

ABSTRACT

“Our Grand Narrative of Women and War”:
Writing, and Writing Past, a Gendered Understanding of War Front and Home Front in
the War Writing of Hemingway, O’Brien, Plath, and Salinger

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Scholars and theorists who discuss the relationship between gender and war agree that the divide between the war front and the home front is gendered. This boundary is also a cause of pain, of misunderstanding, and of the breakdown of community. One way that soldiers and citizens, men and women, on either side of the boundary can rebuild community and find peace after war is to think—and write—past this gendered understanding of the divide between home front and war front.

In their war writing, the four authors this dissertation explores—Ernest Hemingway, Tim O’Brien, Sylvia Plath, and J.D. Salinger—display evidence of this boundary, as well as its destructive effects on persons on both sides of it. They also, in different ways, and with different levels of success, write or begin to write past this boundary and its gendered understanding of home front and war front.

Through my exploration of these four authors’ work, I conclude that the war writers of the twentieth century have a problem to solve: they still write within an understanding of war that very clearly genders combatants and noncombatants, warriors

and home front helpers. However, they also live and write within a historical and political era that opens up a greater possibility to think and write past this gendered understanding. Those writers who successfully utilize these tools are those able to restore their characters to at least some level of community and peace after war's end.

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by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In sketches, stories, and novels, Ernest Hemingway seeks to keep women separate from war experiences and laments the results of a relationship between women and war. Tim O'Brien, in his novels, introduces us not only to women who seem to be comforting reminders of home, yet are actually dangerous and deadly, but also to women who can come to understand their (male) veteran lovers and offer them a possibility of peace. Sylvia Plath, in letters, fiction, poems, and artwork, mourns the effects of war on women and children, often elided by discussions of war's effects on soldiers and against faceless foreign powers, and seeks to involve women in the global conversation on war and politics so that their distinct concerns can be heard. And in his stories, J.D. Salinger writes of veterans, families, children, and girlfriends who all endure war experiences, and whose common experiences and understanding might lead to their transcending the divisive borders between home front and war front experiences, a path toward healing after the wars have ceased.

All four of these authors' work displays three truths about how wars, at least in the Western world in the twentieth century, are thought and portrayed in writing. First, they often serve to define and sharpen boundaries between people whose experiences in war differ, often, and allegedly, in ways that create uncrossable chasms between one group and another. Second, most often, these chasms separate people along a strictly gendered line. And third, the existence, and widening, of these chasms often does little to stop those on either side from attempting to communicate their experiences to those on

the other in order to bridge that gap—attempts that often take the form of storytelling, and only sometimes offer any possibility of communication or rebuilt community.

The ways in which war perpetuates sharply defined boundaries between those who fight and those who do not, between the war front and the home front, between those who know what it was like over there and those who cannot begin to understand, is, in my view, most clearly articulated by Jean Bethke Elshtain in her 1987 book *Women and War*, and it is her ideas that I use to frame my discussion here. Elshtain is adamant that this war front / home front boundary is most often a strictly gendered one; further, this boundary often assumes a mythic quality that transcends the reality of men's and women's actual relationships to war. "In time of war," Elshtain writes, "real men and women...take on, in cultural memory and narrative, the personas of Just Warriors and Beautiful Souls," masculine and feminine tropes according to which men's and women's relationships to war are defined, consciously or unconsciously, in the war stories we continue to tell (4). According to Elshtain's analysis, one of the reasons why war "seduces us" is that we "continue to locate ourselves *inside* its prototypical emblems and identities" (3), among them gender tropes that persist despite evidence that men's and women's involvement in war extends far beyond their confines: "Man construed as violent, whether eagerly and inevitably or reluctantly and tragically; women as nonviolent, offering succor and compassion: these tropes...function...to re-create and secure women's location as noncombatants and men's as warriors." Thus, "sedimented lore—stories of male war fighters and women home keepers and designated weepers over war's inevitable tragedies—have spilled over from one epoch to the next" (4).

Significantly, the strictly gendered war front / home front boundary's mythic quality not only overshadows men's and women's actual relationships to war. It also, Elshtain argues, persists, with remarkable consistency, despite the changing face of war and society's relationship to it, particularly in the twentieth century, when wars have become increasingly bloody; death tolls have mounted astronomically; methods of waging war have distanced the soldier, in space and also psychologically, from his enemy; and when, perhaps most significantly, women have assumed more roles in combat such that the enemy might just as well be "hers" as "his." Though she acknowledges the clear differences between post-WWII and post-Vietnam American society and gender roles, Elshtain still goes on to assert:

But it would be unwise to assume that the combined effects of Vietnam, feminism, the involvement of over 50 percent of adult American women in the labor force, and the growing postponement of marriage and childbirth by young women undercut received webs of social meaning as these revolve around men, women, and war. (7)

Further, and ironically, the efforts of various feminisms to change the relationship between women and war have often ended up re-inscribing women in the same "Beautiful Soul," home front roles:

To the extent that feminist pacifism reproduces Beautiful Soul presumptions and evocations it, paradoxically, helps to ensure the continued triumph of our grand narrative of women and war, of male and female identities insofar as these are forged around the matter of collective violence. The "solution"...would seem to be insisting that women, too, can take up arms. But...Western history is dotted with tales of...women who reversed cultural expectations by donning warrior's garb and doing battle; and their existence as fact and myth seems not to have put much of a dent in the overall edifice of the way war figures in the structure of male and female experience and reactions. (8)

Even in the latter years of the twentieth century, then, despite the shifting face of war and place of women in it and in society, we can still see, Elshtain argues, a clear and

dichotomous relationship between a masculine war front and feminine home front—a relationship based on separation and division, rather than communication and the possibility of reconciliation.

Paradoxically, however, many veterans of the war front return to become tellers (and writers) of war stories who seek communication with others back home—or, at the very least, seek a way to communicate their experience that rings true to them. Thus, war perpetuates division between people while simultaneously producing storytellers who desire to communicate across those divisions. The authors this dissertation considers—Ernest Hemingway, Tim O’Brien, Sylvia Plath, and J.D. Salinger—all participate in this kind of storytelling: storytelling that, with varying levels of success, attempts to speak across the persistent gap between home front and war front in an effort to bridge or even close it. The success or failure of these authors depends upon their ability to transcend these pervasive, gendered categories and notions of what constitutes “war experience,” and to write instead of men and women not as denizens of war front and home front but as what Elshtain terms “chastened patriots” who work together to “break cycles of vengeance” and the harrowing effects of war.

Defining “Gender” and “War” as Categories of Analysis

Before I discuss Elshtain’s “chastened patriot” idea more fully, and apply it to these four authors in the next four chapters, first I want to define what I mean here by “gender” and “war,” and also chart briefly how other scholars have considered the relationship between gender and war.

Of these two terms, “gender” is perhaps the more fraught and difficult to define. Indeed, in the very first sentence of her 1995 book *Masculinities*, Raewyn Connell notes

that: “The concepts ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine,’ Freud observed in a melancholy footnote, ‘are among the most confused that occur in science’” (3). “Gender,” and (two of) its subcategories “masculine” and “feminine,” are slippery terms, and ones that have an unfortunate tendency to slide into meaninglessness. To avoid this slipperiness here, I understand “gender” to mean, in the words of Joan Wallach Scott, “the social organization of sexual difference,” which, Scott emphasizes and I agree, does not necessarily “mean that gender reflects or implements fixed and natural physical differences between women and men; rather gender is the knowledge that establishes meaning for bodily differences” (2). When I apply the term “gender” and “gendered” in the context of war and war literature, then, and argue that the division between home front and war front is gendered, I mean that war, war literature, and the divisions they describe involve the organization of human beings along lines of sexual difference, in ways that reflect traditional (or traditional Western) understandings of “masculine” and “feminine.” Thus, war front and home front are defined, consciously and/or unconsciously, as masculine and feminine, and assigned traits and characteristics that are traditionally placed under the umbrellas of “masculine” and “feminine” traits and characteristics. One example is the dichotomous relationship into which war front and home front are placed with regards to who protects whom: the war front protects, the home front is protected. Being a protector is a traditionally masculine characteristic, while being protected or needing protection is a traditionally feminine characteristic. Another example is the use of violence. Violence and aggression are traditionally masculine characteristics, as Connell notes;¹ they are anywhere from necessary to prized

¹ Connell writes in *Masculinities* that “European/American masculinities were deeply implicated in the world-wide violence through which European/American culture became dominant” (186); she also

on the war front, as the scholars I cite below argue. Passivity, or action in support of the actions of those on the war front and in submission to their needs, are traditionally feminine characteristics, and often used to characterize the home front.

“War,” as a category of analysis, is a bit simpler to define for my purposes here. Literally, “war” denotes conflict—organized, violent, and armed—between the armed forces of two nations or states, or between opposing parties within the same nation or state in the case of civil war; this definition of “war” is likely what comes first to our minds when we hear the word. Of course, “war” is also often defined figuratively to describe other types of conflict within societies and among people, such as gender wars, sex wars, or race wars; we even use “war” to mean conflict within one person who may be “at war” with him or herself. Though these latter definitions are important ones, in the pages to follow, I use “war” according to the first definition. Of course, my choosing this definition does oversimplify; after all, armed conflict between nations often involves wars in the figurative sense: bureaucratic conflicts and treaties, conflicts between proponents and pacifists on the home front, etc. However, I argue—in agreement with Elshtain—that war, according to the first definition, is the type that captures our imaginations and figures in our stories; this type of war is, Elshtain notes, “a pervasive presence” in Western society and imagination; “Without war stories,” she states, “there would be many fewer stories to tell” (x).

The war stories I examine in this dissertation, too, are all concerned with war according to this first definition: armed conflicts between nations, whether those conflicts are the First or Second World Wars, the Spanish Civil War in the early twentieth century,

discusses how, historically, the occupation of soldiering has been understood as a particularly masculine one, regardless of how and whether women were involved in and around the war front (187).

the Korean War, the Vietnam War, or the Cold War.² Indeed, I discuss these four authors in particular because of the wars they write about, and where they are placed historically: these four writers' work concerns and spans major armed conflicts of the twentieth century. Ernest Hemingway writes of the First World War and, later, as an American who was involved in the Spanish Civil War; J.D. Salinger writes as a veteran of the Second World War, although he only rarely writes specifically about it; Sylvia Plath, growing up in the shadow of the Second World War and under the looming cloud of the Cold War, writes of those wars' effects on her society, as well as about the Korean War; Tim O'Brien, finally, writes as a veteran of the Vietnam War.

Not only is it significant that these writers' lives and work extend across the twentieth century and the major wars in which America—and Americans—were involved; these writers' very Americanness is also significant, particularly where the divide between home front and war front is concerned. For the American, and the American writer, the wars of the twentieth century in which the United States were involved were, without exception, fought on foreign soil; the division between the home front and the war front, therefore, is not just a felt distance but a literal divide, the soldier's experience of the war separated from the experience of those on the home front by physical space as well as by the persistent myth Elshtain identifies.

In my discussion of these four twentieth century American writers, and given these definitions of gender and war, then, I propose, in this dissertation, that the relationship between gender and war, and between gender and war writing, has a

² Hemingway's war writing concerns the First World War and the Spanish Civil War; Salinger, a veteran of the Second World War, writes obliquely about it, while Tim O'Brien, a Vietnam War veteran, writes directly about Vietnam. Plath's war writing encompasses past and present conflicts; writing during the Korean War and in the Cold War period, the Second World War also has a presence in her work.

particular character and goal: much war writing is, among other things, an attempt to communicate war experience across the divide between war front and home front, and therefore also across gender lines. These communicative acts are difficult. I have stated that war, first, perpetuates divisions between people, particularly between home front and war front; that, second, this same division between fronts is often gendered; and that, third, one division war perpetuates is division along traditional gender lines. If these are true, then this division manifests itself not only in the gulf in ability to communicate experience between returning veterans and those at home, but also in how these returning veterans—particularly those who tell stories about their experiences—see their relationship to the feminine, often as it is manifested in flesh-and-blood women. Although the gendered war front / home front division is not, and should not be seen as, the same as the gender division between men and women in society, the former does profoundly affect the latter. It also exacerbates the war storyteller's already difficult task, because he (and it is usually he) must somehow write past gender lines in order to transgress the boundary between home front and war front, in order to truly communicate his experience and have it be heard.

Gender and War: the Larger Discussion

The gendered division between war front and home front has been thoroughly explored by a variety of scholars in several significant ways. One way concerns whether or not women are able to, or should, tell war stories, and whether women's writing during war can be accurately called stories of war experience. This scholarship seeks to answer (with an emphatic YES) the question of whether or not women are qualified to write about war, and usually takes the form of anthologies of women's war writing (for

example, *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I*, edited by Margaret R. Higonnet) and books of scholarship about such writing (for example, Susan Schweik's *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War*). Schweik in particular draws attention to the relationship between gender division in society and the division between war front and home front; she writes that wars "have a way of revealing with special clarity how men as well as women are both intensely and uneasily gendered. [...]" [T]he meanings attached to femininity in war are always opposed to those attached to masculinity..." (3). Though she makes clear, and I agree, that these societal categories of gender, as well as the gendering of home and war front, are unsettled practically throughout history—for example, the mass influx of women into traditionally masculine jobs to further the war effort in World War II—still, "the gender ideology in which men are called upon to 'protect' and women and children to 'be protected' still held sway" in America during the Second World War—and, I argue, has reigned throughout the twentieth century (and still does) (5). This gendered and problematic gap between men "at war" and women "back home" serves in her argument to problematize the task of women war poets. According to this gendered gap between home front and war front, writing about war is not the province of writers at the home front, but, and more significantly for my argument here, writing about war is also not the province of women, in particular.

Another way in which this gendered division appears in scholarship, closely tied to the first, focuses on the ways in which women's involvement in war is often elided and not discussed. Many scholars have dedicated their work to recovering this involvement. Many of the examples of this type of scholarship—when they concern the twentieth

century, at least—focus particularly on women’s involvement in the First World War (for example, see Lettie Gavin’s *American Women in World War I*, Kimberly Jensen’s *Mobilizing Minerva*, and France E. Early’s *A World Without War*).

A third example of scholarship concerned with this gendered division, one which takes a slightly different tack, concerns the language we use to talk about war, about waging war, and about the paraphernalia of war. Some scholarship in this category discusses feminist reimaginings and redefinitions of such language (see, for example, Laura Sjoberg’s discussion toward a feminist reformulation of Just War Theory in *Gender, Justice, and the Wars in Iraq*). Other scholarship in this category discusses how war talk is often gendered and sexualized, and the business of soldiery made hypermasculine as a result (see, for example, the essays in *Gendering War Talk*, edited by Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott, as well as Raewyn Connell’s scholarship on masculinity studies).

Despite the different lenses through which they examine the relationship between gender and war, all of these examples, as I argued above, illustrate two specific and significant aspects of the division between war front and home front. First, this division is gendered. Second, this division, while not homogeneous with the gender divisions between men and women in society, nevertheless is influenced by and influences it. Operating, consciously or unconsciously, under the war front / home front division affects how the (male) soldier thinks of and relates to not just the home front, but to women in particular. Similarly, the division between home front and war front, whose existence depends in part upon the belief that the home front needs to be protected, can ironically elide and even work against the actual needs and preservation of the people at

home. As Susan Jeffords argues in *The Remasculinization of America*, the “arena of warfare and the Vietnam War in particular are not just fields of battle but fields of gender, in which enemies are depicted as feminine, wives and mothers and girl friends are justifications for fighting, and vocabularies are sexually motivated” (xi). Mirium Cooke and Angela Woollacott make a similar argument when they write that:

A culturally produced activity that is as rigidly defined by sexual differentiation and as committed to sexual exclusion as is war points to a crucial site where meanings about gender are being produced, reproduced, and circulated back into society. [...] The separation of “front” and “home front” has not only been the consequence of war but has also been used as its justification. Arguably, this remains true despite the experiences of our own wartorn century, during which civilian bombing, wars of national liberation, civil wars, and genocide have challenged the distinctions between these fronts and the gender relations they enforce. (ix)

Cooke and Woollacott’s thoughts are echoed by Sara Ruddick in an essay in the same volume; Ruddick writes:

While an ethos of assaultive masculinity legitimates abusive war and warlike abuse, a myth of manly protection, sustained by military androphilia, prevents men and women from seeing what they already know: wars almost always leave everyone in their vicinity *unprotected*. By looking through myths of manliness, women and men should be better able to see the cruel realities of war engraved on bodies of all ages and both sexes. (113)

“Looking through [these] myths of manliness” in order to communicate the “cruel realities of war” regardless of one’s gender, age, or even experience becomes one task of the war writer—a difficult task seldom accomplished.

The gendered home front / war front division affects not only the people involved on either side, but also how and whether stories can be used to bridge the gap between home and war front. Further, these effects persist across time despite advances in communication (such as social media) that would seem to make those stories easier to

tell, or at least to deliver, from war to home front. For example, Stacey Peebles, in her book *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating the American Soldier's Experience in Iraq*, argues that “War, and contemporary American war in particular, enforces categorization even as it forces encounters across the boundaries of media, nation, and the body” (2). War stories, then, attempt to communicate across difficult boundaries that war itself perpetuates. Stories are, in many ways, concerned with collapsing or at least weakening boundaries and strict categories between human beings in order to engage readers with a human subject who may or may not closely resemble them. However, war, as Peebles writes, “thwarts...impulses to challenge binary modes of thinking and move beyond the need for categorization,” including where categories of gender and the categories of war and home front are concerned. Peebles writes: “[some] soldiers express dissatisfaction with traditional gender roles, most notably the dictates of masculinity, but their attempts to construct a viable alternative fail” on the war front (3); shortly after, she continues: “traumatized and injured veterans...discover [upon their return to the States] the unexpected pain of being ‘in between’ war and home, not able to fully exist in either state” (3).

Taking these ongoing discussions about the relationship between gender and war into account, then, and building on these authors’ ideas, I argue in this dissertation that the gendered home front / war front division, on the one hand, and its relationship to gender division in society, on the other, is reflected in how men and women relate to each other in the writings of the four authors this dissertation concerns. These authors all recognize the ill effects this “in between” state has on all people involved: soldiers, returning veterans, and those back home. In different ways, these authors show how open

communication with, understanding of, and concern for those on both sides of the home front / war front divide can help bring the edges of this rift together. Because the home front / war front divide is gendered, and because, as I argued above, the gendering of the home front / war front divide affects people's ideas about gender in society more generally, the ways the characters and authors I write about here describe and relate to female characters is significant. If warfare encourages soldiers to be hypermasculine, to pit their own actions against a feminized enemy, to act in defense of their wives and girlfriends back home while they are separated from those women in space as well as experience, then, I argue, shedding those wartime ideas about gender is a key step towards those soldiers' ability to feel less "in between."

Here, then, I return to Elshtain, and her concept of the "chastened patriot," because this concept can help pinpoint why some authors more than others are able to write past the gendered home front / war front division in ways that allow their characters, veterans or not, to understand each other and reconnect in community after war. Elshtain closes *Women and War* by encouraging men and women to find ways to be citizens together, not in separate ways defined by the traditional notions of "masculine" and "feminine" she traces throughout her book and claims have the qualities of a persistent myth as far as Western thinking about war is concerned. A figure without gender, the chastened patriot works with other chastened patriots to "step back from absolute formulas and rigid notions and male and female identity" in and beyond the context of war and politics (270). Chastened patriots, because they participate in war and politics but transcend these gendered boundaries, are figures who allow for not only communication across these boundaries but also the dissolution of these boundaries.

Chastened patriots are “citizens who share what Hannah Arendt calls ‘the faculty of action,’” and that action is one of forgiveness and understanding “as one way human beings have to break cycles of vengeance” and misunderstanding (258). The ability to write past a gendered understanding of the home and war fronts, and to investigate the possibility that people—men and women, veterans and not—can come together after war as “chastened patriots” who are able to forgive and understand in order to break cycles of violence, varies in the work of each of the authors that I explore in the following pages. In Hemingway and O’Brien’s fiction, finding a way to interact with women as persons, rather than symbols of those the soldier must protect, and even of threats the soldier must guard against, can help veterans reintegrate into society and find community in life and peace in death. In Plath and Salinger’s work, reconsidering gender as it relates to war experience and telling war stories might result in true community and healing; it might also keep wars from happening, or from happening again.

All four writers, from across the twentieth century and its wars, illustrate two truths. First, the gendered tropes Elshtain identifies, the masculine “Just Warrior” and the feminine “Beautiful Soul,” retain their mythic qualities even into and across the twentieth century, despite the growth of modern (and increasingly depersonalized) violence in warfare, and despite the increased visibility of women’s movements and their efforts, explicit or implicit, to reframe the relationship between women and war. Second, however, despite the fact that they write about war in this bloodiest century, these authors illustrate that it is possible for these tropes to be written past, and for community beyond the boundary lines between home front and war front, between masculine and feminine types of war experiences, to develop.

CHAPTER TWO

“All alone at the war with no new girls”: Nightmares and “War Comrades” in the Work of Ernest Hemingway

Less than a quarter of the way into *A Farewell to Arms*, Lieutenant Henry asks an orderly how “the girls” are doing, referring to the prostitutes at the brothel on the front. The orderly mournfully answers: “There are no girls” (64). The reason why “there are no girls” is not one readers might expect; the brothel hasn’t been closed down by prudish townsfolk, nor have the women in it fled to find safer lodgings or more reputable jobs. The orderly continues: “For two weeks now they haven’t changed them. I don’t go there any more. It is disgraceful. They aren’t girls: they are old war comrades” (64-5). When Henry asks, bemused, “You don’t go at all?”, the orderly says that he does, yes, but repeats his earlier sentiment: “It is a disgrace,” he says, “that [the girls] should stay so long that they become friends” (65). These women-turned-war-comrades work in a brothel on the war front, in a town where the war has basically moved in to stay; they are women who, at least according to the orderly, even wanted to go to the war front: when Lieutenant Henry proposes that the reason there are no new girls is that “maybe girls don’t want to go to the front anymore,” the orderly scoffs, “Of course they do,” and complains that all the new girls are being kept behind “for the pleasure of dugout hidiers in the rear” (65). However enmeshed these women are with the soldiers and ambulance drivers who use their services, though, it seems crucial, for the orderly, that the women at the brothel remain distinct, at least in some ways, from the war he is involved in. Perhaps, when women join their ranks, something happens to the brotherly affection between war

comrades, a bond the orderly states outright at the end of his and Henry's conversation about women: "Underneath we [Italians and Americans] are the same. We are war brothers. Kiss me good-by," the orderly tells Henry (67).¹ Whether or not it is true that, for the orderly at least, women's having the status of "war comrade" devalues male camaraderie, it is clear from this passage that war experience—even just being too long at the front—makes women not-women, or at least no longer desirable. Further, their war experience isn't valuable, isn't something they are to talk about with the men around them as they all experience the war. Women's war experience is, for the orderly, "disgraceful."

For men, however—and more particularly, for the male writer—the ordeals of war make up one type of experience powerful enough to be committed to paper, to be shaped into fine writing, and to be communicated to others. However, these experiences should not be written down and shared lightly, for in Hemingway's work there is the distinct impression that the art of storytelling involves an intense investment of the self, so intense, in fact, that the act of writing a story is a kind of willing self-amputation: a story, once written, involves the removal of the emotions and experiences that evoked and inspired it, such that they could not be recovered or rewritten—at least, not rewritten as they were. One of Hemingway's characters, the protagonist of the novella "A Strange

¹ Of course, as lines like this one ("Kiss me good-by") suggest, sexuality and gender in Hemingway's work are not reducible, and should not be reduced, to men desiring women and women desiring men, or strict categories of "masculine" and "feminine," or even to hetero and queer sexualities. Rather, sexuality and gender are, in Hemingway's work, extraordinarily complex, and most scholarly discussions of gender and sexuality in Hemingway reflect this complexity. For example, we could consider Alex Vernon's analysis of the relationship between Lieutenant Henry and Catherine as deliberately if not overtly portrayed as both hetero- and homosexual in "War, Gender, and Ernest Hemingway"; we could consider as well Debra A. Modellmog's discussion of queerness in *A Farewell to Arms* ("We live in a country where nothing makes any difference": The Queer Sensibility of *A Farewell to Arms*); we could also consider any analysis of Hemingway's most overt portrayal of fluid sexuality, his posthumously (edited and) published novel *The Garden of Eden* (see, for example, the essays of Rose Marie Burwell, J. Gerald Kennedy, Daniel Kempton, and Cary Wolfe in the 2012 volume *Hemingway's The Garden of Eden: Twenty-Five Years of Criticism*).

Country,” describes the phenomenon in this way: “Writing [stories] I had felt all the emotion I had to feel about those things and I had put it all in and all the knowledge of them that I could express and I had rewritten and rewritten until it was all in them and all gone out of me” (649). The stories this narrator speaks of are about all the macho topics often considered Hemingway’s subjects of choice: boxing, horse racing, baseball. In addition, however, “several were about the first war” (649). And significantly, not only were these stories intense, irrecoverable investments of time and emotion on the artist’s part, they were also threatened by a woman’s control over them. Just as the orderly found the collapsing of prostitutes’ roles with that of war comrades’ disgraceful and troubling, so the protagonist of “A Strange Country” finds the mixing of his writing and his woman a troubling, and eventually devastating, one; after all, his former wife, having packed all his manuscripts in a suitcase and set off with them on a train, lost all of them when the suitcase and its contents were stolen as she bought a bottle of Evian water (646).

This event, coupled with the orderly’s anxious words to Lieutenant Henry, make up part of what seems a recurring nightmare of Hemingway’s: that war experience and stories about it will be lost or somehow perverted at the hands of a woman or under her influence. This recurring nightmare illustrates a tension in much of Hemingway’s work between two key ideas. First, stories—especially war narratives—are extremely personal and should not be told lightly; they are at their completion pieces of the author removed from himself, unrecoverable and profound. If these stories are lost, the loss, too, is profound, because these stories must be told to someone. Therefore, the (male) writer is willing to let himself be read and experienced by others; in fact, he must. Second, the profundity and even survival of these stories is threatened by women and the feminine.

Women, and the feminine characteristics they are depicted as embodying (such as, for example, displays of emotion) cannot exert any control over or otherwise own war experiences, the writing process, or the narrative itself. If they do, the narrative will be destroyed, twisted, endangered, cheapened, and even lost. This feminine threat looms large in Hemingway's work, especially over stories concerning war.

However, the characters in Hemingway's war writing also exhibit an intense need to relate to and be with women, though they are rarely able to do so fully. Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley, Lieutenant Henry and Catherine Barkley, Robert Jordan and Maria—all these relationships, though all are somehow thwarted or tragically ended, show an acute desire on the part of the male protagonists to find, and relate meaningfully to, women in their lives. And just as often as this desire appears in Hemingway's major works, so also do romantic heroines who have the kinds of war experiences the orderly is so wary of: Catherine Barkley is a nurse, and she and Brett Ashley, also a nurse with the VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment), both lost their first loves during the First World War; Maria, Robert Jordan's girlish lover in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, has found a place with Jordan's group after being raped and abused by enemy soldiers. We could, perhaps, call all of these women "old war comrades." The expertise and authority these women have in relation to their own war experiences, and the potential they have, therefore, to communicate meaningfully with others—especially men—who possess similar sets of experiences, exists simultaneously with the theme in Hemingway's work that I briefly outlined above: the fear that giving women control over storytelling, particularly over storytelling about war, will result in the loss and even destruction of those stories.

Thus, the need to communicate profound human experiences through stories and through relationships is always in tension with Hemingway's wariness concerning, and even fear of, reconciliation with women and with what, in his fiction, Hemingway paints as the feminine part of human experience. This fear persists despite the fact that, in his war writing, the ability of Hemingway's male protagonists to give the women in their lives real influence over them corresponds to those protagonists' ability to find meaning within and past the war experiences they have endured. It is only when the tension is resolved between this need and this fear, when characters are able to reconcile with and truly relate to the feminine, and when female voices tangle with male voices and share authority over the war narrative, that Hemingway's characters are able to find peace and reconciliation in times of war (and after war).

In order to argue this thesis, I will trace how each of these two seemingly opposing threads finds expression in Hemingway's work. First, I will chart the various places in which Hemingway expresses this fear of female influence over the male artist's work; three of these stand out, and describe incidents so similar that they could be well described as a recurring nightmare of their author. The first expression of this fear occurs in "The Strange Country," which I discussed briefly above. The second occurs in *The Garden of Eden*; this incident is striking because the woman in question does not lose her male partner's writing out of foolishness or forgetfulness, but rather burns his manuscripts out of jealousy. The third expression of this fear, detailed in *A Moveable Feast*, is most striking because the incident described actually happened to Hemingway while he was in Paris in the twenties; this real-life incident, considered together with the

two fictionalized versions of it noted above, provide striking insight into how pervasive this fear is in Hemingway's work.

In the second section of this chapter, I chart the progress of the second thread through Hemingway's three major war novels: *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Each of these novels depicts a great—or the lost potential for a great—love story between a male protagonist and a female heroine, both of whom have been scarred by war, be it the First World War or the Spanish Civil War. These “old war comrades” offer their love interests a glimpse of the possibility of recovery from war experience: by commiserating over the rough deals it has dealt, like Brett Ashley does with Jake Barnes; by escaping it, as Catherine Barkley and Lieutenant Henry attempt to do; or by transcending it, as Maria and Robert Jordan seem to do, for a time.

Finally, I consider the relationship between these two threads, and what conclusions we can draw from their both being distinctly present in Hemingway's work. I discuss Hemingway's work in light of Elshtain's discussion in *Women and War* of the persistent myth in Western culture of a gendered home front and war front, and how Hemingway both does and does not write past this myth. Hemingway seems to understand throughout his writing the need for human connection, understanding, and relationship across the boundaries created by gender and war; however, he simultaneously displays a fear of what might happen if those boundaries, particularly those created by gender, are transgressed. As a result of this tension, Hemingway's protagonists, though they seek the company and understanding of the women in their lives, are thus largely unable or able in limited ways to leave war, and find peace.

Oddly enough, the places where Hemingway's writing about women and about war meet have received relatively little scholarly attention. Alex Vernon, in a 2002 article succinctly entitled "War, Gender, and Ernest Hemingway," also points out this quirk of Hemingway scholarship when he states that "critics have tended to approach Hemingway through either war or gender" but seldom both (39), a separation that, in his view, is a false one.² "Discussions of gender and Hemingway can only be illuminated by consideration of Hemingway the veteran," he writes (39-40). Both of Vernon's points are quite correct: scholars often consider Hemingway and war,³ and Hemingway and gender, but there are few examples of criticism that consider both together, though such consideration might be quite fruitful. Of those that do—including Vernon's—their focus tends to be limited; these essays consider one or a few of Hemingway's novels or stories, rather than charting the intricacies of the relationship between war and gender across a wider swath of Hemingway's work. Vernon's essay, mentioned above, deals primarily with the short story "Big Two-Hearted River," with others of the Nick Adams stories, and with Hemingway's words, mostly in letters, about his own war experiences; the essay argues for a more complex understanding of the connections between war and gender in Hemingway's work. In her book *At Home, At War: Domesticity and World War I in American Literature*, Jennifer Haytock makes a similar argument about *In Our Time* and *A Farewell to Arms*, stating: "I believe that Hemingway recognized the complexity of both masculinity and femininity...and that his war writings provide an opportunity to explore what happens to masculinity when femininity changes" (80). Haytock also

² Vernon restates this thesis in his 2004 book *Soldiers Once and Still: Ernest Hemingway, James Salter & Tim O'Brien*.

