

## ROSEMARY HASKELL

### **War and Writing in the Undergraduate Literature Classroom: Modal Analysis and the Destabilization of the Soldier's Heroic and Idyllic Worlds**

#### **The Class: a Focus on Formalist Criticism**

Last year, I taught “War and Writing” as a sophomore-junior (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> year University) level literature course, mainly for the general student rather than the literature major. Our texts included poetry, drama, prose fiction and nonfiction, as well as that fiction/nonfiction/metafiction hybrid, Tim O’Brien’s collection of related stories about the Vietnam War, *The Things They Carried*. Paul Fussell’s landmark historical and literary-critical work, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, provided context not only for the study of World War I and its literature but also for all Anglo-American literary renditions warfare of the modern age: Joseph Heller’s 1961 satire, *Catch-22*; a selection of British World War I poets; Vera Brittain’s 1933 memoir about World War I, *Testament of Youth*; Emily Mann’s plays about World War II and Vietnam from the 1980s, *Annulla* and *Still Life* respectively; excerpts from Jack Coughlin’s 2005 Iraq war memoir *Shooter*; and an as-yet unpublished essay by Paul Crenshaw, *Military Days*, completed the list. A short

handbook of literary and critical terms, with explanations of different literary-critical perspectives, provided necessary back-up to classroom explanations of terminology and literary-critical method.<sup>1</sup>

At Elon University (North Carolina, USA), the literature classes for the nonspecialist student must teach standard literary terminology, and some introduction to mainstream literary critical or theoretical perspectives, with practice in their application. Various types of formalist, historicist, and mythic perspectives usually form the core of these perspectives. In using these critical methods, in “War and Writing,” we inevitably emphasised both the particularity (historicity) of the nature and experience of war, and its universal, archetypal qualities.

Class population was as follows: twenty-nine students, all except one within the usual 18-22 year-old age span of the typical American undergraduate; nineteen men, ten women; two men in ROTC or the Reserves, with one of them expecting deployment to Iraq in the near future. One man, slightly older—mid-twenties—was a refugee from the Balkan wars, with direct experience of civil war.

The course’s Anglo-American and chronological framework, stretching from 1914 to 2005, provided a manageable and cohesive historical, cultural and literary unit for study. This limited focus nevertheless illuminated the thematic and formal continuity and variation, between, say, Wilfred Owen’s treatment of the enemy (or Vera Brittain’s) from circa 1914-1918, and Jack Coughlin’s 2005 analysis in his Iraq memoir *Shooter* (or Tim O’Brien’s late 1980s Vietnam war story “The Man I Killed”). Our comparisons showed that some aspects of war do not change; but it was also clear to students that wars and their aftermaths shape their cultures, and are shaped by them, in different ways.

Authors, too, as products of their own time and place, write about war in historically—and culturally—determined ways. A type of formalist analysis, using modes, revealed the common ground, while historical criticism of various kinds obviously particularised each experience. This Anglo-American twentieth/twenty-first century framework obviously excludes earlier and nonwestern, perspectives on warfare, a gap that might be addressed fairly easily, if desired, as noted in the final section.

Classroom methods included short lecture, whole-class discussion, student-led discussion (run weekly by a different panel of three students with a prearranged topic), some Socratic question and answer with individual students, and in-class impromptu writings. These on-demand short essays were sometimes used as the basis for further discussion, either immediately or in the next class period. The class met three times a week, each session lasting seventy minutes. The semester is about fourteen and a half weeks, running in the Fall semester from the end of August to the beginning of December. Course requirements were: two 5-7 page papers of formalist and/or historical analysis; one 10-12 page paper exploring the relationship between genre, mode and the development of selected “war” themes; essay-examinations at mid-term and end of term; and the informal in-class essays and discussion leading mentioned above.

In what follows, I propose to focus on the interesting results of our use of modal analysis of the syllabus texts. By this, I mean the use of standard formalist patterns, based on modes—the romantic and epic hybrid, gothic, and pastoral—in order to show how this simple approach to several works illuminates connected facets of warfare and the experience of war. I have reserved the term genre for the principal types of literature—novel, short story, drama, essay, and poetry—while keeping “mode” to describe the

particular treatments occurring within each type: here, romance, epic, gothic and pastoral. In the course itself, we also examined uses of comedy and satire, but for the sake of brevity, I have here limited my focus. I conclude my analysis with brief evaluation of the course and considerations for its next iteration, in Fall 2006.

