

“Down to Gehenna or Up to the Throne”: Rudyard Kipling’s “The  
Winners” as the Key to Sam Mendes’ Film *1917*

In his recently published book *Wasteland: The Great War and the Origins of Modern Horror*, W. Scott Poole focuses on the impact of images and stories associated with World War I upon twentieth century Western culture (Poole 215, 254, 269). He pays particular attention to those generally small sections of earth, known as No-Man’s Land, that separated enemy trenches and that, by the war’s end, were littered with thousands of corpses, many badly disfigured. These unsettling images have continued to linger in the collective memory of the Western world, most notably in films set in a dystopian world that emerged during or after a global disaster (Poole 178). In fact, Poole observes that the nightmarish dimension of some of these images played a significant role in the emergence of a new kind of horror cinema in the 1920s and 1930s and found representation in the demonic creatures featured in several films, among them

Morneau's *Nosferatu*, James Whale's *Frankenstein*, and Lon Chaney's two films *The Wolfman* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (282, 573, 4161).

These haunting wasteland (1) images have continued to resurface in some relatively recent films. Notable among these are the *Mad Max* Movies, *The Dawn of the Dead*, *The Living Dead*, *Eli*, *The Road*, and most recently *A Quiet Place* and *1917*. Sam Mendes' *1917*, one of the most significant films of this group, was selected as the year's best dramatic film at the 2019 Golden Globe Awards. In brief, *1917* tells the story of two British Lance Corporals, Blake and Schofield, who are sent on a mission to northern France, specifically to the bombed-out city of Ecoust. They are told that, just southeast of Ecoust, they will find the Second Devons, two battalions of 1600 British troops, who have been ordered to attack the retreating German front line the next morning. According to the film, while the German army has apparently suffered a series of recent defeats, aerial photographs have revealed that their retreat to the Hindenburg Line (Whistler) is intended to lure the British into a trap to annihilate them with new and powerful weapons for which the allies have no match. (Solly, Whistler). Hoping to avoid a slaughter, head commander General Erinmore orders lance corporals Schofield and Blake (Blake's older brother serves as a captain with the Devons) to go to Ecoust, locate the Devons and give their commanding officer Colonel McIntosh

orders to call off next morning's attack. Just as the two corporals are ready to leave on their mission, the General turns to Blake and recites the final couplet from the first stanza of Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Winners":

Down to Gehenna or up to the Throne,  
He travels the fastest who travels alone. (2)

Kipling's poem is important, for its allusions to Gehenna and "the Throne" provide the key to Mendes' film.

### **1. Down to Gehenna**

Specifically, Gehenna, or the "Valley of Hinnom," is a small valley west and south of Jerusalem where the people of Judah and Israel cast their children into a furnace as living sacrifices intended to appease the demonic fire god Molech ("Gehenna"). According to Old Testament scripture, whoever participated in such sacrifices violated a Mosaic law in which "God expressly forbade the Jews to do what was done in Egypt or in Canaan [:] 'You shall not give any of your children to devote them by fire to Moloch, and so profane the name of your God'" (Leviticus 18:21)" ("Gehenna. Eschatology"). In response to this transgression, God cursed valley of Gehenna and designated it "the valley of slaughter," where the corpses of thousands would provide food for predators (Jeremiah 7: 30-33). In

Mendes' film, the counterpart to the Valley of Gehenna, and by extension "the Valley of Slaughter," is the vast European wasteland, microcosms of which were those small, seemingly accursed patches of land that soldiers referred to as No Man's Land and on which millions of soldiers would lose their lives. The World War I counterparts to those who performed the ancient sacrifices were certainly those political and military leaders, like General Erinmore and Colonel MacIntosh, whose decisions to commit troops to combat contributed to the countless deaths suffered by the innocent young men who fought in World War I (James).

