

NOT ALL GALLANTRY, GONGS AND GLORY: WARTIME IN POPULAR AMERICAN NOVELS

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Abstract: This article discusses perceptions of World War II in modern American literature. Authors acknowledge novels inspired by their authors' combat, and discuss visions of war, aims of wartime literature and major literary archetypes.

Material and methods: The authors analyzed the most popular American novels devoted to the subject of World War II. The analysis covered the visions of war, war literature functions and aims, and major literary archetypes of characters affected by war.

Results: Literary visions of war vary considerably between historical, fictive, realistic, non-realistic, humorous or self-critical. Functions of war literature include: glorifying or demystifying war, but also healing both authors and readers. Also, many literary archetypes can be distinguished.

Conclusions: War in literature is presented as a time of glory and a catastrophe. Attitudes to war in novels vary from historical to fictive, realistic to non-realistic, or humorous, and some novels glorify war while others condemn it. Literary archetypes also vary considerably.

Keywords: victim, wartime literature, demystifying war, warrior

Introduction

Wartime literature has often been written by former soldiers who decided to give a personal record of what they had witnessed while in service. Out of about seventy British poets writing about war, fifty had soldiered in a military conflict and witnessed the horror of war (Cuddon, 2013, p. 769). Also, between the 1940s and the end of the 1950s, up to 2,200 war novels were written in the USA (Hölbling, 2009). While some authors expressed patriotism and support of war, many were downright critical in their approach. They often expressed their disillusion and disdain, anger or even rage as a way of voicing their protest against the pointless loss of precious lives. Some of these literary accounts can be read as memoirs, as a guide on how to survive the war, or as a warning against future conflicts. The many literary genres used by authors to voice their concerns about war include novels, "short stories, autobiography, biography, diaries, journals, memoirs, and stories of escape from prisoner-of-war camps" (Cuddon, 2013).

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1. War novels inspired by their authors' combat experience

Several popular American World War II novels were inspired by their authors' experiences as soldiers. One of them is *The Naked and the Dead* by Norman Mailer, published in 1948. Mailer served during World War II as an infantryman. As a Harvard graduate, he was offered an easy promotion to the rank of an officer, which he refused to accept. Coker (2014) states that even though Mailer did not experience much combat during his time in the military, he had the opportunity to witness the senselessness of army bureaucracy. Coker (2014) summarised his observations stating that "war was increasingly remote from the fighting and the men who were in the thick of it".

Shortly after the end of World War II, James Gould Cozzens published his novel *Guard of Honor* (1948), for which he received the Pulitzer Prize. He was also a member of the US Army Air Forces, and reached the rank of a major (Kinder, 2005). However, Cozzens did not share Mailer's negative feelings towards the military. The plot of his novel takes place in Florida, thus safely remote from the war front, and focuses on two officers who try to resolve a racial conflict in their air force base.

Other influential American literary works concerning armed conflict include *From Here to Eternity* (1951) and *The Thin Red Line* (1962), both written by James Jones, who participated in World War II and was awarded the Bronze Star and Purple Heart for bravery (Britannica, 2021). The first novel describes the military unit stationed in Hawaii before the attack on Pearl Harbour. Jones served in the 25th Infantry Division, 27th Infantry Regiment and participated in the Battle of Guadalcanal. Later, he explained that the official account of the military campaign varied considerably from what the soldiers had remembered (Maggioni, 2017). This inspired him to write about his experiences as honestly as possible. Cusatis (2010) considers the novel *The Naked and the Dead*, along with *From Here to Eternity* and *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway (1929), devoted to World War I, the most realistic wartime novels in American literature. Jones, like Mailer, criticises the army's bureaucracy. Maggioni (2017) states that *The Thin Red Line*, which concentrates on the Guadalcanal campaign, is one of the best combat novels inspired by World War II.

Another distinctive wartime novel is Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). Dawes (2009) indicates that the novel is more humorous than *The Naked and the Dead* or James Jones' works. Interestingly, Vonnegut departed from realism in favour of science-fiction. The main character, a soldier named Billy Pilgrim, travels in time to meet himself both as a younger and an older man. According to Hölbling (2009), it is difficult to explain and make sense of war and therefore the novel's unusual and non-chronological narrative is considered successful. The book's major focus is the bombing of Dresden. Vonnegut himself witnessed the destruction and needed several years to write about his experiences (Coker, 2014). In his interview with Lee Roloff, Vonnegut stated the following about his time in the American army: "Yes, I saw a hell of a lot of death, and I saw a hell of a lot of it during the Battle of the Bulge when my division was wiped out. But then in Dresden I saw a mountain of dead people. And that makes you thoughtful" (Bloom, 2006).

