

English Coursework Essay -
How does the presence of the Japanese soldier threaten the unity of
Sergeant Mitchem's men?

The play is set in the Malayan Jungle during the Japanese advance on Singapore in 1942. Seven British soldiers have different power due to the ranking hierarchy and they have different attitudes to one another. Sergeant Mitchem is the leader of the soldiers. He is a responsible and good leader which is evident due to him stopping many quarrels among his men and making decisions. For example, when Corporal Johnston and Private Bamforth are having an argument, Mitchem stops the argument by saying '*Right. Pack it in. Both of you*'. Next we have Corporal Johnstone, who is second in power to Sergeant Mitchem. It is obvious that Johnstone does not have the respect that Mitchem has. This is because Bamforth has many arguments with him and does not follow his orders efficiently. One example of a quarrel between the two is when Johnstone tells Bamforth to '*Get your pack on!*' Bamforth then responds saying '*you going to inspect us, corp.?*' The next highest in the hierarchy is L/Corporal Macleish. He is a Scotsman and has regular arguments with Bamforth. In one argument Bamforth called Macleish a 'Scotch Haggis'. Macleish responds telling Bamforth to 'Watch your mouth'. However this only encourages Bamforth to continue by saying 'Aw, come off it, son. Where I come from it's just a name'. Then we have the four Privates. Private Whitaker operates the radio and is very shy. However, at the near end of the play Whitaker shoots the Japanese soldier because he advanced on him. Private Evans is a Welshman and is just as pathetic as Whitaker. When Corporal Johnstone tells him to kill the prisoner as soon as he is captured using the bayonet of the gun, Evans steps back and says '*I.....I can't do it, Corp*'. Private Bamforth is the rebel of the group of soldiers. He is cowardly about war and racist about the enemy. For example, he calls the enemy '*the invading army of the rising sun*'. He is disrespectful and rude to some of the other soldiers in the play, even soldiers of a higher rank than him. He calls Corporal Johnstone a 'nit' and a 'Welsh Burk', he calls Macleish a 'Scotch Haggis' and he calls Evans a 'Taff'. Bamforth's attitudes to war are cowardly, he tells the patrol that if a war started near them he would be 'off like a whippet' and he tells them that he would 'get in a wog rowing boat'. Bamforth tries to demoralize the troops and an example of this is when he tells Evans that his girlfriend is probably up in the mountains with a big yank. He sings near the start of the play with lyrics that sum up his rebellious attitude and his sense of humour. Finally we have Private Smith, a minor part in the play but also an important one whose lines give us a summary of what is happening in the play. He attempts to break up arguments with Bamforth and other soldiers but they ignore him due to his low rank. Bamforth enjoys bullying people who can not stick up for themselves such as Private Whitaker. Thus, before the Japanese soldier is captured, we have a rather bad impression of Private Bamforth.

When Bamforth spotted the Japanese soldier he says '*He's lighting up a fag. Well, the crafty old Nip*'. This shows that Bamforth had a pre-determined attitude to any Japanese soldier which is why he used a racist word to describe him. When the Japanese soldier is captured, after Smith refuses to kill him with his bayonet, Bamforth offered to kill him himself by saying '*Here. Give me a hold. It's only the same as carving up a pig. Hold*

him still'. Johnstone also has a bad initial reaction of the Japanese soldier 'I've had enough of him – he stinks of garlic and wog grub'. Sergeant Mitchem also has a bad opinion of him, when the soldier does not understand English Mitchem says '*Trust me to cop a raving lunatic*'. Mitchem then tells the prisoner his rules '*Now get this, Tojo. Understand. You make so much as a mutter and I'll let Jack the Ripper have a go at you*'. Because Mitchem does not give the Japanese soldier a proper name, it dehumanises him so the soldiers will treat him as more of an object. Also by motioning to Bamforth with a bayonet, he threatened the soldier until he cringed, showing that he has no care for the soldier's feelings. Bamforth then scares the prisoner even more by making a gesture with the bayonet to the prisoner's throat. He then shouts 'boo' which shows that the soldier is more like a toy to him that can be manipulated than a human being. Macleish then comments on his physical appearance by saying '*he's not exactly what you'd call a handsome bloke*'. But Macleish actually has a sense of morality and criticises Johnstone for ordering men to put a bayonet in an unarmed prisoner. He defends him as a prisoner of war and reminds Johnstone of the Geneva Convention. When Bamforth is put in charge of watching the prisoner he first treats him like a circus animal and compares him to a pig. When he wanted him to put his hands on his head he says '*flingers on blonde*', and finds it funny that the prisoner obeys him. This shows that Bamforth likes to manipulate him for his amusement. He carries on doing this and exclaims that the prisoner '*dlops his fingers like a two-year-old*'. Johnstone then suggests that they kill him because he knows too much about the incompetence of the British soldiers. Mitchem agrees with this plan and says '*do you think I give a damn twopenny about his life?*' This indicates that Mitchem has no morality when it comes to prisoners of war.

When Bamforth finds the photos of the prisoner's wife and children he develops a new found respect for him. Bamforth begins to see that the enemy actually has feelings too. He finds out that the prisoner has children and compares him to Smith. It is easy for Bamforth to hate what is different and what he does not understand, but when he finds out that the prisoner is not different and he begins to understand him, he begins to like the prisoner. Bamforth says '*he's almost human this one is*'. This quote shows Bamforth acknowledging that the prisoner is not actually as bad as he previously thought. Bamforth starts to be friendly towards the prisoner. He gives the prisoner a cigarette, which Johnstone snatches away, initialising a conflict.

