The Aftermaths of War: How Literature Represents the Reconciliation Process

Elizabeth Stewart

SENIOR HONORS THESIS
Submitted In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements of the
College Scholars Program
North Central College

11, May 2015

Approved: _____________________________________ Date: __________
Thesis Director Signature
Jennifer A. Jackson

Approved: _____________________________________ Date: __________
Second Reader Signature
Ann D. Keating
Table of Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................2

Introduction.................................................................................................................................3-7

Motivations to Enter a Branch of the Military.................................................................8-16

Transformation During War.................................................................................................17-25

Re-entering Society..................................................................................................................26-34

Reconciliation...........................................................................................................................35-43

Conclusion.................................................................................................................................44-45

Bibliography.............................................................................................................................46-47
Abstract

My thesis examines war literature and the representations of individual soldiers who subsequently struggle to adapt to civilian life. This research looks at how literature portrays four components: motivations to enlist, transformation during war, the struggle to re-enter society, and reconciliation. While studies focusing on the mental health of returning soldiers have increased, a point of reference for this thesis, studying literature may shed stronger light on the daily mental struggles of soldiers. War literature, often written by those who once experienced war and combat, provides personal insight. In this thesis, war literature registers these struggles, telling stories of soldiers able to heal from trauma--or not. I then analyze these novels to determine possible ways soldiers might overcome the trauma they have experienced, instead of succumbing to addiction or suicide to erase their pain.
Introduction

Before World War II, the psychological effects of war on soldiers were not as prioritized as after, when the awareness of trauma became more widespread. Since then attempting to help veterans recover from war has been a continuous effort. Examples can be found in numerous studies conducted in an attempt to understand the soldiers who enter war, and to help the veterans who exit. Despite these studies there are still large numbers of veterans who end up homeless (about 50,000), addicted to narcotics (about 4 percent of military personnel abuse prescription drugs, and half of military personnel have claimed to binge drink), or suicidal (about 530 young veterans take their lives each year). While the researchers behind these studies have good intentions, they can only focus on the overall numbers instead of the individual. They look for patterns that the military’s health community can use in order to treat as many veterans possible, and while this is necessary, patterns cannot predict the needs of every veteran. Those who suffer from night terrors, suicidal tendencies, and violent outbursts do not fit among typical patterns; those who suffer from severe PTSD need individualized treatment plans in order to avoid becoming just another statistic.

Studying war literature can offer a deeper and more personal picture of the daily struggles a soldier encounters when faced with the shattered myth of what war truly is, especially if he or she returns to a society who does not understand the trauma and personal transformation that war

---

1 Statistics taken from the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, the National Institute on Drug Abuse, and the Los Angeles Times.
has forced them to undergo. Those who write war novels reveal powerful stories that show how deep trauma works its way into the minds of those who go to war. Kali Tal writes:

“Literature of trauma is defined by the identity of the author. Literature of trauma holds at its center the reconstruction and recuperation of the traumatic experience, but it is also actively engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the writings and representations of nontraumatized authors” (17)\(^2\).

The ongoing dialogue Tal describes is key to discovering what type of people go into war, how they are affected, what happens to them when they arrive home, and how to help them. This thesis will build upon the research of psychological and historical studies by using war literature, by American writers, ranging from World War I to the Iraq War, to narrow in on four important aspects of a soldier and his or her experiences: motivations to enter a branch of the military, transformation during war, re-entry into society, and reconciliation. By looking at these four subjects we follow a soldier’s journey from beginning to end, and we begin to understand just how destructive war is on the psyche. This understanding then leads to the search for answers that will allow us to help veterans who cannot help themselves.

The following war literature will be discussed in this thesis: *Johnny Got His Gun*, a powerful anti-war novel set during World War I, is about the character Joe Bonham, who struggles to understand his new reality and communicate with the world after losing his face and limbs in battle. Even though the novel is set during World War I, it was not published until after

---

World War II. Dalton Trumbo, although never a soldier himself, based the book upon his early childhood memories and an article he had read about a Canadian soldier who had lost all his limbs in the First World War.

*Catch-22*, a satirical novel written by Joseph Heller, follows the storylines of a number of soldiers trying to keep their sanity during World War II. This novel constantly questions the sense of war, as well as questioning why soldiers are dying for civilians who have no idea what is happening to soldiers overseas. It also casts light on the psychological effects soldiers suffer from their time serving their country. Heller was a B-25 bomber, who flew 60 missions at the Italian front during World War II.

*Rumor of War*, written by Philip Caputo, is a novel broken into three different parts based on Caputo’s own experiences during the Vietnam War. In the prologue Caputo acknowledges that this book should not be regarded as a history book, as it is not meant to be a historically accurate, but instead about Caputo’s memories and emotions regarding what he and other men went through. During the war, Caputo served in the Republic of Vietnam and eventually became an infantry lieutenant for the Marines.

*Fields of Fire*, written by James Webb, follows the storylines of several Marines during their time fighting in the Vietnam War. Each Marine comes from a different background and enters war for different reasons. The novel also follows a few of the Marines homes and highlights the difficulties of adapting back to civilian life. Webb eventually became a first lieutenant during his tour in Vietnam. He has been awarded honors such as the Navy Cross and
two Purple Hearts. He retired from the Marines on medical discharge due to shrapnel in his knee, kidney, and head.

*The Yellow Birds*, written by Kevin Powers, is about main character John Bartle who served during the Iraq war. The novel flips back and forth between the past and present. The past focuses on Bartle’s time in Iraq, while he tries to keep a promise he made to the mother of his fellow Marine Murphy. The present focuses on Bartle’s isolation and difficulty dealing with the guilt of breaking that promise. Powers uses what he went through and emotions he experienced when serving in the army in order to write this novel, even though the novel itself is fiction.

*Redeployment*, written by Phil Klay, is a collection of 12 different stories following completely different soldiers who are either serving or served in the Iraq war. Klay has described his own Iraq experience as a “mild deployment,” and while some of his own experiences went into writing the book Klay did a lot of research in order to avoid clichéd characters and storylines. Having 12 different stories allows Klay to tell distinctive pieces of the war from different military positions, showing that war affects everyone differently.

By examining these novels closely through the four subjects mentioned above, it is possible to find answers that research studies alone cannot. Through literature it possible to discover how to help those who come back from war and suffer. Looking at who soldiers are before war, what they go through, and why it is difficult for them to re-enter society is the only way to begin to understand how war traumatizes them. This understanding can then be used to look at how the individuals handle their trauma, and if they are able to reconcile with it. Looking
at those who are unable to reconcile with the horrors of war, and comparing them to veterans who have found ways to work through their pain is a first step to learning what support to give veterans, and how to help every one of them begin to heal.
Motivations to Enter a Branch of the Military

The men and women who enlist to become a Marine, a Soldier, a Pilot Fighter, or other valued member in the various military branches are not the same men and women who leave a war zone. The hopeful, bright-eyed, and determined young people who enlist have their own expectations and idealizations of war. They have watched films that make war seem exciting, have heard the promises made in recruitment advertisements, and have perhaps dreamed about who they will be in the moments calling for the utmost bravery. Yet many return from war aged, lost, and often defeated. Despite overwhelming evidence that those who return from war come back shells of their former selves, more often than not, people continue to volunteer to fight for their country.

