

The Translation of Traumatic Memories of the Vietnam War into Narrative
Memory: Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and *In the Lake of the Woods*

by

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Abstract

Narratives of the Vietnam War were mostly written by American soldiers who experienced and witnessed traumatic events in times of combat, which, in turn, made them severely traumatized. This M.A. research aims to analyze how the traumatic events of this war, which were recovered by the memory of the soldiers fighting there, influence the fictional narratives produced by these combatants. Psychological studies are cited to link the aspects of traumatic and narrative memory and two examples of the literature of the Vietnam War are analyzed.

Keywords: psychological trauma, memory, the Vietnam War.

Resumo

Em geral, as narrativas da Guerra do Vietnam, foram escritas por soldados americanos que sofreram e testemunharam eventos traumáticos em tempos de combate, os quais, por sua vez, os deixaram terrivelmente traumatizados. A presente pesquisa busca analisar como que os acontecimentos traumáticos dessa guerra, os quais recuperados pela memória dos soldados que lutaram lá, influenciam as narrativas ficcionais escritas por esses combatentes. Estudos psicológicos são citados a fim de conectar os aspectos da memória traumática e da memória narrativa. Dois exemplos da literatura da Guerra do Vietnam são analisados.

Palavras-chave: trauma psicológico, memória, Guerra do Vietnam.

Introduction

My interest in war literature was aroused in 2004 when I was an undergraduate student of Professor Thomas Burns in the course “Masters of the American Prose.” Back then, he asked the class to read the story “How to Tell a True War Story” from Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*. In this story, which is both a complex meditation on war literature in general and an intelligent portrayal of trauma writing, O’Brien provides intelligent commentary on the art of storytelling, blurring the line between fiction and reality. That intrigued me. After that, I started reading more about war literature, joining a study group on the literature of the Vietnam War coordinated by Professor Burns.

My undergraduate monograph, completed in June 2007, entitled *War and Trauma: The Significance of Memory in Narratives of War*, analyzes the significance of memory in narratives of war and evaluates some types of trauma-related memories connected to writing. This led me to study how trauma manifests itself in narratives of the Vietnam War. In this monograph, I briefly examined some types of memory related to writing, the effect of forgetfulness in writing, the importance of narrative in cultural life and memory as a crucial factor of integration between the past and the present. This Master’s thesis is a development of my 2007 monograph, and it aims at studying specifically the relation between trauma and war narrative.

My research is on psychology and trauma as a support for the impact of the war on the soldier and its attendant effect on his writing. There are excellent books on how the United States became mired in a war that claimed thousands of lives in a small country in Southeast Asia, but my research focuses on how the traumatic events of this

war, which were recovered by the memory of the soldiers fighting there, influence the narrative process.

Narratives produced by war combatants present repetition, fragmentation, indirection, omission and irony because these narratives rely on their memory, so when combatants narrativize traumatic events through memory, logic language fails. Narratives of the Vietnam War were mostly written by soldiers who experienced and witnessed traumatic events in times of combat, which, in turn, made them disproportionately traumatized.

The literary corpus to be studied is made up of two novels: Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) and *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994). In this research, the issue of trauma and memory of the characters in these works of fiction is analyzed. References will be made to psychoanalysis and philosophy, but the aim is strictly literary.

In her article entitled "Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work: Reading Gertrud Kolmar's *A Jewish Mother*," Irene Kacandes suggests the term "narrative witnessing," which, according to her, is "a circuit connecting an individual writer, her text, and her present reader" (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer 55). It is important, however, not to confuse the relation author/text/reader with the patient/account/therapist relation. They are different. In the author/text/reader relation, the reader does not interfere in the text directly, although the writer knows he/she is writing to a reader who is a part of the same cultural system. In the patient/account/therapist relation, the therapist, who is kind of a reader of an account, interferes in the "text."

According to Kacandes, Pierre Janet and various other researchers and psychoanalysts, the alleviation of traumatic symptoms like flashbacks, reenactments,

amnesia, and numbing, among others, seems to call for the construction of some type of consistent narrative about the event or events that imposed the trauma. This process is sometimes called the translation of traumatic memory into narrative memory, which is the subject of my investigation. It is unfortunate that most victims have phobias of traumatic events and frequently retreat socially, so the creation of a narrative is exceptionally difficult. Not having an understanding listener with whom to share the story, the trauma perpetuates as a “symptom-waiting-to-be-narrated.” Psychoanalytic reports propose that to accomplish healing, a circuit of communication must take place. In this case, the elements of this circuit are an enunciator (the trauma victim-patient), a story (the narrative of the traumatic event), and an enabler of that story (the listener-analyst). The association with this circuit is vital to make a bridge to literature. A story to be considered “told” has to be received by the reader (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer 55-56).

If characters bear witness to their trauma, the process of translation of traumatic memory into coherent narrative memory most probably takes place. This narrative memory can then be incorporated both into the survivor’s vision of the world as well as into his/her own sense of individuality, thus reintegrating the survivor into a community and regenerating links that are vital to individuality. This revitalizes survivors of trauma who are then able to continue with “overhauled” lives. Reading is an activity similar to witnessing trauma, which makes the conscious integration of traumatic events easier. The incompetence of characters in a novel to recognize trauma inscribed in a soldier’s body, their omission of naming, narrating, and remembering, sheds light on novels that would, in some other way, be stigmatized as melodramatic and sentimental. The concept of biographical narrative as a translation comes into play here. The objective of

this research is to consider the narrative process associated with traumatic memory as a translation process.

The idea of “translation,” to which I refer, is a metaphor for the trauma narrative. In a translation process, the translated text loses something in relation to the target text, but at the same time adds something extra to it. The traumatic narrative loses something too, as it is not able to recover the whole of the traumatic event, but it also adds something extra to it.

All types of memories described in this study are crucial in dislocating events from their seclusion and integrating them in a universal scope. That is the work of the writer. Memory is reconstruction. Writing is too, in most ways. The capacity to remember particular past events is closely related to the concept of memory as a process that goes back to the past trying to extract thoughts, images, and feelings to bring them into the present. In the same way, writing travels back in time in an attempt to capture what was lived and convert it into a narrative present that strives to make our lives more meaningful. Here lies the relevance of my research to the field of literary studies in general as well as to war studies, in particular. I hope to encourage the critical reader, who develops a task similar to that of a mediator. Once conscious of the dilemma of the traumatized individual, the recipients of the narrative accomplish a task of narrative healing through memory, as they are prompted to demand cultural and political solidarity in the reading process.

Chapter one analyzes what leads combatants to write war stories. It pinpoints the difference between generals’ accounts of battles and military strategies and the soldier’s tale: how they are small-scale, detailed, confined, very local, incoherent and retrospective by their nature. As horror and strangeness are present in every war, so is

fascination and pleasure. Reality, truth, the restricted vision of witness, the infidelities of the memory, the unavoidable distortions of language are important facets which influence war narratives. That is why “truth” is impossible or even irrelevant. Few American combatants who served in the Vietnam War were comfortable with their role there. Unlike other modern wars, this one was different: it was a long war fought by short-timers whose average age was less than nineteen; most of the troops came from the lower end of the American social scale; it was a war fought without a front, a war of attrition, fought against a phantom-like enemy and against the pressures of an anti-war opinion at home. Thus, the effect on the narratives is evident. Soldiers have an ironic perception of the war, which influences the way they narrate events. Several narratives of the Vietnam War do not end when the fighting is over: homecoming is a common theme. Soldiers come back physically and psychologically damaged, addicted to alcohol and drugs, as well as disturbed by the burden of guilt; an impressive number of them suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

In chapter two I show that trauma is closely connected to traumatic memory, which influences narrative in many ways. Narratives of the Vietnam War were mostly written by soldiers who experienced and witnessed traumatic events in times of combat, which, in turn, made them disproportionately traumatized. In this chapter, a brief summary of the development of the study of psychological trauma from the nineteenth century to 1980 is given, covering its alliances with political movements, its underground history, and its connection to hysteria. The traumatic neurosis of war and trauma in domestic abuse is investigated. An understanding of the psychological consequences of this mental condition is studied. Finally, a definition of trauma is examined and an analysis of how trauma can be a model of history is carried out.

Chapter three briefly examines how psychoanalytic criticism started and the role it plays in literature. The focus of this chapter is to analyze the significance of memory in narratives of war, mostly written by foot soldiers that experienced and witnessed traumatic events in times of combat. Some types of trauma-related memories connected to writing are evaluated: traumatic memory, unreflective habitual memory, narrative memory, cultural memory, the importance of narrative in cultural life and memory as a crucial factor of integration between the past and the present. The contrast between involuntary memories and narrative memories is emphasized.

Chapter four presents a brief biography of Tim O'Brien, the author of the two novels. It also portrays him as a trauma artist, examining how his works both portray and have been generated by Vietnam trauma. Trauma is essentially the agent through which his protagonists are driven to revisit and rewrite their life experiences. O'Brien emphasizes ideas; his traumatized protagonists are mostly involved in meditation instead of action, usually reflecting on what they have experienced in order to understand it. The chapter analyzes O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, a collection of twenty-two interconnected short stories about a platoon of American soldiers in the Vietnam War. The book is a reflection on the experiences of these soldiers during and after the war, an introspective memory novel, a powerful meditation on the experiences of the war, and a self-conscious examination of the methods and reasons behind storytelling. Also studied is O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*, a psychological enigma novel, where O'Brien explores the mysteries of the human spirit and the issue of trauma and memory of the characters, refusing closure and forcing readers to live with uncertainty. In the book, John Wade, a Vietnam veteran and recent candidate for the

U.S. Senate retreats with his wife, Kathy, to a lakeside cabin in northern Minnesota.

Within days of their arrival there, Kathy mysteriously disappears.

Chapter One - The Soldier and His War: the Rifle and the Pen

1.1. What Leads Combatants to Write Memoirs

The war is one of the oldest and most recurrent practices of human beings. Fundamentally, the history of humanity is the history of wars. Combined with the practice of war is the need to narrate it, to depict the conflicts. An event that affects the lives of thousands, and many times millions of people, defining the destiny of nations and continents needs to be registered, both for its importance and for a need to comprehend it. Times of crisis push literature to its limits, requiring writers to exploit their expressive resources to the maximum in response to extreme events.

The literature of war is ancient. The inaugural novel of the western literary tradition is *The Iliad*, a Greek epic poem describing the siege of Troy, believed to have been written around 750 B.C. Its authorship is conventionally attributed to Homer, a blind poet. The importance of the Trojan War in ancient Western literature is so vital that it can be regarded as the most significant topic of the literary corpus inherited from early Western civilization. *The Aeneid*, a Latin epic poem recounting the adventures of Aeneas after the fall of Troy, was written by Virgil in the late first century, and published for the first time only after his death in 19 B.C. *Beowulf*, an anonymous Old English epic poem principally concerning the exploits of the warrior Beowulf and containing historical and legendary tales about the Geats, Danes, and other older Germanic peoples is believed to have been composed between 700 and 1000 A.D.

In later periods, war has also been important to literature. *War and Peace*, a Russian epic novel by Leo Tolstoy delineating events leading up to Napoleon's invasion of Russia, and the impact of Napoleonic era on Tsarist society was published in 1869. Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, a depiction of the American Civil War, published in 1895, shattered American preconceptions about what a war novel could be.

Written thirty years after the end of the Civil War by a twenty-four-year-old young man who had neither fought in war nor witnessed battle before writing this book, Crane relied on his readings of Leo Tolstoy's war stories, popular memoirs of Civil War veterans, and his imagination to create the realistic combat sequences of the novel. He not only captured the disorientation and chaos of the battlefield, but found completely original ways to describe a foot soldier's experience. Different from what had been published previously, the book tells the experience of war from the point of view of Private Henry Fleming, an ordinary soldier, depicting his trials and tribulations, focusing on his individual psychology. Based loosely on the events of the Civil War Battle of Chancellorsville (May 2-6, 1863), Crane represents Henry's mind as a maze of vanity, illusions, and romantic naïveté, challenged by the hard lessons of war. As he faces combat for the first time, Henry experiences an intense array of emotions: courage, anxiety, self-confidence, fear, and egotistic zeal. Crane's experimentation with psychological realism, and his venture into the realm of the human psyche radically changed the common appreciation of the war novel in America.

Catherine Brosman contends that there are different functions of what she names "older" and "recent" war literature. Older war narratives make great military deeds memorable, link them to the history of a nation, establish standards of military behavior and encourage a warlike spirit. By and large, the concept of literary hero has military origins and is collective: heroic courage is stipulated by, exercised as a representative of, and validated by society. Modern war literature, on the other hand, has seized the imagination of the young to sculpt a sense of national purpose and instigate a warlike spirit as well. The modern action novel, particularly the war novel, is basically an offspring of the epic and heroic fashions of earlier literature (Brosman 86).

Brosman states that another function of war literature in modern times, and, in a sense, directly opposed to the former function, is to “demystify war and the military, with its linguistic, behavioral and other codes and to support pacifism.” Examples: D.C. Berry’s *Saigon Cemetery* (1972) and Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990). The goal, nowadays habitual among poets, novelists, and journalists, of narrating the war as it is, and not as what it should be, probably stems from the need to demystify an experience that centuries of histories had worshipped. The means of removing the mask of idealism differ. First: impartial, objective descriptive and narrative style, in contrast with the old heroic vocabulary and traditions. Second: consistent emphasis upon the blood, the fear, the dreadful conditions of existence, and the malicious havoc; third: a powerful appeal to pity; fourth: an open and direct criticism of a war (Brosman 89).

According to Patrick Smith, portrayals of wars in the United States until World War I are restricted mainly to “generals’ accounts of battles and military strategies.” The muddle and the chaos of the conflicts have to be imagined by the reader (Smith 11). Commonly, generals and commanders don’t fight in the fields, don’t live with their soldiers, don’t get themselves shot at. For the most part, they are in the rear, out of reach, where the bullets, the bombs, and the poisonous gases are not. Memoirs of generals and senior officers give a broader view of the war, depicting the story of command, tactics, strategy, power, influence, politics. They are closer to historical narratives.

When considering exclusively the wars of the twentieth century, for example, the two world wars, the Spanish Civil War, the war in Korea, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and some others like the ones in Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Algeria, it is particularly difficult to understand what they were like and how it felt for the

combatant. In this case, history along with politics and statistics fail to convey a human picture. According to Burns, the soldier's tale, the personal narrative of the combatant, describes the "specific sights, sounds and smells of combat, being candidly subjective" (Burns 272). Philip Caputo wrote in *A Rumor of War* (1977) of his experience in Vietnam as he was marching with his platoon through a gallery jungle that grew alongside a river:

The company seemed to be marching into a vacuum, haunted by a presence intangible yet real, a sense of being surrounded by something we could not see. It was the inability to see that vexed us most. In that lies the jungle's power to cause fear: it blinds. (Caputo 85)

This passage is an account of what it was actually like "to be there," where the real horror took place. Men haunted by their imaginations, enduring pain, proving their toughness, confronting death. This is the human story of the war.

The need to record one's experience and feelings has always been a reason for writing. This is also true for combat soldiers. They are led by a number of emotional and intellectual impulses to tell their stories, but one may wonder what leads soldiers to write about their personal experiences if the voice from the past was so grievous. One reason would be to justify one's actions to oneself and to others, another one would be to set the record straight because of official distortion (Burns 271).

The contrast between official dogma and personal experience brings substantial affliction to soldiers. This is another simple reason for writing: to relieve in print traumatic experiences as a therapeutic exercise, or writing as a way to expel the monsters of the memory. The need to confess, to make amends for past mistakes, crimes or sins is usually made transparent by the narrator of war stories (Burns 273). Catherine

Brosman contends that in writing, the trauma suffered by the combatant is somehow relieved, reexamined and accepted via an apparent catharsis. For some soldiers, the writing of their experiences not only means creating art from life but reevaluating individual and moral issues. The rebuilding of combat experiences may work not only as a personal catharsis, but as a collective one (Brosman 90).

Hynes claims that all men who experience war are radically changed. Not all soldiers are self-conscious or introspective enough to write about their changes, but this mutation is there, even if not fully and clearly expressed in narratives. “Change – *inner* change,” is one other reason for war stories: “not only what happened, but what happened to *me*.” This complicated scenario of acting and being acted upon does not commonly put pen to paper right after incidents take place: war stories are “retrospective” by their nature. Eric Hobsbawn contends that most people function like historians: “they only recognize the nature of their experience in retrospect” (Hobsbawn 257). Additionally, memory works slowly, and imagination has to wait upon it to “reveal itself.” To notice how war has changed a man demands the action of time going past and a distance from the “remembered self.” It is no wonder that the bulk of war narratives “come late in life” (Hynes 3-4).

According to Hynes, a war memoir could be considered a “subcategory” of an autobiography, a “conversion literature,” since it is a testimony of a deep inner change in the narrator. War novels written by veterans are often disguised autobiographies. The majority of the war stories start with an average young man, a person of no importance or influence, who undergoes the experience of war to come forth in the end “defined by what has happened to him.” War shapes a nobody into an Individual. No matter how young, a man never returns from a war still a boy. Hynes claims that at the same time

that it “makes men” it sets them apart from others who did not go through the same “shaping” experience, thrusting them into a kind of “secret society.” It is possible that this “sense of isolation” is one reason for writing war memoirs, which would be a kind of communication among the members of this secret society (Hynes 5-6).

Without taking career soldiers into consideration, Hynes contends that military service is a type of “exile” from real life which fosters a sense of isolation. This feeling is not only a circumstance of combat but also typical to the condition of being in a war. He claims that war is not only action, it is a “culture.” According to him, the military way of life, principles, and codes of conduct permeate all facets of army life and definitely changes the most common standards of behavior and feelings (Hynes 8). Friendship, for instance, is so different in war that it requires another name: “*comradeship*.”

A soldier spends virtually all his time, awake and asleep, with his mates; he is with them more continuously than most men are with their wives. And at critical moments his life may depend on their fidelity and courage. Most marriages don't come to that. (Hynes 9)

Such statements make it clear that comradeship in war is much deeper than any friendship enjoyed in civilian life. Additionally, it occurs unexpectedly, unintentionally. “Comrades” in war are not selected, they are chosen by the system (Hynes 9).

According to Hynes, comradeship among combatants is deep, yet feeble: “men die; tours of duty end; even wars end.” This double connotation of “intensity and temporariness” is present in many soldier's tales. Hynes exemplifies this notion with both a passage from Alex Bowlby's *Recollections of Rifleman Bowlby* (1969): “I was afraid of anything coming between me and the Company, afraid of losing the love and

support I had found there [...]” and Guy Chapman’s *A Passionate Prodigality: Fragments of Autobiography* (1933): “[...] this body of men had become so much a part of me that its disintegration would tear away something I cared for more dearly than I could have believed.” It is noteworthy here that the feelings of affection are “not to an army or a nation or a cause, but to a battalion, a company, a platoon, [...] which become the focus of his love and loyalty, like a family” (Hynes 9).

But if attachment among soldiers is different in war, so is hostility. Men can change their “essential nature” and commit atrocities, do things that would be considered “monstrous and inhuman in peacetime,” as if they were in another world:

War is another world, where men feel and act differently; and so, when they return to the other world of peace and ordinariness, they feel a need to tell their tales of the somewhere else where they have been. In memory, war seems like a dream, or the life of some other man, remembered with some kind of astonishment. (Hynes 10)

This passage substantiates an imperative for narrative to both try to explain why men act so differently in wartime and in peacetime and to try to connect these two strikingly different worlds.

For the average combatant, the war is his only chance in life to take part in a historic event. On one hand, historians are the ones who chronicle the history of military operations, battles, glorious victories, and overwhelming defeats. They summarize reports, analyze statistics, and make deductions about strategy and tactics. Superb at pointing the ones to be granted approval, as well as those to take the blame, historians turn “war’s chaos into order.” On the other hand, combatants narrate a different story, one that is habitually rather “ahistorical,” even anti-historical.” Their stories do not

focus on neither the time nor the place where the action took place. Seldom do they name places or date operations. Many times they didn't know where they were; other times they forgot the name of the place, which appears to be appropriate for the stories they tell: precise dates and accurate geography would convert personal experience into battles, into chronicles that are published in history books, magazines, and newspapers. "Unlocated" narrative confines the soldier's tale to his individual sphere. He neither has much to say about strategy nor about other battles that took place elsewhere. He is neither interested in victory nor in defeat, except if that affects him personally (Hynes 11).

According to Hynes, it is noteworthy that very few writers of personal narratives of war have been influenced by the literary styles of their era: "tellers of Victorian wars have not been notably Victorian, narrators of modern wars have not been Modernists." He contends that the usual mode of war fiction is realism. No matter if these soldiers were "one-book amateurs or would-be men of letters," the telling of their stories is direct and undecorated. They have narrated their wars with simple vocabulary, portraying things, persons and actions in a straightforward manner, and avoiding metaphors (Hynes 26). The passage below was taken from Hervey Allen's *Toward the Flame* (1926), an American memoir of the First World War:

I have tried to reproduce in words my experience in France during the Great War. There is no plot, no climax, no happy ending to this book. It is a narrative, plain, unvarnished, without heroics, and true. It is what I saw as nearly as memory has preserved it, and I have set it down as a picture of war with no comment. (Hynes 26)

This passage exemplifies the plain realism present in his novel. That's the way Allen found to tell what a young man learned from combat. He simply recorded what he thought happened, the literary fashion of his time was not regarded.

War narratives are about what happened and how it affected the combatant individually. In general, soldiers are not worried about the *why*. A rational answer to this question would be: the suffering he is going through makes sense to some higher military official or statesman. If there is no answer, or if the answer is irrational, the soldier's reaction is that of rage and bitterness. *Why* is the underlying impetus of personal war narratives, but it isn't the story (Hynes 12).

These narratives are "small-scale, detailed, confined, very local, limited and incoherent," and that's the way it has to be, because that's the way combatants see the war. A German soldier wrote after the First World War: "Shell-hole and trench have a limited horizon. The range of vision extends no further than a bomb-throw; but what is seen is seen very distinctly" (Hynes 12). The visibility in the Second World War was not better, and even worse for men who fought in machines. This is a report of a British tank commander during the Normandy invasion:

One morning ... I was told by the brigade major to report more precisely and more often what was going on. I replied since I was shut up inside a camouflaged, stationary tank with its turret closed down I had precisely nothing, often or not, to report. ... Could he tell *me* what was going on? (Hynes 13)

Soldiers outside the machines could see more, but they didn't have a broader understanding of what was going on. During the Second World War, an American soldier in the North African campaign said that he could see for miles around him in the

open field, but he added: “We actually know no more, as usual, than the folks back home except about our little sector” (Hynes 13). It might be inferred that wars are fought and remembered by soldiers who are not conscious of the events and their meanings outside the reach of their own vision, because “their attention is on other closer, mortal things” (Hynes 14). No combatant will see much of the battle he is fighting, and what he sees will not be recalled the same way as others who have been there will. From this viewpoint, a soldier’s tale will never be an accurate authority. As history, it does not fulfill all the requirements. It is full of mistakes, filled with emotion, one-sided and limited.

Robert Graves’s *Goodbye to All That*, was first published in 1929, more than ten years after the First World War was over, being revised and republished in 1957 at the request of an American publisher. The book is a landmark anti-war memoir of life in the trenches during World War I and one from which post-war generations have built their comprehension of the conflict. Hynes contends that when Graves pondered about the veracity of war novels, he inferred that personal memoirs could not pass the test of historical authenticity:

It was practically impossible (as well as forbidden) to keep a diary in any active trench-sector, or to send letters home which would be of any great post-War documentary value; and the more efficient the soldier the less time, of course, he took from his job to write about it. Great latitude should therefore be allowed to a soldier who has since got his facts or dates mixed. I would even paradoxically say that the memoirs of a man who went through some of the worst experiences of trench warfare are

not truthful if they do not contain a high proportion of falsities. (Hynes 16)

Graves's paradox is quite appropriate. War memoirs are not history and cannot be. They have their own human voice, something that history does not have. They have their own personal profile, which is not the profile of history. They are different in their own way, being neither better nor worse.

As horror and strangeness are present in every war, so is fascination and pleasure. The first chapter of Joanna Bourke's *An Intimate History of Killing* (1999) is entitled "The Pleasures of War," in which she contends that the combat narrative is a way of dealing with a primary tension of war: "although the act of killing another person in battle may invoke a wave of nauseous distress, it may also incite intense feelings of pleasure." According to her, William Broyles, an ex-Marine and editor of the *Texas Monthly* and *Newsweek*, was one of the combatants who investigated some of the basic incongruities in war narratives. He believes that "[...] most men who have been to war would have to admit, if they are honest, that somewhere inside themselves they loved it too." Broyles claims that this is hard to explain to friends and family, and veteran's meetings were somewhat uncomfortable because the joyful side of killing was not easy to confess: "To describe combat as enjoyable was like admitting to being a bloodthirsty brute [...]" (Bourke 1-2).

Rifleman Harris is another example. He retired from his position as a career soldier to open up a shoemaker's shop in Soho, London. In his shop, forty years later, he clearly remembered a French soldier who was killed on August 21, 1808, at the Battle of Vimiero, where the British defeated the French near the village of Vimiero, near Lisbon, Portugal. Harris remembered this soldier was totally roasted and he and his

comrades made a lot of fun of him. Harris was illiterate, and to write his book entitled *Recollections* he had to dictate his memories to an ex-officer in his shop. Probably the most surprising passage of the book is this paragraph, towards the end:

For my own part I can only say that I enjoyed life more whilst on active service than I have ever done since; and as I sit at work in my shop in Richmond Street, Soho, I look back upon that portion of my time spent in the fields of the Peninsula as the only part worthy of remembrance.
(Hynes 22)

This authentic voice is commonplace in most war memoirs. It doesn't mean that Harris's war was especially noble or heroic; the stories he narrates are of British failures. What matters most is that, when these things happened, he was there, as a soldier and as a witness. Other soldiers, in other wars have verbalized the same feeling. A lance corporal, who was with the British troops at Suvla Bay in Gallipoli, Turkey, in 1915, wrote: "It was a horrible and a great day. I would not have missed it for worlds" (Hynes 22). What do these testimonies synthesize? Do they reflect the conviction that war adds greater value or significance to a soldier's life? Not precisely. But they say that war "expands and extends" a man's simple life. At least for once he can be more than a simple man who repairs shoes in Soho or sells cooking utensils. War affords experiences that men esteem highly and remember: shoes and cooking utensils don't offer that.