### **Four modes: or are they three?**

The romance paradigm, merging swiftly into epic and back again, has an obvious appeal for readers of books about war. Epic heroes, and heroes of romance, have careers of adventure, violence, rescue, deliverance, triumph and hardship. The winners (the heroes) go on journeys or quests; they defeat their enemies and emerge victorious, often returning home in glory, sometimes carrying the spoils of war. Classical and mediaeval examples abound. The epic, and then the romance, framework provided our class with a valuable focus on, and insights into, not only the soldier as individual questing hero, but also war's essential and defining relationship: the soldier and his enemy, the enemy he kills or is killed by. Joseph Campbell's analysis in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* was extremely useful in laying the groundwork for our application of the combined epic and romance paradigm, as was Paul Fussell's chapter "Myth, Ritual and Romance" in *The Great War and Modern Memory*.

Second, the gothic mode, with its emphases on terror, horror, the double, the ghost, the other worlds of the dead and half-dead, and its horror-story interest in the repulsive and mutilated body, shows how warfare transforms heroic warrior, friend and enemy alike, into alien, sometimes inhuman, form: ripe for rejection. Killer and killed, in gothic gloom, mutate into something other than the heroic warrior.

Finally, in this account of the course, the pastoral mode, in related fashion, illustrates the alienation not only of the soldiers themselves but of their whole “warlike” world from the “home country” of peace and normality. Paul Fussell’s telling analysis of war and its relationship to pastoral, in his chapter “Arcadian Recourse,” provided the essential base for our work here.

## **FORMALIST ANALYSIS OF SELECTED TEXTS**

### **Epic and Romance: Soldier as Questing Hero But Returning Outcast**

Paul Fussell’s discussion of “Myth, Ritual and Romance” in *The Great War and Modern Memory* was an excellent starter to class discussion of the persistence of ancient archetypes of epic and romance into the modern literature of war. He examines the relevance, for example, of the text of John Bunyan’s quest story *Pilgrim’s Progress* to the World War I soldier’s actual experiences and to the literary renditions of this experience: “Possessing so significant a first name, the artillery subaltern Christian Creswell Carver was in a special position to imagine himself re-enacting *Pilgrim’s Progress*,” writes Fussell, proceeding to quote from Creswell’s letter home.<sup>2</sup>

I also found Joseph Campbell’s epic-romance paradigm, from his *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, easily accessible to my students as a base for this modal type of formalist analysis of our texts.<sup>3</sup> Campbell’s three divisions of the hero’s quest or journey—Departure, Initiation, and Return—with their several subdivisions, were endlessly fascinating as patterns against which to measure the lives of the soldiers we read about.

Simple and generalisable facts with places in Campbell's framework emerged quickly for students as they examined our several accounts of war. Under Campbell's heading "Departure," for example, we find that soldiers, whether volunteers or draftees, must leave home; they may even "refuse the call." They must "cross the first threshold." This crossing may take them to the world of training camps and then the world of battle. Under his second heading "Initiation," these same men must prepare to be tested; they must dwell in this alien world. They will be tested in battle. Under his third heading, "Return": if the soldiers triumph—if they do not die—they return home; as returning warriors, they must re-enter the home world, ideally to resume their former lives. As heroic fighters, their return may be dramatically successful. But Campbell's motif of the returning hero as "Master of Two Worlds" (his fifth subheading under the "Return") is particularly suggestive and poignant in the contrasting light of the many "returned veterans" stories which we read.<sup>4</sup>

Three of our texts indeed examine the returned veteran's, or ex-serviceman's, status in some detail: Tim O'Brien's story of Norman Bowker's return home in "Speaking of Courage," Emily Mann's study of Vietnam veteran Mark's traumatic re-entry into civilian life in her play *Still Life*, and Vera Brittain's account, in *Testament of Youth*, of her own return from nursing on the Western Front, all show the relevance of the epic-romance pattern as a benchmark for measuring the impact of war on its participants.

