

## Quenchless Propensity for Masculinity: A Textual Analysis of David Rabe's *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*

نزعة لا تطفأ للرجولة: تحليل نصي لمسرحية ديفيد راب (التدريب الأساسي لبافلو هاميل)

Prof. Dr. Hamid Hammad Abed

College of Education for Women/ University Of Anbar

[hamed.abed@uoanbar.edu.iq](mailto:hamed.abed@uoanbar.edu.iq)

أ.د. حامد حمد عبيد

كلية التربية للبنات/ جامعة الانبار

Received: 09/07/2021

Accepted: 07/08/2021

Published: 30/9/2021

**Doi: 10.37654/aujll.2021.171143**

### Abstract

David Rabe (1940- ) is one of the most prominent American playwrights who frequently tackles the socially serious issues. Consequently, this study will focus on analyzing the protagonist's eagerness for attaining the sense of masculinity. Rabe has confirmed the impossibility of achieving an ideal masculinity via enthusiastic delusion. In *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, Rabe has investigated what threatens and spoils the ethical texture of the American Army specially in wartime. His portrayal of war carries a satisfactory interpretation since it mirrors his own military life during Vietnam War. This play looks great not purely because of Rabe's employment of a realist technique, but in urging the spectators to be familiar with the quenchless propensity of his protagonist. The significance of this study lies in its textual analysis of the title's character, who fails to understand the warnings and orders of his commander during the period of the basic training.

**Key Words:** Rabe, Pavlo, masculinity, training, propensity.

نزعة لا تطفأ للرجولة: تحليل نصي لمسرحية ديفيد راب (التدريب الأساسي لبافلو هاميل)

المستخلص

يعتبر ديفيد راب (1940-) أحد أبرز الكتاب المسرحيين الأمريكيين الذين غالبًا ما يعالجون القضايا الاجتماعية الخطيرة. لذا ستركز هذه الدراسة على تحليل حماس البطل للوصول إلى الشعور الحقيقي

بالرجولة. أكد راب استحالة تحقيق الرجولة المثالية عبر الوهم الحماس. في مسرحية (التدريب الأساسي لبافلوا هاميل) يتحرى (راب) عن ما يهدد ويفسد النسيج الأخلاقي للجيش الأمريكي خاصة في زمن الحرب. حيث أن تصويره للحرب يحمل تفسيراً مرضياً لأنه يعكس حياته العسكرية خلال حرب فيتنام. وقد تبدو هذه المسرحية رائعة ليس فقط بسبب توظيف راب لأسلوبه الواقعي ، ولكن لحته المشاهدين على التعرف على النزعة التي لا تُخمد للشخصية الرئيسية في هذه المسرحية. إن أهمية هذه الدراسة تكمن في تحليلها النصي لشخصية العنوان ، الذي فشل في فهم تحذيرات وأوامر قائده خلال فترة التدريب الأساسي.

### David Rabe : A Man and Playwright

Among the American playwrights who have depicted the horrific threat of Vietnam War, David Rabe (1940) remains one of the best portrayers who have exposed it in a distinctive style. He widely succeeds in creating the image of unaided soldier that resonates with the meaning for all viewers and critics. As a great American playwright, Rabe makes renowned achievements to “the dramatic literature of Vietnam during the period 1970-75”(Beidler,112). He is highly valued for enriching the American theatre with his realist visions as he reflects his own personal experiences that he has witnessed. Rabe is concerned with writing about his experiences at the time of joining army in Vietnam. A lot of earlier hard works with the intention of tackling Vietnam War, were ineffective to scrutinize the practice of the characters who fought for the sake of their country. These attempts were prepared to motivate the viewers against the entire conflict that might hasten the destruction and chaos for nations. Expecting the dangerous consequences, the American people are unsatisfied with the escalation of war against the Vietnamese nation.