War, therefore, arouses ambivalent feelings. Philip Caputo in his book *A Rumor of War* (1977), states:

[...] I could not deny the grip the war had on me, nor the fact that it had been an experience as fascinating as it was repulsive, as exhilarating as it

was sad, as tender as it was cruel. [...] Anyone who fought in Vietnam, if he is honest about himself, will have to admit he enjoyed the compelling attractiveness of combat. It was a peculiar enjoyment because it was mixed with a commensurate pain. (Caputo xvii)

This passage goes against the traditionalist civilian idea of war in general and of the Vietnam War in particular. According to Hynes, this seems accurate, based on many soldier's narratives from many wars: the majority of the soldiers feel the tremendous exhilaration and romance of war. They even find it beautiful, "and not only *before* they experience war but *after*" (Hynes 27). Some combatants never lose this thrill. They love the war. But one might wonder what exactly these men love. "Not the killing and the violence, I think, but the excitement, the drama, and the danger" – a lot of adrenaline, like a complex, lethal game. This excitement is present in their memoirs, like a strong impetus that keeps them moving through their toughest days. When the ones who are both conscious of their own feelings and honest to themselves ponder on their lives as soldiers, they admit feeling nostalgia for that "strange, exciting world." This nostalgia is probably another reason that leads them to write (Hynes 28).

War stories narrate what soldiers do in war and the impact of the conflict on these men's lives, but not accurately. Memoirs are "retrospective, filtered reality, what memory preserves." Memory is unreliable, not only as a source of history, but as a story of an individual. It molds and gives a distinct quality to forms and feelings of the past, being a barrier to truth. Here lies an important facet of war narratives: reality, truth, the restricted vision of the witness, the infidelities of the memory, the unavoidable distortions of language. Hynes claims that "these problems are not peculiar to war narratives; they are inherent to all our relations with the past." And yet, apparently the

conditions of war maximizes the distortions and increases the complexities of writing about the events (Hynes 25).

One of the complexities of war memoirs is the “I-was-there” concept. A claim to authenticity meaning “this is not made up” leads to a seeming contradiction: the soldier who was there claims his authority as the only genuine witness of his war; yet the truth he speaks of is jeopardized both by the essence of memory and language as well as by other witnesses, each telling his own ultimate truth of the facts. A character in Tom Suddick’s *A Few Good Men* (1978) asks: “Know the difference between a fairy tale and a war story?” As another character asks him “Okay, what?,” he answers: “A fairy tale begins, “Once upon a time,” and a war story begins, “This is no shit”” (Suddick 132). Burns contends that, using the same conventional method, “[...] the fictional account must establish its authority not, in its status as fiction through extra-textual claims, but through the power of its language to elicit the reader’s assent to the reality evoked.” Here, Stephen Crane is the classic example (Burns 271-72).

Tobey Herzog contends that war stories struggle for “a higher level of literary truth.” (Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories* 3) According to Tim O’Brien in *The Things They Carried*,

In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 78)

In the same novel O’Brien says in a simple way: “[...] story truth is truer sometimes than happening truth” (O’Brien 203). These two passages corroborate the fact that truth is impossible, or even irrelevant. But the personal narrative is the closest that it can be

gotten to the reality of what war was like, how it felt, what soldiers did and what the war did to them. No other path would be available, besides imagination, to understand the human experience of war than the witness of the soldiers who were there.

1.2. The Vietnam Soldier-Writer

The Vietnam War (see Appendix for a brief historical account) was an explosive conflict that defined a generation and continues to linger in American and Vietnamese minds. The United States had no real concrete rational reason to get involved in Vietnam, but they got involved anyway and inflicted a lot of damage on the region with no conceivable justification for the suffering the Vietnamese went through, not to mention the lives of the American soldiers lost there.

After years of discord, the question “Why are we in Vietnam?” demanded more than a simple explanation. As time went by, the accounts of the soldiers who had been there, the lives of many young Americans that were sacrificed, the images seen on TV, the taxpayer’s money spent, the innumerable doubts American authorities had as what to do and how to proceed, the wrong choices these men made most of the time, all made it clear that the answer to the question was known: “There was no conceivable justification for the horrors daily inflicted on and suffered in Vietnam” (Young ix).

Therefore, few American combatants who served in the war were comfortable with their role there. The soldier in Vietnam was always tormented by deep skepticism, distressed by an abyss between the reasons given for his presence in Vietnam and his painful daily ordeal. In the beginning, the reason, or the moral justification, was apparently simple: the other side, the North Vietnamese, had been named the aggressor.

When he got to Vietnam, he realized *he* was the aggressor. And upon returning home, he was made to feel a villain or victim, a loser.

Vietnam War novels most often voice a worry about the American presence in Vietnam, question the correctness of the war (O’Nan 4), and examine if the war should be connected to the “larger cultural forces that produced it.” Most of these works address these questions openly, but some just imply them. All the authors have their opinion of the war, and their point of view most invariably comes up in the novels, which leads to an analytical thinking between subjectivity and war literature: “How can the author’s politics not influence his or her depiction of the war?” Assuming that most of the war experiences of combatants are traumatic, their portrayals transcend the confines of politics and go into the personal, emotional connection they have had with the war, thus affecting their depiction. This thinking leads to the questioning of the claim of verisimilitude, an awkward and delicate issue, since the ultimate authority for portraying this war has been conceded to individual participants. In place of a solid and uniform history of the war, what readers are left with are pieces of a puzzle to be put together (O’Nan 4).

The story of the Vietnam War, by both historians and soldier-writers is a kind of a modern admonitory tale as well as a didactic story. It seems that World War I and II are a thing of the past now, but the interference of one country in the affairs of another is still feasible, be it by means of revolutions or civil wars. Recent history reveals that interference of this type is bound to end in “humiliation and withdrawal,” but for the American population, the Vietnam War is “more than a lesson in political unwisdom.” It remains alive in the minds of the Americans “like the memory of an illness, a kind of fever that weakened the country until its people were divided and its cause was lost.”

Hynes claims that this fever is present in the novels American combatants have written about the war, thus making these novels distinct from novels of other modern wars, not only because the United States lost, “but because in the loss there was humiliation and bitterness and the burden of complicity in a nation’s moral failure” (Hynes 177).

There was a shared feeling in the combatants of both the Vietnam War and British soldiers of World War I: they had been “betrayed” by the authorities who sent them to war. But there was a difference: no civilian reaction took place in World War England worthy of comparison with the antiwar demonstrations staged during the Vietnam years. Thus, American combatants in Vietnam had a different sense of betrayal from the soldiers of the First World War: “they had been doubly betrayed,” by the authorities and by the “war protesters of their own generation.” This double betrayal permeates Vietnam’s soldiers’ novels with manifest effect, giving them a disappointed and inconsistent tone (Hynes 180).

According to Hynes, “a nation chooses its war story when it chooses the men who will fight in its wars” (Hynes 182). For the Vietnam War, the United States chose to send young men from the lower end of the social ladder – the rural and urban poor, the children of the slums, of farmers, mechanics and construction workers. According to General Westmorland, who commanded U.S. forces in Vietnam, the average age of his troops was less than nineteen, as compared to an average of twenty-four in Korea and twenty-six in the Second World War. An army of teenagers in a frightening foreign country, with only a few months of military training to make them soldiers, not capable of making moral decisions, not used to taking responsibilities was an army of indecisive, scared boys.

In Vietnam, everyone was a short-timer – the soldier spent 365 days in the war and then was sent back home. No one belonged to a unit for as long as a year. This constant turnover of men led to a discontinuity of effort: there was neither any strong sense of the unit as an entity, nor could any collective trust be developed (Hynes 184).

1.2.1. The Peculiar Nature of the Vietnam War

According to Herzog, the enemy soldier was not the only one to be combated in this war; it was also fought against the “heat, rain and cold; against the land – jungle, elephant grass, rice paddies, rainforests, mosquitoes and leeches, dust, and mud; and even against the civilian population.” The overwhelming majority of American soldiers neither spoke the Vietnamese language nor understood their culture. Most of the time they had trouble deciding whether “Vietnamese civilians, including women and children, were friends, foes, innocent bystanders, indifferent observers or active participants in the war.” The resulting chaos was frequently catastrophic for both sides: innocent Vietnamese civilians killed by insensitive or disoriented Americans and good American soldiers killed by “innocent-looking civilians.” The resulting “guilt, moral dilemmas, brutality, and darkness of the human spirit” emanating from these clashes plague many combatants writing about their Vietnam experience (Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories* 52).

For the American soldier fighting in Vietnam, the people, the culture, and the enemy were awfully strange. It was a frightening place. According to Philip Caputo in *A Rumor of War*, “there was nothing friendly about a Vietnamese bush; it was one of the last of the dark regions of the earth, and only the very brave or the very dull – the two

often went together – could look at it without feeling fear” (Caputo 111-12). Additionally, the savage, cold and inhuman essence of guerrilla warfare added to the soldiers’ frustration. Caputo writes in *A Rumor of War*:

[...] In effect, we commuted to and from the war. We went into the bush for a day or two or three, returned for a brief rest, and went out again. There was no pattern to these patrols and operations. Without a front, flanks, or rear, we fought a formless war against a formless enemy, who evaporated like morning mists, only to materialize in some unexpected place. It was a haphazard, episodic sort of combat. (Caputo 95)

In this passage, Caputo states the outlandish essence of this war. A confused nature of fighting, with no “front, flanks or rear,” fought against a phantom-like enemy. Front lines were nonexistent, enemy attacks could take place anywhere, thus requiring unrelenting alertness and engendering a high level of battle stress. The soldier’s resulting sense of risk, insecurity and vulnerability caused a lot of psychological damage to the Americans (Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories* 51-52).

The North Vietnamese Army fought swift, surprising local actions and then disappeared, leaving the American troops to hunt for them. According to Herzog, “the enemy’s principal strategy was to cause havoc without being seen through small scale-night ambushes, snipers, heavy use of mines and deadly booby-traps, and extensive mortar-fire on American positions” (Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories* 51). The Vietcong guerillas moved imperceptibly in the dark, lying in ambush; every bush and every path was threatening.

The solution American generals found was attrition warfare, a military strategic concept which states that to win a war, one’s enemy must be worn down to the point of

collapse by continuous losses in personnel and material. In Vietnam, once conventional methods for determining military success in battlefield were extremely difficult, US military planners resorted to body-counts to measure progress. Herzog contends that such emphasis on numbers in this war of attrition led to exaggerated assertions of American soldiers' insensitive neglect for Vietnamese civilian lives. In a US military unit, discrimination between confirmed enemy, suspect enemy and innocent civilians was not clear to produce outstanding kill ratios. In an adverse manner, this policy had a substantial influence on the moral sense and determination of American combatants: they were skeptical about the value of numbers in establishing the progress of the war while trying to deal with the moral conflict resulting from such a policy (Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories* 53).

American soldiers, most of them teenagers, were not comfortable with their role in Vietnam. They went through a few months of training to become soldiers. They had a one-year limited tour of duty fighting in a country against a phantom-like enemy whose culture was totally different from the Americans. The conditions of the battlefields were dreadful. The frontlines were nonexistent. The conditions of the nature were utterly exhausting. Body-counts was an indication of battlefield success. There was widespread opposition at home to the war, especially after 1968. Together these and other distinctive features of the Vietnam War directly or indirectly influence how Vietnam war stories are written.

1.2.2. The Ironic Spirit of Modern War Novels

American combat veteran of World War II and well-known literary critic, Paul Fussell, states in his book *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975): “Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected” (Fussell 7). Among the several structural patterns and war themes discussed in his book, Fussell observes the ironic spirit permeating the most reflective and revealing pieces of World War I literature written by Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen, Edmund Blunden and others. This enormous strain between the tough realities of the battlefield and the combatant’s romantic expectations of war has influenced World War I authors as they remember their experiences.

According to Fussell, “[...] the fuel of hope is innocence” (Fussell 18). British soldiers entered World War I with high expectations and idealistic ideas of war influenced by novels and poems of authors such as George Alfred Henty, Rider Haggard, Robert Bridges, Alfred Tennyson and William Morris (Fussell 21). Fussell quotes A. J. P. Taylor in his book: “No man in the prime of life knew what war was like. All imagined that it would be an affair of great marches and great battles quickly decided” (Fussell 21). And yet, the British soldiers faced neither an easy war nor a fast end to the conflict. The horrors were many and the death toll was extremely high. In the battle of Somme, for example, 60,000 British soldiers lost their lives on July 1, 1916. That shattered illusions, destroyed those soldier’s resolute belief in purpose and destiny, and made them realize how different the realities of battlefield were from moral conduct and normal patterns of life.

Such an ironic perception of these experiences influenced the way soldiers narrated events in their books. Fussell contends that the result is a three-part structure implicit in the memoir model of British World War I and also in some of the poetry:

[...] first, the sinister or absurd or even farcical preparation [for battle]; second, the unmanning experience of battle; and third, the retirement from the line to a contrasting (usually pastoral) scene, where there is time and quiet for consideration, meditation, and reconstruction. The middle stage is always characterized by disenchantment and loss of innocence [...]. (Fussell 130)

This three-part model, according to Herzog, has “archetypal connections,” and resembles the rite-of-passage literature focusing on the “education, spiritual growth, or mythic quest” of a main character. A great number of war narratives fit this pattern of “initiation literature,” and Fussell’s structure of “irony and evolution,” particularly stages one and two, are implicit in the best modern war novels: Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) and Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) (World War I); Jones’s *The Thin Red Line* (1962), and parts of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) (World War II) (Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories* 15).

Cheap novels usually support an optimistic, romantic view of the war, and are focused on one of Fussell’s three categories. Here, characters keep the fresh innocence and idealism from beginning to end of their war experiences, or the book highlights the experience factor at the expense of others. In this case, authors “make realism the ultimate goal of their re-creation.” Therefore, these novels are simply “battlefield diaries or warfare manuals.” Worldlier war literature, however, “moves beyond innocence and battlefield experiences into Fussell’s third category,” where combatants try to

systematize and comprehend their experiences. This third stage of memory, reconstruction and consideration may bring about “repudiation of affirmation of the war, insight about the ironies of war, self-awareness, nostalgia for the war environment and battlefield friends, or social estrangement” (Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories* 15-16).

According to Herzog, Fussell’s ironic spirit is also found in Vietnam narratives (Herzog 15). In Philip Caputo’s war memoir, *A Rumor of War*, the author describes the death of an officer:

[...] I remember Corporal Brian Gauthier, who, as one cynical old campaigner put it, “won himself two Navy Crosses: the blue and gold one they pin on you and the white, wooden one they put over you.” Gauthier, a twenty-one-year-old squad leader in A Company, was mortally wounded in an ambush on July 11. They gave him the medal because he continued to lead his men under heavy enemy fire, to quote from the citation, “he succumbed to his wounds.” Later, the regimental HQ camp was named for him. That was nice of them, but they did not give any medals to, nor name anything for, the grenadier who died in the same ambush. He did not have the chance to do anything heroic because the mine he stepped on caused the sympathetic detonation of his 40-mm grenades, killing him instantly. “Sympathetic detonation” was the phrase I used in the casualty report. It was one of those dry, inaccurate military euphemisms. It meant that the explosion of the mine had caused his grenades do go off at the same time, and I could see nothing sympathetic about that. (Caputo 193)

This passage shows how Caputo's ironic vision of his experiences influenced his telling of events. The stark contrast of the reaction between the two deaths is ironic: both were killed in action in the same place, but the grenadier was not decorated, nothing was named for him. The word "sympathetic" was used ironically three times. Neither "brave" adjectives nor rhetorical flourishes of heroic stories were used.

Media coverage of the Vietnam War was different from other previous wars. Journalists photographed and filmed pretty much what they wanted and what they wrote could be printed in tomorrow's paper. News coverage circulated first to the United States and then back to the combat zone. As soldiers suffered in the war, they were bothered by the contrary accounts of what they were doing, published by *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Life*. Those opposing versions of reality took place very early in the conflict. The war in Vietnam was ironic from the start, and its fundamental meaning was "the *absence* of a single coherent meaning in its events" (Hynes 200-1).

1.2.3. Cultural Connections: Myths

Thomas Meyers, in his book *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam* (1988), suggests that the best works about Vietnam are those that transcend the limits of battlefield realism and encompass cultural, historical, experiential and literary connections – past wars, popular myths and American historical novels:

In regard to specific narrative inevitabilities, the Vietnam War was, despite its claims to difference, the extension and evolution of a number of deeply rooted American traditions, a crucial national experience requiring both text and context. (Myers 5)

Part of the American tradition is the thematic influence of mythic heroes, values and actions associated with the American frontier, which were revived at the time when the United States first got involved in Vietnam. According to John Hellmann, President Kennedy's use of the term "New Frontier" in his acceptance speech in the 1960 United States presidential election and its close relationship with the Green Berets, the United States Army Special Forces, became the symbol of the new American mission, the renewed affirmation of the American's frontier myth. Hellman contends that Vietnam narratives often depict the hope that this war will be a chance to revitalize American's "traditional frontier values of self-reliance, democratic idealism, ingenuity, practicality, and generosity, while bringing democracy to Southeast Asia" (Hellmann 37-8).

Another mythic hero influencing American Vietnam combatants was John Wayne, the hero of the westerns and war movies that the Vietnam War generation had grown up on, and the personification of what seemed a particularly American kind of independent courage. Julian Smith observes that, even though they did not share the same political views, "John Wane and John Kennedy were not so terribly far apart. Both were trying to awaken their countrymen from lethargy, to inspire them with tales of courage, to make them feel ... more energetic" (Smith 92).

Unlike other modern wars, the Vietnam was different: it was a long war fought by short-timers; many of the troops came from the lower end of the American social ladder; it was a war fought without a front, a war of attrition, fought against the pressures of an anti-war opinion. Thus, the effect on the narratives is evident. Hynes contends that a war without a front is essentially "a war without a direction, a story without a plot," and Vietnam stories lack narrative continuity:

[...] a man's combat could begin anywhere in the eight-year war and end a year later; during that year he would go into the jungle to "search and destroy," come out, go in again-like a commuter, as Caputo said. Or spend some months defending a bridge somewhere, move to the jungle, go back to the bridge – all of these moves apparently and related to no grand strategic intention. Nor were they shaped by military events – the fighting of a crucial battle, or a great campaign, of a final victory. There is no *momentum* in them, [...] they are gatherings of disconnected incidents – stories of small fierce actions, ambushes, exploding mines, burning villages, interspersed, sometimes, with anecdotes of nights out of the combat zone, in towns, women and drink. These pieces of a fragmented war are separate from each other, linked only by a common ugliness and violence, strung together like souvenir ears on a string, just things that happened in one man's one-year hunk of a long and formless war. The formlessness is the form. (Hynes 206-07)

This passage illustrates well why Vietnam stories do not have narrative continuity. Actually, most of them begin with hope and innocence and have no clear, definite end. Arriving home can be one end, but many times the end is not the end of the war, but the end of the soldier's own war against his traumatized self.

Many narratives of the Vietnam War do not end when the fighting is over. Homecoming is a common theme, like Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story* (1986) and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984). Physically and psychologically damaged, addicted to alcohol and drugs, as well as disturbed by the burden of guilt, a great number of Vietnam veterans felt homeless and many were prone to commit suicide.

Quite a few went to psychiatric hospitals, a great number of them attended group therapy sessions, and rehabilitation programs with other veterans to try to overcome their psychological trauma.

Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story* (1979) is a novel about a wounded soldier's return home from Vietnam who is trying to find a place for himself. At Fire Base Harriette in Vietnam, there were about one hundred soldiers in Alpha Company who were killed, with only Paco surviving. The ghost of one of these soldiers narrates the story of survivor Paco Sullivan, who was left for dead, lying covered with flies and dirt for two days before being rescued. After much time spent in military hospitals, he returns to the United States with his legs full of pins, badly scarred and limping, and becomes an introspective dishwasher in a small Texas town. He has to take daily doses of Librium and Valium to keep going. As time goes by, no matter how hard he works, nothing muffles the anguish in his mind and body. He can neither escape the ghost of the cataclysmic Vietcong attack nor his memories and nightmares. Everyday things bring back savage memories.

Upon returning to the United States, after Paco gets off the bus at a stop sign east of the town of Boone, a young mechanic gives him a lift to town. On the way, the mechanic asks him:

“What happened after they took you out of that place?” – after Paco mentioned the holocaust massacre at Fire Base Harriette. [...] “Nothing much, I guess,” he says, ... “They had me so zonked out on morphine I don’t much remember,” Paco says, “you know?” and that closes the subject. But Paco remembers all right, and vividly. (Heinemann 45)

Through this passage, it is possible to notice that Paco has one part of his personality “working” in relation to the traumatic event and another part that simply rejects this same event. In other words, the subject undergoes a psychological rupture due to the trauma. Of course, he could simply be refusing to talk, but this refusal is most likely related to his trauma.

Like Paco, an impressive number of Vietnam Veterans suffered from a mental disorder designated Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. This label, formally recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980, embraces signs of illnesses which had been named shell shock, battle fatigue, combat neurosis or traumatic neurosis throughout the twentieth century, referring to responses to both natural disasters and manmade atrocities. This experience will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 2 - Trauma and Twentieth Century Wars

2.1. Introduction

Trauma is closely connected to traumatic memory, which influences narrative in many ways. Narratives of the Vietnam War were mostly written by soldiers who experienced and witnessed traumatic events in times of combat, which, in turn, made them severely traumatized. Marilyn Blatt Young, in her book *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* (1991), states that at least sixty thousand veterans have committed suicide after the war was over, more than those that died in it, and the association between their suicides and their war experience is quite clear. According to her, Steven L. Anderson's parents, for example, found this note next to the body of their dead son: "When I was in Vietnam, we came across a North Vietnamese soldier with a man, a woman and a three-or-four-year old girl. We had to shoot them all. I can't get the little girl's face out of my mind. I hope that God will forgive me" (Young 324). The killing of this soldier and these civilians was an overpowering experience for Steven Anderson. He probably felt utterly helpless at that moment, and following that, the image of this girl's face was permanently etched in his mind, haunting him all the time. Traumatized as a result, he presumably lost control, felt an intense fear of annihilation and killed himself. Anderson's story is just one example of the impact of a trauma that both mind and body could not handle.

Trauma is an extreme experience within the range of human experience. That makes it a powerfully dramatic subject central to Tim O'Brien's works, which represent and have been generated by Vietnam trauma. I analyze two of his novels in this study, *The Things They Carried* (1990) and *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994). O'Brien's main characters are survivors of trauma and his narratives are products of trauma and vehicles

of recovery. O'Brien's fiction portray traumatized characters and represents traumatization through point of view, style and organization of narrative.

In this chapter, a history of the development of the study of psychological trauma from the nineteenth century to 1980 is presented, covering its alliances with political movements, its underground history, and its connection to hysteria. The traumatic neurosis of war and trauma in domestic abuse is investigated. An understanding of the psychological consequences of this mental condition is studied. Finally, a definition of trauma is examined and an analysis of how trauma can be a model of history is carried out.

2.2. Hysteria as Forgotten History

According to Judith Herman, psychological trauma research has been characterized by interchanging cycles of vigorous research and total absence of interest. In the nineteenth century, investigation approaches of an analogous nature have been started, later discontinued, and ultimately unearthed, causing a lot of disagreement. Researching psychological trauma implies providing evidence about the truth of dreadful events. When these events are catastrophes produced by nature, "those who bear witness sympathize readily with the victim" (Herman 7). But if the traumatic events were caused by humans, carriers of evidence may be torn between victim and executor. In this clash, it is not ethic to be impartial. The observer is compelled to express support for either side. On one hand, it may be attractive to "support" the villain, since the only thing he requests of the observer is no action, no testimony. On the other hand, the injured party does solicit the onlooker to take part in the affliction of

pain. As Herman argues, “The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering” (Herman 7-8). Herman mentions psychiatrist Leo Eitinger’s *The Concentration Camp Syndrome and Its Late Sequelae* (1980), and calls attention to his words: “War and victims are something the community wants to forget; a veil of oblivion is drawn over everything painful and unpleasant” (Eitinger 127-62). Eitinger contends that the two sides are found in open confrontation with one another: the victims most probably want to forget but are not able to. Unknowingly, the culprits have a deep desire to forget and often manage to do so. The disparity is often excruciating for both parts: the feeblest group is left as the losing party, speechless in an unfair conversation (Eitinger 127-62).

According to Herman, to avoid responsibility for his wrongdoings, the villain fosters oblivion with all his might. He prevents others from listening, remains secret and silent, denies that the events were true and damages the reputation of the victim, saying he/she has lied and overstated the facts. The more influential the architect of the atrocities is, the more extensive is his right to label and characterize reality, and the more completely his points triumph (Herman 8).

The claims of the atrocity-maker become extremely compelling when the observer confronts them isolatedly. Lacking an assisting social setting, the observer normally does not resist the lure to deliberately overlook facts and reality. That is real even when the injured party is an admired and treasured citizen. War combatants of all times, including heroes, protest vehemently about society’s lack of interest in the veracity of the war. If the victim is part of a weak minority, he/she learns that “the most traumatic events of her life take place outside the realm of socially validated reality.” His/her experience turns out to be beyond description, inexpressible (Herman 8).

Research in the field of psychological trauma has to struggle relentlessly against a predisposition to injure the credit or reputation of the victim, or even to depict him/her as unimportant. The annals of the field portray posttraumatic subjects installed in controversial positions and subject to heated debates. Herman contends that it is not clear whether they should receive close attention and be treated with respect or simply be regarded as contemptible. It is not clear if they are actually feeling pain or just pretending illness. It is not clear if their narratives are authentic or untrue. If untrue, it is not clear if they are a figment of their imagination or simply deceitfully fictionalized. Even though there is a lot of published research in the area, as yet discussions focus on the fundamental issue concerning the credibility and actuality of the facts (Herman 8).

Herman contends that “to hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and witness in a common alliance.” For whoever is victimized, the social setting is changed by connections with “friends, lovers, and family.” Considering the greater society, this social setting is engendered by “political movements” that express the feelings of the “disempowered.” As a result, the methodical investigation and analysis of psychological trauma relies on the patronage of a “political movement” (Herman 9). The research and analysis of war trauma turns out to be valid and justifiable exclusively in a setting that takes a stand against the “sacrifice of young men” who engage in warfare. A careful consideration of trauma in “sexual and domestic life” is suitable solely in a setting that disputes the subjection of “women and children.” Progress in the area takes place only under two circumstances: first, when these studies are backed by a strong, particularly influential political crusade authenticating a coalition between researchers and victims. Second, when the commonplace social practices of hushing and negation are

neutralized. Without powerful governmental campaigns for the basic rights and freedoms to which all are entitled, the dynamic movement of providing evidence of the truth certainly yields to the dynamic course of forgetting (Herman 9).

