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LAST TIME IN THE 'STAN

SECTION F44

CPT WARREN

BY

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Webster's dictionary defines "habit" as "the prevailing disposition or character of a person's thoughts and feelings, mental makeup". In the short work, "Breaking the Habit", by SSG Andrew Belet, this theme of habitual routine is stressed. Throughout the story, Belet uses varying themes, parallelism, and rhetorical strategies to illustrate his struggle with smoking and the Marine Corps to his audience.

Within the story, Belet outlines two parallel tales: the first is the story of his youth and his ever-increasing addiction to nicotine and smoking;¹ the second is an account of his desire to quit while facing the stress of being in the war zone of Afghanistan. Belet's story begins in his early youth, about 14 years old. He mentions his girlfriend of the time, one of the motivating factors of his early experimentation with cigarettes. While spending time with his girlfriend one day, her best friend offers Belet a cigarette. Belet "wouldn't touch [cigarettes] again for another six years" (Belet 2). The rest of the story continues with flashbacks to Belet's youth, explaining his growing addiction to tobacco upon his 18th birthday, culminating with his induction into the stress of the Marine Corps. Belet's last flashback depicts himself as a young man uncertain of what dangers deployment will bring.² Belet is living in Hawaii with his wife, expecting a daughter to be born soon. He is nervous and frightened about his impending deployment³; something which wakes him up at night.

Belet sums up his last flashback with his fears, explaining just what glory and terror he expected on the field. The second half of Belet's narrative, interwoven between stories of his growing addiction, outlines his time in Afghanistan and his struggle to quit smoking. Belet's primary focus of his time in "the 'Stan" (3) is his dissatisfaction with his situation. When the reader first sees Belet in his deployment, he has just found out that his unit will be going home within the month. Belet spends a miserable Christmas with his platoon, morosely watching an

awkward staff sergeant hand out presents from the states. This underlying cynicism of Belet continues throughout New Year's Day, another holiday he has missed with his new daughter. By this time, however, Belet has cut down to one or two cigarettes a day, just in time to be informed that he, along with several others, would be traveling home within a few days. As a perfect parallel of leaving Afghanistan behind, Belet tosses aside his last pack of cigarettes to a buddy as he leaves for the airport.⁴

The theme of the story revolves around Belet's addiction to cigarettes and the parallel formed between this addiction and his time in the Marines. Belet's disdain for his own habit of smoking is matched by his disdain for his deployment; "This deployment certainly hasn't lived up to my expectations, and I'm bitter" (3). Belet is stuck in a pattern of smoking just as he is stuck in Afghanistan, and both make his life hell. It isn't until the end of the story that Belet finds the strength to quit smoking, incidentally, at the same time his deployment ends. Throughout the story, Belet seems to transform from a soldier who seems to have simply run across some hard times to a man who seems sarcastic, cynical, and perhaps even apathetic about his future; "Then... who the hell knows? Re-enlist? Go back to school? Get a job? Collect unemployment? My future's so bright, I almost have to wear shades. Almost" (13). Belet definitely seeks to speak to an older audience who has a basic understanding of sarcasm, as well as what war is. From Belet's perspective, it is better that the audience already hold a romanticized ideal of what war is, in order for Belet to crash their predetermined image. His day-in day-out monotonous routine is enough to make anyone dread deployment. Belet focuses on audiences who seek to discover just what is expected in deployment, as such, his stories appeal more to a military audience, while continuing to provide beneficial reading for civilians.

Belet primarily uses the effects of pathos in his writing to reach the reader with a sense of his message. He appeals to the reader's emotions to pity his situation in Afghanistan as well as his situation with smoking. The reader becomes attached to Belet's struggle and inevitably begins to applaud every effort Belet makes to quit. However, the pity of Belet's situation in Afghanistan soon shifts to an emotional realization of the no-glory lifestyle of war. Belet also uses ethos, but sparingly. Belet's credibility in this story is more a result of his simple act of being there⁵, not necessarily the product of a direct attempt of persuasion by Belet. Belet's placement of key phrases is the most evident rhetorical strategy in this story. Belet's flashbacks provide an obvious example of using word placement to build up the moral of his story. Belet smoothly shifts from scene to scene to illustrate to the reader his gradual transition into smoking, as well as his induction into the Marine Corps.

