Grounded Study Guide

Grounded by George Brant

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This study guide was created from the following version of this play: Grounded, by George Brant. Samuel French, United States and Canada. Acting Edition, © 2014.

The text is a monologue, a long speech spoken by a single character – the unnamed female Pilot. Other characters have impact on the story, but are only referred to by The Pilot: they never actually appear.

A note on style: in the script, there is virtually no punctuation. With a few exceptions, there are no periods ending sentences, no commas between ideas. This is the reason why there is no punctuation of the quotes in the summary, other than a slash (/) to indicate where a line ends. An ellipsis (…) in the summary indicates a place in the text where an ellipsis marks the end of a particular line of narrative and a shift into the next.

The Pilot, an American woman assigned to combat in the Middle East, begins her story with a description of the joy and fulfillment she feels while flying, referring to the blue of the sky in ways that suggest her identity is strongly connected to getting into, and being in, that environment. In present tense narration, she goes home on leave, meets a man named Eric, has passionate sex with him, and then returns to duty, only to discover she has become pregnant. She tries to keep flying for as long as she can, but as her pregnancy advances, she finds she is no longer physically able to meet the demands of her job. She tells her Commander, is placed on leave, returns home, marries Eric, and has the baby – a girl, Samantha.

Eventually, the Pilot is placed on ground duty, under circumstances that she disparagingly refers to as “The Chair Force” (19). She is assigned to pilot drone aircraft (i.e. planes that fly by remote control) with orders to destroy suspicious-looking vehicles or personnel. As she reluctantly becomes accustomed to this new way of working, she tries to convince herself that she also has an opportunity for a home life: spending time with her husband and daughter before and after work.

The Pilot’s efforts to meet the emotional, physical, and mental demands of both aspects of her life become increasingly difficult. She and the rest of her unit are assigned to monitor the activities of a particular man, first referred to as Number Two (because of his high status within the military cell that America and The Pilot are fighting) and later, as The Pilot becomes more and more obsessed with finding him, as The Prophet. As The Prophet continues to elude her and the others on her team, The Pilot becomes increasingly troubled, finding it more and more difficult to leave her work behind her when she goes home. Both her husband and her daughter make an effort to ease her situation: at one point, her husband takes her to see a counselor, but The Pilot reacts with angry, paranoid, emotional violence and refuses to continue therapy.

Eventually, The Pilot and her team encounter an opportunity to fulfill their mission and destroy Number Two / The Prophet. At a key moment, however, The Pilot sees Number Two embracing his daughter, which would mean that by pulling the trigger on her

drone's weaponry, she would be responsible for killing two people, one of whom is innocent and who resembles her own daughter. Instead of following her orders and pulling the trigger, she guides her drone into the sky and then deliberately crashes it. She is then shocked to see another drone complete her mission, destroying Number Two and his daughter. The Commander tells her that she has been showing signs of stress for months, has been watched closely, and has had a backup secretly placed on her team in case of a situation exactly like the one just encountered.

In an epilogue, The Pilot reveals that she has been taken off duty and is facing a court martial. She speaks directly to the audience, forcefully telling those who have heard her story that they are not innocent of the deaths of Number Two or his daughter, or for that matter any of the deaths triggered by this particular conflict.

Part 1

Summary

p. 5 - 17. In the cast description, the central character – The Pilot – is described in particular physical detail – height, weight, eyesight, body fat, athletic ability, academic ability. “She should have,” the final line suggests, “heightened situational awareness” (5). There is also a description of visual design, which offers the suggestion that “the design should be more abstract than literal, or perhaps transform the literal into abstract” (5). Under the heading of performance, the description comments that “the audience is The Pilot’s confidante, to varying degrees of familiarity, until perhaps the final pages” (5).

The Pilot begins her story (narrated in present tense) with a description of her feelings about her Air Force flight suit and about flying. Her language contains a reference to feeling at home and safe in “the blue” (5), meaning the sky. The word “blue” returns in her description of being at home on leave in Wyoming, after dropping some bombs in Iraq. While on leave, she and some Air Force buddies go out to a bar. There, she meets a man named Eric, referring to how difficult it can be for guys to get comfortable with her, doing what she does: “I take the guy spot and they don’t know where they belong” (11). She and Eric go to her house, and as they “fuck” (11), he says he can “feel the sky” in her (11). Later, he asks her to put on her suit. She agrees to, and they continue their affair for three more days.

Back in Iraq, The Pilot starts to feel that her suit is getting smaller, and it is becoming more and more difficult to do up her safety belt. She flies as many more missions as she can without damaging the baby she believes, and eventually realizes, she is having. She is tempted by the thought of having an abortion, mostly because she wants to keep flying, but she also realizes that she cannot kill the baby (which she believes is a girl). She takes one more flight so the baby “can have a taste of what it means [so that] she will not be … a needy sack of shit” (13) and then tells her Commander, who reassigns her to a desk job, a situation she describes as being “grounded” (14). She keeps the baby’s existence from Eric a secret for a long time, but eventually decides to tell him once her pregnancy reaches the stage where she cannot work, even behind a desk, and is returned stateside. When she tells Eric the news, he reacts tearfully and happily, at one point taking a picture of her wearing the flight suit which she can no longer close because her pregnancy is too far advanced. Within the space of about half a page of narrative, Eric proposes marriage, they wed, and the baby, Samantha, is born.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section of the play is its introductory directions – specifically, its description of The Pilot: in its content, language, and style, there is a strong sense of resemblance to armed forces regulations. This, combined with a relative

lack of description of personality and, most notably, a lack of name for the character, make clear, thematically relevant suggestions about The Pilot's identity – specifically, that who she is has become defined by what she does. This sensibility is developed even further through the references to the flight suit which, here as throughout the narrative, becomes a powerful symbol of who The Pilot sees herself as being; who others see her as being; and which both the audience and The Pilot herself come to see as a central source of the character's inner conflict.

Outer conflict (conflict defined by circumstances and relationship as opposed to inner state of being) meanwhile, is also introduced in this section: specifically, The Pilot's discovery that she is pregnant. The point is not made to suggest that the two sorts of conflict are mutually exclusive: on the contrary, one of the key points to note about the narrative as a whole is how The Pilot's inner-conflict (around her identity and values) affects, and is affected by, her external circumstances.

Meanwhile, other aspects of The Pilot's identity are explored in her use of language. There is something arguably masculine, or at least connected to her masculine-dominated work environment, about how she talks. Something particularly noteworthy in this context appears for the first time here and continues throughout the play. This is her consistent use of the word "fuck" to describe the act of having sex with Eric. Nowhere in the play is it referred to as anything else: there is no "making love," there is no "being intimate," no euphemisms of any sort. The suggestion here is that in order to fit in with a male-dominated work environment, The Pilot has adopted what is stereotypically a masculine form of speech. This is one way in which the thematically central question of gender and story comes up: has The Pilot adopted more masculine ways of speaking in order to downplay her femininity, or deflect potential attacks on that aspect of her identity? This, in turn, relates to questions about the relationship between gender and story.

Other important elements introduced in this section include the motifs of blue (which represents freedom, power, and possibility) and of being "grounded," the experience of the former repeating throughout the narrative and of the latter being repeated in the play's final moments, with similar meaning but somewhat more ominous implications.

Discussion Question 1

In what way does Part I (Pages 5-17) explore and develop the play's thematic interest in conflicts faced by women in combat?

Discussion Question 2

How does the set of directions before the beginning of the play affect how you see, or imagine the story? How might you add visual elements to the narrative to explore other aspects of The Pilot's story?

Discussion Question 3

What are the implications of The Pilot's comment that she does not want her daughter to be "a needy sack of shit" (13)? What is she saying about her own situation, values, and perspectives?

Vocabulary

G-force, vastness, minaret, maneuver, gauntlet, downrange, breach, tarmac, ejection, ultrasound

Part 2

Summary

Pages 17 – 27. The Pilot describes how, during the first three years of Samantha's life, her desire to get back into the sky (the blue) grows and intensifies. She comments on how Eric tells Samantha that the sky is "where Mommy lives" (17), and how she tells Eric to stop because it is no longer true. Nevertheless, she cannot help becoming impatient to get back up there. Eric encourages her, and The Pilot again comments on how wonderful it is when they "fuck" (18).

…

The Pilot goes to her Commander (a different one from the one she first reported to), and is pleased to learn that the Air Force is looking forward to her return. But then she becomes upset when she learns two things: she cannot have her old plane back, and she is to stay in America and become a drone pilot – as she puts it, a member of "the Chair Force" (19). At first she protests, suggesting that she is being punished for becoming pregnant. As their conversation reveals that The Pilot has the rank of major, the Commander tells her that her pregnancy has nothing to do with her being reassigned: the war is just being fought differently now. As she continues to protest, she is dismissed.

The Pilot is embarrassed when she tells Eric what has happened, and adds that they are being transferred to Las Vegas, where she will operate out of an air force base there. She describes his tears of supportive happiness, and how he calls the situation "a gift" (21). The Pilot tries to talk herself into seeing the situation that way and resigns herself to her new life.

…

The Pilot describes moving to Las Vegas, setting up their home (including Eric putting up the picture of her pregnant and wearing the flight suit), and also describes being disgusted by all the showy aspects of Las Vegas (including "that fucking fake Pyramid") (22). She then waits for her official start of duty, which she describes as becoming "something else something less" (22).