According to Herman, on three different occasions in the recent past, a specific type of psychological trauma came to light, and research into the field has always flourished in alliance with a political crusade. In the beginning, hysteria appeared as a classic psychological affliction to plague women. Systematic investigation of the theme developed in France around 1980, after a political movement in favor of the republic that opposed the power and influence of the clergy in politics. After hysteria came “shell shock or combat neurosis.” Research in the area started both in England and the United States after the First World War and reached a peak after the Vietnam War. Here, the political setting was the breakdown of a devotion to war along with the development of a campaign opposed to warfare. Finally, the latest type of trauma to be disclosed to society was “sexual and domestic violence.” Its political setting was the feminist movement in Western Europe and North America. Herman contends that our current perception of psychological trauma is made up of a combination of these three distinct approaches of inquiry (Herman 9).

2.3. “The Heroic Age of Hysteria”

According to the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, Second Edition, hysteria is a “psychoneurotic disorder characterized by violent emotional outbreaks, disturbances of sensory and motor functions, and various abnormal effects due to autosuggestion.” The origin of the word, according to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s

Dictionary, Seventh Edition, dates back to the “early nineteenth century, from Latin “hystericus,” from Greek “husterikos,” of the womb, from “hustera” womb (hysteria being thought to be specific to women and associated with the womb). For many centuries before the end of the nineteenth century, hysteria had been regarded as an abnormal and odd illness, presenting irrational and unintelligible symptoms. The pioneer of the research on hysteria was Jean-Martin Charcot, a famous French neurologist who was the director of the Salpêtrière asylum in Paris between 1862 and 1893. Salpêtrière was once a holding center for misfits and the criminally insane and Charcot turned it into a laboratory for the investigation of mental illnesses. Some of the eminent physicians who traveled to Paris to learn from Charcot were Pierre Janet, William James, and Sigmund Freud. Charcot was praised for his bravery in venturing into the study of hysteria, an area of academic interest regarded as trivial at that time. Before Charcot, hysterical women were accused of malingering and fraud and their therapy had been assigned to “hypnotists and popular healers.” Charcot was convinced that the patients believed their symptoms were real, and the physical symptoms which were similar to neurological damage like “motor paralysis, sensory losses, convulsions and amnesias” were indicative of a genuine psychological problem. Before 1880, he had proven that these symptoms were psychological, given that they could be induced by artificial means and relieved via hypnosis. He believed that hysterical patients inherited a genetic predisposition to the disease, but the disease became manifest only after exposure to specific environmental stressors, for example, an accident (Herman 10-11).

Even though Charcot held the signs of his hysterical patients in high regard, he was not interested in their private and secret lives. He merely considered their feelings “as symptoms to be catalogued.” The aspiration of Charcot’s disciples, however, was to

exceed his effort and show what actually caused hysteria. Competition between Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud was especially fierce. At that time, each one desired greatly to be the first to announce the significant breakthrough, asserted supremacy of the finding and accused the other of plagiarizing his own results. This tug of war deteriorated into a lifetime of hostility (Herman 11, 248). In order to achieve their aim, these researchers concluded that it was not enough to examine and categorize hysterics, it was essential to “talk to them.” For almost ten years, these scientists listened to women carefully, with absolute commitment and high esteem. This research was fruitful. Around 1895, even though working independently, Janet, in France, and Freud with his colleague Joseph Breuer, in Vienna, reached the same conclusion:

[...] hysteria was a condition caused by psychological trauma. Unbearable emotional reactions to traumatic events produced an altered state of consciousness, which in turn induced the hysterical symptoms. Janet called this alteration in consciousness “dissociation.” Breuer and Freud called it “double consciousness.” (Herman 12)

Even though different names were given to the same disorder, it is important to highlight the fact that all three researchers saw psychological trauma as the main cause of hysteria. Janet and Freud acknowledged the vital resemblance of “altered states of consciousness” caused by “psychological trauma” and those caused by “hypnosis.” Both researchers admitted that the corporal signs of hysteria symbolized “disguised representations of intensely distressing events which had been banished from memory” (Herman 12).

Around 1895, Janet and Freud had also found out that hysterical symptoms could be relieved when the traumatic memories, and the strong feelings that came with

them, were recovered and verbalized. This system of therapy turned out to be the foundation of contemporary psychotherapy. Janet named the method “psychological analysis,” Breuer and Freud named it “abreaction” or “catharsis,” and Freud afterwards named it “psycho-analysis.” The alliance between doctor and patient acquired the characteristic of a search and in this scenario, the “solution to the mystery of hysteria” could be discovered in the meticulous rebuilding of the patient’s past. Janet realized that the disclosure of recent traumas led to the investigation of earlier events, old persistent and unchanging ideas which resided immobile in the deepest layers of the patient’s consciousness. As treatment progressed, these “earlier events” produced “great improvement” (Herman 13).

Richard Webster contends that Freud was significantly moved by the concept that one of the main forms of neurosis took place when a traumatic experience led to the process of unconscious symptom-formation. He began to develop this idea, and to a certain extent, by reference to the work of Breuer. Freud was particularly interested in the legendary Anna O., a gifted, intelligent, twenty-one-year-old woman Breuer had begun to treat in 1880. Anna had developed many physical symptoms: severe cough, paralysis of the extremities on the right side of her body, disturbances of vision, hearing, and speech, as well as hallucination and loss of consciousness. She had fallen ill while nursing her father who eventually died of a tubercular abscess. Breuer diagnosed her with hysteria and progressively developed a treatment which he believed was valuable in relieving her symptoms. He concluded that when he could induce her to relate to him during the evening the content of her daytime hallucinations, she became calm and tranquil. Breuer himself saw this as a way of “disposing” of the “products” of Anna O.’s “bad self” and understood it as a process of emotional catharsis. Anna called her

intimate dialogue with Breuer the “talking cure.” According to Webster, in his published account of the case, written some twelve years later, Breuer said he had concluded that the way to cure a particular symptom of “hysteria” was to recreate the memory of the incident which had originally led to it and bring about emotional catharsis by inducing the patient to express any feeling associated with it.

According to Harold Merskey, Anna O., who was actually Bertha Pappenheim, has frequently been described as the first psychoanalytic patient and her name deserves to be commemorated as the first subject of the cathartic method. The case of Anna O. played a fundamental role in the development of Freud’s thought and the ideas which he contributed are still important:

[...] His consistent emphasis on psychological motives in the causation of symptoms; his description of repression and the mechanisms of defense; his recognition of conflict as the basis for symptoms; his description of transference; his acknowledgment of motives, like sex, which were not previously acceptable in open discussion; and his attribution of symbolic meaning of symptoms – these all have been powerful tools in the elucidation of hysterical phenomena. (Merskey 43)

This passage elucidates the important contributions Freud made with his views to the clarification of hysterical occurrences.

Herman claims that the advancement of Freud’s studies on hysteria led him to an investigation of the sexual lives of women. Even though there was a venerable legacy that acknowledged the connection of hysterical symptoms with female sexuality, Freud’s counselors, Charcot and Breuer, had been extremely doubtful about the function of sexuality at the roots of hysteria. At first, Freud himself was contrary to the idea too.

But later, due to an insatiable desire to learn, Freud was ready to listen. His patients' stories were frightful. Again and again, their reports of "sexual assault, abuse and incest" disclosed capital traumatic events of infancy hidden under the "more recent, often relatively trivial experiences" that had indeed set off the beginning of hysterical symptoms. In 1896, Freud thought he had discovered the origin of hysteria. He published *The Aetiology of Hysteria*, stating that at the base of every case of hysteria there were one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience, events which were part of the beginning of childhood, and could be recalled via psycho-analysis, even though many years lay in between (Freud 203). He deemed his findings as extremely important in the realm of neuropathology. Even though the publication of *The Aetiology of Hysteria* was praised by Freud himself, it signaled the end of this course of research. In less than one year, Freud had confidentially rejected the traumatic theory of the origins of hysteria and was progressively haunted by the "radical social implications" of his theory. He verified that hysteria was extremely frequent among women. If the accounts of his patients were authentic, and if his hypothesis were accurate, he would be compelled to infer that what he named "perverted acts against children" were widespread among the working class of Paris, where he was a disciple of Charcot, as well as among the reputable middle class of Vienna, where he saw his patients. Finding himself in a predicament, Freud decided to stop listening to his female patients. The decisive moment was Dora's case, substantiated as the last "case study on hysteria." Dora was a teenager whose father had basically "offered her to his friends as a sexual toy." She decided to suddenly discontinue the therapy once Freud refused to recognize her feelings of indignity and abasement. He made a point of claiming she derived great pleasure from the circumstance, as it made her feel sexually excited (Herman 13-14).

From the remains of the traumatic theory of hysteria, Freud developed psychoanalysis. This systematic structure of theories originated from the “denial of women’s reality,” as Herman says. Sexuality continued to be the center of research, even though the abusive social setting in which sexual relations took place remained imperceptible. Psychoanalysis turned out to be a careful examination of the inner changes of “fantasy and desire,” detached from the “reality of experience.” In the 1910s, Freud decided that the chronicles of “childhood sexual abuse” of his hysterical patients were false. This retraction meant the “end of the heroic age of hysteria.” At the very beginning of the twentieth century, the whole policy of investigation started by Charcot and developed by his supporters went to seed. Thus, the investigation of psychological trauma was brought to an end and the disease of hysteria was considered nonexistent (Herman 14-15).

According to Herman, more than one man was responsible for this impressive turnabout. Comprehending how research into hysteria could totally fail and how significant findings could be disregarded so fast requires comprehension of the intellectual and political climate that initially brought about the study. In France, the pivotal political dissent in the 1800s was the tug of war between the advocates of a “monarchy with an established religion” and the adherents of a “republican, secular” form of government:

Seven times since the Revolution of 1789 this conflict had led to the overthrow of the government. With the establishment of the Third Republic in 1870, the founding fathers of a new and fragile democracy mobilized an aggressive campaign to consolidate their power base and to

undermine the power of their main opposition, the Catholic Church.
(Herman 15)

This passage makes it clear that the rivalry between the republican leaders and the powerful Catholic Church was extremely fierce. At that time, the heads of the republican movement were “self-made men” of the expanding middle class. They considered themselves as delegates of a legacy of “enlightenment,” involved in a lethal battle with the “forces of reaction: the aristocracy and the clergy.” Their most important political combats were disputed for the control of education, and their “ideological battles were fought for the allegiance of men and the dominion of women.” Jules Ferry, one of the architects of the Third Republic, stated that “Women must belong to science, or they will belong to the church” (Herman 15), a statement that illustrates the strong need the republican leaders had of attracting the highest possible number of supporters to their party.

Charcot, who had achieved success and recognition by his own efforts, belonged to this new upper class. He renovated the Salpêtrière hospital in the 1870s to substantiate the higher, admirable qualities of teaching not connected with spiritual or religious matters, as well as to publicize his excellent hospital management. He had a passion for promulgating scientific principles, and his research on hysteria was conducted to authenticate the predominance of “a secular over a religious conceptual framework.” His speeches on Tuesdays were “political theater.” His assignment was to “claim hysterical women to science.” Charcot provided a scientific elucidation for abnormalities such as “demonic possession states, witchcraft, exorcism, and religious ecstasy” through his conceptualization of hysteria. He and his disciples were moved by a larger, political cause that imparted vitality to such insatiable curiosity about hysteria

and gave impulse to research in the area in the 1890s. Solving the enigma of hysteria meant corroborating the victory of “secular enlightenment over reactionary superstition, as well as the moral superiority of a secular world view.” Charles Richet, a devotee of Charcot, noted in 1880: “Among the patients locked away in the Salpêtrière are many who would have been burned in former times, whose illness would have been taken for a crime” (Herman 15-16). Through this statement, it is possible to notice that scientists made a point of distinguishing their generous support of hysterics from the worst extravagances of the Inquisition.

In the early 1900s, the political impetus that had brought forth the “heroic age of hysteria” had dispersed. The primary overpowering motivation to continue an enquiry that had driven scientists far away from their original designs was lacking. Research on hysteria had attracted them to an underworld of “trance, emotionality, and sex.” It made them listen to women and learn more about their lives than they had ever imagined. Once research on hysteria was a segment of an ideological crusade campaign, scientists were highly appreciated for their “humanity and courage.” But as long as this political stimulus had lost strength, these researchers realized that they were bound to the “nature of their discoveries” and to the intimate “involvement with their women patients” (Herman 17).

Herman asserts that the recoil started before Charcot’s death in 1893. More and more he was required to preserve the belief of the public displays of hysteria that had captivated the Parisian community. Rumor had it that the presentations were “staged by suggestible women who, knowingly or not, followed a script dictated under hypnosis by their patron.” At the end of his life, he seemingly felt sorrow for starting this field of research. While Charcot backed off from the “world of hypnosis and hysteria,” Breuer

backed off from “women’s emotional attachments.” He ended Anna O.’s treatment suddenly, probably because of his wife’s uneasiness due to his almost daily close contact with this attractive woman. This abrupt discontinuation made Anna gravely ill, culminating in her hospitalization. At this point, Breuer was hit by a crisis, as he realized that Anna was emotionally bound to him. Additionally, he was disturbed by the frequent discoveries of sexual experiences as the source of hysterical symptoms. Around this time, Freud’s inquiries directed him towards the “unrecognized reality of women’s lives.” His uncovering of “childhood sexual exploitation” as the main cause of hysteria went beyond the limits of what society could believe in, thus isolating him professionally. Freud’s findings could not be accepted if a political and social setting endorsing the research of hysteria was lacking. This kind of setting never prospered in Vienna and was vanishing quickly in France. Pierre Janet, Freud’s competitor, had never given up his “traumatic theory of hysteria” and had never deserted his patients. Yet, at the end of his life, he realized that his works had been neglected and his ideas ignored (Herman 17-18).

Herman contends that Freud, who had researched the traumatic theory of trauma exhaustively and had fully comprehended its connections, vehemently renounced his findings. Despite the fact that he still concentrated on his patient’s sexual lives, he refused to admit the existence of the “exploitative nature of women’s sexual experiences.” He went on claiming that “women imagined and longed for the abusive sexual encounters of which they complained.” The controversial nature of Freud’s retraction is comprehensible, considering the extreme complexity of the challenging task he confronted. To stick firmly to his theory he would have to acknowledge the

sexual oppression of women and children. At this point, Freud would have to rely on the emerging feminist movement, but that would go against his deep-rooted values:

To ally himself with such a movement was unthinkable for a man of Freud's political beliefs and professional ambitions. Protesting too much, he dissociated himself at once from the study of psychological trauma and from women. He went on to develop a theory of human development in which the inferiority and mendacity of women are fundamental points of doctrine. In an antifeminist political climate, this theory prospered and thrived. (Herman 19)

This passage makes it clear how inflexible Freud was at that time. The sole possible fountain of intellectual substantiation and endorsement for his status would be the feminist movement, but that would be a menace to his beloved "patriarchal values." Refusing to back down, he chose instead to produce a new theory.

The only person who conducted the research of hysteria to its "logical conclusion" was Anna O., Breuer's patient. It seems that she was ill for a number of years after Breuer broke off her treatment, but then she regained her health.

The mute hysteric who had invented the "talking cure" found her voice, and her sanity, in the women's liberation movement. Under a new pseudonym, Paul Berthold, she translated into German the classic treatise Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, and authored a play, *Women's Rights*. Anna O, under her own name, Bertha Papeenheim became a prominent feminist social worker, intellectual, and organizer. In the course of a long and fruitful career she directed an orphanage for girls, founded a feminist organization for Jewish women,

and traveled throughout Europe and the Middle East to campaign against the sexual exploitation of women and children. Her dedication, energy, and commitment were legendary. (Herman 19)

It is astonishing to learn from this passage that because of many twists, obstacles, controversies, and mainly due to the nearsightedness of many researchers and therapists, the investigations on hysteria were logically concluded by an intelligent *patient*, who, after having been rejected by her therapist and fallen ill, found the strength and perseverance to shed light on a realm only entrusted to medical doctors. The point to be taken from the present study is that hysteria, and later trauma, has to be granted a voice, has to be able to tell its story.

2.4. The Traumatic Neurosis of War

World War I killed twelve million men in four years, which compelled the “reality of psychological trauma” to surface and thereby inhabit civilian minds. The fatalities of the widespread destruction of the war were innumerable and one of them was the erroneous perception of male “honor and glory in battle,” made obsolete by modern technological war. Continually exposed to the extreme lethal nature of combat, a vast amount of men started to “break down.” Kept within bounds and made powerless, being at the mercy of nearly nonstop bombardment and destruction, and compelled to watch their companions being crippled, mutilated or killed, many combatants started behaving the way hysterical women once did. They shrieked and cried with no self-control. They became motionless and could not move from one place to another. They were detached and could not speak. They became unmemoried and senseless (Herman 20).

At first, the signs of mental breakdowns were ascribed to physical causes. Cambridge academic psychologist and volunteer medic Charles Myers, who saw some of the first patients, accredited their symptoms to concussion. At that time, it was thought that proximity to shell bursts triggered a nervous disorder called “shell shock.” The name caught on, although shortly afterwards it was obvious that these symptoms could be observed in combatants who had not been subjected to physical trauma. Little by little, military psychiatrists were compelled to admit that the signs of shell shock were caused by psychological trauma. The emotional strain of extended contact with tragic death was enough to generate a “neurotic syndrome resembling hysteria in men” (Herman 20).

Luckhurst states that, in 1915, “shell shock” was the name given to a destructive, intense and external physical cause, but it additionally seemed to be an inner physical state that had no causal relation at all to attacks with bombs, shells, or missiles. This muddle over the investigation of causes and origins of the term “shell shock” resulted in its suppression; it was forbidden as a category of diagnosis in 1918. Yet, this very same term which the War Office Enquiry qualified as extremely inappropriate still remained in 1922, and in reality turned out to personify the traumatic experience of World War I in the “collective memory” (Luckhurst 50).

When the reality of combat neurosis could not be overlooked anymore, medical disagreement, as in the previous discussion on hysteria, focused upon the moral character of the patient. From the perspective of conservatives, a combatant who conformed to standards ought to triumph in war should not yield to intense, overpowering fear. Combatants who became affected with traumatic neurosis were considered inferior with respect to physical makeup, “moral invalids, at worst

malingers and cowards.” Some officials of the armed forces contended that these soldiers were definitely not worthy of being patients. Instead, they were supposed to be “court-martialed or dishonorably discharged rather than given medical treatment” (Herman 21).

Herman states that the most eminent advocate of the orthodox conviction was British neurologist Lewis Yealland, who endorsed a psychiatric rehabilitation scheme based on “shaming, threats, and punishment:”

Hysterical symptoms such as mutism, sensory loss, or motor paralysis were treated with electric shocks. Patients were excoriated for their laziness and cowardice. Those who exhibited the “hideous enemy of negativism” were threatened with court martial. (Herman 21)

Through this passage it is possible to infer that therapists using these approaches had little time for psychological explanations of the symptoms, or what these symptoms meant to individual patients. A quick cure was the primary goal of wartime psychiatry to keep men fighting. Luckhurst states that Yealland, who treated many hysterical mutism cases with electrical shocks to the throat, admitted that his system worked mainly through the suggestive fear of pain instead of any neurological logic (Luckhurst 55).

In opposition to what the traditionalists claimed, however, open-minded medical authorities contended that combat neurosis was a true psychiatric condition that could happen to “soldiers of high moral character;” thus, they endorsed “humane treatment” based on psychoanalytic principles (Herman 21). According to Luckhurst, English anthropologist, neurologist, ethnologist, and psychiatrist William Halse R. Rivers was one of the earliest readers of Freud who applied techniques of psychoanalysis to British

officers suffering from various forms of neurosis. Rivers gave medical aid to the eminent poet Siegfried Sassoon, his most famous patient, at Craiglockhart War Hospital, near Edinburgh, Scotland. Sassoon, a distinguished soldier in combat, was admitted there apparently for shell shock, but actually his stay was mainly to avoid a court martial after he had publicly affiliated himself with the pacifist movement, denounced the war, and refused to return to his regiment (Luckhurst 53).

Pat Barker's novel *Regeneration* (1991) dramatizes a simple, sternly plain opposition between the cruel physical treatment by Yealland's nightmarish electroshock therapy sessions and the sympathetic, analytic-interpretative method pursued by Rivers. The novel tells the stories of Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and others who were treated for shell shock during the First World War by William Rivers at Craiglockhart. The plot revolves around the actual incident involving Sassoon, in 1917. Sassoon, who had been decorated for bravery during his service on the Western Front, suddenly decided to protest against the war, writing a letter to Parliament claiming that the conflict was being needlessly extended. As a result, it was agreed that he be sent to Craiglockhart to be treated for neurasthenia. There, Rivers was given the task of getting Sassoon to return to the front. Friend and fellow poet Robert Graves, worried that Sassoon's declaration against the war could get him court-martialed, was able to successfully convince a military board that Sassoon should not be punished. The authorities did not want to court martial a hero. Several of the characters are based on real people, including Rivers and Sassoon, the poets Robert Graves and Wilfred Owen, and doctors who actually worked at Craiglockhart. Other patients are fictionalized. These include David Burns, who had got his head stuck in the abdomen of a dead German soldier after he had been thrown into the air by the explosion of a shell. Burns

gets sick as the memory of having his mouth filled with decomposing human flesh whenever he attempts to eat.

According to Herman, Sassoon's therapy was remarkably successful. The innovative therapeutic regime adopted by Rivers, removed from military disciplinary models, was designed to show the effectiveness of a compassionate, "enlightened treatment" over the more punitive traditionalist procedures. Rivers was well-aware that the aim of the therapy was to send the soldier back to combat. He did, however, defend the effectiveness of a type of "talking cure." Rivers respected Sassoon greatly, treating him with dignity. Instead of being discredited, reproached, and silenced, Sassoon was heartened to write and "talk freely about the terrors of the war." Sassoon was extremely grateful to Rivers for the treatment, which was considered a success. As soon as the therapy was over, Sassoon openly admitted responsibility for his pacifist declaration and went back to the battlefield. He returned to combat in spite of the permanence of his political beliefs, but what led him to go back was his fidelity to his companions who were still in battle, his feeling of remorse for being saved from their suffering, and his hopelessness at the inefficacy of his isolated objection to the war. Rivers, by administering a regimen of compassionate treatment, had set up two tenets that would be adopted by American military psychiatrists in World War II. First, he showed that men of undisputed courage could yield to overpowering fear. Second, he proved that the most powerful incentive to dispel this fear was "something stronger than patriotism, abstract principles or hatred of the enemy. It was the love of soldiers for one another." Sassoon lived through the war, but, suffering from trauma, he was doomed to relive it until his death. He dedicated the rest of his life to writing about his war experiences and to promoting a crusade for peace. Even though he restored himself satisfactorily enough

from his “bad case of nerves” to have a harmonious fruitful life, he was constantly tormented by the memory of his comrades who had not been so lucky (Herman 22-23).

Luckhurst contends that in military organizations the “individual psyche” does not matter much to “collective discipline and the hierarchy of command.” During World War I, many psychiatrists who were giving medical aid to shell shock patients discovered that “military psychiatry was an impossible profession,” once they had to deal with the adverse responsibility to restore combatants to health and to return to service, which explains a seemingly repetitive pattern in relation to war neuroses, from World War I to the Gulf War: first of all the dilemma is repudiated, then it is magnified and comprehended, and at last forgotten (Luckhurst 51). After the end of the First World War, medical interest in the realm of psychological trauma dwindled away. Even though a multitude of men with prolonged psychiatric impairment packed the wards of veterans’ hospitals, communities were anxious to ignore their presence (Herman 23).

Luckhurst asserts that, in 1941, Abram Kardiner published *Traumatic Neurosis of War*, which was put together based on the notion of trauma in a unique fashion. This book developed out of Kardiner’s observation of chronic shell-shock patients at an American veteran’s hospital in the early 1920s and out of Kardiner’s discontentment with Freud’s libidinal or instinctive theories to explain traumatic neurosis in war. As an alternative, he proposed a conflict between the ego and the environment: “a trauma is an external influence necessitating an abrupt change in adaptation which the organism fails to meet” (Kardiner 79).

Herman states that Kardiner’s conceptualization of hysteria was remarkably similar to late nineteenth-century Janet’s construct of this psychoneurotic disorder. Kardiner acknowledged that war neurosis symbolized a form of hysteria, but he also

became aware that this word had, once more, become so pejorative that its use damaged the reputation of the patients. Kardiner claimed that when the word “hysterical” was used, the social implication was that the patient was a “predatory individual, trying to get something for nothing.” The victims of hysteria neither gained any compassion in court, nor were they treated with respect by doctors, who frequently considered them to be suffering from some chronic form of evil, “perversity or weakness of will” (Herman 24).

The coming of the Second World War renewed the interest of doctors in combat neurosis. With the aim of finding a fast, effective therapy, military psychiatrists made an effort to eliminate the stigma from the “stress reactions of combat:”

It was recognized for the first time that any man could break down under fire and that psychiatric casualties could be predicted in direct proportion to the severity of combat exposure. Indeed, considerable effort was devoted to determining the exact level of exposure guaranteed to produce a psychological collapse. A year after the war ended, two psychiatrists, J. W. Appel and G. W. Beebe, concluded that 200-240 days in combat would suffice to break even the strongest soldier: “There is no such thing as “getting used to combat.” ... Each moment of combat imposes a strain so great that men will break down in direct relation to the intensity and duration of their exposure. Thus psychiatric casualties are as inevitable as gunshot and shrapnel wounds in warfare.” (Herman 25)

This passage makes it clear that, in trying to quantify the level of exposure necessary to destroy the healthy minds of combat soldiers, psychiatrists faced a simple fact: every man has his breaking point; every soldier has his limit.

Herman asserts that American psychiatrists worked hard trying to pinpoint elements that could possibly safeguard soldiers' integrity against complete breakdown, or heal them quickly. They found out one more time what Rivers had confirmed with Sassoon's therapy: "the power of emotional attachments among fighting men." In 1947, after working together with Herbert Spiegel, a psychiatrist who had been seeing combatants at the front, Kardiner rewrote *The Traumatic Neurosis of War*. Both Kardiner and Spiegel contended that "the strongest protection against overwhelming terror was the degree of relatedness between the soldier, his immediate fighting unit, and their leader." Analogous discoveries were revealed by the psychiatrists Roy Grinker and John Spiegel, who observed that the condition of ever-present danger induced combatants to "develop extreme emotional dependency upon their peer group and leaders." The researchers noted that the most effective protection against psychological breakdown "was the morale and leadership of the small fighting unit" (Herman 25).