³ Indeed, considering Hemingway through the lens of war is a common enough way of viewing his work that his war writing has been separately anthologized in the 2003 compilation *Hemingway on War*.

recognizes the tension between fear of and longing for relationship with women in these works, stating that they “show both a fear of the domestic world and a longing for the security domestic ritual can bring” (80). Both of these writers cite the work of Judith Fetterley, who argues in her 1978 book *The Resisting Reader* that “War simplifies men’s relation to women,” erasing the “distinctions among women that normally keep male hostility under some restraint and...legitimizes aggression against all women” (49). In Fetterley’s view, then, a character like Catherine Barkley becomes problematic: “The initial complication Catherine Barkley introduces is being a nurse in a world where all women are whores. The Italians don’t want nurses at the front and don’t know what to do with them” (50). In a much more recent (2009) essay, “‘We live in a country where nothing makes a difference’: The Queer Sensibility in *A Farewell to Arms*,” Debra Modellmog argues for a different view from Fetterley’s of gender, war, and Catherine Barkley, one where Catherine is partly responsible for the queering of normal sexual relationships in the novel: Catherine and Henry’s sex life of “sex outside of marriage, sex in a hospital bed almost surely with the woman on top” is, for Modellmog, indicative of the ways in which war upsets traditional definitions of marriage and sex between men and women (9). Thomas Strychacz’s 2003 book *Hemingway’s Theaters of Masculinity* considers how masculinity is defined and performed in *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway’s “theaters of war.” Finally, in their essay “Soldier’s Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War,” Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out how Jake Barnes of *The Sun Also Rises* is one of several characters of early twentieth-century literature who come back from the war suffering “specifically

from *sexual* wounds” that redefine them as “*not* men” who are “not just publicly powerless...[but] privately impotent” (260).

For all of these critics, then, reading Hemingway through the double lens of war and gender is only fitting. In the following pages, I apply that dual lens not just to Hemingway’s major war novels, but extend my scope to works like *A Moveable Feast*, *The Garden of Eden*, Hemingway’s short story “The Strange Country,” as well as his letters, in order to develop a more complete picture of just why gender and war are so intimately connected, and simultaneously significant, in Hemingway’s work.

Hemingway’s Nightmare Women

Writing—particularly writing about war—in Hemingway’s work is a product of powerful experience and the deep desire to communicate that experience to others. However, coupled with that desire to communicate is the danger women pose to the (male) author’s work: there is, throughout Hemingway’s writing, a general tendency to fear women, and any consideration of war and women in Hemingway must recognize it.

This nightmarish female figure, one whom the male author trusts but who eventually betrays that trust by destroying, or showing the potential to destroy, his work, has its roots in Hemingway’s own life, when his first wife, Hadley, lost years’ worth of Hemingway’s writing on a train. “I suppose you heard about the loss of my Juvenilia? [*sic*]” he wrote to Ezra Pound on January 23, 1923, referring to Hadley’s mistake. The loss of his work is total: Hemingway continues in his letter to Pound: “I went up to Paris last week to see what was left and found that Hadley had made the job complete by including all carbons, duplicates, etc. All that remains of my complete works are three pencil drafts of a bum poem which was later scrapped, some correspondence between

John McClure...and me, and some journalistic carbons” (*Selected Letters* 77). However total the loss was, though, Hemingway’s tone is curiously nonchalant. He does ask Pound not to give what Hemingway suspects would be his natural response: “You, naturally, would say, ‘Good,’ etc. [...] But don’t say it to me,” he writes in the same letter (77).⁴ However, he also seems to have come to terms with the loss in many respects. “Am now working on new stuff,” he continues (77). The writer of this letter, far from being in any measure distraught over the loss of three years’ work, seems to be in relatively good humor, ready to continue writing.⁵

However, the ways in which Hadley’s loss of her husband’s manuscripts is imaginatively transformed in two other places in Hemingway’s fiction, as well as the content of the surrounding sketches into which a description of this incident fits in *A Moveable Feast*, belie the assumption that Hemingway, with Pound, saw the loss of these manuscripts as a potential boon rather than a crushing blow, an “act of Gawd,” as Pound would later write,⁶ rather than a cruel cosmic joke. One of the works of fiction that incorporates this incident is “The Strange Country,” a story that is both four chapters of a novel Hemingway never completed, and preliminary writing for an early version of his later novel *Islands in the Stream*. In this story, the loss of the manuscripts forms part of a story the protagonist, Roger, tells his young lover Helena (whom he calls “daughter”)

⁴ Indeed, Hemingway’s prediction was correct: the editor of *Selected Letters* notes at the end of this letter to Pound that, in an undated reply to Hemingway’s account of the “loss of his Juvenilia,” “Pound called the loss an ‘act of Gawd’ and urged EH to recapture the materials from memory, which [Pound] called ‘the best critic’” (77).

⁵ The loss of his manuscripts does not figure in any of the other letters included in the *Selected Letters*, further indicating that Hemingway was able to move past the event. And even further, the incident does not seem to have had any damaging effect on Hemingway and Hadley’s marriage; their separation occurred in August of 1926, three years removed from the loss of the manuscripts, and the length of time between the two incidents makes any proposed direct connection between them, in my view, at best misguided.

⁶ See note 4 above.

while on a trip in Florida; significantly, much of the events in the rest of “The Strange Country” concern Roger’s worries over events in Europe, particularly the Spanish Civil War, and the possibility that he will have to go overseas. Thus, the male protagonist’s worries about the possibility of war dovetail with his worries about his past and present relationships with women, and with the long-ago loss of meaningful work at the hands of one of those women. The second work, *The Garden of Eden*, was composed simultaneously with “The Strange Country”; the latter, Hemingway worked on at intervals in 1946-47 and in 1950-51, while he began the former in 1946 and worked on it intermittently until his death in 1961.⁷ The war, and the evidence of its presence in Europe, is largely absent from *The Garden of Eden*; Hadley’s loss of the manuscripts on the train is, in this story, connected instead to the dangers of an insane wife’s ambition and jealousy of her artist husband’s talents. In this novel, the wife, Catherine, does not lose the manuscripts by accident—she deliberately burns them. Catherine’s character, the jealous wife who threatens her husband’s art, leads us to the final place in Hemingway’s work where the loss of the manuscripts appears: in one of the sketches in *A Moveable Feast*, entitled “Hunger Was Good Discipline,” where the incident is narrated much like it originally was to Pound shortly after it happened. However, the overall tone of “Hunger Was Good Discipline” gives the incident new gravity. Further, in others of the Paris sketches that make up *A Moveable Feast* the figure of the jealous wife or female

⁷ Hemingway notes his progress on what is likely *The Garden of Eden* in a letter to critic Maxwell Geismar dated September 10, 1947; he writes that he has “been working on same book...I was on when I saw you. Getting very big but I cut the hell out of it periodically” (*Selected Letters* 626). In Charles Scribner, Jr.’s, preface to *The Garden of Eden*, which was published posthumously in 1986, he writes that the published version of the novel is only the first half of the book Hemingway wrote and left unfinished: “Only the second part was incomplete, and the first half taken by itself, with only a modest amount of pruning, provided a wholly harmonious and coherent narrative” (vii). It seems that the editors of the published *The Garden of Eden* preserved both some of Hemingway’s last writing and the spirit in which he composed the novel, themselves “cut[ting] the hell out of it.”

partner, one whose own ambitions threaten the integrity of her artist husband or partner, recurs twice in the real-life characters of Zelda Fitzgerald and Alice Toklas. The existence of these sketches alongside “Hunger Was Good Discipline” invites comparison, and the similarities between Catherine and Hadley, on the one hand, and among Catherine, Alice, and Zelda on the other, also invite us to consider these jealous women in connection to the loss of the manuscripts. Together, these places where Hemingway revisited, in various ways, Hadley’s loss of his work on the train in early 1923 indicate that Hemingway’s reaction to the incident was hardly nonchalant. Though the incident itself clearly provided Hemingway with fodder for writing after the loss of three years’ worth of work had left him empty, it also fueled what seems, in my view, to be a recurring nightmare of the loss and destruction that are possible when a woman is given too much control over the stories, the outpourings of her artist partner’s heart and mind. In the rest of this section, I will investigate each of these three works in more detail in an effort to further prove this point.

At first glance, “The Strange Country” seems an odd story in which to include a version of Hadley’s loss of Hemingway’s “juvenilia.” This story follows a writer and journalist, Roger, and his much younger lover Helena on a road trip from Miami west to Hollywood; the story is set in the mid-1930s, as is clear by Roger’s frequent worries about, and perusal of newspaper articles concerning, the beginnings of the Spanish Civil War. Roger is a well-known writer whose work is taught in colleges; Helena is a would-be actress fourteen years his junior. Roger’s investment in the relationship is complicated; when he tells Helena “I love you,” the text often indicates that he is uncertain or even lying (607, 608, 616), but at other times, as when he watches her sleep

after their first night on the road together, he seems in awe of the love, vitality, and sense of home that she represents to him (618-21). The rising threat of the Spanish Civil War, brewing thousands of miles and an ocean away from the ephemeral fantasy world he has built with Helena in the “strange country” that is both the landscape of her body (615) and the escape from loneliness they both seem to find in lovemaking (617), drives deeper the wedge Roger feels between himself and the possibility of love and home Helena represents. Already feeling acutely separate from her in age and experience, he worries that they will be separated by physical distance as well if he is called away to report on the war (622). Helena, clearly, represents something Roger fears he has lost access to amidst the rubble of his past, broken marriages and his distance—literal and figurative—from his sons. He sees war and violence as something apart from Helena and the sense of family and community she represents, but not because her involvement would be damaging to him, but because he has “to fight to keep the world so it will be O.K. for [Helena and his children] to live in” (622).

However, Roger’s worries don’t prevent him from talking to her about the situation brewing in Spain, without even seeming to hold back in order to keep her from becoming an “old war comrade”; when she asks if he will tell her about “the Spanish business,” as Roger calls it, he obliges readily and thoroughly: “He told her about it as well as he could within the limitations of his knowledge and his information” (625). Overall, Roger is content in her company, afraid that he will deny or destroy her but also deeply valuing her, her youth and beauty and the peace she represents, very content to see her as a reminder of what wars are fought to preserve, ready to tell her about his worries

as long as her interest does not keep him from holding her in his mind as a glowing symbol of all that is good on the home front.

But their bliss is not to last, and, significantly, the cause of its disintegration is Helena's revelation—under the influence of her first glass of absinthe—that she is “a story-maker-upper” (642). After this revelation, the speed, in part aided by the absinthe, at which Helena goes from beautiful young girl and embodiment of peace, to sudden possible threat and invader of “the story business,” is shockingly fast. Helena elaborates on her penchant for storytelling shortly before the absinthe arrives at the table:

“I know it's a weakness and silliness but I make up stories to myself in the daytime and in one of them I save your life. Sometimes it's from drowning and sometimes from in front of a train and sometimes in a plane and sometimes in the mountains. You can laugh if you want. And then there is one where I come into your life when you are disgusted and disappointed with all women and you love me so much and I take such good care of you that you get an epoch of writing wonderfully. That's a wonderful one.” (642)

As her words indicate, Helena wants to affect Roger's life in a specific way that, it gradually becomes clear, is at odds with how Roger has thought she would: she wants to have influence over his work, saving him, becoming the catalyst for “an epoch of writing wonderfully.” Roger's agitation finds new urgency when Helena confesses that, not only does she make up stories, not only does she want some level of control and influence over his writing, but she envisions them as partners, both story writers, engaging not just in sex and flirtation but in discussions of their craft. “I suppose I wanted to be partners even though I said I didn't,” Helena tells Roger, shortly after his increasing tension has turned to belligerence and reduced her to tears. She continues: “You see I'd like to have you not just like me in bed but like me in the head and like to talk about things that

interest us both” (645). The possibility of conversation about stories, she confesses, was “one of the parts of it I’d looked forward to” when their relationship began.

Roger, to his credit, feels awful for upsetting her even as he worries about what he perceives as Helena’s threatening ambition. However, the first thing he tells her about writing is a story familiar to any reader of *A Moveable Feast* or Hemingway’s letters: he tells her a fictionalized version of Hadley’s loss of Hemingway’s manuscripts on the train to Lausanne. As Roger tells it, his first wife—referred to not by name, but as “Andy’s mother”—thought she would bring the manuscripts with her when she met him for their holiday. “She was going to bring it to me as a surprise,” he tells Helena, “She hadn’t written anything about it and...I didn’t know anything about it (646).” She arrives a day later than expected, and is so distraught that she is unable to tell Roger what happened at first. Eventually, however, she reveals that she “had packed all the manuscript folders in a suitcase and left the suitcase with her other bags in her first class compartment”; after a brief trip to buy a paper and a bottle of water, she returns to the compartment to find the suitcase stolen (646-7). The worst part of the story, Roger implies, is the totality of the loss: Andy’s mother, like Hadley, had included “the originals and the typed originals and the carbons”; when Roger returns to their Paris apartment to search, he is forced to recognize that everything really is gone. And in his account we find the acute distress not reflected in Hemingway’s letter to Pound:

“I felt almost as though I could not breathe when I saw that there really were no folders with originals, nor folders with typed copies, nor folders with carbons and then I locked the door of the cupboard and went into the next room...and lay down on the bed and put a pillow between my legs and my arms around another pillow and lay there very quietly.... I knew everything I had ever written and everything that I had great confidence in was gone. I had rewritten them so many times and gotten them just how I wanted them and I knew I could not write them again because once I had

them right I forgot them completely and each time I ever read them I wondered at them and at how I had ever done them.” (647-8)

Not only Roger’s actions, but the language he uses to describe them communicates his distress: these long sentences, hardly interrupted by commas, pile action on top of action with no room for intrusions of thought beyond the immediacy of the loss.

The effect Roger’s story of the loss of his manuscripts has on Helena and on the balance of power in their relationship is complex. On the one hand, Roger has obliged Helena’s ambition and agreed to talk to her about writing, thus accepting in some small way her desire to partner with him as a “story-maker-upper.” On the other hand, Helena has again assumed a passive role, one befitting the “daughter” she is so often called rather than the “equal or a partner” she had confessed to fantasizing about becoming (644). She does not mention the stories she has made up, or wants to tell and write, again for the rest of the story; instead, she comforts Roger: “Please make the drink and then tell me what happened,” she says; her request that Roger keep speaking is the last line of “The Strange Country” (650). In my view, by the end of the story, Roger, through his storytelling, has re-inscribed himself and Helena into their previous roles of more knowledgeable male lover seeking female comfort, and less knowledgeable female lover willing to comfort by listening but not by contributing. In “The Strange Country,” then, the imaginative retelling of Hadley’s loss of the manuscripts forms a watershed point: in the story, it is a symbol of the devastating and destructive effects a woman’s control and ambition could have on her (male) partner’s work. Fortunately—in the world of the story, at least—Helena does not go on to become another “Andy’s mother”; though most, if not all, conclusions about an unfinished story must be made tentatively, in my view, Helena does revert back to the passive role she held in the beginning of the story.

Such tentativeness need not apply, however, to conclusions drawn about the significance of the loss-of-manuscripts story in *The Garden of Eden*, although it, too, was unfinished at Hemingway's death and published posthumously a quarter century later after half of its original length—an entire subplot and second cast of characters—was edited out. Unlike Helena, whose ambition—her desire to be Roger's partner and equal in storytelling—comes out only at the very end of "The Strange Country" before it is swiftly reburied, Catherine, the female lead of *The Garden of Eden*, shows clear signs of ambition throughout the book. She wants control over her husband, David, and his writing from the beginning of the novel; by its end, Catherine's ambition has led her, perhaps inevitably, to extreme, destructive action.

Catherine and David, who have been married three weeks at the start of the novel and who spend the book honeymooning on the Cote d'Azur in the south of France, are individuals whose differences and distinctions Catherine seems bent on blurring or even destroying completely. "I have these flashes of intuition.... I'm the inventive type," David tells her flirtatiously in the early pages of the book as the couple eats breakfast, ravenous from lovemaking. Catherine replies, "I'm the destructive type...and I'm going to destroy you" (5). Her meaning—in its strictest, narrowest context, in this particular passage—is sexual, first and foremost;⁸ however, the balance between their two natures, inventive and destructive, is gradually upset by Catherine, whose "destructive" nature blurs not only the couple's sexual identities in bed, but their physical appearances (particularly, again, where gender distinctions are concerned; for example, Catherine goes about in trousers and fishermen's shirts rather than skirts, much to the chagrin of the

⁸ She tells her husband in the same passage that she is "going to wake up at night and do something to you that you've never even heard of or imagined. I was going to last night but I was too sleepy" (5).

local priest [6-7]). Finally, she seeks to break down the distinction between David, the writer, and Catherine, the wife of the writer, in terms of who has authority and control over the stories David tells. Central to the novel is “the narrative,” the story David writes (at Catherine’s behest) of the couple’s explorations of and experimentations in gender switching; it represents the profoundest meshing of David’s artistic talent with Catherine’s desires and control. The narrative is the only piece of writing that escapes Catherine’s destruction of David’s manuscripts in a dark refashioning of Hadley’s loss of Hemingway’s on the train.

At the beginning of the novel, Catherine’s flirtatious statement that she’s “the destructive type” is not yet sinister, and if she does do some things that blur the distinctions between herself and her husband (both in appearance and in bed), these are sources of amusement and wicked fun rather than disquiet. Further, however blurred and manipulated, Catherine and David remain, at the novel’s beginning, distinct persons who, for all their wildness and experimentation, continue to perform primarily a more traditional femininity and masculinity, respectively. For example, Catherine and David dress androgynously and alike in “striped fishermen’s shirts and the shorts they had bought in the store that sold marine supplies,” clothing that “no one wore...around the village” and that increases the similarity in the couple’s appearance, a similarity that delights Catherine: “They were very tan and their hair was streaked and faded by the sun and the sea. Most people thought they were brother and sister until they said they were married and that pleased the girl very much” (6). However, even though she is wearing a man’s shirt “built for hard wear,” and even though she is “the first girl [David] had ever see wearing” a fisherman’s shirt, Catherine’s choice of clothing, after she has washed it

and her husband's shirt in a the basin in their hotel room (a distinctly feminine, domestic act in and of itself), still highlights her female body; when David looks "at the girl now her breasts [show] beautifully against the worn cloth" (6). For mass on Sunday, Catherine wears "a skirt and a long-sleeved cashmere sweater with her hair covered with a scarf" and David stands "in the back of the church with the men" (6).

In the novel's opening sequence of events, then, strangeness and the blurring of distinctions is always contextualized by and reabsorbed into normalcy and the reestablishment of those distinctions.⁹ However, the couple's mostly conventional relationship soon shifts significantly, a shift marked by David's increasing disquiet and Catherine's decision to cut her womanly long hair short like a boy's, in the same style and by the same barber as David's (15).

The haircut is a harbinger of further disturbances, most of which involve Catherine's increased control not just over her own hair and the gender performances in which she engages her body but over David's life, his role in their lovemaking, and his art. The night after her haircut, Catherine assumes the traditionally male role in sex, telling David, "You are changing.... Yes you are and you're my girl Catherine" (17). The next day, David and Catherine both receive mail. Catherine has received letters from her bank in Paris, two of them containing checks; the checks seem to be part of her

⁹Significantly, this part of the novel culminates in the reassuringly feminine image of Catherine naked on the bed with her long hair haloed around her. Long hair, and its connection to female sexuality, is explicitly mentioned not just in *The Garden of Eden* but also in "The Strange Country." In the latter, Roger insists that Helena not cut her hair. When she suggests it, saying that living by the ocean would necessitate a shorter haircut, Roger tells her that he "love[s] it the way it is"; when she replies that "it's wonderful short for swimming," he says, "Not for bed though" (624). Though Helena insists that Roger would "still be able to tell [she] was a girl," she does not cut her hair, and it is implied that Roger has won this argument (624). This connection between *The Garden of Eden* and "The Strange Country" makes sense, given the nearness of their dates of composition; also interesting is the effect each woman's choice with regards to her hair has on her relationship with the male lead. While Helena does not cut her hair, and slides back into her submissive, "daughter" / lover role with Roger, Catherine does cut her hair and, in doing so, embraces both a much more fluid sexuality and a persona that threatens, and eventually destroys, her husband's work.

inheritance, and her receipt of them seems contingent upon her marriage: “They’ve been deposited,” she tells David. “It’s because I’m married. I told you it was the best thing for us to be married” (26). In David’s mail there are also checks, but they are tied not to his marriage but the sales of the first printing of his book, and with them are included clippings of many glowing reviews of the book. “The point was that the book could not have been better received. The reception was sensational really,” David thinks as he reads his publisher’s tentatively optimistic letter, which also tells him that a second printing has been ordered due to the strong reviews, and in which his publisher hopes “that he was as happy as he deserved to be and taking the rest that he so richly deserved” (23). David, understandably, is heartened and excited by the news and the clippings; Catherine seems to respond similarly, at least initially: “I didn’t know they’d come,” she says when she comes to the table with her own letters, “Let me see them. Please let me see them” (24).

However, Catherine’s enthusiasm soon turns stale. When their waiter asks what she is reading, and whether it is about their marriage, Catherine tells him that the reviews are “criticisms of a book by Monsieur.” The waiter, deeply impressed, asks, “Is Madame also a writer?” Catherine replies, without looking up from the clipping she is reading, that she is not a writer: “Madame is a housewife” (24). It soon becomes clear that, far from delighting or exciting her, the praise in the reviews has unsettled and even disturbed Catherine because it threatens to unsettle the relationship she has with David, dividing him from their dangerous, gender-fluid “us.” “How can we be us and have the things we have and do what we do and you be this that’s in the clippings?” she asks her husband immediately after the waiter leaves. She continues: “They’re terrible.... They could destroy you if you thought about them or believed them. You don’t think I married you

because you are what they say you are in these clippings do you?” (24). Though we could read Catherine’s disquiet as her efforts to urge David to value his work independent of what others say about it, it seems clear from the text that Catherine is not merely worried that her husband will come to rely on others rather than himself for praise, but that his valuing of the reviews will strain their own relationship and his dependence on her.

These early scenes set up the significant conflicts in the rest of the novel, and hint at the destruction of art and relationship that comes at the book’s conclusion. Catherine and David’s transgressions of traditional gender roles and sexual boundaries, which David participates in at Catherine’s urging, form one facet of this conflict. A second is the introduction of another, much more traditionally feminine woman, Marita, into the couple’s life; both Catherine and David find themselves falling in love with her. But the third, and most significant, facet of this conflict develops alongside the gradually strained relationship between Catherine and David: the conflict between David’s writing of the “narrative,” the story of his and Catherine’s travels and time together, including their relational experimentation and transgressions, and the “new and difficult story...that for years he had put off facing”: the story of elephant hunting in Africa with his father when David was a young boy, an experience that sharply altered David’s views of tragedy, of heroism, and of his father. While writing the narrative, David dwells in the world Catherine has created for them; while writing the story of the elephant hunt, David forgets Catherine and Marita and becomes his father: “He only wrote what his father did and how he felt and in all this he became his father and what his father said...was what he said” (147). David drives himself to write this intensely personal story of the elephant hunt, deeply connected to not only his father and his father’s weaknesses and failures, but

also to the resolutely masculine experience of big game hunting and the difficult tangle of respect, deep feeling, destruction, and sorrow that is part of it, and the story is one way David makes sense of past experiences. The narrative, on the other hand, is an obligation Catherine hands him, and writing it does not allay any of their relationship's confusion—indeed, Catherine seems to retreat further and further from sanity as the narrative progresses and the novel unfolds. The tension between these two stories, exacerbated by the strains of the couple's experiments in what most in the town consider perversion, culminates in Catherine's destruction of all David's manuscripts but the narrative.

The clearest example of the intersection of these conflicts occurs in the eighteenth chapter of the novel, when both Marita and Catherine read an early draft of the elephant hunting story; their reactions, and the levels of control each woman seeks—or doesn't seek—to exert over the story are significant. Marita reads the story first, almost immediately after David has finished it. She politely asks, after David has told her of its completion, if she can read the story; he readily allows her, giving her the key to his suitcase of manuscripts, and she reads it twice, sitting near him in their hotel room as he drinks whiskey and soda. After she finishes her second reading, he asks her "Do you like it?"; she replies:

"It's not a thing you like or not like," she said. "It's your father isn't it?"
"Sure."
"Was this when you stopped loving him?"
"No. I always loved him. This was when I got to know him."
"It's a terrible story and it's wonderful."
"I'm glad you like it," he said.
"I'll put it back now," she said. (153-4).

Marita's reply, and the fact that she locks the story back in David's case again after finishing it, show at once that she understands the story but will not try to change it.

Catherine, on the other hand, is obviously jealous of both David's attention to Marita and of the fact that he has let her read the story. Her jealousy takes two forms; first, she tries to establish her own control of David's work, citing her financial contribution to it: "You know, I've never read a story of David's. I never interfere," she says, and belies her own statement about not interfering when she continues, "I've only tried to make it economically possible for him to do the best work of which he is capable" (156). Shortly after, she says nearly the same thing, assuming a level of ownership over David's story because she has helped pay for his writer's life: "Is there any reason then why I can't read this extraordinary story? I did put up the money for it" (156). When David does give her the story and she reads it, she is very critical—pettily and even violently so. She criticizes David's handwriting, and the fact that Marita "miscalled the *pastorale* part," as she begins; when she is halfway through the second part of the story, she tears David's notebook apart and throws it on the floor, crying, "It's horrible.... It's bestial. So that was what your father was like," before accusing Marita and David of conspiring to make her read what she determines is a horrible story (157). Catherine's disrespect for David's story is, significantly, connected in this scene to her insistence that she is in many ways responsible for its composition. Juxtaposed with her response is Marita's: the second woman, who has also shown an interest in reading David's work, reads the entire story, reacts quietly but favorably, and locks the manuscript up respectfully when finished (158).

Their reactions to the story are symbolic of the danger, or balm, that each woman can be to David himself. It quickly becomes clear that the story of his father and the elephant hunt, rather than the narrative, occupies his mind and enables him to grasp a

“dreadful true understanding” not just of his father but of himself (182). And further, it is when he writes about his father and the elephant hunt, not when he writes the narrative, that he feels himself whole and true; significantly, the same happens when he holds Marita in Catherine’s absence: “[He and Marita] held each other and he could feel himself start to become whole again. He had not known just how greatly he had been divided and separated because once he start to work he wrote from an inner core which could not be split nor even marked nor scratched” (183). Marita, content to be a “real” woman in bed and out of it, brings David the wholeness he otherwise only finds while writing. Catherine, on the other hand, is a source of his feeling riven; she demands that his stories be not his, but theirs, and that they be “just the same” (176), down to their haircuts.

Catherine commits her final crime of the novel in this same nightmarish spirit. Thus, when the story reaches its climax and we learn, with David, that Catherine has burned his manuscripts, we hardly share David’s disbelief; harbingers of Catherine’s destruction of the manuscripts have echoed through the novel’s pages up to this point. Catherine, throughout the novel, clearly equated David’s reading the press clippings to unfaithfulness; she repeats this delusion at the novel’s end: “I think he reads [the clippings] by himself and is unfaithful to me with them,” she says (215). David, frustrated and trying to mollify, tells her that the answer to her troubles would be to burn the clippings; she replies, slyly, “How did you know I did it?” (216). Soon after, David discovers that his prediction and Catherine’s sly admission were true: looking in his suitcase of manuscripts, he sees that “the pile of cahiers that the stories had been written in was gone. So were the four bulky envelopes from the bank that contained the press

clippings. The piles of cahiers with the narrative written in them were intact” (219).

Catherine had taken them outside and burned them in a gasoline drum, the same drum in which one of the hotel workers burns the trash. “I paid for them,” Catherine tells him, “I paid the money to do them” (220). David tells her he wishes he could kill her, but he can’t; she’s mad (223).

Catherine’s destroying of the manuscripts on purpose, along with the resolute claim she makes to ownership of David’s work, form a significant departure from Hadley’s tearful confession of her loss of Hemingway’s manuscripts, as well as from Andy’s mother’s remorse over a similar loss in “The Strange Country.” In *The Garden of Eden*, a male artist’s prized and personal work is not lost, and that loss deeply regretted; rather, it is incinerated purposefully, as part of a woman’s devilish scheme to supplant his stories with the ones she herself believes to be most important. The tension between these two different losses of manuscripts—the purposeful one at the hands of a devilish woman, and the inadvertent one at the hands of a careless and remorseful woman—recurs in the pages of *A Moveable Feast*. Here, Hemingway returns to the autobiographical version of the loss of manuscripts story, in which Hadley is careless but deeply sorry about her carelessness; however, the material in the sketch in which the story is contained, as well as the stories of jealous women in other sketches in the book, urge readers to see even Hadley’s mistake as evidence of the threat women pose to their artist partners.

The retelling of Hadley’s loss of the manuscripts in *A Moveable Feast* is couched within a sketch about feelings of hunger and emptiness—both literal and figurative—entitled “Hunger was Good Discipline.” Hemingway, while he tells the story, emphasizes

Hadley's distress: "I had never seen anyone hurt by a thing other than death or unbearable suffering except Hadley when she told me about the things being gone. She had cried and cried and could not tell me" (74). And though Hemingway's letter to Pound after the event in question occurred, and writing of this same event in the *Moveable Feast* sketch, are separated in time by a quarter century, Hemingway repeats the same blase response to the loss of the manuscripts in this sketch that he once told Pound, this time employing a war metaphor: "That was over now and Chink had told me never to discuss casualties.... It was probably good for me to lose early work and so I told him all that stuff you feed the troops. I was going to start writing stories again I said and, as I said it, only trying to lie so that he would not feel so bad, I knew that it was true" (74-5).

However this sketch seems to indicate that Hemingway has long gotten past any lingering resentment or anger toward Hadley for losing the manuscripts, two other sketches in *A Moveable Feast* indicate that Hemingway still believes quite strongly in the idea whose progress I have charted across the pages of "The Strange Country" and *The Garden of Eden*: namely, that overly ambitious women who seek to control their partners' work threaten to destroy that work. The first of these threateningly ambitious women is Alice Toklas, whom Hemingway depicts in many of his letters as a threat to her partner Gertrude Stein's creativity and art, Stein's "evil angel as well as her great friend" (*Selected Letters* 736). In "A Strange Enough Ending" in *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway recounts "the way it ended with Gertrude Stein," and the overheard exchange between Stein and Alice Toklas that contributed to this strange ending. The second of these ambitious women, and arguably the one for whom Hemingway's disgust and hatred flames hottest, is Zelda Fitzgerald, who is the hawklike antagonist of the

sketch “Hawks Do Not Share,” a woman who, as Hemingway paints her, is jealous of her husband’s work and actively tries to ruin it by making him jealous of her pursuits—pursuits more amorous than artistic. Toklas’s alleged manipulation and control result in her partner’s fading and the end of Hemingway’s often-difficult friendship with Stein; Zelda’s active, pernicious jealousy doesn’t make Scott fade so much as it destroys his work and his will to work. Both of these women could be viewed as fodder for a character like Catherine of *The Garden of Eden*, and evidence of a lingering fear of female ambition and control in Hemingway’s work and thought.