As she drives out to Creech Air Force Base where she is to be stationed, The Pilot realizes she is driving out into a desert, glad that she is leaving The Pyramid and Vegas behind. She describes arriving at the base (which she says has the name of a monster "from a shitty movie") (23), and as she walks in, how strange it feels to be wearing her flight suit even though she is not actually flying anything. She goes through her training, noting how the disassembled drones are kept in crates called Tombs, how they are bigger than her plane had been, how they are fully loaded with weaponry, and how she will be able to see her targets through the cameras and sensors in the drone's belly.

She goes through her day, commenting that the drones can stay in the air for as long as 40 hours at a time and that she is only one of a team of pilots flying a particular drone.

At the end of the day, The Pilot returns home, not revealing a great deal about how things went, kissing Sam goodnight, eating the dinner Eric prepared, and going to bed, commenting that the new routine at home is going to take as much getting used to as the new routine of work. She comments that her home life gives her belief and understanding of what she is fighting for (i.e. home and family); proudly adds that she never crashed her drone, although some of the other male trainees did; and describes making a promise to Sam, upset at not being able to see her in the evenings, that their mornings will be special.

The Pilot finishes her training and receives a pin, “the Chair Force pin” (27) that she describes as puncturing her suit. She says she tries to avoid looking at her reflection.

…

Analysis

The question of conflicts faced by women in combat are given active, dramatic voice in this section. At the end of the section, there is The Pilot’s comment about not crashing her plane, a pointed reference to her having learned her job more quickly and more effectively than the men: in other words, there is a sense of gender competition here. In another, more significant, reference to gender issues, the Pilot’s question about the reasons for her reassignment is, very possibly, one that audience members might be asking as well, with the Commander’s answer coming across (at least, as presented by The Pilot) as not entirely convincing. Finally, the theme is developed even further as The Pilot strives to find a balance between motherhood and work that some might say is the struggle of any parent in any job but which is arguably more sharply defined in the context of what The Pilot’s job actually is and its intense gender conflict. An additional point about the play’s exploration here of work / home conflict: there are not a whole lot of other day jobs that carry the additional, thematically significant presence of death with them.

Other important points to note about this section include further references to the blue (which, at this stage, begins to represent freedom and power longed for, rather than actually experienced) and the references to The Pyramid and to the Tombs. The former is an important piece of foreshadowing of later changes in the lives of The Pilot and her family, while the references to both are darkly ironic, given that the Middle East, where The Pilot was stationed, is known for its pyramids which are, in fact, tombs of ancient kings. The references to pyramids and tombs are therefore not only glancing references to the thematic presence of death in the narrative, they can also be seen as symbolically echoing the “death” of The Pilot’s previous career, and symbolically foreshadowing the “death” of a significant part of her life as a result of the play’s climax. One last piece of foreshadowing: the reference to The Pilot’s intention of making Sam’s mornings special, a foreshadowing to moments later in the narrative when The Pilot

realizes both the truth of what those mornings have become, and the reality of her life that that truth represents.

At this point, it's worth noting the portrayal of Eric, here and throughout the narrative. He is consistently loving and supportive, acknowledging and respectful of The Pilot's identity as a pilot and of her intention / struggle to be a good parent. It could be argued that, as such, he is something of an idealized, perhaps even shallow characterization: even his sexual fetishizing of The Pilot's flight suit is not quite enough to make him seem any less than close to perfect. On the other hand, his stability and easy-going nature can be seen as an effective measuring stick against which The Pilot's increasing IN-stability can be seen for what it is.

Discussion Question 1

How does the action of Part 2 (Pages 17-27) develop the play's thematic interest in definitions of identity?

Discussion Question 2

Why is The Pilot so upset with her reassignment?

Discussion Question 3

The Pilot carried her daughter in her belly: the drone is described as carrying its weaponry in its belly. What are the literal and/or implied ironies here?

Vocabulary

sternum, firepower, suburb, anonymous, puncture, transition

Part 3

Summary

Pages 27 - 37. The Pilot has her official first day of work after training, arriving at a trailer on the base “that seals [her] off completely from all sky all blue” (27) She makes her way to a console, replaces the officer already there, introduces herself to The Sensor (“a nineteen year old chewing gum … who will control the [drone’s] camera”) (27) and settles in for her shift. She describes herself as being part of a team, with “a headset full of backseat drivers” (28), watches the grey screen in front of her, and fulfills her assignment: providing air support for a convoy, making sure there are no ambushes. She circles and circles the area, sees nothing, and thinks of herself as “the eye in the sky” (29). Her shift ends. She is replaced in her chair. She goes home, has dinner, watches the television (“another screen”) (30), and goes to bed.

Meanwhile, Eric gets a job as a blackjack dealer at The Pyramid. The Pilot calls him “The Predator,” seeing his job as cheating people out of their money. Because he’s the new guy, he gets the bad shifts, meaning that mornings can no longer be as special as both Eric and The Pilot had promised Sam they would be. The Pilot now has to kiss her daughter goodbye in the morning “and go to war” (30).

At work, two things happen: she falls asleep while on duty, (which, her colleagues say, everyone does at some point), and then she sees some “military age males” (31) doing something by the side of a road. She prepares to attack with the support of The Sensor and other members of the team. The attack is initially successful, and fully successful when she tracks down and kills someone who managed to get away. The Pilot becomes shaken, realizing that she is reacting in exactly the same way as she did when she was flying. She wants to go out and “grab a beer with the boys” (33) but the spirit and situation are not the same. She goes home, realizing when she gets there that she is still wearing her flight suit. She tells Eric what truth she can (because of security clearance issues) and then they eat, they watch the other screen (i.e. the television) and go to bed.

Some time later (the narrative is not clear how long), The Pilot has a similar experience, but thinks about it in a slightly different way – as a punishment of those she kills. She also notices body parts, “guilty body parts” (34) flying through the air. When she gets home, conversation with Eric reveals that while work is not going well, he is struggling with the feeling of being constantly watched by security cameras at The Pyramid. The Pilot comments that he has got his own “eye in the sky” (35). She also describes how skillful he is at leaving for work without waking her up, and how Sam has noticed that their mornings are no longer special. “Smart kid” (35).

Back at work, The Pilot comments on how the grey of her screen seems to be becoming her world. She notices a jeep in a place where there should not be one, confers with her team (which she starts to refer to as Olympus), blows up the jeep, and then debriefs

with her team, moving on “to another piece of sky” (37). Her perspectives on those she is pursuing and on her own situation are changing, and she begins wearing her flight suit home as a signal to Eric that she has had a good day – that she has destroyed The Guilty.

But The Pilot continues to dream of the blue.

…

Analysis

As the play’s plot takes the story in new directions (The Pilot’s becoming adjusted to her new job, Eric taking a job himself, the family reorienting itself), new elements and motifs are also introduced. These include the idea of “the eye in the sky” which, as The Pilot references in the text, is also the title of a pop music hit in the 1980’s, and which evokes not only the experience of being watched, but the pressure of that experience. There is a sense, here and throughout the play, that that both the experience and the pressure contribute to The Pilot’s shifting psychological state.

The Pilot wearing her flight suit home is a motif which, in addition to continuing the play’s metaphoric (and thematically significant) connection between the suit and The Pilot’s sense of identity, also foreshadows how the wearing of the suit, with all its connections, comes to have deeper, and perhaps more unsettling, implications later in the play.

Also worth noting is The Pilot’s reference to her supervisors and teammates as “Olympus,” the latter being the name of the mountain where the gods of Ancient Greece were purported to have lived. The reference here metaphorically suggests, on one level, that The Pilot feels manipulated by the god-like authority of those whose voices she hears in her headset, in much the same way as mortals and heroes in Ancient Greece, myth and history and reality, felt manipulated by the gods. On another level, the reference foreshadows forthcoming references to ways in which The Pilot begins to see herself in relation to The Guilty.

One last new motif introduced in this section, one that is arguably even more significant, is the reference to the gray, which is important for several reasons. First, it is a clear and vivid contrast to the blue suggesting that because the latter is metaphorically connected to The Pilot’s experience of life, positivity, and completeness, the former is connected to experiences of death, negativity, and being fragmented, or lost. This sense of dichotomy in The Pilot’s experiences of these two colors continues throughout the remainder of the narrative.

Finally, the references to The Pilot’s two successful missions can be seen as developing the play’s thematic exploration of the nature of death, entwining this theme with explorations of the mental effects of service and combat.

Discussion Question 1

How do the events of Part 3 (Pages 27-37) develop the play's thematic interest in the mental effects of combat?

Discussion Question 2

Consider the following quote, specifically the way it's punctuated. "I feel my pulse quicken / Ridiculous / I'm sweating my pits my hands / I'm not there I can't be killed the threat of death has been removed there is no danger to me none I am the eye in the sky there is no danger but my pulse quickens why does it quicken / I am not in combat if combat is risk if combat is danger if combat is combat I am not in it / But my pulse quickens / It is not a fair fight / But it quickens" (31). What is suggested by the punctuation, or lack thereof?

Discussion Question 3

Consider the following quote: ""Gaze down upon the guilty and the innocent both on all our children we watch over you my children we protect and destroy you yes Virginia there is a Santa Claus above you and there is a ninth reindeer and her name is Hellfire" (37). Why is the reference to Santa Claus particularly ironic? What aspect of The Pilot's situation does it echo, or refer back to?

