

American Involvement in Vietnam



- Ho Chi Minh declares Vietnamese independence from France soon after end of WWII--in Sept. of 1945. War with France ensues.
- U.S., fearing the spread of communism during the Cold War period, supports French. By 1953, carries 40% of the cost of the war.
- 1954: French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. Geneva Accords temporarily divide Vietnam in half at the 17th Parallel. Elections to be held in two years.

American Involvement, cont.



- U.S. installs staunchly Catholic, anti-Communist Ngo Dinh Diem as President in South
- Diem becomes increasingly oppressive and brutal to Buddhist majority
- Late 1950's: development of Viet Cong in the South
- Strong Buddhist protests against Diem in early 1960's; Kennedy-approved coup in October of 1963

The American War in Vietnam



- Kennedy had been sending American “advisors”
- Johnson sends first American combat troops to Vietnam in 1965
- By mid-1967, U.S. has almost half a million ground troops in Vietnam
- 1968: Tet Offensive; My Lai Massacre
- 1969: Nixon approves secret bombings of Cambodia
- 1970: Shootings at Kent State
- 1973: Draft ends; last American troops leave Vietnam
- 1975: Fall of Saigon

Vietnam War Literature

Outpouring of Vietnam War literature and film begins in late 1970's

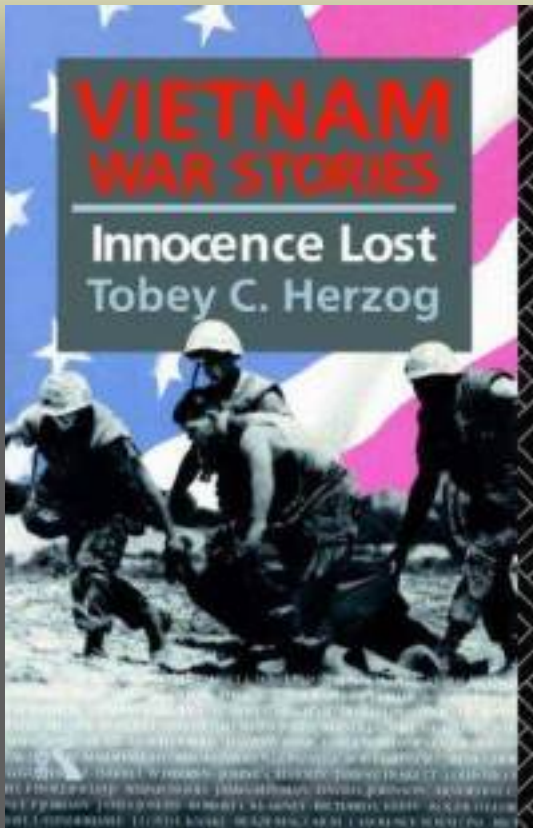
Early Literary Works

- Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976)
- Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977)
- Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977)

Early Films

- *Coming Home* (1978)
- *The Deer Hunter* (1978)
- *Apocalypse Now* (1979)

Literature of the Vietnam War



(from Tobey Herzog's
*Vietnam War Stories:
Innocence Lost*)

Some Questions:

- ➔ Were the experiences of combat veterans in Vietnam unique among wars, or are combat experiences pretty much similar across wars?
- ➔ Do Vietnam War writers present their experiences differently and using unique forms or are there continuities throughout modern war literature?

The Great War and Vietnam



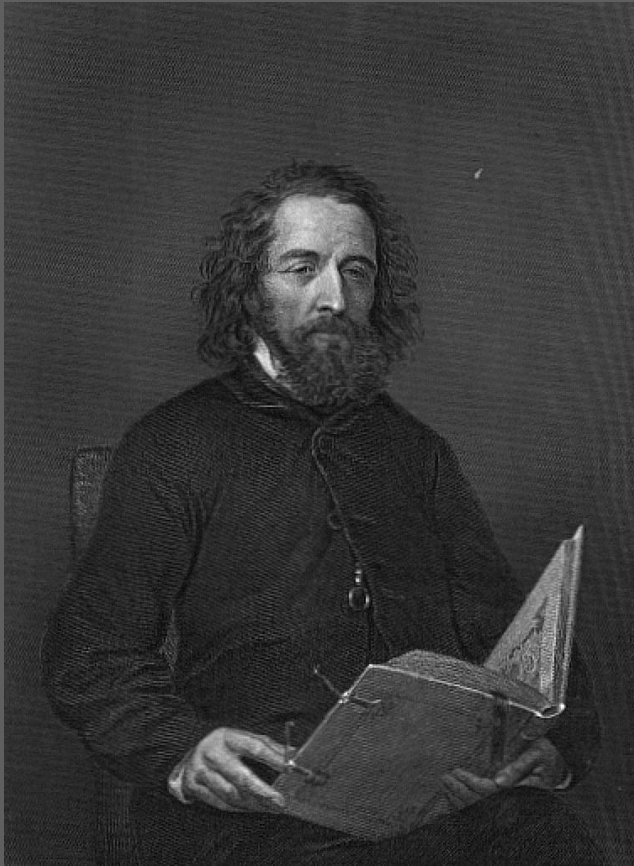
- British WWI literature shares much in common with Vietnam literature.
- Both wars changed their country's mythic self-perceptions.
- Both illustrate tension between romantic expectations of war and battlefield reality.