Far from being "masters of two worlds," returning soldiers in these books are at a loss, out of place, and often ignored or treated with silence, or with hostility. They are unable to regain a foothold in their old worlds, let alone be masters of two. Far from being like Homer's Odysseus, returning to regain control of his palace and kingdom in

Ithaca, and to repossess his faithful and beautiful wife Penelope, these homecomers encounter emptiness, puzzled and silent families, indifferent women, and lives as perpetual outsiders. Mark's encounter with his parents on his return from Vietnam is powerfully rendered:

I walked in the door and set everything down.  
I was home.  
My dad looked at me, my mom looked at me.  
I sat down. Said:  
'Could I have some coffee?'  
That's when my mother started raggin' on me  
About drinking coffee.  
The whole thing broke down.<sup>5</sup>

Similar examples of indifference, and even hostility, occur in Brittain and O'Brien. Vera Brittain, for example, finds that women returning from war have an even more chilling homecoming than men. Back in Oxford after experiencing the "big push" of Spring 1918 in a field hospital, she finds that her shattered psyche is a matter of complete unconcern to her fellow students and her teachers. Andrea Peterson's article, "Shell-Shocked in Somerville: Vera Brittain's Post Traumatic Stress Disorder," helped my students to realise that women as "returning heroes" may get a double dose of rejection, mainly because neither they nor others acknowledge the authenticity of female war experience, nor recognise their postwar suffering as the real thing: genuine "shell shock."<sup>6</sup> O'Brien's returned Vietnam veteran, Norman Bowker, in "Speaking of Courage," is so far from being the "Master of Two Worlds" on his homecoming that he can only imagine the heartfelt conversation he and his father have on their shared experience of war. The conversation simply does not happen, except inside Norman's head.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Combat Relationship: Enemies and Friends**

Soldiers, as potentially heroic questing figures, in literary and real realms, have the typical warrior's task: to kill or be killed. In class, we asked "How does each author present this central motif of war, the killer/killed dyad? Does he or she explore what it means to be on one or both sides of this pairing?" We found that this key relationship yielded much of interest when analysed within the epic-romantic framework in mind. A few examples follow.

Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting," Tim O'Brien's "The Man I Killed," and Jack Coughlin's *Shooter* all address the "enemy" relationship in a military context, while Vera Brittain observes the injured and dying enemy soldiers in "The German Ward" as their nurse. As a variation of this motif, we also examined the phenomenon of "officer guilt" (sometimes simply "comrade guilt") when the dead or dying man is one of your own, not the enemy. Perhaps your carelessness or essential helplessness contributed to or even caused his death? Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est," and "The Sentry;" O'Brien's title story, "The Things They Carried," and the Snowden episode in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* illustrate this particular dynamic.

#### **a) An unequal fight**

Romance, in its medieval and renaissance epic-hybrid form, provides touchstones for analysis of the relationship between mortal enemies. The hero of romance and epic must of course overcome obstacles impeding his path to the great goal; often, this means destroying an enemy, human or monstrous. The gallant epic fighter engages traditionally in hand-to-hand combat, on equal terms, more or less, as did Aeneas against Turnus, or Achilles against Hector, for example.

The killing scenes described by O'Brien and Coughlin, however, depart from this model by introducing profound inequality between the combatants. The enemy, in these illustrations, simply does not have much of a chance against the soldier-killer. For example, the narrator in O'Brien's "The Man I Killed" and "Ambush"—two related stories—throws a grenade from cover at a Vietcong who walks unwittingly past him, along a path through the misty forest. Jack Coughlin the sniper sets his guns sights on a distant body, brought close up only through his telescopic sights. His victim does not see his killer and is unaware of his vulnerability: "He was totally ignorant of his precarious position, standing perfectly still for a sniper, so I again squeezed the trigger and this time watched as the bullet exploded from my rifle,... It slammed the soldier completely around, a sure-kill shot."<sup>8</sup>

Such divergence from the romantic-epic paradigm of the duel, the equal combat, to stress unevenness, is thematically complex. It may maximise the soldier-killer's guilt or produce a kind of bravado of indifference through its ease, as is the case in Coughlin's story: "Mutt and Jeff [his 'twin' victims] were already history, worthy of no more thought whatever."<sup>9</sup> The enemy "doesn't have a chance" in these sample scenes.

Conversely, O'Brien's soldier is struck by remorse and grief—represented in "The Man I Killed" by his silence and staring, in response to his friend Kiowa's attempts at reassurance.<sup>10</sup> He killed the "young man" who "came out of the fog," and "seemed at ease... moving without any hurry up the center of the trail."<sup>11</sup> The killing was too easy; the aftermath is a counter-weight of guilt and sorrow.

Curiously, however, we found that in many of our texts, this imbalance between combatants is restored more pervasively by a recurrent motif of erotic closeness between the two fighters.

**b) An erotic closeness restores the balance**

The eroticism which is at least implied by the physical closeness in the hand-to-hand combat of traditional epic and romance is tapped, but developed in some of our texts in a new way. The two enemies are brought mysteriously close to each other: they are as close as, or closer than, lovers locked in an embrace.

