NORMAN ROCKWELL’S ‘THE WAR HERO’  
A NEW INTERPRETATION  
AND GRAPHIC ANALYSIS

CONCEIVED, DEVELOPED, AND WRITTEN BY  
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INTRODUCTION

_The War Hero_, by Norman Rockwell, is one of my favourite paintings; as with all Rockwell pieces, it is a backwards glance\(^1\) into an America I do not know. Nor could I have known it, without the timely assistance of HG Wells;\(^2\) I was born in 1964. _The War Hero_ was painted in 1945, and appeared in October of that year, on the cover of the _Saturday Evening Post_;\(^3\) it is not part of the _Willie Gillis_ series, which Rockwell had made popular during the war,\(^4\) and which were designed to lift the spirits of the country. This is a rather different work; it is a celebration, and a reminder, of all that we have endured, and overcome; the war is over.

My source material has come, primarily, from the Internet, and has been utilised here via the Fair Use Act; I have given credit for same, insofar as possible. It should be noted, however, for the purposes of this document, that my analyses and my interpretations are entirely my own; they are not the work of others, nor were they provided to me by others.

My interpretations have not been submitted to either a professional historian, art critic, or indeed to anyone connected to Norman Rockwell, the _Saturday Evening Post_; in all honesty, I shouldn’t know where to start.

I have stated that the analyses and interpretations presented herein are entirely the results of my own work, and my own efforts, and so, I must also state that any mistakes, glaring or otherwise, are also my own. I’m hardly perfect, although I certainly try my best; the reader’s gracious indulgence is humbly requested.

Finally, to answer the question which my friends, colleagues and acquaintances have asked, since I first began to buttonhole them with my enthusiasm, and bore them with my efforts, in the immortal words of Sir Edmund Hillary (who, in fact, once held me as a baby): “Because…it was there.”\(^5\)

Respectfully submitted,
Sanjay R Singhal, RA

11 November, 2015

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1 Wharton, Edith. _A Backward Glance_. New York, D Appleton & Company, 1934. One of my favourite books, by one of my favourite authors.


THE PAINTING

The War Hero (aka Homecoming Marine), by Norman Rockwell, 1945; this image was downloaded from the Internet, and is utilised here via the Fair Use Act.
Unusually for Rockwell (but, perhaps, not so much for myself), the subject is off-centre; it is a young, red- haired Marine, seated to the left, looking up at the faces of the men around him. It is similar, in some aspects, to his later painting Saying Grace; it is a man's world, and there are men in it.

The young man, whose portrait was based on a real Marine, looks tired; there are lines around his eyes, and his face is drawn. Certainly he is much thinner; one might call him gaunt. His eyes have a strange, haunted look; to paraphrase Edith Wharton, I am frightened to think what must have gone to the making of them. He cannot be very old; perhaps no more than twenty-five or twenty-six. He has probably been gone for at least four years (based on his service medals), and his enlistment photograph presents a much younger face; it is a face we do not know, or recognise.

The young Marine holds a battle flag; it is the ensign of the Imperial Japanese Navy. This, as well as the colour of his uniform (khaki cotton twill), tells us the Marine has seen some horrific fighting; he has been in the Pacific theatre. Perhaps he has only just come home, bearing his captured flag; Japan did not formally surrender until 2 September, 1945. Perhaps he fought on Iwo Jima, or on Okinawa; he has seen Death, he has looked it in the face.

Yes, he has looked upon Death, and has been courted by it, but he has also served, and gallantly; the Marine wears the Silver Star, the third-highest military decoration issued by the United States Armed Forces. It is awarded for valour, for gallantry in action against an enemy of the United States. It is of no small importance; it is an achievement of great merit, and recognition.

In the upper-right hand corner, we see a newspaper proudly pasted upon the masonry wall with his enlistment photograph; the Marine has served his country well. We see a Service Flag, and we suddenly realise why the Marine has come here, at first and, at last.

