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Vietnam and Literature

1 March 2015

The Vietnam War and its Effect on American Literature

Communism; a word most Americans hate to think about. The United States has made an atmosphere in the country that despises this socioeconomic system that was really gaining popularity in the 1940's. When China fell under the grasp of this system, the U.S. was worried other nations would topple as an effect. This theory is known as the Domino Theory. Once one domino symbolizing a country fell, the others would quickly follow. Lyndon B. Johnson stated "I am not going to be the president who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went." Since America was on a victory high from World War II, its government officials decided to become involved in stopping the spread into Korea. Then the outbreak affected Vietnam in 1955, and immediately the U.S. made a presence financially and then with its military. Due to the presence of military action, this became a war, and with all war comes literature as a byproduct. Almost every war in our history has produced a body of literature. However, the Vietnam War brought about a different experience for the soldiers that drastically affected the literature that was produced during this era.

Before the War

This war set itself apart from the start. The backgrounds of the soldiers headed over to Vietnam were different than any other war due to the way they were gathered. At first, the United States government tried to recruit young men due to the immobilization of the National Guard and the reserves (Puster). The officials would tell the recruits stories of how heroic and

glorious fighting in a war is (Ehrhart). Usually, they referred to the heroes of the “good war”; the generation of men prior to these incoming soldiers whose shadows they all grew up in (Ehrhart). Most of the recruits had also been in junior high school when they heard John F. Kennedy declare “we will bear any burden, pay any price” to defend our liberty (Ehrhart). These recruits had full faith in the American government; no doubts were stirring in their heads (Ehrhart). However, there were not enough of the recruits. To provide the army with enough young man, the draft was reestablished (Puster). These draftees were fed the same stories.

The military officials were “mythmaking” around two figures seen highly in teenagers’ eyes: John Wayne and John F. Kennedy (Lawson, 28). John Wayne was the image of valor, courage, and invincibility (Lawson, 28). John F. Kennedy was a real life naval officer who had a few promiscuous romantic adventures during his time (Lawson, 29). He was a hero to follow, a living legend. A future military member Ron Kovic remarked, “I couldn’t help but feel I was shaking hands with John Wayne” referring to the marine recruiters (Lawson, 28). They were driven to believe these were the heroes to emulate by becoming a soldier which led a lot of Americans to military boot camp. Many of the incoming soldiers headed into the military had high hopes to experience romantic affairs due to the rumored stories associated with Kennedy (Lawson, 29). The military officials created this righteous, heroic image in their heads by manipulating their opinions and thoughts.

This was an easy task for the officials as the soldiers were very young and naive. The average age of the American combatant in Vietnam was 19.2 years as compared with 26 years for the soldier in World War II (Lawson, 27). These soldiers were said to have had their happy childhoods replaced by Vietnam (Beidler, 147). These young adults had their college and high school educations interrupted to go fight in a war (Pratt). At this time, more children and

teenagers were attending school than ever before as the American educational system was reaching out to embrace greater numbers (Jason). The education most of these teenagers had would have been seen as a benefit in the eyes of a soldier from past wars. However, this background of being educated allowed them to have a better understanding of the horrors they were committing in Vietnam.

These conditions the soldiers were under prior to the war led to many changes in the literature produced as a byproduct, including the increased amount and author demographic. The soldiers' educated backgrounds gave them the equipment they needed to turn their experiments into literary documents as they returned home (Jason). Because of this, the literature about Vietnam had authors who had actually experienced it (Sitikoff). Many other wars had authors writing about them that were not even alive during it (Sitikoff). This was a huge positive for the literature. Many of the returning soldiers also went back to earn graduate degrees in various writing programs (Pratt). Tim O'Brien is a great example of a veteran author as he was drafted in 1968 and then sent to Vietnam in 1969 (Farrell). O'Brien was highly educated with a college degree (Farrell). His first book, published in 1973, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, discusses the conflicted moral sense of the soldiers due to their high ideals heading in and the reality once they were there (Lopez). A theme brought up in many works.

Many others who did not earn degrees in writing programs still came home and wrote. They were able to do this due to their somewhat educated backgrounds. This also led to the increase of authors who actually experienced the reality of the war (Sitikoff). However, since they did not have the extended education on writing, many of them turned to poetry (Ehrhart). This form of literature is simpler to tackle than writing a novel or a large work. Vietnam produced an impressive body of poems, whereas Korea produced almost nothing at all (Ehrhart).

“Winning Hearts and Minds” is an example of a volume of poetry (Ehrhart). The poems in this collection are “carried by raw emotion alone” and lack skill and polish which seemed to be evident in lots of poetry from this era (Ehrhart). Most of these soldiers knew little about poetry; they were just so hurt and bitter from their misconceived experience and needed to let it out, similar to the authors of other forms of literature.

