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**MEMORIES, TRAUMAS AND HOPE:
REMAINS OF THE VIETNAM WAR**

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REMAINS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

By

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Abstract

This master's thesis aims to analyze how the Vietnam veterans' experiences are represented in Vietnam War narratives. The thesis therefore necessarily discusses the powerful role of the post-war period in the lives of veterans who fought in different periods of the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War was a pointless and shameful conflict, and its absurdity, immorality, crimes and atrocities remained in the vets' minds, in the form of irreparable traumas. As methodology, historical and cultural approaches are used. The vets lived an important historical moment, and their stories must be considered a legacy of great significance to understand the war narratives through their historical context and to understand cultural and intellectual history through literature. Finally, the thesis intends to show that the representation of the vets' experiences in war narratives is also the result of the vets' strength to transform the traumas of their war experiences into something meaningful.

Key words: Vietnam veteran, post-war, war experience, war literature.

Resumo

O objetivo desta pesquisa de mestrado é analisar como a experiência dos veteranos da guerra do Vietnã é representada nos romances que abordam este evento histórico. A dissertação discute o poderoso papel do pós-guerra na vida dos personagens que lutaram em diferentes períodos da guerra do Vietnã. Essa batalha foi um conflito vergonhoso e com objetivos duvidosos. Sua insanidade, imoralidade, crimes e atrocidades permanecem na mente dos veteranos na forma de traumas irreparáveis. Como metodologia, são usadas abordagens históricas e culturais para mostrar a importância desse momento histórico na vida dos personagens. Os romances que os veteranos escreveram devem ser considerados um legado significativo para compreender a narrativa de guerra por meio do contexto histórico e entender a história intelectual e cultural através da literatura. Deste modo, esta dissertação busca demonstrar que a representação da experiência dos veteranos nas narrativas de guerra é também uma demonstração do esforço do soldado escritor para transformar os traumas de suas experiências de guerra em algo significativo.

Palavras-chave: Veterano do Vietnã, pós- guerra, experiência de guerra, literatura de guerra.

“It don’t mean nothing, man. It don’t mean nothing.”
Bill Broyles, on the veteran’s ironic response to his
Vietnam experiences.

Introduction:

After the American soldiers returned home from the Vietnam War, many vets started to write about their war experiences, and although the reasons to write about them might not have substantial differences in terms of what vets think and how they behave, it is important to notice what Tim O'Brien once stated: "War stories aren't always about war, per se. They aren't about bombs and bullets and military maneuvers. They aren't about tactics, they aren't about foxholes and canteens. A war story, like any good story, is finally about the human heart" (23). Therefore, my eagerness to study the American narratives of the Vietnam War is related to the interest in examining the "human heart," in a broad sense, as mentioned by O'Brien. The human heart is the place where feelings and emotions are thought to be, and it is not only connected to feelings of deep affection, but also to trouble and violence. Thus, the vets' war experiences, their memories and traumas are felt and experienced in their heart. The Vietnam War impacted the veterans' lives enormously, often giving rise to polemics. During, but mainly after the war, the vets experienced the sorrow and agony of the war's aftermath.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate how the vets' experiences are represented in Vietnam War narratives. The aim is not so much to do a poetic analysis of the narratives, but use the narratives as illustrative examples of the vets' war experiences. Thus, two post war American novels are mainly used to give support to this investigation, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976) by Ron Kovic, and *Paco's Story* (1986) by Larry Heinemann.

This thesis discusses the powerful role of the post war in Kovic's and Paco's lives, characters that fought in different periods in the Vietnam War. Kovic's book is supposedly an autobiography, although it is structured like a novel, so Kovic is considered a character. The discussion shows that the Vietnam War brought no positive results for them, on the

contrary, it brought only disgust, pain and loss. Their lives were destroyed due to disablement, psychological disturbances, and disintegration of their families. Kovic's and Heinemann's novels leave patent the aimlessness of such a shameful conflict and how its insanity, immorality, crimes and atrocities remained in Kovic's and Paco's minds in the form of irreparable traumas.

The representation of the vets' experiences in the Vietnam War narratives can be identified from the very beginning at the vets arrival in the American airports, where they experienced rejection and prejudice, just after their return home from the combat zone in Vietnam. The vets' reaction when confronted with the real situations offered by the post war, as well as the way they hoped for the future and lived their lives among people that don't really understand the agony of not being heard and the suffering of not being helped when needed are also depictions of their experiences back home. Many soldiers claim that they are the only ones who can really tell us what it means to be haunted by the traumatic memories caused by the war.

The war myth in North American culture is full of poetry and religiousness, where past and present work together to build the image of the honorable men, courageous, loyal and united to defend freedom and democracy. This myth has largely grown out of the triumphalism of World War II. Real war presupposes pain, suffering and loss, and once it is introduced in the mythical narration of the nation, instead of transforming it into something unbearable, it is transformed into a poetic and holy attitude. The imminence of the loss of human life addresses those who go to the war with a victorious aura. They go in the name of loyalty and belief.¹ Thus, the American soldiers go to war willing to give everything

¹ Spini, Ana Paula. *Ritos de Sangue em Hollywood; mito da guerra e identidade nacional norte-americana*. Ph.D. Degree Project, UFF, 2005.

they have, no matter the consequences. After all, they have properly learned what President John F. Kennedy had once claimed, “ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” And it was this saying that inspired Kovic to get ready to go to war and fight two tours in Vietnam, until the end and without recede (Kovic 89).

But after a while Kovic understood the real meaning of the war and what lay behind it. He states that, “the American government pursues a policy of deception, distortion, manipulation, and denial, doing everything it can to hide from the American people their true intentions” (Kovic 3). In this sentence, Kovic declares how deceptive the American Government is, and how it works in an illusionary way, letting American citizens grow up believing in the myth that their country is the most powerful ever, unbeatable and right in everything they do, a moral and incorruptible country that cares for other nations and is always available to help and serve their neighbors, that America was in Vietnam to solve a problem that the Vietnamese were not able to resolve. According to Frances FitzGerald, however, for

those who had for long believed that the United States was different, that it possessed that fundamental innocence, generosity, and disinterestedness, these facts were shocking. No longer was it possible to say, as so many Americans and French had, that Vietnam was the “quagmire,” the “pays pourri” that had enmired and corrupted the United States. It was the other way round. The U.S. officials had enmired Vietnam. They had corrupted the Vietnamese and, by extension, the American soldiers who had to fight amongst the Vietnamese in their service. By involving the United States in a fruitless and immoral war, they had also corrupted themselves.

(FitzGerald 424)

A whole generation was deeply transformed by the war. The veterans' lives were changed forever. The physical and emotional injuries caused by the Vietnam War are constant threats that overwhelm them. Most of the veterans are haunted and pursued each day by the traumatic memories of the war which has caused an irreconcilable change in their lives.

The method used in this thesis is, primarily, bibliographical and comparative. I review and analyze some of the most relevant studies regarding *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Paco's Story* as war narratives, as well as specific studies on the literature of Vietnam War. In relation to methodology, historical and cultural approaches are used to understand the war narratives through its historical context and to understand cultural and intellectual history through literature. According to David Cowles, "literary texts are not aesthetically isolated from history, nor are they merely products of historical forces; they are themselves agents in the historical and social drama" (237). Hence, the analysis of the vets' experiences in the Vietnam War narratives is best understood when literature and history work together. Since historical facts are narrated, the reader can easily identify with what was written by the author and history is no longer seen only as a chronological succession of events. In his article, "The Historical Text as a Literary Artifact," Hayden White explains this:

all historical writing, as narrative, depends on a 'nonnegotiable item,' the form of the narrative itself, and, further, that the stories of history are understandable by virtue of reliance on fictive forms. From the materials of the simple chronicle, as a series of events, a set of facts, the historian provides explanations only by providing formal coherence: the story, that is to say, is never simply there in facts, but must be created. (394)

However, the veracity of war stories written by veterans assumes the risk to be treated without compromise. The truth in war stories runs the risk of not being taken seriously by the reader. The reader might suspect the veracity of war narratives for the reason that these stories are often the report of a traumatized veteran, and a veteran's traumatized mind can fade events, blur facts and corrupt the truth. In spite of that, the process of writing demands order, structure, and coherence from the past as well as creation and imagination, and the use of imagination in the writing process is a key factor in works of fiction, as White has noticed "all stories are fictions". Moreover, the importance of the vets' narratives in representing a specific moment in their lives has little to do with assertive truthfulness, for the reason that the vets are not worried if their accounts are fiction or non-fiction. What matters is that the vets lived an important historical moment and their war narratives must be considered a legacy of great significance. The Vietnam War narratives are mainly an interpretation of the events by those veterans who were deeply involved with the war. Therefore, their accounts are registers that are not influenced by those who ran the war or the media, but only by the vets' own personal war experiences.

The thesis uses the work of Christian Appy, *Working Class War*, to support the investigation on the vets' experiences. Appy's work deals with the sociological data related to the war and post-war and it supports this thesis on subjects related to the socioeconomic backgrounds of combat veterans as a way of making sense of their military and post-war experiences, including the frigid welcome they received from an unforgiving public and government. Appy's main conclusion is that Vietnam was a class war which drew its troopers, about 80 percent of them, from the poorer and blue-collar classes. He mentions one bitter veteran saying, "It was a case of business as usual. Instead of everybody getting drafted, people who could go to college often did; it was those who couldn't who went into the military" (Appy

220). This sort of comment, widely expressed, reflects the profound resentment against people who lived in suburbs, whose kids went to college rather than basic training, and who eventually had better life opportunities than the poorest who went to war. Appy argues as well that this antagonism lay behind much of the fury that was ever-present when workers flew “Love It or Leave It” banners or shouted down and beat up protesting college students, a proposition that Andrew Levinson wrote about in *Working Class Majority* (1975). It was more often than not “class and class distinction” and not their support for a war they could barely understand that aroused blue-collar disgust. One of Appy’s war memories is about a self-described pro-war vet, once shouting at him, “Where were the sons of all the big shots who supported the war?” (Appy 299). Thus, this specific historical moment, the veterans’ view of America and the way it is delineated are some of the features that are explored in Appy’s work.

In turn, Arthur G. Neal’s work, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience*, supports my thesis in aspects related to the social dimension of the national trauma. Neal’s work also support my understanding of trauma and memory aspects related to the post-war, such as the sadness, fear and anger of the veterans, the social disruption society as moral communities, the disturbances and identity of the veterans and trusteeship. Neal asserts that, “the war did not end for many of the veterans with their return to civilian life. The problems remained of reconstructing their experiences and their self-identities” (102). Thus, Neal’s work also deals with the vets’ experiences back home and the whole process that the vets had to undergo to acquire a new identity. Neal’s comments on the Vets’ experiences and on subjects related to the post-traumatic stress syndrome, the veterans’ memorial and social dimensions of national trauma are seen as an important support to this thesis’ investigation.

The thesis has three chapters that aim to show that the representation of the vets’ experiences in war narratives is also the representation of the vets’ strength to transform the

traumas of their war experiences into something meaningful. It seems that the vets sought not just to extract lessons from their war experiences, but also to use their literary work as a weapon to oppose the Establishment that made the Vietnam War. The thesis focuses almost solely on the war's effect on the Vietnam veterans and American culture at large. The Vietnam and the Vietnamese are merely a backdrop for the drama of Americans confronting themselves. The United States changed as drastically as Kovic, Paco and other veterans had. The Vietnam era witnessed one of the most sweeping and rapid social change in American history and naturally the vets' narratives reflect the flashpoints of the culture.

The first chapter, *Writing Experience: The Veteran and His Literary Voice*, analyzes the Vietnam veterans as writers, as well as their need to write. Actually, most of the vets who became writers or the ones who only wrote accounts about their Vietnam War experiences usually wrote their work through force of circumstance. The way vets write about their war experiences and the reasons that led them to write about them will be discussed in this chapter, as well as the meaning behind of writing such accounts. Back home, the vets were often called "ruthless baby-killers" and "drug addicts," who "fought in an immoral war" (Neil 101). Kovic's account of his war experiences greatly contributes to this first part of the thesis, for the reason that his writing urges to share the truth about what he lived during the war time. As he explains,

I wrote all night long, seven days a week, single space, no paragraphs, front and back of the pages, pounding the keys so hard the tips of my fingers would hurt. I couldn't stop writing, and I remember feeling more alive than I had ever felt. Convinced that I was destined to die young, I struggled to

leave something of meaning behind, to rise above the darkness and despair.

(Kovic 17)

This eagerness to write about the war and the reasons that led Kovic and other vets to represent, through narratives, their disgraceful and painful experiences inherited from the Vietnam War share substantial similarities. Kovic shows that he wanted not just to leave something meaningful for the forthcoming generation but also teach people about the truth that lay behind the war. His writing was also important to recover his feelings of hope and bring light to the darkness he had encountered back home.

The second chapter, *The Homecoming Experience: The Enemy Never Dies*, deals mainly with the vets' experiences in the United States just after the end of the war. The difficulties the veterans had to reintegrate into society begin in the U.S. airports as soon as the vets step on American soil. The vets' struggle to survive increases day after day and the bad service offered in VA hospitals² is something they often had to deal with. The way vets are portrayed in the aftermath of the war is the main purpose of the investigation here presented. And Larry Heinemann's *Paco Story* is primordial to support this investigation. For instance, Heinemann shows in his novel that finding a job is also a problem for Vietnam vets, Paco, the main character of the novel, has to find a job in a society that was afraid of his body full of scars and many times people were careless toward Vietnam vets. Heinemann writes about one of Paco's experiences:

² A VA hospital is a hospital run by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), a branch of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), a cabinet-level agency in the United States government. VA hospitals, clinics, and nursing homes offer care to veterans of the United States armed services, as part of a general benefits package provided to people who serve in the military. Altogether, the staffs of the VHA make up the bulk of the VA, and they include everyone from top-flight neurologists to janitors.

Paco rubs the sweating mug of beer with the pad of his thumb. “My name’s Paco. Just arrived on the bus. Looking for work; Know any? Looking for a place to stay.” And that is all he says, thinking, Answer straight, talk in a normal tone of voice, drink the beer, and leave as soon as the rain lets up.

The kid with the Adam’s apple leans over the bar and into the light, and says, “Well, shit, fella, you might as well keep fuckin’ beatin’ feet, as they say. Ain’t that what they say?”

“You’re telling me there ain’t no work?” says Paco.

“Ain’t no work around this neck of the woods but good, is what I’m saying. Ain’t that right?” he says, and looks around at the rest of the rednecks on his crew. (Heinemann 64-65)

Although the struggle in finding a place to stay and work was common among Vietnam vets, Paco ends up finding a job as a dishwasher in the small town of Boone. The vets had other problems to deal with: many became homeless and drugs were normally used among them, some committed suicide, others committed crimes and were arrested, and the relationship with the opposite sex was also problematic among veterans. Protests were all around the U.S., many vets were organized in groups to protest against the war and the bad conditions they were forced to undergo. These sociological aspects lived by Vietnam vets after the war are extensively discussed in the second part of this thesis and although the veterans came from different places in the United States, most of them wrote similar stories related to the post-war moment. Rejection, prejudice and the way vets lived their lives back home are the main matters developed in the second part of this thesis. The

subject of enmity also plays an important role throughout the discussion here presented.

The United States and the vets' communities have become enemies back home, and thus, new places of threat and conflict are gradually revealed in the vets' hearts and minds.

The third chapter, *Looking for the Hero: Stolen Valour in a Disrupted Society*, explores the social disruption lived by Vietnam veterans and special matters related to morality, fear, shame and honor. The intersection between honor and shame is analyzed, as well as the previous wars' figure of the honored hero who is contrasted with the image of the defeated and shameful Vietnam War veteran. Sara Ahmed explains that, "the exposure of past wounds can be a crucial part of what shame can do" (Ahmed 16). Shame, among many other features, plays an important role to assert the identity of the American nation. Shame also works in the establishment of a post-Vietnam culture in the U.S., and contributes to characterize the Vietnam veteran as a social misfit. In addition, shame is responsible for increasing the impact of the war on those who fought it. Ahmed explains the power of shame in shaping individuals as well as collective bodies. She claims that,

expressions of shame in speech acts of 'apologizing' can work as a form of nation building, in which what is shameful about the past is covered over by the statement of shame itself. Shame hence can construct a collective ideal even when it announces the failure of that ideal to be translated into action.

(15)

Because the United States failed to win the war in Vietnam, the feeling of shame was widely experienced among Americans and especially among Vietnam veterans all around the U. S. Shame was not just a common feeling among vets, but it was also fundamental to the vets' conduct and moral. The columnist David Gelernter claims that, "virtually all Americans agree that Vietnam was a 'national humiliation'" (9-11). Kovic

reminds us that the leaders who sent him to war do not share the same experiences that he and other vets do. According to Kovic,

these leaders have never experienced the tears, the dread and rage, the feeling that there is no God, no country, nothing but the wound, the horrifying memories, the shock, the guilt, the shame, the terrible injustice that took the lives of more than 58,000 Americans and over two million Vietnamese.” (Kovic 23)

Shame has been an important and remarkable feature in the vets’ war experiences and seems that it will persist to follow the veterans wherever they go. The Vietnam veterans are the representation of the failed North American ideal and the unsung glories. And to survive the atrocities generated by the Vietnam War the vets also have to learn how to cope with such a feeling.

1. Writing Experience: The Veteran and his Literary Voice

It took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did. The problem was that you didn't always know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later, that a lot of it never made it in at all, it just stayed stored there in your eyes.

Michael Herr, *Dispatches*

Tensions between fact and fiction have often marked the discussions related to the Vietnam War veterans' experiences narrated in their novels. The process vets undergo to write about their war experiences have not gone unnoticed either, and one of the reasons that makes the veteran writers so unique is because their "facts are tangled up" in their "personal experiences" (Lomperis 42). Thus, everything the veteran writers saw, lived and suffered because of Vietnam, became somehow the account of their traumatic memories. Nevertheless, be their personal accounts fact or fiction, the vets did write about their war experiences, and the intersection between the historical moment they lived during the Vietnam period and the literature they have produced as consequence of the war is something that cannot be ignored. The vets' literary production is, among many other things, the representation of their traumatic memories. Therefore, the Vietnam War narratives are better understood when history and literature work together. Although the vets' experiences were, in a broader view, very similar, there are particularities, facts that belong to each one of them, and these facts are often registered as their own literary voices. The way Vietnam War veterans write about their war experiences, the reasons that led them to write about them and the meaning of writing such accounts are the main purpose presented here.