A 2012 study tries to pinpoint and predict the type of people who willingly enlist in the military, despite the possible psychological damage: “In the United States, individuals who have a lower socio-economic status and IQ, come from rural versus urban areas, are minorities, and associate with deviant peers are more likely to join the military than individuals who remain civilians” (Jackson, Jonkmann, Ludtke, Thoemmes, Trautwein, 271). According to this study, people more likely to join the military are those who fall among the bottom of social hierarchy. While this study doesn’t explicitly say why those with a lower social and economic status are more likely to join the military, it can be assumed that they join because they do not have many alternatives, or at least believe that their options after high school are limited. They may not have

---

the resources to go to college and become successful. As a result, signing up to risk their lives allows them access to specialized job training and higher education.

According to this study, personality also plays an important role among those who enlist: “personality traits prospectively influenced who chose to join the military, as individuals lower in agreeableness, neuroticism, and openness to experience were more likely to enter military service” (Jackson, Jonkmann, Ludtke, Thoemmes, Trautwein, 275). Those more prone to anxiety are more likely to enlist in the military, which is not particularly surprising, as anxiety often keeps a person alert at all times, and in a battle zone, being alert is a mandatory skill, as it means the difference between life and death. The aggressive tendencies found among some recruits can also be advantageous, as the need to prove one’s masculinity or toughness results in the drive to triumph over opponents.

War literature, which has always been concerned with registering the subjectivities, plots, and attitudes of characters as they experience the dire straits of battle, reinforces the findings found in this study, as many characters in a number of novels centered on war come from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the 2014 Iraq novel *Redeployment,* a motivator to join the military is the ability to pay for school:

‘Be All That You Can Be’?” I said. “I don’t know. That was the slogan for me, growing up. And then it was ‘Army of One,” which I never understood, and then it was ‘Army

---

Strong,’ which is about as good a slogan as ‘Fire Hot’ or ‘Snickers Tasty’ or ‘Herpes Bad.’ A better slogan would be, ‘You Can’t Afford College Without Us’ (Klay, 192).

When asked why he joined the army, this character first claims it was to seem masculine and strong, but he quickly, and indirectly, admits that joining the army is the only way he could afford school, suggesting that financial struggles play a large role in decisions to join the military.

Snake, in the Vietnam novel *Fields of Fire*,\(^5\) also comes from a less than ideal home life. It is heavily implied that his father is an alcoholic, who spends his time drinking instead of working. His mother sells herself to men in order to pay the bills, but seems to take pleasure in her chosen profession. Snake himself is also not perfect. However, it is not Snake’s disadvantaged background that compels him to enlist, but instead his personality traits. While he does not drink like his father, or sleep around like his mother, he cannot hold a job because of his constant need to fight. The first time readers are introduced to Snake he is knocking out a man who is so high he can barely walk; the man is easy prey, and Snake takes advantage of that.

Snake’s motivation to enlist stems from his pride in winning fights and believing he is better than his parents and peers. Ultimately his aggressive tendencies not only lead to his enlistment, but they also help him excel among the Marines. Snake is thrilled with how often he gets to fight: “He had always fought, and now it was right fight. He had never been coddled, and now it was weakness to have been coddled” (Webb, 17). Now he is a man who is able to use the

---

skills he has developed, not because of a lack of opportunities, but because that is what he has chosen to dedicate his life to learning. Snake has a tough persona, and being a Marine enhances that persona.

While the study discussed earlier gives an insight into the type of people who enlist in the military, and literature does support its findings, a pitfall of the study is that it lumps a large number of people together; it limits its concerns to people without a strong social or economic status, and those prone to be anxious and aggressive; it creates a cold persona that is potentially applicable to any man or woman, regardless of whether they are in the military or not. Literature, however, shows characters beyond the stereotypical findings, and fills in some of the gaps in studies such as this, providing closer insight to more personal reasons and circumstances that may drive some to enlist. As Margaret Atwood states, “In the end, we are all stories.” It is through literature, creative non-fiction, and other cultural productions that we begin to see the persons behind the statistics, the human face in struggle. Through narratives such as Fields of Fire, Redeployment, Catch-22 and the other novels discussed in this thesis, we begin to see the ethics behind telling stories. This thesis means to send up a flare for stories that teach us to care and give us language for intervening after war, when the glories of war are exposed as myths and the work of healing those who hurt begin.

Another pitfall of this study is that it places the decision to enlist on circumstances and personality, while failing to acknowledge outside influences that can create patriotism, two excellent motivators. Literature shows us that there are many others who enlist for a sense of purpose, along with associated feelings such as masculinity, significance, pride, and honor,
resulting from military and government propaganda. In the Vietnam novel *Rumor of War*\(^6\) Philip Caputo lists a number of reasons he joins the Marines, all related to feeling important:

I rummaged through the propaganda material, picking out one pamphlet whose cover listed every battle the marines had fought, from Trenton to Inchon. Reading down that list, I had one of those rare flashes of insight: the heroic experience I sought was war; war the ultimate adventure; war, the ordinary man’s most convenient means of escaping from the ordinary. (Caputo, 6)

Through propaganda Caputo is exposed to the romanticized battles Marines are involved in, and he is immediately attracted to the prospects of being considered a hero; he is attracted to the idea of being more than just another regular person, and the Marines provide him an alluring picture of becoming a brave and honored hero. The Marines make Caputo feel manly; they give him a foot to stand on; they give him a chance to become a man.

Being an important and accepted figure in society has always been an incredible motivator. Men and women have always wanted to belong to something larger than themselves (however, note that this differs slightly from narcissism and the need to prove themselves stronger and better than peers); even men who would become hated for killing millions of people started out as boys searching for acceptance. To shift perspective away from U.S soldiers and toward enemies across history whose motives align with our own is another way literature reveals the motives of young persons to take up a cause: in her 1992 essay “Our Secret,” in *A*

---

Chorus of Stones, Susan Griffin imagines Nazi soldier Heinrich Himmler as a boy drawn to the idea of becoming a soldier: “It is 1914. A war begins. There are parades. Young men marching in uniform. Tearful ceremonies at the railway station. Songs. Decorations. Heinrich is enthusiastic. The war has given him a sense of purpose in life. Like other boys, he plays at soldiering,” (Griffin, 129)⁷. Himmler is only 14 years old, and the war he imagines is not the war he will create. As the man who conceptualizes the gas chambers, his contributions are nothing like exciting images that compel him to become a soldier who marches in parades and is admired by the population.