“If you are ever writing about [Stein] at length,” Hemingway wrote to his friend and reviewer Edmund Wilson in September 1951, “maybe it would be useful to know that A.T. was the dominant one of the two” (*Selected Letters* 736). This letter is the same one in which Hemingway tells Perkins of when he overheard Stein begging Toklas, an anecdote he also tells in *A Moveable Feast*, in the sketch “A Strange Enough Ending.”

This anecdote, one that, as the editor of Hemingway’s *Selected Letters* notes, Hemingway retold often, has a nearly apocryphal presence in scholarship about Stein in particular, fueling many discussions of the dynamics of Stein and Toklas’s relationship.¹⁰ These discussions, worthwhile though they are, are not my focus here; precisely whether, and how much, Toklas controlled Stein’s work does not matter as much as Hemingway’s

¹⁰ Though the anecdote Hemingway tells probably did originate with him, it has been repeated and enlarged by writers more sympathetic to Stein than Hemingway seems to be ever since. One such perspective is Ulla Dydo’s in her book *Gertrude Stein: The Language that Rises*. Janet Malcolm also writes about Stein and Toklas’s relationship in *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice*, in which she, among other things, summarizes Dydo’s work and the interviews Leon Kutz conducted with Toklas as part of his (never published) PhD thesis from the 1950s. One of the most recent analyses of Stein and Toklas’s relationship, and its impact on Stein’s work, is in Susannah Hollister and Emily Setina’s edition of Stein’s poem *Stanzas in Meditation*, which seeks to untangle the complex composition history of the poem; Toklas, who prepared typescripts of the poem, changed it and insisted Stein change the manuscript when she found references to a former lover of Stein’s in it. All of these texts, and the still-ongoing scholarly discussion they represent, indicate that the nature of Stein and Toklas’s relationship, including any answer to the question of whether Toklas dominated Stein and the level of control she exercised over Stein’s work, remains unsettled.

perception of the same does as far as my purpose in these pages is concerned. And Hemingway's writings show that he strongly believed that Toklas dominated Stein to the point of ruining her.

Hemingway writes to Wilson about the incident on the 22nd of September in 1951, years after it occurred, and in an effort to enlighten Wilson about certain details about Stein:

This day I rang and the servant let me in...and said that Mademoiselle Gertrude was busy but she knew she would want me to wait. [...]
The servant went away and I was standing looking at the pictures when I heard Gertrude in a very loud and anguished voice say, "Pussy! Pussy please don't. Oh please don't say you will do that. I'll do anything if you won't. Please Pussy. Please—"
I was out the door and had it shut by the next words. I didn't want to hear anymore. (*Selected Letters* 736)

Curiously, he does not really tell readers that much more in the sketch "A Strange Enough Ending," where only a few details are changed from the account in Hemingway's letter to Wilson. This sketch, the briefest one in the book, begins and ends with Hemingway discussing the end of his friendship with Stein. Hemingway's retelling of how he heard Stein begging Toklas comprises the middle of the sketch. The sketch ends, like the letter to Wilson, with what Hemingway perceives as Stein's decline in artistic sense and taste. Hemingway finds that he "could never make friends [with Stein] again truly," perhaps because, in addition to whatever exactly unsettled him about overhearing this particular incident at Stein's, he claims at the beginning of the sketch that "there is not much future in men being friends with great women...and there is usually even less

future with truly ambitious women writers”—writers like Stein (*A Moveable Feast* 117).¹¹

Hemingway clearly connects his overhearing Stein pleading, presumably with Toklas, to his view of Toklas as an “evil angel” and “the dominant one of the two,” (*Letters* 736), as well as his perception of the decline of Stein’s art and her taste in the art of others. Hemingway very clearly ties this anecdote to his belief that Toklas dominated Stein, that this control extended to Stein’s art and artistic sensibilities, and both Stein’s writing and her artistic judgment were casualties of her domineering partner’s influence. Further, despite his own less-than-glowing judgments of Stein in places like the aforementioned letter to Wilson, in which he calls her “terribly lazy,” Hemingway also shows very clear sympathy for Stein as he denounces Toklas; though his early letters to Stein are written to both Stein *and* Toklas and usually begin with the salutation “Dear friends,”¹² Hemingway is adamant, after Stein’s death in 1946, that none of his letters to Stein be published until after Toklas has also died. He clearly states this demand in a late 1952 letter to Donald C. Gallup of Yale University Press, who was selecting and editing *The Flowers of Friendship: Letters Written to Gertrude Stein*: “About Gertrude: I have decided not to let any letters I ever wrote her be published as long as that Toklas - - - - is still alive. After she is dead we will sort them out. Don’t you think that letters written to people — Let’s leave that” (*Selected Letters* 781). He then tells Gallup the same anecdote he told Wilson and repeated in *A Moveable Feast*, explicitly naming Toklas as

¹¹ Worthy questions, all, are the following: how, exactly, readers should interpret the conversation Hemingway inadvertently overhears; what sort of situation prompts Stein’s pleading; and even whether we should believe that what Hemingway writes to Wilson and in “A Strange Enough Ending” is a reliable account of an actual event. However, readers’ interpretations of and educated guesses about the meaning and reliability of this anecdote are not as significant here as is Hemingway’s own interpretation of it.

¹² See, for example, letters dated August 9, 1924 (*Selected Letters* 120); October 10, 1924 (126); January 20, 1925 (147); and others.

the villain this time: “I started to hear Toklas talk to G.S. and the terrible things she said and G.S.’s pleading” (781). He closes the letter by emphasizing not only his friendship with Stein, but Toklas’s villainy: “I will not permit publication of any letters of mine to G.S. as long as Toklas is alive. G.S. and I were good friends when she died and we always would have been good friends if it had not been for Alice Toklas” (781-2).

When considered together, Hemingway’s letter to Wilson, his later letter to Gallup, and his words in “A Strange Enough Ending” in *A Moveable Feast* all do not just repeat the same anecdote, but interpret that anecdote in the same way: Gertrude Stein, the artist, was dominated by a jealous and controlling female partner, Alice Toklas, to such an extent that Stein’s art was detrimentally affected and her taste destroyed. Toklas and Stein, though both women, seemed to in many ways perform roles in their relationship that were more traditionally gendered feminine and masculine, respectively; the best example of this in Hemingway’s work is his mentioning that when he and Hadley visited Stein and Toklas, Toklas sat working on a piece of needlepoint, “and she worked on this and saw to the food and drink and talked to [Hadley]. [...] Afterwards she explained...that she always talked to the wives” while Stein talked to their artist husbands (*A Moveable Feast* 14). This gendered relationship dynamic, coupled with the threat the jealous, domineering Toklas clearly poses to Stein’s work—at least in Hemingway’s view—contribute further to the recurring nightmare I have been charting in Hemingway’s writing: that a jealous, controlling female partner will exercise control over a (male or masculine) artist’s work, potentially to the ultimate destruction of that work and even the artist him (or her) self.

A similar dynamic appears in the relationship between another artist and partner, as portrayed by Hemingway in letters and also in three sketches in *A Moveable Feast*, “Scott Fitzgerald,” “Hawks Do Not Share,” and “A Matter of Measurements.”

According to Hemingway, Zelda Fitzgerald, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s dramatic, artistic, and finally insane wife, eventually destroys her husband’s confidence and his talent; this process takes a number of years, beginning without Hemingway’s notice and ending after Zelda’s first nervous breakdown, with Hemingway providing reassurances to Fitzgerald about the size of his penis in a restaurant bathroom in Paris.

The sketch “Scott Fitzgerald,” though not composed first,¹³ nevertheless contains the first hint of Zelda’s duplicity as far as the chronology of Hemingway’s relationship with Scott is concerned. This sketch, about how Hemingway first became acquainted with Scott Fitzgerald as a writer and as a man, is filled with Hemingway’s reactions to strange, off-putting, silly, and even troubling things that Scott is and does: he has an almost girlish face “between handsome and pretty” (149); he believes the best way to find information is through direct questioning, regardless of subject, and in this spirit asks Hemingway if he had slept with Hadley before they married (151); he is very talented, but shy when talking about *The Great Gatsby* to Hemingway, in the way “that all non-conceited writers have when they have done something very fine” (154); he is relatively unapologetic about whoring out his talent to sell short stories (155); he seems a strange type of lightweight drunkard, one who “you could not be angry with...any more than you could be angry with someone who was crazy” (166). Scott is, Hemingway’s descriptions indicate, an off-kilter, troubled, strangely childish man with a great talent who worries,

¹³This sketch was, in fact, likely written years after epistolary evidence of Hemingway’s views on Zelda was mailed to Arthur Mizener in 1950.

like Hemingway, about how his writing will help him provide for his wife and child. He seems to be the human version of the first printing of *The Great Gatsby*, a fine book in a garish dust jacket. Hemingway concludes the sketch with conviction and foreboding. He is convinced, after reading *Gatsby*, that Scott is capable of even finer writing, and feels convicted that he, Hemingway, must “be of any help I could to him and be a good friend” to help him realize his full potential as a writer (176). The final words of the sketch, however, indicate that even his support may not be enough, because there will be Zelda to contend with: “I did not know Zelda yet, and so I did not know the terrible odds that were against him. But we were to find them out soon enough” (176).

Readers of *A Moveable Feast* meet Zelda in the very next sketch, entitled “Hawks Do Not Share,” in which Hemingway elaborates on the “terrible odds that were against” Scott Fitzgerald. The sketch opens with Hemingway at lunch with the Fitzgeralds in their dark, airless apartment; Scott is being a good host, and Zelda is hungover from a party the previous night. She begins to smile happily as her husband begins to drink wine with them; “I learned to know that smile very well,” Hemingway writes, “It meant she knew Scott would not be able to write.” It turns out that, according to Hemingway, “Zelda was jealous of Scott’s work and as we got to know them, this fell into a regular pattern” (180). The pattern is a devastating one, for Scott, his work, and even for Hemingway as he watches it happen: the couple will go to parties and drink heavily; Scott will afterwards resolve not to go to parties and stay out late and get drunk, because all of these things render him unable to work the next day; Zelda will, as soon as she sees her husband working well, complain of boredom and convince him to go with her to parties; the

couple would fight, Scott would “sweat out the alcohol” on walks with Hemingway, and the cycle would begin again (181).

Manipulating Scott into taking her to parties, however, is not, according to Hemingway, the way she “really ruined Scott,” as Hemingway explained to Arthur Mizener in late April of 1950, six years after Scott’s death. He writes: “In case I didn’t, she told him A: That he had never given her sexual satisfaction. B: That it was because his sexual organ was too small (am sending this through the mails to employ these high-flung terms)” (*Selected Letters* 690). This petty criticism is what leads to a bizarre lunch encounter between Scott and Hemingway, which Hemingway mentions both in this letter and in the *A Moveable Feast* sketch “A Matter of Measurements,” during which Hemingway contributes his honest assessment of the size of Scott’s penis, along with some helpful suggestions concerning its most proficient use. “Forget what Zelda said,” the Hemingway of the sketch tells Scott. “Zelda is crazy. There’s nothing wrong with you. Just have confidence and do what the girl wants. Zelda just wants to destroy you” (191). In his letter to Mizener, Hemingway combines his jocular discussion of Zelda’s insult and the Paris lunch with what reads almost like a eulogy of his lost friend, whose talent Hemingway sees as tragically unfulfilled, largely because of Zelda: “He was romantic, ambitious, and Christ, Jesus, God knows how talented. [...] He would make great studies about foot-ball say and war but it was all bull-shit. [...] He was fragile Irish instead of tough Irish. I wish he were here and I could give him this letter to read so he would not ever think I would say things behind his back” (690).

Though Scott and Zelda’s relationship seems—and is—quite different from Stein and Toklas’s, significant in both relationships is the presence of a jealous, manipulative

woman whose influence distorts, damages, and eventually destroys the abilities of her artist partner. As I have discussed throughout the preceding pages, this figure—this nightmarish woman, threatener of artists, deliverer of jealous threats, and destroyer of meaningful work—reappears in several places in Hemingway’s fiction. In these works and in the letters I have discussed above, then, Hemingway, over and over, expresses a deep fear that serious, meaningful artistic work often has over it the foreboding shadow of a jealous woman with ambition who could—and will—destroy that work.

Women in the War Novels: Finding, and Losing, the Potential for Peace

However, developing alongside the nightmare woman who gradually takes shape across Hemingway’s work, another way of viewing women’s presence in the life of a male protagonist emerges in his three major war novels, *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.¹⁴ In these works, the male protagonists in question all show an acute desire to form meaningful relationships, particularly with the women they encounter; these women are not nightmarish but instead portrayed, if not always positively, at least as flawed, human, and potentially capable of helping their male counterparts find peace. All three of these novels depict the potential for a great love story between male protagonist and female heroine, both of whom have lived within and been affected by war. These women—Catherine Barkley, Brett Ashley, and Maria—are “old war comrades” who offer their love interests a glimpse of the possibility of recovery from war experience. All three of the male protagonists, however, are eventually

¹⁴ Of course, these two views are hardly representative of the entirety of the portrayal of women in Hemingway’s work. For my purposes here, however, the coexistence of these two specific views is particularly interesting, and reveals a tension in how and whether Hemingway’s protagonists can collapse the border between home front and war front, between experiences defined as masculine and a longing for experiences often gendered feminine. I argue this point, then, not to negate or neglect all other views of women in Hemingway, but to come alongside them and offer another thread of interpretation.

thwarted in their efforts; these possibilities of peace do not coalesce into postwar happiness.

Even in early passages depicting Jake Barnes's relationship with Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises*, readers already understand that the very things that have had the deepest, and most irreparable, impact on each character's life are the same things they just can't talk about: they can't talk about war, and they can't talk about love. Brett and Jake have both been deeply affected by the war psychologically and, in Jake's case, physically, and these effects bleed into all areas of their lives—especially where relationships are concerned. They also clearly love each other, enough that they seem to depend on and confide in each other more than they do with any of the other characters; Brett asks Jake for help before she asks anyone else, and Jake signs a wire to her with love and agonizes about that choice afterward. The relationship between Brett and Jake, then, suggests some important things about the relationship between gender and war in Hemingway. First, both Jake and Brett have clearly endured war experiences—Brett is, Lieutenant Henry's orderly might mournfully say, an “old war comrade.” Second, those experiences have affected both characters in ways that directly impact their ability to relate, emotionally and sexually, to the lovers they take (or would take, in Jake's case). Third, these characters' inability to maintain a functional, authentic relationship with each other—or even to talk about the things that keep them from doing so—is a war wound that cannot be closed, a fact that suggests that functional, authentic relationships are things both extraordinarily rare and valuable. Unlike the relationships in which Hemingway's nightmarish women are engaged, the relationship between Jake and Brett

is a much longed-for one that, readers understand, might be a source of great love and peace, if only it were possible.

From early on in the novel, Jake's longing for companionship, and the ways in which his war experiences have made companionship impossible, are clear. At the beginning of the third chapter, Jake has picked up a prostitute "because of a vague sentimental idea that it would be nice to eat with someone"; that sentimental idea does not translate well into reality, and he finds himself bored by her, no more closely connected to another human being than he was when he first sat down alone. The injury—which he euphemistically refers to as being "sick," when the prostitute touches him—contributes not only to his feeling disconnected from others, but also, curiously, to his boredom:

"You're not a bad time," she said. "It's a shame you're sick. We get on well. What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"I got hurt in the war," I said.

"Oh, that dirty war."

We would probably have gone on and discussed the war and agreed that it was in reality a calamity for civilization, and perhaps would have been better avoided. I was bored enough. (25)

In this scene with Georgette the prostitute, then, we find Jake's longing for companionship in the form of "vague sentimental idea[s]," a longing that is both thwarted and exacerbated by the effects the war still has on his life.

Readers soon learn that Brett suffers from the same condition. Though she hasn't been physically injured in the war like Jake has, her own war experience has left her with psychological scars that continue to have an impact on her ability to form relationships. Jake's injury precludes him from sexual intimacy; Brett's keeps her from emotional

attachment. Through Jake, readers receive a sparse account of Brett's war experience as he tells Robert Cohn how he met her:

"She was a V.A.D. in a hospital I was in during the war."
"She must have been just a kid then."
"She's thirty-four now."
"When did she marry Ashley?"
"During the war. Her own true love had just kicked off with the dysentery."
"You talk sort of bitter."
"Sorry. I didn't mean to. I was just trying to give you the facts."
"I don't believe she would marry anybody she didn't love."
"Well," I said. "She's done it twice." (46-7).

Much later in the novel, after Brett has taken up with Romero, which spurs Cohn to start (and lose) a fight with the young bullfighter, a drunken Mike adds further details to the picture of Brett's war experience. After he explains that Brett "loves looking after people" (206)—both a positive trait and a curse, for her—he tells Jake:

"Ashley, chap she got the title from, was a sailor, you know. Ninth baronet. When he came home [from the war] he wouldn't sleep in a bed. Always made Brett sleep on the floor. Finally, when he got really bad, he used to tell her he'd kill her. Always slept with a loaded service revolver. Brett used to take the shells out when he'd gone to sleep. She hasn't had an absolutely happy life, Brett." (207)

Brett's inability to relate emotionally to her lovers parallels Jake's inability to relate to others sexually; though Brett's "injury" isn't a physical one like Jake's, her war experiences—as a V.A.D., as a bereft lover whose "own true love" died, as the wife of a shell-shocked soldier—just as thoroughly damn her to a life bereft of meaningful relationships.

Unlike the details of Brett's own war experience, the pair's mutual misery is clear from early in the book, and with it, the reality of their own futile longing to ameliorate that misery with each other. "Oh, darling, I've been so miserable," Brett says to Jake as

they take a cab away from a bar. Jake kisses her in reply, but the kiss is distant, chaste and closemouthed; Brett quickly turns away from it, presses herself “against the corner of the seat, as far away as she could get,” and pleads with Jake not to touch her because she “can’t stand it” (33). When Jake asks in reply, “Don’t you love me?,” Brett responds that she does; Jake asks “Isn’t there anything we can do about it?,” to which Brett can only say “And there’s not a damn thing we could do” (34). Hemingway’s sparse prose style gives us few details, but subsequent paragraphs make clear—albeit obliquely—that Jake and Brett have tried in the past to have some sort of relationship, only to find it impossible because of Jake’s injury and Brett’s tendency to put chaps through hell. They talk around Jake’s war injury, referring to it without naming it; simultaneously, they talk about their love for each other, also without naming it; at one point in the conversation, Jake says, “Well, let’s shut up about it” (34). By the conversation’s end, two things have become clear: first, that Jake’s injury and the couple’s being in love with each other are both the same kind of funny, the same kind of hellish sick joke, illnesses from which they will never recover; second, that these illnesses carve a fault line between them that cannot be bridged. “We were sitting now like two strangers,” Jake observes (35). Despite their familiarity with and obvious love for each other, Brett and Jake continue “sitting...like two strangers” throughout most of the novel.

For several chapters in the last third of the novel, however, there is a glimmer of possibility that the bullfight might give both Jake and Brett some kind of meaning or purpose to hold onto.¹⁵ Readers learn that Jake, though not a Spaniard, is an *aficionado*;

¹⁵ The significance, meaning, and symbolic function of the bullfight in *The Sun Also Rises*, and in other places in Hemingway’s writing (particularly *Death in the Afternoon*), is a topic over which much scholarly ink has been spilled. Examples of these scholars’ arguments include Randall Spinks’s essay “Ernest Hemingway and the Bullfight Primer: Genre, Ideology, and Tragedy,” Steven R. Phillips’s article

he not only loves the bullfight, but understands it. He shares this understanding with Brett, sitting beside her as a companion, not as a stranger, on the second day of bullfighting in Pamplona. However, as he explains the details of the bullfight to Brett, his focus shifts: he begins his explanation with the intent to enlighten Brett, but his descriptions are less for her understanding, and more evidence of his own *afición*:

The bull-fight on the second day was much better than on the first. [...] Romero was the whole show. I do not think Brett saw any other bull-fighter. [...] I sat beside Brett and explained to Brett what it was all about. I told her about watching the bull, not the horse, when the bull charged the picadors, and got her to watching the picador place the point of his pic so that she saw what it was all about, so that it became more something that was going on with a definite end, and less of a spectacle with unexplained horrors. [...] She saw how close Romero always worked to the bull, and I pointed out to her the tricks the other bull-fighters used to make it look as though they were working closely. She saw why she liked Romero's cape-work and why she did not like the others.

Romero never made any contortions. [...] Romero's bull-fighting gave real emotion, because he kept the absolute purity of line in his movements and always quietly and calmly let the horns pass him close each time. He did not have to emphasize their closeness. Brett saw how something that was beautiful done close to the bull was ridiculous if it were done a little way off. (171)

Watching the bullfight, Jake is able to be with Brett and participate in something dangerously, beautifully meaningful at the same time—an opportunity he finds nowhere else, largely due to the lingering effects of his war experience. Hemingway, in a 1923 letter to William D. Horne, solidifies the connection between the war and the bullfight: “It’s a great tragedy - and the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen and takes more guts and skill and guts again than anything possibly could. It’s just like having a ringside seat at the war with nothing going to happen to you” (*Selected Letters* 88). The bullfight can

“Hemingway and the Bullfight: The Archetypes of Tragedy,” and Donald Murray’s essay “*The Day of the Locust* and *The Sun Also Rises*: Congruence and Caricature.” Worthwhile though this line of scholarly inquiry is, it is not my focus here; instead, I read the bullfight through the lens of Brett and Jake’s mutual longing, and their war-doomed relationship.

give Jake the closeness to Brett, and the beauty and meaning that even acts of violence can have when embedded in “something going on with a definite end,” that the war has taken from him.

The war has taken Brett’s ability to love; the bullfight seems to restore that ability. After her “one true love” died of disease in the war, Brett, as I noted above, twice married men she didn’t love; in *The Sun Also Rises*, she is involved with two other men, Mike and Robert Cohn, for whom she also lacks feelings. Her interest in Romero, too, initially seems a purely physical one, divorced from Romero’s connection to the strange, pure, tragic reality of the bullfight: she remarks of Romero to the men, “Oh, isn’t he lovely... And those green trousers” (169); she repeats this sentiment a few pages later, exclaiming, “My God! he’s a lovely boy... And how I would love to see him get into those clothes. He must use a shoe-horn” (181). She seems to exemplify the type of person Montoya, Jake’s Spanish friend and fellow aficionado, warns Jake to keep Romero from: “People take a boy like that,” Montoya tells Jake, “They don’t know what he’s worth. They don’t know what he means” (176). However, she soon confesses to Jake that she believes she is in love with Romero. Brett tells Jake:

“I’m a goner. I’m mad about the Romero boy. I’m in love with him, I think. [...] I can’t help it. I’m a goner. It’s tearing me all up inside.”
“Don’t do it,” [Jake said.]
“I can’t help it. I’ve never been able to help anything. [...] How can I stop it? I can’t stop things. Feel that?”
Her hand was trembling.
“I’m like that all through. [...] I can’t help it. I’m a goner now, anyway. Don’t you see the difference? [...] I’ve got to do something. I’ve got to do something I really want to do. I’ve lost my self-respect. [...] I can’t just stay tight all the time.” (187)

Pages later, after Brett and Romero’s relationship has begun, after Romero has fought Robert Cohn for her sake, and after the differences between pure, honorable Romero

versus the callow Cohn and oafish Mike have become even starker, Jake describes Brett's mood in language striking for its rare emotional and descriptive qualities: "Brett was radiant," Jake thinks to himself. "She was happy. The sun was out and the day was bright" (211). Brett's happiness, the fruit of her love for Romero is a positive thing she can share with Jake; it is a foothold for the continuance of their relationship without forever reminding them of the futile aspects of that relationship. Romero, and the love he has stirred in Brett, is transformative: "I feel altogether changed," Brett tells Jake, after he has considered her radiant happiness in the sunshine, as they walk around the park waiting for the bullfight to begin.

However, the bullfight in Pamplona is a short-lived event, after which citizens and foreigners alike go back to their usual business; rather than allowing themselves to be changed by their proximity to the bullfight, an event fraught with meaning they haven't found elsewhere, Jake and Brett also go back about their business after, and even somewhat during, the fiesta at Pamplona. By the end of the book, the couple has returned to where they began: though each clearly cares about, and even loves, the other, such a relationship cannot happen the way they—and the way their lives—are.

Jake's status as an aficionado, a status that affords him some measure of camaraderie—of community—with locals like Montoya, is crippled by his continued affiliation with his Paris friends and their very non-aficionado behavior. Montoya's reaction to Jake's friends provides the clearest example of how Jake's connection to his friends undermines and threatens his connection to the aficionado culture in Pamplona. Montoya has already warned Jake about what foreigners could do to a boy like Romero: "He ought to stay with his own people. He shouldn't mix in that stuff," he tells Jake

(176). Shortly after this conversation, Jake finds his Paris friends already several drinks in at the dining room of the Hotel Pamplona; at the table next to theirs is Pedro Romero. Romero asks Jake to sit and drink at his table, and talks with him about his, Romero's, life and work; their conversation, and Jake's observations of Romero's unassuming talk of his work, are completely compatible with Jake's status as an aficionado. Soon, however, Brett and Mike, Mike drunkenly, call over to Jake to join them, and both Jake and Romero join the group of American ex-pats. When Montoya returns from an errand and enters the dining room, finding that Jake has not heeded his warning, a rift opens between the two men, with Jake on the side of the expatriate drunks rather than the honored aficionados: "Just then Montoya came into the room. He started to smile at me, then he saw Pedro Romero with a big glass of cognac in his hand, sitting laughing between me and a woman with bare shoulders, at a table full of drunks. He did not even nod" (180-1).

Brett, too, evidences an inability to fully connect to the bullfight and its surrounding culture. Initially, she is less at fault for her inability than Jake is for his; Jake is an aficionado, after all, and Montoya had warned him, while Brett has only a novice's knowledge of the culture of the bullfight. Her ignorance, and the way it keeps her separate from the culture of one of the few men with whom she has been able to fall in love since the war, is clearly shown in the ways she responds to Romero's gestures during bullfights. One of these instances occurs after Romero kills the bull Bocanegra, who gored a twenty-eight-year-old farmer on the way into the arena. The bull's ear is cut off and given to Romero, "who, in turn," Jake reports, "gave it to Brett, who wrapped it in a handkerchief belonging to myself, and left both ear and handkerchief, along with a

number of Murati cigarette-stubs, shoved far back in the drawer of the bed-table that stood beside her bed in the Hotel Montoya, in Pamplona” (202-3). Another of these instances occurs during a different, and later, bullfight, after Cohn had picked a fight with Romero over Brett. Romero, through his sword-handler, gives his heavy brocaded cape to Brett; Brett spreads it out in front of her (at Jake’s urging, no less). “He doesn’t want you to spread it,” a man sitting near Brett says to her, after they all see the sword-handler glance at Brett and shake his head. “You should fold it and keep it in your lap,” the man continues (217). Both of these instances illustrate the rift between Brett, her bullfighter, and the renewed ability to love that he represents for her: she does not know how to correctly use or value the trappings of the culture that has restored her ability to love.

After the bullfight has ended and group has split to leave Pamplona, Jake and Brett revert to their old patterns of living as familiar strangers, loving and unable to be with each other. Like Jake leaves the fiesta after failing to integrate his status as an aficionado with his drunken friends, Brett eventually leaves Romero when she discovers she can’t maintain the refreshed ability to love she found with him: “I’m not going to be one of these bitches that ruins children,” she says to Jake. Then she cries, and says: “Don’t let’s ever talk about it. Please don’t let’s ever talk about it” (247). By the end of the novel, the course of Jake and Brett’s relationship has come full circle; readers recognize again that the most meaningful, poignant, and painful parts of Jake and Brett’s lives are unspeakable things, things that cannot be said and that can never be. The novel closes with Jake and Brett sitting in another cab together, comfortable and resting against each other, not “like two strangers,” but still not together. “Oh, Jake,” Brett says, “we could have had such a damned good time together.” “Yes,” Jake replies, “Isn’t it pretty to

think so?” (251). Their relationship, and the healing and connection after the war that it could have afforded them, is impossible; the ways their war experiences have wounded them will keep them separate no matter how closely they hold each other in the cab.

Jake and Brett’s story in the *The Sun Also Rises* is very much a postwar story; the First World War, now over, is a disruptive guest that won’t leave—a specter that haunts the novel, its characters, and their relationships. *A Farewell to Arms*, though published after *The Sun Also Rises* and its composition thus further removed in time from the First World War, is a war story rather than a postwar story: in it, the war’s presence and effects are immediate and ongoing, present in Lieutenant Frederic Henry’s wounds and the deaths of his friends, in the injured soldiers surrounding Henry and Catherine in the army hospital, in the evidence of shelling in the towns and fields around them. However different the proximity of the First World War is to each of these novel’s events, a similar relationship arc occurs in *A Farewell to Arms* as in *The Sun Also Rises*: two “war comrade” lovers find some level of comfort and meaning in their relationship, despite the conflict around them; two lovers also find that, despite their efforts to keep their relationship intact and strong, circumstances beyond their control tragically end their relationship and permanently separate them from each other.

As the novel begins, Catherine and Lieutenant Henry’s relationship seems like a negative image of Brett and Jake’s: instead of a sexless, stale relationship, still limping along after the war is long over but its effects linger, Catherine and Henry’s is a loving, sex-filled, fledgling relationship that, among other things, provides a life-affirming distraction from the war and its effects on both parties. Like Brett and Jake, Catherine and Henry are initially depicted as “war comrades”—indeed, the ways each of them is

involved in the war are even more similar than Jake's and Brett's, as neither Catherine nor Henry are in combat, instead both serving at military hospitals, Henry as an ambulance driver and Catherine as a V.A.D. nurse. However, after this first part of the novel, and the first arc of their relationship, Catherine and Henry's wartime love story between "war comrades" transforms into a much more traditional one: after ensuring the safety of his pregnant lover, the hero returns to the front, enduring hardships, longing for her presence and comforted by thoughts of her, kept going by the hope that he will eventually return to her side. In my view, it is this relationship, not the relationship of "war comrades" in the first part of the novel, that the war both creates and destroys. *A Farewell to Arms*, then, begins with the possibility of a relationship that not only bridges the home front / war front divide but seems entirely unaffected by it, but that possibility soon fades, and the novel ends by reaffirming not just the gendered lines of home front and war front, but the brokenness that results from having one's relationship in part defined by the divide between those fronts, and the inability to construct a bridge across it.