The American playwrights are somehow late in warning people against war, “Vietnam was not even raised in American theatres until 1971, some six years after the escalation of conflict, three years after the peak of American involvement, and well after public opinion had turned against the war.”(Fenn,87). In some way, the American dramatists find their writings superior and more distinguished from what is fashioned by other writers. As a part of his community “the playwright in America must be free to base his play upon a study of the great universal passions, love, hate, jealousy, fear,

and doubt, or upon the universal sentiments of pity, terror, and sympathy.”(Quinn,655). According to modern American playwrights of the modern era, freedom alone, is not considered the most satisfactory motive. They intend to defend the rights of the human beings, which emerge to be the subjects for their dramas. Rabe’s plays are serious in their tone and meaning to the extent that they sting the audience’s thinking and emotions. For his dramatic depiction of the war crisis, many times, Rabe is awarded as one of the prominent American playwrights. His descriptions of war come as a result of Rabe’s serving in the medical unit of the US Army during the Vietnam War. Consequently, his plays become valid and honest since they reflect his own experiences of military life. Rabe’s innermost purpose “as a playwright is to dramatize the disturbing experiences which made up an important part of the American scene in the 60's and the 70's.”(Hughes,132). He is an eye witness to war and thus by means of writing plays he is bearing observation to what happens there. For not only Rabe, drama is more useful than history in presenting truth. It is regarded as a factory of social, political, psychological, and religious matters.

In essence, Rabe was brought up to breathe the spirit of America. He was “an Iowa native, he attended Loras College and pursued his graduate studies at Villanova University following his return from his service as a medic in Vietnam from 1966-1967.”(Atler,132). Like all highly regarded dramatists, Rabe is concerned with exposing the reality of the humankind despite the consequences. Rabe’s plays are not mere dramatization of the soldiers’ crisis, they are designed as mirrors to reflect the miserable conditions of the civilian people during the wartime. The soldiers expect to be valued and respected when they return home from war, but they are considered as perpetrators.

### ***The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel (1971).***

Written and set during the Vietnam War, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* is one of the remarkable plays of war. Its main concern is the dilemma of a young individual who is longing to be known as a true man. This play is presented in the form of two-act play, the earliest one of the

trilogy portrayed Rabe's familiarity with the war and its aftermath. In fact, it is "a play that also comes, in part, out of Rabe's own bafflement at the American response to Vietnam." (Biggsby,262). It focuses upon Pavlo Hummel who has joined the American forces through their attack to occupy Vietnam. Pavlo has received the idea of recruiting as a relief from his isolation. He aspires to find meaning for the task he is named to, but he is disappointed because most of his comrades do not support and encourage him. Despite his efforts to be a militant and acceptable man among his friends, he is seen as " a fool, almost crackers, an amalgam of the innocent vices and stupid virtues of the universal unknown Government Inductees. He's good-natured and atrocious." (Clurman, 733). The thirst for masculinity is the basic stimulation that crystallizes Pavlo's imaginative reading of his future. It is necessary to perceive that masculinity confirms the manners, social responsibility, and relations of men within their own society.

Rabe creates a vivid picture about such wretchedly young citizen who for the first time experiences the fundamental military training to alleviate his agonizing alienation. Pavlo is viewed going through his principal training, which adds nothing to his personality. Nevertheless, he after all builds within himself a type of warrior, and in Vietnam, he breathes death before capturing the true meaning of masculinity. In reading literature one can perceive a fact that masculinity is made more than born. Despite his attempts to attain the actual sense of splendid man, he makes less progress since he has been a slave of his sexual desires. Pavlo has no confidential scheme of ethics to cope with the trainees. In this play, Rabe shows the collapse of the person and a psychological disintegration, estrangement, loneliness, inner conflict and a loss of self-indulgence. In this context, Christopher Biggsby confirms that "loss seems a central theme, as if something had disappeared from America long before the Vietnam War: some cohesiveness, some sense of meaning beyond self-gratification."(260). As a result, the American soldiers are lost to the degree they offer less support to their families.

Rabe's play reflects his private experience in Vietnam War. Like Rabe, Pavlo is appointed a medic after carrying out fundamental preparation. Pavlo is framed and outlined by Rabe's actual understanding of stiffness in the military organization. Captain has explained to Pavlo the importance of being medic:

CAPTAIN. Don't you think what you're doing here is important? You helped out with poor Brisbey, didn't you?

PAVLO. Yes, Sir.

CAPTAIN. That's my point Hummel. There are people alive who would be dead if you hadn't done your job. Those invalids you care for, you feed them when they can't, you help them urinate, defecate, simple personal things they can't do for themselves but would die without....

Pavlo. Yes, sir... more or less. But i ... just...think I'd be better off in squad duty(74).