Vocabulary

putty, convoy

Part 4

Summary

Pages 38 – 43. After a month of work, “A month of grey / Of nothing / Of camera eye searching searching” (38), The Pilot forgets to take off her flight suit when she gets home, leading Eric to think she’s had a good day when, in fact, the opposite is the case. The Pilot takes a week off, at first determined to spend long-neglected time with Sam. They go to a nearby mall, where The Pilot imagines who is watching what passes in front of the security cameras there, thinking in particular about people in India.

Back home, Sam asks The Pilot to play with her and her “pink ponies” (39). The Pilot describes how she and Eric, in the past, have tried to get Sam interested in planes, but Sam is simply not interested. Later, Eric comes home from work and tells The Pilot everything about his day, a contrast that The Pilot notes: everything that happens in her day is classified. For the rest of her time off, The Pilot sleeps, knowing that she is neglecting her special time with Sam but unable to stop sleeping. At the end of her time off, she wakes up surrounded by Sam’s ponies.

Back at work, The Pilot takes over for another pilot who, on orders, has been lingering over a pile of “our boys” (41), the heat of their dead bodies eventually cooling, according to the drone’s thermal sensors, into the same grey as the rest of the screen. The Pilot wants to use her drone to pursue the “military age males” (41) who killed the boys, but is under orders to keep her drone in place. When she goes home, she is reluctant to go in the house, as she has not been able to clear her head. Her narration compares her experience to that of Odysseus in The Odyssey, saying that if he came home every day, the book would be very different.

When she finally goes in the house, Eric suggests she try her own version of a ritual he does at work: “clap off the game,” signaling to the eye in the sky there that he has concealed no chips in his sleeves, that his day is over. The Pilot dismisses the idea, but the next day gives it a try, stage directions (one of the few in the play) describing her efforts to come up with her own variation on the ritual. It does not seem to work: instead, The Pilot sits in her driveway, trying to imagine her family, “get[ing] a thermal reading” (43). She imagines Sam in bed and Eric on the couch while she remains in the car.

…

Analysis

One of the intriguing things about this script is the layering of imagery, motif, and meaning. Layering occurs with references to eyes (as in the eye in the sky), the colors blue (as in hope) and grey (as in hopelessness), and images of death (as in the images of the dead American soldiers, also associated with grey). This last is particularly significant in terms of themes, given that experiences of death are one of the play’s key

thematic , and overtly developed, lines. Development of these other motifs, or repeated images, is more subtle, and often more metaphorical. Tthe references to eyes is an aspect of the play's thematic exploration of the mental effects of military service (i.e. feeling watched all the time), while the references to blue is a similarly metaphoric exploration definitions of identity. An interesting side note: the colors blue and gray were the colors of the opposing armies in the American Civil War: the Northern armies wore gray, the Southern armies wore blue.

Meanwhile, the references to The Pilot's flight suit, here and throughout the play, also explore the book's thematic references to the Pilot's sense of her own identity, as well as to the mental effects of military service. References here evoke ways in which the lines between work and home life for The Pilot are becoming blurred, and are indirectly foreshadowing of the play's climax, in which The Pilot's perspectives, changed as a result of this increasingly intense blurring, leading to dangerous decisions.

Another repeated motifs in this section include the reference to the story of Odysseus, a lost warrior. The reference in itself is a new element, but it ties into the reference earlier in the play to Olympus: both are references to an Ancient Greek myth, which in turn tie The Pilot's story to the same sort of archetypal, universal human experiences enacted by myths of that nature.

Finally, there are two new motifs introduced in this section, each of which is also an important piece of foreshadowing. The first is the reference to Samantha's ponies, which can be seen as representing the power of her imagination and her desire to connect with her mother and the home life the family is trying to build. They are also foreshadowing of moments later in the play in which both these aspects of the motif play important, arguably triggering, roles in The Pilot's climactic choices. The second is Eric's reference to "clap[ping] off the game." The Pilot's failure to successfully come up with her own version of this ritual is, like many of the other motifs and images of this section, representative of her inability to separate her work and home lives. It also foreshadows not only attempts later in the narrative for her to do so, but the final moment of the play, in which (in significantly ironic circumstances) she manages to finally complete the gesture to her satisfaction.

Discussion Question 1

How do the references to blue and gray explore the play's thematic interest in definitions of identity?

Discussion Question 2

Consider the imagined story in the following quote: ""What if these Indians watching us eventually come here for a vacation but find themselves drawn to JC Penney they don't know why but they are and when they get there they go right past the sale racks right past the shoes they head straight to the changing room they don't know why they have nothing to change they walk in they close the door and they suddenly know why they've

come and they wave they wave to all of their friends back home and then they don’t know why but they start to cry”" (39). What are the echoes here of The Pilot’s situation? What do you think the story suggests about her state of mind and experience?

Discussion Question 3

Given that the story of Odysseus is that of a lost warrior, what are the possible connections (literal or metaphoric) between the reference here and The Pilot’s story?

Vocabulary

surveille, linger, thermal

Part 5

Summary

Pages 43 – 49. The Pilot is given a new mission: track and destroy a man first referred to as Number Two, an important figure in the war. She and the others with whom she works are told to be very sure that they are killing the right person. As The Pilot begins the mission, she notices that Number Two is driving in the same kind of car that she drives – “same desert, different war / No different desert different war” (45). The first day of the mission is unsuccessful, and she leaves for home.

As she crosses the desert, The Pilot stops to gets some air and some quiet. She walks through the sand and finds hundreds of crosses “hammered into the sand / no names just crosses” that make what she is doing suddenly more real. She leaves garbage from inside the car in the midst of the crosses – burger wrappers, bottles of Pepsi – and looks at the sky, waiting for something to happen. Nothing does.

When The Pilot gets home, she finds that Eric is worried because she is so late. She also imagines that Sam has become grey and shakes her awake. Later, after The Pilot has gone to bed after refusing to watch television with Eric, he joins her in the bedroom and suggests they make use of the counseling service the Air Force has provided. The Pilot is reluctant, but agrees.

There follows a long paragraph, the first half of which is punctuated with commas (no periods) in which The Pilot describes the counseling session with a blonde female counselor who, she thinks, shares a mutual attraction with Eric. The session does not go well, with The Pilot not answering the counselor’s questions until, it seems, The Pilot bursts out (in the second half of the speech) with her desire to be considered as an active pilot actually flying missions. The counselor asks whether she feels guilty about what she’s been doing. The Pilot says she knows who the guilty are, referring to herself as a god (“Don’t speak to a god of guilt / This god isn’t interested okay? / This god wants a beer” (48). She tells Eric they’re not going back to the counselor. When Eric asks her to take off the flight suit, she refuses. “It’s how I know who I am” (49).

Analysis

With its introduction of a new character (Number Two) and a new set of orders for The Pilot (to ensure his death), the narrative sets in motion a chain of events that eventually leads to the play’s narrative, emotional, and thematic climax. From this point on, momentum and conflict intensify, building to the point of release at the point where The Pilot makes a choice that defines her personal and professional journeys throughout the play. In other words, the appearance of Number Two (which may or may not be deliberately evocative of a certain bodily function) foreshadows several key later events. At the same time, there is the introduction of another new motif: the field of crosses

marking military graves, an evocation of the book's thematic interest in experiences of death that, like many other repeated motifs to this point, layer in on each other and entwine, to give a complex texture of meaning to the narrative of The Pilot's experience. Meanwhile, the garbage from her car that she places in the field can be seen as kind of an offering to the dead, of the sort that many spiritual practices (including those of Ancient Greece, which has been referred to several times in the play) have enacted.

Meanwhile, there are several repetitions of previously developed motifs, or images. Late in this section, there is one of the clearest, most explicit references in the play to how The Pilot defines her identity through the wearing of her flight suit. Only now, and without her knowing, it is become representative of how troubled she is, rather than how happy and fulfilled she is (which is what it represented at the play's beginning). Then there is the reference to The Pilot's imagined experience of seeing Sam as grey, which functions on a couple of entwined levels: to echo the motif of gray that has, in turn and throughout the play, evoked a thematically significant experience of hopelessness and death.

The most significant element of this section is the sequence in which The Pilot and Eric visit the counselor. This is notable for several reasons. On a technical level, it is one of the very few places in the narrative that employs punctuation: the sense here is that commas (no periods) are used to define and shape the ideas and emotions through which The Pilot is moving in ways that no other piece of text has. This, in turn, emphasizes the importance and intensity of the situation: specifically, The Pilot's denial that anything is happening to her, and the deepening sense of her troubled mental state (i.e. her paranoia).

It is significant that this speech contains this section's reference to the idea of gods and power, which takes on a new and perhaps more frightening aspect in The Pilot's reference to herself as a god. This again evokes the previously introduced sense of connection to myth and archetype; deepens and darkens the play's thematic exploration of identity (i.e. in its suggestion of how The Pilot's perspective of her identity has become corrupt); and turns previous developments of the motif around. Instead of feeling manipulated by the gods, an experience evoked by the previous references to Olympus (where the manipulative gods lived) and to Odysseus (who was manipulated by the gods), The Pilot now has an image of herself as being the manipulator, the controller, the decider of destinies. This self-reference sets up and foreshadows the play's climax, in which The Pilot is called upon to exercise her god-like power, but makes a choice that goes against what she believes of herself, and what she believes she has been chosen, or called, or employed, to be.