Coughlin, the marine sniper in Iraq, for example, is brought into unusual and intimate contact with his victim, through his telescopic sights. The two of them briefly inhabit their own world, in lover-like closeness and isolation:

He thought he was safe.... But through my scope, he appeared in full color, as if on my private television set .... He wore a green field uniform that blended well in his shadowy hideaway. He had a thick mustache. The huge battle raging around us no longer mattered to me, for he and I were now in a special zone, all by ourselves.<sup>12</sup>

Coughlin experiences his victim's life, however briefly, with him. Nearly ninety years earlier, Owen's poem, "Strange Meeting," famously does the same thing, bringing killed and killer together in a ghostly underworld: "I am the enemy you killed, my friend" and ending "Let us sleep now."<sup>13</sup> The two men, we infer, lie down peacefully to sleep next to each other, again in their own world: this time, the world of the dead, the universal underworld of mythology.

The Tim O'Brien character-as-killer, in "The Man I Killed," achieves closeness to his victim by essentially becoming him through a long imagined monologue of

identification with, and about, the young Vietcong's life. The U.S. soldier identifies completely with the young Vietcong, fictionalising an entire life, attitude and point of view, and imagining his opposition to the war, his reluctance to fight, his educational ambitions, and private romantic life. Physical closeness is also achieved, when the killer in effect becomes the dead man's lover, through his close subjective gaze at the dead man: "The nose was undamaged. The skin on the right cheek was smooth and fine-grained and hairless. Frail-looking, delicately boned, the young man would not have wanted to be a soldier and in his heart would have feared performing badly in battle."<sup>14</sup> Only a lover would get close enough to experience these bodily details with such intensity of vision.

An illuminating allotrope of these unequal, but eroticised, battlefield scenes appears in Vera Brittain's memoir of her work as a First World War nurse, *Testament of Youth*. As she nurses wounded enemy soldiers in the "German ward" in a British field hospital just behind the lines, at Etaples in France, she is in an extremely powerful position in comparison with the severely, sometimes mortally, wounded men in her care. The enemy soldiers call out to her, beg for help, which she has the power to bestow upon them. "The cries of the many delirious patients combined with the ravings of the five or six that we always had coming round from an anaesthetic to turn the hut into pandemonium.... Cries of 'Schwester!' 'Kamerad!' sounded all day."<sup>15</sup> Her relationship with them is profoundly unequal, as it is for the combatants described above. Again, however, the intimate contact she has with those who perhaps a day earlier were trying to kill her own friends and relatives, bizarrely restores that unequal balance, and has its own erotic component. Handling the enemies' bodies, unresisted, parodies or shadows the

lover's approach to the beloved, as she perceives his beauty. Brittain describes, for example, "a doomed twenty-year old boy, beautiful as the young Hyacinth in spite of the flush on his concave cheeks and the restless, agonized biting of his lips, [who] asked me one evening in a courteous whisper how long he had to wait before he died."<sup>16</sup>

Such closeness exposes a paradox of the principles of warfare: aren't we supposed to stay away from our enemy—except, of course, when we're trying to get close enough to kill him? As a nurse, of course, Brittain tries to save her patients' lives; but their enemy status brings her (and them) into alignment with the combat scenes describe earlier, where the killer's real or imagined closeness to his victim provokes tenderness, and sometimes guilt.

### **Gothic: Soldiers as ghosts, doubles, and repulsive objects**

A second mode, gothic, never far away from the horror-show depictions of battle, overlaps and interweaves with some writers' use of romance/epic motifs. This overlap reinforces the especially close relationship of killer and victim, outlined above, who in gothic mode are represented as doubles of each other. Owen's soldiers in the underworld recognise their sameness. One says to the other, "Let us sleep now," presumably in amity and harmony, since there is no reason now to see a difference between them.<sup>17</sup> Another brief example occurs in Isaac Rosenberg's poem "Break of Day in the Trenches," where English and German soldiers are, to the trench rat, identical, mere twins or doubles of each other. The rat scurries from one side to the other, indifferently.