During the War

The soldiers also experienced many new aspects during the war. The first aspect distinctly different than previous wars was the setting and style of fighting. The landscape of Vietnam consisted mostly of jungles and mountains (Puster). The American military’s advanced technology did not help in this terrain. In this unfamiliar setting, there were also booby traps, mines, and fox holes that brought about a great sense of uncertainty (Farrell). There were also “no clear arenas of battle” (Farrell). The battles seemed endless, “Nothing in the war. . . ever really began. . .and nothing in the war ever really ended” (Beidler, 3). This threw in an element of constant confusion. The goal in this war was not to gain land or win battles. The U.S. military could not measure those goals. So the strategy was to kill as many people as possible, to get as high of a body count as the soldiers could (Killian). As a result of this style of fighting, the soldiers killed many innocent victims, including women and children.

This chaos, confusion, and uncertainty along with the emotions of killing innocent victims were translated into the literature in many ways. The first way included the authors using forms that first appear confusing, chaotic, or ambiguous to the readers (Farrell). Many authors used this form, because in their minds that’s how they thought about the war (Farrell). It was a chaotic mess that came out on paper. This form used choppy sentence structures, a mix of what actually happened and what they perceived, and flashbacks (Killian). Critic Lloyd Lewis states

that as a result of this form the reader should be “obliged to live the soldier, adrift in an alien universe in which the familiar landmarks have disappeared” (Farrell).

The other way included a different kind of language that appeared. This language is said to “require the use of a glossary” (Pratt). The soldiers called the enemies “the bad guys” and friendly troops “the little guys” (Beidler, 15). Between themselves, they also had nicknames; no one was called their real names except maybe an officer or upper officials (Beidler, 9). These nicknames were of course used in the literature along with other creative terms and lots of profanity (Pratt). Nobody died in Vietnam. They were “dinged, waxed, zapped, greased, lit up, blown away” (Beidler, 6). The soldiers did not want to make sense of the reality so they renamed the actions and people to make it less personal and emotional. This chaotic form and type of language that was evident in the literature coming out of Vietnam was a result of the psychological inability to comprehend and make sense of the soldiers’ experiences.

Another aspect during the war that affected the soldiers was the confusion surrounding their involvement in the war. No one could seem to justify the U.S. getting involved. America was alone in this war, as many of its allies opposed U.S action. The citizens at home were leaning more anti-war than they ever have in the past. In World War II, the military knew exactly why they were there; Hitler was a threat to every country. The soldiers in Vietnam were unclear of exactly what they were fighting for, so it was more difficult for them to justify what they were doing. The nature of the actions did not change. The way they were perceived by the soldiers performing them did. The citizens at home began to protest and speak out. In 1970, the National Guard shot four students of Kent State University who were participating in a demonstration against the war. This increased tensions across the board and made it more difficult for the soldiers to justify and understand what they were doing. (Puster)

This confusion around America's involvement deepened the soldiers' disillusionment which transferred directly into the literature they produced. Anti-war literature was produced in greater numbers and more significance for the first time. A large group of poetry is classified as "political protest poems" (Pratt). These poems were usually written by soldiers and then edited by established poets. The first significant protest volume came about in 1966 and was titled *A Poetry Reading against the Vietnam War* (Pratt). The themes in this collection were similar to other anti-war poems and include moving from innocence to experience, the political policies, reasoning, and affirmation of faith (Minzesheimer and Bowles). These themes were considered rare in war literature before Vietnam (Minzesheimer and Bowles). Poems along with novels, short stories, and movies also did not have the general feeling of "we're all in this together" like World War II (Minzesheimer and Bowles). The feeling presented more of the question "Are you a hawk or a dove? Are you for or against the war?" (Minzesheimer and Bowles). This feeling is evident in many works and allows the reader to really see how conflicting this war was.

During the war, the public was informed of what was happening over in Vietnam daily. This is a huge aspect that differs from all other wars. The public was aware of what was going on due to the fact that this was the first televised war (Killian). People saw the horrors of war in their own homes; it was death and destruction (Killian). The media had a huge role in reversing the opinions of the citizens against the war (Puster). Journalists were also sent over to observe and report back to their respective magazines, newspapers, and news stations (Lopez). These stories were published as soon as possible and broadcasted immediately (Lopez). These journalists portrayed a completely different war than the one politicians and generals were describing to the citizens (Lopez). This created a "credibility gap" between what was happening

in Vietnam and what was being relayed to the American public about it (Lopez). The citizens were hungry for the truth, and the journalists were feeding them.

Since the people at home wanted the truth, the authors had the privilege to not keep anything out of their books. The public would not have been content with literature that told the glory of the war (Killian). They knew the truth; the war was not anywhere near glorious. The audience these writers were creating for wanted insights on the exact experiences the soldiers had, blood, guts and all (Killian). A poem entitled "To Sergeant Rock" explores the idea that being in Vietnam for one year will result in aging ten years (Killian). The sergeant does not talk about the glory a soldier will receive for fighting, instead he dives right in and tells them the prime of their life is behind them (Killian). The truths are revealed in other works of literature as well. The brutally graphic images that were usually kept out were now conveyed through the authors' words (Farrell). The authors also uncovered the actual atrocities committed by the Viet Cong and themselves, the American Soldiers (Farrell). The public wanted the reality, and the soldiers had no difficulty in giving it to them.

