
**Introduction**

**Legend:** The play is introduced by a short Vietnamese verse legend called "The Song of Trang Tu". It tells about the feelings of a husband whose wife died and who is reproached by his neighbours for not mourning enough. The husband says that if he were the first to die, his wife would remarry and his children would have to bear insults of a stranger. He concludes: "If I could restore the course of things by weeping, / My tears would flow for a thousand autumns without ceasing."

**Quote:** Follows a quote by the African-American boxer Sonny Liston: "Life a funny thing."

**Note:** The author's note specifies the characteristics of the protagonist. Pavlo Hummel has "a certain eagerness and wide-eyed spontaneity along with a ... complete inability to grasp the implications of what he does". He is lost but for a long time he has "no idea that he is lost". He is middle class but he "has romanticized the street-kid tough guy" which he wants to become. His behaviour resembles that of a "clinical neurotic". He never gains the "real insight". His "open eagerness" will be replaced by "toughness and cynicism... but he will learn only that he is lost, not how, why, or even where".

**Characters**

**Pavlo Hummel:** A young trainee in the military, later a medic in Vietnam, eventually a soldier. Considered by his fellow trainees weird and annoying, he is a frequent subject to victimization. He may not be stupid in the sense of intelligence, but he is completely incapable to see through his blunders in social intercourse.

**Ardell:** An African-American soldier in a strangely unreal uniform with black ribbons and medals, wearing sunglasses. A mysterious character who keeps on appearing throughout the play but is seen by none of the characters except for Pavlo. He addresses Pavlo with great insight into his feelings, tries to influence his behaviour and explain to him what is going on around him, but Pavlo mostly stubbornly continues acting in his own way.

**Sergeant Tower:** A large African-American army sergeant who drills the trainees from the drill sergeant's tower. Accordingly, his Christian name is Sergeant, his surname is Tower.

**Kress:** Pavlo's unsuccessful fellow trainee and his greatest enemy.

**Pierce:** Pavlo's fellow trainee and his squad leader.

**Mickey:** Pavlo's half-brother.

**Mrs. Hummel:** Pavlo and Mickey's mother. Mentally afflicted.

**Sergeant Brisbeý:** A middle-aged army sergeant, spent seventeen years in service. Lost both his legs and one arm by stepping on a mine.

**Yen:** A young and pretty Vietnamese prostitute. Pavlo's favourite.

**Setting**

Set in the United States Army, 1965 - 1967. The stage is divided into several sections. There is the drill sergeant's tower and the training ground; the barracks interior with some army cots; a lowered pit with a furnace; and a bar.

**Act One**

**Death:** An improvised bar in Pleiku, Vietnam. Pavlo sits in the bar. He is drunk and boasts with his toughness. A hand flashes between the curtains and a grenade is thrown in the bar. Pavlo picks it up and has it in his lap when the explosion comes. Lights go black. The stage is littered with corpses. Ardell appears and orders Pavlo to get up. Pavlo is dead but he obeys. Pavlo dutifully answers Ardell's questions, identifying himself, giving the name of his leader, etc. Pavlo explains that he wanted to throw the grenade, as if he were the great softball player whom he saw playing as a boy.

**Training:** Fort Gordon, Georgia. A whistle blows. A troop of soldier trainees quickly gather at the training ground. Pavlo runs to find his place among them. Sergeant Tower, shouting from the drill sergeant's tower, introduces himself and begins with the instruction. It involves mostly humiliation, loud chorus answers, and repetition of primitive military songs. Pavlo is pointed out from the ranks and he steps forward without knowing what he has
done or what is expected from him. Sergeant Tower orders him to do a series of push-ups because he was not concentrated at the training. Pavlo obeys. It is the beginning of an eight-week military training.

**Furnace Room:** Two of Pavlo's fellow trainees, Kress and Parker, are hiding themselves in the furnace room. They laugh at Pavlo's stupidity. Pavlo volunteered to be a fireman, supposedly thinking about the fire engine, but in fact he was entrusted with the extra duty of looking after the furnace. Meanwhile Pavlo is out doing push-ups again for being caught prowling in the company area. Pavlo joins Pierce and they retire to the furnace room. Pavlo constantly inquires when the gas chamber instruction is on schedule. He fears this part of the training because he had an uncle who was executed in San Quentin State Prison, California, for killing four people in a fight in a bar. Pavlo boasts with having stolen more than twenty cars. When alone with Pierce, he admits that he made the stories up. He tries to make Pierce practice with him his General Orders:

- **Pavlo:** "Just to practise, Pierce. I just wanna practise."
- **Pierce:** "You don't wanna practice shit. You just wanna stand there and have me pat your goddamned head for bein' a good boy. Don't you know we stood here laughin' at you lyin' outa your ass? Don't you have any pride, man?"
- **Pavlo:** "I got pride. And anyway, they didn't know I was lyin'."