The literary voices of Vietnam War veterans, therefore, show the representation of history as a postmodernist work³ and that history cannot be understood simply as a “linear progression of events” (Tysson 283). The relationship between history and literature is something that cannot be avoided. When working together, literature and history, generate a

movement that would destabilize our overly settled conceptions of what literature and history are. It is one, too, that would define history broadly, not as a mere chronicle of facts and events but, rather, as a “thick description” of human reality, one that raises questions of interest to anthropologists and sociologists, as well as those posed by traditional historians. (Thomas 226)

Thomas understands that a work of art is a “kind of historical document,” and literature is not just of anthropological interest, but reveals the true tendencies of history. On the other hand, critics “have come to wonder whether the truth about what really happened can ever be purely and objectively known. They are less likely to see history as being linear and progressive, as something developing toward the present” (Thomas 228).

When literature and history work together the solid notion of their concept is shaken. The intersection between literature and history suggests a “new” concept which

³ The term postmodern literature is used to describe certain characteristics of post-World War II literature (relying heavily, for example, on fragmentation, paradox, questionable narrators, etc.) and a reaction against Enlightenment ideas implicit in Modernist literature.

Postmodern literature, like postmodernism as a whole, is hard to define and there is little agreement on the exact characteristics, scope, and importance of postmodern literature. But as is often the case with artistic movements, postmodern literature is commonly defined in relation to its precursor. For example, a postmodern literary work tends not to conclude with the neatly tied-up ending as is often found in modernist literature, but often parodies it. Postmodern authors tend to celebrate chance over craft, and further employ metafiction to undermine the writer's authority. Another characteristic of postmodern literature is the questioning of distinctions between high and low culture through the use of pastiche, the combination of subjects and genres not previously deemed fit for literature.

“involves the transfer of literary interest from the literary work itself to the literary work grasped in a historical context: as a result, the new construct that is the object of literary interest is, in fact, the complex interrelations between text and context” (Culler 288).

Therefore, the historical text characterizes history extensively, not simply as an account of facts and events, but it also helps to explain human behavior and the context in which this behavior is inserted. Consequently, the text becomes not just meaningful to the reader, but also interesting.

The reasons why Vietnam War veterans write about their war experiences are wide and complex. Loren Baritz, a historian and former provost at the University of Massachusetts, in his book about the Vietnam War called *Backfire*, claims that he writes about the Vietnam War to “clarify American culture.” He understands that the Vietnam War “enlarged aspects of some of the ways” in which “Americans think and act” (11). Hence, the veterans’ interest to write about what they lived during the war period is much more than just registers of a historical war moment, and the reports of their war experiences, whether fictional or not, go deeper than the comprehension of those – journalist and the media in general – who were not directly involved in the Vietnam War.

Many soldiers claim that they are the only ones who can really tell us what it means to be haunted by the traumatic memories caused by the war. Ron Kovic, for instance, who served two tours of duty during the Vietnam War, was paralyzed from the “chest down” in combat in 1968, and has been in a wheelchair ever since. In his classic antiwar narrative, *Born on the Fourth of July*, he declares some of his hope for writing such a book: “I wanted people to know what it really meant to be in a war -- to be shot and wounded, to be fighting for my life on the intensive care ward -- not the myth we had grown up believing” (Kovic 3). Kovic uses his writing to teach people about the truth that lay behind the war and also to

show how destructive the consequences of a war can be. Kovic, however, understands that the American nation is somehow manipulated by a myth that persuades Americans to support the war, as if it was something necessary, a duty that must be done for the good of humanity. Baritz explains the myth:

in countless ways Americans know in their gut – the only place myths can live – that we have been chosen to lead the world in public morality and to instruct it in political virtue. We believe that our own domestic goodness results in strength adequate to destroy our opponents who, by definition, are enemies of virtue, freedom and God. (Baritz 27)

The American people are raised and educated to believe that supporting the United States and their wars is something worth doing. When supporting the U.S. they are demonstrating patriotism and faith in their nation. Fighting in a war is a matter of honor and pride. The American people believe that after donating and risking their lives in combat to defend America, back home, their nation will worry about their needs and future. On the other hand, Kovic's post-war experiences have shown differently. Therefore, to make Americans reconsider the way they think and feel and to make them aware of the myth they have grown up believing in are some of the topics that Kovic writes about. He wants people to know that the myth Americans were taught is based on interests that favor not the American nation as a whole, but only the ones who have the power to control the war, the Establishment. According to Kovic "The American government pursues a policy of deception, distortion, manipulation, and denial, doing everything it can to hide from the American people their true intentions" (Kovic 3). Once the veterans and the American nation become aware of the deceptiveness and illusion imposed by the U.S. government on

them, and when they understand the reasons that led them to believe in such a myth, one of the purposes of Kovic's writing will then have a meaningful function.

Before Kovic came back home, he was in his second tour of duty serving the United States in Vietnam, and just after being shot on the battlefield, he also wrote about one of his war experiences when he was being treated in the battalion area. When he wrote these letters in the battalion area, his reasons to write were completely different, and because he had not faced the post-war reality yet, the American myth he once believed, was still stuck in his heart. Lying down in his hospital bed, he writes:

I am in this place for seven days and seven nights. I write notes on scraps of paper telling myself over and over that I will make it out of here, that I am going to live. I am squeezing rubber balls with my hands to try to get strong again. I write letters home to Mom and Dad. I dictate them to a woman named Lucy who is with the USO.⁴ I am telling Mom and Dad that I am hurt pretty bad but I have done it for America and that it is worth it. I tell them not to worry. I will be home soon. (Kovic 26)

In this passage, he keeps declaring to himself and through his writing that he hopes to get rid of the bad situation he is in. He wants to live and he fights for that, believing that things are under control and that there is no need to worry about anything else. When Kovic writes "notes on scraps of paper," he is, actually, deliberately trying to break free from the physical and psychological pain of war. Analyzing the Vietnam war veterans, Appy explains that during the war, "the relative safety of rear areas, when quiet reflection is possible, they usually try to take their minds off the psychic and physical burdens of war

⁴ The United Service Organizations Inc. (USO) is a private, nonprofit organization that provides morale and recreational services to members of the U.S. military.

with music, beer, letters from home, and diversions of one kind or another” (Apy 207).

Therefore, the battalion area was the place where Kovic started his first drafts as a Vietnam War writer and where the reality of war begun to mix up with the trauma of being damaged for the rest of his life. Even though, at that point, Kovic believed that he had done his quota and there was no need to keep thinking about possible problematic situations or anything that could cooperate to make the situation he was in get any worse.

After being seriously wounded Kovic returns home crippled, thinking that he would soon die. And back home he takes the decision to write about what he had experienced during the war time. He understands that his writing is a way to tell of what he saw and lived as a Vietnam War combatant. As Kovic explains: “I worked with an intensity and fury as if it was my last will and testament, and in many ways I felt it was” (Kovic 16). Kovic writes about his Vietnam War experiences to show that he “was not a victim, but someone who had been trying to move beyond his terrible tragedy and the terrible injustice of that war” (Kovic 18). Thus, Kovic’s fictionalized memoir is the register of his traumatic memories inherited from the Vietnam War. The war was a difficult time and Kovic lived the most terrifying experiences of his life, not only on the battlefield, but also back home where his pain and sadness were constantly increased.

In a certain way, his narrative reveals his struggle to see a world without wars. Kovic’s writing is an attempt “to say no to the insanity and madness” that wars generate. Hence, Kovic addresses his writing to the Vietnam veterans, reminding them that,

many of us promised ourselves long ago that we would never allow what happened to us in Vietnam to happen again. We had an obligation, a responsibility as citizens, as Americans, as human beings, to raise our voices in protest. We could never forget the hospitals, the intensive care wards, the

wounded all around us fighting for their lives, those long and painful years after we came home, those lonely nights. There were lives to save on both sides, young men and women who would be disfigured and maimed, mothers and fathers who lose their sons and daughters, wives and loved ones who would suffer for decades to come if we did not do everything we could to stop the forward momentum of this madness. (Kovic 22)

Therefore, Kovic now writes to protest, to declare firmly and emphatically his objection to war. He writes to assert his complete disapproval of this act of mass destruction. He writes to feel more alive than he had ever felt before and to inspire others to protest in favor of peace. Thus, Kovic's writing works as a weapon to fight not just against the Vietnam War itself, but any other war, for wars have similar and disastrous consequences. And not to "allow what happened to us in Vietnam to happen again," as Kovic has noted, many were the vets who decided to speak up and to write about the causes for which they went to fight in Vietnam. Thus, to denounce the outrages the vets were part of became in Kovic's words, a "responsibility" and an "obligation" (Kovic 22). In March 2005 in one of his anti-war activities, Kovic stated:

The scar will always be there, a living reminder of that war, but it has also become something beautiful now, something of faith and hope and love. I have been given the opportunity to move through that dark night of the soul to a new shore, to gain an understanding, a knowledge, and entirely different vision. I now believe I have suffered for a reason and in many ways I have found that reason in my commitment to peace and nonviolence. My life has been a blessing in disguise, even with the pain and great difficulty that my

physical disability continues to bring. It is a blessing to speak on behalf of peace, to be able to reach such a great number of people. (Wikipedia)

After so many years since the end of the war Kovic did not stop protesting and writing against American wars. His fight continues and has also inspired other veterans and civilians to join his cause.

It was in 1971, almost at the end of the war, that the Vietnam veteran and first lieutenant William Crandell, of the 199th Light Infantry Brigade, Americal Division, understood his “responsibility” and “obligation”. In his “Open Statement” at the “Winter Soldier Investigation”⁵ hearings, Crandell and many other veterans expressed their outrage:

We intend to tell who it was that gave us those orders; that created that policy; that set that standard of war bordering on full and final genocide. We intend to demonstrate that My Lai⁶ was no unusual occurrence, other than, perhaps, the number of victims killed all in one place, all at one time, all by one platoon of us. We intend to show that the policies of Americal Division which inevitably resulted in My Lai were the policies of other Army and Marine Divisions as well. We intend to show that war crimes in Vietnam did not start in March 1968, or in the village of Son My or with one Lieutenant William Calley. We intend to indict those really responsible for My Lai, for Vietnam, for attempted genocide. (Vietnam 1)

⁵ The “Winter Soldier Investigation” was a media event sponsored by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) from January 31, 1971 – February 2, 1971. It was intended to publicize war crimes and atrocities by the United States Armed Forces and their allies in the Vietnam War.

⁶ My Lai was the Vietnam War mass murder of 347–504 unarmed civilians in South Vietnam on March 16, 1968, by United States Army soldiers of “Charlie” Company of 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 11th Brigade of the Americal Division. Most of the victims were women, children (including babies), and elderly people. Many were raped, beaten, and tortured, and some of the bodies were later found to be mutilated. “Murder in the Name of War – My Lai.” BBC. July 20, 1998.

The vets witnessed violent and shocking scenes during the war and their writings are a way to confess such events. The veterans write so as not to forget Vietnam and not to forget those who were responsible to teach them to destroy people's lives in a deliberate way. So, the veteran literary voice can also work to remind the veterans that all crimes that happened during the war were the consequence of the policies and orders given by their own government.

Paul Simon recalls to Vietnam veterans the cause for which they were sent to Vietnam, "over the border they send us to kill and to fight for a cause they've long ago forgotten" (Vietnam 1). Yet, the vets did not forget the war causes and their narratives work to keep their minds fresh and alive. Even though the American government seems to have forgotten about the vets and Vietnam, the veterans' literary voices work to justify and to explain that they are not the only ones responsible for the crimes committed during the war. The vets did not rule or promote the war; rather, during the war, the young soldiers were used and abused as much as possible, until the end of the war and, for many young soldiers, until the end of their lives. Thus, the veterans write to demand justice and the end of the judgments that blame them as the only culprits for war crimes, which in turn was the irresponsibility of the men who made the war. The vets write to make their testimonies alive, as if confessing what happened in the war was a duty that must be done, a task that cannot be forgotten.

Michael Bibby claims that, "in testifying the soldiers seek to atone for their own complicity in the crimes of the war and to provide evidence of those crimes" (Bibby 151). Therefore, the veterans are not running away from their responsibilities in terms of assuming what happened in Vietnam. They do not want to escape from the crimes they

committed during the war. Actually, the veterans have the need to confess, and they often do it through their narratives. They want to show through their stories everything that happened in Vietnam, as well as what happened after the war. They want to reveal their stories as real and accurate as possible, as a depiction of what they saw and lived during this outrageous period. One thing they really wanted to point out is the deceptiveness that lay behind war crimes. They want to confess what is true about Vietnam. As one of the representatives of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), Crandell explains:

We went to preserve the peace and our testimony will show that we have set all of Indochina aflame. We went to defend the Vietnamese people and our testimony will show that we are committing genocide against them. We went to fight for freedom and our testimony will show that we have turned Vietnam into a series of concentration camps.

We went to guarantee the right of self-determination to the people of South Vietnam and our testimony will show that we are forcing a corrupt and dictatorial government upon them. We went to work toward the brotherhood of man and our testimony will show that our strategy and tactics are permeated with racism. We went to protect America and our testimony will show why our country is being torn apart by what we are doing in Vietnam. (Vietnam 1).

Thus, the Vietnam veterans write because they do not want to let their testimonies die. They want to preserve their memories as long as they can to show the world the truth behind the crimes they were forced to commit and also to show how America turned its back on them because they were not able to win the war. Once the vets' testimonies are

remembered, once they have their experiences recollected in their war narratives, a social bond among veterans can easily happen. Thus, the vets' writings, work in this way, as an alliance to keep them united to continue to fight for their rights, for peace and for a world without wars. The veterans have the need to tell their traumatic stories; when writing their war stories, these stories give them a strong "sense of survival" and the testimony of their traumatic experiences can work to give the vets' narratives an "ethically pragmatic meaning in the context of saving the country" (Bibby 152). Thus, the vets' accounts are also an attempt to turn their shame into heroic merit, even though they did not win the war.

Kali Tal, explains that, "one of the strongest themes in the literature of trauma is the urge to bear witness, to carry the tale of horror back to the hall of 'normalcy' and to testify to the truth of the experience" (Tal 120). It seems that what remains for the veteran writers is to write about their war experiences, which are often full of traumas. Moreover, Tal explains that "trauma is a transformative experience, and those who are transformed can never entirely return to a state of previous innocence" (Tal 119). Hence, trauma plays an important role in Vietnam War narratives and it seems to be the biggest legacy of those who fought the Vietnam War. The literature of Vietnam often carries the vets' trauma as if it was a kind of curse that uninterruptedly haunts their minds and souls.

The war survivor, as Lawrence Langer has noted, "does not travel a road from the normal to the bizarre back to the normal, but from the normal to the bizarre back to a normalcy so permeated by the bizarre encounter with atrocity that it can never be purified again. The two worlds haunt each other..." (Langer 88). When veterans write their war stories, they recall their experiences, aiming to give their accounts a meaning that has never existed before. They try to explain to themselves what happened in Vietnam and why they

were responsible to bear the results of this war. They also never understood why people that were against the war were against the veterans. The vets' narratives show that their lives were completely destroyed. Kovic for example, claims that "Vietnam had killed God" (Lomperis 52). So, what was once pure and normal in Kovic and many other veterans' lives can never be settled again. To be treated as strangers, dangerous and killers, are constant ways civilians found to label the vets, something that they will always need to deal with. The vets create, imagine and expose their traumas to tell the stories of the war they lived because of Vietnam. They made a sacrifice to fight for their country that most of us will never understand. It seems that Vietnam War writers somehow use their narratives and wish, through their writings, to get rid of their sorrows, frustrations and irreconcilable innocence, desires that probably will never come true.

There are many other Vietnam veteran writers carrying along with them many other Vietnam War stories. Each one of the veterans brought their own Vietnam back home and produced their personal accounts of the events they have lived during the war period. There are veterans that create their own characters to write about the Vietnam War experience, and this creation mixes the historical events of the war with fiction. But this fictional process of writing has raised, among vets, questions that confront the veracity of the stories the veterans approached, and matters on how to differentiate fact from fantasy have being widely discussed among the veteran writers. For David Winn, "what is 'real' in Vietnam also becomes surreal" (Lomperis 144). Remembered "facts" of the past are selected and can be chosen among many other facts, while other facts might not be remembered or even be excluded. When writing their accounts of the war, the vets pass through a process that involves a constant mixed up recollection of events. Thus, events can be confusing, paradoxical or contradictory, but it seems impossible to separate reality from fiction.

O' Brien has noted that, "in war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true" (O'Brien 88). Whether or not the war narratives are real accounts, the fact is, these Vietnam War narratives are "persistent and vivid. Even during its lean years, it does not let the vets forget the Vietnam War" (Lomperis 44). Thus, the veterans write to remember their war experiences and also to keep their war recollections alive, no matter if their writing demands the use of imagination to create, for example, a new character or a story that did not really happen. Observing the vets writers and their narratives, O' Brien states that, "it is as if the writers are being held prisoner by the facts of their own Vietnam experiences. The result is a closure of the imagination, predictability and melodrama, a narrowness of theme, and an unwillingness to stretch the fictive possibilities" (Lomperis 46). Therefore, the veteran writer of the Vietnam War becomes a unique writer of a unique period, trapped into his own experiences, but always willing to reinvent the reality and the form of communicating the war experience.

In Hayden White's "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" (1974), while comparing truth and history, White argues that truth in history is not equivalent to scientific truth. On account of history being written by different people, history cannot be scientific. Experiencing scientific knowledge, people cannot do the same with history unless they are living it at that moment. He explains that historical narration is artificial and it is not possible to be experimented on. The Vietnam War novelists Tim O' Brien and Stephen Wright perceive a similar artificiality in Vietnam War narratives. For them, "imagination was the writer's richest resource as he sought to weave a memorable story whose truth would be fictive and transcendent, unbound by any obligation to historical fact, whether past or future" (Lomperis 42). Thus, the imagination is vital to generate different forms of

writing and it helps to diversify the vet's war experience accounts as well as give the veteran writers an escape from the obligation of always having to write the "truth."