The journalists sent over brought about another change in the world of literature. These journalists chose to highlight the uncertainty and chaos they were observing and experimented with various writing styles that became known as New Journalism (Puster). These reporters mixed observations and interviews with fictional techniques, creating a new way to tell the story of Vietnam (Puster). Michal Herr was one of these writers, and he felt the traditional ways of reporting were not adequate for the Vietnam War (Puster). Herr realized he could not just write a monthly column like he had intended to (Puster). He had a goal to get the truth which the official press conference would not help him attain, so he collected information based on the military officials and press conferences but added to it with his own interviews, conversations, and

rumors (Puster). This resulted in his novel entitled *Dispatches* where the grunts, or common foot soldiers, do most of the talking (Lopez). These grunts spoke the language of survival amid unthinkable chaos and destruction (Lopez). The line between fact and fiction cannot be deciphered, a technique that was a hit and picked up by many other soldier authors.

The Aftermath of the War

As the soldiers returned home, they faced many aspects that were not expected. First of all, there was no support or help for the transition that needed to be made from the citizens or the government (Ehrhart). The VA benefits were a paltry disgrace and the little that was offered had to be fought for tooth and nail (Ehrhart). The second significant difference from other wars was that there were no welcome home parades (Sitikoff). “Americans seemed to shun, if not denigrate, the 2 million-plus Americans who went to Vietnam” (Sitikoff). Due to this hostile environment, the soldiers felt no sense of accomplishment. Instead of being proud, they blamed themselves (Sitikoff). The last difference was that Vietnam had a one-year tour of duty (Puster). This meant that soldiers arrived in Vietnam alone and then went home alone. The idea of a team or a group of men fighting together never seemed to be established (Puster). The soldiers were alone and being alone in the transition back to civilian life was agonizing for them. Many veterans eventually made the transition, but “more Vietnam veterans committed suicide after the war than had died in it” (Sitikoff).

Due to the differing post war experiences, the literature was affected in three major ways. First, there were many more works of literature produced (Ehrhart). This can be traced significantly to the one-year tour of duty. Since soldiers were constantly returning, there were always works being produced (Ehrhart). By the time one author was done writing, another one would return home and produce another piece. Secondly, there were more memoirs produced

than any other war (Killian). The American public saw a lot with World War II, but even more with Vietnam (Killian). World War II veterans returned home and were automatically seen as heroes. Vietnam veterans were not, so they turned to paper to try and let people know that they were still good guys (Killian). The veterans also wanted to tell the citizens exactly what they encountered every single day (Killian). Lastly, the themes surrounding these works focused on anti-heroism and anti-war (Ehrhart). These authors rarely had anything good to say about their experiences or the war in general. This came as a result of the horrific treatment from the citizens and the government (Ehrhart).

The length and result of the war also had drastic effects on the soldiers. America's military involvement in the war lasted approximately twelve years (Puster). As time passed throughout those twelve years, it became obvious that even to "the most naïve 18-year-old that the war was going nowhere" (Ehrhart). Then to end the war, a cease-fire was formally agreed upon in 1973 (Puster). However, two years passed before the last troops were withdrawn (Puster). The last two years particularly dragged on with little action allowing the soldiers more than enough time to think about their predicament. The questions of who, why and for what resurfaced with no answers in sight. The war was also classified as a loss for the Americans. It was hard for them to accept after "having won two World Wars, with wealth and technology at their command and a brimming confidence in their ability to get the job done" (Puster). The citizens needed someone to blame, and unfortunately the disillusioned soldiers at the bottom of the military food chain were their targets.

The length of the war could also be cited for the outburst of the memoirs. Phillip Caputo, a Vietnam veteran author, remarked "I came home from the war with the curious feeling that I had grown older than my father, who was then fifty-one. It was as if a lifetime of experience had

been compressed into a year and a half . . .” (Lawson, 33). Those veterans had a lifetime of experience to tell the world about so it was no surprise they turned to paper and pen (Killian). The defeat the Americans experienced was also portrayed into many pieces of literature. Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July* begins as the author’s experience is coming to an end in Vietnam (Beidler, 158). A large focus in the book is on the pain the loss of the war brought upon the nation (Beidler, 158). A decrease of pride and confidence in the nation and its government swept the country. Since many of the citizens blamed the soldiers, many of them took to paper to address their feelings toward this (Sitikoff). It was also a way for them to point out that they were really just taking orders from a higher power, and that the higher power is where the blame should be placed (Sitikoff).

The Vietnam War was a disappointment for America. In fact, the war is commonly cited as “the most disastrous of all America’s undertakings over the whole two hundred years of its history” (Ehrhart). However, the production of literature is highly prominent. This literature that was produced provided a whole new world of insights on war. Every war has its own body of literature; hence the genre of war literature, but Vietnam is a step ahead of the rest. The new experiences for the soldiers, despite not being good ones, are to be cited for these changes. The literature allows the reader a clearer picture of the realities of war. It shortens the distance from soldiers and the citizens at home. And the creation of the literature helped transition the courageous veterans back to civilian life and that is the best part, because no one else was there for them.

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