Rabe accentuates that Sergeant Brisbey needs Pavlo's care since he is with one arm and everything amputated below the waist. Simultaneously, Pavlo's concern is only the whorehouse. This will be an evidence for Pavlo's indifference and carelessness because he disregards the basic obligation of his task as a medic. Thus, the dream of obtaining the meaning of manhood and magnanimity cannot be intermingled with delusion.

Because he served in Vietnam, Rabe determined to write this play not for producing a political and military purpose but to explore the soldier's practice and reaction in wartime. To prove his objectivity, Rabe states that "I believe that to think a play can have an immediate, large-scale political effect is to overestimate vastly the power that plays have."(Rabe, xxv). The play is a real depiction of Pavlo's confidence in the masculine figure he has dreamed to live as long as possible. To achieve such desirable image, Pavlo should dominate his lust and depart the whorehouse. On the contrary he was seen quarrelling with one of his comrade for his relation with prostitute in Vietnam. Obsessed by their sexual desires, they forget their military task:

PAVLO. Shut up? (*His hand is twisting her hair*) I don't know who you think this bitch is, Sarge, but I'm gonna fuck her whoever she is. I'm gonna take her in behind those curtains and I'm gonna fuck her right side up and then maybe I'm gonna turn her over, get her in her asshole, you understand me? You don't like it you best come in and pull me off (89).

His vulgarity and rudeness confirm that he is not correctly prepared to be a rational soldier. On the contrary, Pavlo is found with a prostitute called Yen,

talking about his imaginative heroic ability. All through his stay in the brothel, the atmosphere has been changed when someone throws a grenade inside the whorehouse. It explodes in his hand when he tries to throw it out the window. He assures in his speech “sure...that grenade come flying, I caught it, held it.”(8). In this attempt, Pavlo wants to assert for the prostitute that he is a brave militant and acts as a professional soldier.

In spite of Pavlo’s dishonest acts, “it was not the enemy who threw the grenade but a fellow American soldier annoyed because Hummel had interfered with his seduction of a local prostitute.” (Abootson,247). Unfortunately, he is fatally injured and died. In this respect Annette J. Saddik comments that “Even his death, the ultimate experience of the body, is presented as unstable and impermanent, failing to end the chaos and bring meaning.”(180-81). To some degree, Rabe intends to display that the U.S. Army is bare of supreme fame, and American nation deny the criminal acts against the Vietnamese people. It is highly important that “the bodies of only a tiny fraction of those who died in Vietnam had not been recovered.” (Karnow,54). The war’s casualties are massive of the two fighting parties.

The play may disclose that the period Pavlo has spent in Vietnam is not devoid of difficulties and troubles, but they are diluted by his alter ego, Ardell. Rabe utilizes Ardell’s dialogue to reveal Pavlo’s disturbed psyche. Actually Pavlo creates his imaginative world and gradually trusts it. He has mixed fancy with reality till he fashions “a black soldier named Ardell, who is a projection of his inner and wiser self. Ardell helps Hummel to better understand why he has turned out as he has and confront the true human suffering and death faced by both sides in Vietnam.” (Abbotson,248). The troubled character has emulated another character to serve as cathartic resilience.

Despite his ceaseless efforts to be a practical soldier during his basic training, Pavlo is judged by his comrades like a fool, and has been secluded by the sergeant, Tower. Consequently, Pavlo’s strange manners bring about a terrible situation to the degree that he is severely mocked and criticized by many soldiers. Richard Gray has argued that David Rabe is one of the best American playwrights who has specified three of his plays to describe the brutal consequences of the Vietnam conflict. His three plays, *The Basic*

*Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1971), *Sticks and Bones* (1971) and *Streamers* (1976) are dedicated to expose the war cruelty and simultaneously to examine how some individuals have joined army to quench their appetites of manhood. These plays are rendering the devastating impact of war, “on the individual and on the national psyche, in different way. *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* describes the transformation of a sad, helpless young man into a soldier and then into a dead body.”(Gray,719). Pavlo’s comrades never trust him, and they realize that he is not serious in his training since he is busy with his sexual motives. Not only Pavlo is highly motivated by sexual desire , most of the American soldiers are implicitly fighting for the same emotional purpose. Though he at last realizes the reality of his own dehumanized position, it is wretchedly in his fading power, “and there is nothing he can do with this glory to save himself or others.” (Abbotson,248).