Artificiality is then inevitable and the written accounts of the Vietnam War become a source of the vets' ability to create. Veteran writer James Webb explains that "Vietnam was many things. It varied year by year, place by place, unit by unit," (Lomperis 45) and this variety of concepts about the Vietnam War transformed the vets' experiences and their accounts into a complex field to be explored, something vast and difficult to understand. Thus, the vets' experiences narrated in their novels can be also seen as recollections of the images and memories that insist on remaining in their minds, and these memories and images often remain as fictional accounts based on a true war event. According to White there is no "real story," every story is fiction. As he explains:

stories are not lived; there is no such thing as a real story. Stories are told or written, not found. And as for the notion of a true story, this is virtually a contradiction in terms. All stories are fictions. Which means, of course, that they can be true only in a metaphorical sense and in the sense in which a figure of speech can be true. (*Figural Realism* 9)

Based on White's statement, it is possible to demonstrate that the vets' narratives cannot be limited only based on facts. A historical account in order to be written depends on a wide arrange of forms of discourses that rely on conventional narrative forms and the imagination. According to Timothy J. Lomperis, "people draw their lessons from their memories, from that set of images which stays with them the longest. Some, along with Ronald Reagan, remember Vietnam as a 'noble crusade,' while others relive with Daniel Ellsberg his nightmare of the war as a 'heinous crime'" (Lomperis 3). Although Reagan and Ellsberg describe the same historical event both lived during the Vietnam War period,

their accounts of this event are completely different, and for them to communicate their experiences they must rely on imagination. As a war veteran, Ellsberg sees the Vietnam War as a soldier, so his is able to understand the atrocities on which a war is based, while Reagan saw the war based only on his political interests. Therefore, the ones who narrate historical events must use their imagination to write about it, but it does not mean that what is written is true. Sometimes writers produce only what people want to read, and they do not consider the veracity of the historical event because their focus is to please their readers. According to White, “the historian, like any writer of discursive prose, is to be judged ‘by the truth of what he says, or by adequacy of his verbal reproduction of his external model,’ whether that external model be the actions of past men or the historian’s own thought about such actions” (*The Historical Text* 396).

History is recreated with different intentions, and in many circumstances when inspecting history, or drawing on an academic explanation of a story, one begins looking at the primary source, which in the case here proposed, is the Vietnam War. Since, to institute “the facts,” the historian cannot escape from invention, the process of creation and imagination is indispensable to originate the historical narrative, and to commit an error with the antecedents is unavoidable. Therefore, for the veteran writers to create their narratives they need to reconstruct moments, events and the historical facts that are fragmented in the primary sources. So, the Vietnam writers must not limit themselves only to the truth. For the reason that,

history in general is neither memory nor recollection, but the story of their relationship. The indiscriminate cultivation of recollection, the conscious effort to remember everything, is a threat to memory’s power to restore consciousness’s original relationship with its world. (*Literary History* 187)

Therefore, there is no need for the reader to judge the legitimacy of the facts narrated in the vets' narratives. Whether or not the facts of these narratives are true, it is the authors' decision to acknowledge the truth about what they are writing, and probably, the reader will never know the accuracy of the recollections and memories exposed by the author in their narratives. Nevertheless, Lomperis contends that "good literature lasts" and it lasts "because it tells the truth." He has noted that, "what the truth is specifically, however, becomes quickly subject to the interpretation of politics, artistic expression, and morality" (Lomperis 50). Truth in Vietnam War narratives can acquire different ideas and principles that are connected with each veteran's own way to conceptualize the facts they lived during the Vietnam era. Because truth is interpreted, the veteran writer carries the responsibility to tell the "unvarnished truth" and, according to some Vietnam War writers, a little "lying" is needed to tell the truth. Stephen Wright, for instance, argues that, as an author, "the factual material of Vietnam War is so bizarre that many of the true stories, in fact, have a 'tinny ring of inauthenticity to them,' and to actually employ many of these factual coincidences and ironies in a book 'would really, really ring false'" (Lomperis 50).

It seems that in Vietnam War narratives many different opinions are necessary to idealize the Vietnam War that is believed by most veterans. The vets want to tell the truth in their narratives, but they have their own way to do it. Kovic, for instance, claims that "all he had tried to do was tell the truth about the war" (Kovic 165). In order to understand this artistic way of telling the truth, many were the veteran writers that realized, as O'Brien has noted, that "lying is a way one can get to a kind of truth," and O'Brien explains that "issues can be clarified sometimes by telling lies" (Lomperis 51). Therefore, literal truth in Vietnam War narratives seems far from existing, and once the veteran writer is preparing a piece of writing, all the drama that is necessary to judge what is right and wrong about their

Vietnam War experiences turns into a difficult and problematic situation. However, the decisions between fact and fiction must be taken, although, most of the time, fact and fiction become of equal importance. White asserts that it is in the fictional narrative

that our desire for the imaginary, the possible, must contest with the imperatives of the real, the actual. If we view narration and narrativity, as the instruments by which the conflicting claims of the imaginary and the real are mediated, arbitrated, or resolved in a discourse, we begin to comprehend both the appeal of narrative and the grounds for refusing it. (*The Value* 8-9)

Thus, the imaginary struggles to gain control over the factual perceptions of the veteran writer. Even so, the writer might feel the need to hold to his honest vision of the war. For the war narrative to be attractive there is also the need to combine fiction and fact. On the other hand, if the writer does not hold to his creative process to produce his narrative, he will be then writing history. Heinemann contends that “the story of war will always be the individual’s story, for the same reason that ‘authentic’ war stories will always be anti-war stories” (Nally 1), “authenticity” is not enough to represent a “real” war story. Hence, the perception of veterans is very important when they are writing war narratives. It was impossible for the veterans, during the war, to witness everything and see facts in the same way. Perception however, becomes a moral responsibility for the veteran writer and it also demands a “process of selection that Stephen Wright described as moving from ‘crude fact to imaginative truth’ by ‘making all these facts human and giving them human sense’ through creative leaps of imagination” (Lamperis 51). As Heinemann has noted, “it is the writer’s job to understand that some things demand knowledge as well as acknowledgement. Extreme human circumstance will always be story worthy” (Nally 1).

Although the Vietnam War ended more than thirty years ago, the veteran writer continues to draw lessons from that outrageous period. Some veteran writers still have difficulties in fully expressing in their narratives what they have experienced on the battlefield and on their return back home. The difficulty the vets have to express in writing their experiences occurs mainly because not all facts and insights are precisely equal, and also because the traumatic act of war is still a fine that many of the vets have to pay. The debate between fact and fiction seems to be endless. Lomperis, however, has noted that most of the vets' narratives "reveal emotion and can examine motives" and that "it is in lying bare motives" that the veterans "find out why things happen. And these are the real facts: the information that is put in an insightful pattern that allows us to understand" (Lomperis 62). He goes on to write that

an understanding of the Vietnam War is not going to come from one writer's personal experience alone. It is going to come from writing that will be able to make the experiences of others and their writings his own. He will have to incorporate facts that are not his own and that he has not known before. To make his pattern true, other facts, both fictional and nonfictional, are going to have to be related to his own, including the great lost fact of the Vietnam war literature so far, the Vietnamese people over whose hearts and minds the war was supposedly fought. (Lomperis 62)

However, the literary voices of the Vietnam veterans has shown that there is no specific rule to pattern either the vets' writing or the reasons they write about their war experiences. Actually, each veteran has his own way of writing, his own reason to write about his war experiences and a personal way to tell his truth about the war and the Vietnam he once lived. The vets belong to the Vietnam War era and their narratives are the

result of their deep connection and involvement with the war. The war stays and remains alive in the hearts and souls of the American soldiers who fought in Vietnam, teaching real values, life lessons, and highlighting hope.

For example, Kovic's writing, despite asserting an anti-heroic story that tried to affirm the morality of America's involvement in the war and deny the ideas of patriotism and glory associated with war, also works as an attempt to communicate the trauma of war. Kovic, a veteran writer, writes to teach people about the true horrors of war and his writing is a way to raise his voice against the war, as a refusal to be silenced. In a new introduction to his book, *Born on the Fourth of July*, released in March 2005, Kovic states:

I wanted people to understand. I wanted to share with them as nakedly and openly and intimately as possible what I had gone through, what I had endured. . . . I wanted people to know about the hospitals and the enema room, about why I had become opposed to the war, why I had grown more and more committed to peace and nonviolence. I had been beaten by the police and arrested twelve times for protesting the war and I had spent many nights in jail in my wheelchair. I had been called a Communist and a traitor, simply for trying to tell the truth about what had happened in that war, but I refused to be intimidated. (Kovic 17)

Kovic's writing besides exposing his devastated feelings and denouncing the U.S. administration's lies and manipulations, also shares many similarities with other vets' accounts. Other than writing their own truth in their narratives, many of them tried everything they could to speak out against war. They organized themselves in many groups around the U.S. to protest against the war and consequently were beaten, arrested, and put on trial. However, the Vietnam veterans survived the so called "endless war" and they

overcame the silence that used to hold them back in their mutilated bodies and disturbed minds.

The veterans' literary voices brought another sense to the vets' lives after the war, in which the search for hope and a meaning for their war experiences is a constant attempt for those who believed they were betrayed by America. The Vietnam War literature also strengthens the veterans who suffered a dramatic transformation from pro-war patriots to anti-war dissidents. Even though, the war is still going on in their hearts and souls and the vets' accounts remain as a vital component of the vets' trajectory between Vietnam and the other wars.

The Vietnam War was a jigsaw event with no apparent meaning, confusing and hard to follow. Most veterans assert that their literary production is a key factor to keep them in tune with the past, and their narratives work as a link between the Vietnam War era and the people that suffered in it. The vets' literary voices are calls that set their minds to honor those who lost their lives on the battlefield as well as those who survived. It brings back the vets' memories of the war period, and does not let the vets forget the sad loss of so many young American soldiers. For those who come after, Vietnam War literature is the vets' legacy to the world as well as their inheritance, as an attempt to convey their experiences through the facts and fictions that their often traumatized minds are able to bear.

2. The Homecoming Experience: The Enemy Never Dies

All the wrong people remember Vietnam. I think all the people who remember it should forget it, and all the people who forgot it should remember it.

Michael Herr, *Dispatches*.

For many American soldiers who fought the Vietnam War, coming back home was one of the most terrifying war experiences, not because the vets feared a turnaround of their official enemy, the Vietcongs, neither were they worried about being asked to go back to serve the U.S. one more tour of duty in Vietnam, because many were the soldiers who went back to Vietnam for one more year of heavy army duties. On the contrary, the post-war was hard because many of the terrifying experiences undergone by American soldiers in the battlefield of Vietnam jungles drastically increased in their homeland. For the first time the so called 'biggest nation in the world' lost a war, and back in the United States the American veterans were forced to face prejudice and rejection from their own people. The vets were morally denied by Americans, and they often had their veteran rights refused.

The Vietnam War veterans were the generation of combatants that the American people tried hard to cross out of their memory. They were not a "lost generation" as William Eastlake explains, the Vietnam veterans were the "ignored generation, the generation that was used by old people to kill young people" (Eastlake 139). The vets realized that even back home, where they were supposed to find a safe shelter, the war was not over, and "the tragedy of Vietnam War," as Arthur Neil pointed out, "continued for years after the war was over" (Neil 100). The war fought back home increased day after day because of civilians' negative attitudes towards the veterans. Therefore, the Vietnam

veterans had to find a new strategy to survive. They often felt confronted by their communities and their own people turned out to be their new ‘enemies.’ Coming back home was the beginning of a new moment in the vets’ lives and this hard process of returning home was faced, under great difficulty, at the very moment the vets stepped on the American soil.

This chapter focuses on the post-war period and especially on how the representations of the vets’ new identity asserted in this period was shaped as being the consequence of the traumatic war experiences they suffered. The literary characters Kovic and Paco play important roles in illustrating the vets’ identity transformation process, which passed through the investigation of new places of threat, enmity and conflicts that were gradually revealed in the veterans’ lives during the homecoming period.

Many accounts have shown that it was in the American airports that face to face threats towards veterans started. The American airports became places where the vets’ confusion in returning home began to mix with pain, isolation, and rejection. According to Paul Lyons,

in the popular mythology about the return home of the Vietnam veteran there is always an ugly incident at the airport. The G.I.⁷ is confronted by angry, self-righteous protesters, usually described as long-haired and scruffy. The male hippies often seem to be performing before their girlfriends; the females seem to take great pleasure in throwing the epithet “baby-killers” in the vet’s face. (Lyons 193)

⁷ A soldier in the U.S. armed forces. 1930s (originally denoting equipment supplied to US forces): abbreviation of government (or general) issue.

The Vietnam veterans were often met at the airports by protestors who were ready to show their hostile reception. The vets were treated poorly and some of them reported being spat on, usually by the American hippies who saw the vets as losers. In his *Working-Class War – American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, Christian Appy reports a veteran's experience:

I arrived at Los Angeles International Airport. . . . On my way to the taxis, I passed two young women in the waiting area. One of these young women approached me and, in a low voice, called me a 'baby killer' and spat on my ribbons. I was in uniform and wearing the Vietnamese Service Medal, the Vietnamese Campaign Medal, an Air Force Commendation Medal, and the Purple Heart. (Appy 304)

Therefore, being treated as criminals or murderers at the American airports revealed that civilians strongly disapproved the return of Vietnam veterans and their war. This typical act of receiving the veterans badly became part of the substance of the stories that surround this particular post-war experience. The America the veterans returned to was completely different from the America they left before going to Vietnam. As Lyons has noted, in his survey made among the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), "most vets feel that American people made them feel 'invisible and ignored'; very few felt much appreciated and supported," other vets "felt that they were 'treated with hostility and anger,' one of whom recalls being 'jeered and cursed'" (Lyons 194). Thus, if a vet did not experience protestors at airports, then the homecoming story is more limited to how they were treated among their relatives, friends, and strangers. Most civilians were totally apathetic on matters related to Vietnam. Harvard Sitikoff, a professor of history at the University of New Hampshire, explains that "the majority of Americans, it appeared,

neither wanted to talk or think about their nation's longest and most debilitating war--the only war the United States ever lost" (Chambers II 766). Americans seemed not to care about the war anymore and many of them were trying to forget the war. The vets found themselves helpless and without any one to share their traumatic experiences. They returned home and tended to be alone, keeping their thoughts to themselves. They avoided talking about the war and being in touch with other veterans, who were, after all, behaving in a similar way, staying uncomfortably quiet to keep the secret about their heinous crime. Appy explains that the veterans "returned from Vietnam in virtual isolation, received no national homecoming ceremonies, and lacked adequate medical and psychological care, educational benefit, and job training" (Appy 3). The vets were contaminated and alienated by the Vietnam War and often seen as strangers, aliens, indigenous or someone who has never belonged to America. They were the unwanted Americans, wronged and helpless.

On the other hand, the vets complained about the importance of letting America understand that they were not the only ones who lost the war. For them, the American nation lost it, and it is the nation's responsibility as a whole to admit American's first defeat. However, the vets soon realized that no one else would carry this shameful burden with them. The veterans felt alone, not safe, not confident, but completely insecure. The U.S. government, their friends and family had abandoned them. The vets were lonely and unhappy. They were forced to accept the difficulties and the unpleasant task of carrying this historical shame forever. They were blamed and judged by other Americans, who just like them were raised to believe that winning wars was something one took for granted in the United States. Batcheck, a chopper pilot, explains for two soldiers the reason for the American disapproval towards them: "It's because nobody in the States gives a damn about the Vietnam War. They want to forget it. Anyway, you're supposed to win a war. You

remind them that it's still going on. You're supposed to win a war or get killed. You guys didn't do either" (Eastlake 155). The vets were devastated. They were digging in their hearts and minds new trenches to hide from their fellow countrymen the shame of an entire nation. Ashamed and confused, they could no longer live in peace with civilians and the U.S. government. Thus, many active political groups were created to support the veterans' cause against the war and these groups deliberately protested against the rejection and prejudice the veterans were going through. The vets wanted to be listened to and understood by America.

In her essay "Confronting Political Trauma," Cathy Caruth discusses the United States withdrawal from Vietnam and points out the vets' demand for such active political groups. According to Caruth,

this was perhaps the first war in the United States history in which the veterans of the war demanded—through active political groups such as Vietnam Vets Against the War, among others—that the citizens of our country, as well as the politicians in our government, listen to the experiences of soldiers at war and begin to see the war from the soldiers' own unique perspective. (Caruth 179)

The American soldiers who fought the Vietnam War arrived home not as heroes, but as "losers." Before trying to live a normal life in the U.S. and going out to protest against the American reaction to them, many of the defeated and unsuccessful veterans needed to pass through the sore trial and tribulation offered in the poor, rat-infested, and badly equipped military hospitals. Kovic remembers that just before his treatment in the VA hospitals he began to question the righteousness of war and the reasons people were

protesting against the veterans. But after a while he started to realize that the beliefs he was holding for so long could be definitely wrong. As Kovic states:

I was in Vietnam when I first heard about the thousands of people protesting against the war in the streets of America. I didn't want to believe it at first – people protesting against us when we were putting our lives on the line for our country. The men in my outfit used to talk about it a lot. How could they do this to us? Many of us would not be coming back and many others would be wounded or maimed. We swore they would pay, the hippies and draft card burners. They would pay if we ever ran into them.

But the hospital had changed all of that. It was the end of whatever belief I'd still had in what I'd done in Vietnam. Now I wanted to know what I had lost my legs for, why I and the others had gone at all. But it was still very hard for me to think of speaking out against the war, to think of joining those I'd once called traitors. (Kovic 119)

Kovic was devastated when he truly realized the impact of the Vietnam War in his country and on his own body. Kovic, was not only physically injured, but also mentally damaged and traumatized for the rest of his life. In addition, the VA hospitals became for Kovic and many other veterans part of their war experiences. It was for many of them a humiliating and suffocating routine, and to get rid of it was often seen as an impossible mission. Kovic explains that when he arrived in America he was taken to one of these horrible hospitals with fifty other soldiers who were recently wounded in the war. He describes these soldiers as the following:

Twenty-year-old blind men and amputees, men without intestines, men who limped, men who were in wheelchairs and men in pain. He noticed they all

had strange smiles on their faces and he had one too, he thought. They were men who had played with death and cheated it at a very young age.

(Kovic 29)

Kovic explains that the VA hospitals are as horrible as a “concentration camp,” full of “broken” and “depressive” people, a place where it is possible to smell the “living death,” and as Kovic succinctly puts it, “this is a nightmare” (Kovic 35). Nevertheless, the VA hospitals were also part of Paco’s routine, and in one of these hospitals Paco was asked where he was from, but somehow he could not mention his hometown. He only remembered the war which was alive and still going on in his mind.

“From?” Paco repeats. “Not around here. Wounded in the war,” Paco says, expecting an argument. “Got fucked up at a place called Fire Based Harriette near Phuc Luc,” and he stretches his arm and turns his head to the side to show off his scars. “Been in the hospital. Got out of the Army. Convalesced in one VA hospital after another. Cane’s to help with the walking”

(Heinemann 152).

The veteran Paco, “famous as the nameless wounded man from Alpha Company’s massacre” (Heinemann 49) had no home when he got back to the U.S. and no family or friends to welcome him back. He was alone and held by his vivid war memories, speculating his origin and the bad treatment he received in the VA hospitals, wondering whether he would find a place to sleep and work. As usual for Vietnam veterans, Paco was just trying to survive, “looking for anything steady” (Heinemann 72). And wondering just as Kovic, how to get rid of the unwanted memories of war. Some of these memories keep reminding them of their treatment in the “decrepit, rat-infested VA hospital” (Appy 13).