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The Service Flag, bearing a blue star on a white field, surmounted by a red border, was displayed by immediate family members (it is still in use, albeit somewhat modified) with a son, a brother, a husband, or a father in active duty. We see the Marine in this setting, and now, we comprehend its importance; for the young, war-hardened man, it is his home, and it is his family.

Yes, this is a garage; it is where men take their cars to be repaired, or looked over. It is not a woman's world; Eve has not made her appearance in this strange garden of steel and oil, chromium-plating and rubber. We see the figure of the man in the centre; he wears a mechanic's cap, and his gaze is fixed upon the Marine. Perhaps he is his older brother; perhaps he was not able to serve. Does he ponder, as he gazes upon his younger sibling, what strange places he has seen? Does he think of a colour of the sky that is different from his home, or of the shape of a girl in a bar, with a flower in her hair, with skin he has never touched? Does he feel the heat, rising up from the bamboo thickets, does he smell the surf, and hear the waves?

We cannot know; we cannot guess. Our hero has returned to his town and to his brother's garage, where he once worked, before the war. Perhaps he will take up his overalls and his cap again; they are hanging on the wall, where they have been proudly displayed since he went away. His name is Joe; we do not know his surname, and it is not important. What we do know is that he worked here, with his brother; his name is Joe.

There are boys in the garage this afternoon; perhaps they are Joe's nephews, for they bear a striking resemblance. One, slightly taller, stands next to his father. Today, he has taken one step closer to manhood, and although he himself may not realise it, his childhood has been left behind; he has seen the face of war, he has learned of its terrible finality. The other, slightly smaller, is seated next to his Uncle Joe; he looks at him intently, he is wondering to himself, who is this man? Is this really my Uncle Joe, who used to carry me piggy-back? He looks the same, but....

There are other men in the garage, their eyes are fixed upon Joe. In the foreground, with his back to our view, is a thin, old man; we do not see his face, but only the rim of his eyeglasses. He wears a soft cap, and I wonder who he is; perhaps he is Joe's father, and he, too, has come to the garage this afternoon, to hear his son's story, and to look upon him with new eyes. His son has been gone a long time; he has grown old, in the waiting.

There is another man in the background; we do not see him clearly. His hair is dark, and slicked back; his skin appears slightly olive-toned. Perhaps he is a refugee, possessed of some skill with motorcars and their maintenance; perhaps Joe's brother has given him employment. We do not know very much about him, but he, of all the men, stands the furthest away; perhaps he too is wondering what sights young Joe has seen, and what he has done, in the defence of his country.

I turn now to the final, older man, seated on the right-hand side of the painting; I have kept him for last, for he has become the most important to me, of all the men, for he is the proudest. We all know him; we have seen him before. He is the neighbour one sees in churches, and at civil ceremonies; we do not always know his name, but we know his face, and his position. His black, shiny cap denotes his trade; he is a driver. He has brought his vehicles here in the past, to be repaired; he knows the family, he is a pillar of the community. He has said prayers for him, and his country. His expression is one of pride, and rightfully so.

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16 One is reminded, perhaps, of Lieutenant Joe Cable, who was not so lucky and who did not return home. James A Michener. Tales of the South Pacific. New York: Macmillan; 1947.

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He is older than the others; he might be their father, or grandfather, but I do not think so. No, I think he may be a veteran of the Great War; he has fought his battles, he has looked upon Death.

The old man, beaming with pride, does not speak; there are no words he can say. Later, he will go up to the young Marine, and he will buy him a drink, perhaps a beer, or a whiskey. He will tell him that he also served, and came home, and took up his life once again; he will not tell the young man anything else.

There is no need to say anything else; the war is over. The faces of the dying men in the convoys, and the blood-stained fields of Leyte and Okinawa have faded into grey mist; they are behind us, now. There is only silence, in a moment held before us in a glass; the war is over, and in the garages and sheds and machine-shops across the country, the men have gathered to hear the stories of those who fought, and returned.

The war is over; we have taken our last look upon it, and now, we must move forward.
THE MEDALS AND THE SERVICE FLAG

The first image presents the Silver Star medal, with decoration colours as shown. This is the same medal worn by the young Marine in the painting, and, as his highest decoration, is worn on the left. The second image presents the Service Flag, with a single Blue Star denoting an immediately family member in active duty in the United States Armed Forces; it was first used in 1917, during the First World War.

