jim's confession of his role in directing Ben's attention to that trend in fiction writing, threatening him that whatever takes place in the college moves pretty fast and that he catches hold of everything surrounding him. He asserts that the college "is like a big family. One big family. Everyone listening, spreading thoughts quickly until everything comes back around" (Act.1, 5). This indicates that Ben has become the real headache in Wesson's life.

In that sense, president Wesson stands for his own society where returning soldiers are seen as villains who come to destroy and damage the already stable community regardless of "the sacrifices [they] made on a daily basis" (Schaeffer 69). He appears to be a man who adopts Darwin's thought that the fittest and strongest have the right to live in this world where there is no place for the weak and traumatized. For him, Ben is not a normal person with a balanced psychology due to the nature of the alarming fiction he has submitted. He is accordingly the one who puts everybody around him in danger. Therefore, he cooperates with Mindy to save himself and his college from Ben's influences. He selfishly and mercilessly suggests that a student like Ben must no longer stay at the college. With no senses of shame, Wesson does not want Ben to resume his academic life and indirectly tells him that a break could be useful for him. This, in fact, as the play states, adds much to Mr. Navarro's confusion and psychological imbalance.

Ben gets depressed as his society is intent on putting him and his counterparts aside. It is determined to deprive him of the only thing that will give his life a meaning and defeat his depressing feeling that he is "a stranger" in his home country, being incapable of the "emotional responses" needed for "everyday living in America" (Dewey, 125-127). It, in other words, seeks to dismiss him out of the place where he pursues an atmosphere of warmth, a feeling of inner security, and inner freedom to express himself, his thoughts, and feelings in quest of the real self he has lost in the war. As a consequence of this social oppression practiced by Wesson, the representative of the American authority, against Ben, the returning soldier is, as Mindy tells, conquered by deep feelings of repentance and remorse for writing this story that, instead of relieving his pains, has turned his life upside down and intensified his fears.

LIEUTENANT MINDY. He is nervous.

PRESIDENT WESSON. Regarding?

LIEUTENANT MINDY. His continuance ... Ben has some feelings that

when you spoke with him that you believe he should look at other campuses ... did you suggest he take some time off?...

PRESIDENT WESSON. I suggested that as an option, among others ... It could be a good thing.

LIEUTENANT MINDY. I don't think it could.

(A Pause)

PRESIDENT WESSON. I'm only suggesting that breaks are sometimes necessary ...

LIEUTENANT MINDY. He did not mean to cause problems and agrees he should try harder to express himself in a better way. (Act. 2, 52-54)

President Wesson is the one who, in brief, has obstructed Ben's way toward reintegration. This is actually can be attributed to the fact that he deprives the boy of many of the healthy things that are thought to be useful in making the reintegration process easy and accessible.

Thus, through Wesson, *Harmless* argues "how an educational institution ... fails to assimilate someone who has witnessed rather more than the typical undergraduates" (Jones, *chicagotribune.com*) and so does the whole society. It shows how some civilians despise and look down upon their military counterparts who have joined the army to defend their country and their freedom. They overlook their sacrifices and never appreciate their efforts, though misdirected, to bring about everlasting security to all Americans to live peacefully with no fear of Saddam's imminent and unexpected threats against the United States' people and government. Therefore, Neveu's drama calls for a different caring and helpful attitude toward those victims. They must be highly esteemed and valued as they were bound and determined to sacrifice themselves for their dear America, being deceived by the old American myths. He urges the authorities to cure not to intensify the consequent suffering to help the pitiful veterans live a simple life, to live as ordinary people who have their own share in their society, to have families, to be cared about, and to have someone to care about. This is what they need:

God designed us to love, not to fight, so war traumatizes our brains. We end up with images seared into that we cannot forget, cannot escape. Hundreds of thousands of America's warriors live tortured lives. But you can't really

see the scars. Our warriors came home with all their arms and legs. They came home without any obvious wounds. Their psyches were scarred, however, and their brains have learned from that searing experience ... Obviously, we don't know how to fix our brains after we've subjected them to the trauma of war. But we need to develop a cure. (Newhouse 1-3)

Lieutenant Mindy Ergenbright is not very much different from the two men. Selfish interests have caused her to be at Prahl College. She has surely come to the college to defend the American army's agenda and advocate the U.S. military reputation. She is really there to interrogate both President Wesson and Professor Jim and discover if they have contributed to Ben's breakdown apparent through his written assignment. She does not really come to help him defy his serious trauma and to help ease things for him as one of the countless victims of the U.S. military practices in Iraq. This is to say, Mindy's main role, as the play implies, is just to hold the American army irresponsible for the student's psychological exhaustion and charge any of the two men, especially Jim, with prompting their former soldier to fictionalize the war incidents. She states: "If Mr. Mcfehren hadn't prompted Ben, I don't believe he would have written that story at all" (Act.2, 65).