In writing a story based off of Himmler’s diaries, a work of creative non-fiction, Griffin tells how Himmler could not have become a soldier without the help of his father. However, Germany loses World War I before Himmler is old enough to fight in any battles or prove himself in any way. Griffin paints a picture of a Himmler who feels empty without his status of a soldier. This emptiness grows until World War II, when Himmler once again longs to be significant: “Now, as I imagine Himmler, dressed in his neat uniform, seated behind his desk at party headquarters, I can feel the void he feared begin to recede. In every way his life has taken on definition. He has a purpose and a schedule” (Griffin, 138). Horrifically, Himmler’s newfound sense of purpose resulted in the deaths of millions of innocent people. It is a terrible irony that the military offered something Himmler would not find elsewhere: respect and admiration from his peers. Without the military Himmler considered himself weak and empty, but with the uniform and title he was suddenly powerful and strong.

Feeling significant and creating a sense of purpose are powerful motivators to enlist in the military, but there are other equally as powerful motivators. In time of war, patriotism and morale are often high which can be an excellent motivation to enlist. Patriotism and enlistment rates often surge after attacks on the United States, which threaten its foundation of freedom and democracy. As soon as this foundation is threatened society forgets the pain and destruction war causes, one of the issues Chris Hedges tackles in his 2002 book *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*: “Lurking beneath the surface of every society, including ours, is the passionate yearning for a nationalist cause that exalts us, the kind that war alone is able to deliver” (45). This nationalistic cause Hedges talks about can be found in any war: World War II united people to fight against genocide, the Vietnam War united people to fight against communism, and the Iraq War united people to fight against terrorism.

Literature also portrays this need to fight for one’s country when its foundations have been challenged; it highlights the ability to forget the destruction of war in order to unite together for a larger and seemingly more important cause. The Vietnam War, for example, while it angered citizens to the point of shunning veterans by the end, began as a united front against the spread of communism. In *Rumor of War*, Caputo writes in his prologue: “War is always attractive to young men who know nothing about it, but we had also been seduced into uniform by Kennedy’s challenge to ‘ask what you can do for your country’ and by the missionary idealism he had awakened in us” (Caputo, xiv). Caputo’s declaration shows how big a part patriotism has played in the past. As Hedges argues, patriotism creates a reason for people to

---

forget the consequences of war. It gives the government the power to compel its citizens to forget about themselves and fight for a grandiose purpose. It unites the people of a country together, giving them something to believe in after a national tragedy. It gives people pride, encouraging young men and women to fight for their glorious country.

Unforgettable, Joseph Heller’s satirical novel Catch-22 also uses patriotism to show why men decided to fight: “All over the world, boys on every side of the bomb line were laying down their lives for what they had been told was their country, and no one seemed to mind, least of all the boys who were laying down their young lives” (Heller, 25). While this moment focuses specifically on men who are in the middle of the fighting, the reason they enlisted is still obvious. They enlisted for the romanticized vision of war; they were being encouraged to fight for their country. The satirical overtones suggest that men are being brainwashed to fight for their country, and in this case it is the overwhelming illusion that fighting for their country is the noblest action they could do that causes soldiers to sign up to fight and die for a lie.

So far this thesis has discussed motivations that cause people to enlist willingly: however, not all soldiers enlist because they feel as if they have been enlightened by propaganda, a sense of purpose, or patriotism. Some soldiers enlist because they have an obligation to do so. In the Vietnam novel Fields of Fire, readers are introduced to a character who feels the need to carry on a family legacy. Hodges’ main motivator is his family’s history: “my war is not as simple as yours was, Father. People seem to question their obligation to serve on other than their own terms. But enough of that. I fight because we have always fought. It doesn’t matter who” (Webb,

---

22). While Hodges always accompanies his talk of war with words such as honor, glory, and pride, he never fails to circle back to the men who have fought in his family. He refers to them as ghosts whom he feels a kinship with, and who remain constantly with him. While Hodges may talk about honor and pride, he really fights because it is his family legacy to fight and die on the battlefield, a family legacy that he eventually becomes a part of.

The other obligation that causes soldiers to enlist is a draft. It is a motivator that is forced upon unwilling men; men who perhaps do not believe as strongly in nationalism, or have dreams to accomplish elsewhere. Drafts are not implemented lightly; the most memorable draft was the Vietnam draft. In *Fields of Fire*, Webb does not fail to create a character who is forced to become an infantry soldier due to the draft: “The recruiter could not guarantee the Marine Band on a two-year enlistment which was the maximum Goodrich would sign for” (Webb, 91). While Goodrich is not a completely unwillingly drafted man, as he does technically enlist into the Marines voluntarily, similar to men drafted he did not sign up because he wanted to fight. Instead Goodrich only enlisted because he believed he would make it into the Marine band and become a musician. Goodrich’s expectations are less than satisfactory, as he is sent into battle instead. Yet the end result is the same as men who enlisted willingly and eagerly. Goodrich suffers through the same experiences, has the same difficulties transitioning back to civilian life, and has just as difficult of a time trying to reconcile with his trauma. No matter how noble, or damaged, the reasons behind a young person’s going off to war might be, once they are in the thick of it another sort of story emerges, a horror story beyond comprehension, one almost beyond telling.
Transformation During War

The motivations to enlist in the military discussed in the previous section start to fade once soldiers start to learn exactly what it means to be a soldier. From the moment a potential soldier sets foot into basic training he or she is becoming a different person, and once a soldier is sent off to war he or she will never be the same. Hedges writes in *War is a Force That Gives us Meaning*: “Most of those who are thrust into combat soon find it impossible to maintain they mythic perception of war. They would not survive if they did” (21). War literature emphasizes exactly what Hedges is arguing. Novels such as *Catch-22, The Yellow Birds, Rumor of War,* and *Fields of Fire* show this transformation of a person acting and thinking like a civilian to being trained to think like a machine to finally being someone scarred from the horrors of war.

Before focusing completely on literature, this section will first look at the history which has begun to build a picture of why soldiers are unable to stay the same person over the course of their enlistment. The transformation in personality and demeanor begins during basic training, as training is meant to rewire the thinking and actions of soldiers. According to Hew Strachan\(^\text{10}\) after World War II, training became focused on generating war-like scenarios, in hopes to prepare soldiers for war: “All aspect of the Army training program which develop effective combat skills serve to reduce the disruptive effects of fear reactions in combat, in so far as they provide soldiers with a set of habitual responses which are adaptive in danger situations” (225). The military needs men who essentially cannot feel. It needs people who can pull the trigger of

---

an M16 without thinking of the ethical consequences. Training attempts to dull the humanistic responses that occur when faced with a life-threatening situation.

Often training is successful in teaching soldiers how to react instinctively during battle. The flight response is dulled, and soldiers do not stop and contemplate about what they are doing while in the heat of battle. The techniques used in actual military training translates to the scenes written among literature. Those who write war literature write scenes that show how effectively trainings dulls the flight response, and heightens the fight response. In *The Yellow Birds*, Kevin Powers shows how the military takes away humanistic qualities; he shows how training dulls typical humanistic responses, and replaces them with automated ones: “Soon there were voices calling out, “Three o’clock, fucking three o’clock!” and though I had not seen anyone to shoot at, I squeezed the trigger, dazzled by the flashes from my muzzle” (Powers, 117). The character Bartle reacts instinctively to the orders he has been given; he reacts without knowing if there is even a target to aim for. His training has prepared him well: he does exactly what he is supposed to do without fear and without thinking about the person on the other end. He is no longer thinking like a human, but instead he is responding like a robot controlled by a remote.