Kovic however reinforces Appy's statement and writes about the dirty and declined VA hospitals where he received his treatment. As Kovic complains:

The men in my room throw their breadcrumbs under the radiator to keep the rats from chewing on our numb legs during the nights. We tuck our bodies in with the sheets wrapped around us. There are never enough aides to go around on the wards, and constantly there is complaining by the men. The most severely injured are totally dependent on the aides to turn them. They suffer the most and break down with sores. These are the voices that can be heard screaming in the night for help that never comes. Urine bags are constantly overflowing onto the floors while the aides play poker on the toilet bowls in the enema room. The sheets are never changed enough and many of the men stink from not being properly bathed. It never makes any sense to us how the government can keep asking money for weapons and leave us lying in our own filth. (Kovic 39)

The military hospitals were unfortunate places where many vets had to start life again after the war was over. The vets were physically injured and often without anyone from their families or even a close friend to support them during their treatment, and because of their loneliness and lack of money there were no other treatment options affordable and available to them. The VA Hospitals remained as the vets only hope to be treated. Lonely and frightened to talk about the war, the vets often found themselves in a completely different world, in which American people were unable to help or simply comprehend the situation the vets were in. In Kovic's opinion "the hospital is like the whole war all over again" (Kovic 41). The hospitals were places that forced the veterans to hide their frustrations from their families and friends because they knew deep in their hearts

that, in general, civilians would heavily criticize the situation they were in, blaming them for being responsible for their own misfortune. The vets suspected anyone, who after all could be a threat to increase the psychological and physical conflict they were passing through. Kovic, for instance, asserts that, “no one wants too many people to know how much of him has really died in the war” (Kovic 37). The conditions the vets went through in the VA hospitals humiliated them. They frequently felt ashamed, confused and disrespected. They were often treated in a stupid and unfair way by nurses and doctors who saw the vets as “something” that were part of their daily work. Thus, the vets lost respect of those who surrounded them. Explicating his frustration, Kovic complains about his sorrow and pain:

There is no real healing left anymore, everything that is going to heal has healed already and now I am left with the corpse, the living dead man, the man with the numb legs, the man in the wheelchair, the Easter Seal boy, the cripple, the sexlessman, the man with the numb dick, the man who can't make children, the man who can't stand, the man who can't walk, the angry lonely man, the bitter man with the nightmares, the murder man, the man who cries in the shower. (Kovic 38)

Nevertheless, for Kovic, Paco and other veterans there were no excuses for their pain and frustrations. They lost the war and had to learn how to deal with it. They were on the losers' side and had to understand as fast as they could how to behave properly to survive among so many Americans who acted as if they constantly wanted to blame the veterans “with hostility or as outright traitors” (Kovic 161). Therefore, in the veterans' lives the war traumas constantly increased and generated disequilibrium in human affairs, especially among the veterans who were now protesting against the war and against the

civilians who thought the veterans had no plausible explanation to protests against the U.S. government. Kovic, however, states his reasons for trying to overcome the drama he was living.

I'm a Vietnam Veteran. I gave America my all and the leaders of this government threw me and the others way to rot in their V.A. hospitals. What's happening in Vietnam is a crime against humanity, and I just want the American people to know that we have come all the way across this country, sleeping on the ground and in the rain, to let the American people see for themselves the men who fought their war and have come to oppose it. If you can't believe the veteran who fought the war and was wounded in the war, who can believe. (Kovic 165)

However, Kovic's statement shows that the homecoming of Vietnam veterans critically involves the debate of trauma studies. In general, the study of trauma focuses in large part on the bodily or psychic mechanisms through which trauma is experienced and remembered, and more specifically, on the extent to which trauma can be considered a discursive or extra-discursive event, registered either in consciousness or directly in the body. Nevertheless, in her article "Confronting Political Trauma," Caruth explains that:

To listen to the soldiers' voices and to see through their eyes is no simple task; however, the truth to which they have asked us to listen concerns both the horror of war—or, in particular, the horror of a war that has not been clearly justified—and also the horror of betrayal, the betrayal of the public and of the soldiers themselves by a government not willing to reveal either its own motives for entering and escalating the war, or its intentions for remaining there in a stalemate. (Caruth 179)

The post-war has revealed that the traumatic symptoms of Vietnam veterans helped to assert the vets' identity as the vets' being the "horror of war." The vets' narratives produced after the Vietnam War are often based in a mix of images, memories and sufferings that usually keep haunting the vets and shocking their minds to establish the horror. Thus, harmful psychological effects from unpleasant traumatic experiences have been established as the main characteristics of the vets' narratives in the post war period.

In *Paco's Story*, Larry Heinemann writes about the difficulties and struggles of the wounded soldier's return home from the Vietnam War, Paco Sullivan, who has a hard time in finding a place to live and work in the U.S., even although, Paco "wants to discover a livable peace" (Heinemann 174), but things don't really happened the way he expected. Paco returns to the United States with his legs full of pins, badly scarred and limping. He needs daily rations of Librium and Valium and cannot figure out what to do next. According to Heinemann, "Paco would sit up in bed, sore and exhausted, gazing down at himself – bitterly confronted with that mosaic of scars – waiting for his nightly doses of Librium and Valium to overwhelm him" (Heinemann 136). Yet, he becomes an introspective dishwasher in the small town of Boone, no matter how hard he works, nothing muffles the anguish in his mind and body and "sometimes he prances around, but kind of hobbling, kind of deeply and slowly limping. He's got the pills and that bottle on the dresser. Getting more and more drunk, holding his head with both hands" (Heinemann 205). Returning home was not an easy task at all for the American veterans who fought the Vietnam War. The vets were contaminated and alienated by the Vietnam War and often seen as strangers, aliens, indigenous or someone who has never belonged to America. They were the unwanted Americans, wronged and helpless.

In *Paco's Story*, Heinemann uses the metaphor of a ghost to illustrate how the other characters in the novel see the strangeness of Paco. Cathy, for instance, remarks in her diary how her aunt Myrna sees Paco: “aunt Myrna says he has a way of stiffening up and staring right through you. As if he’s a ghost. Or you’re the ghost” (Heinemann 206). Paco was indifferent to the world around him and he carried on living like that, “clean, dirty, it’s all the same to him” (Heinemann 206). Yet, he looks “like death warmed over. Like he was someone back from the dead” (Heinemann 207). Paco however, with his body full of scars, looks more like a living “map” of the Vietnam War in America. He is described as a kind of “braille” or a “mosaic” to be read, appreciated, and someone that awakens curiosity “as if each scar had its own story” (Heinemann 101). Thus, Vietnam Veterans like Paco became a kind of unique personality in the American society. If in one hand the veterans arouse some curiosity, in which just few Americans tried to understand who the vets really were; on the other hand, most of the American people ignored such strange figures among them. The vets’ accounts usually show that many civilians were afraid and scared of so many mutilated and deformed soldiers who, in turn collaborated to depreciate the image of their communities.

Although the Vietnam War was over, the tragic consequences of it lasted for many years. The veterans had returned home, but the national warm welcome back never really happened. Neil explains that, “the returning veterans were treated casually by others in the community as if they were away on vacation” (Neil 101). When Kovic and his veteran friend Eddie arrived in the United States from the Vietnam War they were invited to join a small Memorial Day parade in their hometown. Kovic then begins to feel that there was something different going on inside of him and also on the crowd’s reaction. He realized that the sense of the meaning he had about the war was not the same. Kovic and Eddie went

up to the stage parade to greet the public, but people were careless. “The parade had hardly begun but already he felt trapped, just like in the hospital” (Kovic 108), and instead of people waving and cheering, the crowd stood, “staring at Eddie Dugan and himself like they weren’t even there. . . . And he couldn’t understand what was happening” (Kovic 90). Later on, the “tall commander,” a veteran of World War II, faces the crowd and, “almost crying now, he shouted to the crowd that they couldn’t give up in Vietnam. ‘We have to win...’ he said, his voice still shaking; then pausing he pointed his finger at him and Eddie Dugan, ‘because of them!’” (Kovic 92-93). Kovic got confused with the crowd’s attitude and he was wondering “why he and Eddie hadn’t even been given the chance to speak” (Kovic 93). Kovic explains that “He was beginning to feel very lonely. He kept looking over at Eddie. Why hadn’t they waved, he thought. Eddie had lost both of his legs and he had come home with almost no body left, and no one seemed to care” (Kovic 105). Kovic then realized that part of the American society could not forget that the United States lost the war. The discussions about the role and importance of America in the war were still relevant in some communities, and for some American citizens they should have never gone to fight the war in Vietnam. Moreover, Appy explains that,

Most public discourse about veterans suggested that their problems were primarily ones of readjustment, that veterans returning individually from war lacked collective reentry rituals, that they reentered civilian society so rapidly they did not have enough time to “decompress,” and that society failed to offer veterans the gratitude and welcome so necessary to the reestablishment of a positive civilian identity. While those matters are not unimportant, the simplistic implication of much commentary about veterans was that everything would have been fine had these men simply been given a

parade, a pat on the back, and a few more benefits. However, to follow Peter Marin's argument once again, society has not yet adequately addressed "the unacknowledged source of much of the vets' pain and anger: profound moral distress, arising from the realization that one has committed acts with real and terrible consequences. (Appy 321)

For many other Americans, as a result, the act of wanting to forget the war involved their wish to forget the misery, the death and the atrocities they had followed for many years in the press and television news broadcasts. As Michael Clark has noted:

Since the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam in 1975, the media industry in the United States has worked doggedly to represent that war and its veterans in a form compatible with the traditional norms of popular culture, and the various events surrounding the tenth anniversary of the fall of Saigon testified to the complete success of that program. New memorials were dedicated, complaints about Agent Orange⁸ paid off, and lingering problems with unemployment, crime and the emotional complexities of Post-Vietnam Syndrome were dismissed as the adolescent whining of chronic malcontents by upwardly mobile veterans whose happy families and fine jobs proved that the Vietnam Vet was really OK. (Clark 46)

A new image and history of the war was created to relieve and comfort American citizens, but for the vets this attempt in trying to overcome the cataclysm of Vietnam is something that only collaborated to increase the lies and disgrace the vets were already used to. It was very difficult for the Vietnam veterans to accept a new approach attempting

⁸ Agent Orange: a poisonous chemical used by US soldiers during the Vietnam War to remove the leaves from forests so that they could see the enemy. It caused birth defects in many Vietnamese children, and after the war about 60.000 former US soldiers complained of illnesses.

to represent the war they were still fighting in their minds, especially when such an approach was coming from the press, the media, or the government that had betrayed them. Vietnam was still vivid in their minds, bodies and souls. Many veterans had the feeling that they were still fighting a war, rather than truly being at home and there was nothing they could do to forget it. Kovic's experiences shows that denying the truth of what he had lived through in Vietnam was impossible:

every morning I wheel into the bathroom of my new apartment and throw up. It frightens me to live alone with my paralyzed body and my thoughts of Vietnam. I'm dreaming too often of the dead corporal. The tension and fear are twisted up inside me like a loaded spring. (Kovic 127)

Kovic's traumatic memories followed him insistently, disturbing and harming his life. His constant feeling of desperation is something which many veterans would identify with. Kovic's pain, "like all great pain, disrupts and breaks up the social world's pattern of assurances" (Hariman 40). In a similar way, Paco's great psychological and physical pain also disrupt the patterns and values that American society is used to. Although the vets were in a rich country that could offer comfort, good treatment, and financial assistance, most of the vets had difficulties in attaining such privileges due to the real difficulties and struggles during their transitions back home. The veterans faced redeployment back to overseas duty, and their communities were not prepared to reintroduce them back home. The war trauma was alive, vivid and continuing to shock and harm the veterans' minds and bodies. The trauma seemed to spread among the veterans like an epidemic. Paco, for instance, "luxuriating in the stupefying doses of Librium and Valium" was constantly recalling the fascination lived on the battlefield (Heinemann 136). He needs to take daily doses of drugs to keep going, and no matter how hard he works or how long ago the war

was over, there was nothing that he could do to ease the mental suffering he constantly experiences. The traumatic memories of the war keep invading his mind like a ghost which he cannot escape. Thoughts and nightmares about cataclysmic Vietcong attacks are constant threats that overwhelm him. Everyday there is something that brings back savage memories. As describes some of his nights:

I still dream about it nights – nightmare monsters that smell to high heaven, nasty whirligig-looking contraptions that keep snatching at you, slobbery-looking warlocks with the evil fucking’ eye that gives you cold sweats and shivers so bad you think you got some dynamite dose of malaria.

(Heinemann 21)

Back home Paco is often imprisoned at nights in his own bedroom and his nightmares seem to last forever. The war zone exposure is a life change experience and it has changed Paco’s life utterly and forever, incapacitating him to live a normal life. Paco explains that his memories were usually about,

guys with their heads cracked open like walnuts, bleeding from their ears and the scalp. Guys with their chests squashed flat from fucking’-A booby-trapped bombs. Guys with their legs blown off at the thighs, and shrapnel hits from there on up from a direct hit with a Chicom RPG – an armor-piercing rocket-propelled grenade. (Heinemann 20-21)

He is constantly threatened by traumatic memories that create continuous conflicts in his mind. The representation of Paco’s experiences shows the resemblance between Paco, Kovic and the other Vietnam veterans, reaffirming their war experiences as an intense struggle against the symptoms generated by the war. Nevertheless, Appy asserts that, “more than 500,000 Vietnam veterans who suffered some form of posttraumatic stress

syndrome did not experience the worst symptoms until five or even ten years after their tours” (Appy 310). These traumatic memories of Vietnam War became part of the vets’ daily routine, changing their lives intensively and making their lives something impossible to be recovered. An irreconcilable change happened in the vet’s minds, and they had to deal with the impossibility of having their friends, families and nation as the ones who would support them in the process of healing the traumas of war. According to Herbert Hendin,

This response to combat trauma involves eternal vigilance in dealings with others, an expectation that any argument is a prelude to a violent fight. . . .

Under such emotional pressure, the veteran perceives civilian life as an extension of the war and almost everyone . . . is seen as a potential enemy.

. . . [They have] a perpetual readiness for attack, even when no danger exists.

(Hendin 88-89)

Loneliness and despair are the vets’ most common characteristics narrated in their novels and accounts. Pretty much everything related to the veterans or the Vietnam War was not considered as being good for America. Without any support back home, the veterans felt abandoned, and they did not find a way to share what was happening in their inner side. Intensive feelings of sadness, nightmares, and a sense of numbness were the most visible traumatic consequences. They were abandoned, and responsible for taking care of themselves. Appy explains that,

Even the Veterans’ Administration, an agency that for ten years refused even to acknowledge the existence of psychological problems specifically related to service in Vietnam, eventually conceded that at least 500,000 veterans suffered from Vietnam Delayed Stress Syndrome or, as it is now most commonly known, post-traumatic stress disorder. Specialists who treat this

disorder usually place the figure a good deal higher, at about 800,000, and extensive interviews with veterans suggest that for every man who might be clinically diagnosed with the syndrome, there are just as many who share a number of its symptoms or suffer a milder form. Furthermore, among the many veterans who have lived stable and productive civilian lives, a considerable number have indeed denied or repressed their war-related pain or attributed it to some other, more manageable source. (Appy 320)

Back home there was no government to rely on or family to understand the veterans' pain. Nobody would trust the vets anymore; they were called cowards, and they were the ones responsible for smearing the image of American history. A bitter defeat became part of the Vietnam veterans' lives, echoing in their hearts and minds the shame and guilty of losing the war. They were the first to lose an American War, and now would have to carry this traumatic burden for the rest of their lives. Neil states that:

Psychologically, the veterans were still fighting the Vietcong and dodging land mines. The Veterans were also victimized by returning home to face such negative stereotype as "ruthless baby-killer", "drug addict", and "having fought in an immoral war." There was a lack of appreciation both by the general public and the American government. The nation wanted to put the trauma of the war behind and get on with the business of restoring normality. (Neil 101)

The vets had to struggle psychically and physically to survive, and finding a job became part of their struggle. They had a problem in being accepted as honest and good workers. Civilians and the government avoided the veterans due to their lack of experience, and because they were very young, many of them had never worked before. They had their

first job in the army and many of them only knew how to kill. And because they lost the war, people also thought that they could not work well, and no one wanted to work with a “drug addict” or a “baby killer”. According to Neil, “a former helicopter pilot was requested to take off his coat so a potential employer could see if there was evidence of needle marks for taking drugs; a nurse who had served in a medical combat unit in Vietnam was assigned to emptying bedpans in a civilian hospital” (Neil 101). The veterans hardly ever received support from the government, and most of them did not have the chance to be introduced into society again. Thus, to work and start life normally was almost impossible.

Neil explains that

many veterans developed sleep disturbances, such as difficulty in getting to sleep, waking too early in the morning, or sleeping too much. Sleep was frequently disrupted by recurrent nightmares in which the veteran saw themselves dodging land mines and booby traps, encountering ambushes, watching their buddies die, or witnessing or participating in atrocities. Thus, the war did not end for many of the veterans with their return to civilian life. The problems remained of reconstructing their experiences and their self-identities. (Neil 102)

Kovic’s sleeping experience was full of problems and worries. As he complains: “Sometimes I’d have terrible nightmares about the war. I’d wake up scared in my room in the middle of the night. There was no one to hold on to, just myself there inside my frozen body” (Kovic 163). In addition to the nightmares and loneliness, Paco does not always have a place to stay:

He grins hard against the still-emerging, burgeoning pain rising from under the fading medication; he thinks, I have two things to do before dark, find

work and get a place to stay; any damn work, bear even chintzy damn day labor, and a place to sleep, but not a flop. I'm through with flops; through with sleeping outdoors wrapped in every shirt I own, be goddamned sure of that; through with musty, itchy barn lofts, hospitals (when they let you sleep), and shit-for-nothing, bunkhouse hostels saturated with cockroach poison. (Heinemann 66)

Paco, Kovic and many other veterans had a hard time to reconstruct their lives according to the patterns of the American society, and their traumas were almost always preventing them from being sociable again. And if there was a process that vets could go through to try to restore their self-identity it would demand a lot of time, patience and an understanding that vets and civilians could not bear with yet. The fact that many Vietnam veterans were poor and uneducated helped to increase their problems and also to slow the process of introducing them back to society. According to Appy,

American soldiers found in Vietnam a painful and confusing mirror in which to reflect upon their place in American society. "Poor" in one society, they were "rich" (but "cheap") in another. They were caught in the middle of a struggle between the First World and the Third, a struggle that left thousands of veterans feeling utterly adrift, like homeless and abandoned executors of American power. (Appy 297)

In an interview with the psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, Caruth discusses some of the features regarding trauma and identity. Lifton explains that trauma can also be thought as a theory of the self. He understands that extreme trauma creates a second self which is radically altered, but despite trauma being extreme, trauma correlates to the person's identity. Thus, a traumatized self is created, although, this self is not totally a new self.