For her, we can say, the only reason for writing this story is the writing professor not the disasters and horrors the student has forcefully gone through during his service on the frontline in Iraq as well as the utter ignorance practiced by the cold society. She never admits the fact that war experiences alone have the ability to shatter the psychology of the young fighters and motivate them to adopt such attitudes. In such a deaf society, soldiers do not wait to be motivated to translate their internal vehemence. Those men for whom normalcy has turned a dream become ready to go down whatever road they find to conquer their feelings of anger, nervousness, trauma, and marginalization and defeat the thought that they are strangers.

However, at some moments in the play, we can feel that Mindy has a sense of duty towards Ben and worries about his problems. In spite of her real intentions, she has apparently done Ben a favor. She says that she listens to him and helps him release his sufferings and share them with somebody to be able to cope well with his surroundings after being exposed to the trauma of war with all its distressful memories that obstruct the current of his life. She is the one

who has delved into his psyche while president Wesson wants him as soon as possible to leave the college, and Jim has never engaged himself in reading the story to know what is going on in his student's mind. She states:

Ben has opened up to me. He harbors many emotions, emotions he's trying seriously to understand ... He feels after his sessions with me, he now has the courage to seek further treatment on his own for any adjustment problems he may be having. (Act.2, 52-54)

It is through this character that Brett Neveu stresses the fact that care and concern are magic powers that are truly enough to help America's fighting soldiers who are too ruined by the war to integrate themselves into the mainstream of their society. They are the soldiers' main if not the only need to throw away the war's injuries, overcome their miseries, and fix the resulting mental damages.

Hence, the three characters of *Harmless* are clearly striving not to redeem Mr. Navarro and try somewhat to lessen his pains but to rescue themselves from dangers they imagine he poses. In a critique of the play published in the website of the American weekly newspaper *The Chicago Reader*, it is stated that:

The characters have come together explicitly to uncover the truth--or, more accurately, to sway the others to their own version of it ... each character sees with increasing clarity that his or her reputation and career is in jeopardy. Their desperate scrambling for self-preservation ultimately destroys the hapless student before he can ever appear onstage. (Hayford, *chicagoreader.com*)

As a comment on those characters, one can say that each one of them appears to be involved within the bounds of his or her own egocentric self, having no ability to get indulged with others and instead attempting, in vain, to get them forcefully to understand him / her and trust in the point of view he / she adopts. This is in fact a clear indication to the devastating problem that hits the modern world: the failure of communication. This does not mean that they do not talk together. But, instead, through their dialogues, they are just fighting each other, being unable to make a cogent resolution to help the hapless soldier.

This is to say; the dramatist is deliberately “making verbal intercourse an obstacle rather than an aid to communication” (qtd in Gunton 386). Therefore, through Wesson, Jim, Mindy and before them Ben Navarro, whom the war has ruined his abilities to communicate his feelings to anyone and left him alone in a disintegrating society, Brett Neveu states the fact that the whole American society is plagued by a severe collapse of communication as a direct consequence of going to wars. The war experience is not communicable. Americans have nothing to say, or to be more accurate, they have lost anything that can give their lives a meaning that they can communicate. Thus, we can say that the way Brett Neveu designs the four characters is really so influential that it enables him to successfully crystallize his theme and investigate the tragedies the war in Iraq has caused to American citizens in general and to the returning soldiers in particular.

It can be assumed that *Harmless*' success owes much not only to the theme it discusses but also to the techniques that Neveu has used. When asked about the dramatists who have influenced his dramatic career, Brett Neveu mentions Harold Pinter and Anton Chekhov, stating that his favorite form of theatre “is the straight play (actors in a room where something happens which they must confront) told in a theatrical, non-typical way...” (Neveu, e-mail). This is to say, Brett Neveu, as clarified in this play, is a big fan of the dramatic technique of theatrical realism that many of the 20th century American playwrights have called for through their dramas including Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neil, and Arthur Miller...etc. Those dramatists have become known as modern realists as they have taken the risk of mixing realism with experimentation. Neveu clearly adopts the same thought.