Similarly, Heller’s World War II novel *Catch-22* captures this concept perfectly by simplifying the consequences of taking away a person’s humanity: “General Dreedle wanted his men to spend as much time out on the skeet-shooting range as the facilities and their flight schedule would allow. Shooting skeet eight hours a month was excellent training for them. It trained them to shoot skeet” (Heller, 47). Training for skeet shooting focuses on teaching people

---

how to hit the target; training for battle focuses on teaching people how to hit the target before the target hits them. Training teaches soldiers how to fight efficiently without caring about the person their barrel is pointed towards. There are no emotions involved; there are no consequences; there is only a target in the distance to kill.

Shifting momentarily back to Strachen, he uses history to show how the focus of training has evolved throughout time. Training, along with dulling emotions, has also become more focused on creating one mind among many. Training attempts to break down individualism, and instead makes men think like a unit, like a machine: “it can create unit cohesion. The value of sending into action a group of men who have trained together and who are commanded by the officers who have been responsible for that process, has been particularly remarked upon in the USA” (Strachen, 216). Strachen makes cohesion training sound more like a trust bonding exercise, and while the soldiers training together may feel loyalty for one another, cohesion training does much more than bond soldiers.

Strachen is not the only one who sees this stripping of individuality. In her essay “Clytemnestra’s Memory” in A Chorus of Stones, Griffin while analyzing various moments during World War II, also sees that each soldier in training learns to think the same way, interact the same, and fight the same way. Their individuality is ripped away, and instead they become parts of a larger machine: “So much in the range of human emotions is forbidden to the well-trained soldier… the soldier excludes particular feelings and memories from his idea of who he is” (Griffin, 32). Being emotionless is difficult to imagine, but this is what military training pounds into each soldier: to be emotionless in the heat of the battle when it counts the most.
However, pushing down emotions and memories take bits and pieces of someone’s identity, which becomes catastrophic, often causing a soldier to experience emotions ranging from numbness to anger to confusion, and finally, to guilt as they struggle with what they have been forced to do.

Literature shows exactly how catastrophic the result of training can be once a soldier has been in battle and is trying to overcome the guilt and shame of killing another human being. During the heat of battle it is easier to feel numb; it is easier to shoot and kill, because it means survival. Death becomes a daily scene, and to feel remorse or anger at every moment death takes place would be incredibly taxing on one’s sanity. However, this does not mean a soldier comes away unaffected. In *Rumor of War*, Caputo powerfully conveys how once battle ends it is difficult to stay in the mindset training has tried to create:

The company had only done what it was expected to do and what it had been trained to do: it had killed the enemy. Everything we had learned in the Marine Corps told us to feel pride in that. Most of us did, but we could not understand why the feelings of pity and guilt alloyed our pride… The drill fields and our first two months in Vietnam had dulled, but not deadened, our sensibilities. We retained a capacity for remorse and had not yet reached the stage of moral and emotional numbness (Caputo, 124).

If the men and women in battle were able to remain in a constant numbness, if they were able to keep a distance from their reality it is possible that war would not be as psychologically damaging as it is. However, as Caputo writes, their emotions can only be pushed aside; they do
not disappear for the entire duration of the war. Humanistic responses may dull for periods of
time, but they are never completely gone. While training attempts to make a well-oiled machine,
and for the most part is successful, soldiers cannot completely disregard the humanistic part of
them.

Soldiers try and quell the humanistic parts of themselves, a popular theme seen among
war literature: however, another common theme seen in war literature is the rapid aging of young
soldiers: war requires boys to develop a maturity level they often do not have at the start of their
enlistment. War ages soldiers: it is impossible to go into war and come out the naïve person who
entered. *Fields of Fire* uses the Vietnam War to show how quickly war takes away boyhood.
Hodges receives a warning from a Major before he is sent to his platoon in Vietnam: “I just look
at you and say, ‘that used to be me. But it isn’t anymore” (Webb, 60). It is a vague warning, one
that only hints at what is to come. Hodges is a man who believes he knows what he is going to be
fighting against. However, he soon discovers that Vietnam is a different war than he was led to
believe. His demeanor soon becomes cynical and dark: “In the transient tent there were a half-
dozen new dudes, green-clothes, faces ambiguous, as yet unaffected, who would join the
company in the bush shortly” (Webb, 161). Hodges is no longer the deluded “unaffected” boy.
He has been touched by war; he has been aged by war. The knowledge that the majority of eager,
fresh-faced boys will die for the lies told to them, is a devastating tragedy to him. It is this
tragedy of losing innocence so quickly that makes war so damaging to one’s psyche.
Caputo’s Vietnam War novel deals directly with this concept of becoming a man the minute a boy steps into the war zone. As a novel that is meant to portray the horrors of war, Caputo writes a powerful passage about the aging effects of war before his story even begins:

Most of all, we learned about death at an age when it is common to think of oneself as immortal. Everyone loses that illusion eventually, but in civilian life it is lost in installments over the years. We lost it all at once and, in the span of months, passed from boyhood through manhood to a premature middle age... We left Vietnam peculiar creatures, with young shoulders that bore rather old heads. (Caputo, xvi)

The prospect of meeting death any second, the realization that one is not immortal instantly changes a person. Death snatches innocence from boys who should believe they are invincible for years to come. The demolishing of boyhood so quickly is a moment that soldiers carry with them long after they have come out of battle.

The snatching of innocence is such a horrible tragedy that Catch-22, a novel meant to exaggerate the horrors of war, takes a moment of seriousness to emphasize how young the soldiers going into battle are: “A second ago you were stepping into college with your lungs full of fresh air. Today you’re an old man… You’re inches away from death every time you go on a mission. How much older can you be at your age” (Heller, 48). The character Dunbar emphasizes that when faced with death as often as he and his fellow soldiers are, it is impossible to remain young and innocent. Death taps at the shoulders of soldiers constantly, reminding them that one wrong or unprepared move can end their lives. It ages them, giving them experience and
knowledge that others will never know, taking away their innocence before they have the chance to let the typical experiences of life naturally shed it layer by layer.

When discussing what war takes from a soldier, it is crucial to acknowledge the toll killing takes. The dehumanizing of a soldier during training and the quick aging of a soldier’s maturity during war, severely affects soldiers psychologically, but killing another human being is equally as traumatizing. One of Hedges most powerful passages in *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* comments on this toll: “To be sure, soldiers who kill innocents pay a tremendous personal emotional and spiritual price. But within the universe of total war, equipped with weapons that can kill hundreds or thousands of people in seconds, soldiers only have time to reflect later” (Hedges, 86). Those who write war literature create characters and scenes that show just how devastating killing another human being can be when a soldier has time to reflect on his actions.