3-Part Structure

- ⇒ 1) The sinister or absurd or even farcical preparation for battle
- ⇒ 2) the unmanning experience of battle-- characterized by disenchantment and loss of innocence
- ⇒ 3) the retirement from the line to a contrasting scene, where there is time and quiet for consideration, meditation, and reconstruction.

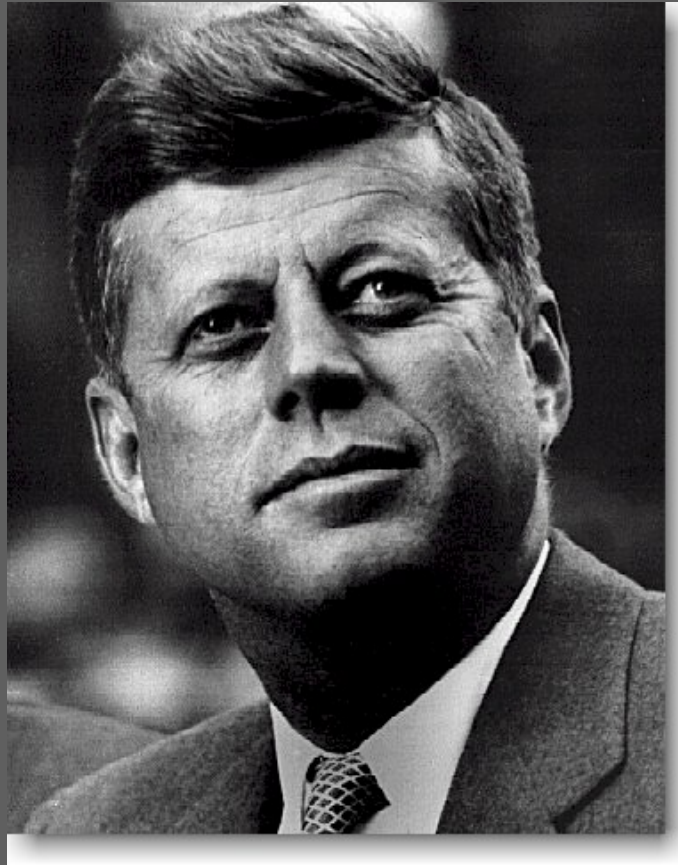


WWI and Vietnam, cont.



- ⇒ If literary romances (the poetry of Tennyson, etc.) were the sources of idealism for British soldiers in WWI, what were the sources of idealism for American soldiers going off to Vietnam?

President's Kennedy's “New Frontier”



Frontier



- ⇒ The American western frontier was officially closed in 1890 by the Superintendent of the Census.

Frontier Mythology

- ⇒ Yet, with Kennedy, this frontier idea could remain as a metaphoric landscape of challenges and possibilities. Vietnam could become the New Frontier.



Vietnam as a New Frontier



- ⇒ Indochina represented a frontier where Americans could return to the remembered virtues of their frontier heritage.

Frontier Mythology in Vietnam

- ⇒ Americans could once again leave the corruption of the city for the rigors and virtue of nature.
- ⇒ On this new frontier, though, Americans would protect rather than destroy the “dark” man.
- ⇒ It was a vision of redemption from the past.



The Green Berets



- ➔ The Green Berets or Army Special Forces became a leading symbol of the New Frontier.
- ➔ Kennedy dramatically increased their numbers.
- ➔ Similar to Western hero, yet also professionalized; comfortable in “civilized” world.

Western hero and Green Beret come together in figure of John Wayne.