The rehabilitation programs that gradually developed during the Second World War were conceived to keep the afflicted soldier and his companions united as much as possible. Doctors attempted new treatments, including hypnosis to induce an altered state of consciousness, drugs such as sodium amytal or sodium pentathol, and therapy sessions using talking cures. According to the Free Dictionary by Farlex, sodium pentathol is an ultra short-acting barbiturate that depresses the central nervous system, slows the heart rate, and lowers blood pressure. In the relaxed state produced by the drug, subjects are more susceptible to suggestion and are therefore easier to interrogate. It is called the "truth drug" for this reason. The psychiatrists who developed these approaches concluded that simply relieving the burden of the traumatic memories was not enough to accomplish a long-term recovery. Psychiatrists Roy Grinker and John

Spiegel argued that “combat leaves a lasting impression on men’s minds, changing them as radically as any crucial experience through which they live.” Hypnosis could speed up the process of gaining access to traumatic memories, but this ordinary cathartic procedure alone was ineffective. They made it clear that hypnosis did not work where there was not enough “follow-through.” In a similar way, they contended that “if the memories retrieved and discharged under the influence of sodium amytal were not integrated into consciousness,” the therapy would not turn out well (Herman 26).

Herman shows that meticulous, extensive research of the long-term psychological impact of combat was carried out only after the Vietnam War was over, when the stimulus for investigation came neither from the Armed Forces nor from the medical area, but from the “organized efforts of soldiers disaffected from war.” In 1970, at the peak of the Vietnam War, psychiatrists Robert Jay Lifton and Chaim Shatan got together with delegates of the new anti-war association named “Vietnam Veterans Against the War.” It was extraordinary and novel for veterans to mobilize against their own war while it was still going on. A number of distinguished Vietnam veterans gave their medals back and “offered public testimony of their war crimes,” thus raising questions about their own country’s unsubstantiated claim of a fair war and adding “moral credibility to a growing antiwar movement” (Herman 26).

The antiwar veterans established “rap groups,” in which they held friendly meetings with their comrades, abreacting their traumatic experiences of the war. These sessions had two objectives: to provide comfort to the traumatized combatants and to make other people conscious of the aftermath of the war. The evidence emerging from these groups directed public attention to the permanent “psychological injuries of

combat.” These veterans rejected both the idea of being forgotten and of being “stigmatized” (Herman 27).

By 1975, quite a few unofficial rap groups had been established in America. After the Vietnam War was over, the Veterans’ Administration authorized an extensive investigation into the effects of wartime experiences on the lives of combatants who were returning home. An in-depth research into the aftermath of Vietnam described the syndrome of “post-traumatic stress disorder” and definitely proved its close connection to “combat exposure.” Both the authentic moral nature of the antiwar crusade and the awful American realization of defeat in a defamed war had enabled the recognition of psychological trauma as a permanent heritage of the Vietnam War. Herman asserts that, “in 1980, for the first time, the characteristic syndrome of psychological trauma became a “real” diagnosis” (Herman 27-28). According to Cathy Caruth, at long last, in 1980, the American Psychiatric Association decided to recognize and include in the new edition of its official diagnostic manual of mental disorders a new category: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. This designation came to comprise signs of illnesses which had been called shell shock, battle fatigue, combat neurosis, or traumatic neurosis throughout the twentieth century and related to reactions to both disasters of nature and atrocities produced by human beings (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 130). Herman contends that, in this manner, “the syndrome of psychological trauma, periodically forgotten and periodically rediscovered through the past century, finally attained formal recognition within the diagnostic canon” (Herman 28).

2.5. Combat Neurosis and the Sex War

As has been shown, research into hysteria carried out at the end of the nineteenth century failed on the issue of sexual trauma. At that time, there was no consciousness that violence was a habitual component of women's sexual lives. Freud looked briefly into this reality and moved away in a state of shock. For a substantial part of the twentieth century, what boosted learning about traumatic disorders was the investigation of combat veterans. Only after the women's liberation movement of the 1970s, came the recognition that the most usual post-traumatic disorders are not typical of soldiers who fought in wars but of "women in civilian life" (Herman 28).

Herman claims that only after 1980, when the work of combat veterans had given both academic force and status to the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder, did it become obvious that the psychological syndrome observed in those who had come through "rape, domestic battery and incest" was basically equivalent to the "syndrome seen in survivors of war." She argues that the implied meaning of this perception is as appalling nowadays as it was one hundred years ago: the subaltern existing state of women is kept and imposed by the concealed violence of men. Herman states that "there is a war between the sexes. Rape victims, battered women, and sexually abused children are its casualties. Hysteria is the combat neurosis of the sex war." She also contends that it has now become clear that the traumas of men and women are the same. Acknowledging the mutual features of distress may facilitate passing beyond the limits of the wide chasm that isolates "the public sphere of war and politics – the world of men – and the private sphere of domestic life – the world of women" (Herman 32).

Research into psychological trauma appears to be solidly constituted nowadays as a genuine field of study. But this scenario could change. This concern could vanish, as it has disappeared other times in the past. It has never been viable to promote research into psychological trauma outside the setting of a political movement. The destiny of this area of study rests on the destiny of the same political movement that has motivated and kept it alive in the last century:

In the late nineteenth century the goal of that movement was the establishment of secular democracy. In the early twentieth century its goal was the abolition of war. In the late twentieth century its goal was the liberation of women. All of these goals remain. All are, in the end, inseparably connected. (Herman 32)

This passage sheds light on the fact that research into psychological trauma is intrinsically a political undertaking, since it draws attention to the ordeal of the exploited. Only a permanent alliance with a worldwide political crusade for human rights could eventually cultivate people's talents at articulating inexpressible emotions, ineffable thoughts, and incommunicable opinions.

2.6. Definition of Trauma

PTSD goes beyond the extreme experiences of combat and rape. Luckhurst contends that those who go through catastrophes, are involved in accidents, combats, or experience excessive "stressor" events appear to exhibit various "identifiable somatic and psycho-somatic disturbances." Apart from numerous physical signs, trauma throws memory into confusion and disorder. Identity suffers likewise. Here, three groups of

symptoms can be identified: the first has to do with the manner in which “the traumatic event is persistently re-experienced” by way of disturbing flashbacks, “recurring dreams, or later situations that repeat or echo the original.” The second group of symptoms implies the antipode of the first one: “persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma.” In this case, the subject either avoids thoughts or feelings connected to the event, experiences a “general sense of emotional numbing,” or has no recall at all of the event. The third set of symptoms calls attention to “increased arousal,” meaning the inability to control mood, “hyper-vigilance or exaggerated startle response.” These signs can begin in a piercing way, persevere incessantly, or, even “appear belatedly,” a long time after the causative event (Luckhurst 1).

In Caruth’s view, there is no solid definition for psychological trauma. She contends that, at different times, different descriptions have been given to severe emotional shock, most of them under different names (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 117). In its general definition,

[...] trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct way of seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. The repetitions of the traumatic event – which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight – thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can

simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing. (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 91-92)

A traumatic event is not lived when it takes place. It can only be comprehended after the fact, through flashbacks, hallucinations and other repetitive phenomena. Additionally, the strange temporal configuration of trauma allows the comprehension of the violent event only in association with another time, upon its repetitive reappearance.

An event is most likely deemed traumatic if it annihilates the psychic safeguards and typical procedures of recording “memory traces.” By some means, trauma is marked with a kind of branding iron straight onto the mind, comparable to shell fragments, and is not “subject to the distortions of subjective memory: it is a symptom of history” (Caruth, “Introduction to Psychoanalysis” 3). For Caruth, psychological trauma is a precious model of history, once the traumatic experience sets itself firmly in the psyche without any mediation: “In trauma, that is, the outside has gone inside without any mediation” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 59). Beneath the token of trauma, history can be understood “only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence, its truth bound up with its crisis of truth” (Caruth, *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* 7). Caruth proposes a comparison between the traumatized subject and the historian who can never gain access to the past in its plenitude:

[...] it is here, in the equally widespread and bewildering encounter with trauma – both in its occurrence and in the attempt to understand it – that we can begin to recognize the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference). Through the notion of trauma [...] we can

understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not. (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 11)

Such assertions describe psychological trauma as a helpful model of referential complexity in which the traumatic event is equivalent to the “real” of history, the past that cannot be straightforwardly depicted. Caruth’s claim seems to be miraculous in the sense that trauma allows history simply to “arise” without understanding or effort, a magical sense that the ever-present past can come back into the present without human mediation:

The experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself. The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 17)

Caruth’s exposition converts memory into experience. The statement “inherent latency within the experience itself” implies that one’s memory of the traumatic event is not distinguishable from the experience of that past event in all its original profusion.

According to Luckhurst, it is repeatedly asserted that psychoanalysis and literature enjoy the privilege of being favored patterns of writing because they are able to “attend” to these intricate “paradoxes of trauma” (Luckhurst 5). According to Caruth, if Freud resorts to literature to characterize traumatic experience, it is due to the fact that literature, like psychoanalysis, is curious about the intricate connection between

“knowing and not knowing.” It is at this precise intersection that the “language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience” converge (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 3).

Jay Winter claims that “fiction and fictionalized memoirs” have been meaningful pathways for the propagation of the conceptions of traumatic memory (Winter 44). This has been unquestionable since World War I, with the publication of the poems of Wilfred Owen, who died in the war, and Ivor Gurney, who survived the war but spent the rest of his days in an insane asylum. The character of Septimus Smith, a veteran of World War I, was injured in trench warfare and suffers from shell shock in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). Before the war, Septimus was a budding young poet and lover of Shakespeare; life for him looked promising and full of possibilities. When the war broke out, he enlisted immediately for romantic patriotic reasons. After the war, he felt numb, disconnected and alienated from familial bonds as well as from the community. His inner devastation is portrayed in these passages:

How Shakespeare loathed humanity – the putting on of clothes, the getting of children, the sordidity of the mouth and the belly! This was now revealed to Septimus; the message hidden in the beauty of words. The secret signal which one generation passes, under disguise, to the next is loathing, hatred, despair. Dante the same. Aeschylus (translated) the same. [...] One cannot bring children into a world like this. One cannot perpetuate suffering, or increase the breed of these lustful animals, who have no lasting emotions, but only whims and vanities, eddying them now this way, now that [...] For the truth is [...] that human beings have neither kindness, nor faith, nor charity beyond what serves to increase the

pleasure of the moment. They hunt in packs. Their packs scour the desert and vanish screaming into the wilderness. (Woolf 98-99)

Septimus, having experienced the calamities of the human race during the war, now sees the tragedies of mankind portrayed in the literature, which, in an ironic way, induced him to fight for England.

Quite a few veterans refused to speak or write about their experiences, but many became storytellers, who, until today, can teach a lot about what trauma means. Winter argues it is essential to recognize the crucial importance of narratives in the comprehension of traumatic memory as a fact of twentieth-century life (Winter 45).

Chapter 3 - Memory

3.1. Introduction

Psychoanalytic criticism starts with Sigmund Freud, who wrote about art and literature in essays of various types. Freud was the first one to become engaged in the pursuit of interpreting culture in the light of psychoanalytic discoveries, and several of his essays focus on how literature discloses some psychological mechanisms at work, such as “the disguised wish-fulfillment, or the compulsion to repeat.” As Freud mentions in a famous statement, “the poets had gotten there before him, and he returned repeatedly to what he perceived as the natural affinity between psychoanalysis and works of art” (Childers 246).

Psychoanalytic thinking discusses key concepts such as the unconscious, the Oedipus complex, the defenses, anxiety, interpretation of dreams, death, and sexuality. The focus of this chapter is to analyze the significance of memory in narratives of war, mostly written by foot soldiers who experienced and witnessed traumatic events in times of combat. Some types of trauma-related memories connected to writing are evaluated: traumatic memory, unreflective habitual memory, narrative memory, cultural memory, the importance of narrative in cultural life, and memory as a crucial factor of integration between the past and the present. The contrast between involuntary memories and narrative memories is seen in the writings in Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-1927). The effect of forgetfulness in writing, especially in Proust’s work, is dissected by Walter Benjamin in his book *Illuminations* (1955). Christoph Hoerl and Teresa McCormack’s *Time and Memory, Issues in Philosophy and Psychology* (2001) methodically examines the non-chronological

organization of memory, the disparity between episodic memory and semantic memory and its connections with the nature of fictional truth and realism. Repetition as a way to cope with the interruption of the flow of remembering is inspected in Freud's text *Further Recommendations in the Technique of Psycho-Analysis: Recollection, Repetition and Working-Through* (1955).

3.2. Narratives of War Anchored in Memory

Narratives of war are anchored in the memories of combat soldiers and all the events that are remembered are fuel for writing. Being a platoon commander supplied the young lieutenant Siegfried Sassoon with innumerable memories to write his poems. The one that follows was written in the hospital ten days after he was wounded.

To the Warmongers

I'm back again from hell
With loathsome thoughts do sell;
Secrets of death to tell;
And horrors from the abyss.
Young faces bleared with blood,
Sucked down into the mud,
You shall hear things like this,
Till the tormented slain
Crawl round and once again,
With limbs that twist awry
Moan out their brutish pain,

As the fighters pass them by.

For you our battles shine

With triumph half-divine;

And the glory of the dead

Kindles in each proud eye.

But a curse is on my head,

That shall not be unsaid,

And the wounds in my heart are red,

For I have watched them die. (Barker 25)

The persona in this poem encapsulates the horrors of the war experienced by the subject and loathes its bloody consequences. Appalled at the carnage and the meaningless sacrifice of young lives, it is almost impossible for him to come to terms with the extremes of man's inhumanity to man and to forget: "But a curse is on my head / That shall not be unsaid / And the wounds in my heart are red / For I have watched them die." Through this passage, it is clear that the subject was determined to remember and to remind the "warmongers" the price of their imagined "glory." Writing this poem was cathartic to Sassoon. His fixed intention to remember most probably explains his fast recovery, although in his particular situation, his regeneration was impelled mostly by a wish to persuade civilians that the war was irrational and not so much to save his own healthy mental state.

3.3. Unreflective Habitual Memory, Narrative Memory and Involuntary Memory

Mieke Bal in her introductory text of *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, describes the difference between unreflective habitual memories and narrative memories. According to her, unreflective habitual memories are predominantly based on routine, like conditioned reflexes, and seem to be automatic. No cook intentionally touches the beautiful gas flames on the stove, knowing they will burn. This knowledge comes from memory, and it helps the individual survive. Narrative memories are different from unreflective habitual memories because they are both emotionally colored and enveloped by an emotional atmosphere that makes them remarkable. Usually, the series of events that make up narrative memory presents high and low emphases, foreground and background, preparatory and climatic events.

Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past (A La Recherche Du Temp Perdu)* is made up of such memories. The novel also incorporates involuntary memories, those that emerge once the narrator strikes them by some gesture, some ordinary sense perception that awakens them. These involuntary memories are routine memories which are inactive and suddenly become narrative memories, at which point Proust stops to wonder. The overlooked, gloomy memories become emotionally colored by the narrator's rapid reaction to them (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, vii-viii). The most famous instance of involuntary memory in Proust is known as the "episode of the madeleine," the episode of the cake dipped in herbal tea in *Swann's Way*, the first volume:

She sent out for one of those short, plump little cakes called petites madeleines, which look as though they had been molded in the fluted

scallop of a pilgrim's shell. And soon, mechanically, weary after a dull day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place...at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory [...]. (Proust 49)

In this passage, the involuntary memories evoked by biting into a tea biscuit are made clear as the narrator experiences an awakening. Proust did not describe his life as it actually was, but a life remembered by someone who lived it.

According to Walter Benjamin, the law of forgetfulness also took place in Proust's work. A lived event is finite, or at least confined in the domain of the lived, whereas the remembered event has no limits, because it is only a key for everything that came before and after. From a different viewpoint, recollection is what determines the way the text is "woven." In other words, the unity of the text lies only in the single act of the recollection itself. It neither lies in the author nor in the action. The intermittences of the action are the mere reverse of the continuum of the recollection (Benjamin 198). Proust's stroke of genius resides not in having written "memories," but in his "search" for the analogies and the similarities between the past and the present.

3.4. Traumatic Memory and Narrative Memory

Bal also mentions another type of memory in her introductory text to *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*: traumatic memory. This type involves a more problematic relationship to narrative: traumatic recall, the injurious reappearance of events of a traumatic kind: “Traumatic events in the past have a persistent presence, which explains why that presence is usually discussed in terms of memory – as traumatic memory” (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, viii). Traumatic memories continue in the same present state for the subject and they bear a specific vividness and/or totally resist integration (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer viii).

The traumatized subject, in his or her difficulty to deal with impressions, scenes or experiences, partially forgets them, interrupts the flow of remembering, and keeps repeating them. That is the way he/she unconsciously finds to deal with the trauma, as illustrated from these excerpts taken from Freud’s *Further Recommendations in the Technique of Psycho-Analysis: Recollection, Repetition and Working-Through*:

[...] If we confine ourselves to this second type in order to bring out the difference, we may say that the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory, but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it. (Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* 196)

We have learnt that the patient repeats instead of remembering, and repeats under the conditions of resistance. We may now ask what it

is that he in fact repeats or acts out. The answer is that he repeats everything that has already made its way from the sources of the repressed into his manifest personality – his inhibitions and unserviceable attitudes and his pathological character traits. He also repeats all his symptoms in the course of the treatment. And now we can see that in drawing attention to the compulsion to repeat we have acquired no new fact but only a more comprehensive view. (Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* 198)

Through these passages it is possible to notice the repetition compulsion, which is an attempt to relive and master the traumatic event. The patient is not able to remember all of what is repressed in him, and what he “cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it.” He is forced to repeat whatever is repressed, instead of “remembering it as something belonging to the past” (Gay 602).

According to Bessel A. Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart, the basis of modern psychiatry was set up more than one hundred years ago with research on “consciousness and the disruptive impact of traumatic experiences.” Strongly impressed by the study that some memories could become the core of future psychopathology, Charcot and Janet at the Salpêtrière, in France, and William James in the United States made strenuous efforts to study how the mind processes memories. They acknowledge two opposite points of view: on one hand, the flexibility of the mind and, on the other hand, how some types of memories became barriers that prevented people from living healthy lives. Psychologists and psychiatrists in the early 1900s were acutely conscious that some memories are not vanishing and that, according to Janet, “certain happenings would leave indelible and distressing memories – memories to which the sufferer was

continually returning, and by which he was tormented by day and by night” (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 158). Janet regarded the memory system as the key organizing network of the mind, “categorizing and integrating” all facets of experience (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 159).

Janet contended that narrative memory “consists of mental constructs, which people use to make sense out of experience” (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 160). He thought that the integration of experiences into “existing mental structures” depends on the “subjective assessment” of what happens:

[...] familiar and expectable experiences are automatically assimilated without much conscious awareness of details of the particulars, while frightening or novel experiences may not easily fit into existing cognitive schemes and either may be remembered with particular vividness or may totally resist integration. (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 160)

Under extreme circumstances, existing meaning schemes may be completely incapable of accommodating frightening experiences,

[...] which causes the memory of these experiences to be stored differently and not be available for retrieval under ordinary conditions: it becomes dissociated from conscious awareness and voluntary control. When that occurs, fragments of these unintegrated experiences may later manifest recollections or behavioral reenactments. (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 160)

According to Janet, this is “traumatic memory.” Here, the subject is not able to construct a narrative out of the frightening experiences. Janet contends that, because the event has not been “fully integrated as it occurred,” it cannot become a “narrative

memory” that is integrated into a completed story of the past (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 160).

In his constant efforts to delineate the differences between narrative memory and traumatic memory, Janet frequently uses a clinical example that manifests both: the case of Irène. Irène was a twenty-three-year-old woman who took care of her terminally ill tubercular mother, whose death Irène experienced as very traumatic. Irène nursed her through sixty consecutive sleepless nights, and when she died, Irène was not able to apprehend the reality of the event. Throughout the night she tried to resuscitate the body, forced it to speak, gave it medications and cleaned its mouth. During this effort, the corpse fell from the bed. She could not call her alcoholic father for help because he was completely drunk. She was finally able to drag the body back onto bed and went on talking to it. Soon afterwards, she became amnesic for the event of her mother's death, the burial, as well as the three months preceding it. She was unable to work, developed severe abulia, and lost all interest in those around her. She was frequently affected by delirious crises in which she very dramatically re-experienced the critical scenes of her mother's last hours and death. Irène attempted suicide twice and was hospitalized in the Salpêtrière Hospital, Paris. Irene was "attached" to the traumatic event in such a way that she could not get beyond. She was unable to adapt to a life without her mother; her behavior resulted from “nonrealization” as Janet called it (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 160-62).

After six months of inpatient treatment and hypnotic therapy, Irène gradually began to tell the story of the death of her mother. The approach adopted by Janet consisted of helping Irène restore her memories, first in hypnosis and then in the waking state. As her emotional tone diminished, Irène was eventually able to reconstruct a

verbal memory of her mother's death without suffering dissociative symptoms. She had to translate her traumatic memories into a narrative, a personal account of the event and how it affected her personality. When she showed that she actually realized her mother's death and could relate her personal account of this event, Janet noted that her other symptoms, like profound abulia, disappeared. Her mental level of functioning increased, Irène proceeded with her mourning, set her life in order, and became independent. She also recovered the emotional portion of the memory: "I feel very sad. I feel abandoned." According to Janet, "as her memory was now accompanied by her feelings, it had become complete" (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 160-62).

Janet gathered that the most impressive plight of Irène was her lack of any memory of her mother's dying. And yet, she manifested another type of symptom. Several times a week, every time she looked at an empty bed, she reproduced the tragic scene of her mother's death, bringing a glass to the lips of an unreal person, cleaning her mouth and having a conversation with this person, getting on this bed to arrange the body. Afterwards, she cried, saying that the body had fallen on the floor and her father, who had had too much alcohol and throws up on the bed, was unable to help her. This imitation of the death scene took about three to four hours. This enactment usually ended by Irène looking hopeless, by an uncontrolled fit, and, in the end, by sleep (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 162).

In this way, Irène presented two different types of symptoms: on one hand, she was amnesic for the death of her mother: she could not give a verbal account of the story. On the other hand, she appeared to recall too much through her enactments (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 162). Janet, then, noticed the difference between "traumatic memory" and "narrative memory." The traumatic memory takes too long: it took Irène

three to four hours to enact the scene and it took her only half a minute to tell the story. According to Janet, this is how narrative memory should operate: “it should be an aspect of life and be integrated with other experiences.” Irène’s traumatic memory in a clear way “was not adaptive at all.” After regaining the narrative memory, she was capable to answer her doctor’s question correctly, and that meant, adjusted to present conditions. For instance, Irène narrated a somewhat different story to Janet than she did to most people: for most people she omitted the loathsome behavior of her father. In this way, if a comparison is drawn, narrative memory is a “social act,” whereas traumatic memory is “inflexible and invariable.” Traumatic memory does not have any social element; it is not directed at anybody, the patient does not react positively or favorably to anyone; it is a lonesome action. On the other hand, narrative memory essentially “serves a social function,” exemplified by the fact of Irène telling persons about the death of her mother as an earnest request for help and “reconnection” (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 163).

According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Fourth Edition 2006), dissociation is a psychological defense mechanism in which specific, anxiety-provoking thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations are separated from the rest of the psyche. Van der Kolk and Van der Hart contend that improper integration of deep emotional experiences into the memory system “results in dissociation and the formation of traumatic memories.” They state that contemporary studies have shown that a great deal of psychiatric patients respond to stress by dissociating. They react inappropriately to stress and behave “automatically,” with irrelevant stereotypic images, ideas, emotions and movements that represent fragmented re-experiences of frightening past events (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 163).

Besides being an example of dissociation, the case of Irène is important to exemplify the difference between narrative memory and traumatic memory. Luckhurst explains the relation between traumatic events and narrative:

The contemporary public sphere is saturated with specialist knowledges, general accounts and stark images of traumatic experience. A traumatic event was initially defined as “outside the range of normal human experience,” something that might also be grasped as a gap between impact and understanding, influx and assimilation. Anyone who has watched rolling news service in the immediate wake of a disaster will have seen a disarray of competing and contradictory accounts, obsessive repetition of the same, unedited footage, and a collapse of distinctions between knowledge, rumor and speculation. This chaos is only gradually corralled into a meaningful, strongly shaped media story, slowly edited back into conformity with News discourse as the initial crisis recedes. The relationship between trauma as a devastating disruption and the subsequent attempts to translate or assimilate this disturbance is a fundamental tension between interruption and flow, blockage and movement. Trauma, in effect, issues a challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge. In its shock impact trauma is anti-narrative, but it also generates the manic production of retrospective narratives that seek to explicate trauma. (Luckhurst 79)

Luckhurst also suggests the role of literature in this process:

For me, the work done by cultural forms inheres in this contradiction: culture rehearses or restages narratives that attempt to

animate and explicate trauma that has been formulated as something that exceeds the possibility of narrative knowledge. (Luckhurst 79)

3.5. Episodic Memory

William J. Friedman states that memory store is not chronologically organized: “[...] events are not chronologically organized in memory nor is there even a special system for assigning temporal codes to individual memories” (Hoerl and McCormack 139). According to Friedman, various studies show that, when provided with a description of some event, we cannot easily remember the nearness in time of some other unrelated but temporally contiguous event. For example, in 1997, Friedman and Huttenlocher asked viewers of the television series “60 Minutes” if stories A and B, broadcast in 1996, had been presented during the same weekly episode or not. Answers varied immensely. Many answered that the stories were presented during the same week, and many said that they appeared during different weeks (Hoerl and McCormack 141).

In her chapter entitled “Attributing Episodic Memory to Animals and Children,” Teresa McCormack states that the term “episodic memory” was initially coined in the psychological world by E. Tulving (1972). According to McCormack, even though it is difficult to define and measure this type of memory, the term has persisted probably because it seizes on an important feature of our practical understanding of memory (Hoerl and McCormack 285). In the introduction of the book entitled *Perspectives on Time and Memory*, the editors Teresa McCormack and Christoph Hoerl assert that the fundamental contention that the contributors to the book share with Tulving is that

“episodic memory is essentially memory for events that were “personally experienced” (Tulving 387) and thus occurred in one’s personal past” (Hoerl and McCormack 7). In chapter 3, entitled “The Chronological Organization of Memory: Common Psychological Foundations for Remembering and Timing,” Gordon D.A. Brown and Nick Chater state that “[w]ithin the psychological literature, much of the discussion on the relationship between time and memory has arisen from the study of episodic memory” (Hoerl and McCormack 77).