The brief opening chapter of the novel depicts through landscape what Catherine and Lieutenant Henry depict through relationship, at least in the first part of the novel: a war front and home front that are inextricable from each other, in a place where everyone, soldier or not, endures war experiences. "In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains," the novel begins (3). This description of landscape, village, and house is interwoven with descriptions of the troops that move through that landscape: "Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks

of the trees too were dusty...and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves” (3). The fields near the village are “rich with crops,” filled with orchards of fruit trees; the village is surrounded by mountains in which “the flashes from the artillery” spark “like summer lightning” (3). These descriptions, where the troops and their movements are inextricable from the fertile, feminine landscape in which they move,¹⁶ continue throughout this first chapter; the line between gendered elements is blurred. Further, the masculine trappings of war and the feminine landscape with its burgeoning fields not only coexist, but even overlap to the point of losing their individual distinctiveness, becoming part of the other. For example, some of the “big guns” that pass by the village, drawn by tractors, blend in with the landscape, the “long barrels of the guns covered with green branches and green leafy branches and vines laid over the tractors” (4). The soldiers, too, lose their explicit masculinity; trudging along the dusty road, the bulges created by their rifles and the extra cartridges tucked beneath their capes make them resemble pregnant women, marching “as though they were six months gone with child” (4).

Henry’s relationship with Catherine in the first arc of the novel develops against this backdrop of fertile valleys threaded with troops, greenery draping their guns. Both of them are working on the front, though neither is actively involved in combat; both have their share of war experiences, just like Jake and Brett. Indeed, much of Catherine’s life very strongly resembles Brett’s: not only is she a V.A.D. like Brett was, she also lost a

¹⁶ Characterizing the landscape as “feminine” is hardly new; the study of such characterizations was inaugurated by Annette Kolodny in her 1975 book *The Lay of the Land*. Kolodny focuses on American literature and culture from 1584 to 1860 in her study of the metaphor of “land-as-woman,” and is mostly concerned with how the American landscape is described as a feminine entity; however, Hemingway’s descriptions of the fertile lands of Italy in *A Farewell to Arms* in 1929 certainly support Kolodny’s claims.

former love, a boy she grew up with and was going to marry, in the war (18-19). She had previously worked on the Western front in France, having started as a V.A.D. in 1915, the same year her fiance enlisted. Her early fantasies, since dashed, romanticized her role and his; as she tells it to Henry, clearly disillusioned, her story solidifies the reality of her war experience both for Henry and for readers: "I remember having a silly idea he might come to the hospital where I was. With a sabre cut, I suppose, and a bandage around his head. Or shot through the shoulder. Something picturesque. [...] People can't realize what France is like. If they did, it couldn't all go on. He didn't have a sabre cut. They blew him all to bits" (20). Further, at least at this point of the story, Catherine's losses as a result of the war have been, if we cannot call them more significant than Henry's, at least more quantifiable and easy to define; in my view, their obvious presence in the text serves to make them, and Catherine's status as a "war comrade" on a level with Henry, unavoidable.

Henry and Catherine's affair begins as a "rotten game," but soon develops into something much more meaningful. After Henry is injured and loses several fellow ambulance drivers to shelling, a trauma for which his friend Rinaldi says he will be decorated if he can prove he acted heroically (Henry responds that he was "blown up while we were eating cheese" [63]), he sees Catherine Barkley again at the hospital in Milan. There, he recognizes the depth of his feelings for her: "When I saw her I was in love with her. Everything turned over inside me. [...] I pulled her down and kissed her and felt her heart beating" (91). The couple make love for the first time together that night; Henry feels "finer than I had ever felt", and the two of them affirm that they love each other. "Now do you believe I love you?" Catherine asks Henry; he replies, "I'm

crazy in love with you” (92). Both recognize that this love affair is a foolish, ill-timed thing; Henry can’t bring himself to care, however, and believes it beyond his control to try to end their relationship: “God knows I had not wanted to fall in love with her. I had not wanted to fall in love with anyone. But God knows I had and I lay in bed in the room of the hospital in Milan and all sort of things went through my head but I felt wonderful” (93).

With the heady rush of their newfound love for each other, however, come some interesting developments, particularly where Catherine’s character is concerned. As I discussed above, in the first part of the novel, before Lieutenant Henry has been injured, his and Catherine’s relationship is one between “war comrades” who find in each other a distraction from the violence around them, and the violence and loss that have, at least in Catherine’s case, wounded them in the past. After Henry is injured, however, Catherine’s place in their relationship shifts: she becomes less and less Henry’s “war comrade” and more and more his attentive nurse and malleable lover—both much more explicitly, traditionally feminine roles. Henry, in turn, after being wounded in action and having lost friends to shelling, is now less an ambulance driver and more a broken soldier after the battle; he has assumed the more explicitly, traditionally masculine role Catherine once thought her now-dead fiance would occupy: wounded, not mortally, recovering in a bed at the hospital where she is (20). And as their roles relative to each other shift, Catherine herself changes: her claim to traumatic, still-devastating war experience, once greater than Lieutenant Henry’s claim to the same, fades into the background, in favor of a Catherine who exhausts herself so she and Henry can have sex on Catherine’s “night duty” while still working during the day, who worries her talk of her dead fiance will

convince Henry she does not love him, who when she speaks says things like “There isn’t any me. I’m you. Don’t make a separate me” (115) and “I’ve tried to be the way you wanted” (139). Henry’s realization that he loves Catherine, and the deepening of his feelings for her, occur as Catherine herself loses depth as a character, as a “war comrade”; Henry loves her as she, more and more, speaks only to emphasize either her love for him or her wish to become *not* herself—to be what he wants, or to become a part of him. During Henry’s time in the hospital recovering, then, readers see that, though Henry discovers he is deeply in love with Catherine, and though that love has a profound effect on him emotionally and even in terms of his recovery, the Catherine he falls in love with is not the Catherine we met in Book One of the novel. She is becoming less and less a “war comrade,” and more and more a symbol of the pleasures afforded by a malleable, willing female whose only desire is to help her wounded soldier recover: an emblem of a comfortable, comforting feminine home front to which a weary soldier can return.

This shift in Catherine’s character and her function in the novel becomes even more obvious in the transition from Book Two into Book Three. Near the end of Book Two, Catherine tells Henry that she has become pregnant—a development she seems to consider a failure to “be the way [Henry] wanted” (139), and that necessitates her removal not only from the hospital in Milan, but from the war effort entirely. The day Henry is to return to the front, he arranges for Catherine to be sent further away from it, and in one of their last conversations before they part, he and Catherine show that they have shed their roles of attentive nurse and wounded soldier in favor of roles even more specifically gendered, roles that firmly locate Henry on the war front and Catherine on

the home front. They joke of Henry being wounded, and Catherine talks of preparing a home for him:

“I’ll have a fine home for you when you come back.”
“Maybe I’ll be back right away.”
“Perhaps you’ll be hurt just a little in the foot.”
“Or the lobe of the ear.”
“No I want your ears the way they are.”
“And not my feet?”
“Your feet have been hit already.”
“We have to go, darling. Really.”
“All right. You go first.” (155)

Catherine leaves by carriage; Henry returns to the front in a train car packed with soldiers.

Lieutenant Henry’s return to the front, and his experiences while there, not only shift his focus from love to the realities of war, but also further shift what, exactly, his relationship with Catherine signifies relative to the war. Very soon after Henry arrives at the front, disaster strikes the Italian army: the Germans break through the front lines, and the Italians are given the order to retreat. It is in this part of the novel that some of Hemingway’s best-known meditations on the nature and meaning of war are found. In one such passage, Henry responds, silently, to an Italian comrade’s insistence that the retreat does not mean that the Italians have lost, nor that the fighting before had “been done in vain,” with embarrassment: “I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain,” he thinks to himself (184). Unlike his patriotic Italian friend, Henry thinks, “I had see nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. [...] Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene” (185).

In the mind of Lieutenant Henry, newly convinced of the ingloriousness and vanity of war, and the boredom and even more exaggerated ingloriousness of retreat, Catherine Barkley becomes not a “war comrade” but a symbol of comfort and home. On the (slowly) retreating truck, as Henry, exhausted, floats in and out of consciousness, his thoughts drift to Catherine, and how she might be sleeping:

Catherine was in bed now between two sheets, over her and under her. Which side did she sleep on? Maybe she wasn't asleep. Maybe she was lying thinking about me. [...] Christ, that my love were in my arms and I in my bed again. That my love Catherine. That my sweet love Catherine down might rain. Blow her again to me. [...] “Good-night, Catherine,” I said out loud. “I hope you sleep well.” (197)

Here, Catherine is not a “war comrade,” a physical presence with whom to share the traumas and losses of war; neither is she a nurse to Henry's wounded soldier, simultaneously a feminine distraction from war and a participant in it. In Henry's dream, Catherine has been reduced to a hazy, comforting figure in a bed, perhaps thinking of Henry, wanting and waiting for him to return. This version of Catherine appears again later Book Three, after Henry has successfully escaped the madly patriotic battle police, symbolically stripped himself of his uniform's stars, and sneaked aboard a train to hitchhike away from the front:

I could remember Catherine but I knew I would get crazy if I thought about her when I was not sure yet I would see her, so I would not think about her, only about her a little, only about her with the car going slowly and clickingly, and some light through the canvas and my lying with Catherine on the floor of the car. [...] You did not love the floor of a flat-car nor guns with canvas jackets...but you loved some one else whom now you knew was not even to be pretended there; you seeing now very clearly and coldly—not so coldly and clearly and emptily. (231-2)

Here, Catherine is again a welcome, comforting distraction from Henry's war experiences; however, at the same time, she is someone who “was not even to be

pretended” at the war front—she is to be kept separate from it. In these passages, then, Catherine is made most abstract and most distant from the war front: she has become love and comfort for Henry, and having become those things, she no longer has any place on the front as the “war comrade” she once was.

In Book Four of the novel, Henry, now a deserter, returns to Catherine, and after a treacherous nighttime boat trip, the pair arrive in neutral Switzerland. By Book Five, Henry and Catherine are away from the war and settled into a pleasant domestic life. In bed with Catherine, the war seems “as far away as the football games of some one else’s college” to Henry (291); in their conversations, they avoid talking about the war and instead talk about the baby, about whether Henry is tired of Catherine because she’s pregnant, about Henry’s growing a beard and Catherine’s cutting her hair, about how their love for each other makes them “the same one” (299). They should be as far removed from the war front as they can be, practically speaking: they are physically distant from it, holed up in neutral territory, and they should be psychologically distant from it while their thoughts are focused on each other and the child that has necessitated their flight from it.

However, though they have left the war front, the couple cannot flee news of the war, nor the meaningless suffering and death that Henry associates with war, and not with Catherine and the love and home she has come to symbolize for him. Scattered throughout descriptions of the couple’s happy life, and always juxtaposed with decidedly domestic activities, are references to the papers, and the unavoidable news of the happenings at the front that they contain. While Catherine is having her hair done at a “fine coiffeur’s place,” Henry goes out for a beer and “read[s] about disaster”: “The

papers were bad reading. Everything was going badly everywhere” (292). While Catherine unpacks after the couple move to a town closer to the hospital, Henry has a whiskey and “read[s] the papers [he] had bought at the [train] station. It was March, 1918, and the German offensive had started in France” (308). After the baby’s birth and death, while Catherine—still alive—is recovering at the hospital, Henry leaves to get supper, and reads the paper: “I was not thinking at all but read the paper of the man opposite me. It was about the break through on the British front” (329). By the time the novel ends, and Catherine and the baby have both died, leaving Henry alone, it is clear that leaving the war front does not mean one leaves behind hardship, senseless death, and the realization that words like “sacred, glorious, and sacrifice” have become meaningless and embarrassing (184-5). Henry’s remark when he witnesses the mob of Italian patriots shooting officers could just as easily apply to his experience watching Catherine and their child die: “The killing came suddenly and unreasonably” (218).

A Farewell to Arms, then, shows that the separation of a masculine war front from a feminine home front creates a false dichotomy. Death, pain, and the loss of faith in ideals like “glory” and “sacredness” exist on both sides of the home front / war front divide. Separating them in order to distance oneself from the trauma of war experience, as Henry tries to do first by sending Catherine away, and later by meditating on idealized thoughts of her, does not create a feminine space of domestic bliss and comfort outside the war; rather, it throws into sharp relief the futility of separating war’s hardship from the hardship of human life. In attempting to distance himself and his relationship with Catherine from the war, despite the fact that their shared war experiences are what brought them together, Henry achieves not connection and hope but loss and

disillusionment. Neither the “real” Catherine, who endured working on the Western front and her fiancé’s death, nor the idealized Catherine, symbol of peace and home, survive Henry’s realization.

In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the last of Hemingway’s major war novels, readers are introduced to another pair of lovers whose bond has the potential to help them transcend the hardships and trauma of war, and form a relationship fraught with meaning in the face of violence bereft of it. In this novel, too, the lovers in question can be called “war comrades”; both of them have endured war experiences and both are participants in the efforts of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. Also, and significantly, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* portrays not just a pair of lovers and “war comrades,” but a group of guerilla fighters, one of whom is a woman who exerts an amount of control over the group’s actions and over her own experiences that is surprising and unique in Hemingway’s work. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, then, comes closest of all Hemingway’s major war novels to writing past a gendered understanding of the divide between home front and war front, using meaningful relationship between two “war comrades” to bridge the gap. However, as in *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* does not succeed in writing past this understanding, due in large part to how the novel portrays Maria, Robert Jordan’s “rabbit” and his “war comrade” lover.

Before I examine the novel’s portrayal of Maria, however, I want to first discuss the character of Pilar, “the woman of Pablo,” a female character unique among the women in Hemingway’s fiction. When Robert Jordan first asks “How is she, the *mujer* of Pablo?,” he hears an intriguing mix of characteristics: “Something *very* barbarous,” the gypsy, Rafael, tells him; he continues: “If you think Pablo is ugly you should see his

woman. But brave. A hundred times braver than Pablo” (26). She has gypsy blood (28), and is a palm reader (27). She is also fiercely protective of Maria, and dedicated to the younger woman’s survival for all her roughness: “We would have left [Maria],” Rafael tells Robert Jordan, “But the old woman tied a rope to her and when the girl thought she could not go further, the old woman beat her with the rope to make her go. Then when she could really not go further, the old woman carried her over her shoulder” (28). When Robert Jordan finally meets Pilar, he finds her ugly, solid, and tough; his descriptions of her all point to strength: she has “a brown face like a model for a granite monument” and a “strong hand grip” (30-1). After Pilar has examined him in turn, and questioned him about his purposes in their camp, she announces, “We will understand each other” (31).

Even more significant than Pilar’s oft-emphasized strength and bravery is the extent to which she is depicted as a “war comrade,” without even the added connection of romantic interest. Pilar is deeply involved in the efforts of the Republicans, surely, and she has suffered loss and trauma at the hands of the war like Brett Ashley and Catherine Barkley. However, Pilar is unique in that she is not only clearly in a position of authority within the camp, but also in a position of authority when it comes to the telling of her own war story: Pilar has not only had war experiences, but narrates them in detail, without prevarication, and without flinching away from them. Further, her war narrative—and her telling of it—does not compete with Robert Jordan’s own narrative, nor does her authority as a storyteller threaten Robert Jordan’s; the two dovetail in a way that promotes mutual understanding and respect.

Pilar’s war narrative occupies a significant portion of the first third of the novel, taking up the entirety of the tenth chapter—over thirty pages in the edition I cite here—

and providing Robert Jordan with some background on the movement and on her once-brave husband Pablo. When the revolution came to her small town, after Pablo, then still a brave comrade for the revolution, had captured and killed the town guard, she says (100-102), Pilar describes how Pablo captured the other “fascists” in the town—over twenty men—and “had them beaten to death with flails and thrown from the top of the cliff into the river” (103). Pilar observed as Pablo arranged for the “fascists”—the town leaders and some middle-class businessmen—to be given last rites before being pushed through a double line of peasant men, men who are uncertain of what one wears to a revolution and so have awkwardly dressed in their best clothes, men carrying flails and other farm implements as weapons, men who will beat these fascists with their flails before flinging them off the cliff at the end of the line, so that all of the movement’s members are complicit in their deaths. Early on in the town’s revolution, Pablo’s ruthlessness and organization has not been transferred to his followers, who hesitate to use their flails on the first man through the line, who are uncertain of what a revolution entails, and who are still mostly sober. However, as the town’s revolution continues, the line of peasants becomes less sober and more ruthless. Eventually, the order of the double line breaks entirely, and the drunken revolutionaries rush the room where the priest is giving the remaining fascists last rights, killing them all, chopping at the priest with sickles and reaping hooks (125).

Throughout her telling of this war narrative, Robert Jordan (and Maria, who is also listening) respect Pilar’s account as an authoritative one; they do not interrupt her to question the narrative, and when they do speak during this chapter, it is most often in response to a question Pilar poses, as Robert Jordan does when Pilar asks him, “Is it not

so in your country, *Ingles?*” when explaining the ugliness caused by drunkenness (116). Similarly, within the story itself, the other revolutionaries treat Pilar as an authority, asking her questions about the order of the day’s events and the reasons why it is being done the way it is. One of the peasants asks Pilar, “Why is this done thus, Pilar?” as the men assembled with their flails in their double line; she responds, “To save bullets...and that each many should have his share in the responsibility” (106). Admittedly, her authoritativeness here is colored by the fact that, first, she might, as the narrator here, be inclined to give herself more authority than she actually received, and, second, that any deference these revolutionaries show her is a result of her relationship with Pablo, not because of her own role as a revolutionary leader. However, in my view, these two points do not diminish the authority of Pilar’s narrative, partially because of the clarity and astuteness of her account, and because of the knowledge and depth of political thought she displays throughout the narrative. Indeed, as Pilar’s account continues, it is clear that not only does she clearly remember the events of the revolution in her small town, she also has developed a thoughtful, astute response to the political aspects of those events. She tells Robert Jordan:

When the square had been closed off and the lines formed, I had admired and understood it as a conception of Pablo, although it seemed to me to be somewhat fantastic and that it would be necessary for all that was done to be done in good taste if it were not to be repugnant. Certainly if the fascists were to be executed by the people, it was better for all the people to have a part in it, and I wished to share the guilt as much as any, just as I hoped to share in the benefits when the town should be ours. But after Don Guillermo I felt a feeling of shame and distaste, and...I wished that I might disassociate myself altogether from the lines, and I walked away. (119)

This passage shows Pilar as not just a willing follower of her lover Pablo, nor another revolutionary swept up into the frenzied, drunken mob, but a woman who has clearly

weighed and considered the implications of her actions and those of the revolutionaries, and who has made and continues to make choices about the politics she will support and associate herself with.

As significant as Pilar's narrative of her experiences is Robert Jordan's response to her narrative in the next chapter. Robert Jordan, readers learn, has heard from many Spaniards how the fascists killed their family members. "How many times had he heard this? [...] He could not remember how many times he had heard them mention their dead in this way," he thinks; and again, a few sentences later: "You only heard the statement of the loss." Pilar's narrative, however, is different: "You did not see the father fall [in those other stories] as Pilar made him see the fascists die in that story she had told by the stream. [...] You did not see the mother shot, nor the sister, nor the brother. You heard about it; you heard the shots; and you saw the bodies. / Pilar had made him see that town" (134). Pilar's abilities as a storyteller so impress him, in fact, that he wishes she could write her story down herself:

If that woman could only write. He would try to write it and if he had luck and could remember it perhaps he could get it down as she told it. God, how she could tell a story. [...] I wish I could write well enough to write that story, he thought. [...] Because of our mobility and because we did not have to stay afterwards to take the punishment we never knew how anything really ended, he thought. [...] The peasants stayed and took the punishment. I've always known it and hated it and I have heard it mentioned shamelessly and shamefully, bragged of, boasted of, defended, explained and denied. But that damned woman made me see it as though I had been there. (134-5)

Not only has Pilar endured war experiences, she can also narrate them so well that they make the hearer—even one like Robert Jordan, who has heard many Spaniards narrate their experiences of loss—"see it as though [he] had been there." Further, the male protagonist Robert Jordan, who is not only a soldier (of a sort), but also a writer himself,

acknowledges her storytelling prowess and even envies it. Pilar, with her bravery and strength, her experiences of war and loss, and her talent and authority to narrate them, stands in sharp contrast to the “nightmare women” that exist elsewhere in Hemingway’s work, and which I described above. She is nothing like them, and in large part because of that fact, her relationship with Robert Jordan is closest to the type of relationship that Hemingway’s soldier protagonists seem to long for: a relationship between “war comrades” who share experiences, command one another’s respect, and whose understanding of the other promotes trust.

However, this type of relationship also, in Hemingway’s work, demands a romantic component, and unfortunately, Robert Jordan’s romantic interest, Maria, bears far more of a resemblance to a woman like Helena from “The Strange Country” than she does to Pilar. When readers are first introduced to Pilar, they hear not only of her ugliness, but of her bravery, one hundredfold that of Pablo’s; her first conversation with Robert Jordan is one between war comrades, and concerns his mission in the mountains. Upon meeting Maria, however, readers hear almost exclusively of her appearance; Robert Jordan’s response to her, a “thickness in his throat,” occurs “every time [he] look[s] at her,” a distinct contrast to the immediate impression of strength that is his first response to Pilar. Further, the introduction of Maria’s war experience in the novel is tied first to its effect on her appearance, and only later to the physical and psychological trauma it has caused her, suggesting that the former is more significant than the latter. As Robert Jordan watches, she runs her hand over her hair, “now in embarrassment,” and tells him, “They shaved it regularly in the prison at Valladolid. It has taken three months to go like this. I was on the train. They were taking me to the south. Many of the prisoners were

caught after the train was blown up but I was not. I came with these” (23). Readers, with Robert Jordan, later learn that Maria has been tortured and gang-raped by her captors, and that when she initially joined Pablo and Pilar’s band, she was beaten to keep her moving with the group, and eventually had to be carried, because of the acuteness of her psychological trauma and physical exhaustion and injury (132-3). At his first meeting with Maria, however, these aspects of her experience and her character—the things that make her a “war comrade” like Brett Ashley or Catherine Barkley—are pushed to the background, not only by Robert Jordan but by the gypsy and by Maria herself. When Robert Jordan tells her, “You have a very beautiful face,” and that he wishes he “would have had the luck to see you before your hair was cut,” Maria reassures him that it will grow out; the gypsy cuts in with his own remark: “You should have seen her when we brought her from the train. She was so ugly it would make you sick” (34).¹⁷ Clearly, then, Maria’s role in the text is based on her relationship with Robert Jordan, a relationship initially kindled and defined solely by her appearance, despite the suffering she has endured. In this way, Maria stands in sharp contrast to characters like Brett Ashley and Catherine Barkley; these latter women’s attractiveness is also significant where their relationships with Jake and Henry are concerned, but their relationships are also colored from the beginning by the war experiences they share with these novels’ male

¹⁷ Maria’s shorn hair is significant beyond its effects on her beauty. Women’s hair seems to have a weighty significance to Hemingway, and his work is filled with examples of women who cut or threaten to cut their hair. Pedro Romano in *The Sun Also Rises* asks Brett Ashley to grow her hair long so that she will be more womanly; Catherine Barkley jokes with Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* about cutting her hair, which Henry protests; Helena in “A Strange Country” also talks to Roger about cutting her hair; and Catherine, David’s wife in *The Garden of Eden*, goes further than her sisters have by first cutting her hair short, and then convincing her husband to cut and style his hair exactly like hers, so that they can be mistaken for siblings. In all of these examples, women cutting their hair seems to have—or has the potential to have—an emasculating effect on the men in their lives, and is tied, in the case of Helena and David’s Catherine, to the threat women pose to their artist lovers’ work, and their control over that work. Maria, whose hair has been cut off against her will, and who is deliberately growing it long again, is the exception that proves the rule: instead of symbolizing a potential threat, she represents a hope for future, ideal womanliness, the absence of such a threat. See also note 6 above.

protagonists. Maria, in contrast, is first introduced not as a war comrade but as a symbol of home front beauty and domesticity: a comely, pert-breasted girl bearing a platter of food.

Robert Jordan's relationships with both women develop in very different ways. His relationship with Pilar is one built on his acceptance of her authority and his respect for her bravery and dedication to her political cause: "I speak to you as though I knew you for a long time," Pilar tells him early in their days together; he responds, "It is like that...when people understand one another" (32). His relationship with Maria is purely romantic, a physical and emotional one that alleviates his loneliness and gives meaning to his handful of days in the mountains, days that turn out to be the last of his life. Indeed, so strong is the love he feels for Maria, and so deeply has it infused his life with meaning, that the nearness of his death pales drastically in comparison with this love. "When I am with Maria," he thinks,

I love her so that I feel, literally, as though I would die and I never believed in that nor thought that it could happen. / So if your life trades its seventy years for seventy hours I have that value now and I am lucky to know it. And if there is not any such thing as a long time, nor the rest of your lives, nor from now on, but there is only now, why then now is the thing to praise and I am very happy with it. [...] / What a business. You go along your whole life and they seem as though they mean something and they always end up not meaning anything. [...] And then, on a lousy show like this, co-ordinating two chicken-crut guerilla bands to help you blow a bridge under impossible conditions...you run into a girl like this Maria. (166-7)

Maria is unlike anything, or anyone, Robert Jordan has had in his life before; she has a special value to him, and a meaningfulness he has heretofore not experienced. She leads him to break his own rule about becoming involved with women while a soldier: "I cannot have a woman doing what I do," he tells her, "But thou art my woman now" (73).

She is, throughout but especially at the end of the novel, not someone Robert Jordan fights with, but the embodiment of what he fights for: “I hope that Rabbit will get out of this all right,” he thinks to himself just before blowing the bridge. “But I can hope that and I do. That I blow it well and that she gets out all right. Good. Sure. Just that. That is all I want now” (434).

In and of itself, Robert Jordan’s relationship with Maria is a very positive one, and through it, Robert Jordan is able to attain peace and meaning in the uncertainty and chaos around him in a way that neither Jake Barnes nor Frederic Henry were able to. However, the novel still ends in death and loss: Robert Jordan, his leg crushed by his own horse’s body, stays behind while Maria, Pilar, and the other remaining members of their little guerilla company flee the fascists; he has resigned himself to his own death, and finally realizes in truth what he thought to himself at the beginning of his relationship with Maria: that their relationship would be intense, but brief. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, as in *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*, human connection between lovers who are also “war comrades” has the potential to allow the male protagonist to overcome the trauma and suffering of war and find meaning and hope, but, in the end, that potential is left unrealized.

In my view, the reason why that potential is not fulfilled, even in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, is that Robert Jordan does to Maria the same thing that Frederic Henry did to Catherine, only immediately rather than gradually: he makes her, and his relationship with her, into a microcosm of a mythic home front, where peace and love and nights in a hotel in Madrid are all possibilities, and all very much separate things from the war front on which the couple finds themselves. This way of defining their relationship with

reference to the war is even more futile in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* than it was in *A Farewell to Arms*; in the latter, there was at least a war front to flee from and a neutral country to flee too, while in the former, home front and war front have bled together so as to be inextricable: fascists are thrown off a cliff in Pilar's town; Pilar and Maria keep a hearth and an almost unbelievably diverse menu for their band of guerillas; Robert Jordan and Maria have their wedding night, and she a "wedding shirt," in a soldier's heavy-duty sleeping bag in the snowy Spanish mountains.

The piece of evidence that shows most clearly how Robert Jordan views his relationship with Maria as a microcosm of the home front, rather than a romantic bond between "war comrades," is the ways in which he, the other guerillas, and even Maria characterize her own war experiences. As I discussed above, the guerillas initially discuss Maria's war experiences only as they relate to her appearance. After the first time she and Robert Jordan make love, Maria confesses, deeply ashamed, that "things were done to [her]"; fearing that Robert Jordan will not love her because she has been despoiled, she emphasizes how much she resisted her captors: "Where things were done to me I fought until I could not see. I fought until—until—until one sat upon my head—and I bit him—and then they tied my mouth and held my arms behind my head—and others did things to me" (71). Robert Jordan's response, while kind and without judgment, is nevertheless to ignore Maria's war experiences and act as though they had never occurred; his words of comfort to her are: "I love thee, Maria.... And no one has done anything to thee.... No one has touched thee, little rabbit" (71). Much later in the novel, Maria confesses—ashamed, again—that intercourse is painful for her because of "when things were done" to her; Robert Jordan again reassures her by telling her that "such things pass and then

there is no problem” (341). In both of these passages, the torment Maria has endured as a war prisoner, never stated outright but only referred to as “things [that] were done to [her],” is continually elided—by herself, by Robert Jordan, and by her other “war comrades.” She certainly has had war experiences, and they do come up in her relationship with Robert Jordan, but they play no part in the relationship itself; in fact, the couple’s relationship acts to help both parties ignore her experiences, instead of their becoming part of the basis for Robert Jordan and Maria’s connection to each other. Thus, Maria cannot be called a “war comrade” in the same way that Brett Ashley and Catherine Barkley might be, and were; though all three women have war experiences, Brett and Catherine’s serve as part of what solidifies and strengthens their relationships with Jake and Henry. Maria and Robert Jordan’s relationship exists, in part, to overwrite her war experiences, and to fashion her as a symbol of the possibility of home front peace rather than a very much human “war comrade,” familiar with suffering.¹⁸

For Whom the Bell Tolls, then, is the novel at once most and least successful in writing past the gendered home front / war front divide of any of the three war novels I have so far discussed. Pilar, unique among Hemingway women as a political force and an authoritative storyteller, shows through her relationship with Robert Jordan the potential for understanding beyond an artificial, and artificially gendered, division between home front and war front. Pilar and Robert Jordan’s relationship strengthens both of them in their duties in the Spanish Civil War, and stimulates Robert Jordan’s work as a writer.

¹⁸ Perhaps part of the reason why Robert Jordan, and Maria herself, would rather forget her war experiences is because they are not just traumatic, but gender-specific and in many ways a violation of the sort of domestic peace Robert Jordan sees Maria as symbolizing. Maria’s having been raped not only keeps her from having sex comfortably with Robert Jordan, it might also have left her incapable of having children. Perhaps, then, Robert Jordan chooses to ignore, and to encourage Maria to ignore, what Maria suffered as a war prisoner because it helps the couple believe their vision of peace and domesticity in Madrid—a hopeless dream, as Robert Jordan knows, if there ever was one.

However, the relationship to which Robert Jordan attributes the most meaning in the novel is his with Maria, whose war experience, while Robert Jordan is glad she tells him of it (353), does not lead him to wish she could write it down; in fact, he wishes they could both forget it, and forge their relationship in its absence rather than with their shared war experience as one of the links between them.