Gothic mode, broad and varied as it is, proved useful to us as a further analytical tool. Gothic paradigms frame combatants variously as ghosts, zombies, and as repulsive

gory creatures. Vera Brittain, in *Testament of Youth*, gazing over the scene of the Etaples field hospital, “recognizes her world for a kingdom of death.”<sup>18</sup> She is, then, a kind of queen of the underworld, and her Persephone-like status reminds us that she too, though a nurse and not a fighter, lives imprisoned by the bonds of war. When the war ends, she will perhaps return to the upper world—where life, not death, reigns. In March 1918, with the German offensive under way, she finds, “France was certainly a queer haunted country... peopled by ghosts and bogies,” with soldiers telling their nurses the most amazing ghost and magic stories to explain their own bizarre experiences under the dislocating terror of unprecedented military assault.<sup>19</sup>

It is but a short step from the ghostly and even magical atmosphere of the perpetual battlefield to the representation of the wounded soldier as an alien, otherworldly, even repulsive creature. The gothic net is a wide one. For example, Wilfred Owen’s speaker, in “Dulce et Decorum Est,” sees one of his men dimly, through his gas-mask, in the midst of a gas attack, as an otherworldly creature, “[a]s under a green sea, I saw him drowning.”<sup>20</sup> A moment later that same man becomes a thing of horror, a disgusting physical specimen, coughing and retching as he rides on “the wagon that we flung him in.” In “The Sentry,” also by Owen, the blinded sentry’s eyes—again viewed by his helpless officer—are comic-horrific, “huge-bulged like squids.”<sup>21</sup>

This gothic analysis or framework also throws into relief “officer guilt,” or, perhaps, “comrade guilt,” as a mutation of the enemy combatant relationship. Owen’s speaker, in “Dulce et Decorum Est,” refers to his relentless dreams of the gassed soldier. O’Brien’s Jimmy Cross, in the opening story of the volume, blames himself for the death of one of his men: if only he, Lt. Cross, had not been day-dreaming about a girl back

home, perhaps this death might have been avoided?<sup>22</sup> The ghosts—and the terrifying bodily images—of the dead persist, as they do for Emily Mann’s protagonist Mark in her documentary drama *Still Life*, whose guilt about his old army buddy R.J. extends to their postwar lives. R. J. dies in a bank robbery, and Mark cannot forget. “We were doing the war all over again./That was the last time I saw him alive” Mark says of their postwar drug crimes.<sup>23</sup>

Yossarian—Heller’s bombardier in *Catch-22*—has the quintessential gothic experience as he bends over his junior crewmate Snowden’s destroyed body. As Paul Fussell’s analysis of this scene shows, irony is the prevailing mode: things are always worse than you think.<sup>24</sup> Reversal of expectation is just around the corner. The gothic formalist paradigm helped us to build on Fussell’s insights. The surprise gruesomeness of Snowden’s disembowelled body to a “rescuer” who expected a minor and salvable wound, extends the representation of “officer guilt” at the death of “your own man.” Snowden has become repulsive, just as the soldier in Owen’s poem—something to be shunned, something monstrous: “Snowden kept shaking his head and pointed at last, with just the barest movement of his chin, down toward his armpit.... Yossarian ripped open the snaps of Snowden’s flak suit and heard himself scream wildly as Snowden’s insides slithered down to the floor in a soggy pile and just kept dripping out.”<sup>25</sup> Another thread is added to our understanding of what death in war can mean. And, like a ghost, the dying and now repellent and disgusting Snowden haunts Heller’s complex narrative, recurring periodically in ever-more-detailed form, as the novel progresses.

The injured comrade-soldier turned up repeatedly, in our texts, as a repulsive object. Ivor Gurney’s First World War poem “To His Love” frames him thus:

Cover him, cover him soon!  
 And with thick-set  
 Masses of memoried flowers—  
 Hide that red wet  
 Thing I must somehow forget<sup>26</sup>

The gothic motif is the more telling through contrast with the “set-up,” which is pastoral love-elegy. Another example: Mark cannot forget the look and smell of civilian dead in Mann’s play *Still Life*; and Norman Bowker—or Tim O’Brien—are haunted by the drowning of Kiowa in the “shit field” of Vietnam. There’s a gallery of repellent physical portraits—the most basic of gothic-turned-horror story (or movie) elements—in most writing about war. It is worth asking what it all means. One meaning is exclusion, the other side of the coin to rejection. We recoil from horrific physical images, and from the warlike world which is responsible for them. Rejection, and exclusion, are further explained and explored within a pastoral framework, the third of the formalist perspectives used in the course.

### **Pastoral: Contrasts, Exclusions, and Failed Retreats**

Examining war writers’ uses of the pastoral mode broadens the focus from combatants to their arena: the battlefield in a concrete sense and the world of war in a more abstract sense. Put simply, pastoral’s inherent contrasts—country against city—make it a useful mode of expression of the differences between war and peace.