The Iraq War novel *Redeployment* devotes an entire chapter to trying to convey what happens when a soldier kills. In this chapter a kid named Dyer kills a man by shooting him in the face. Dyer was not even supposed to be on a mission that required contact with the enemy; that was another squad’s job. Dyer’s squad is just supposed to rescue two soldiers who had been captured and tortured. Dyer is severely affected by his kill: “Dyer’s at one of the main room windows, but he’s not really there. Not tactical. First, he’s too close. Second, not even really scanning. An insurgent could probably walk up and grab his balls before he noticed” (Klay, 21). Even when immediate danger seems to have passed, being alert is critical in any war zone, no matter how high or low the chances of attack are. However, Dyer is no longer mentally there; he
has gone into shock over his first kill. Even though the man he killed was brutally torturing his fellow soldiers, a fact many men would use to justify their actions, Dyer still feels guilt for killing another man; he struggles with the reality that he is actually capable of killing another human being.

Clearly the emotions a soldier experiences during war are enormous, and as soldiers grapple with emotions such as anger, shame, and guilt they start to forget about the reasons they signed up for war. As Hedges claims, believing in the myth of war after being exposed to its reality is impossible. As soldiers struggle to get ahold of the emotions raging through their mind, they also struggle to make sense of a war they no longer wish to be a part of. The war that they believed in when they enlisted, the war they believed they were fighting, no longer exists. They are no longer fooled by propaganda or grand tales of a unified front.

The characters in the Vietnam novels *Rumor of War* and *Fields of Fire*, discussed throughout this thesis, convey the difficulty of making sense of a war that does not have enough victories to make soldiers feel as if they are fighting for a worthy cause. For example, Goodrich in *Field of Fire* spends an enormous amount of time trying to make sense of the war going on around him: “It was beginning to make less and less sense. Mark was beginning to make more and more sense. You just wander around trying to kill them until they kill you, he mused. Where the hell is the sense in that? It’s insane” (Webb, 99). Today the Vietnam War has a reputation among many for being a brutal, devastating, and unnecessary war, but the Vietnam War started out like any other war. Men signed up to fight in a war they believed was in defense of democracy and freedom. Yet Goodrich constantly struggles with why he is fighting a gruesome
war in which thousands of men are dying. Goodrich is not concerned with the lies propaganda sold him; he can only focus on what he sees happening around him: an unknown and dangerous territory that hides the enemy, and creates a kill or be killed mindset.

There are many aspects of war that traumatize soldiers, and the ones discussed in this section are only a small sample of the horrors soldiers are forced to face. The difficult situations soldiers have to face, the conflicting emotions soldiers have to feel, and the confusion created by the loss of a reason to fight, are so traumatizing that when the war is over soldiers continue to carry these memories with them. In the following section, this thesis will discuss how the experience of war has traumatized soldiers in a way that makes it challenging to adjust back to civilian life, because their brains have been rewired to react and think in dangerous, high alert situations.
Re-entering Society

Adapting back to civilian life after fighting in war can be a long, difficult, and sometimes impossible task. The war may end physically, but mentally it can continue for a lifetime. Fighting and surviving becomes the only way of life a soldier is comfortable with. While discussing the myth of war, Hedges, in *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, discusses how shattering the romanticized picture of war causes soldiers to fail to connect to civilians:

> Once in conflict, we are moved from the abstract to the real, from the mythic to the sensory. When this move takes place we have nothing to do with a world not at war. When we return home we view the society around us from the end of a very long tunnel. There they still believe… Combatants live only for their herd, those hapless soldiers who are bound into their unit to ward off death. There is no world outside the unit. (40)

Here Hedges reveals the horrible truth about a veteran's time after war: during this time soldiers and civilians are unknowingly distancing themselves from one another. Veterans cannot connect with civilians, because many civilians still believe in the noble cause of war (one of the exceptions being the overwhelming hatred for the Vietnam War). However, this disconnect among the differentiating attitudes towards war is not the only reason veterans struggle when they return home. Novels such as *Redeployment, Fields of Fire, Catch-22*, and *The Yellow Birds* reveal other difficulties veterans have when trying to adapt back to a civilian lifestyle.

> Forgetting what it is like to live without the constant fear of death makes acting like a civilian impossible upon arriving home. Veterans have to learn how to adapt to lifestyle again.
One of the chapters Klay writes in *Redeployment* highlights the difficulties of returning home, where a soldier's way of life is no longer applicable. Landing in America and having to hand in his rifle causes the character Sergeant Price to feel disconnected and lost:

> When I got to the window and handed in my rifle, though, it brought me up short. That was the first time I’d been separated from it in months. I didn’t know where to rest my hands. First I put them in my pockets, then I took them out and crossed my arms, and then I just let them hang, useless, at my sides. (Klay, 6)

Since arriving in Iraq, Price’s rifle has been his constant companion; not once has he been separated from it; it has kept him safe, and without it he feels detached. His hands which have become accustomed to holding a weapon, now wander as they look for a new resting place. This feeling is strange and new; a soldier’s gun is his safety net, without it he is exposed and vulnerable to the world around him.

Not only do soldiers instinctively grasp for their weapons when they feel vulnerable, but they think tactically, imagining they are still walking on booby trapped land, and looking for hidden enemies. As Hedges argues, there is no world outside the unit, and this applies to veterans when they return home. Gilliland in *Rumor of War* is a perfect example of a veteran still living amongst his unit, despite being back home: “Mountains rolled like gentle waves near Gaviota, in varied shades of brown and green, and Gilliland examined them… I would walk there, he decided. I’d follow that finger to the top. And I’d put another squad on the finger to the right, and one on the finger to the left. Hodges’d like that” (Webb, 192). Gilliland returns from Vietnam
fully aware that he is now back in California, yet he continues to think as he did in Vietnam. For Gilliland, it is more natural imagining a squad in the mountains, and how he would place them so they could kill “gooks,” than it is to imagine him fishing at the beach he is meeting his wife at. Thinking about normal, non-threatening, and enjoyable activities is baffling. Leading men into battle is what he is good at, it is what he has been trained to do, and he made a career out of it. War was his security blanket, and now it has been ripped away from him. Gilliland feels exposed and disconnected with the world around him.

Klay takes Webb’s image even further by creating a startling and unforgettable scene that conveys just how difficult it is to think like a civilian. Price, while shopping with his wife in a crowded mall, cannot help but think about is how the last time he was walking down a street, him and his fellow Marines were checking windows, doors, hallways, and roofs for enemies waiting to kill them. He keeps referring to these memories by the color orange to describe the level of safety he had in Iraq. Orange represents his heightened senses, the necessity of focusing on one moment to the next, and the inability to let his mind rest or wander. He compares the color orange to the color white, which is the safety level of the civilians around him: they are not thinking about possible danger; they have no conscious awareness of what is going on around them. Despite being in a white safety zone, Price still feels as if he is in an orange zone: “so that’s orange. And then you go shopping in Wilmington, unarmed, and you think you can get back down to white? It’ll be a long fucking time before you get down to white” (Klay, 13). The abilities needed to stay alive in Iraq are still alive and active in Price, even though there are no enemies waiting for him around the corner. There is no switch he can flip in order to think like a
civilian again. Coming back from war is not like coming back from an unpleasant vacation where it is easy to forget a bad experience. War is lasting; war is permanent.