All three of these books—*The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—contain, then, a paradoxical theme: the male protagonists in all of these novels acutely desire and value meaningful relationships, particularly with the women they meet, as a way to combat and live through the trauma and suffering they have endured in war. The women they meet, without exception, have also endured war experiences; they are “old war comrades” who offer their love interests a glimpse of the possibility of recovery from the effects of war, partly because of the war experiences both members of the couple share. However, these possibilities of peace do not lead to postwar happiness, mainly because of the fact that none of these stories’ protagonists are able to move past a gendered understanding of the home front / war front divide.

Conclusion

In her book *Women and War*, which I discuss in depth in the introduction to this dissertation, Jean Bethke Elstain introduces readers to the pervasive, mythic figures of the “Just Warrior” and the “Beautiful Soul,” gendered archetypes into which male and female citizens are to fit themselves, archetypes which, she argues, do not open up the possibility of peace and reconciliation, but rather result in generation after generation defining itself in terms of war and conflict. These archetypes become part of people’s identities, and are, she concludes, “solemn, brittle” things: “the tough male warrior; the

pure, pacific woman—[are identities] that not only keep others out, and construe them as enemies, but that preclude any inner dialogue with one's own 'others'" (257-8). In her book's conclusion, she offers a third identity, the "chastened patriot," an option different from the "Just Warrior" and "Beautiful Soul," an option that "constitutes [both] men and women" and which focuses on reconciliation and "gives 'forgiveness' a central role as one way human beings have to break cycles of vengeance" (258). Her work suggests that, in order to move past lives defined by violence and suffering, one thing we must do is work past these gendered archetypes, these identities that define us with reference to war and that keep us from relating to and reconciling with the "others" in our lives and in ourselves.

Hemingway's work, particularly his war writing, acknowledges this need for reconciliation and relationship: characters like Jake Barnes, Frederic Henry, and Robert Jordan evidence a profound need to communicate their experiences through stories and through relationships, and all three men choose female partners and friends who are "war comrades." These women have war experiences just like the men they love and understand; some of them even have the authority and, in Pilar's case, the storytelling prowess to narrate those experiences to great effect. In these ways, Hemingway's war novels begin to do in fiction what Elshtain suggests in politics: write past the gendered home front / war front boundary that defines not just nations, but people in terms of opposition and struggle rather than forgiveness and reconciliation. As I discussed above, these three war novels clearly show that the more a male protagonist is able to reconcile and truly relate to the feminine, the more his voice and hers combine and share authority

over the war narrative, the more those protagonists are able to find peace and reconciliation in times of, and after, war.

However, elsewhere in Hemingway's writing, there runs another, very strong current: an acute fear of what I term the "nightmare woman" who visits upon her partner, a writer, the worst nightmare of the wordsmith: she carelessly loses his work or destroys it deliberately; in the most extreme case, in *The Garden of Eden*, she replaces the stories he intended to tell with one she has demanded he write. Thus, the desire for meaningful human connection amid violence and suffering, a desire that pervades Hemingway's three major war novels, exists simultaneously in Hemingway's fiction with the fear that a meaningful human connection might turn into a nightmare, one in which the male artist loses absolute control over his art.

That these two contradictory views of women, and the potential results of a relationship with them, coexist in Hemingway's fiction leads to the conclusion that Hemingway does not succeed in writing past the the persistent myth Elshtain discusses: the myth in Western culture of a gendered war and home front, in which the people on either side of the divide identify themselves in opposition to the other, perpetuating division rather than fostering relationship and connection. The protagonists of Hemingway's three major war novels seem to understand the need for human connection, understanding, and relationship across the boundaries created by gender and war. However, Hemingway's work simultaneously displays an acute fear of what might happen if those boundaries are transgressed. Partly as a result of this contradiction, Jake Barnes sits alone though with Brett in a cab; Frederic Henry walks out in the rain after Catherine and their son have died; Robert Jordan sends Maria away and waits to die

among the pine cones in the Spanish mountains. Though they found love and some measure of peace with their “war comrade” lovers, for these men, peaceful existence and meaningful relationship after war are impossibilities.

CHAPTER THREE

“This I dreamed of sharing”: Complexity and Contradiction in Tim O’Brien’s Portrayal of Women and War

“Women are going to have to acknowledge that men are being treated unfairly when they are sent to war,” Tim O’Brien states in a 1994 interview, and which scholar Alex Vernon calls “O’Brien’s only open statement expressing any kind of hostility toward women and their relationship with war” (246). O’Brien continues:

I don’t think women have thought about it much. I think women, by and large, in western society have taken it for granted that they don’t have to serve in combat, and it’s not even thought about much. It’s just a given. It’s as if God has somehow granted divine right to women: *You don’t have to die in combat. You don’t have to go through this horror.* Well, God didn’t mandate that privilege, man did. Law did. Tradition did. Culture did. It seems to me that excluding women from combat is a clear violation of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to our Constitution. We should all be treated fairly. Why not only draft blacks, or only draft Albanians, or only draft Italians? There would be a revolution in this country in any of those cases. “How to Tell a True War Story” is meant to call attention to a fundamental inequality. Half our population is excluded from the horror of serving in combat. I want to call attention to that fact. (20)

O’Brien’s words here express a complicated view of women from the perspective of a male veteran. While O’Brien certainly expresses some level of hostility toward women, the place his anger comes from seems to be, strangely enough, emphatically egalitarian. O’Brien’s hostility toward women is rooted, at least in this statement, not in his views of the differences between men and women, but in his belief in women’s equality with men—an equality undermined by culture, law, and tradition.

The women who figure in Tim O’Brien’s war stories are as complex and difficult to pin down as the view on the relationship between women and war that O’Brien

expresses in this interview. These female characters are many and varied, not easily classified, their roles not easily simplified. One of these women appears near the end of his meditations on “How to Tell a True War Story” in *The Things They Carried*; she is a type of listener who doesn’t listen, and O’Brien rebukes her. “Usually it’s an older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics,” he writes. “She’ll explain that as a rule she hates war stories...[b]ut this one she liked. The poor baby buffalo, it made her sad. [...] What I should do, she’ll say, is put it all behind me. Find new stories to tell” (84). This woman’s advice, however heartfelt, is ignorant. “She wasn’t listening,” O’Brien writes. “It *wasn’t* a war story. It was a *love* story” (85).

A few years later, in a piece for the *New York Times* entitled “The Vietnam in Me,” O’Brien writes about another woman, and repeats this idea that stories about war can be love stories. This time, he isn’t writing about a clueless listener and her lack of understanding when he tells a story about a young man’s grief at the death of his best friend and brother-in-arms. Instead, O’Brien writes about his journey back to Vietnam in February of 1994 with his girlfriend Kate. And as he writes, O’Brien is haunted by both memories of the war and by memories of Kate, who, in the time between their trip and the piece’s composition, has left him. “I returned to Vietnam with a woman whose name is Kate,” he writes, “whom I adored and have since lost.” During that trip to Vietnam, as he and Kate talk about the war in their room at the Song Tra Hotel in Quang Ngai City, O’Brien tries to help Kate understand: “I try to explain—ineptly, no doubt—that Vietnam was more than terror. For me, at least, Vietnam was partly love.” He continues:

You love your mom and dad, the Vikings, hamburgers on the grill, your pulse, your future—everything that might be lost or never come to be. Intimacy with death carries with it a corresponding new intimacy with life.

Jokes are funnier, green is greener. You love the musty morning air. You love the miracle of your own enduring capacity for love.

Tangled up in that terror-spawned love is O'Brien's love for Kate; his distress after losing her love is as acute as the distress he feels revisiting Vietnam in body and in his nightmares. Love of life, even romantic love of a woman, is not a thing separate from war; war experience even creates and strengthens this love. Because of this love, throughout the memories he revisits in "The Vietnam in Me," O'Brien tries to help Kate understand his experiences, particularly his war experiences: "I want to tell her things and be understood and live happily ever after. I want a miracle" he writes early in the piece; later, while showing Kate a piece of the Vietnamese landscape that is for him "how peace would be defined in a dictionary for the speechless," he thinks, "This I dreamed of giving her. This I dreamed of sharing."

However, interwoven with both these listeners, female audiences O'Brien wants to make understand but who do not or cannot listen to his Vietnam War love story, are female figures who display the horror possible when women understand too much of war, and even become it. In *The Things They Carried*, this horror is embodied by Mary Anne Bell, "The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," a grunt's girlfriend who devolves from a fresh-faced seventeen-year-old blonde in culottes to a Green Beret initiate with "flat and indifferent" eyes, wearing a necklace of human tongues (110). In "The Vietnam in Me," O'Brien suggests that this horror is part of what spawns the evil of the My Lai Massacre. One of the soldiers involved, Paul Meadlo, "offered this appalling testimony" about why he had opened fire on women and children:

Q: What did you do?

A: I held my M-16 on them.

Q: Why?

A: Because they might attack.
 Q: They were children and babies?
 A: Yes.
 Q: And they might attack? Children and babies?
 A: They might've had a fully loaded grenade on them. The mothers might have throwed them at us.
 Q: Babies?
 A: Yes....
 Q: Were the babies in their mothers' arms?
 A: I guess so.
 Q: And the babies moved to attack?
 A: I expected at any moment they were about to make a counterbalance.

Like Mary Anne Bell and her necklace of tongues, these mothers with their children have become part of the war; their understanding of its terror and its love stories no longer an issue, they are instead emblems of the comforts of the world away from the war that have been swallowed by it—girlfriends, sex, and mother-love. The ultimate horror here seems to be that too much understanding, too much sharing between O'Brien and Kate, between Mark Fossie and Mary Anne Bell, between Vietcong and Vietnamese village women, twists the love story into one only of terror—a terror that, further, the men involved are responsible for. O'Brien took his girlfriend to Vietnam; Mark Fossie sent for his; Paul Meadlo swallowed orders concerning women that made him the killer of innocents. There is a cost to what O'Brien “dreamed of sharing.”

In this smattering of examples from two of O'Brien's works, it is clear that the portrayal of women in that work—and of their involvement as far as telling war stories is concerned—is a complex one not easily or neatly characterized, as difficult to succinctly summarize as the line between a “war story” and a “love story” is to define. O'Brien's work does contain a distinctly feminine horror—the woman who gets too close to war, and becomes it—as well as other misogynistic elements, as some critics have argued.¹

¹ See review of criticism below.

However, these elements are, in my view, balanced by another strong thread in O'Brien's work: the desire for understanding and for love from people on the home front, particularly women. To equate O'Brien's portrayal of women and the feminine with misogyny would therefore not only grossly oversimplify that portrayal; it would be incorrect. Thus, in the following pages, I hope to prove two main points about O'Brien's work. First, O'Brien's work is heavily populated with largely symbolic female figures, embodiments of horrors and threats the soldiers face in Vietnam or, just as horribly, symbols of permanent separation between them and the home front. These women can carry guns for the Viet Cong, or be devoured by the jungle, or just fail to listen and write back. These female figures deny the (male) soldier's ability to reintegrate himself within society, to be understood, because that ability depends upon whether the soldier can reconcile with, understand, and truly communicate with women as human beings. However, second, there are places in O'Brien's work where female characters are more human than symbolic, lovers and girlfriends and wives whose presence and understanding point to the possibility of reconciliation between home front and war front. Through these female characters, O'Brien offers an incomplete solution. Though it is not absolute, this solution does, in my view, allow characters and readers to maintain hope in the possibility of reconciliation: one must, O'Brien's work maintains, not demand understanding or manipulate one's story by including neat morals and untruthful anecdotes. Instead, one must simply continue to tell the story of war experience truly, in different ways, until the conflict might be resolved.

Review of Criticism

Though much of the scholarship on Tim O'Brien's work focuses on issues unrelated to how women and the feminine are represented therein,² a significant body of scholarship does closely examine how women and war are connected in O'Brien's writing. Some scholars consider O'Brien's women in the context of trauma theory and psychoanalysis, such as David R. Jarraway in "'Excremental Assault' in Tim O'Brien: Trauma and Recovery in Vietnam War Literature," and Roy Seeger in "Tell Me Over and Over Again: The Gendering of the Vietnam War and the Cycles of Trauma in Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*." Seeger's article also considers *In the Lake of the Woods* in light of eco-feminist theory, remarking upon the feminization of the Vietnam landscape in the novel (97); the eco-feminist lens is one that others critics, too, adopt, such as Brian Jarvis in "Shaking on a shit field: Tim O'Brien and the Topography of Trauma," where he writes that "the maternal imago haunts the landscape of fecund jungle, intrauterine tunnels and invaginating fox holes, swamps, rivers, and a shit field" (135). The Vietnam landscape acquires an even more sinister feminine aspect in Stefania

² For example, Tobey Herzog's book *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* does not even mention gender in its otherwise thorough discussion of O'Brien's work alongside that of other war writers. Another, and significant, category of criticism on O'Brien's work is concerned with its postmodern and deconstructive aspects; for example, Lucas Carpenter argues in "'It Don't Mean Nothin'": Vietnam War Fiction and Postmodernism" that the Vietnam War was "powerfully representative of the ambivalence and uncertainty characteristic of postmodernism," and that this uncertainty and ambivalence are also characteristic of O'Brien's work; he even groups O'Brien in with other "postmodern thinkers" (35). Dimitri A. Bikos also characterizes O'Brien's work as postmodern, referring specifically to the ways in which his novels question and deconstruct ideas of heroism, and claiming that "the ethos of chivalry and pride often attached to the World Wars of the early 20th century is not reflected in its later decades (243). Steven P. Liparulo, too, argues that *The Things They Carried* in particular "can be said to engage in...refutations of powerful master narratives...and the ideological seductions, manipulations, commitments, and refusals that may have led [O'Brien] to participate in the war" (90). I have considered O'Brien's writing as a response to the crisis of modernity, arguing that O'Brien uses his fiction to "construct a symbol of hope to replace the toppling symbol of nation: a renewed connection between human beings, with story forging the link" (28). Still other critics, such as Philip D. Beidler in *Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation*, discuss O'Brien's work in the larger context of Vietnam War literature, with an eye toward how such literature inscribes the Vietnam War into the American cultural memory—though not necessarily with the parts of that cultural memory concerned with gender.

Ciocia's book *Vietnam and Beyond: Tim O'Brien and the Power of Storytelling*, in which she describes the land as "the image of a monstrous femininity, intent on destroying the soldier...represented, in American narratives of the war, as a *vagina dentata*, a symbol that finds its realistic (!) correspondent in the widespread rumor...that Vietnamese women would hide razor-blades or glass in their vaginas...so as to emasculate [soldiers] or bleed them to death" (127). Such scholarship suggests that the relationship between gender and war in O'Brien's writing is a rich one that has attracted a wide and various array of scholarly attention.

However, my focus here is on a different camp of scholarship on O'Brien's work and its presentation of women and the feminine. Scholars in this camp concern themselves with whether and how O'Brien's female characters are sympathetic or even human, and the conclusions these scholars draw about O'Brien's female characters connect, anywhere from obliquely to explicitly, to their conclusions about how and whether returning veterans are able to communicate their war experience and find peace and community back home. Most often, these scholars identify a distinct thread—or, rather, a wide, unmistakable streak—of misogyny in O'Brien's portrayal of female characters, and they identify a corresponding inability to communicate war experiences past the boundary between home and war front. Such scholars work within a contingent of feminist scholars who argue that much Vietnam War literature, from Michael Herr to Tim O'Brien to other authors with less critical acclaim, reinforces patriarchal institutions and beliefs because it tends to reproduce traditional western ideas of gender. Susan Jeffords's 1989 book *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, for example, argues that the Vietnam War should be read as a "construction of gendered

interests” despite the fact that war might seem to be irrelevant where gender analysis is concerned, as war belongs to the realm of men (81). In her introduction to a special issue of the journal *Vietnam Generation*, also published in 1989, Jacqueline Lawson draws a similar conclusion. Responding to a popular *Esquire* article by William Boyles, Jr., an ex-Marine, entitled “Why Men Love War,” in which Boyles argues that “war is the enduring condition of man, period,” Lawson states that Boyles’s claim is a “canard—that war is the exclusive province of men, a closed and gendered activity inscribed by myth, informed by ritual, and enacted solely through the power relations of patriarchy” (6). Jeffords’s analyses of representations of Vietnam in popular film and literature in her book, and Lawson’s discussion of the brutal rape and torture scenes of Vietnamese women that often appear in Vietnam War literature, both serve to recognize and complicate the misogyny both authors find inherent in Vietnam War literature.

Some scholars who focus on O’Brien’s work in particular, rather than Vietnam War literature more generally, argue that this same misogyny is active in O’Brien’s writing. Benjamin Mangrum, in “Violating the Feminine: War, Kristeva, and *The Things They Carried*,” argues that in *The Things They Carried*, “a view of collective violence emerges in which soldiers find pleasure in feminizing the enemy, sexualizing the images and actions of battle, and thus couching their entire enterprise as an attempt to find pleasure in violating the feminine” (33). Similarly, Lorrie N. Smith, in “‘The Things Men Do’: The Gendered Subtext in Tim O’Brien’s *Esquire* Stories,” argues that, although “O’Brien purports to tell ‘true’ war stories,” his male characters carry “plenty of patriarchal baggage,” and his work “stops short of fully interrogating [war stories] ideological underpinnings...in terms of the binary construction of gender that permeates

representations of war in our culture”; therefore, Smith concludes, O’Brien’s work “offers no challenge to a discourse of war in which apparently innocent American men are tragically wounded and women are objectified, excluded, and silenced” (16-17). In the work of such scholars, then, O’Brien’s work offers little hope that the boundary between home front and war front, between women and men, between peaceful home community and traumatic war experience, will ever be bridged; indeed, their work argues that O’Brien’s writing shows just how wide that boundary is, and even serves to widen it.

However, other scholars see the relationship between gender and war in O’Brien’s work as, if not without misogynistic elements, at least much more complex in how it portrays female characters, and in what those portrayals suggest about the possibility that war experience can be communicated, and the home front / war front boundary crossed. In her article on “Doing Gender and Going Native in ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,’” Elizabeth H. Piedmont-Marton points out that O’Brien’s work, far from solidifying the metaphorical boundaries between, among other things, the sexes and between reality and fiction, instead unsettles them: “The breach of perimeters, confusion of categories, and inversion of hierarchies cause tremendous anxiety among the men of O’Brien’s company because their already tenuous and contingent position is revealed to be completely unanchored” (165). Her point, however, is not merely that the soldiers are unsettled, but that the soldiers’ anxiety is, through O’Brien’s fiction, something the reader can share: “Readers are in an analogous position: They don’t know whom to believe or what to trust” (165). For Piedmont-Martin, then, the home front / war front boundary is a complex one that can be crossed through storytelling, allowing soldiers and readers to share similar experiences. Terry J. Martin and Margaret’s Steiner’s conclusion,

in their essay comparing “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” to its principal source, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, recognizes a similar complexity: they argue that O’Brien’s portrayal of women—or at least, of Mary Anne Bell—is both sexist and critical of sexism: “Not only does [O’Brien] revise Conrad’s sexism by casting in the place of Kurtz a woman...but he also effectively places her forever beyond comprehension,” they write (94). Milton J. Bates, also writing about “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” also points out the complicated relationship between O’Brien’s work and misogynistic elements; he argues that while “Sweetheart” “challenges the more traditional gender polarity of [other Vietnam War writers],” the story “does not, however, challenge their mystification of war” (156-7). Alex Vernon, too, discusses the complexity of O’Brien’s portrayals of female characters, citing both their humanness but also their association with death throughout O’Brien’s work (256). Finally, Susan Farrell, in an essay in defense of *The Things They Carried*, argues that, while “the male characters in the book do indeed subscribe to patriarchal and condescending attitudes about gender” because they “believe that knowledge is attained experientially and thus they exclude women from understanding the war experience,” there is another, corrective view also present in the book: “that understanding may be attained though [*sic*] the imaginative acts of storytelling and reading” (3).

It is with this group of scholars with whom I ally myself in the following pages. The misogynistic elements of O’Brien’s work are very much evident, and they are not, as some scholars have argued,³ merely to be attributed to the fictional O’Brien rather than to O’Brien the author. However, alongside the unfavorable, dehumanizing, and often hostile portrayals of women in O’Brien’s work is a longing that these women, seemingly so

³ Farrell, whom I just mentioned above, makes this point; Piedmont-Martón also alludes to it.

separate from war experience, might understand it, and even the distinct possibility that they can—that the chasm between veteran and home front might be bridged, and the rift between the soldier and his community healed.

“Booby traps for dumb GIs”: Deadly and Devastating Female Symbols

Indictments of the less-than-sympathetic portrayals of female characters in O’Brien’s work are hardly unfounded. These female characters, physically or symbolically present in Vietnam, are often given some, most, or all of the blame for (male) soldiers’ failures, distractedness, or distress. They are symbols rather than people, indicative of the relationship between Vietnam and the home front rather than purposefully imbued with individual personality—as O’Brien so imbues his male characters, even the dead Vietnamese ones in passages like “The Man I Killed” in *The Things They Carried*. This aspect of O’Brien’s work is the one perhaps most worthy of judgment; these women seem to have no place in or around or otherwise in relationship to Vietnam except as malleable symbols and props. But they are nonetheless significant, particularly because it is they who support and define the effects of Vietnam on the (male) soldiers that populate O’Brien’s memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone (Box Me Up and Ship Me Home)*, his novel *Going After Cacciato*, and his work of fiction *The Things They Carried*.⁴ In my view, this less-than-optimal portrayal of women is not only, or even primarily, misogynistic (though, of course, it is that). Rather, these symbols and props wrapped in female flesh function not only to malign women but also, and primarily

⁴ I focus on these four books because they comprise O’Brien’s most considered and most significant war writing. It is worth noting here that O’Brien also considers these his best books; in a 2010 interview with Alex Thiltges, O’Brien states: “*Cacciato*, *In the Lake of the Woods*, *The Things They Carried* and *If I Die* are the ones that I really think are as good as I can make them” (n.p.).

in my view, to emphasize the feelings of being cut off, emasculated, and misunderstood that the soldiers face.

Some of these women are depicted as almost wholly fearsome, evidence of the dangers that rear their heads when the men's longing for sex and other home front comforts get the better of them. This type of woman is introduced in *If I Die in a Combat Zone* when, in between his transcriptions of two misogynistic marching chants, one that lists women by name and by preference of sexual position and one that proclaims "Eskimo pussy is mighty cold," O'Brien meditates on how, in the hyper-masculine world of boot camp, "There is no thing named love in the world. Women are dinks. Women are villains. They are creatures akin to Communists and yellow-skinned people and hippies" (45). Indeed, the book is full of women who meet just this description. These women are altogether Other, and fascinatingly so for the young O'Brien; they are female, communist, and foreign, a seductive version of his enemy in which he can't help but believe (103). At the same time, however, they are also emblematic of the seductions of military R&R that mimic rest and respite from danger—a false rest that is at once a poignant reminder of how far from the safety and comfort of the home front these men are, and merely a precursor to another plunge into the jungle.

This hybrid of prostitute and Viet Cong agent, promising pleasure and pain, appears in the stories the men in O'Brien's platoon tell as they wait at Landing Zone Minuteman for something to happen. O'Brien tries to engage the captain, Johansen, in "conversation about the [politics and morality of the] war; practical Johansen talks tactics and history instead, while around them "the rest of the men talked about their girls" (102-3). The men talk about "R&R and where they would go and how much they would drink

and where the girls performed the best tricks. [...] When they said to watch for the ones with razor blades in their vaginas—communist agents—I believed, imaging the skill and commitment of those women” (103). Woven through these two very different discussions is a common thread of fear, as well: “We lay under our shelters and talked about rumors,” begins the paragraph immediately following the soldiers’ warnings about communist agents with booby-trapped vaginas. “On the sixteenth of April the rumor was that Alpha Company would be CA’d into Pinkville. [...] We feared Pinkville. We feared the Combat Assault” (103). Just as O’Brien’s hopes for high-minded discussions of morality and politics are pulled back to the practical matters of the war on the ground by stubborn, pragmatic Captain Johansen, so the men’s half-joking, half-longing talk about their girls is pulled back to constant threat of danger and death by the girls themselves. Like the lull in the fighting the men sit through, hot and bored, the girls they talk about are not so much a comfort as they are a reminder that every lull is temporary, and death always hovers in distant Pinkville. Later in the same chapter, the pattern will repeat: after three days of R&R, during which the men take in, among other things, a melancholy floor show in which a Korean woman in a black evening gown stripped to Simon and Garfunkel’s “Homeward Bound,” they get the order to head to Pinkville. “One moment the world is serene,” O’Brien writes near the end of the chapter, “in another moment the war is there. It is like the cloudburst, like lightning, like the dropping of the bomb on a sleeping Hiroshima”—like falling into the embrace of a smiling prostitute and finding a razorblade.

The rumored communist agent woman, subject of soldiers’ gossip as they crouch in the dark, becomes a reality in the next chapter, when the soldiers in O’Brien’s platoon

find a Vietnamese woman in a green uniform, shot through buttock and groin by one of their bullets. The men gather around her and the medic futilely working on her; their conversation reflects the difficulty they have when confronted with a being simultaneously enemy and woman. “She’s a pretty woman,” one of them says, “pretty for a gook. You don’t see many pretty gooks, that’s damn sure” (113). Another remarks on how she’s unfortunately “shot dead through the wrong place,” most likely meaning that the location of her injury has made her body unsuitable for raping. However, even as the men turn the dying woman’s body into a sex object, they simultaneously view her as a wounded enemy soldier, one they cannot save but might allow to die with some measure of respect. “Can’t we give her some shade?” one of the men asks the medic. “Can’t carry her, she won’t let us,” the medic replies. “She’s NVA, green uniform and everything. Hell, she’s probably an NVA nurse, she probably *knows* she’s going to die. Look at her squeeze her hands. Trying to hurry and press all the blood out of herself” (113). They radio for a dustoff helicopter, which takes awhile because “she was going to die...and partly because she was with the enemy”; while they wait, the man who shot her strokes her hair and offers her Kool-Aid from his canteen. Her presence, and her death at their hands, symbolize the same dichotomy found in the soldiers’ gossip about communist agent prostitute: she is the enemy in a woman’s body, a body the men long for and which they have been taught to protect rather than destroy; she is a woman in an enemy’s uniform with the enemy’s purpose, not worth making the helicopter pilot risk his neck. She is dangerous because she is both at once: “Didn’t know she was a woman, she just looked like any dink,” the man who shot her says, leaning over her (113).

This dangerous type of woman, whose veneer of feminine charm conceals the weapons and wit of the enemy, also appears in *The Things They Carried*, though her mask is a different one. Mark Fossie's girlfriend Mary Anne Bell, whose story many scholars of O'Brien's work discuss,⁵ is the star of one of the "stories that will last forever" because it "swirl[s] back and forth across the border between trivia and bedlam, the mad and the mundane" (89)—a mix reminiscent of the combination of mundane pleasure and fantastic threat that the communist spy prostitute of *If I Die in a Combat Zone* embodies. Mary Anne Bell may or may not have actually existed, but her story is true, in large part because the fear she exemplifies is so very real for the soldiers who, like Rat Kiley, tell and retell her tale. Like the Asian prostitutes of *If I Die*, Mary Anne Bell provides her boyfriend and his platoon with a measure of home front comfort; however, she, too, is drawn in by Vietnam, whatever comfort and peace she offered turning to terror instead.

At the beginning of Rat Kiley's tale, Mary Anne Bell, flown over by her boyfriend, "shows up with a suitcase and one of those plastic cosmetic bags. Comes right out to the boonies. I swear to God, man," Rat Kiley tells the fictional O'Brien, "she's got on culottes. White culottes and this sexy pink sweater" (90). Mary Anne Bell is the antithesis of Vietnam: blonde, dressed in pastels, she is "just a kid, just barely out of high school," the same age as many of her boyfriend's platoon but immune to the draft because of her gender, a feminine image of what they could have been without Vietnam.

⁵ Smith, Mangrum, Piedmont-Martin, Martin and Steiner, and Bates, whose scholarship I discussed above, all at least mention "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" in their analysis; many of these scholars make this particular story the focus of their analyses, and seem to view it as a locus of Tim O'Brien's view of the relationship between women and war. However, in my view and as I argue in this chapter, O'Brien's stance on women and war's relationship is far more complex, and is best pieced together by looking across his body of work. Other scholars, such as Vernon and Farrell, also take this view.

She also symbolizes the potential of a peaceful, if mundane (indeed, perhaps desirable precisely because it is mundane) future after the war. “Mary Ann Bell and Mark Fossie had been sweethearts since grammar school,” Rat Kiley says. “From the six grade on they had known for a fact that someday they would be married, and live in a fine gingerbread house near Lake Erie, and have three healthy yellow-haired children, and grow old together, and no doubt die in each other’s arms and be buried in the same walnut casket. That was the plan” (94). The plan, however, is foiled, because Mary Anne Bell is curious.

Despite her boyfriend’s warnings and patient admonishments, “[t]he war intrigued her,” Rat Kiley says. “The land, too, and the mystery. [...] She wanted to get a feel for how people lived, what the smells and customs were. It did not impress her that the VC owned the place” (96). Almost frighteningly quickly, Mary Anne’s curiosity leads her to swim in the Song Tra Bong despite the threat of ambushes and snipers (96); to “get her hands bloody” and feel the adrenaline rush that comes with working to save wounded men (98); to fall “into the habits of the bush” and stop wearing her jewelry and makeup, cutting her hair short and tying it up in a bandanna (98). Her assimilation into the world of war culminates in her joining the six Green Berets that share camping space with the platoon at the outpost, going out on ambush with them and returning carrying an automatic rifle, “her face...black with charcoal” (102). Mark Fossie tries to assert himself with her, to get her back into her girlish clothes, and even to send her back home, but he is ultimately unsuccessful. She is swallowed by Vietnam—and it seems she goes down smoothly. Mark Fossie finds her in the Green Beret’s den, a grotesque mixture of her former bubbly self and her new self, become part of the landscape and the war: “she wore her pink sweater and a white blouse and a simple cotton skirt,” but she also wore “a

necklace of human tongues...threaded along a length of copper wire, one overlapping the next, the tips curled upward as if caught in a final shrill syllable" (110-11). She stares at her speechless boyfriend with eyes "utterly flat and indifferent" and tells him: "You're in a place...where you don't belong" (111). She continues, still staring blankly, "Sometimes I want to *eat* this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country—the dirt, the death—I just want to eat it and have it there inside me. That's how I feel" (111). When Ray Kiley and Mark Fossie leave the Greenies' bunker, they can hear them playing and singing their "weird tribal music, which seemed to come from the earth itself, from the deep rain forest"; tangled with this music is "a woman's voice rising up in a language beyond translation" (112). Mary Anne Bell, no longer any home front comfort, has become what every soldier knows they could: what the fictional O'Brien feels himself become when he torments a fellow soldier for a perceived slight: "I was capable of evil," he says (200). "I was Nam—the horror, the war" (209).

