



handbook of literary and critical terms, with explanations of different literary-critical perspectives, provided necessary background 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 yearold 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.

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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

Finally, in this account of the course, the pastoral mode, in related fashion, illustrates the alienation not only of the soldiers themselves 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 reenacting *Pilgrim’s Progress*,” writes Fussell, proceeding to quote from Creswell’s letter home.



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 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, "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." 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 had over their shared experience of war. The conversation simply does not happen, except inside Norman's<sup>7</sup> head.

The Combat Relationship: Enemies and Friends





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 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, 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 paradigm of the duel, the equal combat, to stress unevenness, is thematically complex. It may maximise the soldier'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, presented 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 counterweight 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 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 love-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 bubble, 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. Frolicking, delicately boned, the young man would not have wanted to be a soldier and in his heart would have feared performing badly in battle." 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." 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



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 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 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

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home, perhaps this death might have been avoided<sup>??</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

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 ~~use~~ 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 ~~wort~~ 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 ~~in~~ in 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 battle ~~field~~ 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









as they do so.<sup>36</sup> Comedy and pastoral overlap, but the focus here is the pastoral 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 ~~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

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<sup>6</sup> Andrea Peterson, "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), 52.

<sup>7</sup> O'Brien, *Things They Carried*, 166.

<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*, 4-5.

<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" 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*, 167-367. (6167367Td (616367Td w 1.253 0 Td ( )0.74MC /P <</MCID 49 >>BDC 6.4