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19 The image of the Silver Star is in the public domain, and has been downloaded from Wikipedia.com; it is utilised here via the Fair Use Act. Although I do not normally use or cite Wikipedia articles and/or images, this was the best version I could find.


21 The image of the Service Flag is in the public domain, and has been downloaded from Wikipedia.com; it is utilised here via the Fair Use Act. Although I do not normally use or cite Wikipedia articles and/or images, this was the best version I could find.

22 Ibid, Blue Star Mothers of America Author(s). About the Service Flag.
The other medals are, in descending order, the Purple Heart, the Distinguished Unit Citation, the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal, the Organised Marine Corps Reserve Medal, and the Marine Corps Good Conduct Medal. This Marine has seen hard fighting, and has been wounded; he has lived to tell about it.

25 I was unable to locate a suitable photograph of this medal, although I did find the decoration colours.
The ensign of the Imperial Japanese Navy, as used from 1889 to 1945. Notice the off-centre placement of the "rising sun" emblem, and its correspondence to the figure of the young Marine in the painting.

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29 The image of the Imperial Japanese Navy ensign is copied here under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License, Version 1.2 or any later version(s) published by the Free Software Foundation.

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Let us now examine the structure of *The War Hero*; we have finished, for the present, our examination of its soul. This is a contemplative piece; it is a centred arrangement. There are many factors which contribute to this unity of focus and direction; they are a hallmark of Rockwell's talent.

The young Marine, is seated slightly off centre, to the left. There are directional gazes from every other figure; Rockwell uses smaller objects, lines and shadows to direct our eye to him. Even the folds of the captured Japanese flag contribute to this arrangement, and it is an intentional one.

It is *tempting* to suggest that Rockwell's composition of *The War Hero* was influenced by the battle flag; it is the centre of the Marine's story, and he holds it in his hands. The draped, triangular folds of cloth and the bright bands of red correspond to *two other red objects in the garage*: the small American flag on the shelf in the upper left-hand corner, and the border of the Service Flag\(^{30}\) in the upper right-hand corner.

Our attention is focussed upon the clasped hands of the Marine, his brother, and the two boys; the eyes of the other men also direct our gaze. The hands of the father and the driver are not shown, but one may assume they are clasped as well, based on the position of their arms. The mechanic's arms are not clasped; he is not a member of the family, and this suggests that the driver...*may be the Marine's uncle*. Certainly the colour of their hair is similar; it is of some interest. If we look at their profiles, *they are mirrors of each other*; we perceive a balance of young and old, the aged warrior, gazing in pride upon his warrior nephew. His expression declares his emotion: he is *proud* of this boy.

This is a *family* of men; we are looking at them, but they do not see us. We see two fathers, in the foreground; they are the older generation. In the centre, we see two brothers: the eldest, who looks intently upon his younger brother, the Marine named Joe; they are flanked by the third set of brothers: two small boys, watching in amazement. The standing boy, Joe's nephew, has taken a step back; he is looking upon his uncle with new eyes, and new comprehensions; does he know of a place called Korea? Will he go there? Will he fight?\(^{31} 32\)

We do not know, of course; the year is still 1945, and some time will pass before the spectre of war will appear again. Perhaps the boy will go; perhaps he will become a soldier, and fight; he will carry his uncle's example before him, and in the green hills above Inchon, he will remember his uncle's medals, and he will understand.

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\(^{30}\) Ibid, Blue Star Mothers of America Author(s). *About the Service Flag*.


