

John Brown

by Bob Dylan

1. (a) Referring closely to the song 'John Brown,' relate the hollowness of war as compared to the richness of peace, in the matter of conflicting nations.

Answer: Bob Dylan rose basically as the promoter for positive social changes. He brought out the bitterest truth about wars, through his poems or anti-war songs, like the one given here "John Brown." Actually, wars have nothing to do with the citizens of both the conflicting countries, be it anyone at any point in time. Same is the case with the soldiers too of both the conflicting nations: both sides face the severity of war and aftermath. It has all to do with the heads of supreme authorities of the concerned nations who act like war-mongers at the cost of the lives of the citizens including innocent children who are the worst hit ones. Comparatively, peace allows the survival of citizens of both the conflicting nations. As in this poem John Brown went off to war with great pride and high hopes. During the war itself his hopes were shattered and he realized that the victory or loss of war is not going to make any effect on his life. The observation of this song is based on the poet's much sensitive view towards the deplorable effects of war.

(b) How radically does the idea of war change for John Brown when once he has been a part of it?

Answer: When the announcement of war comes up. John Brown and his mother both are filled with the overflowing sense of patriotism. His mother sends him with a heavy heart but a head held high with honour. John too realizes that he has a certain duty towards his nation and he must stand up in the hours of need for his nation. The mastery of Dylan can be well witnessed here in presenting the clear-cut contrast of opposite emotions before, during and after the war, in the minds of the citizens' as well as the soldiers. He has conveyed out a bigger and deeper picture of war with much more clarity of the impact it causes to the people living around. The idea of war which once was a matter of pride for John, the hero of this song suddenly changed during the war itself. There he felt that the soldier with whom he is fighting with an intention to kill him is not actually an enemy, rather the man on the other side is also stuck in the same fix as he is. They both are merely pawns for the war-mongers, and the war is not going to bring any great change to them.

(c) Though his mother is proud of her son being to war, is she able to accept the loss that the war had caused to her son?

Answer: As is the beginning of the poem with the description of the mother's pride for her son who has now become a soldier. She takes pride in sharing the same with her neighbours. When her son is on the war front she receives letters with the optimistic tone

from her son. This makes her happier. But soon the letters stop coming from her son for the next ten months, and then her son returns back home in a badly wounded position.

So, the issue, which was a matter of pride in, verse three for the mother:

"That's my son that's about to go, he's a soldier now, you know"

...is paradoxically contrasted at the end of the poem in verse eight:

Hence the mother had to turn her face away, seeing the worst bruised condition of her son.

"Oh tell me, my darling son, pray tell me what they done.

How is it you come to be this way?"

The author has presented the effects of the war from a different angle. He has tried to show the deeper impact of war upon the public through an individual soldier's views.

Long Questions and Answers

1. What message does the lyric 'John Brown' by Bob Dylan convey to its readers?

Answer: John Brown is an anti-war lyric written by Bob Dylan. The lyric begins with aspirations and expectations. People believe that John Brown's contribution in the war would make their society famous and he would earn lots of medals. John Brown's mother, like every other mother, asks him to take care of himself and be obedient to his captain. She is hopeful that her son will do well and fight earnestly in the war. She loves her son and is proud that he realizes the need to protect his country. People often think that winning mementoes and achievements is the greatest part of being successful.

John Brown's family and friends wish him well. His mother tells everyone about her son's brave decision to sacrifice his life for war and the nation. John Brown, the young and brave soldier leaves his civilian life to dedicate his life to the country. He sends letters consistently to his mother. However, the letters stop coming after a while. There is no message from John Brown to his mother for several months. John Brown returns home after spending several months in war. When he returns, he cannot be recognized by his own mother. The war leaves him scarred for life both physically and emotionally.

The message from John Brown is to make people realize the reality of war. People often think wars can be won, but they are either lost on both sides or won by both sides. Wars are lost when both parties fight against each other and are won when they decide to restore peace by talks and not harming either side. When wars are fought, the soldiers realize how terrible is fighting against people similar to you. They realize that medals can be easily won, as they participate in war but to truly win the war is impossible unless they understand that war isn't the sole way of declaring supremacy over one another.

Dylan tries to spread the message of peace and let people know of how soldiers and their families suffer just because of political interests. There is a deeper meaning to John Brown'. It shows the conversion of a simple man to a war hero, who has won lots of medals but lost his youth and sacrificed his life in the process.

The ultimate message of the poem is to live in peace and harmony as it is not the number and type of medals that count but the fact that each family remains together, safe and sound, protecting their family and making the world a peaceful place to live in.

2. What is the most difficult decision every soldier has to make while participating in war? With reference to the poem 'John Brown', write your opinion on the same. You may use the points below for reference.

- reality of war
- requirements to be a soldier
- great emotional strength
- fighting against people similar to the soldier

Answer: The thought of participating in a war itself is very disturbing and requires confidence, willpower and the determination to succeed. A soldier has to have a strong will to protect their country and emerge victoriously. Being a soldier requires training, endurance, and resilience. This also means that a soldier doesn't only have to be strong physically but also mentally prepared. A war always has unexpected results, that need to be accepted by the soldiers. To do their best and accept the result of their efforts is an important requirement for soldiers.

When it comes to emotional strength, a soldier has to make decisions, which impacts them throughout their life. The choice to not participate in war but watch his comrades being injured or the choice to participate in war and accept the consequences of war, which last throughout their lives are the only choices thrown at them to choose from. In the poem 'John Brown', John Brown tells his mother that war isn't as easy as any other profession. It doesn't only include training and skill development but also requires toughness to fight against people similar to him, people who have left their families to protect their nation.

"But the thing that scared me the most was
When my enemy came close
And I saw that his face looked just like mine."

The lines above show the biggest decision every soldier has to face. They have to decide whether to kill someone so similar to them or protect their country by killing them. Soldiers realise that the war is just a battle between two ideas and people are in no way related to the wars they fight. Soldiers have to face the obstacles, kill people who are no less than their own brothers.

3. Is war as honourable as it sounds? Write your opinions based on this topic with reference to the poem 'John Brown'.

- war is like an illusion
- losses in war
- damage to people and the environment
- perspectives of war
- consequences of participating in wars

Answer: One could say that war is like an illusion. The idea of participating in war often is considered being patriotic and loyal towards the country. It is the most honourable duty a person could ever do for their country.

To people, participating in wars for the protection and reputation of their country sounds honourable but the reality is that war is all about losses. No matter which side wins or loses, there will be losses and families destroyed on both sides. To participate in wars, youth resolve to sacrifice their family, their freedom and their future and decide to live with hardship.

A war isn't as ideal as it sounds. Wars are waged because of rivalry between people and their ideas and have no relationship with the soldiers who participate on the battlefield. A war involves the use of weapons- both nuclear and nonnuclear, which cause heavy damage to the environment and human lives. Wars initiate due to differences and disagreements between parties and contribute nothing to the citizens. A war, when is fought is the factor that severs relationships between people of different regions and has little hope to reinitiate good relationships.

Wars always have two or more perspectives. People consider that wars can be either won or lost, but the fact remains there is a major loss on both sides and damage to nature. In the poem, John Brown's mother considered that it was an honour for her son to participate in war because of the medals he would soon bring. However, to John Brown, it was a battle he had to fight against himself. John Brown realized the plight of participating in the war. He fell victim to the opponent's weapons but worse of all, he was harmed emotionally. He realized that winning medals was much easier than fighting with people who were just the same as him.

A war, no matter how much honour and prestige it brings to a country, it crushes the dreams of many and scars them for life.