2. Divergent approaches of wartime novel

Wartime writers expressed different views on war and now contrasting approaches to war and military conflicts in literature can be distinguished. Coker (2014) observes, among others, the historical approach of wartime texts. Historians, similarly to ancient writers and poets,

emphasise epic themes of a war, describe how a particular conflict developed and resolved, what particular combat strategies were used against the enemy, what importance for the larger historical developments a conflict had, or what consequences it brought for the future. Usually, historians concentrate on hard facts and make sense of the events, while novelists make sense of personal experiences. From the perspective of a historian, a novelist does not convey a war objectively and a soldier's death is seen as his fate or the ultimate act of patriotism (Coker, 2014, p. 6).

A contrasting approach to war is the fictive approach (Coker, 2014). This outlook on military conflicts dates back to the 18th century, when the new genre, novel, showed interest in the internal life of the characters and their psychological journey. A war novelist's goal is to describe what in his or her opinion constitutes the essence of war; that is the soldiers' experience. While in the eyes of historians war is seen as epic, the fictive approach shows war as a personal experience with a significant psychological impact, subsequently paying little attention to the reasons of the conflict and the bigger perspective. Brosnan (2009) claims that the fictive approach is more authentic and truthful than the historical one. From this perspective, the death of a soldier is seen as existential experience pertaining only to that individual, as "the novelist's truth is an existential reality" (Coker, 2014).

Comedy aims at highlighting the insanity of everyday life, and war is no exception (Maddocks, 2004). Because war can be labelled the 'ultimate insanity', it may also be the 'ultimate challenge' for comedians (Maddocks, 2004). The humorous approach to war in literature is not a recent phenomenon and dates back to Aristophanes, an ancient Greek comedy-writer. Usually, the aim of approaching a given topic with grim humour is to express strong disapproval or condemnation. McLoughlin (2011) claims that humour does not exclude solemnity as, together with laughter, it makes the reader feel the tragic experience of war more deeply. A similar effect is caused by the caricatural and satirical approach to war.

Harold (2007) distinguishes between the realistic and non-realistic approaches to war writing, and claims that defining the latter seems more challenging than defining the former. It is possible to enumerate some characteristics of the realistic approach to war as a certain kind of aim, namely truth-telling or 'faithfulness' to the facts; a certain kind of content, the representation of social reality in its particulars; and a certain kind of form, involving simplicity rather than ornateness, mirroring that of documentary history (Lamarque and Olsen, 1994, in: Harold, 2007)

Thus, the realistic perspective will directly concentrate on facts and numbers and on historical and cultural context, and follow a particular form. Realistic war novels tend to express a strong political opinion that young human life is too precious to be wasted, that the powerful decision-makers lack the skills or will necessary to avoid military conflicts, and that their unwise decisions bring untimely death to many (Brett, 2016). Harold (2014) states that making generalisations about non-realistic war novels is aimless as each of them seems distinctive. *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller is considered one such non-realistic novel due to non-linear, often confusing narration, repetitive and often nonsensical dialogues filled with pun and wordplay, and a wealth of characters challenging to follow.

Another approach to war writing is the self-critical approach (Rau, 2009). Some novelists have written about the immense costs of war rarely mentioned in the most popular titles, but connected to i.e. postcolonialism, POW, children, gender roles, sexual minority issues, or trauma. Such novels usually emphasise the traumatic effects of war on those not directly involved in combat but left on the home front. Again, the significance of a particular war, battle or victory is ignored. By doing so, the authors desire to rewrite the myth of war. They also try to explain why some of the myths were created in the first place and how they have influenced the popular

vision of war. Examples of such novels are *Austerlitz* by W. G. Sebald (2001), or *The Dark Room* by Rachel Seiffert (2001).