The reality of veterans such as Gilliland and Price is what we know as PTSD. However, experiencing phantom-like thinking and actions that relate to a soldier's time in war reflects minor symptoms of PTSD. Even though they have the mindset they had during their time overseas, Gilliland and Price are still able to interact with the world around them. However, not every veteran is as lucky. Many severely traumatized veterans struggle with what John Talbott, a professor who teaches warfare at Stanford University, refers to as reenactments, or “a fragment of a story, representing a larger and longer disaster, but without beginning, middle, or end and without meaning, resolution, or point” (438). These reenactments in which a soldier is thrust back into a moment of terror can happen anywhere, and can last for any amount of time. When a reenactment happens a soldier can no longer distinguish from past, present, or future; he or she can only suffer through the moment with hopes that it will end quickly.

Reenactments are such a common result of war that Heller’s Catch-22 once again abandons its satirical tone to emphasize just how frightening these reenactments are. He uses his character Hungry Joe to reveal the psychological trauma veterans come away with: “As soon as Yossarian, Nately and Dunbar put him to bed he began screaming in his sleep. In the morning he stepped from his ten looking haggard, fearful and guilt-ridden, an eaten shell of a human building rocking perilously on the brink of collapse” (Heller, 62). Every time Hungry Joe is no

---

longer in combat he is able to relax and have fun, making it seem as if he has walked away from war without many scars. However, when he is put to bed his nightmares place him back into his B-25 bomber in the midst of danger, causing him to shout out in his sleep as he once again fights for his country's freedom. When he wakes up, the nightmare has taken its toll. Every morning Hungry Joes is shaken, fearful, and fighting against a complete mental breakdown.

Another common result of war is the overwhelming guilt that floods through a veterans when they reflect back on the atrocities they committed, even if they were ordered to commit these atrocities. Veterans doubt their good intentions, and attempt to determine their own self-worth, based off the ethics they often had to abandon during war. *Fields of Fire* uses Goodrich to show how decisions made during war come back to haunt veterans once they’ve returned home: “I fought with myself about this for months. I even turned a guy in for murder. I thought it was my duty. But I just don’t know anymore. What you guys are missing is the confrontation. It loses its simplicity when you have to deal with it” (Webb, 336). To Goodrich turning in a fellow soldier for murdering Vietnamese soldiers out of revenge seemed morally right, but upon returning to the States, Goodrich is tormented by whether attempting to be moral during war was a mistake or not. He had been in a war where he was told to shoot gooks no matter what, which is exactly what his fellow Marines had been doing. During war lines are blurred, making morally difficult decisions acceptable; however after war these lines become indistinguishable, making it difficult for veterans to measure their actions according to the decision-making war calls for. Instead they measure their actions against the morals of everyday life, making their actions seem inexcusable.

30
Turning in his fellow Marines is not the only memory Goodrich torments himself with. Towards the end of his tour, he fails to kill a “babysan,” resulting in the death of a Marine: “You know why I’m all fucked up? Because of a little girl… I was a team leader. I had a kid who was going to shoot her. I knocked his rifle down. Just in time to see him shot in the face” (Webb, 336). Once again Goodrich’s moral high ground has failed him. By failing to accept that Vietnamese children could be enemies, he caused the death of a brave and honorable man. He lives and struggles with this guilt daily. The torment he inflicts upon himself results in isolation from his parents and former friends. It fills him with anger and contempt, and it breaks him.

It is through Literature that Hedges’ argument, that killing on a massive scale comes with an emotional and spiritual price (86), is becoming clearer. However, the consequences of war have only been touched upon. The difficulty of adjusting back to civilian life is not easy, and many veterans retreat into isolation, as they feel they can no longer connect to the world around them. They are so broken and severely affected by their time in war that the world “outside the unit” is too much for them to handle. Many returning soldiers can no longer connect with their friends or family, and they begin to spend more alone.

Kevin Powers’ novel *The Yellow Birds* conveys the isolation that results from a failure to reconnect with the world through Bartle. Upon arriving home, Bartle keeps to himself while acknowledging that the Iraq War has taken a piece of him: “I had deteriorated more than one might expect in the short time I’d been home. My only exercise was the two-mile round trip I made every afternoon… I avoided roads, opting instead for the train tracks that passed by our house” (Powers, 131). While Bartle at least exercises, allowing him to get fresh air for a small
amount of time, the rest of the time he remains alone in his mother’s home. His mother begs him to go out with friends at one point, and while he attempts to meet his friends at the river for a swim, he ends up camping alone out of sight. He cannot handle such a normal interaction. A month later he gets an apartment, increasing his isolated state; he rarely leaves his apartment, and he no longer has the companionship of his mother.

However, the isolation and difficulty adjusting to a civilian lifestyle soldiers are not solely a soldier's fault. Civilians also share a responsibility for the difficulty soldiers have when returning home. As Hedges acknowledges, civilians lack the understanding of what really happens during war; they cannot grasp that going to war is not a noble sacrifice. As a result, they do not always understand why a veteran comes back a completely different person than before. While many civilians are aware that veterans do change, they do not understand this awareness means, and as a result they do not respond properly.

The Vietnam War is a prime example of when civilians did not understand the traumatizing war soldiers had just fought in; civilians made soldiers feel hated and unwelcome upon their return home. In *Field of Fire*, Goodrich has immense difficulty dealing with civilians who feel the responsibility to tell him what he fought for was wrong, especially as he is still struggling with the decisions he made in Vietnam. Even Goodrich’s friend, who defected to Canada to avoid the draft, attempts to convince Goodrich he suffered for idiotic beliefs: “after what it’s done to you, how can you still believe? For what did you give your leg eight thousand miles away? Because if you didn’t let them line you up like a duck in a shooting gallery they would throw you in jail? What kind of belief is that?” (Webb, 329). This kind of hostility causes
Goodrich to become enraged, giving him another reason to distance himself from the outside world. Soldiers who have fought for their lives do not want or need to be lectured from people who do not know what it is like to be in a war zone. They do not want their choices and their beliefs to be questioned and opened for scrutiny by people who have only experienced war while sitting comfortably in their own homes. For these reasons a veteran is less likely to engage with civilians, as the hatred and hostility only makes it harder to transition back to living like a civilian.