Discussion Question 1

How does Part 5 (Pages 43-39) develop the theme of conflicts faced by women in combat?

Discussion Question 2

What is the purpose of The Pilot's "offering" at the field of crosses? What does the gesture mean, or suggest?

Discussion Question 3

Why does The Pilot start referring to herself as a god? What references earlier in the play have prefaced, or prepared the way, for this idea?

Vocabulary

smite, convoy, prophecy, decompression, decipher

Part 6

Summary

Pages 49 – 57. Back at work, The Pilot continues her monitoring and pursuit of Number Two, to whom she now refers as The Prophet, in the same way as his people do. She becomes increasingly tense and determined, also continuing to visit the crosses in the desert and to go through the motions of family life at home, commenting at one point that Sam needs to "remember the sky" (50).

One morning, The Pilot wakes up and finds a gold-wrapped package on her bedside table - a gift from Eric "for the drive home" (50). She takes it with her, and has another long day of watching for Number Two. Finally, the car stops and someone gets out – someone that The Pilot realizes is not Number Two and has been pissing into an empty Pepsi bottle, which he empties into the desert. After her shift, The Pilot again drives through the desert, leaving a pissed-in Pepsi bottle in the sand.

Afterwards, she opens Eric's gift, and discovers that he has prepared a CD for her, labeled it "Decompression" (53), and has included "The Pony Song," which seems to have been composed by Eric. "WHERE O WHERE WILL WE RIDE TODAY / O THE PLACES WE'LL SEE / WHERE O WHERE WILL WE RIDE TODAY / MY PRETTY PONY AND ME" (54). The Pilot listens to it, feels some release, and when she gets home, tells Eric that she liked it. She also reads a story to Sam, but is still in her flying suit. She later allows Eric to take it off, describing how he compliments and praises her with every zipper he undoes. They have sex, which is referred to neither as fucking nor as making love, but as her taking him into her, and which results in him having an orgasm and her faking one. The Pilot comments that Eric seems to think "he's solved something" (55). Later, she imagines the sight from the same perspective as the drone: from above. For a moment, she continues to feel better, but then after they are finished and Eric is asleep, she imagines images, like those she sees on her screen, in the shadows on the ceiling. She pulls on her suit and climbs back into bed.

The next morning, as The Pilot is preparing to go into work and as she and Eric share a moment, Sam "flies" her pony around the room, and the family has a moment of connection. There is one last reference to the photograph of The Pilot in her flight suit, taken when she was pregnant, and then The Pilot leaves for work.

Analysis

Tension between the demands of the two sides of The Pilot's life deepens and intensifies in this section. On the one hand, there is the intensifying call of her mission, which manifests in the increased significance of the nickname given to her target, a further evocation of the play's thematic interest in the psychological effects of military service – or, more specifically, of aspects of faith on both sides of the military conflict in

which both characters involved. On the other hand, there is the intensifying call of her home life and well-being, manifested in the gift that Eric gives her. Here, the point to note is the reference to The Pony Song, which has a clear connection to both Sam's previously referenced favorite toy and foreshadows the way in which that toy, as previously discussed, plays an important, triggering role in The Pilot's climactic choices.

All that said, in this section the narrative does offer glimpses of hope (in the aftermath of The Pilot listening to The Pony Song for the first time, and in the section's final image of the flying pony) and a sense of increasing despair. The darkness of the latter moment (i.e. The Pilot putting her suit back on, her imagined images) is intensified by its juxtaposition with the metaphoric emotional brightness of the former. Meanwhile, the sequence of events at the end of this section is, in its mood and energy, powerful foreshadowing of the play's impending climax, which takes place in the following section.

The same point could be made about the reference to the photograph, also at the end of this section. Earlier in the narrative, the photo had been a reference to the optimism shared by The Pilot and her husband that their new life together could, and would, successfully entwine two aspects of life: fulfilment and happiness at both work and home. Now, as with so many images in this play, the image becomes deeply ironic, given that The Pilot's capacity for joy has been taken over, eaten away, by confusion, darkness, and a sense of death. This same point could be made about the sex in this sequence: up to now, sex has been an act of connection and union, but now it is representative of difficulty and disconnection. There is the sense here that The Pilot thinks Eric believes he has resolved their relationship, and that her difficulties are over. The Pilot knows he is wrong, and she seems helpless to change: this is represented by her putting on the flight suit.

Finally, the offering of the filled Pepsi bottle echoes the previous "offering to the dead" made by The Pilot at the field of crosses, but because of the bottle's contents, seems to have even more negative implications. Because the bottle is full of urine, and because Number Two / The Prophet also fills Pepsi bottles with urine, there is a sense that on both sides of the equation of conflict in play here, people's lives are being, almost literally, pissed away.

Discussion Question 1

How does the narrative develop the theme of definitions of identity in Part 6 (Pages 49-56)?

Discussion Question 2

What is ironic about the fact that The Pilot, at around the same time, spends time at the field of crosses and also starts referring to Number Two as The Prophet?

Discussion Question 3

What are the ironic / thematic / metaphoric implications of the lyrics of “The Pony Song”?

Vocabulary

decompression, decipher

Part 7

Summary

Pages 57 – 63. On her way into work, The Pilot plays the “Decompression” CD, commenting that “Backwards feels right” (57) and describing how she threw her Air Force pin out the window in the direction of the crosses. She pays particular attention to The Pony Song.

At work, The Sensor comments on how she stinks. The Pilot ignores him and sits down at her screen, following the Prophet with her drone and convinced that this will be the day that she kills him. Eleven hours pass. The Prophet’s car arrives at a village and stops in front of a small house. The Pilot and her team, anticipating that the moment is coming, cannot understand why he does not get out, but then realize that The Prophet is just watching his family from his car, keeping them safe: he seems to know that he is in danger.

The car begins to pull away. A girl runs out of the house. The car stops, and The Prophet gets out. Olympus recognizes him, and shouts at The Pilot to take her shot. “I will / For God is mightier than her Prophet / In 1.2 seconds God is going to call her Prophet home” (60).

But then The Pilot imagines that the Prophet’s daughter is Sam, and that she is carrying one of her ponies. In spite of the screaming from Olympus in her headset, The Pilot turns the plane away and into the sky, eventually deliberately crashing it. “I have saved my daughter” (61). Suddenly, The Pilot realizes that there is a second drone – “Sam is back on the screen” (61). The Commander tells her that for the last several weeks she has been watched, and there have been signs of strain in her, so a backup drone had been dispatched. The Pilot tries to restrain the pilot of the second drone, but The Sensor holds her back. The Prophet looks up and sees what is happening. He tries to shield his daughter, and The Pilot thanks him. “Shukran / Shukran” (62). The Prophet and his daughter are blown to bits. They dissolve “into the grey / There is only the grey now / Only the grey” (63).

…

Analysis

This section of the play contains its point of narrative and thematic climax – specifically, the point at which The Pilot makes her choice to not follow through on her orders and, in fact, does exactly what her training, her orders, and her previous conditioning have led her to believe was the right, necessary, and true thing to do. In narrative terms, her choice is the event to which every incident in the story, every circumstance and decision, have built to. In thematic terms, all five of the play’s central themes reach their point of peak exploration in this moment. Her choice is clearly portrayed as a result of

the cumulative effects of military service; it is arguably the sort of choice that many would believe would be more relevant to women in combat. Her choice defines and emphasizes the struggle with identity that The Pilot has encountered throughout the play. As a result of her choice the audience, the command system, and The Pilot herself all learn where her commitment truly lies; and finally, the moment looks at two clear sides of the experience of death - its being avoided or deflected. Here it is important to note that nowhere else has the symbolic connection between death and the color grey been more vividly developed: the death here is the death foreshadowed by every other reference to death and grey in the narrative up to this point.

The Pilot throwing away her air force pin, as well as her focus on “The Pony Song” can be seen as foreshadowing the moment at which The Pilot sees her daughter with The Prophet.

The Sensor’s comment about how The Pilot smells is likely meant to be interpreted beyond a literal sense, symbolically suggesting that The Pilot’s moral center has become somehow corrupt, or rotten. It is important to note that there is no concurrent sense of which aspect of The Pilot’s morality has become corrupted: her sense of duty as a member of the Armed Forces, or her sense of duty as a mother. The later action of the play suggests that it is the former, suggesting that in the play’s point of view, The Pilot’s duty (and therefore that of any military officer) should be first to the military, and therefore to the ideals and goals of the country for which the military fights.

The reference to the pony juxtaposed with the reference to the plane being turned into the sky is ironic on several levels. Perhaps most notably, it is ironic because of what Sam did with the pony in the previous scene – made it fly which, in juxtaposition with The Pilot’s actions here, reinforce the idea that the ponies represent freedom. This suggestion contradicts that of the point made above: that in finding her freedom again, The Pilot is living her true morality, her true duty. In other words, in this climactic sequence, the play is arguably setting up the potential for debate of the play’s basic question of which is the truest duty.

Finally, there are the complex ironies and metaphors associated with The Pilot saying “thank you”, in an Arab language, to The Prophet.

Discussion Question 1

How could the events of Part 7 (Pages 57-63) be considered a manifestation of the play’s thematic interest of the conflicts faced by women in conflict?