**Individual Initiative:** Pavlo does not respond to the whistle, which is the signal for the trainees to create formation, and he remains alone in the furnace room. Ardell gives him orders and Pavlo clumsily tries to practice them. Sergeant Tower enters in search for Pavlo. Pavlo explains that he was practising out of his individual initiative in order to become a good soldier. Then he continues to ask Sergeant Tower how many push-ups he can do, so that he could adopt his example. Sergeant Tower stares at Pavlo incredulously. Sergeant leaves and Ardell drifts towards Pavlo. He starts instructing Pavlo in Chemical, Biological, and Radiological Warfare:

- **Pavlo:** (Choking.) "But I'm too beautiful to die." (Rummages about in the furnace room.)
- **Ardell:** (Throwing a mask to him.) "But you the only one who believe that, Pavlo."

**Mistreatment:** Kress, Parker, and other trainees have been waiting for Pavlo in the barracks. They grab him, take a banknote from his pocket, and accuse him of stealing. There is no evidence in the play either for or against Pavlo being a thief. Pavlo weakly defends himself against the accusation:

- **Pavlo:** "I was just testin' you, Hinkle, to see how stupid you were leavin' your billfold layin' out like that when somebody's been stealin' right in our own platoon. What kinda army is this anyway, you're supposed to trust people with your life, you can't even trust 'em not to steal your money."

Kress occupies Pavlo's bed and refuses to leave it. At the same time he will not have Pavlo sleep in his original bed, telling him to sleep on the floor or to stay up. Later, when the trainees undertake a five-mile run, Kress is exhausted and irritated at Pavlo, who starts doing push-ups as if out of habit:

- **Kress:** "Oh, Hummel, no. Hummel, please. Hummel, you're crazy. You really are. He really is, Parker. Look at him. I hate crazy people. I hate 'em. YOU ARE REALLY CRAZY, HUMMEL. STOP IT OR I'LL KILL YOU."

**Soldier Stories:** Pavlo is ordered to clean the dayroom where a corporal and another soldier play the game of pool. They benevolently let Pavlo join them and are surprised at his genuine interest in and knowledge of the Vietnam military operations. The corporal amazes Pavlo with a story of his squad leader, one Sergeant Tilden, who shot an old man and a young girl, seemingly Vietnamese civilians, because he suspected they had dynamite on them. Pavlo loses the pool game and gives the men the money they won on him. Pavlo believes that Sergeant Tilden saved the lives of American soldiers and adopts him as his example of a hero. Pavlo intends to become a model soldier himself, he is going to wear his uniform all the time when at home and imagines his mother being proud of him.

**Confrontation with Pierce:** When Pavlo enters the barracks, a blanket is thrown over him, he is called thief and beaten and kicked. Pavlo is unable to defend himself and responds to the situation in a very inappropriate way: "Didn't I do enough push-ups? How many do you have to do, Ardell?" Pierce wonders what he could do about
Pavlo from the position of a squad leader who is supposed to keep order in his team. He does not join the mistreatment of Pavlo but he cannot come to terms with Pavlo's character either. On this Pavlo tells Pierce that he changed his name from Michael so as to take distance from his father. He believes that one day his father will come to apologize for having left him. Ardell concludes the dialogue, addressing Pavlo:

Ardell: "Sometimes I look at you, I don't know what I think I'm seein', but it sooo simple. You black on the inside. In there where you live, you that awful hurtin' black so you can't see yourself no way. Not up or down or in or out."