The term “semantic memory,” or factual memory, is the term coined by psychologists to describe the kind of memory by which one keeps factual knowledge of the world, the information one has previously encountered as a true fact, for example, the date associated with a news event (Hoerl and McCormack 187, 258, 294).

In chapter 10, entitled “Out of the Past: Episodic Recall as Retained Acquaintance,” M.G.F. Martin describes an incident that happened to John Dean involving the Watergate case. At that time, Dean was President Nixon’s former counsel. When Dean gave testimony before the House on the Watergate affair, his recollection of specific occurrences and the subject matter of the talks that had taken place in the Oval Office was extremely detailed and thorough. His recall was so detailed and so perfect that one of the senators labeled him “the human tape recorder.” But without Dean’s knowledge, Richard Nixon secretly taped what Dean had bore witness to, thus turning the case into a real-world investigation for work in memory. A research involving the comparison between Dean’s testimony and what Nixon taped was conducted and published by psychologist Ulrich Neisser in 1981.

Neisser highlighted the fact that this comparison turned out to be an impartial test for Dean’s authenticity. Dean was never sued for lying under oath, nor censured in

any official reports for inaccuracy or false testimony. The general conclusion was that John Dean told the truth. However, the contrast between the tape and the testimony exhibits important disparities between the two. For instance, in some situations Dean assumes that people who participated in meetings spoke, when they actually did not; in other cases he reverses some familiar turns of phrases and details of plans made from one meeting to another, confusing one held in September with another that took place in March, for example. Dean does get the general import of several meetings right, but he fails to get the words right while still giving their substance, and he does not even get the gist of some particular meetings correctly. "In general, the narrative drift of the course of events as told by Dean is accurate, albeit sometimes the tale involves a bias towards Dean himself as occupying the centre stage" (Hoerl and McCormack 257). There is a general consensus that Dean is not deceiving the House Committee, as long as the correct details of particular events should not be considered so much (Hoerl and McCormack 257).

M.G.F. Martin asserts that someone might be prone to consider that, when we narrate occurrences that we have witnessed, we have some kind of special access to the past. But according to Martin, what Neisser's case study suggests is that "there is no such fundamental divide between memories which relate one to past episodes that one has witnessed, and memory simply as a store of information about the world." Dean knew a lot about the Watergate cover-up and the broad unfolding of events due to his special position as Nixon's former counsel. When it came for him to narrate specific episodes of the affair, he could count on his general knowledge of the events and of Nixon's character to rebuild the incidents as they must have taken place. According to Martin, we should not consider that there is a basic disparity between episodic memory

and semantic memory but simply contrast the different kinds of ways that retained information can be used in memory tasks. We have the feeling that Dean had special access to past events as an eyewitness because of two factors: first, he had greater factual knowledge about the events than the committee he was reporting to, and second, “the story that he told using those facts was a story that featured him as the central agent of the narrative” (Hoerl and McCormack 258).

Dean’s episode is an interesting case that raises intriguing questions about the nature of fictional truth and realism. Hemingway’s novel *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950) is the story of Richard Cantwell, a war-ravaged American colonel stationed in Italy at the close of the Second World War. In the novel, a young girl tells the Colonel he should write about the war because he can talk so well about it.

“You ought to write,” the girl said. “I mean it truly. So someone would know about such things.”

“No,” the Colonel disagreed. “I have not the talent for it and I know too much. Almost any liar writes more convincingly than a man who was there.” (Hemingway, *Across the River and into the Trees* 116)

In this passage, the questioning of the claim of verisimilitude is clear through the sentence “Almost any liar writes more convincingly than a man who was there.” The authenticity of the voice of the man who was there depends on his episodic memory, which can also be questioned. Similar to the Dean case, war stories many times involve a bias toward the narrator himself, as he is in the center stage.

3.6. Cultural Memory

Bal defines the term “cultural memory” as an interaction between present and past. According to Bal, “cultural memory, for better or for worse, links the past to the present and future” (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, vii). Bal contends that the various purposes of the memorial presence of the past are many: conscious recall, unreflected reemergence, nostalgic longing of what is lost, and polemical use of the past to reshape the present (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, vii). Cultural recall is something of which the subject is an agent and that he/she additionally performs, even if these actions are not consciously devised (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, vii).

Bal claims that the importance of the understanding of cultural memory is directly connected to the need to integrate the traumatizing events of the past into the present. She asserts that also important is the need of a second person to play the role of an authenticating witness to a grievous past which is difficult to find, define or achieve. This way, the action of the memory facilitates an interchange between the first and the second person, which promotes the development of the narrative (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, x).

Often, when the trauma or wound of the subject prevents his own memory from acting as healing integration, interaction with others can overcome the problem. According to Bal, “this other” is usually a therapist, but it could be anybody that could take the place of a “second person” to whom the traumatized person could give an account of his experience, therefore sharing this thing that up to this point was a haunting image. Thus, this second person is necessary for the first person to come into

his own present, and be capable of bearing the past (Bal, xi). In her text, Bal highlights the importance of narrative in cultural life, which, according to her, “is a privileged form of communication, information, and artistic reflection” (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, xi).

In her introductory text to *Acts of Memory- Cultural Recall in the Present*, Bal cites Jonathan Crewe, one of the editors of the book. According to Crewe, “memory is always open to social revision and manipulation” because it is comprised of socially constituted forms, narratives, relations, and obedient acts of interference in it (Bal, xiii).

In her chapter entitled “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self”, Susan J. Brison asserts that survivors of trauma claim they were somebody different before they were traumatized. The act of annulling the self in trauma involves a radical interruption of memory, a separation of past from present and an incapacity to conceptualize the future. Nevertheless, sooner or later, survivors of trauma discover ways to revitalize themselves and continue with “overhauled” lives. She argues that “mastering traumatic memory involves a shift from being the object or medium of someone else’s speech to being the subject of one’s own” (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, 39). Bearing witness to the trauma makes this shift easier because it transforms traumatic memory into a coherent narrative that can be incorporated both into the survivor’s vision of the world and also into his/her own sense of individuality. Additionally, it reintegrates the survivor into a community, regenerating links that are vital to individuality. Brison contends that “[m]emories of traumatic events can be themselves traumatic: uncontrollable, intrusive, and frequently somatic. They are experienced by the survivor as inflicted, not chosen – as flashbacks to the events themselves” (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, 40). On the other hand, Brison asserts that telling stories to others

strengthens the subject to acquire more control over the marks generated by trauma. “Narrative memory is not passively endured; rather, it is an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to make a self” (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, 40). Brison affirms that the narrative of one’s trauma is not always therapeutic and may not be enough to recover a person from trauma, but it contributes meaningfully to such recovery to the extent that nowadays it is largely accepted in the field of the psychology of trauma (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, 40).

In her text entitled *Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy*, Marianne Hirsh contends that even though experience is personally lived, it is simultaneously culturally apportioned. She also claims that discourses are not intrinsic to the human mind. According to her, discourses are shared because they belong to the domain of culture, thus suggesting that memory is at the same time cultural memory. Therefore, our experiences and memories do not set us apart from others; they empower interrelatedness, or culture. Memory constitutes the interrelatedness of people as a whole, or culture. Memories are the real subjects of culture, and they only take place in the minds of human beings. Culturally shared discourses had a life of their own before people started using them, but on the other hand, the use of discourse relies on human intermediation. Eventually, it is human intermediation that sets in motion the past materialized in living conditions. “Memory is not something we have, but something we produce as individuals sharing a culture. Memory is, then, the mutually constitutive interaction between the past and the present,

shared as culture but acted out by each of us as an individual” (Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, 37).

Jay Winter contends that when a group of individuals come together to recall meaningful events, events which identify them as a group, these individuals produce something he called “collective memory.” When they are not a group any longer, when there is an interference of extraneous events, when they become old, when they move some place else or find other interests in live, then the collective changes or disintegrates, and so does the “collective memory.” Naturally, it is persons who remember, not groups or establishments, but these persons, situated in a particular group context, make use of that context to remember or recreate the past. This notion of the socially constructed nature of “collective memory” is imperative to historical study, because it makes it impossible to talk about memory “as if it exists independently of the people who share it” (Winter 156).

One of the fundamental propositions of the work of French philosopher and socialist Maurice Halbwachs is that human memory can only function within a collective context. In the introduction to Halbwachs’s *On Collective Memory* (1992), Lewis A. Coser wrote about a study entitled “Generations and Collective Memory” by Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott which appeared in the *American Sociological Review* in June 1989. The study aimed at clarifying the connections between “generational effects, life course and collective memory.” A correlated theory tested was “that the events and changes that have maximum impact in terms of memorableness occur during a cohort’s adolescence and young adulthood.” Coser contends that the study uses the discoveries of Karl Mannheim on general effects, but mainly ideas from the work of Halbwachs. According to him,

The Vietnamese war, for example, left a deep imprint on the minds of people who were then in adolescence and early adulthood, whereas for later cohorts it was but a historic memory with comparatively little potency. [...] By and large, however, the study gives considerable support to the notion that the collective memory of each generation is largely influenced by their life experiences at a relatively young age. (Halbwachs 30)

This passage makes it clear that public events of considerable relevance like wars have a powerful impression on people's minds, but the impression is stronger if the participants are in their late teens or early adulthood. This hypothesis is highly relevant to the memories of the Vietnam soldier-writer, since, as seen in the previous chapter, the average age of the American soldier was less than nineteen years old.

In Pat Barker's novel *Regeneration* (1991), Dr. Rivers wakes up in the middle of the night with chest pains. He then sees his doctor, who insists that he take a three-week vacation. During this time, he visits his brother's house and reflects on his relationship with his deceased father. Rivers then visits his old friend the psychologist Henry Head, who offers him a job at a war hospital in London. Dr. Rivers decides to take the job offer and leaves Craiglockhart Hospital. In London, he finds pleasure in his new work, until he gets to know Dr. Lewis Yelland, a psychiatrist who really existed. Dr. Yelland, who specialized in war patients, invites Rivers to watch one of his sessions. Rivers feels extremely uneasy as he watches one of Yelland's nightmarish electroshock therapy sessions on a patient named Callan, yet Dr. Rivers is unable to protest. While on duty, Callan had suddenly fallen down when he was feeding horses and remained unconscious for five hours. When he recovered consciousness he was unable to speak.

The patient had been strapped to a chair for periods of twenty minutes at a time, and very strong electric current applied to his neck and throat. Hot plates had been applied repeatedly to the back of the throat, and lighted cigarettes to the tongue. (Barker 227)

That night, Rivers has a nightmare that he is shoving a horse's bit into Sassoon's mouth, similar to the way Yelland shoved the electrode into the patient's mouth. Dr. Yelland did actually apply these methods as they are described in the novel, which are depicted in detail in his book *Hysterical Disorders of Warfare* (London: Macmillan, 1918).

Rivers had his own experience of PTSD with Yelland and the horse bit dream. The dream itself shows that Rivers perceived on a societal level that institutions, of which he was a part, had violent coping responses to veterans' suffering. With treatments such as electroshock, the researchers wanted to obliterate the memories as much as most of the soldiers did, hoping for unfeeling pawns who would carry out their dirty work and not haunt them upon return about bad foreign policy decisions.

Forgetting was also encouraged after the Vietnam War. In her epilogue to *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990*, Marilyn B. Young wrote of the effort of the American government to try to make the society and the veterans forget the war:

What militarists deplore as the Vietnam syndrome can better be understood as a relatively unique event in American history: an inability to forget, a resistance to everyday workings of historical amnesia, despite the serious and coordinated efforts of the government and much of the press to "heal wounds" of the war by encouraging such forgetting, or

what comes to the same thing, firm instructions on how to remember.

(Young 328)

Here we see the connection with cultural memory. Evidence is already surfacing in the War in Iraq of the struggle of a society to cope with traumatic memories. According to CNN International, soldiers have received orders to glorify reports of the deaths of their mates in combat into heroic accounts in an effort to make the war seem worthwhile to the American public, when the sad events were in fact grim or even accidental and senseless.

Memory is crucial in dislocating events from their seclusion and integrating them in the totality of experience, that is, to narrative memory. Memory is reconstruction. Writing is too, in most ways. The stories narrated by combatants tell us a considerable amount of what they have been through, and the *way* they are told reflect some of what was going on in their psyches. What is told is experience refracted through memory. The weight of memory in narratives of war is heavy. The framework of the soldier's tale is most often affected by his traumatic memories. The next chapter will analyze how the trauma suffered by the combatants and recovered by their traumatic memories influences their narrative process.

Chapter Four – The Return of the Repressed

4.1. A Brief Biography of Tim O'Brien

Tim O'Brien (William Timothy O'Brien Jr.) was born on October 1st, 1946 in Austin, Minnesota, spending his early life there until 1956, when he and his family moved to Worthington, Minnesota, near the Iowa border. His parents were both World War II veterans; his father was in the Navy, serving on a destroyer off the coasts of Okinawa and Iwo Jima during the two major Pacific campaigns; his mother was a Wave working in a hospital. O'Brien grew up listening to his father's numerous personal war stories and had a traditional all-American childhood and adolescence, with baseball, girls, and high school events. Two significant things combined influenced O'Brien as a writer: his family valued books and he was an avid reader; additionally, his mother was an elementary schoolteacher, who cared much about grammar. He had a complex relationship with his father. On one hand, senior O'Brien supported his son by playing ball with him, teaching him how to play golf and taking him on trips. He read voraciously and was highly critical about literature, which impressed young O'Brien. On the other hand, his father was an alcoholic, having been confined in an institution a few times. Dinnertime was usually difficult for O'Brien. By the time dinner was served, his father would be completely drunk and gloomy, and the delightful, fashionable man whom O'Brien loved had changed radically. An important factor in this uncomfortable father/son relationship were feelings of rejection, loneliness, and confusion O'Brien felt whenever his father was institutionalized for alcoholism and would disappear from his life. In order to avoid these feelings, O'Brien turned to magic, which he learned first from library books and then from magic tricks. From age 10 on, he practiced enough to become a talented magician, performing at birthday parties, talent shows and junior

high convocations. This interest remained until he went to college (Herzog, *Tim O'Brien* 4-10).

In 1968, he earned a B.A. in political science from Macalaster College in St. Paul, Minnesota. In August of the same year, he was drafted into the U.S. Army. From 1969 to 1970, he completed a 13-month tour of duty in the Vietnam War with Alpha Company, the Fifth Battalion of the 46th Infantry, being discharged in 1970 with the rank of sergeant. From 1970 to 1976, he was a Ph.D. graduate student in government at Harvard University. He stopped short of finishing his dissertation with a focus on American military intervention. In 1973 he married Ann Weller, divorcing her in 1995 (Herzog, *Tim O'Brien* xv-xvi).

His first novel, *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* was published in 1973. The second, *Northern Lights* (1975), was followed by *Going After Cacciato* (1978), *The Nuclear Age* (1985), *The Things They Carried* (1990), *In The Lake of the Woods* (1994), *Tomcat in Love* (1998) and *July, July* (2002). His style ranges from memoir (*If I Die in a Combat Zone*), to realist fiction (*Northern Lights*, *The Nuclear Age*) to magical realism (*Going After Cacciato*), comedy (*Tomcat in Love*), and experimental short fiction (*The Things They Carried*) (Smith 20).

O'Brien has devoted most of his writing to his war experience. His interest in writing about the Vietnam War started right after his return from Vietnam (Herzog, *Tim O'Brien* ix). According to Herzog, the War is only the starting point for O'Brien to delve into the daily struggles of questions of "conscience, despair, deteriorating relationships, evil, temptation, moral dilemmas, self-discovery, and, morality" of individuals; issues that are unaffected by time and not restricted to the battlefield. (Herzog, *Tim O'Brien* 24).

4.2. The Trauma Artist

According to Mark Heberle, O'Brien's works both portray and have been generated by Vietnam trauma. Vietnam assumes, in this manner, a figure for something else in O'Brien that he correlates with traumatic experiences, and his writing is a fictional portrayal of such experiences, frequently mimicking its symptoms (Heberle xviii, 23). Trauma is essentially the agent through which his protagonists are driven to revisit and rewrite their life experiences, and, O'Brien's writing mimics the occurrences of constriction, intrusion, hyperarousal, and others that are typical of traumatized survivors as well as the experiences they have lived through (Heberle xxi-xxii).

Heberle claims that O'Brien's fictional narratives are arranged as meditations contemplative of past situations or reflections by intensely traumatized characters trying to revisit the origins of their collapses in order to recover themselves. O'Brien emphasizes ideas, thus, his traumatized protagonists are mostly involved in meditation instead of action, usually reflecting on what they have experienced in order to understand it. Except for *In the Lake of the Woods*, these traumatic fictions also work as therapy for their subjects and furnish some redemption for what has been suffered; in summary, they reproduce trauma therapy, which depends on an effort to communicate to others an unspeakable affliction, in order to put the life of the posttraumatic survivor in order (Heberle xxi).

4.3. *The Things They Carried*

The Things They Carried, a collection of twenty-two interconnected short stories, or perhaps episodic novel, about a platoon of American soldiers in the Vietnam War, is a reflection on the experiences of these soldiers during and after the war. Regarded as a work of fiction, O'Brien deliberately blurs the line between fact and fiction presenting characters that seem to be individuals that actually existed. In the novel, the author Tim O'Brien creates a protagonist called "Tim O'Brien." This fictional soldier-character allows the author to explore emotions as if they were fictional creations, thus challenging the reader to consider a story that is fiction to be true. The fictional Tim O'Brien tells stories of his life and Vietnam War experiences, relates war stories told to him by other soldiers, and comments on the art of storytelling. *The Things They Carried* is an introspective memory novel, a powerful meditation on the experiences of the war, and a self-conscious examination of the methods and reasons behind storytelling:

You take the material where you find it, which is in your life, at the intersection of past and present. The memory-traffic feeds into a rotary up in your head, where it goes in circles for a while, then pretty soon imagination flows in and the traffic merges and shoots off down a thousand different streets. (O'Brien, *The Thing They Carried* 38)

This passage makes it clear that the soldier-author becomes much more than a recorder, as he engages in a struggle with creative tensions between memories of what he went through in the war and the metamorphosing power of his imagination.

For O'Brien, memory and imagination are means of access to explore possibilities, solve problems, and make choices, as well as to write stories. Imagination

can also be a path for getting away from the real world, or it can be a danger: “Imagination was a killer” (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 11) (Herzog, *Tim O’Brien* 27).

Tina Chen, in her article “Unraveling the Deeper Meaning: Exile and the Embodied Poetics of Displacement in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*” (1998), contends that, in O’Brien’s novel about the Vietnam experience, truth does not exist in truthful portrayals or authoritative accounts, as the author himself analyzes:

In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. [...] And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed. (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 78)

O’Brien makes the point that the objective truth of a war story is less relevant than the act of telling a story. Storytelling becomes an expression of memory and a catharsis of the past. In addition, the ways of telling a war story may be contemplated from various different viewpoints.

Several of the stories in the book are told from O’Brien’s narrator viewpoint, twenty years after the war:

I feel guilty sometimes. Forty-three years old and I’m still writing war stories. My daughter Kathleen tells me it’s an obsession, that I should write about a little girl who finds a million dollars and spends it all on a Shetland pony. In a way, I guess, she’s right: I should forget it. But the

thing about remembering is that you don't forget. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 38)

With this distance, facts have become cloudy, and all that remains of the experience are the lingering feelings and memories. This passage substantiates the fact that war stories are contemplative of past situations and events, as well as how memories of meaningful events of the past have a present persistence.

Chen claims that, according to O'Brien, "[a]bsolute occurrence is irrelevant" because "a true war story does not depend upon that kind of truth" (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 89). Pledged to analyze the connection between the concrete and the imagined, O'Brien breaks down the twofold idea of "happening-truth" and "story-truth:" "A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 89). In order to evaluate if what he has written is "truer than the truth," O'Brien chooses the type of response his stories should evoke: "A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe" (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 84).

Even though many of chapters can stand alone, *The Things They Carried* is an integrated novel with short stories ranging from two-page vignettes to stories of considerable length, which include passages of story, memoir, anecdote, confession, characters sketches, and lyric prose poems, are all united by the narrative voice of forty-three-year-old soldier-author Tim O'Brien (Herzog, *Tim O'Brien* 105). The soldier's common experiences connect the short stories. The plots are determined not by occurrences and events, but by the changing moral postures and development of their characters. The fragmented structure of the stories and arbitrary displacement of time allow the stories "coalesce into a seamless whole" (Smith 100). As Herzog argues, "the

confusion and ambiguity of the form and content of *The Things They Carried* mirror the disorder of the Vietnam War” (Herzog, *Tim O’Brien* 107).

The Things They Carried was published in 1990, at a crucial point in the post-war period, when it became clear that the Vietnam veterans were not like the veterans of World War II. Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, these veterans made a strenuous effort to gain recognition and to call attention to their problems: “The lack of skills, the bad service records, the war wounds, have been only part of the difficulty many veterans face” (Young 321). Initially, the far-reaching scope of psychological complications these veterans faced was labeled “postwar trauma,” but the continuity of, or the sudden start of, ten or fifteen years after the war, of symptoms of emotional numbness, sleep disturbances, depression, anxiety, irritability, outbursts of anger, flashbacks, depression, feelings of intense guilt and alcohol or other substance abuse, changed the name “postwar trauma” to “post-traumatic stress disorder” or PTSD (Young 321).

Among her case studies of traumatic symptoms in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Judith Herman quotes only one Vietnam writer, extensively citing passages from *The Things They Carried*. In the section entitled “Traumatic Transference” (Herman 136-140), Herman asserts that patients suffering from a traumatic syndrome develop a characteristic kind of transference in the therapy relationship. The traumatic transference reactions of the patient have a deep, life-or-death quality unparalleled in common therapeutic experience. Here, the patient idealizes the therapist, and when the psychiatrist fails to meet these idealized expectations, the patient is frequently overcome with rage. In this case, the patient is not tolerant with the therapist, not allowing him/her to make any mistake, because his/her life depends on the psychiatrist. This despairing

rage at a savior who “lapses even momentarily from her role is illustrated in the case of the Vietnam veteran Tim O’Brien, who describes how he felt after being wounded in battle” (Herman 136-37):

[...] the need for revenge kept eating at me. At night I sometimes drank too much. I’d remember getting shot and yelling for a medic and then waiting and waiting and waiting, passing out once, then waking up and screaming some more, and how the screaming seemed to make new pain, the awful stink of myself, the sweat and fear, Bobby Jorgenson’s clumsy fingers when he finally got around to working on me. I kept going over it all, every detail. I remember the soft, fluid heat on my own blood. *Shock*, I thought, and tried to tell him that, but my tongue wouldn’t make the connection. I wanted to yell, “You jerk, it’s shock – I’m *dying!*” but all I could do was whinny and squeal. I remember that, and the hospital, and the nurses. I even remembered the rage. But I couldn’t feel it anymore. In the end, all I felt was that coldness down inside my chest. Number one: the guy had almost killed me. Number two: there had to be consequences. (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 227-28)

This evidence exposes not only the defenseless violent anger of the injured party terrified by death but also the displacement of his anger from wrongdoer to health care provider. He feels that the doctor, not the armed foe, almost put an end to his life. His sense of humiliation and shame additionally increases his fury. Even though he gravely needs the rescuer’s help, he feels himself humiliated to be seen in this filthy physical condition. As his wounds heal in the hospital, he thinks persistently about a plan of retaliation, not against the enemy, but against the incompetent doctor.

Traumatized people feel completely abandoned, solitary, expelled from the human and divine systems of care that preserve life. Thus, a feeling of alienation and disconnection permeates relationships with family members, beloved ones and even with the community and religion (Herman 52). Survivors need assistance from others to better deal with their psychological wounds, and here, the question of judgment is of vital importance to restore the sense of attachment between the combat veteran and those close to him. The combatant feels himself isolated not only by what he has experienced, but also by his unique status as an “initiate in the cult of war.” On one hand, he fancies that no civilian can understand his meeting face to face with evil and death, and regards them as innocent and ignorant. On the other hand, he considers himself as superior and filthy. “He has violated the taboo of murder. The mark of Cain is upon him. A Vietnam veteran in O’Brien’s text describes this feeling of being contaminated (Herman 66):”

[...] The town could not talk, and would not listen. “How’d you like to hear about the war?” he might have asked, but the place could only blink and shrug. It had no memory, and therefore no guilt. The taxes got paid and the votes got counted and the agencies of government did their work briskly and politely. It was a brisk, polite town. It did not know shit about shit, and did not care to know.

Norman Bowker leaned back and considered what he might’ve said on the subject. He knew shit. It was his specialty. The smell, in particular, but also the numerous varieties of texture and taste. Someday he’d give a lecture on the topic. Put a suit and tie and stand up in front of

the Kiwanis club and tell the fuckers about all the wonderful shit he knew. Pass out samples, maybe. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 163)

This community did not want to listen, citizens only wanted to go on with their lives. Here, the notion of the veteran as an isolated individual is clear. Civilians are probably satisfied to idealize and depreciate his military service and take no notice of what this service involved. In the case of this passage, the fixation on trauma will probably be perpetuated by social habits that nurture the isolation of veterans from the rest of the community. Irony is used: "Pass out samples, maybe."

Herman asserts that homecoming soldiers have always been, in a special way, sensitive to the extent of assistance they meet at home. They usually look for palpable proof of public recognition. After every war, soldiers have generally expressed bitterness at the widespread lack of public awareness, interest, and attention; they dread their sacrifices will be soon forgotten. For this reason the persistence on "medals, monuments, parades, holidays, and public ceremonies of memorial, as well as individual compensation for injuries." Even public ceremonies conveying congratulations seldom please the appetite for recognition of combat veterans, "because of the sentimental distortion of the truth of combat. A Vietnam veteran addresses this universal tendency to deny the horror of war" (Herman 70):

If at the end of a war you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 76)

Herman simply refers to O'Brien as a "Vietnam veteran," and quotes this passage. Fiction doesn't make O'Brien's representations less authentic or true. *The*

Things They Carried is the only work of Vietnam War fiction quoted in Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* and these passages were cited as cases to exemplify Vietnam War trauma generally by a leading psychotherapist, who is an Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School and Director of Training at the Victims of Violence Program at Cambridge Hospital. Jonathan Shay, M.D., Ph.D., staff psychiatrist in the Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic in Boston, also cites *The Things They Carried* in his book *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1994), a study of the *Iliad* and PTSD. Shay quotes the narrator's persistence in "How to Tell a True War Story" that "a true war story is never moral" (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 76) to argue more widely that trauma can never be straightforwardly unraveled through writing (Shay 183).