According to Lifton, this apparently new self is “what one brought into the trauma as affected significantly and painfully, confusedly, but in a very primal way, by that trauma. And recovery from post-traumatic effects, or from survivor conflicts, cannot really occur until that traumatized self is reintegrated” (Trauma 137).

The war trauma lived by Vietnam vets back home intensified their suffering as a constant threat and gave the veterans a new post-war identity that reaffirmed who the vets really were. They often found trouble in asserting their identity. It was difficult for them to have an aim or a focus for their lives and many of them never really understood what to achieve in their post-war life. Kovic, however, found out that protesting against the war would help him to give meaning to his life. Through the years after the war, he understood pretty well what matters were involved in the Vietnam War, the lies, the corruption and the political interests that lay behind it. Besides, he could use his own disgrace to favor him in this new stage of his life:

This body I had trained so hard to be strong and quick, this body I now dragged around with me like an empty corpse – was to mean much more than I had ever realized. Much more than I’d known the night I cried into my pillow in Massapequa because my youth had been desecrated, my physical humanity defiled. I think I honestly believe that if only I could speak out to enough people I could stop the war myself. I honestly believe people would listen to me because of who I was, a wounded American veteran.

(Kovic 150)

Kovic then started to feel useful again, a new strength took over his body and gave him a new task in life, protesting against those who were promoting the war. Many veterans’ reports claim that in Vietnam they were completely different people, during their

service in the Vietnam War and especially in the battlefield, they took on a new identity. They were trained to forget all the values they had acquired at home with their families, friends, and teachers. At the war, the vets had to incorporate the new self they were trained for. They became machines to kill and destroy. But back home, the veterans with their contaminated identity were useless and they suffered the consequences of the war when it was finally over.

Since many veterans had difficulties in forgetting their unwanted memories, some of them even tried to move to a different country as way to escape from people and things that would remind them of the war. It was very hard for veterans to openly share their war experiences with others, and even if they met other Americans or other veterans, there was a psychological distance that would often set them apart from the normal social environment. Their conversations were full of pain and frustration. Many relatives and former friends did not know how to interact with them or deal with their reality. The civilians were not able to manage this process of accepting the vets back home because they were not prepared or trained for this. The veterans were psychologically isolated with no support to rely on, and the reconstruction of their identity was something hard to achieve. According to Neil:

The post-traumatic stress syndrome included persistent feelings of sadness or emptiness, an inability to derive pleasure from everyday activities, difficulty in concentrating or making decisions, feelings of guilt and pains that did not respond to treatment. The war veterans were disproportionately represented among alcoholics, hospital patients, the divorced, and prison inmates.

(Neil 102)

Many of the veterans returning from Vietnam lost the sense of relationship, and they did not know how to relate to their families and friends in the same way they used to do before the war. The vets also had many problems with sustaining a more intimate relationship with members from the opposite sex. They did not know how to offer and find assistance for their loved ones. During the war the army somehow taught them to be emotionless about things related to women, so they could entirely focus their strength, thoughts and emotions on the enemy. They had to find a way to manage their feelings and leave their emotions for women alone. Neil explains that, “emotionality was seen as a feminine characteristic that had no place in the macho world of the military. As one platoon sergeant put it, ‘Sentiment is a word in the dictionary somewhere between shit and suicide’” (Neal 103). The soldiers were trained not to show emotions or express sorrow for whatever happens in Vietnam. However, the way Paco was assaulted at Fire Base Harriette during his tour in Vietnam clearly illustrates how willing the American veterans were to accomplish the task they were given, even if it was necessary to attack their own American platoon:

But most particularly, people think that folks do not want to hear about the night at Fire Base Harriette – down the way from LZ Skator-Gator, and within earshot of a ragtag bunch of mud-and-thatch hooches everyone called Gookville – when the whole company, except for one guy, got killed. Fucked up dead, James; scarfed up. Everybody but Paco got nominated and voted into the Hall of Fame in one fell swoop. The company was night-laagered in a tight-assed perimeter up past our eyeballs in a no-shit firefight with a battalion of headhunter NVA – corpses and cartridge brass and oily magazines and dud frags scattered around, and everyone running low on

ammo. Lieutenant Stennett crouched over his radio hoarsely screaming map coordinates to every piece of artillery, every air strike and gunship within radio range, like it was going out of style, when all of sudden – zoom – the air came alive and crawled and yammered and whizzed and hummed with the roar and buzz of a thousand incoming rounds. It was hard to see for all the gun power smoke and dust kicked up by all the muzzle flashes, but everyone looked up – GIs and zips – and knew it was every incoming round left in Creation, a wild and bloody shitstorm, a ball-busting cataclysm.

(Heinemann 14)

At Fire Base Harriette the sudden attack happened without any remorse. This attack shows that American soldiers were ready to use their gun power without thinking about the results of its destruction. The passage demonstrates that in Vietnam an American soldier could act emotionless and indifferent. Luckily, Paco was the only survival of such a cataclysm, but the physical and emotional pain of the wounds inherited in this attack will follow him forever.

Once the vets had no feelings left anymore they could keep a low expectation or no understanding at all in terms of seeing the war as something evil or unnecessary. By being emotionless, they could also protect themselves from the effects of the war to be immune from the atrocities faced in their everyday war routine. However, back home things were completely different, and all the emotions that were repressed in the war came to the fore. The vets wanted and felt the need to have a relationship. They wanted to be with the opposite sex. They wanted to experiment the sexual relation that the battlefield was not able to offer. Many of them kept wondering where and what kind of women would have a relationship with a deformed veteran. After the war, many of the vets had their bodies

mutilated or severely wounded and some of them could not have sex anymore, like Kovic. With their bodies often full of scars and pain, the vets believed they were monstrously unattractive to women. Traumatized, they were not capable of fulfilling sexual relationships. However, they dreamed about having sex, and they patiently waited for an opportunity to be sexually redeemed. Heinemann shows that,

fucking the girl is something Paco has dreamed about over and over, sprawled spread-eagle on his creaking bed, with his flaccid cock (slashed with scars) flopped to one side of his thighs – oh, how his back would ache on those nights – his pubic hair fluffy and prickly, almost cracking in the heat, like dry grass. (Heinemann 172)

Paco wishes to have sex with his next door neighbor Cathy. It becomes an obsession and a routinely characteristic in his thoughts and imagination. For most veterans the subject of sex was not easy to deal with at all. If they really wanted to have sex, many of them had to pay for it. Otherwise, they had to fulfill their sexual need with thoughts, imagination and dreams. For the ones who had already experienced sex before the war, what remained was the pleasant memories of their perfect bodies working in a proper way, without delimitations or any missing part, the way their bodies should have always been. The frustration of not being able to be physically and mentally normal again hurt and agonize the vets. Kovic let his readers aware of his extreme physical and mental pain: “I got paralyzed from the chest down. I can’t move or feel anything” (Kovic 101). He also shares the agony of having lost all hope in having sex again and how disturbance persists in hurting him:

NO NO NO, that’s not right! That’s not fair! I want it back! They have taken it, they have robbed it, my penis will never get hard anymore. I didn’t even

have time to learn how to enjoy it and now it is gone, it is dead, it is as numb as the rest of me.

I watch other women now. I see their long slim legs standing pretty. I start to get excited, my mind racing with fantasies, and then the hurt comes...

(Kovic 112)

The emotional stress Kovic experienced is common among veterans. He comes home in a wheelchair. His body is shattered by a bullet and he can no longer feel anything below his waist. He is in a very bad situation and desperate to have his strong and healthy body back to the normal. He claims: "I want to feel, I want to feel again. . . . Please God" he says, "I want it back so bad. I will give anything, anything just to be inside a woman again" (Kovic 111). Kovic's post-war sexual life experience is a mirror of many other vets' stories whose years of disillusionment and reprimands from their countrymen are added to by the post-war traumatic experiences which they cannot avoid. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth explains that, "trauma unsettles and forces us to rethink our notions of experience and of communication" (4). Hence, Kovic found himself almost incommunicable in his homeland because his traumas were increasing and he could not really understand what had really happened to him. And just like Paco, Kovic had to learn how to live with a deformed body full of scars and pain.

The Vietnam veterans were often afflicted by war trauma. They returned home full of war symptoms and they had to carry this sickness every single day. Appy asserts that, "at a very early age Bob Foley [a Vietnam veteran] learned about alcoholism, divorce, violence, unemployment, loss, and fear: the realities of life. He associated these realities with family life" (Appy 72). Sometimes the vets' family and friends did not know about the vets' symptoms, they did not understand it, and often the vets found themselves unable to

share their traumas or did not know how to share them. Thus, the vets' traumas impacted not only their lives, but they also impacted the lives of those who were around them.

In addition, Neil explains that the soldier who survived the war attacks also felt guilty about being alive and they frequently asked questions such as "Why do some men continue to live while others are killed?" and "Why him and not me?" (Neal 103). This survivors' guilt disturbed the veterans and grew out of the chaos of the war. The discussions about what was right or wrong in humans affairs or who dies and who lives did not always find a reasonable answer, and because of that, for many veterans such fatalities were seen as the will of God.

As years passed by, Kovic understood, through his war experiences, how brutal and sad a war can be, and how the outrageous consequences of war can damage a whole nation. In a recent letter he wrote to Iraq's and Afghanistan's former soldiers and active-duty service members, Kovic calls for veterans and GIs to support antiwar movements and fight against wars. He came to the following conclusion:

We who have witnessed the obscenity of war and experienced its horror and terrible consequences have an obligation to rise above our pain and sorrow and turn the tragedy of our lives into a triumph. I have come to believe there is nothing in the lives of human beings more terrifying than war and nothing more important than for those of us who have experienced it to share its awful truth. (*Raise your voices*)

The Vietnam War narratives, the press, the media and many other reports have shown that the number of Vietnam veterans psychologically disturbed after the war was much bigger than it was during the war. The number of Vietnam veterans who committed suicide back home was much greater than the number of soldiers who died during the war.

The Vietnam veterans also had to deal with the embarrassment of being unfavorably compared to men who fought other American wars, especially those of World War II. Many veterans became homeless and their serious emotional problems were never treated properly at the VA hospitals. Many Vietnam veterans have history of alcohol and drug abuse. The unemployment rate and divorce rate for Vietnam vets were much bigger than the national average. And a considerable proportion of all incarcerated people were Vietnam veterans. Thus, the estrangement and difficulties of continuing life after the end of the war, the emotional stress, the prejudice and rejection, became for many veterans their everyday struggle.

In conclusion, the American literature of Vietnam War has shown that the post-war experiences in the life of Kovic, Paco and many other real and literary veterans who fought the Vietnam War, can be seen as the representation of an uttered cry of the vets' despair to show the destructive power of the war. The result of the war in the vets' lives and the way they lost all hope in those who could help them, but instead decided to shrug their shoulders when the vets most needed them can be used as an example for the future American generation. Besides, the Vietnam War brought no answer to America or to the world, but rather disgust and distrust of the American government. And although the U. S. government knows the cost of war, America insists on producing war after war and never considering it as the last option.

The consequences of such actions are the death of soldiers and civilians. The battlefields might have changed and the excuses to fight might be different, but the result of American wars remains the same. Lots of children, women and other civilians are severely victimized. Wars generate horrible memories and traumas that often follow its participants for the rest of their lives. It causes great sorrow and suffering on both sides, with both civilians and

veterans heavily feeling the result of such tragedy. The truth, however, is that the American myth of the effectiveness of war persists, the wars continue to happen, and the veterans' experiences have repeated and remained the same, war after war. But as Herman Melville has reminded us: "We are blind to the real sights of this world; deaf to its voice; and dead to its dead" (Melville 367).

3. Looking for the Hero: Stolen Valor in a Disrupted Society

Saigon was an addicted city, and we were the drug: the corruption of children, the mutilation of young men, the prostitution of women, the humiliation of the old, the division of the family, the division of the country-- it had all been done in our name. . . . The French city . . . had represented the opium stage of the addiction. With the Americans had begun the heroin phase.

James Fenton, *Granta*.

The Vietnam War was one of the most painful, traumatic and divisive events in American history. For almost twenty years, the bitterly contested conflict cost the lives of almost sixty thousand Americans and more than three million Asians, most of them Vietnamese. During a certain period after the war, all around the U.S. people debated the American involvement in Vietnam War. The war made the United States ill and the drama of the war spread throughout the country like an epidemic. The soldiers who survived the Vietnam War had, solemnly and shamefully, to carry for the rest of their lives the heavy burden for losing the war. They felt unfairly treated by American civilians who collaborated to increase the vets' suffering for not recognizing their attempt to defend what was perceived as the U.S. interests.

Examining the American literature of Vietnam War, especially the veterans' experiences narrated in this literature, this chapter will discuss the negative side of shame, aiming to understand how wrongdoing in the past may shape lives in the present. According to Sara Ahmed, shame can work to "acknowledge past wrongdoing" (Ahmed 101). Helen B. Lewis however, explains that, "the roots of the word shame are thought to derive from an older word meaning to cover; as such, covering oneself, literally or

figuratively, is a natural expression of shame” (Lewis 63). Therefore, the feeling of shame hurts and causes pain, and as part of the vets’ experiences, it generated past wounds that have followed the vets’ ongoing struggle to survive in a disrupted post-war American society. According to Appy:

The other world of Vietnam provided soldiers a new lens through which to examine The World. They saw firsthand the extreme contrast between the wealthiest nation on earth and one of the poorest, the contrast between America’s extraordinary technological power and the rudimentary material life of a peasant economy. They saw America’s power unleashed, reducing much of the Vietnamese landscape to bomb-cratered wasteland. This experience raised troubling questions not only about the purpose and legitimacy of the war in Vietnam but also about the meaning of life in the United States. (Appy 254)

Corrupted and morally suspect, the soldiers who survived the Vietnam War could not bear the pernicious self-conscious negative affect of the war on their bodies and minds. To understand the immoral impact of the Vietnam War on its participants, it is necessary to examine the role of shame in the veterans’ lives as a feeling of sadness, embarrassment and guilt, which gradually became part of their war experiences. Appy explains that the Vietnam experience raised problematic questions that confronted the soldiers’ beliefs about what is right and wrong, and what is important in life:

What values underlie American wealth and the exercise of its power? Is there any more purpose to life in the United States than there is to the war it wages in Vietnam, or is life in the United States also for nothing? Does the language of freedom and democracy used to justify the war have any more

basis in the reality of American society than in the regimes it supports abroad? Are Americans, for all their wealth and technology, more civilized than the rice farmers of Vietnam, or less? And who really values life? Such questions surfaced most acutely among veterans after returning to The World, but they grew directly out of their wartime experience. (Appy 254)

In his book *Shame: The Exposed Self*, Michael Lewis explains that the best way to understand shame is to consider it as an intense and negative emotion, which is directly related to the self, which has to deal with standards, responsibility and self-failure (Lewis 13). He explains the need of emotions in requiring self-reflection, with the feeling of shame more linked to the self. According to him, “shame is elicited when the self orients toward the self as a whole and involves an evaluation of the total self” (Lewis 71). In Gilbert’s words, “Shame is elicited when one experiences failure relative to a standard (one’s own or other people’s), feels responsible for the failure, and believes that the failure reflects a damaged self” (Gilbert 126). David Ross, who served as a medic in the First Infantry Division (1966-67), offers these reflections:

When Americans are talking about Vietnamese or people in India or somewhere, it’s not like we’re looking at them like they’re next door neighbors. . . . Most of us were never able to see the Vietnamese as real people. . .

I remember President Johnson in one of the psy-op [Psychological Operations] flicks we saw saying that the communist weren’t like us – they didn’t have feelings. But I always remembered . . . going into this area [after an American B-52 strike] where there was a little girl with her leg . . . traumatic amputation . . . and . . . still alive. Her mother was dead. The

whole place turned upside down, a few people still wandering around with the look of the dead, a totally shocked daze.

I wondered how people would feel in Pittsburgh if the Vietnamese came over in B-52s and bombed them. . . . I'm trying to imagine a bunch of steelworkers after their wives, children, fiancées, parents, grandparents, have been blown up or are running around screaming in agony. (Appy 255)

Thus, the way shame affected the veterans and its different relations among other unnatural behavior such as guilt, pride, sorrow and regret are analyzed in this chapter. The aim is to show how Vietnam War narratives depict the consequences of shame on the vets' experience, even though, as Tangney points out, "the location of the dividing line between the concepts of shame, guilt, and embarrassment is not fully standardized" (Tangney 1256).

American society has largely experienced the presence of war heroes throughout its history, mainly because the United States has always been involved in wars, with the U.S. being usually successful in their military actions. Thus, the American government and anybody who wanted to profit with the war imposed on the soldiers a moral obligation to win the combats in which they got involved. The American government creates a necessity, in which the American army has to give the victory back to civilians. Devoted and patriotic, Americans trust in their army and are pleased to know that their soldiers are well prepared to protect them from the attack of any enemy forces that might threaten them, so that American virtues, values and freedom can be preserved. American citizens are taught to believe that winning wars is an obligation; defeat is unacceptable and shameful. But the American soldiers who fought in Vietnam were trained to be like a robot, to obey instantly, to not think, but to go and fight. They are trained to put aside the values learned back home to assume the U.S.'s military identity.

Kovic explains how one drill sergeant used to speak scornfully to the raw recruits: “you no good fucking civilian maggots. . . . I want you maggots to know today that you belong to me and you will belong to me until I have you into marines” (Kovic 77).