Just as importantly, in ancient times the term Gehenna was also used in reference to Hades, Hell or Purgatory ("Gehenna. Eschatology.") In some versions of the *New Jerusalem Bible*, Jesus uses the term "Gehenna" to refer to a place where the wicked are eternally punished for their transgressions against God. In the *Gospel of Mark*, for instance, Jesus warns, "It is better for you to enter into life maimed, than having two hands, to go to Gehenna into the fire that shall never be quenched (9:43). In the *Gospel of Matthew*, Jesus upbraids the Jewish rulers when he states, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, to make him twice as much a son of Gehenna as yourselves (23:15) (Stewart). (See also Matthew 10:28, Matthew 18:9, Mark 9:43, Luke 12:5, James 3:6.) Accordingly, within the

film itself, the lance corporals' journey to Ecoust becomes analogous to a trip into and through the Hell created by the leaders who were placed in charge of the war and who, like those who participated in child sacrifices to Molech, drew inspiration to commit millions of young men to battle may have come from the demonic dimension. (3)

Supportive of this analogy, film critic Phil De Semlyen observes that Mendes' film takes the viewer "into a subterranean realm below the German lines and [makes it] ...suddenly clear what Mendes has in mind: a quasi-horror movie where things go bump in the dark and light with equal frequency." Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian* reinforces De Semlyen's observation when he writes that Blake and Schofield, to fulfill their mission, must traverse a "post-apocalyptic landscape, a bad dream of broken tree stumps, mud lakes left by shell craters, dead bodies, [and] rats." Karl Vick of *The Times* astutely observes that the film's setting recalls "Hieronymus Bosch[s] 'Hellscapes.'"

In *1917*, the two corporals' journey through the "Hellscape" leading to Ecoust is filled with terrors. In fact, the terrors begin to materialize as soon as Blake and Schofield begin walking through (or descending into) the No-Man's-Land separating their own British soldiers from the German troops. Undoubtedly,

soldiers like Blake and Schofield who were familiar with these small patches of earth would most likely have been acquainted with some of the ghoulish horror stories associated with No-Man's-Land. (4) For instance, one particularly popular legend told of "scar-faced and fearless deserters banding together from nearly all sides... and living deep beneath the abandoned trenches and dugouts... [I]n... one version, the deserters emerged nightly as ghoulish beasts, to feast upon the dead and dying, waging epic battles over the choicest portions "(Deutch).

Accordingly, as they begin their journey, the two lance corporals are greeted by images that serve as symbolic confirmation that the world as they knew it has been turned upside down: the rotting, fly-infested carcasses of horses used in combat; a dead German soldier, possibly impaled on one of the iron posts supporting a makeshift barbwire fence; another dead soldier, possibly British, wrapped head-to-foot in barbwire; corpses—or parts of corpses—buried in the muddied craters created by shelling; a dead soldier's eyeless face protruding from a crater's walls of mud; another corpse though whose gaping chest wound Schofield accidentally thrusts his left hand in an effort to keep away the rats. In this case, these grotesque images become symbolic "embodiment[s]" of those demonic forces that help fuel this war. Certainly, they are "contradictory to...the natural, social, or personal worlds of which [lance corporals Blake and Schofield]

are a part [;] [these grotesque] images most often embody distortions, exaggerations, a fusion of incompatible parts in such a fashion that it confronts [them] as strange and disordered, as a world turned upside down....” (Wolfgang Kaiser quoted in Yates 2-3).

The terror intensifies as the corporals move into the larger wasteland beyond the small patch of the No-Man’s-Land separating their troops from the Germans. Foreshadowing the trap the Germans have prepared for the second Devons, Schofield is buried alive and temporarily loses his sight in an abandoned, underground German bunker after a giant rat sets off an explosion by touching an almost invisible tripwire. Now, Schofield must trust Blake’s directions as he leaps across an abandoned mine shaft widened by the explosion. The terror of this early part of the journey to Ecoust crescendos in a scene marking the corporals’ transition into an even darker dimension of a war, one in which opposing armies almost completely abandoned the “rules” of traditional military combat that, established by the Geneva Convention of 1864, were devised to protect civilians as well as wounded enemy soldiers and “curb the brutality of war by setting limits on the weapons and tactics that can be employed”(Lu).