In addition to these women, who symbolize the combined longing for and danger of companionship and rest in wartime, another type of threatening symbolic female figure plays a role in O'Brien's war writing. This second type does not herself embody or come to embody any part of Vietnam. Instead, she symbolizes the rest found not on R&R but on the home front, away from the war in thought and in space. Unlike the communist prostitutes or Mary Anne Bell, this woman is brought to Vietnam only in her soldier's mind. At best, she symbolizes a longing for home and community that will never be realized; at worst, she is a deadly distraction from the demands and dangers in Vietnam's jungles. Such women appear in O'Brien's thoughts in *If I in a Combat Zone*, in Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's lovesick musings in *The Things They Carried*, and in Paul

Berlin's vivid and magical daydreams in *Going After Cacciato*. All of them offer ephemeral comfort; all are unreal; some lead to death and others to the reality of the soldiers' estrangement from home.

In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, as he goes through boot camp at Fort Lewis, Washington, learning how to be a soldier and a man, young Tim O'Brien imaginatively crafts this symbolic female figure out of his thoughts of a girlfriend who sends him letters from home. She is, at first, mainly someone whose presence, through her words, anchors him to his peacetime life and identity while the army tries to make him into one of them: "I memorized her letters, whole letters," he writes. "Memorizing was a way to remember and a way to forget, a way to remain a stranger, only a visitor at Fort Lewis" (34). As he continues to think about her, however, her own identity and reality as a human being and companion become less important, and she becomes more and more a symbol of the self O'Brien is afraid to lose:

I lied about her, pretending that she wrote the poem [she sent me] herself, for me. I compared her to characters out of books by Hemingway and Maugham. In her letters she claimed I created her out of the mind. The mind, she said, can make wonderful changes in the real stuff. So I hid from the drill sergeants, turned my back on the barracks, and wrote back to her. (34)

O'Brien resists the violent, rough, ignorant, unthinking brand of soldierly masculinity he is being taught at boot camp with his fabricated girlfriend, a girl who simultaneously symbolizes the home front life he doesn't want to leave, and allows him to create for himself a soldierly identity more in keeping with his college-boy reading lists: an identity like Hemingway's, fighting war while questioning its morality and usefulness. Or one like Socrates', he writes later: "You think of Socrates; you see him beside you, stepping through basic training as your friend. [...] He would not succumb. [...] You think about

other heroes. [...] You write letters to blond girls from middle America, calm and poetic and filled with ironies and self-pity, then you smoke, then you rouse out Kline for the next watch" (46-7).

O'Brien's "blond girl from middle America" becomes even more symbolic, less flesh and more fantasy, once he is actually in Vietnam. On watch, as he crouches behind a hedgerow, watching the road for any enemy movement, O'Brien passes the time by thinking about a girl:

It was hopeless, of course, but I tried to visualize her face. Only words would come up in my mind. One word was "smile," and I tacked on the adjective "intriguing" to make it more personal. I thought of the word "hair" and modified it with "thick" and "sandy." [...] For all of this, I could not see her. When I muttered the word "hair," I could see her hair plainly enough. [...] But if I uttered the word "face" or tried to squeeze out a picture of the girl herself, all there was to see was the word "face" or the word "eye," printed out before me. [...] And I was learning that no weight of letters and remembering and wishing and hoping is the same as touch on temporary, mortgaged lands. (92)

Significantly, in this passage, O'Brien does not consciously shape his girlfriend into a symbol of what he's behind; in fact, he wants her to be less symbolic, "to make it more personal." Instead, he finds himself unable to visualize her whole, a realization that is followed quickly by another: that she belongs to a different world than the one he occupies, and that he is gradually losing touch with that world. Later in the book, he will get mail from this same girl, now traveling in Europe with another boyfriend; this and other news that he receives from home jars painfully with his life in Vietnam: "My mother and father were afraid for me, praying; my sister was in school, and my brother was playing basketball. The Viet Cong were nearby. They fired for ten seconds, and I got on the radio...and we went to another village" (121). Once again, thoughts of a home front girlfriend become, rather than sources of comfort, another reminder of just how far

her soldier is removed from home, and the fear that he might not be able to return or rejoin his home community again.

A nearly identical version of this symbolic female figure, a home front sweetheart whom her soldier carries with him in letters and in fantasies, appears in the first sentence of the title story of *The Things They Carried*. “First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha,” the book begins. “They were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping, so he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack” (1). Martha never mentions the war in her letters, but she does quote poetry, describe her classes as an English major at Mount Sebastian College, and sign her letters “Love, Martha.” Though Jimmy Cross knows Martha does not love him the way he loves her, the letters and their author remain a precious escape for him: “In the late afternoon, after a day’s march, he would dig his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, unwrap the letters, hold them with the tips of his fingers, and spend the last hour of light pretending” (1). When the light dies, he folds the letters up again, and though he does his duty as First Lieutenant, Martha remains at the forefront of his mind: “Slowly, a bit distracted, he would get up and move among his men, checking the perimeter, then at full dark he would return to his hole and watch the night and wonder if Martha was a virgin” (2). Martha, who does not even mention the war in her letters, symbolizes a life apart from the war, a life where love is possible; she symbolizes the kind of life Jimmy Cross wishes he could return to and regrets not seizing hold of when he had the chance (5).

However, Martha’s letters, and the life and love they represent, do more than remind Jimmy Cross of the home front peace and love he wants to have; they are also a distraction, and that distraction costs him and his platoon. While waiting for Lee Strunk,

one of his men, to check a tunnel before the platoon blows it—a deadly job the men draw lots for, hoping to avoid it—Lieutenant Jimmy Cross’s attention is not on his work:

Lieutenant Jimmy Cross moved to the tunnel, leaned down, and examined the darkness. Trouble, he thought—a cave-in maybe. And then suddenly, without willing it, he was thinking about Martha. [...] Kneeling, watching the hole, he tried to concentrate on Lee Strunk and the war, all the dangers, but his love was too much for him, he felt paralyzed, he wanted to sleep inside her lungs and breathe her blood and be smothered. [...] He wanted to know her. (11)

Lee Strunk emerges safely from the tunnel, while Lieutenant Jimmy Cross stands there, vaguely aware of the world around him, but unable to “bring himself to worry about matters of security. He was beyond that. He was just a kid at war, in love” (12). Soon after Lee Strunk makes it out of the tunnel, another one of Cross’s men, Ted Lavender, is “shot in the head on his way back from peeing” (12).

Lieutenant Jimmy Cross blames himself, and his constant daydreams, for Ted Lavender’s death, and the morning after Lavender is shot, Cross burns Martha’s letters and photographs. He also makes a resolution with himself to forget Martha and dedicate himself to being a soldier:

No more fantasies, he told himself.
Henceforth, when he thought about Martha, it would be only to think that she belonged elsewhere. He would shut down the daydreams. This was not Mount Sebastian [College], it was another world, where there were no pretty poems or midterm exams, a place where men died because of carelessness and gross stupidity. [...] He would dispense with love; it was not now a factor. (24-6)

Lieutenant Jimmy Cross is determined to forget Martha, to locate her (properly, he thinks) in her own world at college and on the home front; he is equally determined to drive a wedge between that home front and the war front where he finds himself, “another world” where there is no poetry and where love is not a factor. Like O’Brien’s

thoughts of home in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's thoughts of Martha remind him of the people and life he loves, while simultaneously making him acutely aware of how far he is from them. Further, he faces the pressure to forget completely, lest another of his men be killed while he daydreams. For Jimmy Cross, this symbolic female figure, whom Martha embodies, is a reminder he cannot carry with him and still be a soldier.

The symbolic female figure, reminder of the distant home front and its accompanying comforts and community, takes strange and thoroughly fantastic shape in *Going After Cacciato*. The novel's plot, centered on a dreamy young foot soldier named Paul Berlin, alternates between real life and fantasy; some chapters tell the story of Paul Berlin and his platoon's ordeal as soldiers in Vietnam, while others follow the plot of a waking dream Paul Berlin has, in which he and some of his comrades follow a soldier named Cacciato, who deserts and decides to walk from Vietnam to Paris. Near the beginning of this imagined journey, Paul Berlin and his companions meet a refugee girl named Sarkin Aung Wan, traveling with her two aunts west of Saigon. Her father was a restaurateur who died in childbirth—he was shot by VC as her mother was giving birth—and her mother died of grief soon after; her family has since dispersed, and as the war continued and their town became a combat zone, Sarkin Aung Wan had “no choice but to leave” (53). Sarkin Aung Wan, who is “part Chinese, part unknown,” nevertheless does not fit into the category of dangerous Asian women who could be communist agents. As a refugee, fleeing the war as Cacciato and Paul Berlin are, Sarkin Aung Wan is a victim of the war's violence, rather than a potential threat; she broadens the scope of the symbolic female figure, emblematic of the home front, by showing readers and Paul

Berlin how the Vietnamese—and others who have settled there—have watched war swallow their home front and their peace. As such, she symbolizes not so much a longing for home, community, and personal peace back in America, but rather the reality of the scope of war's destruction, and the potential for a more global peace and international community. Or, as Paul Berlin thinks as he watches her surreptitiously the first night she shares their campfire, she is “a possibility. A thing that might have happened on the road to Paris” (54).

Significantly, the possibility she represents to Paul Berlin overrides the fact that, as his lieutenant puts it, “We’re still soldiers and this here is still a war” (59). “True, it was no place for women,” Paul Berlin thinks to himself, “But [he] could not stop toying with the idea: a mix of new possibilities. A whole new range of options” (59). When, in his waking dream of the road to Paris, his lieutenant threatens to force him to leave Sarkin Aung Wan behind, and Paul Berlin finds he cannot imagine a good solution, a “lapse of imagination” provides an answer: a hole in the road to Paris, which leads to an improbable underground journey, on which Sarkin Aung Wan accompanies Paul Berlin and his men. She travels with them to Mandalay, where she clips Paul Berlin’s toenails for him in a room at the Hotel Minneapolis (113-4). She travels with them to Delhi, where they shop for face creams, visit the zoo, eat lunch, and worry only about where to stop for dinner (170). She travels with them to Tehran, where they celebrate Christmas, and where, during a night of revelry at a grotto, the music and dancing remind Paul Berlin of high school dances with blond Louise Wierstma, a memory that Sarkin Aung Wan echoes: “Just a creature of his own making—blink and she was gone—but even so he liked the way she closed her eyes to the music.... She smiled as she danced. [...] It

was the way Louise Wiertzma had once smiled, guarding secrets. And now Sarkin Aung Wan smiled that same guarded smile” (202). And when they finally reach Paris, Paul Berlin and Sarkin Aung Wan walk around the city hand in hand “in the way he imagined lovers must stroll” (294). “In Paris, where it ended, it was right to fall in love,” Paul Berlin thinks, “and so he did” (294). Sarkin Aung Wan’s reply is to smile and say, “Such a wonderful possibility” (294).

Sarkin Aung Wan is, in many ways, the light of which Mary Anne Bell is the shadow. Mary Anne Bell, the home front sweetheart devoured by Vietnam and beyond rescue, is a symbol of despair, of loss of innocence and irrecoverable home; Sarkin Aung Wan, however, is a symbol of hope, future, and reconciliation not just between soldier and home front but between East and West—a woman Paul Berlin knows is not real but for whose presence in his imagined world he is willing to break that world’s boundaries of reality. But, however much she is a bright reflection of Mary Anne Bell’s dark image, Sarkin Aung Wan is separated from Mary Anne Bell, and from the other much-longed-for female figures in O’Brien’s work, by the extent of her unreality. Mary Anne Bell’s story, while unlikely, is nevertheless a “true war story” as O’Brien would define it, in that it turns the hearer’s gut and communicates some measure of truth about war. The home front sweetheart O’Brien dreams about in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, however unreal he makes her, is nevertheless based in reality; the fictional O’Brien elaborates on and extrapolates from her letters because he has those letters with him in the first place. Sarkin Aung Wan, however, has no locus in reality; Paul Berlin creates her out of his own longing for love and home, and she is vivid and wonderful for a time, but eventually, as one of his comrades tells him, “You can’t get away with this shit. The realities always

catch you. [...] No maybes. Reality doesn't work that way" (309). In my view, then, Sarkin Aung Wan is the most heart-wrenching of these symbolic female figures because her very unreality, the fact that Paul Berlin can never have her no matter how much he dreams or tells her that he loves her, leads readers to conclude that, for these soldiers, returning to home, peace, and community is just as unreal. Their longing for home and community is just as likely to be realized as they are likely to meet a Sarkin Aung Wan on the road to Paris. "Reality," as Paul Berlin's comrade says, "doesn't work that way."

Whether they take the form of dangerous Viet Cong agents disguised as prostitutes, hometown girlfriends simultaneously real and imagined, or wholly imaginary figures like Sarkin Aung Wan, the symbolic female figures that populate O'Brien's war writing share one common characteristic. They each emphasize how distant the soldiers who interact with and dream about them feel from home, rest, and love—further, they emphasize how home, rest, and love have no place in the jungles of Vietnam, and may not even be recoverable once the soldiers return home. Though these female figures may be, even correctly, interpreted as evidence of misogyny and malignment of women in O'Brien's work, they are more rightly understood as symbols of the soldiers' longing for the home they may never be able to return to, a community they may never rejoin, and a peace they may never achieve; reality doesn't work that way.

"Sisters who don't write back": Women as Emblems of a Misunderstanding Home Front

Eventually, those of Tim O'Brien's soldiers who survive the Vietnam War return to the home they alternately longed for and feared dwelling on, lest it distract or pain them. Almost without exception, O'Brien's soldiers also return home as storytellers: men who are willing, and often desperate, to communicate their experiences of the war with

someone from back home, hoping that someone will understand. And most often, whether out of ignorance or deliberate refusal to listen, no one does understand. The part of misunderstanding home front in O'Brien's work is most often played by female characters. The first type of symbolic female character I discussed exemplified the soldiers' longing for home while they were in Vietnam, and their fear that Vietnam will somehow consume them and they will never return home; this second type of female character exemplifies the soldiers' experiences after they have returned home, to find many of their fears realized. For all O'Brien's concern with telling a "true war story," the fact remains that in much of his fiction, those war stories, however true, just won't be heard.

In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, young Tim O'Brien is introduced to this unfortunate truth before he even leaves for the war. At this point in the memoir, O'Brien has reached the final stage of a plan to flee to Sweden that has occupied him for months. He has all his paperwork in order, has saved money, has written apologies to his family, and has finally arrived in Seattle, where he books a hotel room to wait until the next morning, when he will escape his impending deployment by fleeing to Canada. Restless, he leaves his hotel room and takes a taxi to the University of Washington, where he rings the bell of a sorority house and asks the girl who answers if one of the women there will give him a date. "I'm not a sex maniac," he assures her. "I'm just visiting Seattle, and I didn't want to waste the night. Maybe a movie or something?" he continues (66). The girl, understandably, is wary, makes a polite but thin excuse ("I have to study. Big exam tomorrow" [66]), and ushers him out with a smile saying, "Besides, this is no way to conduct human relations" (67). On the one hand, this girl's rejection of O'Brien is only

wise, makes complete sense, and has less to do with rejecting O'Brien out of hand than it does with her own safety. On the other, however, this rejection is a microcosm of what O'Brien and his fellow soldiers' future relationship will be like with those on the home front, loved ones and strangers alike. Burdened by extreme stress and fear, terrified of war experience but equally terrified of their families' rejection and pain, they will, having survived war, each fly home, approach a door, and meet a stranger, familiar and not unkind, but whose rules for conducting human relations they no longer meet.

Similar misunderstanding women bookend young O'Brien's year in Vietnam in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. As he leaves the plane that has taken him from home front to war front, he and his fellow soldiers are wished luck over the loudspeaker by the stewardess, who also "gives out some kisses, mainly to the extroverts" at the door (69). This well-meaning stewardess reappears in the last chapter of the memoir. "The stewardess comes through the cabin," O'Brien writes, "spraying a mist of invisible sterility into the pressurized, scrubbed, filtered, temperature-controlled air, killing mosquitoes and unknown diseases, protecting herself and America from Asian evils, cleansing us all forever" (206). She is "blond, blue-eyed, long-legged, medium-to-huge-breasted," there as if to say "we did well, America loves us, it's over, here's what you missed, but here's what it was good for"; symbolic of the home front for which they fought, fresh-faced and smiling, but turning up its nose to the odors of her soldiers' war front experiences. "Does she care if I don't want to be sterilized, would she stop?" O'Brien thinks, watching the stewardess's empty smile. Designed to remind the soldiers of what they've allegedly been protecting, she also warns them of the limited degree to which their less-than-"sterile" experiences will be tolerated. The stewardess, and the

good home front folks she represents, accepts only sterilized soldiers home: “The stewardess, her carefree smile and boredom flickering like bad lighting, doesn’t understand. It’s enraging, because you sense she doesn’t want to understand” (205).

In *The Things They Carried*, these misunderstanding women appear again. Unlike the sorority girl, who turns O’Brien away for viable reasons and whose rejection is not necessarily unkind, and unlike the stewardess, whose unwillingness to understand is something O’Brien only senses, a response to a story he could tell but has not, the misunderstanding women in *The Things They Carried* misunderstand in ways that seem much more cruel and intentional. Further, their misunderstanding comes in response not to unspecified, unspoken fear (like O’Brien’s as he talks to the sorority girl), nor to unspoken experience (like the stewardess). Instead, they have heard the soldiers’ war stories and have still misunderstood and rejected them. Indeed, the deliberately misunderstanding woman is so ubiquitous where telling “true war stories” is concerned that, for O’Brien, it seems that such women are part of what makes a “true war story” in the first place.

In fact, two incarnations of this misunderstanding woman appear in the section entitled “How to Tell a True War Story.” The first is Curt Lemon’s sister, to whom his best friend Rat Kiley writes after Lemon is killed by a mine; the story of Lemon’s death and Rat Kiley’s letter to her begin the section, in fact, immediately following O’Brien’s opening words: “This is true.” “A friend of his gets killed, so about a week later Rat sits down and writes a letter to the guy’s sister,” O’Brien explains. Rat tells her about how great her brother was, how he was a “real soldier’s soldier,” brave and badass with “stainless steel balls,” “crazy in a good way.” “It’s a terrific letter, very personal and

touching,” O’Brien writes. “Rat almost bawls writing it.” O’Brien emphasizes how much of himself and his own grief Rat reveals in writing the letter: “Rat pouts his heart out. He says he loved the guy. He says the guy was his best friend in the world. [...] He tells the guy’s sister he’ll look her up when the war’s over” (68). Perhaps Rat thought his love for Curt Lemon and his grief over his death would bridge the gap between himself and Lemon’s sister, allowing them to unite across an ocean and past vastly disparate experiences of the Vietnam War. However: “Rat mails the letter. He waits two months. The dumb cooze never writes back” (68). The story of Curt Lemon’s senseless, laughably unexpected death is a “true war story,” according to O’Brien: something without a moral, without virtue; something that does not instruct or try to make its hearers feel uplifted (68). Rat Kiley’s grief is part of this “true war story,” as is his use of obscenities, calling Lemon’s sister “cooze” instead of “bitch...woman, or girl” (69). But Lemon’s sister herself, who (we assume) reads the letter but never writes back, is another element of the “true war story.”

So is, we learn later in “How to Tell a True War Story,” a certain type of audience member O’Brien is used to seeing when he tells the story of Curt Lemon’s death:

Now and then, when I tell this story, someone will come up to me afterward and say she liked it. It’s always a woman. Usually it’s an older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics. She’ll explain that as a rule she hates war stories; she can’t understand why people want to wallow in all the blood and gore. [...] What I should do, she’ll say, is put it all behind me. Find new stories to tell. (84)

O’Brien’s response to this type of woman is Rat Kiley’s response to Curt Lemon’s sister: “I’ll picture Rat Kiley’s face, his grief, and I’ll think, *You dumb cooze*. Because she wasn’t listening” (88). However necessary it is for soldiers returning from Vietnam to tell their stories, part of telling those stories truly will always be, O’Brien suggests, an

audience—usually a female one—that deliberately misunderstands, whether she refuses to write back or would rather not labor to hear. O’Brien writes, closing “How to Tell a True War Story,” that “in the end, of course, a true war story is not about war. [...] It’s about sisters who never write back and people who never listen” (85).

The vast majority of female figures and characters in O’Brien’s work, then, indicate a profound separation between home front and war front for the soldiers that populate his fiction. While the soldiers are in Vietnam, these women could be communist prostitutes who promise comfort while threatening destruction; they could be old girlfriends or half-Chinese refugees, partly real and partly imagined, who symbolize comfort and home that might never be regained. When they return, having escaped the war or some devastating experience during it, desperate to share their experiences with a sympathetic listener, these women never reply, or never listen; they force the soldiers to reintegrate themselves with a home front that does not deign create a space for them and what they’ve endured. The men of the war front and the women of the home front are wholly separate entities, and the gap that yawns between them is a painful one, like the bleeding space between two edges of a wound.

Defining this gap comes at the price of the humanity of O’Brien’s female characters. These female figures, more often worthy of loathing than longing, are used as symbols rather than described as persons, whether they appear in Vietnam as dangerous Viet Cong prostitutes, in letters as missed girlfriends, or on the home front as misunderstanding audience members. They are indicators of the relationship between Vietnam and the home front rather than persons purposefully imbued with individual personality. That these women are largely symbolic, given no place in or around or

otherwise in relationship to Vietnam except as malleable symbols and props to support and define the effects of Vietnam on male soldiers, is, as mentioned above, not only misogynistic but also indicative of how profoundly O'Brien's soldiers feel cut off from the home front and all that it means to them. Indeed, that most of the women in these works are symbols, not persons, is only to be expected: these women's humanity is as distant to the soldiers as the reality and acceptance of the home front peace and respite that they symbolize.

This pattern is a damning one; by maintaining a division between a masculine war front and feminine home front, and by continuing to define women as distant symbols rather than human beings, the soldiers are allowed no possibility of peace, no re-entrance into the communities they were forced to abandon to go to war. However, this pattern, and the female characters who define it, are not the last word that O'Brien offers about the possibility—or lack thereof—of reconciliation between home and war front, of peace for the returning soldier. O'Brien's 1994 novel *In the Lake of the Woods* suggests another possibility, challenges readers to recognize that the relationship between returning soldier and home front folk will never be cut and dry, and even (depending on their reading of the story) encourages them to choose to believe reconciliation is possible.

"She sleeps in the blending twilight of in between": In the Lake of the Woods and the Possibility of Reconciliation

At first glance, the main female character in *In the Lake of the Woods* is similar—often troublingly so—to the symbolic female figures in the other three of O'Brien's works that I discussed above. Kathy Wade, wife of Vietnam veteran, failed politician, and amateur magician John Wade, was still in college when her then-boyfriend John

graduated and nine months later “found himself at the bottom of an irrigation ditch” in ‘Nam trying to keep himself sane and alive” (36). She, like First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross’s Martha, writes John letters; they are “cheerful and newsy, full of spicy details” and “chitchat about family and friends” (36). Kathy focuses on telling stories about her sister, and about “teachers and roommates and [the] basketball team”; like Martha, Kathy “rarely mentioned the war” (36). As John Wade’s time in combat continues, and as he settles more and more into his war persona, “Sorcerer,” and confides increasingly unsettling details to Kathy in his letters, her letters back become less of a comfort and more an indicator of acute separation between him and her, and between the spheres of war front and home front that they occupy. On one occasion, Kathy waits weeks to write John back; when she does, in a letter containing “no endearments, no funny stories,” she tells him: “A piece of advice. Be careful with the tricks. One of these days you’ll make *me* disappear” (38). In later letters John thinks he detects “a new coolness in her tone, a new distance and formality” (39), and he, who went to Vietnam “[o]nly for love. Only to be loved,” is terrified of losing her (59). Like Jimmy Cross’s Martha, or even Curt Lemon’s sister who never writes back, Kathy is in some ways emblematic of the home front her soldier left, and back into which he, to his increasing terror, may never be able to reintegrate himself.

John Wade’s love for and relationship with Kathy also contains some of the most disturbing and misogynistic characteristics of any of the relationships depicted in O’Brien’s major war works. One of John Wade’s penchants, no doubt rooted in his terror that those whom he loves will leave him, is to spy on Kathy; his spying begins shortly after their relationship does, over a year before he sets foot in Vietnam. There seems to be

practically no difference between John's "spying" and the stalking behavior of a male predator bent on perpetrating violence on his female victim; further, obsessive distrust is clearly an issue for John: "He looked for signs of betrayal: the way she smiled at people, the way she carried herself around other men" (33). More troubling than John's apparent obsession with not just Kathy's behavior, but her interactions with other men, is the way John blames Kathy for his obsession with stalking her: "Kathy had brought it on herself: she had a personality that lured him on, fiercely private, fiercely independent. [...] He understood her need to be alone, to reserve time for herself, but too often she carried things to an extreme that made him wonder. The spying helped" (33-4). Even when he is not spying on her, John's love for Kathy has disturbing and controlling qualities: "There were times when John Wade wanted to open up Kathy's belly and crawl inside and stay there forever. He wanted to swim through her blood and climb up and down her spine and drink from her ovaries and press his gums against the firm red muscle of her heart. He wanted to suture their lives together" (71). John's need to control Kathy from the inside out extends all the way to her own womb: when Kathy discovers she is pregnant, John persuades her to have an abortion, to rid her body of the baby that was "all [she] wanted," for the sake of his political career (156).

Alongside these clearly misogynistic elements, and the fact that Kathy functions in many ways as a symbol of the home front community and acceptance John longs for, is the very real possibility that John Wade killed his wife while they were camped out in a cabin on the shores of the Lake of the Woods, recovering from John's failed run for senate office. Kathy and John, after John lost the race for Minnesota state senator by a devastating margin, retreat to this cabin to escape the press, collect themselves, and

perhaps rebuild their relationship in the wake of what political races and secret-keeping have done to it. A week into their stay, Kathy disappears without a trace. The novel centers on the question of whether or not John killed his wife, and this question remains unanswered. However, the book is filled with powerful evidence for John's guilt, and some of the most devastating of that evidence is tied to John's experiences in Vietnam, where he and his fellow Charlie Company soldiers were involved in the My Lai massacre in 1968.

Much of this evidence appears in chapters entitled, conveniently, "evidence"; these chapters occur among others that detail John's past in politics and his past in Vietnam, and that describe John and Kathy's love story and hypotheses about what could have happened to Kathy. Pastiches of conversations (with John's mother, Kathy's sister, John's campaign manager, the police, and the people from whom the Wades rented the cabin), quotes from other texts (J. Glenn Gray's *The Warriors*, books on helping a partner with PTSD, the Geneva Conventions) and lists of things found (in the cabin, in John Wade's box of magic tricks), nearly all of these "evidence" chapters include transcripts of court testimonies from various members of Charlie Company who participated in the My Lai massacre. These men elaborate on aspects of their crimes; the most common of these aspects is gross violence against women and children—violence that is inhuman even in the context of war. When asked to describe his victims, soldier Rennard Doines states: "They was women and little kids. [...] They were lying on the ground, bleeding from all over. They was dead" (144). Dennis Conti answers in the affirmative when asked if he "carr[ied] a woman half-nude on your shoulders and [threw] her down and [said] that she was too dirty to rape?" (145). In Paul Meadlo's testimony, which O'Brien also quotes in

“The Vietnam in Me” and which I, in turn, quoted and discussed in the introduction to this chapter, Meadlo says of the “children and babies” he shot: “They might’ve had a fully loaded grenade on them. The mothers might have throwed them at us” (136). In the world of the war front, where even the moral codes of war (those found in, for example, the Geneva Conventions, also quoted in the “evidence” chapters) are ignored or forgotten, the lines of soldier and civilian are blurred, and women and children become an enemy that must be shot, raped, and thrown into a ditch. The My Lai massacre’s place in the text, and the fact that O’Brien emphasizes not just the massacre’s horror but a specific aspect of its horror—the indiscriminate destruction of women and children—support the conclusion that John Wade is the murderer the public believes him to be, a belief that lost him the senate seat and possibly his wife. John Wade, his life and self shrouded in secrets, his body having been present during military action that violated women, children, and Geneva Conventions, could be just that: a good liar whose lies finally caught up to him, a good magician whose greatest disappearing act was to end his wife’s life, a good politician adept at navigating the political battlefield, a soldier culpable of acts so atrocious they are considered horrors even in the context of war. Yes, John Wade may have killed Kathy Wade, proving once again in O’Brien’s fiction that the soldier, once returned home, can never reenter the home front community: he is so damaged and changed by his war experiences that, rather than finding peace at home with his wife, he enters another battlefield and makes his wife the casualty of his political war.

However, one of the most important elements of *In the Lake of the Woods* is that its central question—did John Wade kill his wife, or not?—is left unanswered. In the end, then, whether or not John Wade is actually responsible for Kathy’s death is far less

important than the fact that O'Brien leaves open, for both his readers and for John Wade himself, the possibility that Kathy Wade might still be alive. If Kathy Wade is dead at her husband's hand, perhaps our judgments of John Wade, and the judgments of the constituency that refused to elect him, are warranted; perhaps we are correct in considering him not a war hero but a war criminal, a man whose life and work is inseparable from the atrocities he witnessed and presumably committed, a former soldier who has not escaped and cannot escape the violent war front that formed him. But if it is possible that Kathy Wade is alive, then it is also possible that John Wade, innocent of her murder, is innocent also of the atrocities his constituents and O'Brien's readers have heaped on his head. If Kathy is possibly alive, then John Wade and soldiers like him can possibly find some measure of peace and community back on the home front.

This possibility allows us to read Kathy Wade as a complex, and very human, symbol of the hope that soldiers like John Wade can reintegrate into community after war. And just as evidence of John's guilt pervades the text, so, too, does evidence supporting his innocence. Significantly, much of this evidence relates to Kathy, and who she is as a person, and how well she knows her husband. In this reading, Kathy is not only a symbol, but a human woman with characteristics that enable her to know and understand her husband despite his brokenness. For example, Kathy's love of puzzles is mentioned throughout the book; one of the things she leaves behind at the cabin is an open book of crossword puzzles, something that, for her, "was a ritual. She liked to start each day with a sense of accomplishment, solving what could be solved" (112). Later in the text, in one of the chapters that contain hypotheses about Kathy's fate, she is described as feeling "strong and capable" as she steers a boat through the lake, trying to

navigate back to the cabin; this strength and capableness springs from the way she “liked unlocking things, finding solutions” (167). These passages, and the many others like it, suggest that if any woman could put together the pieces of the puzzle that is John Wade, it is Kathy. Another piece of evidence for this reading concerns John’s stalking habits, one of the most disturbing elements of his and Kathy’s relationship. According to one of Kathy’s college classmates, “Kathy always knew about” the spying, but tolerated it anyway (191). Kathy was also a Girl Scout in her youth, practical evidence that points to her ability to potentially survive in the Minnesotan wilderness (217). These pieces of evidence indicate that Kathy, far from being the passive recipient of her husband’s grosser eccentricities, not only knows about them but is skilled enough to further “solve” him.