Discussion Question 2

What is the connection between The Pilot throwing away her pin and her actions when confronted with the opportunity to kill The Prophet?

Discussion Question 3

Why does The Pilot thank The Prophet? What is the significance of her doing so in what she thinks is his own language?

Vocabulary

Shukran

Part 8

Summary

Pages 63 – 64. Stage direction: “The Pilot achieves a state of peace, of power” (63).

The Pilot speaks of being in a place of grey – “concrete not sand,” referring to being “grounded” in her “court-martial home” (63). She also refers to her suit having been taken away, but adds that it is still with her: she earned it, “through sweat and brains and guts / Guts they will never understand / Guts YOU will never understand” (63).

The Pilot then address the audience “even more directly than before” (63), referring to those who watch her; who have slaughtered her child, hidden her away from her husband and her blue; and who think they are safe. She says there is no safety for them, and then finally, successfully, performs her gesture of letting go (i.e. letting go of the game).

“Boom” (64).

End of play.

Analysis

On one level, in this brief section (which is ultimately something of an epilogue), the narrative answers a key question posed by the play’s climax: what happens to The Pilot in the aftermath of her choice? The answer – that she faces a court martial – has significant thematic implications, particularly relating to the issue of The Pilot’s identity. On another level, the style of the epilogue, and of The Pilot’s narration, takes on a very different tone: confrontational and challenging, almost as though the audience has, in The Pilot’s mind, taken on a different identity.

Then there is the reference to The Pilot finally completing her gesture, an indication that, at least in her mind, she has resolved the questions of where her mind and perspective are oriented, where her loyalties lie, and in relation to the stage direction that opens the epilogue, come to a degree of peace with it all. The question, however, is this: are the peace and calm that seems to be part of her identity now a continuation of her psychological deterioration, or are they a manifestation of her true identity, forged and tempered in the conflict into which she was placed, and within which she so desperately struggled? One piece of evidence in this section suggests it is the former: the reference to the death of her child, which did not happen. It would seem, then, that The Pilot is still in a state of delusion, suggesting that for her, the alternate reality of The Prophet embracing her daughter has become her true reality. This, in turn, means that The Pilot is in the “grey” area of a kind of psychological death, as opposed to literal physical death, which has, to this point, been the primary metaphoric meaning of “grey.”

There is clear contrast here with the reference to the “blue,” again representing freedom.

Finally, there is the last word of the play: “boom.” Here again, there are multiple levels of meaning. In contemporary terms, it is arguably marking a particularly significant or emotional point has been made, and there is nothing more to add. There is also, of course, the fact that “boom” is also the sound of an explosion, of the sort that ended the lives of The Prophet and his daughter, and arguably the career of The Pilot. Then there is another level: that The Pilot has “dropped a bomb” of responsibility on the audience, and by extension the military and political cultures that have shaped the beliefs that made both her, and arguably The Prophet, necessary.

Discussion Question 1

How do the events of the epilogue develop the play’s thematic interest in definitions of identity?

Discussion Question 2

What does The Pilot mean when she makes her comments about guts?

Discussion Question 3

At the beginning of the play, directions suggest that at the end of the play, the audience is “perhaps” no longer The Pilot’s “confidante” (5) Why do you think this is the case? What has changed about the relationship? About The Pilot?

Vocabulary

annihilate, imperceptible

Characters

The Pilot

The Pilot, whose name is never given, is the play's central character, protagonist, and narrator. In the description that prefaces the play, she is portrayed in terms that seem to reflect the physical requirements of women in the military rather than anything else. In other words, it seems to be less of a description of the character in the play and more of a description of a person in the American Armed Forces: appropriate in that the character clearly tends to define herself more by what she does than by who she is as a person. This approach to the character's self-portrayal is a key manifestation of the play's thematic exploration of the nature of identity.

Aside from there being no reference to The Pilot's name, there is also no reference to her family of origin or her personal history. There are no comments about parents or siblings, to academic history or training, or to previous relationships. The story of her successes and eventual downfall seems entirely self-contained, defined by the present situation, with the development of her relationship with her husband and daughter playing out within the context of her military life. As discussed above, that side of her is the dominant one. In spite of what the narrative portrays as her best efforts, she is unable to successfully integrate a personal life with her professional on. All she is, all she seems to really want to be, is what she does – work as a pilot in the military.

All that said, the narrative clearly portrays her has experiencing significant mental and emotional difficulties as a direct result of her inability to disengage her sense of self from what she does. She is portrayed as becoming increasingly psychologically unwell as she becomes more and more obsessed with completing the mission to which she has been assigned, to the point where her two very different lives become suddenly, unexpectedly, and debilitatingly entwined. This is not to say that she lacks self-awareness: her knowledge of herself, however, as well as her beliefs about her goals, become increasingly unstable and out of balance, with the result that she makes a choice that she thinks preserves her sanity and sense of priorities but which, in fact, brings to a close what up until then had been the most defining aspect of her life. She essentially ends the play with no remaining identity.

Eric

Eric is The Pilot's husband. He is portrayed throughout the narrative as sensitive, admiring, supportive, and compassionate towards her when she starts to display some changes in character as the result of the inner conflict she feels between her job and her family. Their relationship begins with a sexual encounter, develops into something deeper, and in many ways (at least in the narrative) ends with another sexual encounter, which takes place just before The Pilot essentially ends her own career by making the choice not to fire on the target she has been assigned to kill. What happens to Eric and

Samantha in the aftermath of that moment is unclear; all that the epilogue reveals is that The Pilot has been separated from them.

Samantha

Samantha is The Pilot's daughter. She is conceived in the aftermath of a sexual encounter between The Pilot and Eric, and is the catalyst for The Pilot's being shifted into a new career. She becomes the focus of The Pilot's efforts to develop and maintain a family life, and also becomes an unwitting trigger of guilt, when her desires to spend time with her mother conflict with The Pilot's sense of duty. One of Samantha's colorful toy ponies and what she does with them become important symbols of hope and possibility for The Pilot and for the play as a whole.

Commander (1)

Two different commanders play defining roles in the trajectory of The Pilot's career. The first Commander is her superior officer in Iraq, where she is stationed. It is he who assigns her to a desk job once her pregnancy becomes too advanced for her to fly any more. He is portrayed as efficient and matter-of-fact.

Commander (2)

The second Commander to appear in the play is the Commander of the desert base where The Pilot begins her new career as a grounded pilot of drone aircraft. He is somewhat more acerbic in his relations with The Pilot, and is also very careful with her. In the aftermath of her climactic choice to not kill her assigned target, he reveals that because of her having displayed signs of instability, he has had her watched.

The Sensor

The Sensor is a member of The Pilot's team at the base in the desert near Las Vegas. He is responsible for manning and operating the radar and other detection equipment in The Pilot's drone. He is much younger than The Pilot, and has a tendency towards tactlessness.

Military-Aged Males

This is the generic term used to describe the targets for The Pilot and others manning the drones at the desert base near Las Vegas. The narrative never explicitly explains why these sorts of people are the emphasized targets, but the implication is that "military-aged males" are more likely to be enemy combatants. Notice that the term does not include any reference to their being ACTUAL combatants.

Number Two (The Prophet)

This is the name given to the man who becomes the primary target of The Pilot and others who are on her mission team. He is identified as a second-in-command of the military and combat organization which the American Military (of which The Pilot is a member) is assigned to destroy. He is given the nickname "The Prophet" by The Pilot who, in the emerging delusion that she is a kind of god, sees Number Two as someone who is "guilty" of betraying the truth and whom she, as a god, has the responsibility to destroy. Number Two / The Prophet is killed, along with his daughter in an attack from The Pilot's team.

The Prophet's Daughter

The Prophet's Daughter is unnamed and appears only at the play's climax. When her father stops off to visit her, she runs out to meet him, an action that seems contrary to The Prophet's intention. He leaves the safety of his car to embrace her, a circumstance that triggers an opportunity to fulfill her mission and kill him. She refuses to take that opportunity, because to do so would mean killing The Prophet's Daughter, whom she sees in terms of her own daughter. The Pilot's efforts to save The Prophet's Daughter fail; she dies, along with her father, in the second wave of attack from The Pilot's team.

The Therapist

As The Pilot's husband Eric becomes increasingly concerned about her psychological well-being, he suggests that they see a therapist provided by the military. The Pilot reluctantly agrees, almost immediately reacting negatively when she first encounters The Therapist, whom she describes as pretty and blonde. The Therapist, is viewed solely from the perspective of The Pilot, but even given the latter's reaction, there is the sense that The Therapist is at the very least competent and perspective, enough so that The Pilot seems to sense that The Therapist is getting pretty close to discovering uncomfortable truths, and ends the counseling sessions.

Symbols and Symbolism

Flying

Throughout the narrative, and primarily for its central character (The Pilot), flying represents power, responsibility, and commitment. Most importantly, it also represents freedom and identity. The fact that The Pilot is prevented from actually flying does significant damage to both her experience of being free and her sense of identity, with the result that she becomes psychologically incapacitated.

The Pilot's Flight Suit

Perhaps even more than flying, The Pilot's flight suit represents and encapsulates her sense of identity. In her mind, and in the way she communicates about herself to an audience, she is a flyer. Her flight suit, worn throughout the narrative and in a variety of circumstances (including those in which her psychological well-being is clearly breaking down) serves as a representation of both that identity and her desperation to hold onto it.