According to Heberle, O'Brien has told one interviewer that the origin of the book was the image of the war as something to be carried, "a weight of things that derived from his own experiences:" "remembering all this crap I had on me and inside me, the physical and spiritual burdens" (Heberle 178).

The Things They Carried is not a memoir, and although it includes many interconnected stories, it is not a continuous narrative work either. According to Heberle, it is more convenient to identify its twenty-two "fictions" as "pieces" or "sections," instead of chapters or stories. No matter what genre it is, *The Things They Carried* follows a group of about a dozen GIs who "experience the mixed trauma and boredom of combat in Vietnam and reappear in the various episodes that make up the book" (Heberle 179). The combatants in *The Things They Carried* belong to an Alpha Company themselves. Similarly, in his first book, *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me*

Up and Ship Me Home (1973), O'Brien is one of its members, and a vast amount of first person narrative and commentary in the book offers his own viewpoint (Heberle 179).

The introductory section of the novel, also entitled "The Things They Carried," is a prologue to the book. Here, O'Brien mixes story-telling with a technique of enumeration to introduce objects, fears, memories, hopes, dreams, and most significantly, stories that the narrator and other soldiers carry with them. They carry the physical and psychological baggage of life on their tour of duty in the Vietnam War as well as in the war of life. O'Brien describes each of the major characters by describing what they carry, from physical items such as canteen, grenades, pocket knives, heat tabs, dog tags, C rations and standard weapons to emotions:

They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. [...] They carried shameful memories. They carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down, it required perfect balance and perfect posture. They carried their reputations. They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. (O'Brien, *The Thing They Carried* 20-21)

This passage, besides showing that the emotional burden these combatants carried was far too much to bear, also expresses O'Brien's interest in the issues of courage, doubt, and fear; the things soldiers carry into war. A pivotal activity in the book involves the narrator and characters telling stories about these burdens, identified in this first section. The list of the things they carried only muddles the more important burden, the great psychological weight of their experiences and memories. This first section opens with a

list of combatants, troubled by personal and collective trauma. These characters will appear again the following episodes. Some squad members of Alpha Company die and the novel develops recalling these deaths until all have been recovered in the last section, which bears an oxymoronic title: “The Lives of the Dead,” suggesting that these lives are not over.

In “How to Tell a True War Story” O’Brien addresses the act of writing itself, blurring the divisions between truth and fiction as well as author and authorial persona through a series of paradoxical reversals. His definition of a “true war story” develops slowly as the story unfolds:

A true war story is never moral. (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 76)

You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 77)

You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end. (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 83)

True war, stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis. (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 84)

In a true war story, if there’s a moral at all, it’s like the thread that makes the cloth. You can’t tease it out. (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 84)

Smith contends that the word “tell,” in these passages, connotes both the act of narrating the story and the ability to distinguish a true war story from other stories (Smith 99-100).

“How to Tell a True War Story” is narrated by the fictional persona Tim O’Brien, who intermingles stories and comments with his own writing. He offers a story told to him by Mitchell Sanders, in which a patrol goes into the mountains for a weeklong operation to monitor enemy movement. What follows is an example of storytelling that debates the issue of the substance of fiction and its relationship to trauma:

I hear this one, for example, from Mitchell Sanders. It was near dusk and we were sitting at my foxhole along a wide muddy river north of Quang Ngai. I remember how peaceful the twilight was. A deep pinkish red spilled out on the river, which moved without sound, and in the morning we would cross the river and march west into the mountains. The occasion was right for a good story.

“God’s truth,” Mitchell Sanders said. “A six-man patrol goes up into the mountains on a basic listening-post operation. The idea’s to spend a week up there, just lie low and listen for enemy movement. They’ve got a radio along, so if they hear anything suspicious – anything – they’re supposed to call in artillery or gunships, whatever it takes. Otherwise they keep strict field discipline. Absolute silence. They just listen.”

Sanders glanced at me to make sure I had the scenario. He was playing with his yo-yo, dancing it with short, tight little strokes of the wrist.

His face was blank in the dusk. (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 79)

The jungle is spooky, and the men start hearing strange, and frightening noises:

They hear violins and cellos. They hear this terrific mama-san soprano. Then after a while they hear gook opera and a glee club and the Haiphong Boys Choir and a barbershop quartet and all kinds of weird chanting and Buddha-Buddha stuff. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 81)

And yet, the voices they hear are not human. Sanders alleges that the mountains, the rocks and the trees were making the noise and “they order up firepower. They get arty and gunships. They call in air strikes. [...] They make those mountains burn” (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 81). After that, they run back to camp base in the morning. Later, asked by a colonel what had happened, they do not answer because they know he will not understand their story:

They just look at him for a while, sort of funny like, sort of amazed, and the whole war is right there in that stare, It says everything you can't ever say. It says, man, you got *wax* in your ears. It says, poor bastard, you'll never know – wrong frequency – you don't *even* want to hear this. Then they salute the fucker and walk away, because certain stories you don't ever tell. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 81)

The next day, Sanders admits he made up parts of the story: “I got a confession to make,” Sanders said. “Last night, man, I had to make up a few things” (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 83).

Being an event that was “personally experienced,” Sander's story is an example of episodic memory. Because he is the central agent of the narrative, his story raises questions about the nature of fictional truth.

In its fictional context, this narrative of American soldiers who go into the mountains, go through a traumatic experience, but in the end come back in safety “addresses the anxieties of its listeners, who anticipate their own dreaded mountain mission in the morning. Whether it happened or not, it is true to their fears and hopes.” Ultimately, the incapability of the survivors to reveal to others what they have experienced implies that even though storytelling is a compulsory means of expression for traumatization, “the trauma itself is incommunicable” (Heberle 188).

Kiowa is a foot soldier in Alpha Company and O’Brien’s best friend. He is intelligent, gentle and quiet-spoken, a devout Baptist and a Native American who always keeps an illustrated New Testament with him. He is killed in battle, dying in a dreadful way, drowning in the excrement of a sewage field. Retold five times, his death becomes a prominent subject in four sections (“Speaking of Courage,” “Notes,” “In the Field,” and “Field Trip”), clearly showing that the episode that constantly runs through O’Brien’s memory, is almost impossible to be overcome:

Kiowa, after all, had been a close friend, and for years I’ve avoided thinking about his death and my own complicity in it. Even here it’s not easy. In the interest of the truth, however, I want to make it clear that Norman Bowker was in no way responsible for what happened to Kiowa. (O’Brien, *The Thing They Carried* 182)

Kiowa was gone. He was under the mud and water, folded in with the war, and their only thought was to find him and dig him out and then move on to someplace dry and warm. (O’Brien, *The Thing They Carried* 185)

A stupid mistake. That's all it was, a mistake, but it had killed Kiowa.
(O'Brien, *The Thing They Carried* 191)

At one point, the boy remembered, he'd been showing Kiowa a picture of his girlfriend. He remembered switching on his flashlight. A stupid thing to do, but he did it anyway, and he remembered Kiowa leaning in for a look at the picture – “Hey, she's *cute*,” he'd said – and then the field exploded all around them.

Like murder, the boy thought. The flashlight made it happen. Dumb and dangerous. And as a result his friend Kiowa was dead.
(O'Brien, *The Thing They Carried* 191)

Norman Bowker found Kiowa. He was under two feet of water. Nothing showed except the heel of a boot. (O'Brien, *The Thing They Carried* 191)
Beside him, a few steps to the left, the young soldier was still searching for his girlfriend's picture. Still remembering how he had killed Kiowa.

The boy wanted to confess. He wanted to tell the lieutenant how in the middle of the night he had pulled out Billie's picture and passed it over to Kiowa and then switched on the flashlight, and how Kiowa had whispered, “Hey, she's *cute*,” and how for a second the flashlight had made Billie's face sparkle, and how right then the field had exploded all around them. The flashlight had done it. Like a target shining in the dark.
(O'Brien, *The Thing They Carried* 198)

Retelling his demise five times is the way the narrator unconsciously deals with the trauma of Kiowa's death, in accordance with Freud's theory of repetition. The narrative is fragmented: the story of Kiowa's death is interspersed with other narratives and

thoughts; each time just small pieces of the story are presented. Indirection is also present, as his death is not told in a straightforward way. As Caruth asserts,

Not having been fully integrated as it occurred, the event cannot become, as Janet says, a “narrative memory” that is integrated into a completed story of the past. (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 153) [...] the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one’s own, and others’, knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall. Thus in the story of Janet’s patient Irène, her cure is characterized by the fact that she can tell a “slightly different story” to different people: the capacity to remember is also the capacity to elide or distort, and in other cases, as van der Kolk and van der Hart show, may mean the capacity simply to forget. (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 153-54) [...] The impossibility of a comprehensible story, however, does not necessarily mean the denial of a transmissible truth. (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 154)

It is important to highlight that Caruth asserts, according to Janet, that the event cannot become a narrative memory that is integrated into a “completed” story of the past. As in the case of Irène, narrator O’Brien tells a slightly different story to different people.

Some twenty-odd years later, narrator O’Brien returns to Vietnam with Katherine, his daughter. He visits the place where Kiowa had died, looking for pardon, possibly for an explanation, or anything that might soothe his troubled mind.

[...] I returned with my daughter to Vietnam, where we visited the site of Kiowa’s death, and where I looked for signs of forgiveness or personal

grace or whatever else the land might offer. The field was still there, though not as I remembered it. Much smaller, I thought, and not nearly so menacing, and in the bright sunlight it was hard to picture what had happened on this ground some twenty years ago. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 207)

Ted Lavender is a platoon member who is killed by a sniper's bullet while urinating. Lee Strunk, who was chosen at random to perform the dangerous task of crawling into a tunnel to clear it, returns unharmed. Lavender dies, in an ironic way. His unexpected death reappears throughout the first section from beginning to end, but it is only *mentioned* eight times before it is actually described on page 13:

Ted lavender, who was scared, carried tranquilizers until he was shot in the head outside the village Than Khe in mid-April. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 4) In April Ted Lavender was shot [...]. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 5) But Ted Lavender, who was scared, carried 34 rounds when he was shot and killed outside Than Khe [...]. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 7) Kiowa, who saw it happen, said it was like watching a rock fall [...]. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 7) They wrapped Lavender in his Poncho (8). In the first week of April, before Ted Lavender died [...]. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 9) Until he was shot, Ted Lavender carried the starlight scope [...]. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 10) Before Ted Lavender died there were 17 men in the platoon [...]. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 11) Ted Lavender was hot in the head on his way back from peeing. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 13)

The traumatized narrator uses indirection as well as these repeated fragments before finally describing Lavender's death. Within the list the soldiers carried by necessity, one item has an ironic practical application in Lavender's death:

Because the nights were cold, and because the monsoons were wet, each carried a green plastic poncho that could be used as a raincoat or groundsheet or makeshift tent. With this quilted liner, the poncho weighed almost two pounds, but it was worth every ounce. In April, for instance, when Ted Lavender was shot, they used his poncho to wrap him up, then to carry him across the paddy, then to lift him into the chopper that took him away. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 5)

Lavender's death invades *The Things They Carried* more dramatically with the imaginative meditations of Jimmy Cross, the leader of Alpha Company, a young lieutenant, whose men suffer while following him. His mind is taken by thoughts of virginal Martha, a young woman he dated before he joined the army: "He was just a kid at war, in love. He was just twenty-four years old. He couldn't help it" (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 13). Cross carries the burden of responsibility for his men, but he also carries ten ounces of letters, two photographs and a good luck pebble from Martha, as well as memories, hopes, and fears about her love for him. Cross is a reluctant combatant, and he dreams of Martha while trying to perform his duties. Lavender's death haunts Jimmy Cross throughout the war: his soldier has died, and he was powerless to make it otherwise. He blames his own carelessness for Lavender's death, and his desperate love for Martha for his negligence. Alone in his foxhole the night after Lavender is shot, Cross was unable to control his feelings and started to cry:

In part, he was grieving for Ted Lavender, but mostly it was for Martha, and for himself, because she belonged to another world, which was not quite real, and because she was a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey, a poet and a virgin and uninvolved, and because he realized she did not love him and never would. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 17)

The day after Lavender's death, Cross destroys the letters and the photographs, hoping that the symbolic purging will allow him to better protect his men. He pledges not to think about Martha:

On the morning after Ted Lavender died, First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross crouched at the bottom of his foxhole and burned Martha's letters. Then he burned the two photographs. There was a steady rain falling, which made it difficult, but he used the heat tabs and Sterno to build a small fire, screening it with his body, holding the photographs over the tight blue flame with the tips of his fingers.

He realized it was only a gesture. Stupid, he thought. Sentimental, too, but mostly stupid.

Lavender was dead. You couldn't burn the blame. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 22)

The lieutenant's ironic burning of the souvenirs will do nothing to wipe out his guilt. He cannot erase his love for Martha either, because "the letters were in his head," or the perception that "she wasn't involved. She signed the letters Love, but it wasn't love, and all the fine lines and technicalities did not matter" (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 23). Averting both heartbreaks, he decides, at the end of the story, to "perform his duties

firmly and without negligence” (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 24). He knew it would do no good for Lavender, but from then on he would behave himself as an officer and command responsibility:

He would dispense with love; it was now a factor. And if anyone quarreled or complained, he would simply tighten his lips and arrange his shoulders in the correct command posture. He might give a curt little nod. Or he might not. He might just shrug and say, Carry on, then they would saddle up and form into a column and move out toward the villages west of Than Khe. (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 25)

Cross builds a wall between his humanity and his experience, the only firm ground against the insecurity and chaos of war, where life and death are determined by chance and subject to the fancies of fate. Traumatized both by Lavender’s death and the realization that Martha does not love him, the decisiveness of this resolution contradicts the playing taking place inside his imagination, “which tries to cover up or replace the death of Lavender and the loss of Martha” (Heberle 198).

In “Love,” the O’Brien’s persona emerges for the first time. Character “Tim O’Brien,” a middle aged writer, remembers when, many years after the war, Jimmy Cross visited him at home and they reminisced about the war:

Spread out across the kitchen table were maybe a hundred old photographs. There were pictures of Rat Kiley and Kiowa and Mitchell Sanders, all of us, the faces incredibly soft and young. At one point, I remember, we paused over a snapshot of Ted lavender, and after a while Jimmy rubbed his eyes and said he’d never forgiven himself for lavender’s death. It was something that would never go away, he said

quietly, and nodded and told him I felt the same about certain things.

(O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 29)

Cross showed O'Brien, then, a photograph of Martha playing volleyball in a small frame, one that Martha had given him personally years later at a high school reunion. Cross told O'Brien he still loved Martha. Examined as a unit, these two sections, "The Things they Carried," and "Love" become a metafiction portraying the perseverance of trauma, which is presented in a fragmented and repeated way. Jimmy Cross's double burden – his bothered mind by Lavender's death and its association to his unreciprocated love for Martha – express the meaning of Jimmy Cross's traumatization: the clash between loving his men and his devotion for Martha imply that love, like war, may be too painful to bear.

In another example of narrative repetition with variation, the death of Curt Lemon appears four times in the section "How to Tell a True War Story" and two other times during the course of the book, each time with additional details. His death was an accident resulting from a game of catch with a grenade:

This one does it for me. I've told it before – many times, many versions – but here's what actually happened.

We crossed that river and marched west into the mountains. On the third day, Court Lemon stepped on a booby-trapped 105 round. He was playing catch with Rat Kiley, laughing, and then he was dead. The trees were thick; it took nearly an hour to cut an LZ for the dustoff.

(O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 85)

Other descriptions of his death:

His face was suddenly brown and shining. A handsome kid, really. Sharp gray eyes, lean and narrow-waisted, and when he died it was almost beautiful, the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms.

(O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 78)

The scene is almost poetic in its depiction. These passages are examples of fragmented structure, repetitive content, and multiple perspectives. Here is another excerpt:

This one wakes me up.

In the mountains that day, I watched Lemon turn sideways. He laughed and said something to Rat Kiley. Then he took a peculiar half step, moving from shade into bright sunlight, and the booby-trapped 105 round blew him into a tree. The parts were just hanging there, so Dave Jensen and I were ordered to shinny up and peel him off. I remember the white bone of an arm. I remember pieces of skin and something wet and yellow that must've been the intestines. The gore was horrible, and stays with me. But what wakes me up twenty years later is Dave Jensen singing "Lemon Tree" as we threw down the parts. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 89)

The passage above is quoted in Herman's book to exemplify the following:

Traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images. [...] Often one particular set of images crystallizes the experience in what psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton calls the "ultimate horror." The intense focus on

fragmentary sensation, on image without context, gives the traumatic memory a heightened reality. (Herman 38)

Twenty years later, the traumatized narrator still wakes up with the horror of Curt Lemon's death on his mind. His death, like Jimmy Cross's obsession with Lavender and Martha are not simply past events but remain present in the narrator's imagination.

"The Man I Killed" is a section with an intense, introspective look at the death of a Vietnamese soldier, apparently by O'Brien's own hand. O'Brien uses meticulous physical details, including descriptions of his wounds that go from head to toe:

His jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole [...]" ... "His rubber sandals had been blow off. One lay beside him, the other a few meters up the trail. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 139)

Azar and Kiowa, two of O'Brien's friends, try to comfort him, as he is devastated by the death of the man. O'Brien never expresses what he is feeling; he never says a word throughout the story. His shock is all that the reader can really know, expressed through his silence and his staring:

"Think it over," Kiowa said.

Then later he said, "Tim, it's a war. The guy wasn't Heidi – he had a weapon, right? It's a tough thing, for sure, but you got to cut out that staring" (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 141).

"Listen to me," Kiowa said. "You feel terrible, I know that." (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 142)

The last sentence of “The Man I Killed” is: “Talk,” Kiowa said” (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 144). These words end the section, but not the trauma, which, according to Heberle,

is presented not as an episode in the past but as an intrusive memory haunting the narrator. Talking only to himself, he never responds to Kiowa; therefore, although he is able to recover this traumatic experience, it remains unexpressed to others. As studies of PTSD survivors have revealed (Shay 115-19), destroying the enemy can be as terrible an experience as the death of one’s comrades, but ideological and social codes make the public expression of grief in such cases more difficult. O’Brien’s narrator tries to resolve his feelings both by recreating the young Vietnamese soldier in his own image, especially his sense of obligation to others, and by imagining that his victim’s death will find some redemption. [...] But however much the narrator refigures his own distress, it can neither be laid to rest nor communicated to others. (Heberle 202)

In this section, O’Brien’s narrative portraying his trauma through mutism is repeatedly presented in fragmentary bits.

In “Speaking of Courage,” gloomy veteran Norman Bowker, traumatized by his failure to save Kiowa from drowning in a shit field, returns home. He is socially disoriented, has difficulty adjusting to the normalcy of everyday life and cannot tell his father about almost winning the Silver Star by saving his friend’s life: his father is too busy to listen. The townspeople are unaware of what he has been through in the war and how he is suffering after the conflict is over. Norman wants to talk about his experience

in Vietnam, but the town wouldn't listen either. The first sentence summarizes Norman's condition with an expressive understatement that could be applied to innumerable other traumatized veterans: "The war was over and there was no place in particular to go" (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 157). He drives his father's car around a local lake, passing time, and thinking about his life before the war, as well as what he saw and did in Vietnam:

Turning on his headlights, driving slowly, Norman Bowker remembered how he had taken hold of Kiowa's boot and pulled hard, but how the smell was simply too much, and how he'd backed off and in that way had lost the Silver Star.

He wishes he could've explained some of this. How he had been braver than he ever thought possible, but how he had not been so brave as he wanted to be. The distinction was important. Max Arnold, who loved fine lines, would've appreciated it. And his father, who already knew, would've nodded.

"The truth," Norman Bowker would've said, "is I let the guy go."

"Maybe he was already gone."

"He wasn't."

"But maybe." (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 172)

"No, I could feel it. He wasn't. Some things you can feel."

His father would have been quiet for a while, watching the headlights against the narrow tar road.

"Well, anyway," the old man would've said, "there's still the seven medals."

“I suppose.”

“Seven honeys.”

“Right.” (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 172)

Norman thinks about telling his father that “the truth is that I let (Kiowa) go.” His father’s response, one dismissive of the death but praising Norman’s other seven medals, indicates that he has missed the entire truth of the story, which is his son’s desperate sense of guilt for not having been able to save Kiowa. The narrative reflects the isolation of the trauma survivor and his social instability as he circles the lake, remembering his failure to remove Kiowa out of the shit field while observing the trivial details of the town life from a distance. The perseverance of the traumatic memory is “captured by the meaningless circularity of his drive,” momentarily discontinued at an A&W Root Beer stand (Herbele 204-05).

The traumatic origins of “The Man I killed” and “Speaking of Courage” are made known only indirectly and in an evasive manner. Their complex representation reflects their deeper level of shock: the narrator can neither get over his own killing of the young soldier nor of Kiowa’s death (Heberle 200).

In “Love” the narrator also implicitly labels himself as a trauma survivor. In this section, he tells Jimmy Cross that he is haunted by nameless things that cannot be erased from his mind: “It was something that would never go away, he said quietly, and nodded and told him I felt the same about certain things” (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 29). And yet, only towards the end of “Spin” does his traumatization begin to come forth from obscurity as a detached series of fragments that come into his mind; a list of remembered images from the war:

A red clay trail outside the village of My Khe.

A hand grenade.

A slim, dead, dainty young man of about twenty.

Kiowa saying, “No choice, Tim. What else could you do?”

Kiowa saying, “Right?”

Kiowa saying, “Talk to me.” (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 40)

The complete story will eventually appear ten pieces later, only to be additionally elucidated and justified in “Ambush” and “Good Form:”

He was a short, slender young man of about twenty. I was afraid of him – afraid of something – and as he passed me on the trail I threw a grenade that exploded at his feet and killed him. (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 147)

Later, I remember, Kiowa tried to tell me that the man would’ve died anyway. (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 149)

He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other was a star-shaped hole. I killed him. (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 204)

At the same time that the intrusive memory converges on the man he killed, Tim O’Brien’s obsession on Kiowa’s company, as one who comforts, expressively connects this earlier trauma to his friend’s dreadful death, as if Kiowa’s demise itself were an appalling memory only starting to surface from repression (Heberle 201). Here it is possible to notice the fragmentation of the narrative, when only a detached series of fragments comes to the mind of the narrator; each time just small pieces of the story are

presented. Indirection is also present, as the story of the death of the man is not told in a straightforward way. The use of repetition is clear.

In “Notes” O’Brien examines the previous section, “Speaking of Courage,” and relates the presumably “true story” behind the fictional story. Bowker, who committed suicide by hanging himself in the locker room of a YMCA three years after the story was written, suggested to O’Brien that he write the story. In the spring of 1975, O’Brien received a letter from Bowker describing his struggle to find a meaningful use for his life. Bowker couldn’t adjust to coming home and he looked to O’Brien to articulate the feeling of loss that Kiowa’s death had brought to him. Bowker couldn’t talk to anybody about it; he did not know what to say. O’Brien included passages of Bowker’s letter in this section, which suggested that O’Brien should write a story about a veteran who feels like he died in Vietnam and cannot adapt himself to daily life. The section “Notes” is a highly therapeutic fiction. Heberle asserts that in eventually expressing Bowker’s repressed trauma, “the narrator addresses his feelings of guilt for not doing it originally. But in addition, the end of “Notes” reveals that the new story allowed him to give voice to his *own* traumatization” (Heberle 206):

It was hard stuff to write. Kiowa, after all, had been a close friend, and for years I’ve avoided thinking about his death and my own complicity in it. Even here it’s not easy. In the interests of truth, however, I want to make it clear that Norman Bowker was in no way responsible for what happened to Kiowa. Norman did not experience a failure of nerve that night. He did not freeze up or lose the Silver Star for valor. That part of the story is my own. (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 203)

The final sentence is open to several possible meanings or interpretations because of the narrator's unconventional fictional double role as "writer and participant in his own scenarios:" it is not clear whether he merely made Bowker feel guilty for Kiowa's death, or if he feels guilty for Kiowa's death himself. "If the former, Bowker would have revealed in the letter his failure to save his friend; if the latter, the *narrator* failed to pull Kiowa out of the slime." Naturally, both Bowker and the narrator Tim O'Brien probably feel guilty about Kiowa's death "whether or not they could have saved him because soldiers frequently feel guilt and grief if their own survival of a comrade's death seems unfair or incomprehensible" (Heberle 207):

The soldier's grief helps us comprehend the powerful bond that arises between men in combat. This bond may be so intense as to blot out the distinction between self and other, leading each to value the other's life above his own. But now the other is dead; the survivor still lives. "It should've been me!" is the cry of guilt that goes up in the midst of grief from a survivor condemned by his very survival. (Shay 69)

Anyhow, Tim O'Brien's personal trauma – his "involvement as an accomplice" in Kiowa's death – has either been "refigured through Norman Bowker or remains something that cannot be told" (Heberle 207).

In "Good Form" O'Brien makes it clear he was once a soldier, he is a writer now, and confesses that most of the other stories in *The Things They Carried* are made up! Here, he offers a fourth account of the occurrence at My Khe: he claims he was present but he did not kill the Viet Cong soldier, and then adds: "But listen. Even *that* story is made up" (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 203). Eventually he offers an explanation: he writes stories not to remember past experiences but to invent them, to

surmount the emotional psychological pressure of the past. He states: “What stories can do, I guess, is make things present. I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again” (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 203). In this narrative, writing converts Vietnam into “morally meaningful fiction through fictional traumatization;” additionally, it works as therapy for a non-identified lingering feeling of responsibility or remorse associated to “things the narrator couldn’t carry at the time they occurred” (Heberle 203). Once again, both these stories and thoughts are presented repeatedly, in a fragmented way.

In the final section, “The Lives of the Dead,” which is an intentional conclusion to the book, the deaths of other squad members, of the Vietnamese soldier O’Brien did or did not kill, and of Vietnamese civilians blend with the death of nine-year-old Linda, Timmy’s girlfriend in fourth grade. This section embodies and dramatizes what *The Things They Carried* has exemplified about “true war stories” and their relationship to traumatic experiences. Beginning with the clear statement that “stories can save us” (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 255), this final section brings back to life Ted Lavender, Kiowa, Curt Lemon, and

a slim young man I killed, an old man sprawled beside a pigpen, and several others whose bodies I once lifted and dumped into a truck. They’re all dead. But in a story, which is a kind of dreaming, the dead sometimes smile and sit up and return to the world. (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 255)

By merging Vietnam and a love story, soldiers and nine-year-olds, “The Lives of the Dead” goes beyond the war and illustrates the narrator’s earlier insistence that “a true

war story is never about war” (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 91). The paradox of the title pinpoints a key issue of *The Things They Carried*: “the ways survivors carry the dead with them through the rest of their lives” (Herbele 212).