Paul Fussell notes that war is, for many writers, the opposite of pastoral: “If the opposite of war is peace, the opposite of experiencing moments of war is proposing moments of pastoral.”<sup>27</sup> Pastoral, as we know, is about the idyllic countryside and its implied opposite: the corrupt city. Writers on pastoral, as Fussell reminds us, emphasise

the ancient mode's exclusionary and contrastive qualities.<sup>28</sup> While it is true that the poetry of the ancient pastoralists, Theocritus, Virgil, Bion, Moschus—the idyllic arcadian variety of pastoral—may function allegorically in that the events of the pastures may parallel those of the city, the city is always kept at a decisive distance.

We found that in our selected writings about war, both fiction and nonfiction, the pastoral mode is frequently deployed, even if only fleetingly. Sometimes, the pastoral is idyllic and arcadian. In other works, the Georgic, rather than the idyllic, version creates a framework for the war's meaning. For example, Edward Thomas's First World War poem "As the Team's Head Brass" plays on a Virgilian swords-into-ploughshares motif to bring the agricultural world into relationship with the wartime one. He then puts the motif into reverse, to show ploughmen becoming soldiers, so that their country work is left undone: "The blizzard felled the elm whose crest/I sat in.... /The Ploughman said 'When will they take it away?'" and the reply is "'When the war's over.'"<sup>29</sup>

Everybody knows, of course, that August 1914 in England was an exceptionally hot sunny month and that the summer as a whole before war was declared on 4 August, was memorably beautiful—green, flower-scented, shaded by magnificent trees. Or, if they do not remember it, or do not believe it, they accept the image as an explanation of the contrast between before and after, pastoral idyll of peace and the city of war, a green England on the brink of the gun-and bayonet-filled abyss. "Summer of 1914" has entered the lexicon of cultural and political analysis.

We found many examples of pastoral, used pervasively or incidentally. A few examples make the point. An early episode in Vera Brittain's memoir is a long description of speech day, or "graduation," at her brother's school in July 1914. It is

couched in idyllic pastoral mode: warm sun, blue skies, the scented rose garden where her love for Roland, her brother's schoolmate, blossoms. Thus Brittain, like many others, frames the calm before the storm: "Looking back upon those three radiant days of July 1914, it seems to me that an ominous stillness, an atmosphere of brooding expectation must surely have hung about the sunlit flower gardens and the shining green fields."<sup>30</sup> The fast-approaching war, in retrospect, occupies the place of the urban opposite to the pastoral scene of peace.

Such contrast prepares us for the way that many authors exploit the fact that battles and military action often occur in idyllic surroundings, reminding us of war's ability to violate a pristine world. Fussell's discussion of Edmund Blunden's work makes this point clearly: "Here [in *Undertones of War*] an appreciation of theater joins a fondness for pastoral to project the understanding of war as a travesty—comic this time—of nature."<sup>31</sup> *Memoirs of the first day on Somme* (1 July 1916) mention the beautiful summer weather and the singing of the birds: at the time, and later, a sharp "bright line" between the peacefulness of nature and the slaughter that was to come, and was known to be coming. Isaac Rosenberg's poem about soldiers coming back to camp at night, "Returning, We Hear the Larks," also explores this duality: "Death could fall from the air as easily as song/But song only fell/On our upturned faces."<sup>32</sup> To appreciate war, one appreciates the beauty of nature; and to appreciate nature, one contemplates its opposite: deadly attack.

But writers about war do not place it in a beautiful natural setting for the sole and simple purpose of what Fussell calls "ironic contrast" though this is indeed a powerful means of understanding wartime life's distance from "ordinary" life. Pastoral context

also, as Fussell admirably demonstrates, highlights a more detailed picture of the complex dislocation of values, beliefs and attitudes caused by war and war experience. Fussell's prime example of such dislocations is Isaac Rosenberg's 1916 poem "Break of Day in the Trenches," where the sign of war's impact on natural law is the unlovely primacy of the trench rat.<sup>33</sup> Rat has become king: men are "less chanced than [the rat] for life," which can travel freely between the trenches: an action which would mean death for humans.<sup>34</sup> Men have become the trench-dwelling subterranean creatures, crawling beneath the surface of the earth, at the mercy of new predators, while the normally fragile and transitory poppy described as resting behind the soldier's ear has at least as long a life expectancy as the man who wears it.

Other writers on our list analyse, through pathetic fallacy, the response of the natural world to the insult, and assault, of human warfare. Sometimes nature—in revenge—becomes the enemy of humans. Nature attacks those who violate it, as punishment. Sometimes those violators are shut out, not only from a home in nature, but from human society as well.