The Photograph of the Pregnant Pilot

Late in her pregnancy, The Pilot's husband Eric takes a picture of her wearing her flight suit, which cannot be fully zipped closed around her nine-months-pregnant belly. The image is hung in the living room of the home The Pilot shares with her husband and daughter, and becomes a symbol of the hope they all share that The Pilot's work and home life can be unified. Late in the play, however, a reference to the photograph becomes an ironic representation of how that hope has not been fulfilled.

The Pilot's Pin

The pin can be seen as representing how her new position (groundwork) has "punctured" her sense of identity, represented by the flight suit. When she begins her new job as a grounded pilot of drone aircraft, The Pilot is given a service-related pin to wear on her flight suit. She describes the pin as "puncturing" her suit, a description that carries with it a negative, perhaps even destructive connotation. It foreshadows the eventual, almost total breakdown, of that identity.

Blue

Throughout the narrative, the color blue - specifically, the sky - represents freedom, identity, and power, particularly for The Pilot. She describes herself as being happiest when she is in "the blue": rarely does she actually refer to it as "the sky." As the

narrative and her psychological deterioration both progress, the loss of the blue in her life contributes to the acceleration of that deterioration. Finally, in the play's court martial-defined epilogue, The Pilot seems to grieve the loss of her connection to the blue almost more than anything else.

Grey

Over time, and over the course of the narrative, grey becomes a potent and vivid symbol of death, both literal physical death and the psychological "death" (of dreams, of hope, of freedom, of perspective) experienced by The Pilot. As she starts work at Creech Air Force base, The Pilot notes that the screen she is assigned to watch as she flies her drone aircraft is grey, a clear and vivid contrast to the blue in which she is accustomed to flying in. It is important to note the contrast between the metaphoric meanings of grey and the likewise metaphoric meanings of blue, which throughout the narrative represents life, and freedom.

Tiger

Tiger is the name that The Pilot gives the airplane that she flies in Iraq, and it is a potent symbol of the freedom and power that she believes define her identity. She experiences a close bond and connection with the plane, and becomes devastated when she learns that she will no longer be assigned to pilot it.

The Pilot's Drone

When The Pilot is reassigned after coming back to the military following her pregnancy, she is assigned the responsibility of flying a drone aircraft - that is, a plane that is flown by remote control, rather than by a pilot in the cockpit. The Pilot sees this new assignment as a professional demotion and a personal difficulty, preferring to be flying Tiger or some other actual plane. Here it is important to note that The Pilot never gives her drone aircraft a name.

Samantha's Ponies

Samantha's frequent requests for her mother to join her in playing with her collection of colorful toy ponies can be seen as representing Samantha's wish to be closer to her mother - and, on a larger scale, as symbolizing the call, or allure, of family life.

Later in the narrative, when Samantha pretends that the ponies can fly, they become a symbol of what Samantha subconsciously hopes for her mother (i.e. happiness, freedom, and psychological health) and an ironic foreshadowing of the dark-sided sense of freedom that leads The Pilot into her climactic, career-ending decision to not follow orders.

Eric's Gift

As The Pilot's psychological troubles intensify and deepen, Eric prepares a CD of songs for her to listen to that he believes will help her develop necessary separation between her work life and her home life. The CD contains one particular song - The Pony Song - that helps The Pilot in exactly the way the gift was intended. The gift represents Eric's hopes for, and efforts in support of, a healthy family life for The Pilot.

The Pony Song

The Pony Song is one of the songs on the gift of music that Eric gives to The Pilot. Its lyrics are evocative of the feelings and ideas associated with Samantha's ponies, and as such are powerful symbols, as is the song itself, of hope and possibilities for joy. It's important to note that the narrative contains no indication of, or reference to, whether the song was pre-existing or whether Eric wrote it: either way, the intent of The Pony song is to provide The Pilot with an opportunity to clear her mind after work.

The Letting Go Gesture

Another way in which Eric attempts to help The Pilot separate herself mentally and emotionally from the stresses of her job is to suggest that she do what he does: "clap off the game," something he is instructed to do in his work at a casino, an indication that his shift is over and that he has not inappropriately held on to any chips from the gambling table. In other words, it is a gesture of finishing, of letting go. The Pilot attempts to act on Eric's suggestion, but is unable to find her own version of the gesture and, ultimately, unable to let her work go. Only at the end of the play, when she is imprisoned and awaiting court martial, does the narrative indicate that she is successfully able to complete the gesture.

The Crosses in the Desert

For The Pilot, the crosses seem to represent the sacrifices made by her and other armed forces personnel: for the audience, they can be seen as another representation of the play's thematic exploration of aspects of death.

One night, as she is driving from the air force base where she works to her home in Las Vegas, The Pilot passes a field of crosses that marks military graves. She stops and pays her respects, doing so more and more frequently as time passes and she becomes increasingly psychologically damaged by her work.

Settings

Iraq

The first few moments of the play are set in Iraq, where The Pilot is initially stationed. Iraq, negatively impacted by an American-influenced war for several years, is the place where, initially, The Pilot feels most at home: specifically, in its skies, in its "blue," where she feels freest, most herself, and most able to do the job / fulfill the duties and commitments that define her.

Nevada

The American state of Nevada is the setting for much of the play: the city of Las Vegas, where The Pilot and her family make their home; and the desert outside Las Vegas, where the military base to which The Pilot is assigned is located. The Pilot describes her hatred for the artificiality of Vegas, but welcomes the atmosphere of the desert, which she says reminds her of Iraq where, as noted above, she was happiest.

Creech Air Force Base

This U.S. military base, in the middle of the Nevada desert, is where The Pilot is reassigned once she returns to duty after giving birth. Isolated and secure, the base (and the trailer there in which The Pilot works) are the primary settings for much of the action in the latter part of the play, including its climax.

The Military Prison

The play's epilogue, which takes place after The Pilot has made her career-ending choice to not kill her assigned target, is set in the military prison to which she has been sent to await court-martial. She describes it as being grey, cold, and confined, a clear and vivid contrast to the "blue" (that is, the sky) where she feels most at home, and most free.

The Early 21st Century

In terms of time, the play is set in the early part of the 21st Century, a period where tensions between America and the Middle East (particularly the country of Iraq, where the first part of the play takes place) are arguably at a point of high, intense tension. This tension, and the pressure it puts on The Pilot, play an important, if primarily sub-textual role, in defining The Pilot's actions and state of mind over the course of the play.

Themes and Motifs

The Mental Effects of Military Service

The play's story is, on a fundamental level, defined by its exploration of the deterioration of The Pilot's mental and emotional state: its events, and particularly its climax, are what they are as a result of The Pilot having lost healthy perspective on herself, on her situation, and on the world. She begins the play clear about who she is and what she wants. That said, her perspective is unarguably limited and defined by circumstances that are themselves defined by a military context. It is important to remember that The Pilot has been trained by an organization operatating from a particular set of premises about how a service person should think, feel, and behave, whether on duty or off. There is the very clear sense that throughout the narrative, The Pilot strives to live according to those premises.

There is also the clear sense that this striving is what triggers her (eventually debilitating) inner conflict. That conflict arises when the premises of behavior and attitude defined by the role and practice of being a soldier contradict premises of behavior and attitude defined by the role and practice of being a parent. Perhaps, by extension, the play is suggesting that there is a contradiction between the role and practice of being a solider and simply being a human being. In any case, torn between two very different and equally demanding realities, The Pilot becomes disconnected from both, arriving at the play's climax in a psychologically deteriorated state that is a blend of both where there no longer seems to be a clear truth in either.

Here it is important to note that nowhere in the play is there a reference to The Pilot's experience being systemic or universal – that is, being something experienced by every pilot, male or female, in her situation. At the same time, the play was written and first produced within a cultural context of increased public awareness about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a psychological illness (frequently experienced by soldiers) in which a traumatized individual suffers various debilitating, or transformative, symptoms in the aftermath of his / her experience. The point is not made to suggest that The Pilot suffers from PTSD, but is made to suggest that both PTSD and the cognitive disconnection experienced by The Pilot are part of a continuum of psychological issues that can result from active, combat-defined military service.

Conflicts Faced by Women in Combat

While the narrative never explicitly explores the particular question of conflics faced by women in conflict, its presence is implicit – that is, embedded into, and raised by, the fact that the central character of this play is a woman. In Western culture at least, there has long and generally been resistance to the practice and principle of women playing an active role in military conflict, with those who give voice to such resistive feelings tending to suggest that there is potential conflict of a sort that this play vividly

dramatizes – between duty and family, between country and kinship. Consider whether this play would have even been written about a man in the same situation. Most likely, the answer is no, given that for decades the assumption has been that men would automatically and unquestioningly prioritize duty over anything else, including family. And for centuries, men have. On some level, therefore, the play seems to be making the thematic suggestion that those who resist the idea of women in active combat are right: their priorities, perhaps in spite of their best intentions, end up in the wrong place, and they become unable to do the job they have committed to.

This, in turn, raises the question of whether the reactions of her commanding officers to The Pilot's situation are sexist. On the one hand are the simple facts: physiologically, a pregnant combat soldier is simply not able to physically fulfill the demands of the job, at least in the later stages of pregnancy. Therefore, the decision to move The Pilot to a desk job can be defended as a purely logical one. Then there is the fact of how war is being fought in contemporary society: the shift from in-person piloting to drone piloting is a military-wide situation and has nothing to do with The Pilot's being a mother … at least, that is what her second commander wants her to believe. The thematically related question then becomes this: are the actions of the commanding officers in both these situations sexist, or practical? Perhaps more relevantly: are they the former disguised as the latter?