The resurrection of the dead permeates this final section. O’Brien brings characters back to life, imagining and animating them beyond the limits of tangible, sensory life. *The Things They Carried* started with Ted Lavender’s death, and it ends with his corpse waiting for a helicopter for evacuating the wounded from a battlefield. Here, Lavender is unbelievably resuscitated while Mitchell Sanders and the rest of the platoon engage in a dialogue with their companion before sending him home:

Mitchell Sanders smiled. “There it is, my man, this chopper gonna take you up high and cool. Gonna relax you. Gonna alter your whole perspective on this sorry, sorry shit.”

We could almost see Ted Lavender’s dreamy blue eyes. We could almost hear him.

“Roger that,” somebody said. I’m ready to fly.” (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 261)

Like the rest of the dead, Linda is resurrected through the narrator’s story. This happens as he inspects a photograph of himself as a nine-year-old:

[...] there’s no doubt that the Timmy smiling at the camera is the Tim I am now. Inside the body, or beyond the body, there is something absolute and unchanging. The human life is all one thing, like a blade tracing loops on ice: a little kid, a twenty-three-year-old infantry sergeant, a middle-aged writer knowing guilt and sorrow.

And as a writer now, I want to save Linda's life. Not her body – her life. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 265)

As he rescues her, consequently he saves himself. Towards the end of "The Lives of the Dead," what is implied is that while stories can save lives, what is saved is actually a fiction:

I'm forty-three years old, and a writer now, still dreaming Linda alive in exactly the same way. She's not the embodied Linda; she's mostly made up, with a new identity and a new name, like the man who never was. Her real name doesn't matter. She was nine years old. I loved her and then she died. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 273)

The facts are less meaningful than the "truth" the story has led readers to believe. The dead are fictions in a "true war story" that plays the role of saving the lives of Linda and other characters forever:

And right here, in the spell of memory and imagination, I can still see her as if through ice, as if I'm gazing into some other world, a place where there are no brain tumors and no funeral homes, where there are no bodies at all. I can see Kiowa, too, and Ted Lavender and Curt Lemon, and sometimes I can even see Timmy skating with Linda under the yellow floodlights. I'm young and happy. I'll never die. (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 273)

By making readers believe in the man who never was, fiction can bring into being people who will never pass away.

4.4. *In the Lake of the Woods*

In this psychological mystery novel, O'Brien explores the enigmas of the human spirit, forcing readers to live with uncertainty. He creates a mystery story and gives the readers a chance to unravel the mystery from a number of situations supplied by the narrator, a self-described "biographer, historian, medium" (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 30). "Or readers can simply accept the inconclusive ending as a reality of life – a postmodernist notion that some important things can never be known" (Herzog, *Tim O'Brien* 143). In this way, the "fictional narrator-author" of the novel remarks in one of the many footnotes of the book: "if you require solutions, you will have to look beyond these pages. Or read a different book (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 30).

The plot is bleak and simple. The story is told by an unnamed narrator, a Vietnam veteran, who has become obsessed with the disappearance of a wife and husband, Kathy Wade and John Wade, in the fall of 1986. The name John Wade, by the way, sounds like an imitation of the American cultural icon "John Wayne." John Wade, a Vietnam veteran, has been a political star in the making since his return from service in Vietnam in the late 1960s. After serving six years in state politics, he is primed for a run at the U.S. Senate. Even though at one time just before the 1986 election Wade was the favorite candidate for senator, he suffered a devastating defeat. Crushed and humiliated by the loss, he and Kathy decided to take a vacation to ease the pain of Wade's low spirits. They go to a cottage in the Lake of the Woods, in north central Minnesota and southwest Ontario, Canada; a remote and desolate place. And yet, even the solitude of the couple's retreat can not repress the demons John Wade has struggled against for more than a decade:

But it was more than a lost election. It was something physical. Humiliation, that was part of it, and the wreckage in his chest and stomach, and then the rage, how it surged up into his throat and how he wanted to scream the most terrible thing he could scream – *Kill Jesus!* – and how he couldn't help himself and couldn't think straight and couldn't stop screaming it inside his head – *Kill Jesus!* – because nothing could be done, and because it was so brutal and disgraceful and final. He felt crazy sometimes. Real depravity. Late at night an electric sizzle came into his blood, a tight pumped-up killing rage, and he couldn't keep it in and he couldn't let it out. He wanted to hurt things. Grab a knife and start cutting and slashing would never stop. All those years. Climbing like a son of a bitch, clawing his way up inch by fucking inch, and then it all came crashing down at once. (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 5)

There, on their seventh night together, Kathy mysteriously disappears. The only thing John remembers of that night is waking up to boil a kettle of water for tea. Instead of preparing tea, he pours the boiling water over some household plants, reciting "Kill Jesus," which seems to please him. He also recalls, soon after that, boiling another kettle and bringing it into the bedroom, where he watched Kathy sleep. And yet, he cannot remember whether he poured the boiling water on her face, and afterwards submerged her deep in the lake together with their motor boat, or whether he just climbed back into bed with Kathy, went to sleep and woke up the next morning to find that she was gone. Disoriented by her loss, John talks to his closest neighbors; they call the sheriff and organize a search party, but the endeavor is unsuccessful. The authorities are suspicious of John's calm demeanor and noninvolvement in the search effort and

suspect he killed his wife. Kathy's sister joins in and John begins to look for Kathy too. After eighteen days the search party is cancelled and the investigation into John is enhanced. John borrows a neighbor's motor boat, buys some supplies, and heads north on the lake. By the end of the book, he disappears with the boat and no one ever discovers what has happened to either John or Kate.

The known facts of the story are not many. John's involvement in the war had never come up in conversations with Kathy, and she respected his privacy. Kathy had a secret of her own, an affair three years earlier with a dentist, and she had suspected, since John's return from the war more than a decade before, that her husband hid a secret. Since they got married, Wade had been extremely worried that the facts of his past might become known, and he decides

[...] to be vigilant. He would guard his advantage. The secrets would remain secret – the things he'd seen, the things he'd done. He would repair what he could, he would endure, he would go from year to year without letting on that there were tricks. (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 46)

Near the end of his run for the U.S. Senate, newspaper articles suggest John's participation in the My Lai (the name of the hamlet itself is known by a different name to the Vietnamese: Thuan Yen) massacre, on March 16, 1968. The reports are the main reason for the abrupt end of his career. The reader finds out through the narrator's inquiry that Wade was responsible for the death of an old Vietnamese man, as well as a fellow GI, who surprised him in a bunker. This information, which proves to be true, devastates Wade's political fortunes and additionally weakens his already unstable marriage.

According to O'Brien's foreword, *In the Lake of the Woods* "must be read as a work of fiction." The structure of the book has some similarities with O'Brien's previous novels, in particular

shifting time sequences among past, present, and future, as well as interwoven chapters grouped according to distinct content and functions. The thematic links among these three groups are O'Brien's recurring tensions between fact and fiction, happening-truth and story-truth, and the failure of memory versus the power of imagination. (Herzog, *Tim O'Brien* 153)

Apart from the plot, which extends over eight of the book's thirty-one chapters and follows the predicament of Wade and his wife, O'Brien presents seven chapters named "Evidence" and eight chapters titled "Hypothesis," to locate the point of view outside the main story, thus empowering the reader to inspect the facts of the story from a more objective outlook. The evidence chapters present the results of the narrator's background research, containing interviews with Wade's mother; his sister-in-law, Patricia Hood; excerpts from biographies and memoirs of American presidents; instruction from handbooks on magic as well as fragments of the testimony of Lieutenant Calley from the My Lai war-crimes trial. While the novel examines the moral and psychological breakdown of John Wade to its fullest extent, the evidence chapters induces the reader to make a comparison between his mental collapses and the political history of the United States.

The novel comprehends a number of different kinds of texts, a postmodernist assortment of genres that may function as different approaches to the truth. The narrative presents fragmentation and omission: for about half of the book, the main

event of My Lai is only hinted at: “Dead human beings in awkward poses” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 48), “the ghosts at Thuan Yen” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 50). Eventually, when in Chapter 13, Lieutenant Calley’s name appears, the reader clearly understands Wade was at My Lai, and the story is finally told.

Irony is present in the novel: after the bloodbath in My Lai, Richard Thinbill, who was unwilling to take part, wants to tell, with the purpose of being able to live with his sense of rightness. Thinbill is a Native American. In chapter 25, O’Brien juxtaposes quotes from people at My Lai and those of soldiers who had taken part in the carnages of Native Americans in the old west and of colonists in the Revolution: “It stays with me even after all these years. I guess it probably haunted John too, except he tried to do something about it. Erase it, you know? Literally – Richard Thinbill (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 258). “We must act with vindictive earnestness against the Sioux, even to their extermination, men, women and children – General William Tecumseh Sherman” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 257). The extermination of the Native Americans could be compared to what Americans were doing in Vietnam.

In the Lake of the Woods interchanges various imagined narratives and repressed memories of the past with a present reality, the hunt for Kathy Wade. Similar to *The Things They Carried*, the novel is narrated by a persona who appears to be O’Brien himself, an American Vietnam veteran who policed the My Lai region one year after Wade did. Moreover, some facets of Wade’s life before and after Vietnam mirror O’Brien’s life. The book is not just the story of John Wade; it presents the course of “trying to understand him by reconstructing his life through the broader prism of traumatization” (Heberle 218).

Omission is present in the narrative, as the novel deals with tragedy in an indirect way: only clues are given, and then poignant memories begin to trouble Wade. The complete horror – the rape of women, the murder of children, the killing madness of the soldiers, the piles of dead bodies – is only narrated in chapter 13. An evidence-chapter (chapter 16) provides excerpts from the court-martial, which is almost as staggering as the murders: no feelings or emotions are expressed by the soldiers, allied with an absolute lack of answers.

According to Timothy Melley, *In the Lake of the Woods* is chiefly about failures of memory, the modes in which a traumatic past can contaminate and deform memory. In certain aspects, “the narrative resembles postwar noir tales in which an amnesic detective begins to suspect himself” (Melley 112). But the novel does not adhere to convention, because it intertwines Wade’s attempt to remember Kathy’s vanishing with his memories of the My Lai massacre, and ultimately with other historical mass murders. In this way, O’Brien connects Wade’s individual case of amnesia to greater collective memory failures. Offering no conclusive elucidation, “it seems an end-of-line instance of postmodern historical skepticism” (Melley 112). At the same time, the narrative portrays a condition of individual amnesia that “acts as a warning *against* collective or historical amnesia.” O’Brien shapes a deeply amnesic character to critically appraise the collective forgetting that has obliterated the My Lai massacre and others from American historical awareness. Melley contends that this paradoxical strategy “results directly from the notion that the production of history (that is, historical narrative) may be understood through a model of traumatic repression” (Melley 112-13).

No matter what happened to Kathy Wade, her disappearance is the climax of John Wade’s personal collapse, a man who has been devastated by traumatic

experiences and destroyed himself trying to make them disappear. In his childhood, John felt unloved by his alcoholic father Paul Wade. John's relationship with his father was crucial in forming his attitudes as an adult. Apparently, nothing that the young boy did could satisfy his father, who teased him endlessly about his weight and his grades, despite his son's unconditional love. When John was fourteen, Paul Wade committed suicide by hanging himself in the garage. John blamed himself for the failed relationship with his father and imagines himself looking for him, spending hours "looking for his father, opening closets, scanning the carpets and sidewalks and lawns as if in search of a lost nickel" (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 15). To get away from these moments of rejection and his feelings of inadequacy, young John withdrew himself into his own imagination – "mirrors" – developing tricks of mind that would empower him to form nice images of a father that loved him unconditionally: "The mirror made things better" (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 66). In adulthood, John still had a turbulent relation with his deceased father, who still had an effect on his choices: "More than anything else John Wade wanted to be loved and to make his father proud" (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 208).

John Wade then turned to magic, practicing magic tricks in front of a mirror for long hours to master the art. Magic became an extension of the mirrors in his mind, as he made pictures appear in his mind and controlled imaginary spectators. "For the young Wade, these mirrors and magic serve as means for escape, knowledge, control, power and possibilities of happiness in his life" (Hezorg, *Tim O'Brien* 160). He got involved in politics to win the approval of others that his father had denied him. Heberle asserts that John Wade goes to Vietnam "hoping to make his dead father proud of him, initially gains his comrades' admiration and the pseudonym "Sorcerer" for feats of

violent magic, but has a breakdown during the My Lai Massacre,” because he kills an Vietnamese man and one of his comrades, and later changes the official records to erase his name from Lieutenant Calley’s company (Heberle 225).

According to Melley, *In the Lake of the Woods* has an “unusually self-negating plot structure.” It has the story of John Wade’s traumatic life and a frame story (a story within a story) about another veteran’s effort to decipher Wade’s mystery. This other veteran, the narrator of the novel, is a compulsive investigator who attempts to solve the riddle of Kathy’s disappearance, but does not succeed. O’Brien strives to feign the matter-of-fact investigation of his narrator, who comes up with numerous citations and even confesses: “even after four years of hard labor I’m left with little more than supposition and possibility,” and like a principled biographer he asserts that “much of what might appear to be fact in this narrative – action, word, thought – must ultimately be viewed as a diligent but still imaginative reconstruction of events” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 208n21). Towards the end of the novel, he admits his despair: “But who will ever know? It’s all hypothesis, beginning to end” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 300). Melley claims it seems impossible for this narrator “to develop a unified account of the past, impossible to ground historical narrative in the authority of “fact”” (Melley 113-14).

Melley contends that O’Brien’s novel “extends historiographic uncertainty into its primary narrative by refusing to solve the mystery of Kathy Wade’s disappearance.” Not even John Wade has access to his memory of the night Kathy disappeared. On that night,

A ribbon of time went by, which he [John Wade] would not remember, then later he found himself crouched at the side of the bed. He was rocking on his heels, watching Kathy sleep.

He would remember smoothing back her hair.

He would remember pulling a blanket to her chin and then returning to the living room, where for a long while he lost track of his whereabouts [...] the unities of time and space unraveled. There were manifold uncertainties, and in the days and weeks to come, memory would play devilish little tricks on him. The mirrors would warp up; there would be odd folds and creases; clarity would be at a premium.

At one point during the night he stood waist-deep in the lake.

At another point he found himself completely submerged, lungs like stone, an underwater rush in his ears. (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 50-51)

Historical doubt, in this way, plagues not only the historian-narrator but also John Wade himself, who endures deep traumatic amnesia. And yet, another anomaly to Wade's amnesia is real. At the same time that he cannot remember what he did on the night Kathy vanished, he cannot recollect the severely traumatic events in My Lai, where he got away from the massacre by his GI companions, shot and killed an old Vietnamese farmer with a hoe, thinking it was a rifle – a reflex action, but that is part of the irony – and then shot PFC Weatherby, a soldier of his unit. What reruns in his mind was awful, disturbed memories of these deeds and the terrible bloodbath commanded by Lieutenant William Calley, in spite of his hard effort to obliterate them from his mind and from the historical documents. Wade also graphically remembers the traumas of his

childhood, especially the suicide of his father. According to Melley, “his experience thus reverses the classic psychoanalytic model of traumatic repetition, and the more recent phenomenon of “repressed syndrome,” in which an early event is repressed only to return through later unconscious repetition of neurosis.” In this case, the latter event is forgotten only after the previous ones have completely sprung to mind (Melley 114-15).

O’Brien arranged the notion of traumatic amnesia in a peculiar mode, making “historiographic skepticism” plague both segments of his novel, metamorphosing the issue of historical representation into an issue of individual memory. He chose to justify collective, historical violence in the setting of individual, domestic violence. That’s how he connects individual and collective trauma. *In the Lake of the Woods* is, in some aspects, about trauma that never ends, the bent “of violence to perpetuate itself” (Melley 115).

O’Brien expresses his interest in this subject by inserting in his “Evidence” chapters passages from psychological texts:

To study psychological trauma is to come face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature. (Herman 7) (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 26n13)

The violation of human connection, and consequently the risk of a post-traumatic stress disorder, is highest of all when the survivor has been not merely a passive witness but also an active participant in violent death or atrocity. (Herman 54) (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 142n55)

Analogous excerpts from psychological texts, veteran recovery reference books, and Wade's relations, imply that the grown-up John Wade is still grieving from the war, and specially from the My Lai massacre. In the tone of Herman's work, O'Brien tracks down Wade's post-traumatic stress not only to Vietnam, but to incidents of his childhood – and especially to the pressure of becoming a man: “More than anything else John wanted to be loved and to make his father proud [...]”(O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 208). And yet, when John becomes involved with magic and spends hours in the basement practicing, his alcoholic father ridicules him: ““That pansy magic crap. What's wrong with baseball, some regular exercise?” He'd shake his head. “Blubby little pansy”” (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 208). Tragically, Paul Wade commits suicide in the garage when John is fourteen, annihilating any possibility of receiving approval from his father (Melley 116).

Melley contends that masculinization is pivotal in most of O'Brien's war fictions, which portray intricate reveries of escape from war and focuses on characters “who go to war not out of courage but out of fear.” In *The Things They Carried*, the narrator of “On the Rainy River” says: “I would go to the war – I would kill and maybe die – because I was embarrassed not to” (O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* 62). The major instrument of this menace to the soldier's masculinity is his father. John Wade indulges in elaborate fantasies about the credit his father might grant him for his duty (Melley 117):

It was in the nature of love that John Wade went to the war. Not to hurt or be hurt, not to be a good citizen or a hero or a moral man. Only for love. Only to be loved. He imagined his father, who was dead, saying to

him, “Well, you did it, you hung in there, and I’m so proud, just so incredibly goddamn proud.” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 59)

The guilt Wade carries with him cannot be exorcised. He is afflicted by his service and actions in Vietnam and by his relationship with his father, both of which continue to deeply influence his decision making in the present, including his choice to cover up his involvement in the My Lai massacre. In chapter sixteen (an “Evidence” chapter) the narrator quotes a passage from J. Glenn Gray’s *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (1959) related to Wade’s affliction:

It is a crucial moment in a soldier’s life when he is ordered to perform a deed that he finds completely at variance with his own notions of right and good. Probably for the first time, he discovers that an act someone thinks to be necessary is for him criminal ... Suddenly the soldier feels himself abandoned and cast off from all security. Conscience has isolated him, and its voice is a warning. If you do this, you will not be at peace with me in the future. You can do it, but you ought not. You must act as a man and not as an instrument of another’s will. (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 141-42)

Ultimately, it is the trauma of his father’s suicide, and not his own experience that molds John Wade’s potentiality for violence: “What John felt that night [the night of his father’s suicide], and for many nights afterward, was the desire to kill” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 14). O’Brien intermixes John’s early trauma with the trauma of war and they soon become indissoluble. On the day Wade returned from Vietnam he felt “dangerous” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 41). He had an impulse to meet

Kathy, but after some time he gave up and checked into a hotel. There, at night, he felt himself strange:

That dizzy, disconnected sensation stayed with him all night. Exotic fevers swept through his blood. He couldn't get traction on his own dreams. Twice he woke up and stood under the shower, letting the water beat against his shoulders, but even then the dream-reels kept unwinding. [...] At one point, near dawn, he found himself curled up on the floor, wide awake, conversing with the dark. He was asking his father to please stop dying. Over and over he kept saying please, but his father wouldn't listen and wouldn't stop, he just kept dying. "God, I *love* you," John said, and then he curled up tighter and stared into the dark and found himself at his father's funeral – fourteen years old, a new black necktie pinching tight – except the funeral was being conducted in bright sunlight along an irrigation ditch at Thuan Yen – mourners squatting on their heels and wailing and clawing at their eyes – John's mother and many other mothers – a minister crying "Sin!" – an organist playing organ music – and John wanted to kill everybody who was weeping and everybody who wasn't, everybody, the minister and the mourners and the skinny old lady at the organ – he wanted to grab a hammer and scramble down into the ditch and kill his father for dying. (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 42)

What is clear in this passage is not only the constant repetition of the memories, but also the impossibility of separating distinct traumas that stirs Wade's anger. John feels an identical "killing rage" after losing the election: "He wanted to hurt things. Grab a knife and start cutting and slashing and never stop" (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 5).

While he is standing near Kathy's bed with the boiling teakettle, he sees images from Thuan Yen: "The teakettle and a wooden hoe and a vanishing village and PFC Weatherby and hot white steam" (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 51). O'Brien entangles the separate traumas of John Wade's life "until each seems a cause of the next and a result of the former" (Melley 117-18).

This scheme allows O'Brien to convey the pivotal essence of the novel: "the extension of Wade's story into an exploration of American history" (Melley 118). First, O'Brien knits Wade's traumas with each other as well as with an ample circuit of collective, historical traumas. Second, by repeating traumatic memories continually, and in an uncanny way, O'Brien puts historical events in a new context "to suggest the power of narrative context to produce historical meaning" (Melley 118). Third, O'Brien uses Wade's closely associated traumatic memories to elaborate a thesis about the extensive interdependence between trauma and forgetting. O'Brien's concepts of historical amnesia are portrayed essentially through John Wade, and all the historiographic commentary of the novel likewise. Wade's power for violence, as well as this enormous ability to forget are generated following his father's suicide. To deal with the suicide, John develops "his most defining mental habit" (Melley 118):

In the weeks that followed, because he was young and full of grief, he tried to pretend that his father was not truly dead. He would talk to him in his imagination, carrying on whole conversations about baseball and school and girls. Late at night, in bed, he'd cradle his pillow and pretend it was his father, feeling the closeness. "Don't be dead," he'd say, and his father would wink and say, "Well, hey, keep talking," and then for a long while they'd discuss the right way to hit a baseball, a

good level swing, keeping your head steady and squaring up your shoulders and letting the bat do the job. It was pretending, but the pretending helped. And so when things got specially bad, John would sometimes invent elaborate stories about how he could've saved his father. He imagined all the things he could've done. He imagined putting his lips against his father's mouth and blowing hard and making the heart come alive again; he imagined yelling in his father's ear, begging him to please stop dying. Once or twice it almost worked. "Okay," his father would say, I'll stop, I'll stop," but he never did. (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 14-15)

Here, face to face with the unending repetition of traumatic memory – “the fucker kept hanging himself. Over and over” (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 283) – John Wade learns how to administer trauma via fictional techniques. His key figure for this ingenious mental habit is the mirror:

In the mirror, where miracles happened, John was no longer a lonely kid. He had sovereignty over the world. Quick and graceful, his hands did things ordinary hands could not do – palm a cigarette lighter, cut a deck of cards with a turn of the thumb. Everything was possible, even happiness.

In the mirror, where John Wade mostly lived, he could read his father's mind. Simple affection, for instance. “Love you, cowboy,” his father would think.

Or his father would think, “Hey, report cards aren't everything.” (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 65)

Magic had a double function: to provide Wade with a feeling of control and achievement as well as to allow him to start absorbing functions of storytelling – “the narrative practice of simulating reality through illusion” (Melly 119).

As a magician, John makes use of mirrors to rehearse and produce his illusions, and he uses their psychological counterparts all through his life to contradict or hide shame and trauma, or to make them disappear: “For a few seconds Sorcerer shut his eyes and retreated behind the mirrors in his head, pretending to be elsewhere, but even then the landscapes kept coming at him fast and lurid” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 105). Precisely, just like it happened in Vietnam, Wade’s self-protective magic fails to function in the life he builds for himself and Kathy after the war. All along, Wade has been extremely dependent on her, in a relationship that is complex, somewhat neurotic. She has made sacrifices for his career, particularly a baby whom she aborted in accordance with his wishes. Kathy, after twenty years with Wade still loves her husband; but she finds herself in a marriage lacking energy, spontaneity, passion, and happiness: “Maybe, in the end, she blamed herself. Not the affair so much, but for the waning of energy, the slow year-by-year fatigue that had finally worn her down. She had stopped trying” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 253).

John’s loss of his wife is the climatic tragedy of his self-destruction, and it brings about the desolate narrative of the novel, whether seen as Wade’s meditation on a whole life of concealing guilt, shame, and lack of love following Kathy’s disappearance, or as the narrator’s rebuilding of Wade’s “inner life.” The novel starts in a similar way to Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929):

In the summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river

there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. (Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* 3)

In September, after the primary, they rented an old yellow cottage in the timber at the edge of Lake of the Woods. There were many trees, mostly pine and birch, and there was the dock and the boathouse and the narrow dirt road that came through the forest and ended in polished gray rocks at the shore below the cottage. Then there were no roads at all. There were no towns and no people. (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 1)

Like Kathy Wade, Catherine Barkley is already dead, but at least the narrator, her lover, Lieutenant Henry, knows her destiny. A subsequent reflection by Frederick Henry implies Wade's situation at the beginning of the novel as well as his final wretchedness:

The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you but there will be no special hurry. (Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* 222)

John Wade is "none of these." Different from Frederick Henry, Hemingway's protagonist, John Wade cannot bring about an individual peace for himself or the woman he loves. He has not detached himself from his war; he has, in vain, tried to make it evanescent, and the psychological strategies of concealment and circumventions that have installed an acute crisis in John and Kathy's relationship are reflected in the Lake of the Woods:

Beyond the dock the big lake opened northward into Canada, where the water was everything, vast and very cold, and where there were secret channels and portages and bays and tangled forests and islands without names. (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 1)

Right from the beginning, in the first chapter, O'Brien develops a posttraumatic setting in which John and Kathy are disastrously attempting to convalesce from his public shame at the numerical result of the voting:

Everywhere, for many thousand square miles, the wilderness was all one thing, like a great curving mirror, infinitely blue and beautiful, always the same. Which was what they had come for. They needed the solitude. They needed the repetition, the dense hypnotic drone of woods and water, but above all they needed to be together.

At night they would spread their blankets on the porch and lie watching the fog move toward them from across the lake. They were not yet prepared to make love. They had tried once, but it had not gone well, so now they would hold each other and talk quietly about having babies and perhaps a house of their own. They pretended things were not so bad. (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 1-2)

At the outset, the novel appears to be a traditional realistic fiction. And yet, realism is delicately ruptured by a short narrative story of their sixth day together: "In less than thirty-six hours she would be gone, but now she lay beside him on the porch and talked about all the ways they could make it better" (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 3). The chapter is concluded with an analogous temporal disruptive division as they attempt to bring comfort to each other on the veranda of the cottage that evening:

There was the steady hum of lake and woods. In the days afterward, when she was gone, he would remember this with perfect clarity, as if it were still happening. He would remember a breathing sound inside the fog. He would remember the feel of her hand against his forehead, its warmth, how purely alive it was.