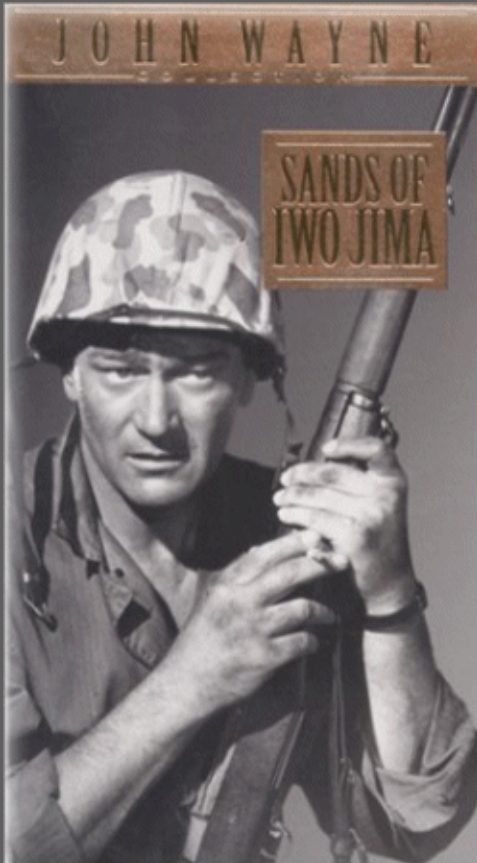


The Green Berets

- ⇒ Hollywood's (and Wayne's) 1967 version of Vietnam War.
- ⇒ John Wayne bought the rights and directed and starred in the movie.
- ⇒ President Johnson ordered the army to give whatever technical support he needed, and they did.
- ⇒ Ironically, despite the book's success, the film a failure (change in nation's perceptions of the war from 65-67.)



The “John Wayne Syndrome”



- ⇒ Vietnam generation the first true electronic-media generation.
- ⇒ Young soldiers conditioned by Hollywood’s sanitized and romanticized depictions of WWII.
- ⇒ Thus, much Vietnam literature mentions movies, John Wayne as particular influences.

John Wayne Syndrome, cont.

- ⇒ The name John Wayne entered the war vocabulary: “we did John Waynes” or “He John Wayned it.”
- ⇒ Perpetuated stereotypes of masculinity or what “real men” are.



What is the John Wayne Persona?

- ➔ He is someone who acts (rather than contemplates) and he delivers.
- ➔ He is a loner: doesn't depend on others because he can do it all himself.
- ➔ He has the equipment to beat the bad guys.
- ➔ He is, above all, very good.



The Green Berets' version of the Vietnam War



- ⇒ American soldiers have unquestioned patriotism and loyalty
- ⇒ Have worthy allies in the S. Vietnamese
- ⇒ Control their own destiny
- ⇒ Have definite good guys and bad guys
- ⇒ Don't experience fear, doubt, guilt, or even self-revelation
- ⇒ Seem immortal

Missing from this depiction

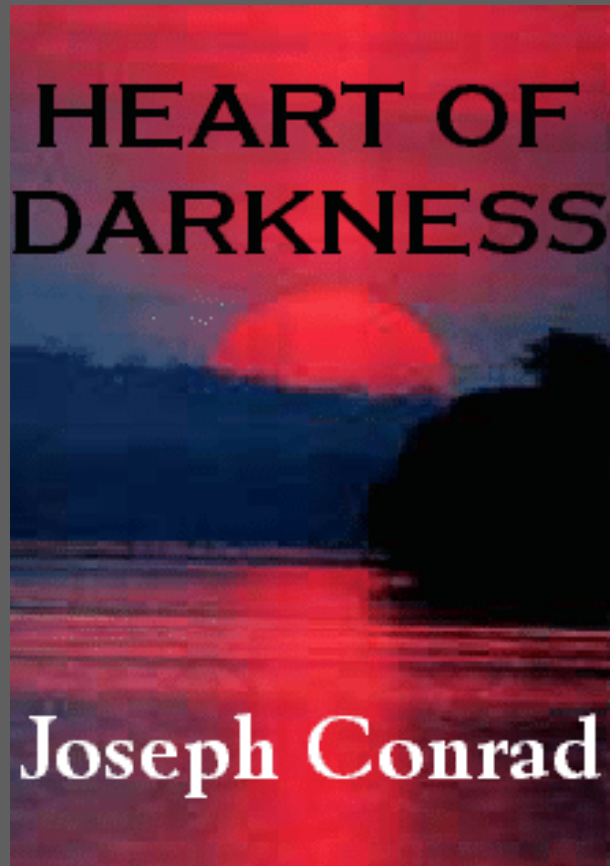
- ⇒ Tough moral issues involved with the war
- ⇒ Confessions of fear, brutality, frustration
- ⇒ Question of personal responsibility for violent actions
- ⇒ Lack of control and order experienced by soldiers





- ➔ The cultural myths DON'T describe reality.
- ➔ Vietnam War literature is often brutally graphic and shocking, relating atrocities committed both by the Viet Cong and by American soldiers.

