

## Week 5 Reading Questions: America and War

I want to begin our readings on war with a quote from Michael Herr, whose non-fiction war reporting on Vietnam, *Dispatches*, remains one of the most famous books on war in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Near the end, after some gruesome stories and as honest a description as possible, he makes two statements you should keep in mind as you approach the readings:

First, discussing the stories people tell about war, he states that “War stories aren’t really anything more than stories about people anyway” (245).

Nearer the end, when his friend, Page, is asked to write a piece that takes “the glamour out of war,” he replies, ““Ohhhh, war is *good* for you, you can’t take the glamour out of that. It’s like trying to take the glamour out of sex, trying to take the glamour out of the Rolling Stones.’ He was really speechless, working his hands up and down to emphasize the sheer insanity of it. ‘I mean, you *know* that, it just *can’t be done!*’ We both shrugged and laughed, and Page looked very thoughtful for a moment. ‘The very *idea!*’ he said. ‘Ohhh, what a laugh! Take the bloody *glamour* out of bloody *war!*’” (248-49).

I start this week with Herr because, besides the fact that I almost assigned his book, his journalistic perspective offers an outlook on war that our readings may avoid. War stories are stories about people, true, but there is also a certain glamour to war that is hard to ignore, so keep this idea in mind while reading and see what the other authors think.

### General Questions:

What attitudes towards war emerge this week? Do the poets and story writers seem to have differing opinions? Are things more direct this week/more in your face?

Melville, “A Utilitarian View of the Monitor’s Flight” (750)

I originally had this poem down for Views of Science week, so it will act as a bridge into writings about war. In this poem about the Civil War, what aspect does Melville (the writer of *Moby Dick*, for the record) draw our attention to?

Formally, note the regular stanzas: does this change? How does each stanza assist the plot of the poem? What is this poem literally stating?

How important are symbols/images in this poem? Particularly in the last stanza, what point does Melville argue?

Emerson, “Concord Hymn” (594)

Emerson, a famous American writer and philosopher, will come back in the second half of our course, but for today we are concerned with this short poem. What does the title word, “hymn,” imply? Note that this poem was written for a specific occasion (on July 4, 1837) – does that change our perception of the poem?

Let’s look at each stanza:

S1: Note the ‘tense’ of the first stanza – to what historical event does Emerson refer?

S2: Time gets personified in the second stanza – what has happened to the evidence of past events?

S3: What is the goal of his present moment, in this stanza? What are they doing?

S4: Who is the “Spirit” in stanza four – a most sensible question might be, what does Emerson ask of this Spirit? What, ultimately, is the goal of this poem, as asked in the fourth stanza? [Hint: at what event is this poem performed/what are they putting up?]

Crane, “Do Not Weep, Maiden, for War is Kind” (1895)

Stephen Crane comes from the school of American Naturalism, writers who follow the romantics and attempt, through realistic depiction and honesty, to show the true state of man in the world – at the mercy of the earth’s forces, beaten and alone, and without much hope. Keep this in mind as you approach the following poem.

Formally, note that the poem has a regular stanza pattern: three stanzas of direct address (imperative case) and two stanzas of explanation. How do they add up to one meaning?

Throughout this poem, note the clear imagery Crane uses – what kind of impression do you think he seeks to leave on his audience?

Finally, if you are having trouble, it might be worth looking into the concept of irony. How exactly is war ‘kind’? To whom? Why should people stop weeping, exactly? Should they?

Twain, “The War Prayer” (1865)

This story by Twain almost works more like a poem, since it is clearly divided into short sections and relies heavily on imagery and symbolism. I’m going to take a ‘less is more’ approach to the questions here, since if nothing else this story seems to hit the reader over the head with a message (like propaganda?).

Can you find the three major parts of the story? How is each different?

What message does the “aged stranger” bring to the people of the town? How does he seek to get his point across?

How does the ending (the third, short section) complicate the meaning of the story? Where are you left in relation to the events in the story? Why are we left here, do you think?

Hemingway, “In Another Country” (1918)

As the novel we are reading for next week was written by Hemingway, I thought it was fitting to include him this week, in short form. Take a moment to check out his biography and get familiar with the themes of this piece.

The most famous contribution Hemingway made to 20<sup>th</sup> Century literature was through his style. His fiction takes the conventions of journalism and war reporting, with hard facts and clear description, and makes them literary. As he is famously quoted, “If a writer knows enough about what he is writing about, he may omit things that he knows. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one ninth of it being above water.” In other words, instead of telling you everything, he tells you just enough to leave you to puzzle out the meaning. With that introduction, let’s get to the story.

1847 – What is the setting of this story? What is our main character’s situation? What is the significance of the “machines,” to keep up the science theme from last week?

1848 – What is your sense of the description on this page? Do we get to know our narrator? What is the main problem that he and the other officers have to deal with?

1849 – What do we learn about medals and bravery here? How does his explanation of the major and his opinions complicate the story?

1850 – In the end, how does the situation of our narrator contrast to that of the major’s wife?

Note Hemingway’s description of human connection – how does the narrator respond when he

hears about the major's wife? This is an example of the 'iceberg' principle above – he tries to show us how people really act, not how they would like to act. How does this story end?  
General – How does this story manage to make a comment about war? What is that comment?

O'Brien, "On the Rainy River" (2103)

As our longest and most complex story of the week, take your time with this one. O'Brien presents this story as a personal narrative of the Vietnam War, so note that he names himself the teller and character. He is fairly clear about his motives for writing this story, but pay attention to how he tries to connect with his audience.

2103-2104 – What reasons does our author give for writing this story? How important is his use of the word "confession"? (Is his confession like Poe's narrator's confession in "Black Cat"?)

2105 – How would you characterize our narrator here? How does his discussion of courage and the setting he presents help us get to know him?

2106 – On this page, we learn about a draft notice and "a disassembly line": how do these details of his life show his situation?

2107-2109 – What are his motives for going or not going to war? Why can't he make a decision? Note the rhetorical devices used on 2109 to relay his experience of meeting the old man – does it help him to be so honest?

2110-2112 – How do the details of setting and character make us feel here? What sense does our narrator try to convey to us? Why can't he make a decision?

2112-2115 – In this section, we get the main, climatic moment of the story. How does his dilemma get worked out in this experience? In other words, how does O'Brien show us what he wants us, as readers to feel? How does the very long paragraph function on 2114?

2115 – In the end, is this just a story about the difficulty of courage? What does he want us to take away from the end of his tale of personal decision? How much of this story is about challenging normal ways of thinking?

### **General Comments:**

Do you think these readings on war have been different in quality or in motive from our other readings? Have they been more overt? Does a subject like war lead to different responses than a subject like religion? Or, how is war characterized (versus science, for instance)?