According to Appy, for the drill instructors (DIs), everything civilian in the recruits must be destroyed: “Every civilian identity is worthless. New recruits are the lowest form of life. They do not deserve to live. If they are ever to be marines, they must acknowledge their total inadequacy. They must be torn down in order to be rebuilt, killed in order to be reborn” (Appy 87). During the period of war and especially in the boot camp, the veterans passed through a process of identity formation, “brainwashing.” Jacqueline E. Lawson explains that this process of identity formation is a “simultaneous demystification and remystification of manhood – destroying one’s masculinity in order to make one a man – allowed for the eventual restructuring of the personality into nothing but the mythic identity: the super patriot, the noble warrior, the killing machine” (Searle 30). John Ketwig:

We were pushed, pulled, beaten, screamed at, humiliated, and emasculated. . . . Up at five, train till six. . . Always aching, always cold, always scared; never secure. . . Exhaustion. Depression. Over a thousand days. Hand-to hand combat. Charge a dummy with a mock bayonet. “What’s the spirit of the bayonet?” “Kill! Kill! Kill! (Ketwing 25)

In his novel, *Born on the Fourth of July*, Kovic explains that “he had never been anything but a thing to them, a thing to put a uniform on and train to kill, a young thing to run through the meat-grinder, a cheap small nothing thing to make mincemeat out of” (Kovic 165). Kovic and the other veterans had their mentalities transformed to destroy the enemy. In Vietnam, the American soldiers were like machines whose only aim was pretty

much to hunt and kill. According to Marine veteran Gene Holiday, once drafted, the soldiers' bodies and minds have to pass through a complete and severe transformation:

They tore you down. They tore everything civilian out of your entire existence -- your speech, your thoughts, your sights, your memory -- anything that was civilian they tore out and then they re-built you and made you over. But they didn't build you from there up. First they made you drop down to a piece of grit on the floor. Then they built you back up to being a marine. (Appy 86)

Therefore, the American soldiers who fought in Vietnam were built up to be a completely different person, or rather a "machine." They acquired a new identity that made them often insensitive to matters that were important to them before the draft. In *A Rumor of War*, Philip Caputo asserts that he succumbed to the dark and destructive human emotions: "perhaps the war had awakened something evil in us, some dark, malicious power that allowed us to kill without feeling" (Caputo 309). On the battlefield, the vets were often confused, and the battles they were involved in often sounded senseless to them. Baritz points out in *Backfire* that "one GI put it this way: 'We don't take any land. We don't give it back. We just mutilate bodies. What the fuck are we doing here?'" (Baritz 290). Once on the battlefield, the soldiers started questioning the reasons they were fighting in Vietnam, and the feeling of absurdity and dissatisfaction often permeated. The uncertainty of soldiers shows how disorganized the war was. Their questions asserts the "sense of the war's total lack of order or structure, the feeling that there was no genuine purpose, that nothing could be secured or gained, and that there could be no measurable progress" (Capps 56), except for the policy of the body count.

In his autobiographical novel *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, O'Brien complains that to submit to a war would "extinguish" all his "books and beliefs and learning" (O'Brien 22). O'Brien did not want to fight in a war he believes to be immoral and unjust, and he thought about escape from the draft. He did not want to be part of the Vietnam War, but things did not end up the way he expected. Appy explains that O'Brien

wrestled with the dilemma throughout his military training and at one point came so close to deserting that he purchased a plane ticket to Sweden where he intended to live in exile. O'Brien went to war, however, feeling that he had failed to determine his own fate, that he had abandoned his principles by allowing the military to decide his fate. (Appy 53)

Differently from Kovic, O'Brien's reason to go to war was motivated by the fear of being shamed before his friends and acquaintances because he did not want to be seen as a coward. The traditional motivating factors such as patriotism and the desire of being a war hero that persuaded Kovic to fight for America in Vietnam was not enough to motivate the well educated O'Brien, who after all, was more concerned about what his family and friends would think of him if he did not volunteer to go to war. Therefore, it seems that it was impossible to avoid the fear of shame during the war period, which was indeed a great motivation for those who were hesitating or even not sure if they should volunteer to fight in Vietnam. And because these reluctant men were concerned about what their community and family would think of them if they give up going to war, many of them accept to risk their lives in the war.

The soldiers who fought in Vietnam were taught to fight for democracy, as if their struggle would really solve the world's problems, and as if going to war in Southeast Asia was the best way to give their lives for America. They were led to think that if there is a

war it must be a winner, and if there is a winner it must be the United States of America. They were pressured and somehow subtly forced to accept ideas and beliefs taught in the army. They were led to believe in J. F. Kennedy's words: "ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country" (Kovic 9). And to accept those words they thought would not be a difficult task.

The President Kennedy's saying became for many soldiers a kind of proverb they kept in their hearts to help remind them of the importance in fighting the war. Such words worked as an inspiration that boost the soldiers to keep believing in the importance of their war duties to defend America from the threats of Communism. These words would help them to keep focus. Kovic, for instance, believed in the President's words and in his diary he points out his pride and honor in being an American soldier:

He wrote in his diary that night how proud he was to have been made the leader of the scouts, to be serving America in this its most critical hour, just like President Kennedy had talked about. He might get killed, he wrote, but so had a lot of Americans who had fought for democracy. It was very important to be there putting his life on the line, to be going out on patrol and lying in the rain for Sparky the barber and God and the rest. He was proud. He was real proud of what he was doing. This, he thought, is what serving your country is supposed to be about. (Kovic 194)

Nevertheless, it was back home that Kovic's pride in serving the U.S. started to fade. Kovic gradually discovered that he was trapped and negated by his own people and government, those he had fought for. The negative effects of losing the war caused him an intense and painful sensation of having done something bad. The feeling of being negated by his own country seems to work in Kovic's mind as a sign that constantly reminded him

of his own failure. A mix of shame, guilt and the desire to hide from others took over his mind. According to Darwin, this act of hiding is related to shame. Darwin explains that, under a keen sense of shame there is a strong desire for concealment. We turn away the whole body, more especially the face, which we endeavor in some manner to hide. An ashamed person can hardly endure to meet the gaze of those present, so that he almost invariably casts down his eyes or looks askant. (Darwin 368)

Kovic's war experiences provoked in him a need to hide because he could not deal with the shame that constantly accused him, negating everything he wished to be. His war experiences also show that American culture can express many contradictions when compared to the different stages he lived because of the war. Before Kovic's enlistment in the army, he and many other American teenagers were excited and determined to risk their lives in favor of their country. They were proud to tell people about their choices and show themselves before others. There was no need to hide because there was no shame at all, and to become a war hero was Kovic's strongest motivation to serve the U.S. in Vietnam. It was his dream and everything he was really looking for. As Kovic explains:

In the last month of school, the marine recruiters came and spoke to my senior class. . . . It was like all the movies and all the books and all the dreams of becoming a hero come true. I watched them and listened as they stood in front of all the young boys, looking almost like statues and not like real men at all (Kovic 73).

The Marines, who visited Kovic in High School fascinated him. These soldiers were wearing impeccable military uniform that had many medals on it. The Marines' image was so strong for Kovic that it was enough to convince him that wearing a Marines' uniform

was a motive of pride and honor. The tall soldiers with their solid and perfect well-built bodies reminded Kovic of his Hollywood war hero John Wayne, and the marines' image attracted the young and naive Kovic, who believed that the Marine Corps "built men." The experience in meeting those Marines revealed the strength of the American government to brainwash the youth who fought in Vietnam. Kovic explains how fascinated he was when he met those marines:

As I shook their hands and stared up into their eyes, I couldn't help but feel I was shaking hands with John Wayne and Audie Murphy. They told us that the Marine Corps built men – body, mind, and spirit. And that we could serve our country like the young president had asked us to do. . . . I stayed up most of the night before I left, watching the late movie. Then "The Star-Spangled Banner" played. I remember standing up and feeling very patriotic, chills running up and down my spine. I put my hand over my heart and stood rigid at attention until the screen went blank. (Kovic 73-75)

Kovic deluded himself into thinking he would one day be like the Hollywood war heroes Audie Murphy and John Wayne, whose image "provided America's youth with the prototype of valor, courage, maleness, invincibility, and immortality" (Searle 28). The volunteers to fight in Vietnam, as Kovic, received a lot of influence from the Hollywood movie culture of war, and as many of them were uneducated, they usually did not have access to other representations of war. According to Baritz, there "were no literary conventions to organize the thinking of the soldier, as there had been in World War I. The references were all to movies, preferably starring John Wayne" (Baritz 172). Thus, the draftees were eager to go off to fight, without knowing the real meaning of war. In addition, there was the "decorated naval officer" and American President J. F. Kennedy who

cooperate to inspire the teenager soldiers to fight for America in Vietnam. Searle explains that Kennedy's

romantic adventures in Pacific aboard PT-10 were touted and sensationalized by the media throughout the 1960 presidential campaign. . . . This was the hero to follow, this was a living legend, in whose name a generation of young Americans were willing to 'pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship . . . to assure the survival and success of liberty' (Kennedy Inaugural Address, 20 January 1961). (Searle 29)

Before the war, the veterans' wish to serve the army was based on this American war myth, "to assure the survival and success of liberty," which made the young soldiers dream of being one day a war hero. The young Americans thought that just the fact of serving their nation would make them someone respectable and honored by their fellow compatriots. They would finally become someone able to receive the status of war heroes. Seduced and naive about the matters related to the war, Kovic's body and spirit felt stronger like never before. Kovic was finally ready to leave home and head off to fight in Vietnam, a country that he and many soldiers, and most civilians have never heard of before. Serving their country brought for many of these young soldiers a feeling that they were fighting for freedom.

The vets' literature shows that in the beginning of the war, veterans felt the importance and the privilege of being qualified to be part of the American army. Pratt claims that, "most of the early works do present well-meaning, dedicated American military men" (Lomperis 130-131). These young American soldiers, however, did not know shame, yet. They were attracted to the power of mythmaking, which works in pushing the youth to emulate their war heroes. According to Searle,

no one is more susceptible to the seductive power of mythmaking than the young. Mythmaking is crucial component of adolescence, for it is youths, with identities unformed, unactualized, who search most persistently for role models to emulate. The nineteen-year-old sees himself as the inheritor of myths, a *tabula rasa* yearning for an imprint of selfhood. Mythmaking is equally important to nations, for it is through our myths that we derive a sense of identity, a feeling of national pride and purpose. Without a collective national mythology, waging war would be a far more problematic proposition than it is, for war is dependent on the illusions held by one generation and passed down to the next. (Searle 28)

As most of the soldiers were at a very young age, the U.S. army easily shaped these new soldiers' identities, which, after all, were inspired by World War II heroes. Appy explains that, "during the Vietnam War most of the volunteers and draftees were teenagers; the average age was nineteen" (Appy 27). Easily persuaded, Kovic sustained his patriotism as if it was his worthiest virtue. He was eager to accomplish his military task as good as his war heroes did in the World War II. Once back home, however, his opinion about serving his country in war drastically changed, mainly because part of his body was destroyed in combat in Vietnam, a loss that brought shame and a feeling of failure to him. Civilians often confronted him in this new post-war world, and he was not ready to face his new reality yet. As Erik H. Erikson points out, "one is visible and not ready to be visible" (Erikson 244). Kovic became a useless soldier, a maimed and frustrated human being. He tried everything in his power to stop thinking about the war, and he did not want to remember its pain and sorrow:

He would turn the chair and push it down the narrow hallway, past the bookshelf, banging his hand against the wall, cursing, and then pushing the chair angrily into his room. He would stay up all night sometimes, sitting by the typewriter, trying to forget the war, the wound, by putting words down on paper (Kovic 113).

Kovic could not bear the disastrous consequences of the war in his body and mind. He wanted to get rid of the unwanted memories of Vietnam, and he did not want to be remembered as the result of failure and shame because of the war in Vietnam. According to Ahmed, “to be witnessed in one’s failure is to be ashamed: to have one’s shame witnessed is even more shaming. The bind of shame is that it is intensified by being seen by others as shame” (Ahmed 103). Thus, Kovic’s shame and most of the vets’ shame can be seen differently from many participants of other wars, like WWII for example. For the first time, a war was broadcast live. Civilians followed the war daily and watched the disastrous consequences. Although civilians were supporting the soldiers at the beginning of the war in the mid 1960’s, in the late 60’s, their view of the war gradually changed, and their actions against the war spread around America. Vietnam veterans also suffered as the war assumed unexpected proportions, which changed the vets’ view of the war. These changes are expressed in the vets’ novels. Pratt explains that “much of the fiction that treats this period of war shows the transition not only from small-unit action to large-scale military operations but also delineates the author’s progression from optimism through doubt to pessimism over the future of the American effort” (Lomperis 130).

The characters of Kovic and Paco clearly illustrate the consequences of this war period. Kovic was involved with the Vietnam War as a Marine between December 1965 and January 1968. Heinemann served a combat tour as a conscripted draftee in Vietnam

from 1967 to 1968. Thus, Kovic and Paco's stories are mainly based on this period of war. According to Pratt, "most of the novels that are set later in the war show increasingly embittered, amoral American servicemen who, like West's ambassador, either quickly became or are already disillusioned by their participation in the war and spend their tours merely trying to survive" (Lomperis 131).

After all, Kovic was not a war hero, nor just an ordinary American veteran, but a crippled and maimed Vietnam veteran. And because of his condition, he was often bullied wherever he went. He was the representation of the Vietnam War, and for many civilians, the personification of evil and immorality. He became something that the entire nation was trying to forget. As Kovic claimed, "I gave three-quarters of my body for America. And what do I get?" (Kovic 181). Kovic felt completely annoyed and impatient because he would never have his life back to normal again. He became not just the American shame, but his own shame. People used to see him and point at him as if he was guilty of a sordid crime. He was the "baby killer," the "drug addict," and the one who fought the "immoral war" (Neal 101). As time passed, for many civilians the war was not a very strong subject anymore, but for Vietnam veterans little had changed. Appy explains that,

while most Americans were all too able to forget the war, many veterans could not. Try as they might to bury the war, its unresolved emotions and memories festered below the surface, sometimes coming out in indirect, unpredictable, dangerous, and self-destructive ways: sudden flashes of anger, hard drinking or drug use, panic attacks, extreme distrust, inability to care about anything or anybody. Meanwhile, the sources of so much of this pain were largely unknown or unexpressed. The silence of so many veterans, so profound during the 1960s and 1970s but, for some, lasting much longer, is

one of the most significant and psychologically destructive examples of group self-censorship in American social history. (Appy 308)

Vietnam veterans were trapped in their own minds and bodies and could not escape from the madness of their traumas. They were fenced in by the destruction they were led to create. The vets were persuaded to be someone that they did not want to be or did not know how to be. Paco, for instance, had to live with the feeling that he had been left behind, he had to deal with the feeling that he should have died in combat with his fellow comrades. In a “Conversation with Kurt Jacobsen,” Heinemann talks about his novel, *Paco’s Story*, and he explains that, “Paco is transformed into a piece of meat. He feels as if he’s been left behind. Because the guys who are narrating the story are the 93 dead guys of his platoon and they aren’t happy about being dead at all. So, it’s an odd irony. Wishing you were dead” (Jacobsen 152). The deaths of Paco’s comrades bring to his mind savage memories that are always haunting him. His dead colleagues are like ghosts that keep reminding him of the desperate attack at Fire Base Harriet. The attack traumatized Paco forever. Paco was angry about the way he needed to manage his own life. The war marked his bodies with deep scars, and it exposed his pain and shame of being a Vietnam grunt. According to Kovic,

for some, the agony and suffering, the sleepless nights, anxiety attacks, and awful bouts of insomnia, loneliness, alienation, anger and rage will last for decades, if not their whole lives. They will be trapped in a permanent nightmare of that war, of killing another man, a child, watching a friend die, . . . fighting against an enemy that can never be seen, while at any moment someone – a child, a woman, an old man, anyone – might kill you.

(Kovic 20)

Failure, shame, distress, guilt and regret were all mixed up in the vets' mind and reflected in their bodies. For Vietnam veterans it was impossible to get rid of these bad feelings. Such feelings started to generate unnatural behavior that was gradually becoming part of the vets' routine. In one of Kovic's poems, he wrote that, "after the war there was no God, and for Him there was no country anymore" (Lomperis 34). For many veterans, all the good memories they had about America died with them during the war. The huge pain of not being understood and accepted back in their country suffocated their hopes and dreams. For Kovic, he was rejected by God, by his country, and his family. As he claimed, "there was very little left of a country for me. There was very little left of a mother and a father and sisters and brothers, family; the war shattered all of that" (Lomperis 34). He tried to survive from the suffering of loneliness and the sorrow of living in an alienated society incapable of understanding the truth behind the war. He tried to deal with civilians who were deaf to vet's voice and blind to see the marks of war on the vets' body. Hopeless and alone, Kovic claimed that: "There was just me, alive and breathing every single day, trying to make sense of this madness. What does it mean to really be dead, to lose everything, because I don't believe in God. There is no God for me after Vietnam" (Lomperis 34).

Kovic was emotionally stressed after the war, and he became a completely different person. The wound inherited in Vietnam physically changed his mind and body. He could not walk anymore, or even move from the "chest down." Kovic asserts that he is "the living dead man" (Kovic 50). Psychologically disturbed, the way he used to think and behave suffered a deep and irreconcilable change. According to Ahmed, "emotion is the feeling of bodily change. The immediacy of the 'is' suggests that emotions do not involve processes of thought, attribution or evaluation" (Ahmed 5). Without being able to measure their suffering or analyze the situation they got involved back home, the way vets behaved and

reacted when in touch with civilians, often caused insecurity between both of them, who usually felt threatened for not knowing how to cope with the situation they were involved in. Meanwhile, other civilians felt completely apathetic when dealing with Vietnam veterans, who in turn felt angry and judged by them. As Kovic explains:

I feel very alone, very alienated from my country, from my mother, from my father, from my friends. I feel two things: I want people to feel what I'm feeling. I want people to act the way I want to act. I want people to feel the urgency that I feel. I want to feel a part of everyone else, even while sitting in a wheelchair. I'm convinced that I can feel a part of everyone else.

(Lomperis 34)

The consequences of the war in Kovic's body also brought shame to his masculinity. From the mid chest down he was a useless young man, and being crippled embarrassed and dishonored him. Kovic was forced to pass through a process of formation, in which he acquired, through shame, a new identity. His shame took over his thoughts, and consequently, it materialized in his deformed body. He explains how things were different when he just arrived in Massapequa and was invited to a hometown parade that was supposed to welcome him back home:

He couldn't tell at first exactly what it was, but something was not the same, they weren't waving and they just seemed to be standing staring at Eddie Dugan and himself like they weren't even there. It was as if they were ghosts like little Johnny Heanon or Billy Morris come back from the dead. And he couldn't understand what was happening. (Kovic 107)

The rejection Kovic felt when he got back to his community played an important role to increase his shame. Kovic neighbors' attitude when looking at him reveals how

civilians appeared to be disinterested in his returning home. Kovic's neighbors did not react the way he was expecting, and their behavior embarrassed him and showed how unimportant and meaningless he was for them. Kovic claims that:

Even though it seemed very difficult acting like heroes, he and Eddie tried waving a couple of times, but after a while he realized that the staring faces weren't going to change and he couldn't help but feel like he was some kind of animal in a zoo or that he and Eddie were on display in some trophy case. And the more he thought about it, the more he wanted to get the hell out of the Cadillac and go back home to his room where he knew it was safe and warm. (Kovic 108)

Kovic's shame was so intense that he felt the need to hide and to be away from those who confronted him with hideous looking, as if he was not human, as if he was too ugly to be human. And just as the war left him unable to walk, now, he was not allowed to talk to his community and make his life work again. Alone and in an almost hopeless despair, Kovic claimed: "Oh Jesus, please Jesus, you gotta help me, you gotta give me strength. This broken body ain't gonna mend and it's gonna be this way for a long time and you gotta help me now Jesus you gotta help me somehow" (Kovic 113).