Heart of Darkness



- ⇒ Often Vietnam War lit. parallels structures found in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.
- ⇒ Moral explorations of individuals, stripped of civilization's restraints, confronting evil, primal emotions, chaos, savagery.

Parallels with *Heart of Darkness*

- ⇒ Key questions: What spiritual darkness resides in us? What do we possess to hold off this darkness?
- ⇒ Similar jungle settings
- ⇒ Confrontations with a seemingly “savage” or “primitive” race
- ⇒ Ultimate confrontation with darkness in the self
- ⇒ The fascination and allure of darkness, of horror, of war



Soldiers seeking control

(a theme linking all modern war literature)

- ⇒ In most modern war literature, soldiers pursue order and control in response to war initiation and loss of innocence.





- Lack of control often asserted in death recognition scenes. Soldier confronts a dead body and must face his own mortality.
- Also evoked by scenes in which soldiers perceive themselves as expendable cogs in a giant war machine. Individual deaths not necessarily meaningful. Images of entrapment and victimization.

Reactions to loss of control



- ⇒ Some soldiers give themselves over to the war, become brutal, desensitized to death.
- ⇒ Perhaps because of psychological impact of brutal and impersonal guerilla warfare, this theme of combat numbness even more prominent in Vietnam War narratives than other war literature.

Other reactions



- ⇒ Attempts to escape the war by establishing some sort of order and control in daily existence.
- ⇒ Attention to surface details of life (work, basic needs, familiar routines) keeps people from asking difficult questions.
- ⇒ Also, daydreaming, imagining.
- ⇒ Sometimes drugs and alcohol (esp. in Vietnam narratives and film).

Differences between Vietnam and Earlier Wars

- ⇒ A soldier entered and exited war individually rather than in a military unit.



Differences



- ➔ Widespread opposition at home to the war, especially after 1967

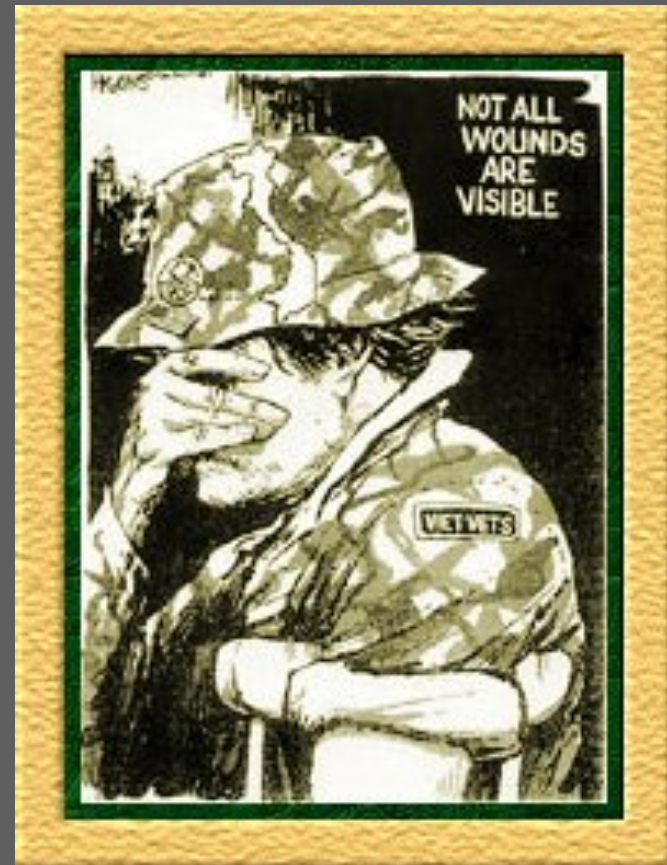
More differences



- ⇒ A “contained conflict” without distinct battle lines.
- ⇒ Emphasis on body counts as indicators of battle-field success.

Differences, cont.

- ➔ One-year tour of duty (short-timers syndrome).
- ➔ Brief post-combat transition period for soldiers returning to U.S.
- ➔ Unusually high incidence of delayed psychiatric casualties after the war (PTSD)



Further difficulties of Vietnam War



- ➔ Guerilla war required constant alertness and sense of danger and stress.
- ➔ War waged against the elements as well as against the enemy.
- ➔ Difficulty in distinguishing between enemies and civilians.