For the two lance corporals, the transition into this horrifying dimension of World War I begins when a German fighter plane, shot out of the sky by two

British planes, crash-lands onto the barn next to which Blake and Scofield positioned themselves to watch the “dog fight” and nearly takes the two corporals with it. His clothing on fire (a possible visual allusion to Moloch), the German pilot screams, presumably for help, and Blake and Scofield respond by pulling him from the cockpit, dragging him away from his plane onto safe ground and smothering the fire. Indeed, Blake and Schofield’s reaction to the German pilot suggests that both corporals were likely influenced by a world view that not only emphasized the sanctity of human life but upheld the rules of war established by the Geneva Convention of 1864. In this scene, at the leading of Blake (the less experienced and more naïve of the two), the two corporals put aside the divisions and hostilities of war and observe what was once standard war protocol as they try to save the life of a wounded pilot. In fact, to help bring the German around, Schofield goes to the farm’s well and pumps into his helmet water intended for the pilot. In the process, he hears shouting behind him, and turns to see the wounded German pilot thrust a knife into Blake’s stomach. In immediate response, Schofield shoots the pilot dead, and Blake bleeds to death, cradled in Scofield’s arms.

In a somewhat ironic fulfillment of the clause “He who travels fastest travels alone,” Schofield must now hasten to find his own way to Ecoust and, beyond



that, to the regiment of British soldiers that the Germans intend to slaughter. Here the second meaning of “Gehenna” has some bearing. In fact, if the second part of the analogy based on the Kipling poem has any further significance—that for Jesus the term “Gehenna” was equivalent to Hell—then the viewer can assume that, in entering Ecoust, a skeletal city the ruins of which suggest a cemetery, Schofield has stepped into (or descended into) an earthly counterpart of Hell. Thus, as he crosses what is left of the iron bridge leading into Ecoust, he immediately finds himself the target of a sniper, whom he kills before going on his way. As Schofield moves on, the rapidly blinking sepia-tinted black and white images, caused by the umbrella flairs that the Germans were using to illuminate the presence of allied troops, create the impression that he is walking through a nightmare and reflect in Schofield a growing tension-verging-on-panic resulting from his rather sudden loss of contact with the world that he knew before he joined the army. The nightmare continues as he struggles to find his way through the backstreets of Ecoust, now quite literally a land of shadows (or a place of the dead) where he encounters German stragglers, dehumanized by the Great War, that emerge zombie-like out of the smoke from burning buildings and begin shooting at him. Indeed, the lights and shadows, combined with the stragglers, create an almost hallucinogenic effect, awaken something close to a desperation

(clearly etched into Schofield's face) and contribute to the emergence of Schofield's own darker side, which manifests itself in an act of self-preservation when, in one of Ecoist's abandoned buildings, he strangles to death a young German soldier, whose shouting threatens to give away their position. Finally, in perhaps the most horrifying and significant scene in his journey through Ecoist, Schofield stops behind what appears to be a cross and watches an enormous fire of apocalyptic proportions angrily devour some buildings that likely include the town's sixteenth century church, the scene a possible reminder of Jesus' promise to his disciples that the powers of Hell will never prevail against the Christian church (Matthew 16:18). Conversely, the scene may be intended as symbolic reflection of the disintegration of the traditional Judeo-Christian world view that had long occupied the center of European thought and that would continue to disintegrate following the end of the war. Indeed, the entire Ecoist experience suggests the activity of those demonic forces—the Apostle Paul refers to them as the “principalities and powers” of darkness (see Ephesians 6:10-20)—that were epitomized by the ancient fire god Molech.

### **III. “Up to the throne”**

However, Mendes' film stops short of presenting World War I as a nightmare that offers no hope of redemption, divine or otherwise. In fact, as Schofield is

trying to find his way out of Ecoust, he is temporarily given shelter and assistance by a French woman, who has lost her husband, who has in her care a baby girl not her own, and who nurses Schofield's wounds and begins to bring the corporal back to a sense of who he was before the war. In response, the kindness Schofield revealed as he held the dying Blake re-emerges as he gives the baby a canteen of the milk he found in the barn of the farmer on whose land Blake was killed and then recites for the infant Edward Lear's "The Jumblies" (5), a nonsense poem that Schofield probably shared with his own daughter and that may be intended to reveal his own indifference to a war with which he wanted nothing to do.