Kurt Riezler explains that, "shame has a function in a process of formation which is both individual and social. This functional meaning can be constant though the contents of shame vary and change" (Riezler 457). Therefore, America was responsible not just for robbing Kovic of his dignity, but also the cause that annihilated his young body. Kovic had to learn to live as a defeated soldier, who was after all, a crippled and ashamed Vietnam veteran. Unable to have a normal sexual life, Kovic's feeling was often expressed through anger and sadness. He had no choice, but to accept his dead body, knowing that he would

never be able to feel pleasure anymore. Kovic's pain, however, can be explained "as private, even lonely experience, as a feeling that he has that others cannot have, or as a feeling that others have that he himself cannot feel" (Kotarba 15).

In an interview with the BBC, Alan Johnston talked to Kovic about two moments that changed his life forever: one on the battlefield, and one at an anti-war protest in Washington. In one of these moments, Kovic explains the reason why he decided to go back to war. Disheartened, Kovic says that he went back for a second tour in Vietnam because he was upset with the demonstrations he saw against the war in the States: "I'm going to set my own example for my country. I'm going to become part of a great victory, in the way my father and the fathers of my neighborhood were part of the victory of World War II."⁹ However, Kovic paid a high price for having tried to be an impossible example to be achieved. He was shot and disabled during combat in Vietnam. He was not able to prove any victory, and he was far from being, as a soldier, an example to his nation. Actually, the protests in the U.S. increased, and the disgust toward the veterans got worse. For Heinemann, the war is a "special evil all by itself," and he explains that, "the politest way to say it is that we were not pleasant people, and the war was not a pleasant business. We were not fun to be around" (Jacobsen 152). Kovic, for example, shows his angry:

It is gone for America. I have given it for democracy. . . . I have given my dead swinging dick for America. I have given my numb young dick for democracy. It is gone and numb, lost somewhere out there by the river where artillery is screaming in. Oh God Oh God I want it back, I gave it for the

⁹ Kovic, Ron. "Witness: Ron Kovic – Ex US Marine and Peace Activist." BBC World Service, 10 Jul 2011. Web. 18 Jan. 2012. This BBC video production is about Ron Kovic's war experience.

whole country. I gave it for every one of them. Yes, I gave my dead dick for John Wayne and Howdy Doody. (Kovic 98)

Kovic's returning to American made his emotional problems increase after he realized that his physical and moral conditions would never be the same anymore. He was not able to be an example to his nation, and he could not be like his war heroes. He was no longer the deluded young boy from Massapequa. As he points out, "My trauma was still very deep, and that beautiful boy, that body, had been destroyed, defiled, and savaged. My wounding in Vietnam both physically and emotionally haunted me, pursued me, and threatened to overwhelm me" (Kovic 16). Distressed and confused, Kovic's emotions also contribute to shape his already deformed body. Ahmed explains that, "emotions can shape what bodies can do" (Ahmed 4). And this emotional transformation reflected in Kovic's disable body is the result of his reaction when he found himself alone and unable to accept himself in the way the war had deformed him.

Kovic was also confronted by massive oppositions of civilians who were acting angrily against him and everything related to Vietnam. According to Spinoza, emotions are "the modifications of the body, whereby the active power of the said body is increased or diminished, aided or constrained" (Spinoza 85). Because of his paralysis, Kovic was often constrained, and his inability to move forced him to think differently, and consequently he behaved in a strange manner. Therefore, he could not control the power of his emotions on his body. Ahmed explains that emotions can be intensified and change a person's behavior, especially when there are barriers that impede the natural flow of the communication of emotions between people:

In interpersonal communication, the blocking of an emotion can lead to the intensification of emotions: your inability to 'hear' my anger may make me

angrier. Blockages aren't only effects of defensive behaviors, but are also effects of emotional collisions. For example, if I express my anger, and someone returns that anger with reasonableness, indifference or even happiness, then the feeling of anger is intensified. Or the anger could slide into another emotion: despair, frustration, bitterness. (Ahmed 190)

Therefore, the post-war period affected Kovic's emotions and heavily intensified the depressive situation he inherited after his treatment in a decrepit, rat-infested VA hospital, which resulted in shame and disgust to his life.

Over the years however, Kovic realized that protesting against the war helped him to deal with his damage body. And although "it was starting to become very clear that there would be no change in his condition, no reconciliation with the half of his body that seemed so utterly lost forever" (Kovic 117), the protests against the Vietnam War strengthen Kovic and helped him to ease his psychological and physical pain. Kovic, with a body that he could hardly feel, a body that has to be "dragged around" with him "like an empty corpse" (Kovic 150), was starting to find a real meaning for having survived the Vietnam War. Protesting against the war not just ease Kovic's pain, but also worked to make his life meaningful. As Kovic points out:

I struggled to leave something of meaning behind, to rise above the darkness and despair. I wanted people to understand. I wanted to share with them as nakedly and openly and intimately as possible what I had gone through, what I had endured. I wanted them to know what it really meant to be in a war — to be shot and wounded, to be fighting for my life on the intensive care ward — not the myth we had grown up believing. I wanted people to know about the hospitals and the enema room, about why I had become opposed to the

war, why I had grown more and more committed to peace and nonviolence.

(Kovic 17)

What Kovic was trying to say to America can be seen in the conclusion of Ehrhart's poem "A Relative Thing," in which the poet, according to Lomperis, "expresses the feelings of *all* Vietnam veterans, regardless of their views about the war" (Lomperis 119).

The poem, however, is addressed to all Americans, and it concludes:

We are your sons, America,

and you cannot change that.

When you awake,

we will still be here. (Lomperis 119)

In August 1972, Kovic attended the Republican National Convention to protest against the war and to try to disrupt President Nixon's speech. At that moment, Kovic was not a very expressive figure yet. His fury was enough to strengthen him to shout: "Stop the bombing, stop the war, stop the bombing, stop the war, as loud and as hard as he could, looking directly at Nixon" (Kovic 180). Kovic's protest sounded uniquely to Roger Mudd, who took the opportunity to interview him for CBS news. Kovic took advantage of this moment to complain bitterly about how he had been unfairly treated after the war:

I'm a Vietnam veteran. I gave America my all and the leaders of this government threw me and the others away to rot in their V.A. hospitals.

What's happening in Vietnam is a crime against humanity, and I just want the American people to know that we have come all the way across this country, sleeping on the ground and in the rain, to let the American people see for themselves the men who fought their war and have come to oppose it.

If you can't believe the veteran who fought the war and was wounded in the war, who can you believe. (Kovic 165)

Kovic wanted to show America that Vietnam veterans were rewarded with indifference. Emotionally sick, the Vietnam veterans often recognized themselves as shamed. Ahmed explains that

when we recognize ourselves as shamed, that self-identification involves a different relationship of self to self to others from the recognition of ourselves as guilty. In shame, more than my action is at stake: *the badness of an action is transformed to me*, such that I feel myself to be bad and to have been 'found' or 'found out' as bad by others. (Ahmed 105)

The veterans felt ashamed not just because they were witnessed by the whole nation fighting in a war considered bad and immoral, but especially because their families and friends, people who they really loved, also disapproved and showed contempt for their military actions in Vietnam. According to Silvia Tomkins, "If contempt has been controlled by shame, the individual responds with shame whenever he is in the presence of anything which disgusts him" (Tomkins 228). Therefore, it was this indifference and the bad treatment received by great part of civilians, including friends and family, that collaborated to make Kovic and other veterans realize the savage reality that the Vietnam War was. The way Americans witnessed the Vietnam veterans' shame, looking and pointing at them, and the aversion towards the veterans, greatly contributed to affect the vets' relation to civilians who were not directly involved with the war, and who could not understand what veterans were experiencing after the war.

Paco, for instance, with his body full of scars, "as if each scar had its own story," limping and in continual pain, "the pain of his body sharp and clean, bristling, from the tip

of his head to the bottoms of his feet” (Heinemann 101-103), goes from door to door looking for a job. Heinemann points out that, “Paco walks across the way toward Hennig’s Barbershop as though he were coming up to a proscenium stage. . . . Hennig took one look at the severe, amateurish cut of his hair and nailed him for a GI without so much as a second glance” (Heinemann 77). The townspeople were looking at Paco as if he belonged to a completely different place, as if he was a strange creature from another planet. Meanwhile, “Hennig works along, combing and cutting, talking to his waiting customers and snipping those scissors a couple of solid clips in the air, pointing at Paco, so that every eye in the place is on Paco by the time he is in the door” (Heinemann 78). Paco got involved in a situation on which there was nowhere to hide or avoid people’s judgments. The experience lived by Paco, demonstrates that Vietnam veterans were seen as a symbol of defeat among civilians, usually because of the shame that was constantly stamped on the vets’ faces.

The vets’ bodies often carried scars, and some of them had part of their bodies mutilated. The vets’ physiognomy usually expressed the sadness, anger and feelings of revolt. These marks were common characteristics of veterans who usually felt alone and hopeless. Their loneliness provoked in their minds negative thoughts about how civilians usually looked down on them. Ahmed explains that,

shame as an emotion requires a witness: even if a subject feels shame when it is alone, it is the imagined view of the other that is taken on by a subject in relation to itself. I imagine how it will be seen as I commit the action, and the feeling of badness is transferred to me. Or I remember an action that I committed, and burn with shame in the present, insofar as my memory is a memory of myself. In shame, I am the object as well as the subject of the

feeling. Such an argument crucially suggests that shame requires an identification with the other who, as witness, returns the subject to itself. The view of this other is the view that I have taken on in relation to myself; I see myself *as if I were* his other. My failure before this other hence is profoundly a failure of myself to myself. In shame, I expose to myself that I am a failure through the gaze of an ideal other. (Ahmed 105-106)

On the other hand, the vets' suffering and shame was in part responsible for bringing them together again; such encounters were important to support the vets' attempt to overcome their pain. In addition, to protest against the war was something that gave veterans a meaning for their lives. As Kovic explains:

I told Skip that I was never going to be the same. The demonstration had stirred something in my mind that would be there from now on. It was so very different from boot camp and fighting in the war. There was a togetherness, just as there had been in Vietnam, but it was a togetherness of a different kind of people and for a much different reason. In the war we were killing and maiming people. In Washington on that Saturday afternoon in May we were trying to heal them and set them free. (Kovic 140)

Many were the veterans, like Kovic, who became more and more active in antiwar organizations, and these veterans who were fighting against the war attended protests and strikes around the United States, aiming at denouncing the horror of war. The veterans wanted to stop the war and find peace. And because Kovic was attending and leading many protests against the war, he started to be known as a "different kind of war hero, one who was a hero of conscience and a hero of peace" (Wikipedia).

But civilians had the need to have a special day to praise their war heroes and the nation's victories. Civilians wanted to see the end of the war and their country as winner. Hence, when American wars came to an end, the U.S. could be proud to receive their war heroes back home with parades and celebrations, and honor the soldiers who bravely risked their lives to fight for America. Neil explains that, "popular war heroes were celebrated and commemorated in ballads, linking them with heroic figures from the past" (Neil 64). According to Caruth, "the hero has to sacrifice his life to show that he is not after all a coward" (*Trauma* 84). The veterans used to attract crowds of people wherever there was a parade in the States, which gave rise to pride and become an inspiration for those who were going to fight the forthcoming American wars. Nevertheless, Vietnam veterans' tentative parade experience was bitter and induced shame. When Kovic was asked to be grand marshal in Massapequa's Memorial Day parade, his drivers, who were American Legion veterans of World War II, tried unsuccessfully to engage him in a conversation about the many local boys who had died in Vietnam:

Remember Clasternack? . . . They got a street over in the park named after him . . . he was the first of you kids to get it . . . There was the Peters family too . . . both brothers . . . Both of them killed in the same week. And Alan Grady . . . Did you know Alan Grady? . . .

We've lost a lot of good boys . . . We've been hit pretty bad. The whole town's changed. (Kovic 99-100)

The change in Kovic's hometown was deeply felt by him, who even on the battlefield, still dreamt of being a hero, even after being shot and wounded: "I had been shot. The war had finally caught up with my body. I felt good inside. Finally the war was with me and I had been shot by the enemy. I was getting out of the war and I was going to

be a hero” (Kovic 221). Although Kovic was physically injured and his life was at risk, the fact that he could go back home to become a war hero was the only thing he could think of. Kovic, after all, finally got what he first thought to be the so estimate “new million-dollar wound” (Kovic 221). Tobey Herzog explains that, Kovic

finds himself tormented by (what he believes to be) his accidental shooting of a fellow-soldier and his involvement in the deaths of several innocent civilians. Unable to cope with these thoughts and the war, he seeks an easy way out of the horror and moral dilemmas, a million-dollar wound that will send him home, but not severely wounded. (Herzog 30)

This war experience in Kovic’s life can be seen as an attempt to make his mission in Vietnam worthwhile, and it was the chance he had to make all the “protective Jonh Wayne illusions about masculinity, war, and individual conduct” work (Herzog 29). War heroes bring hope and ensure that the world needs them to establish morality and virtues. They are wanted and honored, and no matter how damaged a soldier can be due to the aftermath of the war, once he comes back home as a winner, as a war hero, he deserves to be treated with respect and admiration. Nevertheless, the war fought in Vietnam showed the opposite. The American veterans had no trophy to lift up, no real meaningful medals to stick in their uniforms, no parades, nothing that would make them proud and honored. However, they were accused of being responsible for defeat. The vets felt how civilians tried to forget whom they were or what they represented. The vets had become America’s biggest traitors. Shame and fear were the vets’ only adornment.

Vietnam veterans were often unfavorably compared to WWII vets, whether this comparison was made by themselves or civilians, it only contributed to increase their emotional feeling of failure. Even though, in “Carrying the Darkness with us,” Heinemann

realized that, “any soldier returning home must rediscover his humanity and establish a livable peace with the discovered, liberated, permanently dark places in his own heart -- the darkness that is always with us” (1). Shame brought difficulties and frustrations that took over the vets’ emotion and it transformed the ideal they once had about America.

According to Ahmed:

Through love, an ideal self is produced as a self that belongs to a community; the ideal is a proximate ‘we’. If we feel shame, *we feel shame because we have failed to approximate ‘an ideal’ that has been given to us through the practices of love*. What is exposed in shame is the failure of love, as a failure that in turn exposes or shows our love. (Ahmed 106)

Civilians believed that the soldiers who fought the Vietnam War did not show as much devotion and effort in their duties as the soldiers who fought in WWII. All around the U.S., stories related to the soldiers and the Vietnam War were created or reinvented. Civilians aimed to find out a reasonable answer for the American involvement in such conflict. For many civilians the vets deserved to be forgotten and crossed out of American history.

The American literature of Vietnam War shows that Vietnam became a kind of metaphor for America’s humiliation, and the vets’ accounts are the written legacy of that shameful event. Kovic’s and Heinemann’s novels narrate the humiliation and despair felt by Vietnam veterans, but many of the more thoughtful veterans also took responsibility for their actions. As William Ehrhart, a poet and former Marine, pointed out on NPR’s ‘Talk of the Nation:’ “You know, the Vietnam War, we imagine it’s this thing that happened to us when, in fact, the Vietnam War is this thing we did to them” (Mendible1).

Ehrhart's feelings in having betrayed his own moral values and ideals seem to be a constant struggle in his life. He takes the responsibilities of having lost the war for himself, and he does not want to accept the need to share the war's defeat with anyone else apart from Vietnam veterans. His argument asserts that vets were the only ones responsible for killing, spreading fear, evil and destruction. Such bitter feeling is common among Vietnam vets, who were confused for not really understanding what the Vietnam War was about. Tobias Wolff, in his memoir of the war, addresses questions that can be seen as an attempt at self-justification. Wolff tries to understand who he was and who he became after the war. He investigates not the truth he wishes to live, but the truth he really thinks most veterans live now, how veterans were led from innocence to war experience:

How do we tell such a terrible story? Maybe such a story shouldn't be told at all. Yet, finally it will be told. But as soon as you open your mouth you have problems, problems of recollection, problems of tone, ethical problems. How can you judge the man you were now that you've escaped his circumstances, his fears and desires, now that you can hardly remember who he was? And how can you honestly avoid judging him? But isn't there, in the very act of confession an obscene self-congratulation for the virtue required to see your mistake and own up to it? And isn't it just like an American boy, to want you to admire his sorrow at tearing other people's houses apart? And in the end who gives a damn, who's listening? What do you owe the listener, and which listener do you owe? What more can be said? (Wolff 208)

Wolff's disillusionment is the result of his understanding of how civilians see him and the other veterans. He is conscious about the negative view civilians have about him and his

experience in Vietnam. And now he needs to deal with who he was and who he became.

His arguments are necessary confessions that help him to cope with his shame.

According to Ahmed,

the failure to live up to an ideal is a way of taking up that ideal and confirming its necessity; despite the negation of shame experiences, my shame confirms my love, and my commitment to such ideals in the first place. This is why shame has been seen as crucial to moral development; the fear of shame prevents the subject from betraying 'ideals', while the lived experience of shame reminds the subject of the reasons for those ideals in the first place. (Ahmed 106)

The Vietnam veterans' experiences show that they did not want to betray their country or turn their back on values learned back home, and just after the war, they were not willing to deny the ideals acquired in the army. Nobody wants to lose a war, and no one wants to experience the bitter taste of failure. Civilians also expected too much from their government and from the soldiers who were representing them in Vietnam, they wanted to see America doing their role of 'setting the world free', but their will failed, and shame took over the American nation. Both, veterans and civilians were frustrated, but the vets' shame was even bigger because they were in the most vulnerable position in this tragic event. And as Appy puts it, Vietnam was a working class war. The poor and uneducated people were fighting it, most of them in their late teens, and they were obligated to swallow all the curses and hatred civilians threw at them. Indignant, the Vietnam veteran Steve Harper complains: "Where were the sons of all the big shots who supported the war? Not in my platoon. Our guys' people were workers. . . . If the war was so important, why didn't our leaders put everyone's son in there, why only us?" (Appy 11). In WWII, the average

age of the U.S. soldier was 26, and they were also the most educated generation of U.S.

soldiers up to that time. According to Burns, narratives of WWII often show that,

soldiers had to some extent become familiarized with the horrors of modern, technological war and had a better idea of what to expect. By ironic turn, the soldiers who fought in Vietnam were raised on the narratives (especially Hollywood war movies and the stories told of their fathers) of the Second World War, which, notwithstanding its terrible realities, was represented as a noble effort, whose victory was worth all sacrifices necessary to achieve it.