Belet leaves little room for revision and editing within his paper. This story is a great example of writing, and Belet crafts his tale very specifically, outlining his transition into and out of smoking and the Marine Corps. Belet's use of flashbacks and rewinds can sometimes cause confusion, however. While several transitions are well formed and the reader can clearly see the correlation, some others lack the necessary smooth transfer of thought, such as the first transition from the tale of Belet's first cigarette to the first scene in Afghanistan. (1) Throughout the story, Belet also sets a defined military backdrop to the setting, using terms like "OSB" (2), "AO" (3), and "Okie" (10). These terms add a flavor of realism to the story, however, in several instances, they are used in situations where the meaning is pertinent to the sentence; "I'm part of the... guys who show 1/3 (the final Marine Battalion in Afghanistan) around our AO" (3). Here, the reader is uncertain just what Belet's duty is, and references like these prove to be confusing. Finally, Belet focuses the majority of his detail on the flashbacks of his story, whereas the

primary focus of his writing is clearly based upon his time in Afghanistan. This imbalance of equivocation makes the story seem slightly lop-sided, and it is easy to confuse the focus of the story with Belet's youth. When speaking of his girlfriend's best friend, an relatively unrelated character, he goes into detail, describing her as a "another rough around the edges lass" (1) and as a "short, acne faced young [girl] who dressed in [a] denim [jacket] and reeked of Marlboro Reds" (1). However, when speaking of his time in Afghanistan, Belet speaks more of attitudes and actions rather than descriptive details; "All I want to do is bury my head in my sleeping bag and try not to picture the awesome Christmas that my family is surely enjoying. I want to forget missing my daughter's first Christmas" (8). In the first quote, Belet describes the physical and tangible attributes, in the second, he focuses on an appeal to emotion. Overall, Belet has crafted an excellent piece of work, one which captures his audience and concisely conveys his intended point; despite all the hell of Afghanistan, "something deep inside [Belet] WANTS to do another four years, WANTS to go to SOI, WANTS to teach the new Marines to be Grunts. Sadism? Masochism? No, just another bad habit, I reckon" (16).

Habits are formed so easily, yet they can be so difficult to break, no matter how determined the individual. Belet's valiant struggle against tobacco and the mundane routine of his deployment are a perfect example of such habits. Throughout the story, Belet uses rhetoric and parallelism to convey his intended point to the reader. This style of writing concisely illustrates Belet's dissatisfaction with the Marine Corps, and his fight of "breaking the habit."

¹ CDT Siegrist, B1, '12, assistance to the author, emailed suggestion, West Point, NY, 22 October, 2008. I was advised to change my sentence structure by CDT Siegrist.

² CDT Siegrist, B1, '12, assistance to the author, emailed suggestion, West Point, NY, 22 October, 2008. I was advised to change my sentence structure by CDT Siegrist.

³ CDT Kim, D4, '12, assistance to the author, emailed suggestion, West Point, NY, 23 October, 2008. I clarified my sentence based on CDT Kim's advice.

⁴ CDT Siegrist, B1, '12, CDT Zhang, E2, '12, assistance to the author, emailed suggestion, West Point, NY, 22 October, 2008. I revised my summary to include different aspects of two separate summaries I had previously created based upon advice by CDT Siegrist.

⁵ CDT Kim, D4, '12, assistance to the author, emailed suggestion, West Point, NY, 23 October, 2008. I clarified my meaning based on CDT Kim's advice.

Works Cited

Belet, Andrew. "Breaking the Habit."

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