Along with the evidence for John’s innocence that Kathy’s character provides, there is also evidence about John Wade himself that may exonerate him. John’s love is often a disturbing, possessive, consuming kind of love, but, at the same time, it is the deeply flawed and human love of a man whose identity was formed by far more than the war. Though blaming an adult’s disturbing tendencies on his unhappy childhood runs the risk of sounding clichéd and even misguided, it is clear in the text that John’s fear of losing Kathy’s love is closely connected to his unmet longing for his father’s love and affection (14-15, 65-67). His magic, the tricks he performs and the layers of persona he hides behind, are techniques he uses to disguise what he sees as his irredeemable faults, not ways to manipulate others into feeling at ease before he reveals his true monstrous colors. When John met Kathy, he felt simultaneous love and fear: “The trick then,” he thinks, “was to make her love him and never stop. The urgency came from fear, mostly;

he didn't want to lose her" (32); later, he muses, that "to his surprise, Kathy kept loving him, she didn't stop" (34). Further, his fear is rooted not in distrust of Kathy but in his own inability to *believe*, beyond doubt, that Kathy will stay with him; John stalks Kathy not because of "trust or distrust," but because the "whole *world* worked by subterfuge and the will to believe" (33).

Perhaps the strongest evidence for John Wade's innocence is the record of his actions during the My Lai massacre in the novel—if, indeed, we believe that record. John Wade, known as "Sorcerer" to the rest of his platoon, kills a total of two people at My Lai: an old man carrying a stick, which Sorcerer mistakes for a weapon, and PFC Weatherby, who surprises Sorcerer as he stands at the bottom of an irrigation ditch surrounded by bodies, slime, flies, and burning hootches; Sorcerer shoots him before he can say more than "Hey, Sorcerer" (110). The text strongly suggests that Sorcerer shoots Weatherby and the old man not because he's received orders to do so, nor because he himself is filled with malice or evil, but because he is so overwhelmed by the horrors he is witnessing that he retreated into himself, "gave himself over to forgetfulness," and performed a trick, willing the world to vanish and lashing out reflexively against those who startle him out of his trick (108). If we believe this reading, then, John Wade's actions in My Lai are not those of a monster, but of young man experiencing terror and horror far beyond anything his home front friends and family would ever experience.

Reading the text with this list of evidence in mind, then, one might decide to believe an improbably probable story: that Kathy's disappearance, and John's later disappearance (he boats into the lake after her a few days after she vanishes), were part of the ultimate disappearing act. This story proposes that John, faced with the permanent

impossibility of being understood and listened to in the political world in which he sought power and love, escaped that world to live with a person who did, albeit incompletely (as all human understanding is), commit herself not to an image of him as war hero or shrewd politician, but to solving the puzzle he presented to her. John and Kathy's love, however flawed and even disturbing, is, in this reading, based on their mutual effort to love and understand. John doesn't devour Kathy, and she doesn't abandon him; instead, they are like the "pair of snakes [John had] seen along a train near Pinkville, each snake eating the other's tail":

"That's how our love feels," John wrote, "like we're swallowing each other up, except in a *good* way...and I can't wait to get home and see what would've happened if those two dumbass snakes finally ate each other's heads. Think about it. The mathematics get weird. [...] Anyhow, it's not so bad over here, at least for now. And I love you, Kath. Just like those weirdo snakes—one plus one equals zero!" (61)

Kathy and John Wade's relationship is all-consuming, both in a deeply disturbing way and "in a *good* way." Kathy Wade's character and her relationship with her husband, then, show that, in O'Brien's fiction, reconciliation between the Vietnam veteran and the folks back home is both possible and impossible, depending on what one believes, and which evidence one chooses to listen to. "Can we believe that he was not a monster but a man?" O'Brien writes to close the novel. "That he was innocent of everything except his life? Could the truth be so simple? So terrible?" (303).

This reading—that Kathy Wade may be alive, if we choose to believe it; that John Wade may be "not a monster but a man"; that stories, even if they give us no definite answers, can allow for the possibility of reconciliation and life—is, in my view, one of the most pervasive themes in O'Brien's fiction, and one which allows for the redemption and new life not just of soldiers but of those whom they love. The soldier who tells and

retells his story, trying to tell it true, may finally communicate with his home front audience and create new life where there was only the destruction of misunderstanding and death. This theme appears in all of the novels I have been discussing in this chapter, and finds its clearest expression in the final section of *The Things They Carried*, entitled “The Lives of the Dead,” in which O’Brien’s fellow soldiers and his first girlfriend are both given new life through stories.

“Stories can save us”: “The Lives of the Dead” and Reconciliation through Story

In an early chapter of *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, young Tim O’Brien contemplates the purpose of his memoir, lamenting the fact that his book cannot “take the form of a plea for everlasting peace,” because all he is left with after the war “are simple, unprofound scraps of truth. Men die. Fear hurts and humiliates. [...] Is that the stuff for a morality lesson, even for a theme?” (23). Still unable to solve the problem of his text’s message, he asks his readers a question about storytelling. “Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there?” he writes. And then, answering his own question, he continues: “I think not. He can tell war stories” (23). O’Brien revisits this passage in a 2010 interview with Alex Thiltges, elaborating on its meaning. He tells Thiltges:

I do think that through telling stories that involve human characters doing human things in the world—we’re allowed to watch. And even through fiction, kind of participate in a story. If you love a book and you’re reading it, you’re kind of in the book. You’re not going to leave it with lessons, what you’re going to leave with is the experience of lived life. You’re going to live the life of Huck Finn going down a river or Ahab chasing a whale or Tim O’Brien going to war and it will become part of your experience. (n.p.)

Both these passages, separated by over thirty years, communicate the same point: that telling stories is a way to connect listeners to the teller's experience, to help them participate in that experience, in a way that is profound and potentially life-altering.

The power of storytelling also appears, this time with a powerful magical quality, in *Going After Cacciato*. The story in question is the one Paul Berlin tells to himself: his waking dream that he and his platoon went after Cacciato and finally walked all the way from Vietnam to Paris, fleeing a nightmare of war toward a dream of peace, and home. Near the end of the novel, during one of Paul Berlin's imagined scenarios, he dreams that he and Sarkin Aung Wan, having arrived in Paris, sit on opposite sides of a round table in the old conference room in the Salle des Fêtes, a narrow spotlight beam focusing on their table. Sarkin Aung Wan, speaking in a voice not her own, but instead in "the voice of translation, a man's voice, precise and unaccented and impersonal," encourages Paul Berlin to begin "the realization of that vision" that brought him to Paris. She asks him to make his dream a reality, in a way that allows him to return to the world and to his own world:

Live now the dream you have dreamed. [...] This is not a plea for placidness of mind or feebleness of spirit. It is a plea for the opposite: that, like your father, you would build fine houses; that, like your town, you would endure and grow and produce good things; that you would live well. For just as happiness is more than the absence of sadness, so is peace infinitely more than the absence of war. Even the refugee must do more than flee. He must arrive. He must return at last to a world as it is, however much in conflict with his hopes, and he must then do what he can to edge reality toward what he has dreamed. (318)

Sarkin Aung Wan's speech suggests that Paul Berlin use the power of his dreams—of the imagined story he has told himself—not to escape reality, but to change it for the better, in a way that allows him to reenter the community he left to go to Vietnam.

Paul Berlin elects not to take her advice, and decides to abandon the war neither in body nor in imagination any longer. His reasoning resonates with that of the young O'Brien of *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, of the O'Brien of *The Things They Carried*, and of John Wade in *In the Lake of the Woods*: he fears the loss of his family's esteem and love if he does something they would perceive as cowardly. He feels a sense of obligation to the people he left at home and to the uniform he wears; he fears rejection: "It is this social power, the threat of social consequences, that stops me from making a full and complete break," he tells Sarkin Aung Wan. He continues shortly after: "Even in imagination we must be true to our obligations, for, even in imagination, obligation cannot be outrun. Imagination, like reality, has its limits" (320-321). Paul Berlin is, like O'Brien writes of himself in *The Things They Carried*, "a coward. [He] went to the war" (61), and allowed obligation to trump the freeing power of the stories he told himself.

However, like *In the Lake of the Woods*, *Going After Cacciato* also leaves its readers with possibility. In the second-to-last chapter of the book, a chapter set in the reality of observation duty rather than the dream journey to Paris in Paul Berlin's imagination, the power of the story persists. "The last known fact" is that Cacciato has fled. "What remained," the chapter concludes, "were possibilities. With courage it might have been done" (323). The novel concludes similarly. After Paul Berlin has awakened—from sleep that was, significantly, dreamless—he looks out at the landscape with his lieutenant. "And who knows? He might make it. He might do all right," the lieutenant tells Paul Berlin in a flat voice. He admits that Cacciato faces "miserable odds," but the novel leaves Paul Berlin and readers with possibility: "Maybe so" (336). However improbable Cacciato's successful flight to Paris is, the story allows for the possibility of

escape from the war, for soldiers to return and “edge reality toward what [they] have dreamed” (318).

Both of these books, then, maintain that because stories communicate not abstract messages but human experience, they also give their tellers the possibility to communicate with and to return to the home front communities that they left. *In the Lake of the Woods* and *The Things They Carried* also communicate this idea; however, these two books make and emphasize a connection between the power of stories, on the one hand, and the humanity and value of the female listener, on the other.

In *In the Lake of the Woods*, the power of a story rests in the listener’s willingness to put their faith in it, despite that story’s lack of a clear or certain ending—whether that story is one of the explanations different characters offer for Kathy’s disappearance, the account of John Wade’s actions in the My Lai massacre or of his political platform, or even the “stories” John’s magic tricks tell, which ask the reader to believe in the possibility that cards, balls, mice, and even people can vanish and reappear. The possibility of Kathy Wade’s reappearance is another story we may choose to believe in. I have already discussed how the character of Kathy Wade fits the characteristics of the symbolic female figure that appears elsewhere in O’Brien’s work, but who also, at the same time, is a very human character whose flaws and strengths dovetail with her husband’s. Kathy Wade is a woman who, of any of the female lovers, girlfriends, and wives of O’Brien’s war fiction, both makes an effort to *know* her husband and succeeds, at least in part, at doing just that. When John Wade loses her, he does not lose the possibility that he and his experiences might be understood, as Rat Kiley does when Curt Lemon’s sister doesn’t write back. Rather than losing this possibility, he loses the person

who actively worked to understand the puzzle he presented to her. Kathy represents not the mostly passive, misunderstanding female listener; she is an active listener whose attempts at understanding are at least partly successful. Through Kathy's life and relationship with John Wade, O'Brien writes a story in which this kind of understanding between the suffering veteran and the home front girlfriend can develop and establish a clear, if flawed and human, bond. If we, as readers, interpret the story to mean that Kathy Wade could possibly be alive, we also believe in the possibility that this mutual understanding could result in lasting happiness and even peace.

Finally, then, in "The Lives of the Dead," the last section of *The Things They Carried*, stories offer not just the possibility of continued life; they, miraculously, can bring the dead to life again. O'Brien places these miracle-performing stories in direct opposition to the way language is used in war. "By our language," he writes, "we transformed bodies into piles of waste. Thus, when someone got killed...his body was not really a body, but rather one small bit of waste in the midst of a much wider wastage. I learned that words make a difference. It's easier to cope with a kicked bucket than a corpse; if it isn't human, it doesn't matter much if it's dead" (238). O'Brien uses language to counteract this wartime language, pulling life from the wreckage and waste of the war. Stories, in "The Lives of the Dead" and in O'Brien's fiction more broadly, unite soul and body back together when they have been blown apart; they keep the dead alive, and pull them out of the waste, reintegrating them back into a larger human story.

While he is in country, O'Brien and his fellow grunts tell each other these stories. "We kept the dead alive with stories" he writes: with stories about how Ted Lavender, who was always high, "wasn't dead, just laid-back"; with the stories told by the Christian

members of the platoon, who “believed in the New Testament stories of life after death”; with stories that are passed down like legends; with stories the soldiers simply make up. All these stories are “a way of bringing body and soul back together, or a way of making new bodies for the souls to inhabit” (239). Curt Lemon, the friend whose sister never writes back to Rat Kiley, is dead; however, his comrades bring him back to life in a story about how Curt Lemon had gone out trick-or-treating on Halloween, stark naked except for some body paint. “To listen to the story...you’d never know that Curt Lemon was dead,” O’Brien writes. “He was still out there in the dark, naked and painted up, trick-or-treating, sliding from hootch to hootch in that crazy white ghost mask. But he was dead” (240). Because of the story, Curt Lemon can be dead and alive at the same time; the story preserves the essence of Curt Lemon even though his body is dead.

But the power of story to overcome death and connect people to each other again, according to O’Brien, is a power available to human beings in general, not a special ability of soldiers. The deaths of soldiers, of Ted Lavender, Kiowa, and Curt Lemon, loom large in “The Lives of the Dead”; but so, too, does the death of young Timmy O’Brien’s first girlfriend, Linda. Linda is a girl who, even at nine years old, Timmy knew he loved: “When I write about her now...it’s tempting to dismiss it as a crush, an infatuation of childhood, but I know for a fact that what we felt for each other was as deep and rich as love can ever get. It had all the shadings and complexities of mature adult love, and maybe more, because...it was not yet fixed to comparisons or chronologies or the ways by which adults measure such things” (228). The two fourth-graders go to the movies on their first date; it’s a World War Two film, which Timmy worries might be too much for Linda but which ends up affecting him more instead;

watching a dead body being flung into the ocean, Timmy thinks: “Even then I kept seeing the soldier’s body tumbling toward the water...how inert and heavy it was, how completely dead” (232). The dead body on the movie screen foreshadows Linda’s death only a few months later from a brain tumor. Young Timmy closes his eyes at the dead body on the movie screen; he also closes his eyes at Linda’s wake after viewing her body, which doesn’t seem real (242). The present-day Tim, remembering his fourth-grade self, also turns away from the body, but to look beyond it: “Inside the body, or beyond the body, there is something absolute and unchanging,” something that connects him to fourth-grade Timmy and makes them the same person despite the years and experience separating them. “The essence remains the same,” he writes.

That essence is what the magic of stories preserves. “And as a writer now, I want to save Linda’s life,” he writes. “Not her body—her life. She died, of course. [...] But in a story I can steal her soul. I can revive, at least briefly, that which is absolute and unchanging. In a story, miracles can happen. Linda can smile and sit up” (236). Lying in bed at night, Timmy invents his own dreams about Linda; he will think about a friend’s birthday party, or going to a movie, and suddenly Linda will show up, and he’ll walk her home. “It was a kind of self-hypnosis,” he writes, “Partly willpower, partly faith, which is how stories arrive” (244). Bringing Linda back to life in his dreams becomes Timmy’s first effort at being a storyteller: “She was dead, I understood that. After all, I’d seen her body, and yet even as a nine-year-old I had begun to practice the magic of stories. Some I just dreamed up. Others I wrote down—the scenes and dialogue” (244). And in his stories, Linda tells him amazing things about being dead and being alive: “Once you’re alive...you can’t ever be dead,” she says once (244); in a different dream, when Timmy

asked her what it is like to be dead, she tells him, “Well, right now...I’m *not* dead. But when I am, it’s like...I don’t know, I guess it’s like being inside a book that nobody’s reading” (245). Linda is only dead, then, when no one is telling a story about her. As long as someone picks up the book and starts reading—as long as stories about her continue to be told—Linda will never die, because she’s been alive, and through stories, people remember her being that way.

Linda and Timmy’s love story is interwoven with the war stories of Curt Lemon, Ted Lavender, and Kiowa in “The Lives of the Dead.” Indeed, this final section of *The Things They Carried* closes with all of O’Brien’s beloved dead together, all of them revived through the same power of story:

[I]n the spell of memory and imagination, I can still see her as if through ice, as if I’m gazing into some other world, a place where there are no brain tumors and no funeral homes, where there are no bodies at all. I can see Kiowa, too, and Ted Lavender and Curt Lemon, and sometimes I can even see Timmy skating with Linda under the yellow floodlights. I’m young and happy. I’ll never die. (245-6)

In the end, in both “The Lives of the Dead” and in the other works I’ve discussed in this chapter, war and love are inextricable from each other; all war stories are love stories. All of us are, O’Brien writes in “The Vietnam in Me,” “on war time...at one point or another: when fathers die, when husbands ask for divorce, when women you love are fast asleep beside men you wish were you.” All of us suffer and watch loved ones die; all of us face separation from those whom we love. But through stories, those gaps can be closed—among them, the seemingly unbridgeable gap between war front and home front. In the world of O’Brien’s work, then, women and the feminine are not only degraded, dumb, dangerous, distracting, and stripped of their humanity in favor of being made into symbols. Two of O’Brien’s most important war works conclude with women whose

stories, along with those of soldiers and others, are part of the possibility of salvation and continued life: through the telling and retelling of all of these stories, about men and women and soldiers and civilians, the dead are never really dead, the “essence” of who people are is never gone, and love is never really lost.

Conclusion

The moral of war stories, according to one of O’Brien’s fellow grunts in *The Things They Carried*, is the fact that no one listens to them: “Nobody listens,” he says tell O’Brien. “Nobody hears nothin’. [...] The politicians, all the civilian types. Your girlfriend. My girlfriend. Everybody’s sweet little virgin girlfriend” (76). And in much of O’Brien’s writing, this moral holds true: the folks on the home front often don’t understand, and don’t try to; as a result, a painful gap between returning soldier and home community opens up and never really closes. This yawning gap is also often symbolized in O’Brien’s books by women: fearsome foreign women who seem to offer comfort but instead only remind the soldier that respite and safety are not to be had in Vietnam; girlfriends who get sucked in by the jungle and are never the same; and “everybody’s sweet little virgin girlfriend” who at best avoids talking about the war and, at worst, distracts her soldier from his duties to his men and his efforts to preserve his own life. Such women comprise the most glaringly misogynistic elements of O’Brien’s work, and they prove to the soldiers with whom they interact that returning home, reintegrating into community, and finding some sort of postwar peace might very well be impossible. Perhaps that impossibility is the real moral of a “true war story.”

However, O’Brien’s fellow grunt isn’t quite finished with his moral. “What they need,” he continues—what “the politicians, all the civilian types” and “[e]verybody’s

sweet little virgin girlfriend” need—“is to go out on LP. The vapors, man. Trees and rocks—you got to *listen* to your enemy” (76). O’Brien’s comrade may be talking about listening to the enemy, but what he says is also true about listening to one’s friends and loved ones. To fully comprehend the moral of a true war story, this passage suggests, one has to “go out on LP” and experience what the soldiers experienced. Doing so is at once possible and impossible, a feat achievable through direct experience or through really listening to stories in an effort to truly understand. Only through these efforts can the misunderstanding home front begin to understand, and the rift between civilian and soldier begin to heal.

However improbable this kind of understanding and experience is, O’Brien’s work is also filled with characters who suggest its possibility. These characters, significantly, are also women, and all of these women are at once symbolic and human, fraught with the meaning with which O’Brien imbues them, but also complex and focused on developing their own understanding of others’ experiences. These women work to understand their soldiers’ experiences while also helping those soldiers see a life beyond the war. One of these women is Kathy Wade, who is possibly alive, and offers the possibility of reconciliation and continued life for her husband John. Another is Linda, Timmy’s nine-year-old girlfriend, through whose continued life through stories Timmy, and later Tim, O’Brien learns to preserve all wasted life, soldier or civilian. A third is the fictional daughter O’Brien writes for his fictional self in *The Things They Carried*, a little girl named Kathleen who returns with him to Vietnam years after the war, and helps him see not only the land that he fought in and lost friends in, but also what it was now, a sunny, unremarkable bit of marshland. With Kathleen by his side,

O'Brien can think to himself: "In a way, maybe, I'd gone under...and now after two decades I'd finally worked my way out. A hot afternoon, a bright August sun, and the war was over" (187).

I'll conclude with the fourth of these women, O'Brien's girlfriend Kate, from "The Vietnam in Me," whose story helped me open this chapter. Kate is simultaneously ignorant and understanding, her presence making O'Brien aware both of the gulf between his experiences and hers, and of possible ways across that gap. "In 1969, when I went to war," O'Brien writes,

Kate was 3 years old. Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, McNamara, Bunker, Rogers, Bundy, Rusk, Abrams, Rostow—for her, these names are like the listings on a foreign menu. Some she recognizes not at all, some she recalls from books or old television clips. But she never tasted the dishes. She does not know ice cream from Brussels sprouts. Three years old—how could she? No more than I could know the Southern California of her own youth.

Still, it was Kate who insisted we come here [to Vietnam]. I was more than reluctant—I was petrified, I looked for excuses. Bad dreams and so on. But Kate's enthusiasm won me over; she wanted to share in my past, the shapes of thing, the smells and sunlight.

As it turns out, the sharing has gone both ways. In any other circumstances, I would have returned to this country almost purely as a veteran, caught up in memory, but Kate's presence has made me pay attention to the details of here and now, a Vietnam that exists outside the old perimeter of war.

Even though O'Brien's relationship with Kate ends, and even though her own understanding of Vietnam—and of him and his experiences—is revealed, finally, to be incomplete, the possibility of understanding still exists. Kate, at once an embodiment of home front naivete and enthusiastic compassion, enables O'Brien to see Vietnam beyond the war—to hear, and tell, a story of continued life where only trauma and death had existed before.

Thus, the misogynistic ways in which women are portrayed in O'Brien's books, and the ways in which they symbolize the inability of returning veterans to have their stories told and understood, exists in constant tension with the idea that stories can save all of us, men and women and civilians and soldiers. Reconciliation is, on one hand, as much an impossibility as is writing the misogynistic and dehumanizing rhetoric out of the language of war. However, sometimes war stories are actually love stories, and some of the women in O'Brien's work figure in those love stories in ways that offer the possibility of reconciliation and peace. Continuing to tell those stories can, we hope, and possibly, reunite us with the dead and with each other.

CHAPTER FOUR:

“I’m willing to let you know me if you’ll do the same”: The Possibility and Importance of Mutual Understanding in Sylvia Plath’s War Writing

One of Sylvia Plath’s early publications was a newspaper article in the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, published on May 16, 1953, while Plath was a student at Smith College. The article appears on page two of that day’s *Gazette*; the paper’s first page is crowded with wartime headlines. “Sabres Bag 11 MIGs, Damage 6 In One Of Mightiest Victories,” one proclaims, jerking readers’ attention to a story about Allied Sabre jet pilots whose actions against Communist MIGs comprise “one of their mightiest triumphs over the Red jet fighter”; the article also lists the number of kills of “Chinese” and “Reds” in Korea. Another article discusses Egypt’s accusation that the British are trespassing in the Suez region, while the third on the page, entitled “Transatlantic War Of Words Less Violent,” concerns a war more literary than literal: the battle between British and American newspapers in their criticisms of each country’s foreign policy.

This newspaper’s reader in 1953, after perusing these stories about warfare and political conflict, would have turned to the next page and found a story similar yet vastly different from those immediately preceding it. Plath’s story also clearly reveals its wartime context, and concerns a wartime subject; readers can discern that readily from its title, “Austrian-Born Junior Enlists in Marine Corps, ‘Can’t Wait To Get There.’” In some ways, then, it fits neatly into the rhetorical space of the day’s newspaper—or, at least, that of its first page—by participating in a worldwide conversation concerning war and politics. However, the story is also clearly a human interest story, part of a genre of

journalism we might call “puff pieces” rather than “hard journalism.” Rather than focusing on the “real” stuff, the cold hard facts of war, the story is a bubbly account of an interview with Antoinette Willard, a Smith College student who is “joining the Women’s Marine Corps mainly because of the wonderful opportunities the service offers,” and who is also “petite, attractive,” a “pretty brunette,” and an “energetic Smith girl” who gives “glowing account[s] of her planned activities for the summer at Quantico.” Antoinette, Plath notes, is a well-traveled young woman who speaks three languages and whose family fled Austria when she was a child when the Nazis rose to power; she is well-educated and speaks knowledgeably about her decision to join the Women’s Marine Corps; further, she is well aware of the shape her military career will take, and how it is related to the military service of others: “As a woman officer, I’ll be assigned to any of the noncombatant jobs open to male officers,” she says; Plath later lists those jobs for her readers. However, Antoinette’s clear qualifications for military work are repeatedly juxtaposed with descriptors, some of which I listed above, that seem to urge readers to take her less seriously, to see her military service almost as an extracurricular activity rather than a step towards her eventually getting “a job in the foreign service,” her “main ambition.” Antoinette’s words, and Plath’s article, are full of a fascinating tension between knowledgeable civic engagement and what seems to be a cultural expectation that such engagement be cute, if the one engaged is a young woman.

Three years before this interview was published in the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, Plath published a poem that shows this same tension. “All that morning in the strawberry field / They talked about the Russians,” begins Plath’s poem “Bitter Strawberries,” which initially appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor* on August 11, 1950, mere weeks after

the US government sent military forces to Korea (*CP* 299). These first two lines immediately juxtapose the world of the home front, in the strawberry field, and the war front where the Russians lurk. The rest of the poem's first stanza continues and further develops this juxtaposition: "Squatted down between the rows / We listened. / We heard the head woman say, / 'Bomb them off the map'" (*CP* 299). A few lines later, after a description of buzzing horseflies and the "thick and sour" tang of strawberries in the air—an ironic pastoral setting, perhaps—another woman interjects: "Mary said slowly, 'I've got a fella / Old enough to go. / If anything should happen...'" (*CP* 299). Again, readers are treated to a description of the strawberry fields of the home front, with its "high and blue" sky, its laughing children "[l]eaping awkward and long-legged"; again, the voice of a woman—the head woman—breaks into this description: "'The draft is passed,' the woman said. / 'We ought to have bombed them long ago'" (*CP* 299). This pattern, where news from and words about the war front are juxtaposed with and break into the women's work on the home front, is clearly a major feature of this particular poem.

As the poem nears its ending, however, a curious thing happens: the war and home fronts, rather than being juxtaposed, fuse into one. The head woman stands, "a thin commanding figure / In faded dungarees. / Businesslike she asked us, 'How many quarts?'" (*CP* 300). The woman's commanding presence and her masculine clothing, coupled with her position as head woman and the way she is depicted as snapping "sharply" at one of the children, invite comparisons between her and a member of the military—perhaps a drill sergeant. The strawberry pickers are her army, and under her direction they commit acts of violence on their own battlefield: "Kneeling over the rows,

/ We reached among the leaves / With quick practiced hands, / Cupping the berry
protectively before / Snapping off the stem / Between thumb and forefinger” (*CP* 300).

This final image, of a protective hand cradling a berry before severing it from the plant, completes the fusion of war and home fronts in the strawberry field. The feminine hands that once nurtured the plants now break them.

Two key themes arise in this poem, both connected to the relationship between gender and war. First, the poem makes clear the war front and home front are not neatly divided categories. Women (and children) are always, already, a part of war and workings of the state; they speak about war, discuss its effects, and worry about its impact on their lives. Further, their responses to it do not uniformly correspond to a single feminine stereotype, but vary widely; some of their responses show worry for loved ones, or display a hatred of violence, while others seem to relish the violence and sense of patriotic justice war might bring.¹

Significantly, however, Plath’s emphasis here on women and children’s connection to and involvement in issues of the war front does not mean she writes past the home front / war front dichotomy. The second theme that arises in this poem makes it clear that Plath still affirms some aspects of this dichotomy; in particular, this second theme sees war and the issues of the war front as threatening not so much to humanity more generally, but as a violation of the feminine, and women who become warlike, like the head woman, shed some of their femininity to devastating effect. Mary and Nelda’s

¹ Roman makes this point in her essay “Cold War 1950: Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath,” arguing that while the head woman “sides with the political ideology of Cold War militarism” and shows that “Plath did not align militarism exclusively with the public, masculine sphere,” the voice of Mary (whose “fella” is of draft age) and that of Nelda, the young girl who speaks against bombing and the draft, display varying levels of protest (248-249). All three together, Roman argues—and I agree—constitute not just a response, but a complex feminine response to war and political ideology.

worries in the poem, for example, stand in stark contrast to the head woman's; both Mary and Nelda, like the head woman, take part in the conversation about war, but they assume more feminine roles, worrying about a lover and responding to violence with horror. The head woman's response, then, while it does show that to Plath, the conversation about war is one in which women must be included—they're already participating, in fact!—also shows that some types of responses are antithetical to what seems, in the poem, women's interests and the feminine qualities that must be preserved. The poem's final image makes this theme especially clear: the women's hands all cup "the berry protectively before / Snapping off the stem" (*CP* 300), seeming to nurture and shelter but, in the end, destroying the very things they nurtured. The head woman's response to the talk about the Russians, and to her fellow workers' worries about violence and losing loved ones, conforms to this same theme: she becomes warlike and in so doing, violates a nurturing femininity that is the appropriate, life-preserving feminine response. "Bitter Strawberries," finally, presents a complex, even conflicted challenge to the home front / war front dichotomy. The poem challenges ways of thinking that would keep women from the war front—or, at least, the conversation about the war. However, the poem does not challenge the gender norms that feed the home front / war front dichotomy, instead emphasizing that women should respond to war as nurturers and preservers of life—as life givers, not life takers.²

² Jean Bethke Elshtain traces the "life-giver / life-taker" dichotomy through the West's political history in *Women and War*, arguing that this dichotomy comprises a cultural mythos that persists throughout history, and despite ever-present exceptions to its rule. "In time of war," she writes, "real men and women—locked in a dense symbiosis, perceived as beings who have complementary needs and exemplify gender-specific virtues—take on, in cultural memory and narrative, the personas of Just Warriors and Beautiful Souls," personas that constitute "sedimented lore—stories of male fighters and women home keepers and designated weepers over war's inevitable tragedies" which have "spilled over from one epoch to the next" (4).

Plath repeats this same tension, this complex and conflicted challenge to the gendered home front / war front dichotomy, in other genres; in fact, it forms a thread that can be traced throughout her work, and this thread is woven through her work in a multitude of ways. Throughout her work, Plath shows a sort of double awareness, between a keen and often well-informed desire to be politically engaged and to enter the conversation about war in the 1950s, on the one hand, and, on the other, the knowledge that her place in that conversation will always be, for better or worse, explicitly gendered. In her newspaper article about Antoinette Willard, the feminine quality of Antoinette's upcoming military service, and Plath's writing about it, works to detract from the article's gravity, and seems to encourage readers to take Antoinette less seriously than we would, for example, the heroic Sabre jet pilots whose mighty triumph over the Reds was detailed in the same paper. In "Bitter Strawberries," Plath gives the women's experiences and worries gravity and weight, though she also emphasizes their proper role as nurturers. Throughout her work, Plath assumes a political perspective that, though it does not write past a gendered understanding of war and politics, does engage with the concerns of politics and war in a way that promotes reconciliation, community, and family over and against the (masculine) values of violence and human destruction perpetuated by war.

Review of Criticism

Sylvia Plath's work—in her poetry, her fiction, her journals, her letters, and her essays; in the margins of her notebooks and in collages and sketches—is simultaneously extremely personal and extremely political. And, despite the preponderance of scholarship that reads her work autobiographically or sees her as primarily a confessional poet, many scholars of Plath's work readily acknowledge the relationship between her

work and the world she worked within, with its past and present wars lurking in the literal and temporal distance, and the threat of nuclear holocaust looming above. Because this area of Plath studies has received so much scholarly attention, particularly in the last fifteen years or so, I begin here by briefly sketching out its most prominent threads. Into this cloth of criticism I will be weaving my own perspective, one which argues that a consistent, though often self-conflicted, political perspective can be traced all the way from Plath's early poems, stories, and journal entries, through to her late letters and what most regard as the culmination of her talents in the *Ariel* poems.