The War Hero (aka Homecoming Marine), by Norman Rockwell; 1945. This image was downloaded from the Internet, and is utilised here via the Fair Use Act. The right eye of young Joe, the Marine so recently returned from the Pacific theatre, is the focus of every other person in the garage; notice the arrangement of legs & arms which also direct our gaze. It is hard to look upon him, but one cannot look away.
Notice the use of slightly tilted parallel lines to arrange the figures, shifting the focus as our eye travels through the painting. The yellow lines are centred upon the Marine’s clasped hands, and the battle flag he holds; they align with the mechanic’s right arm, his father’s left shoe, his brother’s right eye, and his own mechanic’s cap, bearing his name. The orange lines are centred upon the brother’s clasped hands, his left arm, and his cigarette; they align with the mechanic’s tilted head, the brim of his father’s cap and the folds of his shirt. They also align with the smaller enlistment portrait of the young Marine pasted on the wall.

A third alignment, in red, places the figure of the driver within the group.

My first review of the structure of the painting’s composition revealed a series of dynamic, triangular alignments between the eyes of the young Marine, his brother, and their clasped hands. Curiously, both of the boys’ hands are clased together as well; this is a moment to be held, to be treasured, and kept in one’s memory, long after the reality of it has passed. The horizontal lines which organise the painting are not level; they are tilted slightly upwards to the left, again drawing our eye to the figure of the young Marine.

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Notice the use of slanted, parallel lines to arrange the figures, shifting our focus as our eye travels through the painting. The top line, in red, aligns with the eagle, globe & anchor device on the Marine's cap, his brother's eyes, the barest glimpse of his enlistment portrait behind his nephew's head, and finally, the blue star of the Service Flag. The second line, in orange, aligns with the Marine’s upturned head, notably his ears & right eye, the winch knob, and the standing nephew’s head. The third line, in yellow, aligns with the seated nephew’s head, the Marine’s service medals, the lower winch knob, the brother’s clasped hands (again!), and the standing nephew's clasped hands. The fourth line, in blue, is less distinct; it aligns with the father’s belt and the driver’s trousers. Nonetheless, it is a parallel arrangement.

A second arrangement of tilted, parallel lines organise further elements within the painting, and again leading our eye to the figure of the young Marine. They are curious compositions, each containing items which, in relationship to the other, provide further meaning and depth. Of special note is the connection between the young Marine and the standing boy: his nephew. He is looking at him, as if to say, “You are next; you must pay attention; this will happen to you.” The baton is being passed, to a new generation.

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The centre of the painting is the clasped hands of the brother, perched upon the workbench; they are big, rough hands; they have worked, very hard, for the past four years. The elements of the painting all focus upon these hands; there is a vertical arrangement which divides the painting into two halves. This line, highlighted in red, connects the light fixture, the brother’s head, eye and chin, his clasped hands, and the knee of his father, in the foreground. One might suggest that the father’s left shoe is also part of this arrangement.

The centred, vertical division of the painting is not, I suggest, accidental; Rockwell is too careful a master of composition to allow such things. The figure of the brother is the secondary focus of the composition; of all the figures, his is the most prominent. It is a curious arrangement; he occupies the centre, and in this perspective, the painting says something about his struggle, and his fight. There is a bond between the brothers: one has gone to war, has fought, been wounded, and has returned; one has stayed at home and maintained his garage, cared for his family, and perhaps their father as well. They have both travelled hard roads; now, in the glow of victory and the homecoming, there will come a moment when the two of them will be alone. There will be another conversation, and another story; we will not overhear it, but we already know what will be shared. It is a covenant of horror, of blood and guts and the screams of dying men; it is the reality of war, and yet within its embrace, it is a badge of honour, and of service.

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The geometry of the painting is now clear; it is a diamond, impaled upon a star; both are highlighted in red. Each corner of the diamond brings the figures into the conversation; it is become a family portrait of two fathers, two sons, and two grandsons. The standing figure, of the mechanic, remains outside the circle.

I suggest, in this arrangement, the use of two geometries as a dynamic: the first anchored by the young Marine, and the second by his brother. The third anchor is the driver, and his position here makes his relationship to the family clear: he is not a casual acquaintance, but a valued relation and friend. It is a triumvirate, with its apex not the young Marine, but the brother; it has been a long, difficult time.