A discussion on various approaches to war writing should also include the absurd vision of war. Although the notion of absurd in literature has not been clearly defined, there is general agreement as to three general features: 1) worthlessness of human life is a common theme, 2) it is existential in nature, and 3) plots are absurd and illogical (Bennett, 2015). Gavins (2013) states that absurd is an artistic expression of a human being's inability to find inherent meaning in their existence. An example of such a war time novel is *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut. In the novel, the chronology is not observed, as the main character jumps between decades. Also, some action, like bombing the German city of Dresden, is presented backwards, as if planes sucked the bombs back inside, removing them from the ground beneath and restoring peace. Besides, as stated before, the main protagonist travels in space. Absurdity in literature came as a response to the incomprehensible horrors of World War II and the Holocaust (Bennett, 2015).

3. Aims of wartime novels

War literature has been serving other aims than informational or educational. Brosman (2009) explains that one of the aims of war narratives is to glorify and memorise military successes, which in turn may serve as an inspiration to fight. Importantly, many both classical and modern literary works have been promoting participation in wars and have been playing an important role in shaping new generations of soldiers. Wartime literature across history has often glorified heroic sacrifice and the prestige that a person may derive from serving in the military. War prose such as *Gallic Wars* written by Julius Caesar as well as *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane, still popular today, have been influencing people's interest in war. Moreover, war narratives have shaped and encouraged the idea of manhood over the centuries. To achieve that, the authors depicted the battlefield as a place where a man has a chance to manifest his masculinity in competition with other men. In some literary works, such as *From Here to Eternity*, the internal battle of a soldier is the most pivotal part. War is a place where a person is able to discover who they are (Coker, 2014)

An opposing aim is to demystify war and the military (Brosman, 2009). Demystification requires depicting war in a realistic way without glorifying it and the people who participate in it. Redefining war and the military is connected with other aims that war prose fulfils, which is the promotion of peace. However, the authors that do not intend to glorify the idea of war, may often, even subconsciously, contribute to the encouragement of the spirit to fight, especially by describing heroic attitudes of an individual (Brosman, 2009). Authors use various techniques to demystify war. One way to achieve that is writing about war in a cold, detached, objective style, as opposed to the traditional, glorifying one. Another way can be describing war as a sequence of random events, half-organised by half-specialists, where military actions and decisions defy logic and careful planning. War can also be demystified by providing long and vivid descriptions of damaged bodies, painful deaths, or terrible conditions endured by soldiers, and finally by appealing to the mercy of the reader and direct criticism of war (Brosman, 2009).

One of the possible ways of managing the traumatic memories of war is to write about them, hence another function of war writing, the healing. First of all, writing about one's experience during war may be beneficial for the authors and readers alike and it may serve as 'collective catharsis' (Brosman, 2009). Coker (2014) states that the author, through describing

his experiences, connects with his readers and that connection resembles a contract. He emphasises that not only the plot of a novel is pivotal, but also the opportunity to interpret the text and its meaning as the readers' desire. The readers, to a certain extent, co-create a novel as they interpret the story and the lives of the characters. Another way in which war literature can help heal is that it may facilitate the work of psychologists when treating soldiers. Through literature, professionals may acquire some in-sight knowledge about traumatic experiences to fully understand their patients. Besides, the analysis of literary works may be helpful in testing and developing psychological theories (Hunt, 2010).

4. Literary characters at war

“...war stories are nothing more than stories about people...”
Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (1977)

Traditionally, characters presented in wartime literature have been divided into clear to define archetypes: soldiers and civilians, men and women, or adversaries and companions. However, in relation to modern wartime novels and their characters, other categories seem to gain prominence.

One type of a wartime character is a warrior, traditionally defined purely by courage and readiness to sacrifice his life (Coker, 2014). Nowadays, however, being a warrior resembles much more than that, it resembles a religious calling. A warrior is not born a warrior, he answers the call and becomes one. To become a warrior, a person has to combine “two dimensions of war: the instrumental and existential”. Only war gives warriors the opportunity to advance their humanity and confirm their exceptionality. Warriors approach war from different angles; they serve at war either because it is their profession or they were left little choice, and when they kill their adversaries, they do it with skill. Cole (2009) uses the term ‘citizen soldier’ as a description of a person forced to fight in a war. One of the earliest examples of a literary warrior is Achilles in the *Iliad* by Homer.

Heroes are the creation of war (Coker, 2014). In ancient times, heroes resembled gods as they were powerful and mighty; however, the creation of a hero has changed since then. In modern literature heroes are less active and powerful, and, as a consequence, readers see them as more sympathetic. The modern heroes are characterised as people with “self-deprecating humour, greater self-knowledge and a good-hearted response to those who are less (or less than) heroic themselves”. Readers tend to appreciate these characters more than heroes forced into heroism. What distinguishes heroes from warriors is the fact that the former group is often ironic about war. An example of a literary hero can be Henry Fleming, the main character in *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane.