The *locus classicus* for these pastoral aspects of war experience is Wilfred Owen's poem, "Exposure," where angry nature turns against the soldiers out in the field: "Sudden successive flights of bullets break the silence./Less deathly than the air that shudders black with snow." The "east wind... knives us" and "Dawn [is] massing in the east her melancholy army." Later, the men in the field nostalgically imagine their homes, where "the innocent mice rejoice;" but, they realise, "on us the doors are closed/We turn back to our dying."<sup>35</sup>

The flexible and rewarding pastoral mode takes another turn in Heller's *Catch-22* and in O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story." Nature is sought by the soldier as refuge, cleanser, place of redeeming innocence: but it fails. The natural world is no longer available, in Romantic fashion, to purify the corrupt soul.

Joseph Heller, in *Catch-22*, by way of follow-up to Yossarian's terror and guilt at Snowden's death, uses a key pastoral image, the Garden of Eden's tree, to explore Yossarian's desire for redemption. Bombardier Yossarian, stripped of his clothes, is found hiding in the tree at Snowden's funeral. Trying to return to an edenic ultimate pastoral state, this Second World War would-be pre-lapsarian Adam wishes to escape his "officer guilt," in Snowden's horrific death. Abandoning his uniform, which was corrupted by Snowden's blood and guts, Yossarian refuses to take part in the funeral rites, refuses for a while to be a soldier in uniform. He also chooses to appear stark naked to receive his medal. His return to nature—a world of "not war"—cannot last, but it is part of Heller's general theme of Yossarian's flight from combat in particular, and an evil corrupt world in general. The tree, unfortunately for Yossarian, may be the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and provides no refuge for him. At the end of the novel, the hero Yossarian makes his "existential leap" away from war and into peace. The tree episode may be seen as part of the development of this personal ethical theme.

Tim O'Brien also chooses the tree as part of his depiction of another ghastly combat death. Curt Lemon, a soldier in Vietnam who is blown up by his own hand grenade which blasts his fragmented body up into the tree under which he had been playing, ends up as a gruesome garland of body parts for the tree. The gothic fruit of the tree is then "picked" by Lemon's comrades, who find themselves singing "Lemon Tree,"

as they do so.<sup>36</sup> Comedy and pastoral overlap, but the focus here is the post-lapsarian scene of the tree in the garden of Eden: the tree of knowledge after the apple has been eaten. Now, not even nature can be regarded as pure and innocent.

In a third example, we see O'Brien's returned veteran Norman Bowker trying to cleanse himself of the guilty memory of his friend Kiowa, who disappears into the Vietnamese shit field, "the village latrine," because, Bowker argues, he, Bowker, could not stand the thought of diving under the stinking muck to rescue his friend.<sup>37</sup> Bowker walks into the Midwestern lake on the 4 July; but the narrator lets us know that this cleansing act doesn't have the desired redemptive effect. Bowker ends by killing himself, we are told, just one page later.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

I have limited this assessment of the role of formalist analysis in the undergraduate literature classroom to only three modes, but, as noted earlier, we also examined comic and satiric treatments of war. *Catch-22*, Siegfried Sassoon's poetry, and parts of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* lent themselves well to such an approach. In addition, different kinds of historical criticism—mainly economic, sociological, and gender criticism—balanced our use of formalism.

Students were thus able, by applying both formalist and historical methods of criticism, to examine war and writing from perspectives which not only emphasised the persistence, even universality, of warfare and the world of war, but also its particularity and historicity.

Epic-Romance, Gothic, and Pastoral provided the means of analysis which led relatively inexperienced readers of poetry and prose to an understanding of some of the complexities of the combat experience: of what it means to have killing as your task; of what it means to be unable to leave the war behind; and of what it means to try to cross—and re-cross—the divide between the world of war and civilian life.

Such knowledge, at a time when American and British armed forces were engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan, seemed to me to be likely to attract special interest and attention. In terms solely of numbers, this assumption proved correct. The course started out over-enrolled, dropping back by four students as the first weeks unfolded. War, as a traditionally “male” topic, has the useful effect of drawing men to the mainly female discipline of English literature. In addition, some of my students, men and women, had friends and relatives in the armed forces; two of the men in the class were likely soon to be deployed to Iraq. Many students had older relatives who are Vietnam veterans, or Gulf War Veterans. One might say that for once, literature seemed important, interesting and particularly illuminating of topics that actually mattered, then and there, to the students. For the instructor, this was an unusual experience.