Confrontation with Kress: The eight-week training is at end. Kress and Burns fail the tests and must stay for another eight weeks. Kress gets furious and thinks he will kill himself. Pavlo, who passes, tells Kress that he is sorry for his failure in a very clumsy way. Kress throws him to the floor and blames him for having passed the tests by cheating. Pierce saves Pavlo from further assault but keeps on wondering about Pavlo's incapacity for proper behaviour: "You gotta learn to think, Hummel. You gotta start puttin' two and two together so they fit." Then Pierce gives Pavlo up:

Pierce: "You're happy as a pig in shit, I don't know why I keep thinkin' you ain't."
Pavlo: "I am not."
Pierce: "Up to your eyeballs!"
Pavlo: "I'm gonna kill myself, Pierce!" (It bursts out of him.)
Pierce: "If you weren't in my squad, I'd spit in your face..."

Suicide: Pavlo remains alone in the barracks. He yells after the fellow trainees, who are leaving him behind, that he hates them all. Pavlo still thinks of Sergeant Tilden and wishes to have such a gift to see through people as Tilden showed when shooting the suspicious Vietnamese civilians. Ardell shows understanding for Pavlo's confusion and promises that he will soon learn more, however, he implies that the knowledge will not be pleasant:

Ardell: "I know. I know. All you life like a river and there's no water all around---this emptiness---you gotta fill it. Gotta get water. You dive, man, you dive off a stone wall into the Hudson River waitin' down dark under you. For a second it's all air... so free... Do you know the distance you got to fall? You think you goin' up. Don't nobody fall up, man. Nobody."

Pavlo swallows the contents of a whole bottle of pills, some one hundred aspirins, and crawls on his bunk. Later he is discovered by others and there is a general confusion. Pierce is worried about having a suicide attempt in his squad. Kress wonders how comes that the army did not throw the weird Pavlo out. Ardell criticizes Pavlo and reproaches him as the other trainees unite in the attempt to resuscitate Pavlo: "You always think you signifyin' on everybody else, but all you doin' is showin' your own fool self." While Ardell is talking, Pavlo is being dressed in his uniform by the other soldiers. When his transformation is finished and Pavlo looks nice and neat in the military clothes, Ardell leads him to the top of the drill sergeant's tower:

Ardell: "OVER, BABY! Ardell can make you straight; you startin' ta look good now; you finish up, you gonna be the fattest rat, man, eatin' the finest cheese."

Act Two

Homecoming: Pavlo returns home to Connecticut after having finished his training. He confronts his half-brother Mickey, with whom they have the same mother. Pavlo is the younger brother, he was born after the death of Mickey's father. Their mother is apparently mentally afflicted, she is always dating and thinking herself pregnant. Mickey does not believe that Pavlo was to the military training. He thinks that Pavlo spent the last three months in the city, going to films, and that he just bought the uniform in some shop. Pavlo forgives Mickey an unspecified guilt and dismisses him, claiming he does not need any half-brother any more. Pavlo asserts that he now has real brothers and real friends who respect him:

Pavlo: "Look at me! I'm different! I'm different than I was! (This with fury.) I'm not the same anymore. I'm not an asshole anymore. I'm not an asshole anymore. (Silence as he stares in
I came here to forgive you. I don't need you anymore."

Mickey:  "You're a goddamn cartoon, you know that."

Pavlo:  (Rapidly, in a rush of words.) "I'm happier now than I ever was, I got people who respect me. Lots of 'em."

Women: Pavlo used to go out with one Joanna Sorrentino of whom he was really fond. Pavlo's mother spoiled the relationship by writing Joanna a letter in which she called her bad names. Pavlo thinks that Joanna probably killed herself on account of his absence but he learns that she is alive and married. Pavlo goes out to a bar and gets drunk. He fails to attract any girl despite wearing his uniform, quite the contrary to what he imagined:

Pavlo:  "Stupid fuckin' uniform. Miserable hunk a green shit. Don't we go to good bars---why don't you work for me? And there's this really neat girl there sayin' to me how do I like bein' a robot? How do I like bein' one in a hundred million robots all marchin' in a row? Don't anybody understand about uniforms? I ain't no robot. You gotta have braid... ribbons and patches all about what you did. I got nothin'. What's so complicated? I look like nothin' cause I done nothin'."

Pavlo cannot stop thinking of Joanna and he calls her. There is only her mother on the phone. Pavlo's mother appears and talks about her new job as a shop assistant. The son of her fellow worker was just killed in Vietnam. He joined to be a mechanic but he was transferred to infantry and killed. Infantry is where Pavlo himself wants to be placed. Pavlo demands from his mother to learn who his father was. His mother says that he had many fathers, meaning the heroes in the films that she pointed out to him. She claims she told him the name already:

Pavlo:  "You never told me."

