



Dalton Trumbo's

# JOHNNY GOT HIS GUN

## Discussion Guide for Teachers

Prior to screening the film, have students discuss the questions below on Freedom and Patriotism. Return to the same questions afterward to explore how their views have been influenced or altered by the film.

### **Freedom:**

What is freedom? Are we born with it or is it given to us? Does freedom carry with it a sense of responsibility? Do we own it? Can it be taken away? Can it be given away? If it can be given away, would you give your freedom away? Why? Why not? Under what circumstances would you give your freedom away?

### **Patriotism:**

What is patriotism? Are we born with it or is it instilled in us? Does patriotism carry with it a sense of responsibility? What purpose does patriotism serve? Is patriotism a love of country as an ideal or is it literal? Is the platitude, "My country, right or wrong," right or wrong, and why? What is your patriotic duty?

### **Study Guide for Students was created by Jennifer McQuillan.**

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*Dalton Trumbo's Johnny Got His Gun* begins with the song "Over There," one of the most popular and patriotic tunes during World War I. The song is readily available to listen to on the internet (at YouTube and other sites). The lyrics are printed here for your perusal.

### VERSE:

Johnny, get your gun, get your gun, get your gun,  
Johnny show the Hun you're a son of a gun  
Hoist the flag and let her fly, Yankee Doodle do or die  
Pack your little kit, show your grit, do your bit  
Yankees to the ranks from the towns and the tanks  
Make your mother proud of you and the old Red White and Blue

### CHORUS:

Over there, over there, send the word, send the word, over there,  
That the Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming,  
The drums rum-tum-ming every where  
So prepare, say a prayer, send the word, send the word to beware  
We'll be over, we're coming over,  
And we won't come back 'til it's over Over There!

Over there, over there, send the word, send the word, over there,  
That the Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming,  
The drums rum-tum-ming every where  
So prepare, say a prayer, send the word, send the word to beware  
We'll be over, we're coming over,  
And we won't come back 'til it's over Over There!

So prepare, say a prayer, send the word, send the word to beware  
We'll be over, we're coming over,  
And we won't come back 'til it's over Over There!



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1. How does this optimistic rallying cry for soldiers underscore Joe's situation throughout the movie?
2. Joe notes that he is glad his father is dead, because he wouldn't want his father to see him in this condition. How does Joe's comment highlight the irony of starting the movie with this song?
3. Joe is seen wearing a long john undershirt (a Henley) and a pair of WWI military pants, rather than in a hospital gown and mask. How does this choice of clothing affect the movie's viewers? How easy is it to forget what war he served in? Why might this be important?
4. How does the way Joe is dressed reflect how he sees himself in his own mind's eye? How is that different than how he must appear to those around him? Does Joe seeing himself as being healthy, youthful, and trapped help to draw the audience into Joe's world?



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5. Throughout the first ten chapters of his novel, Trumbo spends a great deal of time establishing imagery, especially in terms of the sights, sounds, movement and taste Joe has lost. How does Ben McKenzie's acting manage to capture that imagery?
  
6. McKenzie works on what is called a black box stage with minimal props and scenery. How does this environment reflect Joe's sense of being trapped inside the "shell" of his body?
  
7. How do the uses of the bench and chair enhance his performance? What does the chair come to symbolize or represent in Joe's world? What does the bench symbolize or represent? Which represents his past life and which represents his present life and how?
  
8. Director Rowan Joseph uses light and sound minimally but to great effect. Choose three moments in the movie where lights and/or sound are done so artfully that you forgot McKenzie was on a nearly empty stage.



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9. McKenzie himself chose to be barefoot throughout the film. How is his choice significant to Joe's plight?
  
10. When Joe tries to keep his mind fit, he often reverts back to the learning he did in school; reviewing multiplication tables, listing the planets, or remembering characters from works of literature. At one point he complains that school should have taught him something he could remember. What does he mean by this comment? What should he have learned in school?
  
11. Joe relives three key moments from the war: the shooting of "Lazarus," the insanity of his friend Huey, and his own terrible moment when the shell explodes. These memories produce an epiphany for Joe: he's lying in the hospital like a side of beef, and what? He no longer considers Lazarus, Huey and himself as separate individuals; what does this realization cause him to question?
  
12. The closing shot backs away from Joe as he furiously tries to maintain the fitness of his mind by reviewing his multiplication tables. The camera arcs high overhead, so that the audience sees Joe from above, his words becoming fainter and the lights dimming on him. Where does this leave Joe? The audience?