The end-of-semester written course evaluations from students provided me with some insights into their views of the course, but this limited information cannot yield too many broad generalisations. Almost all students enjoyed the class discussions, indeed the classroom activities generally. Almost all found the workload heavy and quite demanding, but many had chosen the course for its topic, and found it interesting and intriguing. The texts received generally favourable ratings, with the notable exception of Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth*, which was deemed boring and/or too long. Still, I

consider the book a valuable choice, not least because the core of the book—the woman’s traditional experience of war—is actually getting more common among American undergraduates. Even the boys may now be left behind while the girls are in Baghdad. I hope the students in fact reach this core of meaning, even though Brittain’s collage of letters, diaries and retrospective narrative may be too diffuse, even too feminine and “romantic,” for current undergraduate tastes.

Still, there will be some changes when the course is taught again. Included will be the new medium, the blog, and a non-western writer’s view of a war zone. One of our university’s undergraduate students—a woman—currently deployed in Iraq, is writing a blog of her experiences, posted on the university website. We will follow her text and find ways to incorporate the electronic medium and the new blog genre into our traditional literary framework. Since readers of the blog may respond to it, our literary work could become interactive, with students helping to create texts about the experience of war. Finally, excerpts from *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog From Iraq* by “Riverbend” will provide a print-version of this new medium and genre, analysing her civilian experiences of occupied and battle-torn Baghdad.<sup>39</sup>

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (London: Penguin Books, 1991); Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (London: Penguin Classics, 2005); Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1961); Emily Mann, *Annulla and Still Life*, in *Testimonies: Four Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997) 1-30, 31-132; Jack Coughlin and Casey Kuhlman, with Donald A. Davis, *Shooter: The Autobiography of a Top-Ranked Marine Sniper* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory*, 140-1.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1949), ix-x.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>5</sup> Mann, *Still Life*, 107.

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- <sup>6</sup> Andrea Peterson, “Shell-Shocked in Somerville: Vera Brittain’s Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” in Angela K. Smith, ed., *Gender and Warfare in the Twentieth Century: Textual Representations* (Manchester University Press, 2004) 33-52.
- <sup>7</sup> O’Brien, *Things They Carried*, 166-7.
- <sup>8</sup> Coughlin, *Shooter*, 126.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.
- <sup>10</sup> O’Brien, *Things They Carried*, 141-3.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.
- <sup>12</sup> Coughlin, *Shooter*, 86-7.
- <sup>13</sup> Wilfred Owen, “Strange Meeting” in Jon Silkin, ed., *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 206, lines 40 and 44.
- <sup>14</sup> O’Brien, *Things They Carried*, 141.
- <sup>15</sup> Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 378.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.
- <sup>17</sup> Owen, “Strange Meeting,” line 44.
- <sup>18</sup> Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 416.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.
- <sup>20</sup> Wilfred Owen, “Dulce et Decorum Est” in Silkin, ed., *First World War Poetry*, 192, line 14.
- <sup>21</sup> Wilfred Owen, “The Sentry” in Silkin, ed., *First World War Poetry*, 208.
- <sup>22</sup> O’Brien, *Things They Carried*, 23.
- <sup>23</sup> Mann, *Still Life*, 57.
- <sup>24</sup> Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory* 34-5.
- <sup>25</sup> Heller, *Catch-22*, 439.
- <sup>26</sup> Ivor Gurney, “To His Love” in Silkin, ed., *First World War Poetry*, 115, lines 16-20.
- <sup>27</sup> Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory*, 231.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.
- <sup>29</sup> Edward Thomas, “As the Team’s Head-Brass” in Silkin, ed., *First World War Poetry*, 99, lines 13-16.
- <sup>30</sup> Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 87.
- <sup>31</sup> Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory*, 261.
- <sup>32</sup> Isaac Rosenberg, “Returning, We Hear The Larks” in Silkin, ed., *First World War Poetry*, 220, lines 10-12.
- <sup>33</sup> Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory*, 252.
- <sup>34</sup> Isaac Rosenberg, “Break of Day in The Trenches” in Silkin, ed., *First World War Poetry*, 218, line 15.
- <sup>35</sup> Wilfred Owen, “Exposure” in Silkin, ed., *First World War Poetry*, 190, lines 1, 13, 16-17, 28-30.
- <sup>36</sup> O’Brien, *Things They Carried*, 78, 79.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 162ff.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 173, 177.
- <sup>39</sup> “Riverbend,” *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog From Iraq* (New York: Feminist Press, 2005).