We begin to wonder whether giving the prisoner a cigarette was a friendly gesture, or one designed to wind up Johnstone. He may actually like the prisoner, or he may be using him as a tool to cause more hostility.

When the Japanese prisoner gives Macleish a cigarette, Johnstone mocks him for allowing the soldier to befriend him. Macleish then defends himself by saying that there is no harm in accepting a cigarette. But Johnstone continues to mock him and says '*you ought to go the whole way, lad. Turn native. You'll be eating your Connor from banana leaves next. I wouldn't trust his stinking wog tobacco*'. Johnstone then realises that the cigarettes are British Army issue and comes to the conclusion that '*he must have thieved them from the lads up country*'. Mitchem then reacts to this by saying '*if there's one thing gets my hump it's knocking off – it's looting*'. Macleish then suddenly turns against

the prisoner and motions to the cigarette saying *'I'll ram it down his rotten throat! I'll make him eat the rotten thing!'* Evans then says to Mitchem *'He wants a lesson, Serge. He ought to have a lesson taught to him'*. Macleish then shouts *'I'll kill him!'* The other soldiers notice his sudden change in attitude towards the prisoner and Mitchem says *'Will you? You swap sides quick'*. Due to the anger from the incident and racist hate towards the prisoner, Johnstone acts on impulse and slowly tears the prisoner photographs into pieces and drops them on the floor. When the prisoner starts forward, Macleish relieves his anger by striking the prisoner across the face. None of the soldiers question the morality of what they are doing even though they probably have photos of their own. When Bamforth arrives back on the scene and sees what had happened, he ridicules their actions and tells them that the cigarettes were his. *'You Scotch nit! You dim Scotch nit! I gave him them!'* Macleish then changes sides again and says *'How was I to know? I...I've told you, boy, I thought he'd knocked them off'*. Bamforth then helps them to realise how immoral they are by asking each one of them in turn if they want to kill the prisoner. *'Well, come on, Jock, finish off the job!'*, *'Smash his face for him!'* and *'What about you, Taff? You want to have a crack at him?'* The soldiers do not react showing that Bamforth has proven his point. Slowly but surely, the soldiers realise their mistakes and Evans offers to stick the pieces of the photo back together for the prisoner and give him back his wallet.

When the case is discovered in the Japanese prisoners possession that was not given to him by Bamforth, the soldiers turn against the soldier yet again and suspect him of looting. Evans says *'so he has been on the lifting lark? Half-inching from the boys up country'*. Bamforth whole-heartedly defends him and gives possibilities for the reason of the British cigarette case being in his possession. When all the possibilities are proven impossible and it is evident that the soldier did steal the case, Bamforth exposes the hypocrisy of the soldiers and turns on Private Whitaker who had looted off the Japanese himself. He says *'His locker's loaded with Jap loot. It's like a little Tokyo inside his locker'*. Whitaker claims that *'it's not a crime'* to be in possession of some Japanese loot. Bamforth responds by stating that the same is true of being in possession of English loot and the soldiers realise that they were wrong again. Eventually they return the case back to the Japanese soldier realising the morality of the fact that they are just as guilty as he is.

The end of the play is made up into a grand finale of the killing of the P.O.W and the death of all the soldiers except Johnstone who is captured. It was important for the prisoner to die, so we as an audience feel empathy for him and dislike for the British soldiers who we originally liked at the start of the play. Once the soldier is killed by Whitaker, he puts his face in his hands indicating regret of what he had done. Bamforth's final comment in the play's simplicity after Whitaker killed the prisoner accurately describes his discontent and disappointment of the actions of Whitaker. *'You've got the biggest souvenir of them all. You've done it this time, Whitaker'*. One would expect Bamforth to be in sorrow but he just had a solemn disappointment for the immorality of the soldiers.

Once all the soldiers have been killed by the Japanese, we face the one of the biggest ironies of the play. When Johnstone takes the white scarf from the Japanese P.O.W and lifts his white flag of surrender, we question ourselves whether the Japanese will treat the new English prisoner the same way that the English treated the Japanese prisoner. Do we even care anymore that if the English prisoner dies? After all, Johnstone treated the Japanese prisoner the worse out of all the other soldiers. We may even want him to be maltreated as a punishment for his previous mistakes.

In conclusion, I believe that this play is all about the different moralities of war, especially the treatment of prisoners of war. The play can be seen to describe the flaws of mankind just like George Orwell's *Animal Farm* but it can also be seen to display the true qualities of mankind such as Bamforth's defence of a stranger completely different to him except for a mutual understanding between them. How ironic that Bamforth, the rebellious soldier who we initially disliked at the beginning of the play, turned out to be the sole form of morality within the group of soldiers. Thus, we later learned to respect him and his defence of a person in a war situation who greatly needed it. However, how do we know whether the Japanese will not treat the English prisoner in the same way that we treated their prisoner. How interesting that Mitchem and Johnstone held back Bamforth from stopping Whitaker killing the prisoner. This means that even after all of Bamforth's efforts, they still wanted to have the prisoner killed. Eventually, the unity of Sergeant Mitchem's men is affected because they all turn against Private Bamforth and the soldier. If there was not the presence of the prisoner then the soldiers would operate in their usual way with Bamforth rebelling and not displaying any changes in his character.