In his article “How Not to Relate”, Brett Neveu admits that in his new plays he gives up the pure realism of his early ones that feature everyday people involved in everyday problems and offer everyday ways to solve these problems. In other words, he stops writing “...something folks could relate too easily and thus audiences didn't have to reach too far to get at the meat of the drama” (Neveu, *lpontius.com*). He gets fed up with such realism that enhances logic, order, and rationality that the world is really devoid of. He stresses that he is no longer interested in such a traditional way of relating. For him, drama should be

a mix of the weird and the normal. The strange and the routine ... [and] theatre artists should strive to reach beyond what others consider relatable ... [and] to dive head first into the awesomely new and bizarrely extraordinary, allowing this to become what the audience may find themselves relating to... (Neveu, *lpontius.com*)

Harmless is a realistic play presented within a theatrical framework. Actually, Neveu's intention to mingle realism with theatricality is to present not just a photocopy or replica of life but instead, and much better, to give an impression of life defined by the rules of the readers / audience's perception and motivate them to work hard to find out the intended reality of this life. The play is realistic in the sense that it revolves around a real-life situation, a soldier returning from the war front with psychological burdens that threaten to ruin his life. Moreover, it involves real characters who are a microcosm of average American citizens. It is set in a realistic place: the office of the college's dean which is an ordinary room that stands for the whole American society where people are safe but some outside forces, wars, disrupt their safety and indulge them in never-ending worries. Additionally, the play's language is realistic and bears no experimentation. Characters use colloquial and informal language. They utter recognizable sentences and use conventional grammar and syntax that sound familiar to the audience's ears. Nevertheless, as the play is a departure from utter realism, Neveu resorts to some absurd and surrealist elements that are dramatically significant for his theme.

Absurdism, which is the thought that life is cold and hostile, the world is devoid of any rational meaning, and that man's existence is helpless and futile, pervades the play since the very start. For a simple example, the play is permeated with many off-topic, absurd conversations that are intended to stress the absurdity and illogicality of what the United States has done in Iraq. The talk about insects that President Wesson holds with Jim Mcfehren in act one and that he has with Lieutenant Mindy about drinking coffee in act two are classified as so since they are unrelated to the play's main focus and bring no real meaning and end with nothing of real value to be gained. Using such disconnected speeches, as with Harold Pinter, who is "undoubtedly the most influential and important craftsman in English theatre" (Mauro 422) is a technique that Neveu

employs to present a clear reference to and critique of the difficulty of communication that has overwhelmed the modern world. Hence, much of the characters' talk is reminiscent of this communication problem which is one of the main themes of the theatre of the absurd.

Additionally, Neveu infuses *Harmless* with touches of surrealism which is one of the Avant-grade movements in arts that has flourished in Europe between the two world wars in revolt against rational thought that does not fit into such a world fractured by wars. Ben Navarro has a surrealistic existence in the play. While he is physically kept away from the stage, during the course of the action he is allowed to reside the audience's imagination. His absence can be considered more effective than his attendance as it has forced the readers / audience to make up their minds and work hard to understand Ben's character and share his miseries without even standing before them on stage face-to-face and eliciting their sympathy on his own. Surrealism is also manifested in the student's horrible dreams and nightmarish memories of the war that follow him like his shadow since his return from Iraq, helping Brett Neveu to dramatize the agony of that young man, uncover his undermined psyche, and emphasize that the war has not yet ended for him though it came to an actual end. This in addition to the dream-like fantasies to which Ben Navarro escapes “to pursue a visual and sensational reality that does not exist in the literal (concrete) world, but only in human deep psychic sphere and imagination” (Zhang 71).

Besides, the play's texture is permeated with some past memories that other characters get back, through flashback, for no particular reason. In fact, indulging such memories is an expressionist device that provides the spectators with an insight into those characters' lives and inner worlds and suggests that the past still lives in the present. Most of these memories are of violence which is one of the recurrent surrealistic strategies that both Antonin Artaud and André Breton introduced to theatre “to evoke extreme emotions [and work] viscerally through the bodies of spectators” (McConachie 367). For them, cruelty is “the key alchemical ingredient that generates an apocalyptic revolt within the audience” (Roudané, *American Drama since 1960*, 27). It is an influential means that can disturb the image of a Utopian society overwhelmed by senses of calmness and repose with no violence or anxiety. For instance, toward the close of the play, Lieutenant Ergenbright recalls one of her past memories which is nothing but a scene of aggression and inhumanity that presents Mindy as a ruthless, merciless, and barbarous person who stands for the whole American army that is the symbol of violence and cruelty. She says:

And one night when I was nineteen my mother slapped me in the face. I had said something crude to her and she became very upset and raised her hand and slapped me in the face. A moment afterwards, I attacked her. I hit her in the head and in the body with my fists, I hit her again and again until she fell. She screamed at me to stop. I didn't. I hit her until her nose bled and my arms stiffened...She asked me to get her towel to wipe the blood but I refused. I walked out of the room and left her sitting in the corner all by herself. (Act.2, 84)

The three characters are also violent in their verbal interactions most of the time. Their talks together are nothing but a series of sarcasm, accusations, and reproach in extremely violent language that disturbs audience's peace of mind and sparks their revolt against the war and its influences. One of such influences is the Americans' unjustifiable constant resort to violence and aggression against themselves. So, war, in general, is conceived as the main stimulus of the violence that the characters of the play commit.

Moreover, *Harmless*, and also the other two plays, is a representational drama. This is to say, despite being partially influenced by the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht as Neveu himself told the researcher via e-mail, the popular Brechtian alienation effect is not activated in any of the three plays. This is to say, while Brecht has intentionally demolished the fourth wall that hinders actors-audience interactions as if the dramatic action takes place in a world that the audience is not a part of, the young author has apparently set up this invisible fourth wall between the actors and the spectators. He has kept members of the audience distant and unattached to the play's world, working merely as observers of “actors on stage interact[ing] with one another to portray the scenes” (Campbell and JoAnn 4). None of the three characters takes notice of the spectators nor does he / she draw them to the frame of the held conversations. They are not allowed to step out of their roles and directly address the audience and involve them in the play's discussion about the disrupted life of the young returning veteran, Ben Navarro. This, actually, causes them to be captivated within the grips of empathy, and this is what Neveu seeks after. He wants to create an illusion of awful reality and does not want anything to disrupt the flow

of emotions he intends to nurture in his audience to drive them to understand what they have been a cause of.

To further stress the problem of the difficulty of real communication, the play's script is permeated with pauses at some moments. This is a primary feature of Neveu's dialogue as also with Harold Pinter who uses the three silences: ellipsis, pauses, and silence between lines in many of his plays particularly *The Homecoming*. In fact, the use of pause is “a very expressive form of dramatic speech” and a sort of “interruption to the action where the lack of speech becomes a form of speech itself” (Raby 148). Evidently, Neveu inserts such a pause as a mark that characters sometimes reach to the point where the channels of communication are broken: where they fail to understand one another's point of view, they have a problem to find something to say about the student and his story, and to defend themselves against each other's accusations. Neveu grants the readers freedom to understand the situation at hand and try to catch the message he needs to communicate on their own. Spectators should try to detect what emotions and ideas intended to be delivered through pauses. Hence, the problem of communication is spotlighted in *Harmless* both verbally and non-verbally. It is seemingly intended to emphasize the gravity of such a defect of contemporary life that resulted mainly from the terrible wars' experiences that left the whole world in utter chaos, devoured anything to be communicated, and stole man's desire and ability to say even a word.

Although many critics have lauded *Harmless* as an influential drama about the tragedy of a returning soldier that shows the great talent of its young author, they think it has some faults and shortcomings. Some critics believe that keeping Ben Navarro away from stage though he is the pivotal character of the play is a needless adventure. For them, Ben should be there at the center of the work being allowed, even before other characters, to stand on stage in front of the audience to visualize the horrible impacts of the war on the American psyche and leave them with deep hatred of wars and their leaders. This point is discussed in the Chicago Tribune article “Neveu's Newest Play Is Anything but Harmless” as follows:

“Harmless” takes a risk that the actual student under discussion never appears in the play ... And indeed, there are times when “Harmless” feels as if it dances around its main theme, afraid to show the man at its heart. It spends too much time discussing

someone who is not there ... So, if he were to revise this thing, Neveu should probably spend more time with the issues of those in the play and a little less describing the unseen. (Jones, *chicagotribune.com*)

Contrary to this opinion, *Harmless'* hero has been kept unseen for a particular purpose. Brett Neveu may have intended to create an atmosphere of suspense and so to draw the audience's attention to the victim under focus. As Ben appears to have no ability to communicate well with people around him, his attendance on stage may not tell the audience much about his suffering. So, his absence may be more effective since it gives a good chance to the audience to get much information about him through the conversations between the other three characters who exist mainly to provide readers / audience with an access to his character. Furthermore, the author may want the spectators to realize that soldiers have no place in their society. They have been sent to a futile war and returned to find themselves aliens in their home country. He wants to give Ben Navarro who is the representative of the whole war generation undivided attention as a man who has lost his existence in a society that is supposed to bind them all with its concern and care. Hence, veterans are seen as the real victims who suffer from most of the consequences of wars. So, one can say that Neveu has not centered his play on an absent hero by chance. Instead, he has specific intentions to motivate readers / audience to try hard on their own to understand the trauma of the soldier without any help even of the man himself. We can also say that Neveu introduces his main character in this way in order to, in David K. Sauer's words in his book *American Drama and the Post Modern*, "... play with the audience's expectations, and to undermine subtly the audience's certainty of having an objective, all-knowing position from which to judge the action" (17).