Another example is Klay’s *Redeployment*. Klay once again uses Price to show the distance between a veteran and his or her loved one. Cheryl greets Price after months apart with a hug, a kiss, and a “how are you,” which Price translates as: “how was it? Are you crazy now” (Klay, 8). Even when Cheryl says things such as “I’m proud of you” and “Isn’t it good to be home,” Price notices she seems scared and skittish, as if she is expecting him to snap at any moment. However, even with the obvious strain in their relationship, Cheryl handles his return better than others. Price’s fellow Marine comes back to find out his wife is five months pregnant, even though he has been gone for seven. Price’s corporal comes home to find out his wife has abandoned him (Klay, 10). Returning home is daunting, and the support of a loved one can make the process easier. Yet when loved ones act like a spouse is going to crack, or they abandon their spouse before they arrive home, it can increase the difficulty of transitioning back to a normal life, and it can increase the chance of isolation. If a spouse or other loved one cannot give the necessary understanding or support to a returning soldier, then why should a soldier believe the general public will respond any differently?
The difficulties veterans have when coming home could potentially destroy them. Veterans come home to a place they no longer know how to act in, and people they no longer know how to connect to. Many struggle with guilt and isolation. However, it is the way soldiers deal with these difficulties that becomes increasingly important to study, as there are veterans who are able to overcome these difficulties, and there are veterans who unfortunately let their trauma destroy their lives. The next section discusses how literature and literary critics provide different pieces that could potentially mean recovery for every veteran who returns home from war.
Reconciliation

As discussed in the previous section, coming back from war is difficult. Veterans need time to adjust and ease back into civilian life. This adjustment period is different for every person who returns from war, but is also critical, as it is during this time that veterans attempt to reconcile with the scars war has left them. During this period it is essential that soldiers acknowledge the horrors they have been through, and understand that they have changed, and their actions and the things that happened during war do not define them, because choosing to live with their demons can be catastrophic. However, coming to terms with what they did and what happened to them in order to move past war is not easy, and for some it seems impossible.

In *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, Hedges sums up perfectly how disastrous dealing with the trauma of war can be: “In the beginning war looks and feels like love. But unlike love, it gives nothing in return but an ever-deepening dependence, like all narcotics, on the road to self-destruction” (Hedges, 162). Ironically, the road to self-destruction for many veterans is narcotics, as narcotics numb memories and pain, allowing them to go through life with blinders on. They do not experience the world around them anymore, and they do not pay attention to the demons lying dormant inside of them. Literature repeatedly tells the stories of veterans who have been unable to overcome the difficulties of returning home.

In *Field of Fire*, Goodrich is unable to overcome the guilt that torments him upon his return home. As a result he takes his pain pills long after his physical wounds have healed:
he would pop a full quota of pills (the body no longer needing them but the mind craving
them desperately) and once again, for the millionth time, explore the reaches of his nerve
ends, searching out emotions that might help him face the empty words, and the stares
that followed his limp. (Webb, 333)

The stares from people who cannot grasp what he went through are just as difficult to confront as
his demons concerning his actions that caused his fellow Marines to die in Vietnam. He
continues to take pills even though he no longer physically needs them to control his pain.
Mentally Goodrich has become addicted to the only outlet that allows him to become oblivious
to the world around him.

Pills also help those who suffer from nightmares to sleep, calming their mind enough so
that they are not transported back to war as soon as they shut their eyes. In Redeployment, Klay
dedicates another chapter to showing the addiction that occurs among traumatized soldiers:
“Rodriguez laughed… He pulled a plastic sandwich bag full of little pink pills out of his cargo
pockets and held it at eye level. “How you think any of us sleep?””(Klay, 137). After the death
of Marine Fujita, the troop Fujita belonged to has a difficult time accepting his death. As a result,
a few of the Marines talk to the priest in an attempt to find peace within themselves. However, it
is quickly revealed that Marines, such as Rodrriquez, have been using pills to survive each day,
even before Fujita’s death. To some pills are necessity to surviving war, both during and after
war.
Similar to taking pills, alcohol is also commonly used to try and keep painful memories away. In *Redeployment*, Klay dedicates yet another chapter to revealing the catastrophic effects of a war. Captain Kevin Boylan is affected by alcohol in the same way other soldiers are affected by pills: it numbs him, and gives him freedom from his constant battles: “See, our unit had one no-shit hero… that sergeant was Boylan’s, and he’s the whole reason Boylan and me are tight, and why at two in the morning, drunk off his ass but full of plans to continue to drink away his deployment money and his demons, Boylan is calling me” (Klay, 239). Boylan traps himself in a vicious cycle: he goes on tour, returns home, and immediately calls a friend to go out drinking with him so that he does not have time to start reflecting about what he went through. Boylan’s drinking problem is so severe he spends more of his time blacking out than he does trying to stay lucid. No matter how badly he embarrasses himself, no matter how many times he has to rely on friends to get him safely home, Boylan does not quit. It is a way to escape the pain, and he fully embraces that escape.

Drugs and alcohol are an easy and addicting way to forget the horrors of the past; however, when the trauma caused by war seem irreversible some veterans lose hope, and the will to live. Hedges writes: “When the mask of war slips away and the rot and corruption is exposed, when the addiction turns sour and rank, when the myth is exposed as a fraud, we feel soiled and spent. It is then that we sink into despair, a despair that can lead us to welcome death” (Hedges, 164). Veterans who think about suicide are in such a dark place that they cannot imagine anything could take away their pain. They are as Hedges says, soiled and spent; veterans who are
in such despair have suffered so long that they no longer can see light in their life; all they experience is a constant darkness that suffocates them and sucks out their will to live.

In his iconic anti-war novel *Johnny Got His Gun*\(^{13}\) Trumbo’s character Joe has lost everything there is to lose: he has no face, no limbs, and no way to communicate with the few people in the hospital who interact with him. When Joe first wakes up in the hospital and he learns the extent of his injuries, suicide is becomes an appealing option: “He got a wild panicky eagerness to die to kill himself” (Trumbo, 61). When Joe wakes up and realizes he has no limbs or face he begins to panic. Every time he discovers another part of his body is missing he becomes convinced he is dying, which causes his panicked state of mind to consider suicide to end his life sooner than if he waits for his injuries to kill him. While Joe’s suicidal thoughts pass, the state of mind Joe is in when considering suicide is one of complete hopelessness and darkness, making him vulnerable to the decision of ending his pain forever. Suicide is an alluring thought for any veteran who spends all of his or her time in pain and darkness, as suicide will make sure they never have to experience those feelings or memories again.

While literature often emphasizes how the horrors of war can lead to a life of addiction, or a life that ends in suicide, in the hopes of making society re-evaluate the necessity of war, literature also reveals that there is a way to help each veteran return from war and reconcile with his or her trauma. Through different war novels, such as *Redeployment, The Yellow Birds,* and *Johnny Got His Gun,* and the analysis of literary critics, we can start to piece together possible treatment plans to help veterans live a life free from pain.

One of the ways literature offers healing is through acceptance. In *Redeployment*, readers are introduced to the character Jenks, a soldier whose face is disfigured because of an explosive in Iraq, and who has accepted what has happened to him:

Whether I’m a poor, disfigured vet who got exactly what he volunteered for… or the luckiest man on earth, surrounded by love and care at what is unquestionably the worst period of my life, is really a matter of perspective. There’s no upside to bitterness, so why be bitter? Perhaps I’ve sacrificed more for my country than most, but I’ve sacrificed far, far less than some. I have good friends. I have all my limbs. I have my brain and my soul and hope for the future. What sort of fool would I have to be, to not accept these gifts with the joy they deserve? (Klay, 230).