The clasped hands, once again, occupy the centre of these geometries; we are reminded of the family’s prayers for a son, a brother, and an uncle, who has been gone for a long time and is now safely returned. Three aspects of a boy, who is become a man; we see them here, within the diamond and the star.
Further geometries within the diamond and the star have been highlighted in orange; we realise that these lines connect the enlistment portrait, the eyes of the brother, the Marine and the seated nephew. A second, diagonal line connects the clasped hands (!) of the standing nephew, and touch upon the Marine’s left knee, the battle flag, the seated nephew’s left leg, and the frame of an automobile bumper, propped up against a packing-box. In the opposite direction, a single line connects the brother’s eye, the letter ‘R’ on the standing nephew’s sweater, and the right eye of the seated uncle. Additional vertical and (sloped) horizontal lines define the space even further; they are a part of the structure within which the figures are composed. Notice the top, horizontal line, highlighted in orange, connecting the American flag on the left, and the enlistment portrait on the right.

The geometries grow more complex, grids overlaid upon each other in a tartan motif; Frank Lloyd Wright would have been proud. Nothing is accidental; each of the elements within the painting is brought into the arrangement; our eyes travel about the space, and observe each detail again, as if for the first time.

The standing nephew’s position, beneath his uncle’s enlistment portrait, tells us a story; the future is not far away, and he will be the next to go. We fear for his safety, and clasp our hands, in prayer.
Further geometries within the diamond have been highlighted in yellow; they bring the figure of the uncle into the arrangement. Notice the diagonal line of the uncle’s cap, passing through the standing nephew’s eye in one direction, and passing through his own eye in the other. Additional vertical alignments have been highlighted in yellow as indicated above; notice the yellow, vertical line right of centre, passing through the packing-box, the father’s left shoulder, the father’s head, the brother’s left shoulder, and the uniform hanging upon the wall.

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Further geometries have been highlighted in bright green; they bring the figure of the seated nephew into the arrangement. Notice the standing mechanic, still excluded from the central composition; he is not a member of the family. The face and clasped hands of the brother are become a fulcrum, about which these are resolved.
Further geometries have been highlighted in blue; they present an interesting balance of figures. Notice the sloped, blue line touching upon the shoulder of the seated nephew, which extends upwards to the Marine’s enlistment portrait; notice also the vertical alignment created by the figure of the seated nephew. This alignment begins at his small shoe, extending vertically through his right leg, the tilt of his neck, the standing mechanic’s elbow, and the American flag on the shelf. This vertical alignment on the left is balanced by a similar arrangement on the right: it encompasses the enlistment portrait, the head of the standing nephew, the letter ‘R’ on his sweater, and the father’s right shoulder.

It is a curious feature of the vertical geometries that the face of the young Marine and his counterpart, the driver in the black cap, are excluded from same; they stand alone among the other faces and other elements of the room, via this perspective. They are also the only men in the painting wearing brimmed caps: the Marine wears his officer’s cap, of course, and the driver wears his black cap.33

CONCLUSION

The War Hero is a reminder that, to all of us, the sacrifices of war, while imagined, conceived, and realised on a grand scale, are nonetheless composed of individuals: fighting men who served their country in a time and a place where they were needed. Many did not return; many remain buried at sea, on vast, windy beaches, or beneath blood-soaked fields; their souls, and their spirits, are remembered only by a few.

They did not question their duty; they fought, and won a war which history now tells us was most likely created at the stroke of a pen. They did not question such doings; they defended their country.

There are those who returned home without limbs or organs; there are those who appeared whole, but were destroyed on the inside. The tragedy of America in the post-war years is the neglect of these men; they did not deserve such treatment. They did not complain; they put away their swords, took up their ploughshares.

The young Marine, in the garage where he has worked all his life, has returned home; he is safe, he is alive. His eyes tell a different story; they have seen wonders, and horrors, which we cannot imagine. He is tired, and spent; his body and his mind have suffered devastations of which we know nothing, and yet, we celebrate his achievement and his homecoming. Perhaps there will be a parade; perhaps not. It does not matter; the Marine is home, and we are there to greet him, at last, and to hear his story.

36 “And He shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” The Book of Isaiah; Chapter 2, Verse 4 (KJV)

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