Another fault attributed to *Harmless* is that, though stressing the fierce harm the war has done to Ben and returning soldiers in general, it never offers a solution to the student's crisis. But, against this view, the playwright is not necessarily supposed to give solutions to the problem discussed within his play. His main role is to present the problem and spotlight its dangers in a way that stimulates the readers / audience's minds, touch their hearts, and provoke them to handle this problem and try to find solutions for it. Throughout this play, Brett Neveu is just depicting an awful image of the war experience and seeking indirectly to expose its shocking influences on living soldiers. Neveu aims at presenting the undisputable truths of the war and igniting the audience's disgust

and rage that could force them to think deeply to solve this problem and revolt against their country's fondness of leading wars.

Harmless is an ardent attack on the American war against Iraq that cannot be probably considered a righteous war as George Bush claimed. It was neither initiated to free Iraq from Saddam's dictatorship nor to defend the United States against his frequent threats, as Bush long alleged, but merely for some imperialistic ends to catch hold of the Middle East. Brett Neveu intends this play to deliver a clear and direct message to both the American nation and those in the White House that “terror and fear don't share space with rational civilization ... that irrational behavior rings and spreads like cracks in a pane of cut glass” (Act.2, 83). His real intentions are to stimulate the Americans' anger against the practices of their government in an attempt to force Bush and his assistants to adopt a rational thought and stop running the risk of going vainly to wars for no worthy cause.

Furthermore, the play is mainly intended to focus much attention on the totally marginalized American soldier returning from the war with unbearable horrible pains that “is the burden he carries, the weight which holds him fast to the mud that surrounds and buries him” (Act.2, 83). Like many of Neveu's plays, *Harmless* concerns those people in authority who never care to look at anyone whom they see as a threat to their power and positions. Hence, *Harmless* can be conceived as a rich addition to the American antiwar literature that emphasizes the brutality of wars and bestiality of its leaders and warns soldiers that they are the victims of their American culture which is the illusory guarantor of peace and democracy.

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أثر العنف في مسرحية "غير مؤذ" لبريت نيفيو

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المستخلص

يعد بريت نيفيو (١٩٧٠ -) أحد الكتاب الأمريكيين المعاصرين في المسرح الذين إهتموا بما يجري حولهم من أحداث تخص المجتمع الأمريكي حيث ينعكس هذا في أعماله الأدبية والمسرحية ، ويعتبر بريت نفسه مسئولاً عن العنف الذي سببته أمريكا بلا وعي ، ولم يعلن بريت فقط عن العنف الذي تمارسه بلده بل أيضاً عن العنف الذي تسببه للمواطنين بعضهم البعض والتي اتضحت في مسرحياته (غير مؤذ) ، و يركز بريت في عمله علي تصوير العنف الذي اصبح جزء لا يتجزأ عن الشخصية الامريكية الناتج عن الحروب التي خاضتها امريكا في الأونة الأخيرة ، ويرى بريت أن الحروب خطيئة تؤدي إلي الدمار الشامل للعالم بأكمله ويسعى بريت دائماً إلي مناقشة دمار الحرب مع المشاهدين من الناحية العاطفية والنفسية والتي أثرت علي الشعب الأمريكي ، ومن خلال هذه المسرحية يوجه بريت رسالة للعالم بأن الحرب تذل الأنسان ، والأنسان ضحية للعبث ، والظلم والقدر وأن السلام لا بد وان يعم في النهاية لأنه الأصلح للعيش ويعمد بريت في مسرحيته علي التركيز علي مجموعة من الجنود الامريكين المهمشين في المجتمع بعد عودتهم من حرب العراق محملين بالآلام والجروح النفسية والجسدية ، وتعد مسرحيته إنذاراً لثقافة أمريكا ضد الحرب حتى يتحقق السلام والديمقراطية.

الكلمات الدالة: العنف، الصدمة، مناهضة الحرب، الجنود الأميركيون المهمشون