(Burns 276)

The Vets' accounts show that the disadvantaged class, the "innocent, idealistic, middle-class volunteers who are brutalized by the war," (Appy 82) still bears the brunt and shame of the war traumas. Everything veterans knew about America before the war was not enough to understand the political power in which the Vietnam War was involved. In general, Vietnam veterans "had a kind of innocence, a political innocence," and according to Appy, they were

Savvy as they often were about life in their own homes and neighborhoods – how things got done, who had power, where to go for help – they remained largely ignorant about the world of national and international politics and power. Like most Americans, they had little idea of how American economic and military power was used in countries throughout the world or how that power was perceived by the people of those countries. (Appy 82)

The soldiers who fought in Vietnam were adolescents who lacked adult maturity to understand "the seeming purposelessness of the war" (Neal 93). Those teenage soldiers did not have well balanced emotions to deal with the armed conflict in Vietnam. Neal explains

that, “some were driven by hatred of the enemy and by negative perceptions of the Vietnamese people. Killing was experienced by some as excitement that provided an outlet for rage and survivor guilt” (Neal 93). In general, Vietnam veterans were naive and did not know much about matters related to wars and Vietnam. Appy explains how Vietnam veteran, Bob Foley puts it:

“I had to learn at a very early age the realities of life. But . . . things about the country, I didn’t learn until Vietnam.” Growing up he knew that his family and community could make life miserable, but he clung to the faith that “your country won’t do you wrong.” Men like Foley possessed a curious combination of skepticism and trust, guile and guilelessness, worldliness and parochialism, sophistication and naivete. They were at once streetwise and innocent. (Appy 82-83)

These young soldiers were like ‘pawns’ in the endless ‘war game’ that the Pentagon and the politicians in Washington D.C. were playing. The American government treated the war as a business operation, in which profit had to be achieved even if the decisions taken would lead to outrageous consequences. For many years the U. S. tried new strategies to win the war, and more money and people were constantly necessary to go and fight in Vietnam. Never in American history had a war lasted so long. The soldiers were psychologically overwhelmed; they were physically tired, mentally stressed and completely hopeless about being in Vietnam. All around the world, television and radio programs were treating the Vietnam War as the ‘endless war.’ The soldiers just wanted to go back home, they just wanted to get out of that hellish place and some of them even considered getting physically injured or killed. The trauma of the combat assignment was reflected in the comment of Kovic when he eager to get out of that horrible war place and go back home:

“I would go off alone sometimes on patrol looking for the traps, hoping I’d get blown up enough to be sent home, but not enough to be killed. It was a rough kind of game to play” (Kovic 210).

In *The Things They Carried*, O’ Brien argues that, “A true war story is never moral.” He explains that

it does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil.

(O’ Brien 65-66)

Thus, the vets’ experiences are the story of immorality and evil. Their narratives personify the humiliation and shame inherited in such bloody period. And now, it seems impossible for many Vietnam veterans to follow any American standard that is offered to them. For Philip Caputo, “every generation is doomed to fight its war, to endure the same old experience, suffer the loss of the same old illusions, and learn the same old lessons on its own” (Caputo 77). Vietnam veterans lived their own Vietnam, had unique experiences and wrote their own stories about their war experience. Kovic, for instance, “as a result of his participation in the war, had to confront the burdens of suffering and conscience in order to go on living, which he was only able to do by taking up the role of a veteran who opposed the war” (Burns 276).

Going against the war was for many veterans a way they found to recover from the negative results of the war in their bodies and minds, protesting and being part of groups such as Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), helped veterans to reassert a sense of their own morality. Kovic, for instance, “passed from helpless rage to the transforming power of antiwar work” (Burns 279). Kovic was no longer an observer of the anti-war protests, but he became active in his new role of giving speeches around the U.S. against the war, what he really wanted to do “was to go on and speak out” (Kovic 144). Kovic then joined a group of Vietnam War vets and was encouraged to fight against the war, his life, however, was transformed from that point on. As Kovic explains:

All of a sudden everything seemed to change – the loneliness seemed to vanish. I was surrounded by friends. They were the new veterans, the new soldiers with floppy bush hats and jungle uniforms right here on the streets of America. . . . We could be honest about the war and ourselves. . . . We were man who had gone to war. Each of us had his story to tell, his own nightmare. (Kovic147)

Kovic received a warm welcome from the VVAW, something that did not happen in his hometown after his return home. He found support and shelter among those whose war experiences had come from the same historical event he got involved. The VVAW sent him to make many speeches around the country. He became a “living dead” example of the shameful war and he was not afraid of showing his body anymore. In his speeches, he wanted everybody to look at him, so his audience could see for themselves the result of the war in his own body. As Kovic states, “Yes, let them get a look at me. Let them be reminded of what they had done when they’d sent my generation off to war.” (Kovic150). Kovic took every single opportunity to talk against the war. He went to many television

programs, high schools and universities. He wheeled his chair to protests all around the U.S. to tell Americans how veterans were treated in VA hospitals, and he told them about the enema room. "I wanted people to know about the hospitals and the enema room, about why I had become opposed to the war, why I had grown more and more committed to peace and nonviolence" (Kovic 17). Kovic not just wanted to tell people his war experiences, but he wanted them to understand his suffering and what were the real motives that generated it. Kovic's traumas were not a secret any more, and because he wanted to stop the war, he would do anything to achieve his goal, as he explains, "I had been beaten by the police and arrested twelve times for protesting the war and I had spent many nights in jail in my wheelchair. I had been called a Communist and a traitor, simply for trying to tell the truth about what had happened in that war, but I refused to be intimidated" (Kovic 3).

Kovic's attitude against the war made his negative feeling of shame gradually disappear, and he realized that although his body was not strong anymore, the power of his words had not been affected, and through his voice and his writing, he finally found meaning to his war experience. Thus, Kovic's concept in serving his country in wars completely changed, and now, it seems that for Kovic, to be ashamed is to be silenced and not to denounce the evil behind the war myth. Kovic set himself as an example to be followed, and his dead and crippled body became his most powerful tool to confront those who support wars, as he explains: "I'm the example of the war," I would say. "Look at me. Do you want your sons to look like this? Do you want to put on the uniform and come home like me?" (Kovic 150). Kovic explains that some people could not believe the conditions Vietnam veterans lived in the hospitals, "others could not believe anything at all" (Kovic150).

But even having found a meaning for his post-war life through the protests against the war, after a while, Kovic started to be disturbed again by his war memories. The speeches brought back thoughts about the war, the hospital and Vietnam. Each speech Kovic gave was not just revealing his experiences, but it was also bringing back recollections of the war, and sometimes he could not talk much about things “like the corporal from Georgia and the ambush in the village and the dead children lying on the ground” (Kovic151). His traumatic memories were still deep inside of him, and now he realized that some things were impossible to be shared. He asserts that no one could understand him properly, “not even the man I had come to know as my brothers” (Kovic 151). If, in one hand, Vietnam veterans had similar war stories, traumas and memories that could put them together, on the other hand, there was among them a great difficulty to openly share what happened to them.

In conclusion, it is difficult to ignore shame in Vietnam War accounts, which indeed is a powerful subject in war literature. The representation of shame in the vets’ failure demonstrates that Vietnam veterans were not able to achieve the social ideal demanded and imposed on them through the moral standards of American society. The vets’ shame worked to judge them and contributed to damage their values and character. Shame made the restoration of the vets’ identity difficult, complex and uncertain. The vets often carried with them a feeling of injustice, which kept reminding them that they were responsible for the bad things that happened around them. The unwanted feelings of shame and distress continued to be part of the vets’ routine, and these feelings they were not able to avoid, separate or even reduce them. The feeling of being followed was also very common among veterans, and most of them had the sensation that death was somehow hunting them. The vets also regret that the feeling of not have being welcomed home persists. Emotionally

sick, the feelings of anger, guilt and fear continued to be part of the vets' daily routine, and apart from the frequent sleepless nights, nightmares and isolation, all normal responses to the craziness of the Vietnam War, America's defeat in Vietnam left much confusion of mind, shame and rage.

And yet, the unresolved emotions and eagerness for personal and national anguish had to be managed. Kovic found a meaning for writing about the shame he inherited during the war, and writing about his struggles strengthened him not to shy away from the larger issues that surround the war. His shame became a motive and an inspiration for his writing, and his writing helped him to minimize his anger. Caputo explains that the main unresolved problem among Vietnam veterans is guilt. According to Caputo,

there is the guilt all soldiers feel for having broken the taboo against killing, a guilt as old as war itself. Add to this the soldier's sense of shame for having fought in actions that resulted, indirectly or directly, in the deaths of civilians. Then pile on top of that an attitude of social opprobrium, an attitude that made the fighting man feel personally morally responsible for the war, and you get your proverbial walking time bomb. (qtd. in Sevy 56)

Although, it seems that Caputo, college educated and a professional reporter, is more sensible than Kovic when dealing with his war experiences, he does not have the same enthusiasm to express his emotions and feeling of shame. For Caputo, his narrative was only "a story about war, about the things men do in war and the things war does to them" (xiii). Caputo gives the impression that his emotions are under control, and his passion and anger may seem reserved, which gives the impression that he was very honest about himself.

The American literature of Vietnam War shows that, the paranoid feeling of being followed by an invisible enemy is common among Vietnam veterans, and the sensation of being persecuted is the result of their anxiety, shame and wrath. Such feelings assert in the veterans' mind a self-contempt for have been involved in the war. Thus, the historical defeat, the incompetence and cowardice of the American leaders, are still heaped onto the backs of Vietnam veterans.

Vietnam veterans, especially the soldier writers, could objectify their own war experiences through their writing, which worked as a tool to disconnect who they were from who they became after being involved in the war. In this sense, writing their narratives proved to be therapeutic. And although most accounts show incidents that were real, later on, these incidents were developed into stories that gradually revealed facts that had not necessarily occurred (i.e. were fictionalized), but were essential to clarify and explain the vets' war experiences, their feelings and traumas. What happened to Vietnam veterans and how they wrote their stories, can be seen as an attempt to explain not only how frustrated and disillusioned they were, and how the consequences of the war remained in their memories, but also were the recovery of their personal regeneration. As Caputo explains:

In spite of everything, we felt a strange attachment to Vietnam and, even stranger, a longing to return. The war was still being fought, but this desire to go back did not spring from any patriotic ideas about duty, honor, and sacrifice, the myths with which old men send young men off to get killed or maimed. It arose, rather, from a recognition of how deeply we had been changed, how different we were from everyone who had not shared with us the miseries of the monsoon, the exhausting patrols, the fear of a combat

assault on a hot landing zone. We had very little in common with them.

Though we were civilians again, the civilian world seemed alien. We did not belong to it as much as we did to that other world, where we had fought and our friends had died. (Caputo XVI)

Conclusion:

My study of the vets' experiences narrated in their autobiographical and fictional works show that since the war was over the veterans who participated and suffered in the armed combats that took place in the fields and jungles of Vietnam often felt the need to make sense of this tragic event. Many of the men who fought in the war wanted to find a way to express their physical and psychological pain. Writing was for many veterans an attempt to make their war experiences meaningful. Through writing, Vietnam veterans expressed what happened to them during the period of war, and this need to tell of their war experiences were illustrated in stories that later become a part of the American literature of Vietnam War, which have indeed become an important contribution to contemporary American literature.

The Vietnam War, however, was nobody's imagination. The war was real, and its devastating destruction causes physical and psychological damage to those who took part in it. During the war thousands of people died, property and resources were destroyed, Vietnam veterans and civilians started to perceive the world differently, and this new view in approaching the world changed American politics and military policies. The Vietnam War narratives remain to sustain the vets' memory as the representation of their war experiences, illustrating, explaining, and rationalizing the war as an important source that registers their traumatic experiences.

The vets' literature helps to understand the traumatic event of Vietnam War through the point of view of those who actually fought it, as well as to comprehend the lessons veterans extracted from it. Kovic, for instance, used his book as a weapon to oppose those who used the war to manipulate the young American teenagers who volunteered to fight in Vietnam.

The vets' war experiences are fraught with shame and dishonor, and their accounts show that shame played an important role in asserting the identity of the characters in their novels. Shame also shaped the identity of post-war America and helped to understand how social differences were affected after the war. In turn, the vets' stories confronted the values of American society and cooperated to change the Americans' view of the Vietnam experience. The vets' accounts give a better understanding of who the American citizens were before the war, and who they became when the war was over.

Vietnam veteran writers like Kovic and Heinemann recorded their individual war experiences mainly based on what they went through during their tour in Vietnam. Their narratives aim to preserve their traumatic war memories, and reinforce the mythologies of conflicts about American policies and values, which were key factors to keep sustaining the ambiguous war. The vets fought the war in Vietnam for ten years, and because the war was so long, the meaning of their experiences was affected and acquired many different responses. Although the historical moment veterans lived in Vietnam were the same, each veteran writer sought his own truth about what they experienced during the war. They wrote the story of their own Vietnam, and extracted different lessons from the experience they had. The vets' narratives demonstrate that their novels became for many veterans the legacy of their intriguing war memories, and their stories still raise polemics about whether the depictions of their experiences are the result of their imaginations.

The vets' experiences show how the United States supports the war myth in which going to war and fighting for America is an honorable and glorious attitude. John F. Kennedy's words, for instance, presupposes that: "We will bear any burden, pay any price to ensure the success of liberty." Such argument expresses the need to impose upon Americans a doctrine that emphasizes the war myth in their own culture. This myth leads

Americans to believe that the United States is the model of an ideal society, a model that needs to be followed and respected by other nations, even if it is necessary to impose these ideals through war. Thus, the characters of Kovic and Paco, become somehow the victims of such idealism, which made them go to war to solve a problem that Americans thought Vietnamese were not able to resolve. This problem however, was never resolved.

Consequently, the vets' accounts bring as the most common subject, the sad stories of the vets' anger, which is usually about the physical and psychological suffering they lived during and after the war. Many soldiers who survived the war still have to carry in their inner side the feeling that there is always an enemy surrounding them, fencing them, and trying to attack them. The vets' psychological disturbance assures them that it is impossible to catch this enemy or get rid of this ghostly sensation. They have to live with the feeling that there is something or someone constantly haunting them.

The vets' accounts show how easily the lives of the participants in the war were destroyed due to the illusions the young teenagers had in becoming a war hero. No one ever told them the war would be so hard, nor the consequences so dire. Among those who survived, besides having to carry the war's psychological trauma along with them, they often had to deal with physical injuries.

The war in Vietnam was also sad because most Americans did not respect or support the veterans neither during nor after the war, and such attitude collaborated to increase the vets' frustrations and shame for losing the war. The depiction of the vets' experiences in the narratives is also a way they found to handle their own conflict.

Kovic, for instance, tried to warn U.S. authorities about how senseless and destructive wars are, but the U.S. government and most civilians paid no attention to his words. The United States continued to fight many other wars after the one in Vietnam, and

the war against terrorism, in Afghanistan, was one of the last wars in which America got involved. In an article entitled “Back Home, and Homeless,” published by *The New York Times* in October 2011, Afghanistan veteran Matt Farwell, who was a soldier in the U.S. army from 2005 to 2010, reveals that since he came back home from Afghanistan he has been homeless. As Farwell states, “Four and a half years in the Army, including 16 months as an infantryman in eastern Afghanistan, provided plenty of skills with no legal application in the civilian world. It was, however, wonderful preparation for being homeless” (Farwell).

When comparing Farwell’s experience to Vietnam vets’ experiences, it is possible to notice that, although the Vietnam War has been over for almost forty years, it seems that in general, the dark side of the Vietnam veterans’ experiences keeps repeating itself among the new generation of American veterans. This new generation of American veterans, such as Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, was not able to learn the reality of war with the experience lived by Vietnam veterans. Similarly to Kovic and Paco, Farwell’s feelings about being back home is that he is now living in a “foreign and hostile country.” In addition, like Kovic who had a young, strong and “perfect body” before the draft, Farwell claims that he “was a healthy and an absurdly well-educated striver.” Now that Farwell returned home, he faced the post-war reality, in a similar way Kovic did, the war erased Farwell’s dreams of being a war hero, and brought psychological devastation to his mind. To be healed however, seems to Farwell something far possible, it seems that what remains are his war experiences and pain, and as he points out: “I’d learned that fact the only way fools like me learn anything: experience.”

Even more terrifying than reading the consequences of the American wars in the vets’ novels, is to watch them on what is called, National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic,

in San Diego, California. This open-air clinic, full of disabled veterans of different generations, shows the vets' struggle to drag their mutilated bodies into the sea for therapeutic exercises. The vets struggle to build their bodies and confidence hoping to overcome their traumas and stop blaming the war. For Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist with the Veterans Administration, post-traumatic stress disorder is "a war injury." He asserts that, "veterans with combat PTSD are war wounded, carrying the burdens of sacrifice for the rest of us as surely as the amputees, the burned, the blind and the paralyzed carry them" (Farwell).

After all, it seems that civilians will never feel the cruelty of the Vietnam War in the same way veterans do. The holes war can leave in the hearts of those who fought seems to be impossible to measure. Once their official war is over, they return home to continue fighting a psychological, traumatic and painful combat against their unwanted memories of war. Therefore, a veteran's enemy never dies, it is always in their thoughts, confronting and threatening them.

Although the vets' experiences show that the result of wars is always disastrous, it seems that the war myth also has the power to make wars something fascinating. The men who go to war feel the importance of being part of a great historical event. They believe that they can actually change the world through the armed combat they are involved in, and because of that, the war's aftermath is not enough to stop the young men, who are most susceptible to myth from volunteering to participate in such heinous, intense, excited and risky experience.

The greed and pride of those who manage wars are also involved in manipulating the soldiers and reinforcing the importance of the war myth. The policies and profit in which the business of war is involved seem to be more important for those who run wars

than veterans' physical and psychological suffering. Thus, it is possible to conclude that truth is the first victim in a war, and because of that, the war myth persists, armed combat seems to have no end, and veterans' experiences keep being repeated in the lives of those who volunteer to fight in wars. Nevertheless, the truth in the vets' narratives are a partial antidote to lies and propaganda. Although the vets' narratives are the result of their memories and imagination, their Vietnam War stories show that the emotional truth behind their narratives is much more important than the factual truth on which their stories are based.

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