With the idea of hero comes the notion of an anti-hero, another creation of war. Cambridge Dictionary (2021) defines an anti-hero as a person “who does not have traditionally heroic qualities, such as courage, and is admired instead for what society generally considers to be a weakness of their character”. Simmons (2008) explains anti-heroes as “dissident, subversive individuals opposed to the ideological mores of the establishment” and suggests that anti-heroes were frequent characters in the 1960’s American literature as they reflected the rebellious spirit of the society, protesting particularly vehemently against the Vietnam War. Frequently accompanied by demythologisation of war, satire and parody, anti-heroes are understood as un-heroic heroes, who perhaps have high ideals, but seem powerless in front of the reality of life.

Another character type, a villain is seen as necessary at a time of war because war has tremendous corrupting power (Coker, 2014). People who would never consider themselves villains fall into circumstances where they are overtaken by low instincts: “ordinary people tricked by bad luck, often venture outside of the boundaries they know to be right and find themselves unable to get back. War allows small men to become particularly villainous” (Coker, 2014). An example of a villain in postmodern wartime novels is General Cummings from *The Naked and the Dead* by Norman Mailer.

Apart from warriors, heroes and villains, many literary characters of wartime novels are classified as survivors (Coker, 2014). A literary war survivor can either be a person who somehow manages to stay alive, or a person who manages to remain themselves despite the witnessed war horrors. Sometimes surviving war is not a result of a brave act but an act of cowardice or some ‘petty compromises’, which are then a source of shame. The survivors are often ridden by tremendous guilt because they feel that those who died were the best men or soldiers, and the dead are the ones who should have lived instead. It can be said that survivors in war literature share similarities with anti-heroes because they often act in an un-heroic way. An example of a survivor is Yossarian in *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller, who decides to walk away to survive the unsurvivable.

A renegade is a literary archetype, for whom war and honour seem impossible to go hand in hand. Scheckner (2009) describes a renegade as a person who “rebels, becomes an outlaw or a deserter”, which makes it possible to distinguish more than one type of renegades. It can be a character who betrays their nation, religious group, or political party, or it can be a rebellious person who defies the law or traditions. A renegade may also be a person who deserts or abandons their own beliefs or the cause. Again, Yossarian can be considered a renegade because he fails to do what is expected of him as a soldier and refuses to be a mere ‘cog in the war machine’.

Another archetype of wartime novel characters are victims, and victimhood also has many faces (Coker, 2014). In general, victims are characterised by suffering because they were made to believe that going to war is the right decision. Their fate results from being betrayed, among others, by their naivety and self-confidence, or by those who convinced them to go to war. Their lives are damaged at a young age. When enlisting, they often feel capable of conquering the world, yet abandon such desires once lived through war. If they die another hideous death, they are only a figure in the statistics. However, victims are not always those who perish in war, there can also be soldiers who lived through the war but upon coming back home seem incapable of going back to normal lives, as they realise that the memories of the atrocities take over their lives. Victims have sometimes been disrespectfully called ‘collateral damage’ (Coker, 2014), yet the victims’ suffering will not be wasted if readers learn from their experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

The popularity of war novels indicates that the topic of military conflict and its effect on people is still sought after. Wartime literature readers are witnesses to the tragic experiences of soldiers who are either in the centre of a conflict or on the edge of it; they are witnesses to the characters’ thoughts, emotions, or tragic and hideous deaths. Readers get a chance to get a vivid picture of what a war is like, especially credible if their authors experienced war first-hand. While some readers seek objective facts, many others are interested in the subjective experiences of individuals: how an individual lives through a war, or what transformation they

undergo. Most importantly, however, war narratives reveal the truth about men that would have remained hidden had they not faced danger, fear, pain, or loss.

The vision of war in literature is never homogeneous, as it can be seen both as a time of glory and catastrophe. Attitudes to war in novels vary from historical to fictive, realistic to non-realistic, humorous, and satirical to self-critical. Also aims of war literature vary, as some novels glorify war while others condemn it. Likewise, there are many different literary archetypes of character involved in military conflicts or indirectly touched by it. Finally, taking part in combat creates the ultimate opportunity to discover the self. Some characters find out they are capable of the bravest actions while others turn out to be cowards or villains.

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