Mrs. Hummel:  "I did. I whispered it in your ear. You were three. I whispered the whole thing in your ear!"

Pavlo:  "Lunatic!"

Mrs. Hummel:  "Nooooo!"

Pavlo:  "Insane, hideous person!"

Mrs. Hummel:  "I've got to go to bed now. I have to get my rest."

Field Hospital: August 1966. Pavlo leaves to Vietnam where he was assigned to a field hospital to serve as a medic. Pavlo takes care among others for Sergeant Brisbey, a man who lost both his legs and an arm by stepping on a mine. Sergeant Brisbey asks Pavlo to lend him his rifle, claiming that he likes to touch it, but in fact he is probably thinking of suicide. He is unable to reconcile with the loss of his limbs. Pavlo refuses the request. Sergeant Brisbey calls him cruel, comparing his cruelty to that of God:

Sgt. Brisbey:  “Do you know... if you were to get the rifle, Pavlo, I'd shoot you first. It's how you end up anyway.” ... “You've made me hate you.”

Pavlo:  “I'm sorry. I didn't mean that to happen.”

Sgt. Brisbey:  “No, no, you're not sorry. You're not. You're glad it's me, you're glad it's not you. God's always glad that way because it's never him, it's always somebody else. Except that once. The only time we was ever gonna get him, he tried to con us into thinkin' we oughta let him go. Make it somebody else again. But we got through all that shit he was talkin' and hung on and got him good----fucked him up good----nailed him up good... just once... for all the billion times he got us.”

Pavlo cannot come to terms with his being a medic rather than a soldier in the field. When he hears the sound of Sergeant Tower's whistle, on which the troops are coming into formation, he leaves the prostitute whom he is with, pulls up his trousers, and starts performing the drill together with the other soldiers.

Soldier Service: Pavlo asks Captain Miller to be transferred to field. Captain Miller reminds Pavlo of the usefulness of his service in the hospital but Pavlo insists on his wish. While they are talking, a soldier can be seen hit by
explosion. He cries for a medic but nobody comes to help him. Pavlo is eventually transferred:

**Captain:** “You want to get killed, don't you, Hummel?”

**Pavlo:** “No, Sir. No.”

**Captain:** “And they will kill you, Hummel, if they get the chance. Do you believe that? That you will die if shot, or hit with shrapnel, that your arm can disappear into shreds, or your leg vanish—do you believe that, Hummel? That you can and will, if hit hard enough, gag and vomit and die... be buried and rot—do you believe yourself capable of that?”

**Pavlo:** “Yes... Sir. I... do...”

Two Vietcong men emerge and cut the throat of the wounded soldier. Pavlo wants to carry the dead man away, though his fellow soldier discourages him. Pavlo starts liking the service, as he shows in his conversation with Ardell: “I'm diggin' it, man. Blowin' people away. Cuttin’em down. ... It ain't no big thing.” Pavlo is stabbed in his side by the enemy when he is carrying the dead body away. Pavlo recovers from his wound and willingly returns to service. Ardell points out to him that he could be released home if he asked for invalidation. Pavlo does not even consider it and Ardell wonders: “Like it's gonna make a difference in the world, man, what you do; and somethin' made bad's gonna be all right with this one more you're gonna kill.” Pavlo is wounded for the second time, his leg is hit by a shrapnel. The third time he is hit in his back by a bullet. After this he asks to be released but the officer says that it is impossible.

**Death:** Pavlo starts frequenting the local bar where prostitutes are available. Yen, a young Vietnamese girl, becomes his favourite. Sergeant Wall promises Yen to take her to America but Yen disbelieves him. Pavlo rudely asks Sergeant Wall to give up Yen for half an hour because she is the only girl he likes and he is in a hurry. Sergeant Wall does not want to give Yen up and there is a fight between the two. Pavlo kicks his opponent in the crotch and Sergeant Wall crawls in a corner. Pavlo starts boasting with his toughness. Sergeant Wall pulls the pin on his grenade and throws it. Pavlo has the grenade in his lap when it explodes. After four days Pavlo dies. Ardell appears and several men come to put Pavlo into his coffin. Ardell converses with Pavlo who does not comprehend that he is dead. Ardell sings the lines of soldier songs that were already heard several times throughout the play, and Pavlo repeats. Ardell slams the lid of the coffin, Pavlo's voice is no more heard. Ardell exits.