Race and Class Issues



- ⇒ First fully integrated war
- ⇒ Drew disproportionately upon racial minorities and poor
- ⇒ Thus racial tensions among the troops
- ⇒ Class tensions between troops and officers

Search for Form

- Vietnam War writers search for literary forms to adequately express their experiences
- Question underlying much literature of the later 20th century, early 21st century: How does one write about atrocity?

Can War Trauma be Communicated?



- “There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre.”
--Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969)

Search for Form

“It is the duty of the Vietnam War writer to incorporate the seeming illogic of the war into the structure of his work. The reader should be obliged to live like the soldier, adrift in an alien universe in which the familiar. . . landmarks [have] disappeared.”

--Critic Lloyd Lewis

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- Vietnam War writers often use forms that may at first appear confusing, ambiguous or chaotic to readers
 - Often formal experimentation designed to represent the disorder and confusion experienced by soldiers in Vietnam

Focus on Surface Details

- Because of the difficulties in understanding or making sense of the war, not much focus on large political and historical questions
- Rather, focus on the surface details of daily existence-- everyday routines, jokes, conversations, superstitious rituals
- Cliché--“If you weren’t there, you can’t possibly understand what it was like”



Is War Trauma Able to be Communicated?

- Yet, the literature criticized for presenting just such a view (Vietnam War impossible to understand)
- James C. Wilson: decries “dope and dementia” view of the war
- Best Vietnam War literature often probes this problem: raises questions about the potential for art to communicate or even transform the trauma of war experience into something meaningful.

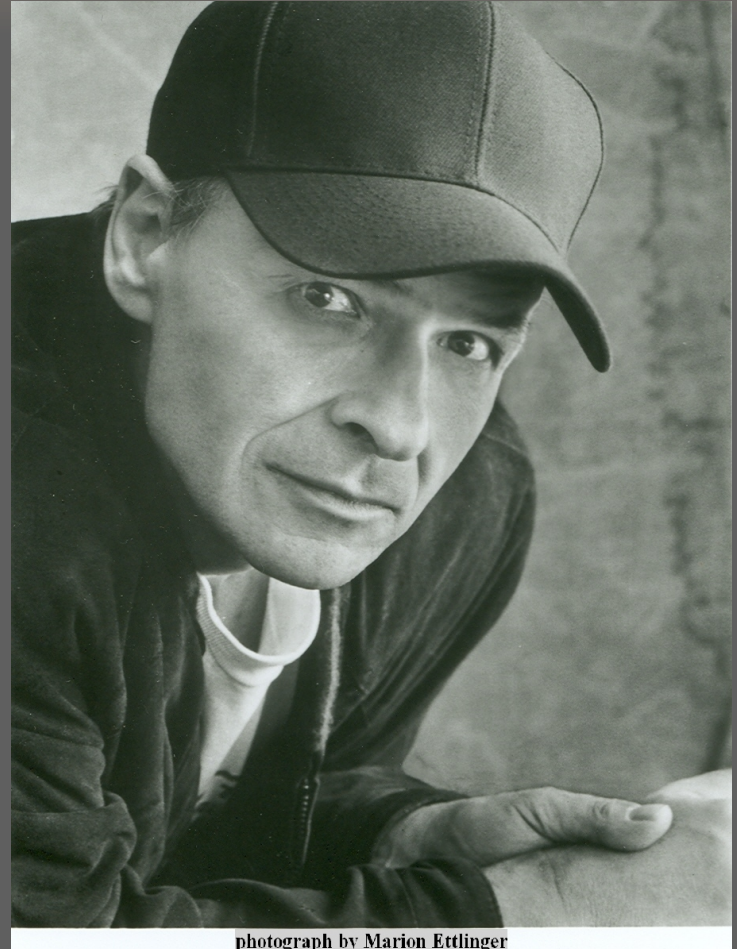
Tim O'Brien



- Born in Austin, Minnesota in 1946
- Graduated from Macalester College in 1968; B.A. in Political Science
- Full scholarship to graduate school at Harvard School of Government
- Drafted into Vietnam War in 1968; served tour of duty in 1969-70
- Entered the doctoral program at Harvard upon return
- First book the memoir: *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973)
- *Going After Cacciato* (1978), wins National Book Award
- *The Things They Carried* (1990)
- *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994)

Tim O'Brien

- O'Brien's work as much about the process of storytelling as it is about war
 - Metafiction
 - Blurring of genres
 - Blurring of fact and fiction
 - Suspicion of historical "truth"



photograph by Marion Ettlinger