On the other hand, it is important to note that there is little or no reference in the narrative to any other female military personnel. The absence of any such reference, combined with the absence of direct exploration of questions of sexism, implies that the author's intention is, on some level, for The Pilot's situation be considered as entirely individual and not arising from, or defined by, gender. But there is the play's paradox: because there has been such active resistance to the idea of women in combat, it is perhaps inevitable that the play be seen as referring to, or exploring, the situation of all women in a military situation. Ultimately, it becomes possible to see the play's story and its thematic representations of gender issues in the military as both: the story of an individual playing out a conflict that, on a fundamental level, could be played out by others of her gender.

Definitions of Identity

The play's central character and protagonist has no real sense of self aside from her identity as an airborne pilot in the American Air Force. There are several ways in which this aspect of her situation manifests: perhaps most significantly, she is not given a name, only referred to as "The Pilot." Then, as the play begins, she experiences defining joy and vividly portrayed fulfillment when she is in the cockpit of her plane, flying through the blue (i.e. the sky). There is also her attachment to her flight suit which, throughout the narrative, both the character and the story see as almost entirely defining her primary identity. Finally, when she is reinstated after being grounded by an unexpected pregnancy, she is angrily and resistively surprised to learn that she is to be permanently grounded: she is told she will still be a pilot, but only by remote control (i.e. assigned to flying drone aircraft). This goes against all the things she has defined

herself as for what seems to have been most of her adult life, and while she strives to make the best of the situation, the narrative makes it clear that it contradicts her beliefs about herself to such an extent that it becomes a key trigger of her psychological deterioration.

The Pilot struggles to integrate different aspects of identity into her life – not only becoming a grounded pilot, but also a spouse and mother. She makes both attempts not in response not to any internal need or drive, but as the direct result of a shift in circumstances: she becomes pregnant, finds herself unable (or unwilling) to have an abortion, and finds herself in a family situation that she never sought, but ultimately felt was the right and appropriate set of circumstances in which to put herself. This sense of enforced transformation, in spite of a certain willingness to make the attempt, creates such a strong sense of internal conflict in her (i.e. that she is not living according to what she believes is her true identity) that her psychological well-being, as mentioned, begins to fail. At the play's climax, the two sides of her identity reach a point of peak conflict, with the realities of one infusing the other and vice versa, to the point where she has virtually no identity left. This end to her story is visually, and vividly, manifested by the final set of circumstances in which the audience sees her: imprisoned, and without the Air Force uniform that has, throughout the play, defined her sense of identity and security in ways that nothing else seems able to.

Questions of Commitment

At the core of all the play's other thematic considerations is the question of commitment – specifically, the evolving nature of The Pilot's commitments, to her work and to her family. As the narrative begins, there is no question as to where her priorities and commitment lie: with her assigned duty as an airborne military pilot. As the narrative progresses, her priorities and commitment begin to shift, as she finds herself drawn towards, and intrigued by, her experience of being a wife and mother. In other words, as her investment in her family deepens, she becomes increasingly torn between what she believed was the main focus of her life and what she thinks could be, should be, or is becoming its main focus. As the narrative draws to its conclusion, its internal debate about, and exploration of, this theme reaches its climax: at a point where The Pilot is in a position to express and manifest her commitment to her job and duty as a fighter pilot, she instead chooses to express and manifest her commitment to her being a mother.

The point must be made that at its point of climax, the narrative clearly portrays The Pilot as having become psychologically unwell, albeit seemingly aware that this is the case. The question then becomes whether this expression of her commitment is a rational, thought-out one. Given what the play is clearly saying about The Pilot's state of mind, the accurate answer would seem to be no. The play's thematic suggestion, therefore, would seem to be that her primary commitment should be to her duty as a pilot rather than her duty as a parent: duty to her country, over duty to her family. It might not be going too far, in fact, to say that the play can be seen as suggesting that, for a military service-person, prioritizing something other than military service is something of a psychological aberration. It is certainly treated as a crime: as a result of

her choice, The Pilot ends up in military prison and facing a court martial. Her defiance in the face of her situation does not lessen the fact that on almost every level, her choice is portrayed by the play as being the wrong one.

Experiences of Death

On another level of core meaning, the story of the play is also one of death – sometimes slow, sometimes immediate, and in this context, always painful. The Pilot begins the play psychologically and physically alive, inhabiting a vivid intensity of existence that comes across as a harsh, almost angry kind of joy infused with irony: the beauty of her experience in the blue is associated with, and a direct result of, her intention and mission to kill people. As the play draws to its conclusion, she is still physically alive but psychologically dead, having essentially lost all the elements of her life that brought her joy – the harsh joy of flying, the more tender joy of being a mother, the passionate joy of being a sexually appreciated spouse, and perhaps most significantly, the ability to distinguish the different sources of her joy. Over the course of the narrative, key parts of the central character die a slow, painful, confusing death: it therefore becomes arguable that the deaths of Number Two / The Prophet and his daughter, while physical as psychological, are of a better sort, quick and relatively painless.

In addition, the slower death of The Pilot is foreshadowed by the deaths of the American soldiers (Part 4), whose deaths may or may not have been quick but whose slowly-fading body heat (as mapped by the thermal sensors of The Pilot's drone) metaphorically represents the slowly-fading heat of The Pilot's passion for both her work and her family. By the same token, the quicker deaths of Number Two and his daughter are foreshadowed by The Pilot's determined, almost gleeful killings (there is that ironic joy again) of guilty, military-aged solders (Part 3), described in graphic terms that reveal just how much The Pilot's soul is, on some level, that of a hunter/destroyer.

The most intriguing representation of death in the play emerges from the references to the field of crosses encountered by The Pilot as she drives to and from work. They are an evocation not of an experience of death, but an experience of being dead: absent from the world, no faces, no bodies, nothing but names. There is an odd sense of ritual about The Pilot's bringing items to the dead lives represented by the crosses, almost as though she is trying to bring them back to life: there is perhaps a sense that she is striving to bring her dying self back to life. In any case, all these references to, and experiences of, death can perhaps be seen as preparing the reader / audience for the play's final moments, which can be seen as The Pilot's warning to the reader / audience that all they have watched and heard is not so much a warning about the dangers of war, but about the inevitability of death, of those in the audience and of those they love.

Styles

Point of View

The Pilot's story is told from the first person, present tense point of view. In theatrical terms, the piece is a monologue, a long speech spoken by a single character: the generally applicable term to plays of this sort is "one person show," a play in which the speaker of the monologue is the only character who actually appears and whose perspective is the only one the audience gets to hear. The experiences and reactions of other characters become known only through what the speaker of the monologue chooses to say about them: anything other than the speaker's perspective becomes implied, often through the deployment of irony. This means that the narrative's point of view is also limited (i.e. getting inside the experience of only one character) as opposed to omniscient (i.e. getting inside the experience of most, if not all, characters).

In terms of thematic point of view, there are some essential points to note here. The first relates to the gender of the play's central character and protagonist: the story, and particularly its climax, can be seen as making a particular point about the experience of women in combat. Does the play suggest that for the reasons its action dramatizes, women should not be allowed in combat? Some readers might see it that way: the question of whether the playwright sees it that way is arguable. A second thematic point of view is intriguingly tied into the first: the play's exploration of the mental effects of combat on those who fight. The question raised by the narrative is this: is The Pilot's experience of being affected by her combat-defined work unique to her gender-specific circumstances (i.e. having given birth to a child)? Or is it a situation that might be common to fighter pilots of any gender? One possible answer might lie in the fact that the narrative offers no contrasting or parallel point of view: there is no sense at all of how a male parent might react in the situation experienced by The Pilot. By omission, therefore, the narrative seems to be taking the point of view, in relation to both these questions, that The Pilot's experiences and choices ARE ultimately defined by her gender.

Language and Meaning

There are several important elements to note in relation to the play's use of language, and its associated meanings. The first has to do with its being both a monologue and a play, which means that the primary means of communicating both meaning and event is through dialogue. There is little use of prose or stage direction, meaning that what the audience comes to understand about the protagonist and the story comes entirely through what is said. This, in turn, leads to the second important aspect of the play's language: its use of occupation-specific terminology and style. There is a sense of matter-of-factness about the play's use of jargon associated with The Pilot's line of work, and also of her way of speech in general.

A third important aspect of the play's use of language is how it is placed on the page. For the most part, The Pilot's monologue is placed on the page almost as a poem would be – in short lines that each focus on a particular aspect of an image or emotion. This suggests a certain fragmented perspective, or way of communicating, on The Pilot's part. This contrasts with sections such as The Pilot's reaction to seeing the therapist which are written in longer paragraphs and communicate a sense of stream-of-consciousness, that ideas flow freely and with a lack of controlled / shaped connection. With the fragmented sentences, ideas interrupt each other; with the paragraphs, ideas flow into each other. A related point has to do with the play's use of punctuation – or rather, its non-use. For the most part, punctuation is rarely used – not at all in the fragmented, single-line sections; limited to commas in the paragraphed sections. Because periods and commas both evoke stoppages or pauses of one kind or another, their absence tends to suggest a sense of flow that verges into an energized drive, a sense of momentum that kicks in right at the story's beginning and continues all the way to its end.