Talking about his thefts, vulgarity and sexuality, and false heroism has made a profound gap that separates him from his colleagues. He says to his comrade, Kress “You never steal a car Kress? You know how many cars I stole?”(18). Instead of a precise examination of his words before uttering them, he is driven by his vulgarity to talk randomly without caring for the consequences. Subsequently, Pavlo has been badly treated by the trainees and he is charged with stealing their wallets. Passively he defends himself against his comrades’ allegations. In contrast he has been isolated, though he explains to them that he steals only from his enemies. Pavlo is a failure even in his familial ties with his mother since the days of childhood. Hence, his unpleasant connection with his mother echoes as a reason for his recruitment. Because of his frequent dispute with her, he willingly joined the military during Vietnam conflict, realizing that he should confirm his manhood to his mother. Secretly, he outlines a vision that the army will frame his personality with positive features of masculinity and magnanimity. He has talked with Tower to know if he is right :

And I was wondering also, Sergeant Tower, and wanted to ask you -- when I was leaving home, my mother wanted to come along to the train station, but I lied to her about the time. She would have wanted to hug me right in front of everybody. She would have waved a handkerchief at the train. It would have been awful. She would have stood there, waving. Was I wrong?(23-4).

By neglecting his mother's attempt to accompany him to the train station, he is not confident that he has acted the manly procedure as a son who is not affected by the tie and passion of motherhood.

The idea of manhood never comes by mere imagination, but it is built and made with the passage of time through constant determination and strong will. In fact, this act shows his disordered personality. The father's abandonment or constant absence has strong impact on the son's conduct. He needs the father's care and monitoring to guide him and implant the seeds of masculinity and loyalty to his family. Once, Pavlo asks his mother about his original father, she tells him that he "had many fathers, many men, movie men, filmdom's great – all of them, those grand old men of yesteryear, they were your father" (62). Hearing such a shocking answer, divulges the fractured relation with his mother and the uncertainty of his origin.

Claiming masculinity, Pavlo aspires to be an active member in the U.S. Army. He declares "I was practicing D and D, Sergeant, to make me a good soldier"(22). His desire to fight others is shown through his dialogue with comrades as he believes that the honour of fighting cannot be obtained through his medic job but in joining infantry. Holding the grenade in his hand is a sort of suicide. Because he is worried about affirming manhood, he sacrifices himself to rescue his girl friend. All his dreams to gain an honourable social status are futile as "the play ends with Pavlo being placed into an aluminium coffin, his protests cut off when the lid is slammed and locked."(Krasner,431).

Furthermore, as a dreamer of masculinity, Pavlo seems hesitant about his future because of his disintegrated family. He always lacks the sense of maleness that might not equalize him with other men. Therefore he strives through his military basic training to obliterate his insufficiency and cowardice. However, the maltreatment of Tower creates a sense of incongruity, which disheartens Pavlo's enthusiasm to be good fighter. Not only Tower disturbs him, Hinkle, Kress, Pierce and other trainees, making comic story about how Pavlo, still lying in bed all the morning. In addition to his mother and father's miserable and complicated situations, the troubles and sarcasm that he faced in training camp extend the hopelessness of reconciliation with his comrades. Consequently, he prefers isolation rather

than gathering with his group. To reflect such disordered individual, Rabe has utilized a brilliant way in developing the theatre to express the intended purpose.

Concerning Rabe's exploitation of theatre, he believes that theatre is still unable to reproduce the actual rigidity and cruelty of war. In his introduction to *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, Rabe has emphasized his own experience in a time of war:

As a cathartic response to his own experiences serving in the conflict: "I have written them to diagnose, as best I can, certain phenomena that went on in and around me... Family, marriage, youth, and crime are all viewed as phenomena permanently a part of the eternal human pageant. I believe war to be an equally permanent part of that pageant." (Rabe, xxv).

The unachievable inspiration of manhood still dominates Pavlo's thinking and conduct to the extent that he has lost his life. He is ashamed of himself since he is unable to act like his comrades, therefore he feels inferior to them and becomes so sensible to consider any word directed to him as a kind of insult and humiliation. He is extremely provoked by Tower's description of the trainees who cannot control and use a bayonet properly. His dream of being a practical individual is darkened with Tower's emphasis that the soldiers have performed the role of a woman rather than a man. This type of deprecation has closed the way that Pavlo outlines to expand his familiarity with the basic training.