The scenes that follow his brief stay with the French woman suggest that Schofield's journey, particularly his escape from Ecoust, may even be determined by a providence that shapes his end. (6) Thus, after escaping Ecoust by jumping into a raging river (in which he nearly drowns), Schofield is carried by a floating log to shore where he must navigate through and around a pile of corpses. Beyond the shore, he finds the Devons sitting in a forest that has remained untouched by the war and listening to a soldier singing the nineteenth century spiritual "The Wayfaring Stranger."

I'm a poor wayfaring stranger

I'm travelin' through this world of woe

Yet there's no sickness, toil, nor danger

In that bright land to which I go

I'm going there to see my Father

I'm going there no more to roam

I'm only going over Jordan

I'm only going over home

I know the dark clouds will gather 'round me

I know my way is rough and steep

But golden fields lie just before me

Where God's redeemed shall ever sleep....

I want to wear a crown of glory,

When I get home to that bright land;

I want to sing salvation's story,

In concert with that blood-washed band,

I'm going there to meet my Saviour [sic],

To sing His praises forevermore;

I'm just a-going over Jordan,  
I'm just a-going over home.

The song is significant because it distinguishes between a visible “world of woe,” one that has been torn apart by the war, and an invisible world free of pain and suffering, where the soldiers who die in battle will meet God the father and Christ the Savior and be reunited with their mothers and fathers. The content of the song also feeds into the long-existing tension between the almost nihilistic view of World War I that has been adopted by several scholars, Poole among them, and the traditional religious perspective that informs the song.

In fact, it may be worth noting that the song is only the most obvious of the film’s allusions to a spiritual dimension that transcends a world given over to the suffering exacerbated World War I. For instance, earlier in the film, before the two lance corporals reach the command center where General Erinmore gives them their orders to reach Ecoust before daybreak, Blake mentions somewhat jokingly that before he joined the army to fight the Germans, he considered becoming a priest (The “priestly” side of Blake may have been evident in his eagerness to help the German pilot, who turns the tables on him and kills one of the men who saved him). Again, before Blake and Schofield leave the trenches and start their journey to Ecoust, one of their superiors recites a blessing for

them, an act that suggests belief in something beyond the natural. Even later, in a possibly fortuitous series of events, the raging river into which he plunges to escape the horrors of Ecoust carries him to a corpse-lined shore beyond which he finds the Second Devons not only listening to the lyrics of the old gospel song but doing so with an almost unearthly tranquility, one suggesting that these soldiers have a peace about the seeming inevitability that most will die in battle and spend eternity in heaven. And while Schofield, desperate to give Colonel MacKenzie orders to call off the attack, might be the beneficiary of good luck, his decision to get to the colonel—who believes that he has the Germans on the run and is willing to fight to the last man—by leaving the temporary safety of the trenches and risking his own life by running across the battlefield (where British soldiers are dropping left and right) has about it a sense of the heroic and the miraculous. In the tradition of heroes like Hercules, Orpheus, Theseus, Aeneas, Beowulf, and Jesus, Schofield has returned from a hellish underworld, in this film the ruins of Ecoust. And while Mendes himself claimed that the military commanders of the war would have perceived Schofield's heroics as "accidental," the viewer needs to bear in mind that Mendes may in fact be honoring his grandfather, who fought in the war and who, at one point, did undertake and complete a mission that put his own life at risk (Scott, Noveck, Waxman)