Jenks has as reason to be as angry as any other soldier. Just like other soldiers Jenks was put into a dangerous territory; he had to fight for his life; he saw people die, and he was up injured, resulting in permanent disfiguration. He has suffered, and he could have easily have taken a more destructive path. Yet Jenks has managed to come to the realization that being angry, bitter, and wallowing in pain will not turn back time; it will not change what happened; it will not make him handsome again. Jenks accepts his trauma, because he realizes that worse things could have happened. By reconciling with his past Jenks gives himself freedom. He allows himself to move on, and live a relatively normal life.

This story in *Redeployment* shows that reconciliation is possible; however it does not reveal the journey Jenks takes to reach acceptance. So we must look at another novel to discover
another piece to the road of recovery. Powers’ novel *The Yellow Birds* on of the steps needed to reach acceptance is revealed. Bartle, has agonized and tortured himself over breaking his promise to keep his fellow Marine Murphy alive. He blames himself for Murphy’s death, and at one point wants to commit suicide, but Murphy is lucky and is sent to prison before he can take any drastic measures: “My loss is fading too and I don’t know what it is becoming. Part of it is getting older, I guess, knowing Murphy is not. I can feel him getting farther away in time, and I know there are days ahead when I won’t think of him or Sterling or the war” (Powers, 223).

While prison seems like a punishment, it is actually a blessing. Bartle finds peace, because he uses his time in prison to reflect back on the war, something that many soldiers avoid. He uses the prison wall to write symbols to make the things that happened to him in Iraq into a timeline that makes sense. While Bartle is not able to make sense of everything, and he will always have some scars from the war, over time his reflection allows him to build relationships with the people he had neglected when he first returned to the States. It also allows him to reconcile with himself and live an ordinary life after his sentence is over.

As *The Yellow Birds* reveals, time is a key factor in coming to terms with what happens during war. Bartle shows that even when everything seems bleak, over time acceptance is possible. In order to reach the stage of acceptance, veterans have to face their trauma no matter how difficult it may be. However, facing trauma is not easy. Here, we shift from literature to literary critics to discuss ways in which veterans can hopefully face their trauma, even when it is painful, even when veterans wants to hide and push their memories, guilt, and shame away. In her essay “Our Secrets” Griffin reveals how understanding who a veteran was before entering
war can help him or her accept the terrible things that happened while overseas. She does this by trying to understand why Himmler grew up to be a part of gruesome genocide. Griffin examines Himmler’s diary, which he began at the age of 10. She finds the diary has no feelings, no emotions in them, and she blames this on Himmler’s father (118). Griffin also looks at an old German parenting book, in which she finds pictures that look like torturing methods, but are really techniques on how to ensure a child has correct posture (120).

Griffin uses this information not to forgive Himmler for his crimes, but to understand why Himmler ended up playing such a large role in the extermination of millions of people, in order to make Himmler seem more human. In an interview Griffin says: “People ask me, Do you forgive him? And that’s not the point. Who am I to forgive Himmler? The point is that we need to understand how someone like him came to be, in terms that are different from just calling him a monster” (Roeder, 27)14. Understanding Himmler does not make his actions acceptable, but understanding him does allow him to be recognized as human susceptible to error instead of a monster with no heart or conscious. While Griffin claims that the point is to understand, not forgive, this understanding of who veterans were during war can be separated from who they are after war, allowing them to face their trauma.

Another way to face trauma is to write about it. Writing about war is not only a way to expose the truths about the horrors of war, but it is also a therapeutic way to work through the awful memories and emotions leftover from war. In her novel Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma, Kali Tal writes: “literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and

retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it real both to the victim and to the community. Such writing serves both as validation and cathartic vehicle for the traumatized writer” (Tal, 137). As this thesis has discussed, literature reveals the truth about how destructive war can be to a person through stories. Literature, as Tal argues makes the experience of war real. However, literature clearly has more purpose than revealing stories. Literature reveals that writing must be therapeutic, as many of authors of war literature, such as Heller, Caputo, Powers, and Webb, have experienced war themselves. While not every veteran who returns home has the capability to produce a full-length novel, the overwhelming amount of literature written by veterans themselves suggests that incorporating writing into veteran programs would tremendously help veterans reconcile with their trauma.

The final way literature reveals how overcoming trauma is possible is learning how to communicate with civilians again. Coming back from war creates such a large disconnect between soldiers and civilians that it is essential that they learn to communicate with one another again, even when it seems impossible. While *Johnny Got His Gun* is meant to be an anti-war novel, among its pages it contains one of the most hopeful messages: that it is possible for veterans to learn to communicate with the world again. Joe has no limbs and he has no face; he cannot move and he cannot talk; he faces the toughest obstacles when it comes to trying to connect with the few nurses that come into his hospital room every day. However, he does find a way: “In the back of his mind something began to glimmer. If he could in some way make use of vibrations he could communicate with these people. Then the glimmer became a great dazzling white light” (Trumbo, 162). The attempt to communicate is not easy. When Joe first begins to
tap out Morse code using his head no one understands what he is trying to do. He is ignored or
given drugs, and there are moments where he begins to lose hope, but he refuses to give up.
Despite the doctors and nurses continuing to fail to recognize his attempts at communicating, Joe
keeps on trying until he is heard, until he is able to reconnect with the world that had previously
been closed off to him. Eventually his dedication pays off; someone realizes his attempts to
communicate through Morse code, and fetches someone who can tap Morse code back to him. If
a man without the ability to speak can reconnect with the world, then there is hope that other
soldiers can overcome their turmoil and learn to reconnect with the world around them.
Conclusion

War seems to have become a permanent fixture in our current world, and as a result there will always be young people who believe the propaganda that romanticizes war; there will always be young people to enlist and fight for a unified cause, whatever that unifying cause may be. However, as long as there are wars to fight, there will be veterans who come back from war defeated and lost. As Hedges writes in *War is a Force That Give Us Meaning*: “As long as we think abstractly, as long as we find in patriotism and the exuberance of war our fulfillment, we will never understand those who do battle against us, or how we are perceived by them, or finally those who do battle for us and how we should respond to it all” (Hedges, 180). While this thesis does not attempt attempts to understand those we fight against, it attempts to understand those who go into battle for us, and what they go through psychologically.

This thesis has conveyed the depth of transformation soldiers go through, as stories provide us with personal truths that research studies cannot reveal. Literature reveals that no matter how varying the motivators are to enlist in the military, many soldiers who are thrust into the midst of battle will undergo such a severe transformation in personality, beliefs, and demeanor that they return home from war unable to interact with society. However, the crucial information literature reveals, is that there is a path to helping veterans who have a difficult time reconciling with their trauma. Individual war novels may not have the answer to helping but veterans, but literature as a collective whole shows that veterans can overcome their trauma and lead normal lives if they face and accept their trauma, and learn how to connect with those around them again, even if it is a long, difficult road to do.
The next step that goes beyond this thesis is to take the research and discoveries discussed throughout it and try to incorporate it into current programs dedicated to helping veterans adjust back to civilian life. Taking the information literature provides us, and figuring out how to teach each veteran to reconcile their trauma is one way to making sure veteran’s homeless, addiction, and suicide rates decrease year after year until they are nonexistent. It is through the help of literature that we can educate returning soldiers and the clueless public that war is not glory and patriotism: war is death.
Bibliography