Finally, there is the play's exclusive use of the present tense in its narration. This draws the reader / audience into the immediacy and intimacy of the protagonist – narrator's experience. This stylistic choice continues throughout the narrative but reaches its most significant manifestation in the play's final moments, in which The Pilot's experiences at the point of contact with The Prophet and his daughter, narrated in present tense, are brought home to the reader / audience in an intensely visceral way.

Structure

The play (which is, as noted above, a monologue) is essentially one long story, told by a single character, that follows a single narrative line from beginning, through middle or rising action, into climax, and out of the climax into its end, also known as denouement or falling action. Other examples of this sort of theatre (i.e. extended monologues) follow different structures – moving back and forth through time, into / out of the voices of other characters, into / out of other plotlines. This piece does none of those things: while there are points at which the narrative makes significant jumps in time (months, years, weeks), those jumps are always forward, into the protagonist / narrator's future, never her past. Even through these jumps, and in their aftermath, the narrative stays in present tense, meaning that the audience / reader is likely to become emotionally engaged with the protagonist moment-by-moment throughout the play.

All that said, the play's climax is the point at which narrative action, character development, and thematic explorations all combine at the story's point of greatest intensity. This is the moment, almost at the play's conclusion, in which The Pilot is faced with the choice to either complete her mission or kill a young girl whom she sees in terms of the life of her own daughter. In other words, she is faced with a choice between the two commitments she has made, commitments that throughout the play, she has experienced as being in deep conflict: to her career, and to her family. In terms of dramatic writing in general, building a climax around a choice with high personal stakes for the characters tends to be the most dramatically effective: the choice presented to

The Pilot here is an example of just how effective it can be to structure a narrative in such a way.

In the play's denouement, The Pilot faces the consequences of her actions - imprisonment, court martial, and what seems to be a deepened experience of emotional / mental unwell-ness. In these final moments, she confronts the audience with a vivid evocation of what she sees as its complicity in the deaths for which she is responsible. The narrative line of her story might have reached its conclusion: there is the sense, though, that in her final challenge to the audience, The Pilot is suggesting that the audience's own response to the story is just beginning.

Quotes

It’s more than a suit / It’s the speed / It’s the G-Force pressing you back as you tear the sky / It’s the ride / My Tiger / My gal who cradles me lifts me up / It’s more / It’s the respect / It’s the danger / It’s / It’s more / It’s / You are the blue / You are alone in the vastness and you are the blue / Astronauts / They have eternity / But I have color / I have blue.
-- The Pilot (Part 1)

Importance: In this quote from the very early stages of The Pilot’s narrative, she sums up, in somewhat poetic language, part of the reason why she feels so strongly about being a pilot, and about flying. It also introduces the motif - repeated image of "the blue," which refers to the sky and which, here and throughout the play, symbolizes freedom and identity.

She’s got a spark in her eye / She’s gonna be trouble / Like I said perfect / Maybe a little small / A little early / But that’s okay / Just means we have to watch out for her at first / First / few / years."
-- The Pilot (Part 1)

Importance: This quote sums up The Pilot’s first impressions of her daughter. There is also a sense that it has echoes of The Pilot's image of herself.

I have been given a gift / I get to fly again / Sort of / But I will not be eight thousand miles away while I do it / I will see my daughter grow up / I will kiss my husband goodnight every night / No tracer fire / No RPG’s / The threat of death has been removed / The threat of death has been removed from our lives.
-- The Pilot (Part 2)

Importance: In this quote, The Pilot tries to talk herself into feeling good about the change in career and life that has been imposed upon her. An RPG is a military weapon.

I feel my pulse quicken / Ridiculous / I’m sweating my pits my hands / I’m not there I can’t be killed the threat of death has been removed there is no danger to me none I am the eye in the sky there is no danger but my pulse quickens why does it quicken / I am not in combat if combat is risk if combat is danger if combat is combat I am not in it / But my pulse quickens / It is not a fair fight / But it quickens
-- The Pilot (Part 3)

Importance: This quote dramatizes The Pilot’s emotional and physiological reaction to her first encounter with enemies through the drone. Note the length of the central sentence, presented without slashes, punctuation, or breaks. The punctuation here, or lack thereof, seems to echo and/or represent the mental and emotional energy at work in The Pilot in the moment.

Look at them / Poor saps / You don’t learn do you / You can’t hide from the eye in the sky my children / We look down from above we see all and we have pronounced you guilty / boom / another grey inferno”
-- The Pilot (Part 3)

Importance: This quote manifests a change in The Pilot’s reaction to the bombings she is leading. There are clear echoes here of some kind of feeling of omnipresence, or god-like sensibility. There is also a reference here to the color grey, which here and throughout the play is an image of death.

Gaze down upon the guilty and the innocent both on all our children we watch over you my children we protect and destroy you yes Virginia there is a Santa Claus above you and there is a ninth reindeer and her name is Hellfire.
-- The Pilot (Part 4)

Importance: With the same sort of unpunctuated, unbroken, adrenaline-ized energy as her first attack, the Pilot speaks to, and of, the “guilty” people she and her team are destroying. There is a considerably irony here: the references to Christmas in this quote can be seen as an echo of Eric's earlier references to his and The Pilot's life in Las Vegas as being a gift.

The screen and I’m falling asleep wrapped up in him and I realize the Commander was right we are the top shit we get to kick ass and screw our husbands and kiss our kids’ forehead goodnight and that’s something a fighter pilot never had never
-- The Pilot (Part 4)

Importance: With the same sort of unpunctuated, unbroken, adrenaline-ized energy as her first attack, the Pilot realizes that she really is living a good life - or at least tries to convince herself of it.

What if these Indians watching us eventually come here for a vacation but find themselves drawn to JC Penney they don’t know why but they are and when they get there they go right past the sale racks right past the shoes they head straight to the changing room they don’t know why they have nothing to change they walk in they close the door and they suddenly know why they’ve come and they wave they wave to all of their friends back home and then they don’t know why but they start to cry
-- The Pilot (Part 4)

Importance: Note again the adrenalized, unpunctuated, enegetically intense style of writing here as The Pilot imagines someone in India doing something akin to her job - anonymous, watchful, removed from being human.

… can we pretend that I don’t come home every night every single fucking night can we do that can we do that very simple thing can we can we can we all pretend that I’m really in a real fucking war
-- The Pilot (Part 5)

Importance: Again punctuation free, The Pilot's text here evokes her desperate, urgent desire for her life to be different – for her to be treated as though she is still a pilot in the sky, not a pilot at a console, and be free of the (self-imposed?) pressure she feels to also be a good wife and mother.

… [Sam] flies that pony all over the room that fucking pony flies that pink pony soars / Eric is crying and I wish I could wish I knew this was a real moment wish I knew this was where I am / But wherever I am I love it it makes my hear soar / I'll carry that I'll try to carry that into the grey / I kiss them goodbye / Something's going to happen so I kiss them goodbye / Sam makes me kiss her Pegasus too / I do it / Gladly
-- The Pilot (Part 5)

Importance: In an emotionally intense buildup to the play's climax, The Pilot reveals a personal emotional intensity to her reaction to a moment of playfulness on the part of her daughter. The pony, here as elsewhere, embodies possibility and hope, an evocation amplified by the idea that the pony is flying: flying has, throughout the play, represented freedom and true identity. The grey is, again, a reference to death which combines with the clear reference to a foreboding, or an intuition, that The Pilot is sensing some kind of impending death. Pegasus is yet another reference to Greek Mythology, following on references earlier in the narrative to Mount Olympus (the home of the Greek gods) and to Odysseus (a Greek hero of myth). Pegasus was a powerful winged horse, the friend and ally of the hero Perseus.

Do not stare at Sam / Stare at the sky instead / The innocent sky / Stare at this you fucker stare / (stage direction: we see blue) And it's there / It's there / It's there in the grey / It's thee / I see it
-- The Pilot (Part 6)

Importance: In what amount to the final moments of her professional and military career, The Pilot makes a choice to turn her drone away from The Prophet and his daughter, whom she imagines having Sam's face, and lifts it into the sky, eventually crashing it. The reference to the blue is key: it suggests that she is making the choice out of a desire to reclaim the hope, possibility, and sense of identity with which she began the play.

Know That You Can Keep Me Here Forever You Can Bury Me in a Bunker of Grey But That Does Not Protect You for One Day it Will Be Your Turn Your Child's Turn and Yea Though You Mark Each and Every Door with Blood None of the Guilty Will Be Spared / None / None / None
-- The Pilot (Part 6)

Importance: This quote, taken from the play's epilogue, is notable for several reasons. The formatting and punctuation emphasize and define The Pilot's intensity; it turns The Pilot's tortured sense of guilt and responsibility onto the audience, also warning viewers of the impending deaths of their own children; and contains another reference to those who do The Pilot's job as being godlike: specifically, the quote about each and every door being marked with blood. This is a reference to the passage in the Bible's Old

Testament in which the homes of Jews that were marked with blood were spared God's killing of the firstborn of Egypt. By deploying the language of this quote, The Pilot seems to be suggesting that those who engage in the sort of violence that she once did are, in fact, without mercy - that is, without the sort of mercy she tried to practice on The Prophet's daughter.