“Happy,” she said. “Nothing else.” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 7)

In this passage, the modal verbs raise John Wade’s awareness beyond the scene being portrayed. As the reader becomes conscious of the presence of the narrator, theorizing what Wade would probably have felt later, he/she also understands that Kathy is already dead “before she says her final words here, making the already desolate scene a memory suffused with grief and loss” (Heberle 232). Towards the end of the novel, the last vestige of Wade’s self envisages Kathy buried “beneath the surface of the silvered lake. Her eyes are brilliant green, her expression alert. She tries to speak but can’t. She belongs to the angle. Not quite present, not quite gone, she swims in the blinding twilight of in between” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 288), and the narrator rewrites the introductory image of the cottage that is now empty, standing “in timber overlooking the lake” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 287), as though the small vacation house had never known the presence of John and Kate:

There are many trees, mostly pine and birch, and there is a dock and a boathouse and a narrow dirt road that winds through the forest and ends in a ledge of polished gray rocks at the shore below the cottage. (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 287-88)

“What has transpired between the opening and closing scenes is a ghost story, an account of missing persons haunted by memories of vanished lives. The road ends at the edge of a lake in an empty wilderness” (Heberle 233).

John’s ability to remember the final moment of joy above is “made even more traumatic by what he cannot remember: his final moments together with Kathy on their last night in the cottage.” “What He Remembered” (Chapter 4) are the events of the day, but “How the Night Passed” (Chapter 8) portrays the climaxing collapse of John’s life, a psychological breakdown that definitively erases his final moments with Kathy from his memory. Waking up from terrifying dreams caused by the total destruction of his life, Wade swears at what has happened to him and burns the houseplants in a condition of near-traumatization (Heberle 233).

According to Melley, because Wade’s comrades knew him only as “Sorcerer,” he believes that “over time [...] memory itself would be erased” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 269). This condition of being self deceived is connected to an “odd concept of secrecy” – Wade’s sense that Vietnam “was a secret,” that “History was a secret,” that “Secrecy *was* the war,” and that deep inside every man, including himself, were “incredible secrets” – things “so secret that he sometimes kept [them] secret from himself” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 73). Melley contends that

the concept of a secret inner life has always been essential to liberal, and especially masculine, subjectivity. The notion that one keeps secrets from oneself, on the other hand, became culturally viable only with the rise of psychoanalysis. But *In the Lake of the Woods* extends repression well beyond familiar Freudian ground and into the postmodern territory of robust repression and multiple personality, where one can forget one’s

own recent actions wholesale. It is this notion that permits the concomitant view that History itself is a “secret,” that the past is altogether inaccessible. For if we cannot trust even our own testimony, then what hope is there for a valid history of traumatic events? (Melley 120-21)

This question is exactly what Wade’s amnesia is devised to stimulate. His forgetting is not merely an intriguing individual abnormality, but a mode to express the status of collective memory in contemporary American culture. O’Brien has expressed the “postmodern historiographic crisis” through John Wade, whose psychological state of mind becomes

an emblem of history’s groundlessness. Wade is a postmodern hall of mirrors because he is a *model of history*, a model in which the truth of events is always out of reach, obscured by failures of memory, falsified documents, and misleading testimony. (Melley 121)

In many aspects, *In the Lake of the Woods* portrays a cycle of violation and murder in America that develops both from the experience of war and the process of becoming a man:

O’Brien does not articulate this notion as such but instead presents a suggestive collage of historical and fictional echoes that are, like the experience of trauma itself, fragmented and repetitive. Yet what is so strange about these fragments is that they are presented as evidence in the case of Kathy Wade – as if the history of war time atrocities were somehow casually connected to her disappearance. If they tell a story at all, it is one that must be pieced together out of the scraps left by the

narrator. It is certainly not a tale about Kathy, about whose fate the narrator finally admits “nothing is solved” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 301n133). It is, rather, about collective atrocities that have punctuated all the armed conflicts of the United States – how they can be forgotten by their perpetrators and inaccessible to their historians. And yet O’Brien locates this account of historical dynamics in a story of individual grief and amnesia, a story that is unresolved from both of its widely divergent points of view. (Melley 123)

The requirement to validate the truth of events and the perception that only narrative discourse can imitate the power of those events is what makes *In the Lake of the Woods* come to an end before the reader discovers what has happened to its main characters. The authentic trauma of the soldier can only be accessed again as history, so “the narrative of John Wade gives way to the narrative of historical reconstruction.” This type of narrative cannot conclude, it can simply validate the complexity of approximating the past before giving clarity to a sense of deep skepticism and uncertainty about our expertise in telling its story. (Melley 129).

O’Brien’s writing is based on wonder and possibility, things which are linked to paramount issues about the human mind and heart. Meditating on these issues, he establishes some truths: “[...] absolute knowledge is absolute closure” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 266), a closure that for author O’Brien undermines the role and allure of storytelling. Similarly, “absolute knowledge of Tim O’Brien and his writing is neither possible nor desirable.” This vital assessment of O’Brien’s life and writings – angles of art and life – “has provided some facts, a few truths, various perspectives, and numerous possibilities” (Herzog, *Tim O’Brien* 167). Readers of *In the Lake of the*

Woods can arrive at their own conclusions based on “evidences” and their “hypotheses:”

“The angle shapes reality” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 288).

Conclusion

It has been shown in this thesis that narratives of the Vietnam War were mostly written by soldiers who experienced and witnessed traumatic events in times of combat, which, in turn, made them severely traumatized. These traumatic events, which were recovered by the memory of these combatants, influence the narrative process. The narratives present repetition, fragmentation, indirection, omission and irony because they rely on the soldier's memory, so when they narrativize traumatic events through memory, logical language fails.

I have argued that the alleviation of traumatic symptoms like flashbacks, reenactments, amnesia, and numbing, among others, seems to require the construction of some type of consistent narrative about the events that imposed the trauma. This process is sometimes called the translation of traumatic memory into narrative memory. The idea of "translation," to which I refer, is a metaphor for the trauma narrative. In a translation process, the translated text loses something in relation to the target text, but at the same time adds something extra to it. The traumatic narrative loses something too, as it is not able to recover the whole of the traumatic event, but it also adds something extra to it. The objective of this research was to consider the narrative process associated with traumatic memory as a translation process.

I started my study pinpointing the difference between generals' accounts of battles and military strategies and the soldier's tale. The latter is small-scaled, detailed, confined, very local, incoherent and retrospective by their nature. In this research I analyzed the reasons that lead combatants to write war novels: the need to justify one's actions to oneself and to others; the need to set the record straight because of official

distortion; the need to relieve in print traumatic experiences as a therapeutic exercise; the need to confess and to amend for past mistakes; the need to create art, but also to reevaluate individual and moral issues; the need to write about the one's inner changes, and finally the need to explain why men act so differently in wartime and in peacetime. I showed that a soldier's tale will never be an accurate document. As history, it does not fulfill all the requirements; it is full of mistakes, filled with emotion, one-sided and limited. Additionally, personal memoirs can never pass the test of historical authenticity, because they are not history and cannot be. They have their own human voice, which is something that history does not have. They have their own personal profile, which is not the profile of history. They are different in their own way, being neither better nor worse.

War stories narrate what soldiers do in war and the impact of the conflict on these men's lives, but not necessarily accurately. Memoirs are retrospective, filtered reality, what memory preserves. Memory is unreliable, not only as a source of history, but as a story of an individual. In this way, truth in a war story is impossible, or even irrelevant. According to Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried*,

In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. (O'Brien 78)

I showed that the Vietnam was different from other modern wars: it was a long war fought by short-timers whose average age was less than nineteen; most of the troops came from the lower end of the American social scale; it was a war fought

without a front, a war of attrition, fought against a phantom-like enemy and against the pressures of an anti-war opinion at home. Thus, the effect on the narratives is clear.

An instance of the persistence of trauma is clear in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and *In the Lake of the Woods*. Both novels are characterized by repetition, the distinctive feature of survivors of PTSD, and O'Brien's words are an endless refiguration of trauma writing that express a symptom that is never healed.

According to Heberle,

Vietnam is not only a war or a book but also an arena of psychic wounding and its posttraumatic aftermath. (Heberle xvi) O'Brien uses Vietnam as a synecdoche for the U.S. war in Vietnam and its effects on Americans, but he also uses it metaphorically as a psychic condition characterized by traumatization, a condition derived from his own experiences that is variously rewritten in his works. (Heberle, xviii)

O'Brien's fiction does not merely portray traumatized characters, it impersonates traumatization by way of narrative structuring, style, opinion, and judgment. Among the typical devices of such enactments are "repetition; fragmentation; violation of temporal sequence; lack of affect; understatement, irony, and other markers of emotional constriction; and images and actions resonant of unspeakable violence" (Heberle 15).

The Things They Carried deals primarily with themes tracing the movement from innocence to experience, the pathology of courage, and the passage from loss to redemption. Those themes are viewed exclusively through the filter of memory. According to Heberle, *The Things They Carried* is a "work of recovery as well as trauma" (Heberle 178). Although "you can tell a true war story by its absolute and

uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil” (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 76), yet “this too is true: stories can save us” (O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* 255). Heberle contends that *The Things They Carried* “negotiates between these two truths by making storytelling itself the most important subject of the book.” In the book, stories are created making use of a broad diversity of discursive gestures, including “recollection, confession, and explanation, as well as explicit storytelling; and many tales are repeated, elaborated by further details or supplemented by additional explanation or commentary.” The work is an example of the need to write one’s own self “beyond trauma and the impossibility of ever doing so” (Heberle 178).

“The angle shapes reality” (O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 288). This puzzling phrase provides insight to O’Brien’s notions about fragmented structure, repetitive content that reflects symptomatic traumatization and multiple perspectives found in his book. In *In the Lake of the Woods*, the protagonist John Wade, has concealed his participation in the My Lai Massacre, from the public and from his wife. When this shameful secret comes to the surface, it not only destroys his political career but also menaces to crush his marriage. Throughout the novel, he suffers PTSD intrusions and loses his wife – and perhaps his life. The trauma of John Wade and the trauma of author Tim O’Brien are, in many aspects, similar (Heberle 29-30).

O’Brien’s abiding fascination with mystery and ambiguity of actions and characters leads to another key ingredient in his writing – the technique of incremental repetition, or iteration. In chapter 29 of *In the Lake of the Woods*, the narrator notes:

It is by the nature of the angle, sun to earth, that the seasons are made, and that the waters of the lake change color by the season, blue going to gray and then to white and then back again to blue. The water receives

color. The water returns it. The angle shapes reality. (O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 288)

In the Lake of the Woods extends repression beyond familiar Freudian territory: one can forget one's own recent actions altogether. It is this idea that allows the attendant view that History itself is a "secret," that the past is altogether inaccessible. If we cannot trust even our own testimony, then there is no hope for a valid history of traumatic events (Melley 120-21).

Like trauma, amnesia is everywhere in contemporary American culture, especially with relation to traumatic historical events like Vietnam. We live in an age of forgetting. Wade's amnesia is devised to show that his forgetting is not merely an intriguing individual abnormality but a mode of expressing the status of collective memory in contemporary American culture. O'Brien has expressed the "postmodern historiographic crisis" through John Wade, whose psychological state of mind becomes a symbol of the lack of rational basis of history. And if narrating the story is what concedes the right to the psychologically sick person to "transcend trauma, as Judith Herman claims, then O'Brien's narrative seems to document the need to repeat that trauma compulsively, not only as memory, but as historical fiction, too" (Melley 129).

Through his writing, it seems that O'Brien's purpose is to produce imaginatively attractive literature that transcends the specific points, details, or circumstances of Vietnam through an enduring traumatic fiction. His importance in the American cultural scenario lies in the fact that while the United States is trying to forget the war, O'Brien is trying to show how one cannot repress traumatic memories.

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Appendix - Historical Contextualization of the Vietnam War

Since its origins, Vietnam has been threatened by China. Successive dynasties based in China ruled Vietnam directly for most of the period from 111 B.C.E. until 939 A.D., when the country became independent. Vietnam remained a tributary state to its larger neighbor for most of its history, but repelled invasions by the Chinese as well as three invasions by the Mongols between 1255 and 1285. Unfortunately, following its independence, Vietnam's central power weakened, local authorities frequently became autonomous while revolts amidst the peasants broke out. In 1527 the country was divided in two, north and south, leading to a civil war (1627-1672) which favored European ambitions. French missionaries then installed themselves in the country. In 1802, the ruler of South Vietnam, Nguyen Anh, reunited the country with the help of France. The independent period temporarily ended in the middle to late nineteenth century when the country was colonized by France. For more than eighty years France had removed the name "Vietnam" and ruled the country as three separate districts: Tonkin, Annam and Conchin China. Resistance against Chinese rule then had turned to a fierce struggle against France. Marilyn Young claims that, twentieth-century Vietnamese patriots often quoted poet Nguyen Trai's boast that Vietnam had "at no time lacked heroes," implying that Vietnam had at all times had enemies. (Young 2) At all times, the history of the country had been marked by resistance to each and every foreign presence. During World War II, Imperial Japan expelled the French to occupy Vietnam, seizing control of the country's economic resources, while retaining the French administration. According to Young, "In their five-year tenure in Vietnam,

Japanese policies devastated the economy, creating a famine in the North that killed between 1.5 and 2 million people.” (Young 2)

In May, 1941, the Vietnamese nationalists established the Viet Minh, the League for the Independence of Vietnam, led by Ho Chi Minh, a Vietnamese revolutionary and president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from 1945 (DRV) until his death in 1969. In September, 1945, World War II ends. Ho Chi Minh seized this opportunity contacting U.S. forces just a few months later. He began collaborating with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), as U.S. undercover operation against the Japanese. According to Tucker, “some scholars have suggested that Ho’s revolutionary army even received financial and military support from the OSS and that Ho himself was an “official agent.” (Tucker 173) Japan surrenders and Ho Chi Minh proclaims Vietnam independent from French colonial rule announcing the formation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. He did so before a crowd of half a million people gathered in Ba Dinh Square, in Hanoi, directly quoting the U.S. Declaration of Independence: “All men are born equal. The Creator has given us certain inviolable Rights: the right to life, the right to be free, and the right to achieve happiness” (Young 11). France, unwilling to let go of its colonial holdings, drives the Viet Minh out of South Vietnam. With the future of Vietnam at stake, the Viet Minh and France spend over a year in negotiations. The Viet Minh demanded a free, unified country, while the French insisted on a control over South Vietnam. In November, 1946, France shelled the city of Haiphong, a seaport in North Vietnam near the Gulf of Tonkin, killing six thousand Vietnamese civilians. The intention was to start a war in an attempt to regain control over Vietnam.

In March, 1947, in a speech to Congress, President Truman separated the world between governments of “free peoples” and those of “terror and oppression.” The Cold

War had begun. Communism, in whatever form it might have taken, had become the new enemy of the U.S.. Despite the fact that Ho Chi Minh was not anti-American, nor was evidence found that he was working for the Soviet Union, he was condemned for being a Communist. Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist, not a Communist, this is what Americans never understood. Ho Chi Minh implored the U.S. to help Vietnam in its struggle for freedom, but not only did the Truman Administration ignore these requests, it also began secretly funneling aid to France.

Howard Zinn contends that, in the United States, a 1950 secret memo from the National Security Council postulated what came to be known as the “Domino Theory:” like a row of dominos, if one country fell to communism, the next would do the same and so on. The Domino Theory, explicitly stated by President Dwight Eisenhower, asserted that if Vietnam were to become communist, then the rest of Asia would follow, ending with Japan becoming a communist country. Despite criticism, the Domino Theory would guide the U.S. in its crusade against communism in Vietnam, and throughout the world. Thus, by 1954, the U.S. was financing eighty percent of the French war effort, ostensibly to “stop communism” in Asia. But there were other reasons, revealed in a 1953 U.S. congressional study: the area of Indochina is wealthy in rice, rubber, coal, and iron ore. Its position made it a strategic key to the rest of Southeast Asia. (Zinn 162)

Despite the crafty schemes of France and the United States, the Vietnamese unanimously supported Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh, forcing France to surrender in 1954 with the defeat of the French forces at Dien Bien Phu, thus marking the pivotal end of war for France. A cease-fire was called, followed by France’s eventual withdrawal from Vietnam. In June, 1954, France and Vietnam agreed to terms of peace

under the Geneva Accords. The 17th parallel temporarily separated the country in two: to the North the Communist Vietnamese government of Ho Chi Minh, to the South, the dictatorship led by an American puppet, a former Vietnamese official called Ngo Dinh Diem. Elections were to be held in two years to unite the country (Roberts 677).

Diem ruled over South Vietnam as an authoritarian power, and his regime became increasingly unpopular. He was a Catholic and most Vietnamese were Buddhists. Additionally, he trusted only his family and he was close to the landlords in a country vastly inhabited by peasants. Already fragmented with rivalries and factions, South Vietnam suffered under massive corruption, religious oppression and poor leadership. In the north, in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh faced his own problems. Dissidents were executed, and the military was used to put down uprisings. Fearing a communist victory in 1956, Diem and the U.S. blocked elections scheduled to reunite Vietnam. American military advisors were then stepped up in South Vietnam and the U.S. poured money into South Vietnam to prop up its economy. Premier Diem instituted oppressive measures to root out communists in the South and continue his rule. From December 1961 to 1962, President Kennedy authorized a drastic increase in the number of military advisors sent to Vietnam. Within a year, 9,000 advisors were directly assisting South Vietnam in fighting against Communists. In May of 1963, thousands of Buddhists demonstrated against Diem in the city of Hue. Soldiers fired on them and several protesters were shot or trampled to death. The following month, the world was shocked by the protest of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc, who self-immolated himself on a street of Saigon.

According to Young, there were explanations for the American involvement in the war. First, the United States supported the French after the Frenchmen had lost the

war in Vietnam. To help France fight to retain its Indochinese colony was to fight Communism in the anti-Communist context of the 1950s and 1960s, to create an anti-Communist state. Second, the U.S. had to find Japan a Southeast Asian commercial trade replacement for the embargo the United States had imposed on China. Third, the U.S. was in Vietnam to reshuffle the post-World War II world according to the axioms of liberal capitalism (Young ix).

Zinn contends that in November 1963, Diem had already become a nuisance and a shame. With C.I.A. help, the South Vietnamese military overthrew Diem in a coup, murdering him and his brother Nhu. Three weeks after Diem's murder, President Kennedy was assassinated and Vice President Johnson assumed the reigns of power. On August 02, 1964, President Johnson used a shadowy set of events in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the coast of North Vietnam, to start full-scale war. Allegedly, North Vietnam attacked a U.S. warship there. A second attack, conceived by the U.S., though not actually occurring, provided the impetus to launch the war. Congress overwhelmingly passed the resolution, giving the president broad powers to wage war. Right after the Tonkin incident, American warplanes began bombarding North Vietnam. In October, the American military battled for the first time with North Vietnamese soldiers fighting in the south. It was also the first time B-52 bombers gave support to ground forces. President Johnson increased the magnitude of the war, dispatching over 200,000 troops to South Vietnam in 1965, and 200,000 more in 1966. In late 2005, the United States issued a study disclosing that North Vietnam never attacked American warships in the Gulf of Tonkin and that intelligence had been intentionally falsified or suppressed (Zinn 163-65).

In March, 1965, the first “teach-ins” were held at American universities to protest the war. A growing anti-war movement included veterans, politicians and foreign leaders. From 1965 to 1967, American troops strength built as the war intensified. According to Hobsbawm, the United States “dropped more high explosives on the unhappy country than had been used in the whole of the Second World War” (Hobsbawm 217).

In January of 1968, taking advantage of the Lunar New Year of Têt, the Communists launched a massive assault on South Vietnam. The Têt Offensive, a critical moment of the Vietnam War, was a series of surprise attacks by the Vietcong (rebel forces sponsored by North Vietnam) and North Vietnamese forces, on scores of cities, towns, and hamlets throughout South Vietnam. North Vietnamese leaders believed they could not sustain the heavy losses inflicted by the Americans indefinitely and had to win the war with an all-out military effort. In addition, Ho Chi Minh was nearing death, and they needed a victory before that time came. The combined forces of the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Regular Army (NVA), about 85,000 strong, launched a major offensive throughout South Vietnam. The attacks began on January 31, 1968, the first day of the Lunar New Year, Vietnam's most important holiday. It took weeks for U.S. and South Vietnamese troops to retake all of the captured cities, including the former imperial capital of Hue. Even though the offensive was a military failure for the North Vietnamese Communists and Vietcong (VC), it was a political and psychological victory for them. South Vietnamese and American troops may have recovered fast, but that was not true of Americans at home. The Tet Offensive sent shock waves throughout the United States, alarming those who had believed the White House's assertions that victory was near. It did, however, convince those with doubts that the

situation was even worse than they had pictured, turning American public opinion against the war. Television coverage of the destructive fighting in Saigon and Hue was far-reaching and detailed, leaving many with the feeling that the United States and its ally were in an extremely difficult and troubled situation. Many in Washington still expected a major battle at Khe Sanh, in northwestern Quang Tri Province, in South Vietnam, or further large communist attacks elsewhere. The Tet Offensive was the psychological turning point of the war. U.S. military historian Brig. Gen. S. L. A. Marshall summed it up as “a potential major victory turned into a disastrous defeat through mistaken estimates, loss of nerve, and a tidal wave of defeatism” (Tucker 397).

In March of 1968, President Lyndon Johnson announced he would not seek reelection. On March 16, American Lieutenant William Calley and his troops murdered the entire South Vietnamese village of My Lai, killing hundreds. According to Young,

[...] in a series of news reports by Seymour Hersh in *The New York Times* it became clear that not only had a platoon of soldiers cold-blooded killed virtually the entire population of a village (raping many of the women before murdering them), and a village from which not a single shot had been fired, but that the Army had systematically covered the whole thing up. (Young 243)

At first, American military authorities denied the incident, but as photographic evidence surfaced, they were forced to admit it. According to Tim O'Brien,

[...] The number of civilian casualties during operations in Son My village on March 16, 1968, is a matter of continuing dispute. The Peers Commission concluded that “at least 175-200 Vietnamese men, women and children” were killed in the course of the March 16th operation. The

U.S. Army's Criminal Investigation Division (CID) estimated on the basis of census data that the casualties "may have exceeded 400."
(O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* 146n67)

In 1969, President Nixon began secret bombing raids into neighboring Cambodia, a neutral country used by North Vietnam to infiltrate south. The resulting destabilization of the country eventually led to a genocidal Cambodian dictatorship which murdered millions of its own people. On September fourth of the same year, Ho Chi Minh died of a heart attack in Hanoi. In 1970, Americans protested Nixon's invasion of Cambodia, with massive protests being held throughout the country. At Kent State University and Jackson State University, protesters were shot and killed by the National Guard. In May, 1972, while American ground troops decreased, Nixon initiated Operation Linebacker, a massive bombing campaign against North Vietnam. New "smart" bombs were used: computer-controlled bombs mounted with television cameras for precise targeting. Massive casualties ensued. In November of the same year Nixon was reelected. In December, he initiated what would become known as the "Xmas Bombings," dropping more tonnage of bombs in 12 days than in the entire period of 1969 to 1971. But the aerial bombing did not make the Vietnamese people quit. The attacks draw worldwide condemnation and Nixon's popular approval ratings sank. Congress called for an end to the war. In January, 1973, Henry Kissinger and North Vietnamese representative Le Duc Tho met in Paris to sign terms of "peace with honor," but the war continued without U.S. military involvement. In April 30, 1975 Saigon fell. The last Americans evacuated the city and North Vietnamese forces rolled into the capital. The war was over. Nearly 30 years after Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam's independence with the words of Thomas Jefferson, Vietnam was unified

under a communist government. Fifty eight thousand and fifteen Americans died in the conflict. It is estimated that over one and a half million Vietnamese lost their lives.

According to Hobsbawm,

The Vietnam War demoralized and divided the nation, amid televised scenes of riots and anti-war demonstrations; destroyed an American president; led to a universally predicted defeat and retreat after ten years (1965-75); and, what was even more to the point, demonstrated the isolation of the United States. (Hobsbawm 244)

It is extremely difficult to understand why the United States became involved in the war, but the answer lies in the post World War II political climate – the Cold War. The defeat raised questions about the quality of advice that was given to successive presidents by the Pentagon, especially by Kennedy and Johnson administration officials such as Walt Rostow and Robert McNamara. David Halberstam comments on the Kennedy-Johnson team:

“[...] it underlines the weakness of the Kennedy team, the difference between intelligence and wisdom, between the abstract quickness and verbal facility which the team exuded, and true wisdom, which is the product of hard-won, often bitter experience. Wisdom for a few of them came *after* Vietnam.” (Halberstam xiv)

It is beyond belief that men who were said to be the best to serve in the government had been the architects of a war that was the worst national tragedy since the Civil War. Almost three million Americans served in Vietnam. Between 1965 and 1975, the United States spent \$111 billion on the war, resulting in a large federal budget deficit. Young contends that,

American troops could clear territory, evacuate populations, drop napalm, defoliate crops, transform the landscape with bomb craters, take Vietnamese mistresses, vaccinate Vietnamese children, train troops, supervise interrogations and administration of prisons. They could expend, in a single day, more firepower than the French had during the entire fifty-six-day Battle of Dien Bien Phu. They could flatten cities in the North, as they did the city of Vinh; they could destroy villages in the south. But they could not make the South Vietnamese love the government the United States had brought to power in Saigon, nor could they govern the country themselves. (Young 171)

This passage makes it clear that no power, not even a superpower, has unlimited strength and resources. But perhaps most significantly, military actions are meaningless in isolation from political actions.

Set against the two World Wars, the Vietnam War was a small-scale event. It started as a local conflict, fought initially against the French rule and then internally as a civil war, finally culminating in the interference of rich countries. Still it was a war of international relevance, as important in its time as the Spanish Civil War, which devastated Spain thirty years earlier. Comparable to the Spanish war, it became a worldwide reflection. A far cry from the war, in the streets of American cities, as well as in Paris and London, people demonstrated against a conflict that did not and at the same time did affect them directly. The aftermath on the American people was similar to the effect of the First World War on the British: the disappointment they shared changed the way generations perceived their country, its leaders and war itself.