### III. Notes Toward a Tentative Conclusion

When all is said and done, the key to Mendes' film remains the last couplet of the first stanza of Kipling's poem "The Winners": "Down to Gehenna or up to the Throne;/ He travels fastest who travels alone." In fact, within the context of the film, the terms "Gehenna" and "Throne" can be taken as allusions to the two movements in Western culture that have long been opposed to each other and that implicitly reflect, within both the film and the larger Western culture in which the film was produced, an ongoing and unresolved tension between traditional religious belief and a movement that began with the Enlightenment's rejection of the practices and superstitions (Cassirer, d'Holbach) associated with religion and that has seemingly culminated, in the present, in a kind of nihilism that rejects most all of the claims of traditional religious thought. This tension, established by the allusion to Kipling's "The Winners" and the song "The Wayfaring Stranger," makes it difficult to find a final meaning in Mendes' *1917*, the "moral" of which therefore remains somewhat ambiguous and therefore open to interpretation.

However, this tension seems to have little bearing on the film's final scene, which reveals that Schofield seems, at least temporarily, to have moved beyond the horrors of World War I. In fact, in the film's final scene, as he sits under a tree and takes from his billfold pictures of his wife and daughter, Schofield tunes

out most everything around him. As he does so, the film comes back to where it began, with the camera's primary focus upon Schofield, certainly the counterpart to Mendes' grandfather, lying under a tree and likely dreaming not of the horrors of the war or of meeting God in paradise but of the only thing that truly matters to him: his family back home.



## END NOTES

1. One of the most helpful definitions of “wasteland” is offered by *Miriam Webster*: “an ugly often devastated or barely inhabitable place or area.”
2. Here is the full first stanza of Kipling’s poem “The Winners” (published in 1888):

What the moral? Who rides may read.  
 When the night is thick and the tracks are blind  
 A friend at a pinch is a friend, indeed,  
 But a fool to wait for the laggard behind.  
 Down to Gehenna or up to the Throne,  
 He travels the fastest who travels alone.

3. The term “demonic,” as the term applies to Mendes’ film, deserves some explanation. According to Irena Kuznetsova, “In the most general terms, [the demonic] can be identified with an irrational and mysterious force or energy that thinkers, artists, and theologians from antiquity to modern day have sought to comprehend and locate either within or outside of individuals, while personifying it in the figures of demons...or in demonic-like characters” (246). In more contemporary terms, the demonic consists of those dark and mysterious impulses that are buried in the subconscious

mind and that, in Mendes film, fuel the military leaders' decisions to commit more and troops to combat.

4. Horrific and ghoulish images associated with this wasteland, and specifically with the No Man's Land separating enemy trenches, began haunting Western society even before the war ended. According to historian David Deutch, several ghoulish tales "arose out of... real-life horrors" specifically generated by "No-Man's Land" but historically associated with the European wasteland on which the fighting of World War I cost the lives of millions of soldiers and civilians. Interestingly, these tales, filled with haunting images, particularly the one I describe below, suggest that these stretches of land, microcosms of the larger wasteland, had taken on a demonic dimension in the eyes of some. Again, according to Fran Brearton, "No Man's Land was a place with "[m]en drowning in shell-holes already filled with decaying flesh, wounded men, beyond help from behind the wire, dying over a number of days, their cries audible, and often unbearable to those in the trenches; sappers buried alive beneath its surface."
5. This is the opening stanza of Edward Lear's poem "The Jumblies" (published in 1872):

They went to sea in a Sieve, they did,  
 In a Sieve they went to sea:  
 In spite of all their friends could say,  
 On a winter's morn, on a stormy day,  
 In a Sieve they went to sea!  
 And when the Sieve turned round and round,  
 And every one cried, 'You'll all be drowned!'

They called aloud, 'Our Sieve ain't big,  
 But we don't care a button! we don't care a fig!  
 In a Sieve we'll go to sea!'

Far and few, far and few,  
 Are the lands where the Jumblies live;  
 Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,  
 And they went to sea in a Sieve....

(6) The allusion is to Shakespeare's Hamlet, who in a conversation with his best friend Horatio concludes that the upcoming duel with Denmark's King Claudius—or anything that seemed to determine his way—may be the result of Providence: "There's a Divinity that shapes our ends, /Rough-hew them how we will" (V, ii, 9-11, *Hamlet*).

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