Admiring the bold American soldiers, Pavlo addresses himself to have strong heart, and turns to a killer. Thus, shooting a powerless Vietnamese farmer is the first crime he has done through his career in Army. Obviously, the certainty of fighting is so repulsive than the dignified orders of war on which Pavlo has been taught. The honour of attempt is the only thing that Pavlo has won throughout his period in military basic training. Nothing is recorded as a sign of success except the accelerating steps to his death. Although most of his comrades never appreciate or respect him, they demonstrate a compassionate, pathetic and rational manner toward him after his suicide endeavour. His irrational death generates signs of surprise and exclamations as he has lost himself at the hand of his comrade for trivial thing

away from a simple connotation of masculinity. The lack of a means of persuasion causes the incompatibility between the opposing individuals, so each becomes so convinced of his opinion and does not clearly realize the importance of adopting the suggestions of one another.

### Conclusion

In *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, Rabe attempts to convey his message that the individual's troubles of anxiety and difficulty of survival within his society urge him to look for ways of change to confirm his true belonging. Moreover, the playwright intends to substantiate throughout the predicament of Pavlo, how the American society has marginalized the propensities and chances of its male individuals. Though this play carries within its lines some political approaches, Rabe shifts attentions towards many of American soldiers' social and psychological troubles when they fight outside their native country. The U.S. Army's policy of 'how to kill' is portrayed as a detestable practice that most of the American people might deny. Because Soldiers become hopeless and helpless about their future, they rush to join the U.S Army believing that their enlistment may make available opportunities to insure acceptable living. Generally speaking, people prefer amusement rather than living the horrors and traumas of war.

Rabe has employed various procedures to allure his viewers into serious contemplation on the soldiers' lives when they fight for the sake of the wars makers. Intentionally, Rabe creates an actual image of the war that may most of the American people recognize its cruelty. In order to attain the highest evaluation of efficiency, Rabe shows his neutrality by granting his viewers and readers a free will in expressing their judgments and estimation. He is extremely sympathized with the innocent soldiers. Truthfully, Rabe realizes that through the stress of war, the soldiers are dreadfully dishonoured and insulted when they are led just like domestic cattle to be wood for battles. Because the title character is so obsessed with the idea of masculinity, he does not comprehend the real threat of war. Understanding the true meaning of manhood depends mainly on the mentality of the individual and his personal way of life.

Some of people believe that the idea of masculinity is only when a person is a strong fighter, while others believe that every sincere and noble act, whether in wartime or civil life, is the wonderful embodiment of

masculinity and magnanimity. For this reason, Pavlo's lack of awareness of this meaning increased the gap and tension between him and his companions during the period of basic training, and as a result he lost his life. Rabe intends to prove that waging war against other countries causing more casualties. In fact, the most important characteristics of masculinity apart from the condition of participating in wars, are undoubtedly the primacy of public interest over factional interest, self-denial, and advocating the right against falsehood regardless the consequences. Briefly, masculinity cannot coincide with betrayal, nor with treachery, nor with decadence, and inferiority in all its forms. Pavlo was duped over an illegal masculinity, especially when he mixed his ambitions with his sexual desires.

### References

1. Abbotson, C. W. (2003). *Thematic Guide to Modern Drama*. Greenwood Press. London.
2. Adler, N. (1996). *Vietnam Protest Theatre: The Television War on Stage*. Indiana University Press. Bloomington.
3. Beidler, Ph. (1982). *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*. University of Georgia Press. Athens.
4. Bigsby, C.W.E. (2004). *Contemporary American Playwrights*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.
5. Clurman, H. (1971). The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel. *Nation*. 7(1). 733.
6. Fenn, J. W. (1992). *Levitating the Pentagon: Evolutions in the American Theatre of the Vietnam Era*. University of Delaware Press. Newark.
7. Gray, Richard. (2004). *A History of American Literature*. Blackwell Publishing. Malden.
8. Hughes, C. (1976). *American Playwrights 1945-75*. Pitman Publishing. London.
9. Karnow, S. (2006). *Vietnam: A history*. Penguin Books. New York.
10. Krasner, D. (ed.). (2005). *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama*. Blackwell Publishing. Malden.
11. Quinn, H. (1923). Modern American Drama. *The English Journal*. 12(10). 653-662.

12. Rabe, D. (2002). *Plays: 1, The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel, Sticks and Bones, Streamers, The Orphan*. Methuen Publishing Limited. London.
13. Saddik, J. (2007). *Contemporary American Drama*. Edinburgh University Press. Edinburgh.