Stan Smith inaugurated this particular branch of Plath scholarship, arguing in 1982 that: "It is precisely because her poetry is intensely private that it records so profoundly and distinctly the experience of living in history. In Plath's poetry, there is no gap between private and public" (202). Tracy Brain, writing nearly two decades later, makes a very similar statement: "By taking Plath's writing away from the conventional personal readings to which it is customarily subjected, we see that her poems and fiction...are deeply, politically engaged with the world" (36-7). Other scholars have added their own leaves to the volume of study of Plath's work and its connection to history, politics and war; there are several categories into which such scholarship falls. The first, and probably the most longstanding, is the discussion of the relationship between Plath's work and the Holocaust; such studies focus most on Plath's late poetry, on the *Ariel* poems in particular, and mainly discuss the appropriateness of Plath's use of Holocaust imagery to illustrate the abuse and anger of the poems' speakers. One contributor to this category of Plath scholarship is Al Strangeways, who argues in his 1996 essay "'The Boot in the Face': The Problem of the Holocaust in the Poetry of Sylvia

Plath” that the problem of how the Holocaust is represented in Plath’s poetry is, in fact, not limited to Plath’s work: “our reaction to [Holocaust imagery] as readers and the strategies Plath uses to approach [the Holocaust] are tied to a wider problem relating to the place of the Holocaust in our culture” (371); Strangeways also emphasizes the importance of reading all of Plath’s poetry through a political lens in his book *Sylvia Plath: The Shaping of Shadows*. Another scholar who contributes to this body of work on Plath’s writing is Matthew Boswell, who argues in his 2008 essay “‘Black Phones’: Postmodern Poetics in the Holocaust Poetry of Sylvia Plath” that Plath’s use of Holocaust imagery is effective and even justified because of the point it makes about the gendering of violence: “In some senses, the aggressive feminist position Lady Lazarus assumes in the final stanzas is not a total distortion of the concerns of Holocaust verse, and could be justified by the insight that the Holocaust was an event which was, for the most part, conceived and perpetrated by men” (57). William Wootten also discusses the Holocaust imagery in Plath’s work in his recent (2010) essay “‘That Alchemical Power’: The Literary Relationship of A. Alvarez and Sylvia Plath,” as does Steven Gould Axelrod in his 2011 essay “Plath and Torture: Cultural Contexts for Plath’s Imagery of the Holocaust.” Both of these scholars also focus on Plath’s later poems, and on “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” in particular. This body of scholarship on Plath’s work, as these examples illustrate, can have an inward or an outward focus, discussing the relationship between Plath’s work (personal) and historical events (public) by emphasizing either how Plath’s use of Holocaust imagery reflects her own struggles or how that same imagery contextualizes Plath and her work within cultural and social problems that extend beyond the problems particular to her own life.

A second category—another leaf, if you will, on the branch of Plath scholarship that considers her work’s connection to history and politics—considers the relationship between Plath’s work and the Cold War era, often focusing in particular upon the kinds of paranoia, surveillance, and apparent cultural homogeneity of the period. Sally Bayley’s work is representative of this type of scholarship; her 2006 essay, “‘I have your head on my wall’: Sylvia Plath and the Rhetoric of Cold War America,” focuses on *The Bell Jar* and the *Ariel* poems and presents “a revisionist reading of Plath’s late work in the light of the rhetoric of scrutiny and surveillance emanating from figures such as McCarthy” (158). Kate Baldwin, in her 2004 essay “The Radical Imaginary of *The Bell Jar*,” argues that Esther Greenwood may be read as haunted by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, a “bad mother” who did not properly integrate under Cold War dictates of what American women should be (187). Deborah Nelson, in a 2006 essay on “Plath, History, and Politics,” makes a related argument, connecting Plath’s work to the role the domestic sphere played in the Cold War 1950s: “On the one hand, mass culture and public servants alike extolled the virtues of mothers and wives. [...] On the other hand, there was a creeping anxiety that wives and mothers enjoyed too much power in the home and could not be trusted with the care of future soldiers and statesmen” (29-30). Robin Peel has extensively explored the relationship between Plath’s late works and Cold War politics in his 2002 book *Writing Back*, focusing, like Bayley, on *The Bell Jar* and the *Ariel* poems. Luke Ferretter, in his 2010 book *Sylvia Plath’s Fiction: A Critical Study*, extends the study of Plath’s political views as expressed in her work to his discussion of Plath’s fiction.

Closely tied to this second category of Plath scholarship is a third category, one that often begins by discussing the relationship between Plath's work and its context in the Cold War era, but that then extends such a study into a discussion of how Plath's work may reveal Plath's own political views. Both Peel's *Writing Back* and Ferretter's *Sylvia Plath's Fiction* fit into this third category as well as into the second I discussed above. In Peel's more recent work in both his 2004 essay "The Ideological Apprenticeship of Sylvia Plath" and 2007 essay "The Political Education of Sylvia Plath," he brings Plath's earlier writing—particularly her coursework as a student at Smith and at Cambridge—into his discussion of Plath's development as a political thinker. Both Peel and Ferretter emphasize a particular subset of Plath's body of work in their scholarship; Ferretter, as his book's title suggests, focuses on Plath's fiction written throughout her life and career, while Peel privileges Plath's later work in *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel*, arguing in his most recent essay that Plath's "post-1960 experience involved a reassessment, revival, and restoration of a dormant political engagement, culminating in the *Ariel* sequence" (40-41).

Finally, there is a less densely populated category of Plath scholarship that discusses the presence of political concerns in Plath's work as they relate to gender in a very specific way. Though nearly all of the scholars whose work I have presented so far discuss, with lesser or greater amounts of focus and detail, how Plath's concerns about women's roles in her society dovetailed with her political concerns, two scholars in particular have based their arguments on how Plath's work presents and comments on the home front / war front dichotomy as a gendered one. One is Camille Roman, who—in an 1999 essay concerned mostly with Elizabeth Bishop's poetry—makes the case that

Plath's 1950 poem "Bitter Strawberries," when read against the Korean War context, complicates "the traditional role for women in Western war that historians of gender, cultural production, and war have characterized as the role of 'Penelope'...supporting and welcoming home the military" (247).³ Roman is right to firmly ground "Bitter Strawberries" in the context of the Korean War, and to point out the complex role(s) the poem gives to women with respect to war; her argument suffers not based on its premise but simply because its scope is limited to one poem. Langdon Hammer's essay "Plath at War," one of the essays in the 2007 book on Plath's visual art, *Eye Rhymes*, is similarly limited. Hammer, though he does discuss others of Plath's works, bases his argument in Plath's visual art. Discussing a piece of artwork Plath drew as an eighth grader in 1946, makes the point that "Plath seems to understand...that the girl at home and the soldiers in battle occupy related, gendered positions that together constitute some larger whole" (148).⁴ Both of these scholars, each limiting their arguments to one or a few of Plath's works, point out that Plath's work about war draws attention to the existence of a gendered home front / war front dichotomy; further, they both point out that Plath's work often challenges this dichotomy, complicating the ways in which women like Plath experienced, were affected by, and themselves affected times of war.

In the following pages, my goal is to further extend the arguments made by scholars like Roman and Hammer. Further, I aim to correct what in my view is the error

³ Roman frames her discussion of "Bitter Strawberries" with the work of scholars such as Susan Schweik (author of *A Gulf so Deeply Cut*), Miriam Cooke (editor of *Gendering War Talk*) and Helen Cooper (author of *Arms and the Woman*), all of whom I also discuss in the introduction to this dissertation.

⁴ Hammer's essay goes on to argue that the presence of war in Plath's work helps her articulate "aggression...as part of the poet's relation to herself"; these references to war, in Hammer's view, reveal personal struggles more than they comment on political struggles outside of Plath's own life. Here, Hammer and I must deviate from each other; it is extremely important, in my view, to consider the personal and the political in tandem with each other when discussing Plath's work, rather than allowing one to supplant the other.

in Robin Peel's work. Plath's writing and other work about war emphasize, again and again, how staging and going to war, and how building up weapons for the thrill of power, is destructive to women and children—to the home front—and therefore endangers not just those who fight in it, allegedly for the defense of women and children, but endangers the entire human race. This stance is clear throughout Plath's work, whether referring to the shadow of World War II, the Cold War and the arms race, or the Korean War, all of which Plath lived under or through. Therefore, arguments like Roman's and Hammer's, while valuable, are incomplete; in addition to her early poetry and her visual art, *all* of Plath's work—or, at least, that work which references war and other related political concerns—refers to and complicates a gendered home front / war front dichotomy. Further, Plath's work also reveals a surprisingly consistent view of this dichotomy, rather than a perspective that did not quite crystallize until 1960, as Peel has argued.⁵ In her writing throughout her life, then, Plath warns that reconciliation with the (feminine) home front after war may be pointless, if the wagers of war do not recognize that they destroy the very people—women and children—they aim to preserve. Her work presents the perspective that one cannot—and should not—wage or talk about war without talking about, talking with, and considering women, because women and their concerns should never be considered separate from the concerns and interests of the

⁵ See all three of Peel's works that I have so far referred to. *Writing Back* and "The Ideological Apprenticeship of Sylvia Plath" most clearly evidence this viewpoint, and though Peel deviates from it somewhat in "The Political Education of Sylvia Plath," he maintains that Plath's post-1960 work remains the work that shows best "the effective fusion of politics and art" (41). However, Peel does well to urge scholars of Plath's work to view Plath through a political rather than (or in addition to) a confessional lens in his conclusion (60).

human race more broadly. In short, then, Sylvia Plath is throughout her work the sort of author she told Peter Orr she was in 1962: “I’m a rather political person as well.”⁶

In order to argue this thesis, then, I will be drawing from many of Plath’s works, in multiple genres, from across her life and writing career. I contend that Plath’s work—both public and private, published and unpublished, in myriad genres—presents this perspective consistently. Though the effects of age and experience give this perspective nuance, her work does not evidence that she arrived at such a perspective gradually, or that it suddenly crystallized somewhere around 1960. Therefore, in the following pages, I will be discussing how Plath’s work shows this perspective on gender and war in categories defined by topic and loosely chronological.

First, I chart how Plath’s early works, many of which concern the Korean War explicitly or more obliquely, articulate a perspective on the relationship between gender and war that shows how women are necessarily an integral part of the conversation about war and politics. In her letters to pen pals such as Eddie Cohen and Hans-Joachim Neuport, Plath claims her place as a woman in conversations about war and its effects on the home front. In her journal entries during her time at Smith, Plath continues to discuss these topics in conversation with herself as a woman, an artist, and a student. In her early fiction, such as the unpublished story “Brief Encounter,” Plath considers through her art

⁶ Strangely, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar see irony in Plath’s statement here, arguing that although “Plath claimed in a late radio interview to be deeply concerned with world politics, she did not have and explicitly political imagination” (297). They support this idea in part by stating that Plath “rarely tried to shape her dissatisfactions with gender imperatives into a theory” (297). Though I agree that Plath nowhere states, right out, such a theory in her work and writings, I contend that Plath’s work does indeed supply a consistent vision about how war, women, and politics should relate. Part of what makes this vision interesting—and, perhaps, difficult to ascertain in some ways—is the fact that it is coupled with an attachment to certain elements of “gender imperatives,” a fact that makes it difficult indeed to locate Plath comfortably within many feminist perspectives, including, perhaps, the one from which Gilbert and Gubar themselves write.

the different types of responses women can have to war, privileging the responses that would help soldiers reintegrate themselves into the human community. In all three of these genres—letters, journals entries, and creative writings—Plath articulates a consistent perspective on the relationship between gender and war, stressing the importance of women’s voices in conversations about war and inserting herself deliberately into those conversations.

Second, I discuss three of Plath’s works of fiction: “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit,” “The Shadow,” and *The Bell Jar*, all three of which begin in the context of war and violence, and which display the effects of war and violence on the women, children, and families each story concerns. In these works, Plath suggests through the art of fiction what she had already articulated in early poems, in letters, and in journal entries: all questions related to war, and the political conversations and events surrounding war, should concern women (and children) because those on the home front are not separable from the war front.

Third, I examine Plath’s late writing, focusing in particular on her letters to her mother and her 1962 article “Contexts.” I briefly discuss scholarship on Plath’s use of Holocaust and Cold War imagery in the *Ariel* poems. I then discuss her letters in the last half-decade of her life, in which Plath’s concerns about war and politics more heavily involve the Cold War and nuclear armament, and again show how these concerns are interwoven tightly with the concerns of women and children. “Contexts” (1962) neatly summarizes Plath’s perspective on the relationship between gender and warfare, echoing the perspective carried through her work throughout her life.

Finally, I discuss how Plath's continued, consistent insistence that women's concerns and voices always be incorporated into political and wartime conversations, on the one hand, exists alongside, on the other hand, Plath's equally consistent attachment to some traditional elements of femininity. Plath seems to want two things at once: one, to be involved with and taken seriously by the participants in the (masculine) realms of war and political discussion about war, and, two, to uphold and endorse some aspects of traditional femininity while deriding women who do not (one thinks, for example, of her harsh judgment of the maiden professors at Smith, unmarried and childless and wed to their careers). In the end, all of Plath's responses and challenges to the myth of a gendered home front and war front come from within that myth rather than writing against it or past it. However, despite her location within this dichotomy and her inability to write past it, Plath's participation in the conversation about war and politics is deeply involved, thoughtful, and empathetic.⁷ Through these efforts and these writings, she articulates a perspective on the relationship between gender and war that emphatically involves women in the conversation about war, and that implies that healing and peace—both personal and political—happens through relationships. I close this chapter by considering how—and whether—these two sides might be reconciled, and their implications for the study of Plath's writing about politics and war.

⁷ Here, I differ markedly from Robin Peel, who argues in "The Ideological Apprenticeship of Sylvia Plath" that Plath's "early political ideas were not original, and her 1950s journals do not suggest that they were deeply pondered. The twenty year old Sylvia Plath was sharp but as yet uncomplicated, and performed expertly the role of the All-American girl" (63). While I agree that Plath did, indeed, perform "expertly" the feminine role she was to assume at Smith, to argue that this performance somehow detracts from the complexity and thoughtfulness of Plath's political thought is, at best, misguided. Further, I see the level of originality in Plath's political thought to be of little consequence, and the argument that her "1950s journals do not suggest that [her political ideas] were deeply pondered" is patently false, as I hope I have illustrated above, and will continue to illustrate throughout the rest of this section.

Entering the Conversation about War and Politics

As a student in high school and college, Plath made her first forays into the conversation about war and politics through three relationships in particular. One of them is Plath's with her German pen pal Hans-Joachim Neupert, with whom she corresponded in her late high school years and at Smith. Another pen pal, Eddie Cohen, also corresponded with Plath about war and political questions during this time, and her correspondence with him forms the second relationship I will discuss here. Finally, I discuss Plath's brief, complicated, and troubling relationship with a veteran who assaults her on a date, but who later, I argue, she incorporates—and even redeems—in her story “Brief Encounter.” In all of these writings, Plath shows herself to be, as both a fledgling political thinker and as a young woman, actively engaged in thinking and conversing about war and politics through her relationships with young men on whom war has had a direct impact. These writings emphasize both her thirst for knowledge about what war is like, but also her desire to empathize with these young men and understand their stories.

Plath began her epistolary relationship with Hans-Joachim in 1947, when she was sixteen and a tenth grader at Wellesley High School, presumably as part of a school project.⁸ From her very first letter to Neupert, Plath's thoughts are very clearly not just on learning about her pen-pal's personality and culture more broadly, but instead focused very specifically on understanding the experience of living in a country that has not only been at war, but seen it. Plath begins this first letter, dated April 13, 1947, by remarking about how little American students know about the personal lives of Germans, and then segues into a physical description of herself and her interests. Immediately after,

⁸ Ferretter notes that Plath's correspondence with Hans-Joachim began at the urging of her English teacher, Wilbury Crockett; Crockett is also likely part of the impetus behind Plath's publication with Perry Norton of “Youth's Plea for World Peace” in the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1950 (92-3).

however, Plath transitions—quite abruptly, as if excited to finally reach the questions she really wanted to ask—into a confession about how little she knows about what war is like; she has heard stories of bombings, but has not lived through their horror. This same pattern, in which Plath describes herself and life in America, before segueing abruptly into talk of the horrors of war and her longing for peace, appears again later in the letter; perhaps it even reoccurs a third time (the last page of this particular letter is lost). Already in this first letter to Neupert, Plath has shown herself to be curious and passionate about both understanding another person *and* understanding what living through war is like. Further, not only is learning about war tied explicitly to learning about a person who endured it, but peace is also directly connected to relationships that stretch over the boundaries of cultures and states. In the same paragraph in which she confesses her lack of knowledge about war, Plath also expresses her awe at the fact that, despite the fact that both live in a war-torn world, she can communicate and form a friendship with someone far from her.

In Plath's letters to Neupert over the rest of her high school years in 1948-1950, she continues to articulate variations on this theme: that war is a project of destruction, whose effects human relationships can mitigate and heal. In the interest of articulating this idea, Plath also repeats her admission that she is largely ignorant of what war is like, and, significantly, this admission is always tied to her curiosity. She admits her ignorance not to be coy, but because she wants Neupert to help her understand. In a letter dated June 14, 1948, for example, she asks Neupert if he would like to compare and contrast German and American thought about life, science, religion, and war; she wants to know his thoughts on these topics, she writes. In a later letter, dated September 24 of the same

year, Plath laments—in response, we gather, to something Neupert has written her on the subject—that those who live in relative prosperity focus on petty problems, and cannot really understand life’s seriousness. One major example of this seriousness, readers learn in the next paragraph of the letter, is war. She writes that she desperately wants to experience the wartime and political events she only hears about on the radio or reads about in the newspaper, but the reason why she wants these experiences is not morbid fascination but a desire to connect. Again, Plath’s curiosity about war and its effects are deeply rooted in her desire to understand how other people live. It is fitting, then, that she closes this letter with questions to Neupert about how his life, in particular, has and has not changed as a result of the war, and how it has affected his plans for the future; finally, she connects all her curiosity and questions back to a person, one we presume she has come to care about.

Later letters, too, contain this same theme. In a letter dated January 29, 1949, Plath expresses her fear at the prospect of a third world war; not only would it be a purposeless disaster, but it would also, she is sure, be so destructive that humankind would be unable to recover from it. The answer to such destruction is, again, relationship—in this letter, however, Plath combines her previous emphasis on interpersonal relationships, like hers with Neupert, with an emphasis on relationships between states. She wonders if a unified Europe, brought about through peaceful discourse rather than force, could bring about peace; she also imagines not just a unified Europe, but a unified world, under one peaceful system of government. Her passionate ideas about world unification and peace—doubtless tied to her involvement with the United World Federalists; she encloses a packet of information about the group with the

same letter—are in keeping with her work’s overall emphasis on relationship’s ability to make war unnecessary. Indeed, this emphasis on relationship shows that Plath’s thought on matters of war, state, and politics strongly reject any division between these matters and the concerns of individual persons; states, for Plath, cannot be considered properly if one does not consider the people who make them up. Significantly, then, this letter concludes much like its predecessors, too; Plath tells Neupert that their correspondence has helped her think of Germany not as a state, but as a body of people, a group of other Hans-Joachims whom she might also befriend.

Plath’s correspondence with Eddie Cohen did not begin as part of a school project. Rather, it started after Cohen, a Chicagoan English major, having read Plath’s story “And Summer Will Not Come Again” in *Seventeen* magazine (his sister’s copy, not his), demanded a Boston phone book from Marshall Field’s, found Plath’s address, and sent her a first letter. It is unsurprising, then, that the tone of their correspondence is vastly different, at least in their earlier letters, from the tone of Plath’s correspondence with Neupert. The subjects of their early conversations are much different, as well. While Plath’s letters to Neupert are filled from the beginning with both big concepts like war, peace, and the fate of humankind, alongside the smaller details of her everyday life, Plath’s correspondence with Cohen is initially a flirtation over mutual interest in writing, and eventually delves more deeply into personal details than did her correspondence with Neupert.⁹ When the two pen-pals begin to discuss issues of politics and war, then, those

⁹ As we have access only to some of Plath’s letters to Neupert, and mainly Cohen’s letters to Plath (with a few of Plath’s responses intermixed), drawing these conclusions about Plath’s correspondence with either is a task best undertaken with caution and much careful reading. In my view, the letters that are extant provide ample evidence to support the readings of each correspondence that I offer here. Plath’s letters to Neupert are in Smith College’s collection of Plath materials in the Mortimer Rare Book Room, while her correspondence with Cohen is housed at Indiana University’s Lilly Library.

discussions spring out of the relationship they've already developed, rather than being the focus of their correspondence from the beginning or coming up at least partly because of a school assignment. Significantly, then, Plath's correspondence with Cohen shows all the more clearly the strength of the connection in Plath's thinking between issues of war and politics, and issues of relationship and the value of particular persons. Plath enters into this conversation about war and politics with Cohen under no urging from a teacher, and to fulfill no course requirement: her correspondence with Cohen reveals her readiness to enter these conversations on her own, and the depth of her thought about these issues.

Cohen and Plath's correspondence, beginning with Cohen's first letter on August 3, 1950, is initially a chiefly flirtatious one. Cohen praises Plath's writing in "And Summer Will Not Come Again"; Plath calls him out on his attempt at flattery; Cohen replies with a lengthy letter than includes a meticulously detailed and jocular self-description; Plath replies with her own self-description, including the fact that, horror of horrors, she is a girl with brains. These early letters eventually evolve into a surprisingly frank, honest, and often weighty correspondence that tends, more often than not, to concern two things: in-depth discussions of relationships and sex, and equally in-depth discussions of the Korean War and the other political concerns that directly affect both Plath and especially Cohen, who fears being drafted. This combination reveals how the concerns of the state, including issues of war, are never, for Plath, separable from issues of home, family, and relationship. Indeed, war threatens to destroy everything that allows homes, families, and relationships to thrive, and, for Plath, it is only through emphasis on this latter trinity of home front values that the violent rhetoric and values of war can be undermined and refuted.

Plath makes this perspective most clear in a letter she writes in late 1950, in response to a September 8, 1950 letter from Cohen, “the one about [his] walk in the city, about war” (*J* 19). She copies part of this letter down in her journal; Cohen later sends her a copy of this letter, enclosed (at her request) with one of his dated May 14, 1951. Part of her response, a part she copies into her journal, to the looming specter of nuclear holocaust is an urge to “live every moment with terrible intensity,” an urge motivated by her own fear for herself. “Remember, remember, this is now, and now, and now,” she writes. “Live it, feel it, cling to it. I want to become acutely aware of all I’ve taken for granted” (*J* 19). Here, Plath clearly connects the threat of war to her own life; it is impossible to separate this threat from its effects on how she, a teenage girl on the home front with little personal connection to soldiers and politicians, lives and thinks. A second part of her response, also copied into her journal, extends past herself to encompass her family. War, and those who perpetuate it, detrimentally affect the very families they aim to protect. What’s more, the wagers of war do not even listen to the protest of those ostensibly under their protection:

I want to stop it all, the whole monumental grotesque joke, before it’s too late. But writing poems and letters doesn’t seem to do much good. The big men are all deaf; they don’t want to hear the little squeaking as they walk across the street in cleated boots. Ed, I guess this all sounds a bit frantic. I guess I am. When you catch your mother, the childhood symbol of security and rightness, crying desolately in the kitchen; when you look at your tall, dreamy-eyed kid brother and think that all his potentialities in the line of science are going to be cut off before he gets a chance...it kind of gets you. (*J* 19)

The concerns of war, then, do not exist apart from Plath’s own life, or that of her family; however, and ironically, it is a devastating and frustrating truth that those who control the conversation about war leave little room for her own “letters and poems.”

However, in the rest of the letter she sent to Cohen, Plath's ideas about war extend beyond her worries for her own person and for her own family. The letter begins by clearly connecting Plath's experience to Cohen's; her response is motivated in large part by his words: "Your letter came just now...The one about your walk in the city, about war. You don't know quite what it did to me" (*J* 19). And amidst Plath's confessions of her own fears for herself and her family, she returns to this opening idea: the profound ability of communication between human beings, no matter how far apart, to ameliorate the painful effects of war and violence on human life. Immediately before telling Cohen about her fears for her brother, or the sinking feeling inside when she sees her mother break down, she expresses her outrage over the fact that the quoted statements in the paper—all from young men expressing their willingness to answer the call to go to war—are never Cohen's; his point of view, like his friends', like hers, is ignored. However, unlike the "big men [who] are all deaf," through their correspondence, both Plath's and Cohen's fears are voiced; their relationship and willingness to listen to each other, even if it never reaches those "big men," still works against the one-sided, ultimately destructive conversation those like them perpetuate. At the end of the letter, Plath states a variation on the theme she also voiced in her letters to Neupert. Cohen, she says, truly understands what she is trying to communicate; she tells him that he should never stop talking to her, because their conversation is as significant as if they were the only two people living. Again—and, significantly, outside the boundaries of school-assigned responsibilities and concerns—Plath's ideas about war and politics, and her emphasis on relationships between would-be strangers as a solution to the destructiveness of war and a one-sided politics of violence, reveals itself in her correspondence. Plath is,

in the late 1940s and early 1950s, already a political thinker and writer, one whose ideas about politics and war are deeply interwoven with her relationships.

Plath's relationships with Eddie Cohen and Hans-Joachim Neupert extend over months and years of communication and involve often intense divulgement of personal thoughts and questions about war and its effects. However, Plath's writing to these young men doesn't seem to make its way into her creative writing—at least, not in any readily discernible way. The relationship that, in my view, actually makes its way into Plath's fiction is a brief and eventually violent encounter with an “older,” “partly bald,” and “quiet-but-nice” disabled veteran. Arguably, a version of this veteran appears in Plath's unpublished story “Brief Encounter,” in which a Korean War veteran, also disabled (he is missing one leg), finds respite and community through his conversation with a young woman on a train. It is this man's experience of war that Plath, finally, incorporates and even redeems by including it imaginatively in her fiction.

Plath describes her blind date with the disabled veteran, Bill, in two places: first, in her journals, and second, in a letter to her mother. The letter is dated December 4, 1950; Plath's date with the veteran occurred shortly before, during her first winter at Smith. In the relevant passage in her journal, Plath describes the date as rather stale and forced in its early stages—“Conversation is bad from the beginning,” she writes (*J* 40)—but eventually the two warm up a bit to each other when Plath, in a move that is undoubtedly part flirtation, but also seems genuinely interested, confesses that she herself tires of dates where “so often you never do more than find out where your date lives.” “I'm willing to let you know me,” she tells Bill, “if you'll do the same. Then tonight won't be a total loss” (*J* 41). The conversation changes immediately and becomes

meaningful, partly because, we gather, it has shifted away from small talk and delved into the more weighty topics of politics and war: “He starts talking about political science. You ask questions, loving him for sharing a little of what matters with you” (*J* 41). When Bill suggests they walk outside, because “we can’t talk here,” Plath complies; when he confesses that his father died recently—a man who, he says, “used to talk to me the way you did” about political science, she comforts him, “impulsively patting his shoulder maternally. There there baby” (*J* 41). Immediately after this scene of maternal comforting—a deliberately feminine image and action—Plath asks Bill to tell her about the war:

“Tell me. About the war.” (He’s a veteran. Pat told you. He was disabled. You wonder if he has a wooden leg and think how noble you would be if he had one.)
“Where were you hurt?” you ask delicately.
“I got hit in the lungs by a shell. I was in the hospital two years.”
“What’s it like to fight? to kill someone?” (Your curiosity is aflame. Granted you can’t be a man, but he can tell you how it was.)
He is nonchalant. “You go from one island to another, practicing. Then one day you start out again. ‘This one isn’t taken,’ they say. You get out. You eat, sleep, joke. What do you do if you see an accident? You try to fix him up. That’s all you do to your guys in war. It’s not so different.” (*J* 41)

Here, Plath’s interest in Bill is shown clearly—if it wasn’t altogether clear already—to be less than genuine; the relationship she cultivates with him is, on her part, out of a desire for information rather than a wish for companionship. She even writes to herself that, if Bill’s injury had permanently maimed him, “how noble” she would be for going out with him.

The conversation takes a slight turn, however, away from war and towards matters equally unsuitable for a nice young lady. “You want to be worldly,” Plath writes. “You remember Eddie’s letters. You ask with impersonal gravity, ‘Have you had many

women?'" (*J* 42). As Plath questions him, Bill confesses to having had three lovers; he follows this confession by telling Plath, "I want you to be mine, all mine," to which Plath responds, internally and sarcastically, "(You think vaguely of a marriage proposal. How lovely - he has become captivated by your keen and sympathetic mind)" (*J* 42). What happens next first terrifies and then enrages Plath: Bill assaults her, pushing her down in the pine needles—"You are sick. He is damn strong"—while all the things Plath has been told about good young women's responsibilities concerning sex race through her mind: "You are playing a part. You want him, yet you remember: 'Once a woman has intercourse she isn't satisfied.' 'You need time and security for full pleasure.' 'You'll be finished at Smith'" (*J* 42). Bill backs off in response to her struggling, and Plath tries, weakly, to explain to Bill "how it is"; the two reach an impasse, a gulf widened by mutual lack of understanding, when Bill replies in kind: "'You don't know how it is,' he says. 'You can't, when you're all burning, on fire inside.' (Okay, so you don't)" (*J* 43). Plath closes the entry with words of impotent rage: "You know that you won't go out with him again if he asks. But you will never take a walk. You will never be alone. And you hate him because he has deprived you of that: - - walks and aloneness. And you hate him because he is a boy. And you won't see him if he asks again" (*J* 43). Plath is simultaneously aroused by Bill's actions and hating him for assaulting her, simultaneously curious about and despising him, simultaneously reminded that she doesn't understand male sexual arousal yet acutely aware of, and frustrated in the desire to satisfy, her own: "You pull away, disgusted, yet not disgusted" she writes (*J* 43).

This maelstrom of frustrated desire and anger toward men and their greater sexual freedom also figures, though Plath has clearly edited it, in a letter Plath wrote to her

mother, dated December 4, 1950, which I mentioned above. She begins, as she did in the journal entry, by talking about how she decided “to stab in the dark and see if I could get to know him better,” rather than continuing with small talk (*LH* 62). “I told him I like to write and draw and know people more than just on the surface,” she writes to Aurelia. “Evidently,” she continues, “he was rather overwhelmed by the fact that I could be so intelligent and yet not be ugly or something, and...he told me that he was twenty-five, disabled in the last war. Naturally that bowled me over, so I asked if he could tell me at all about it” (*LH* 62). She also mentions the fact that she and her date seemed to genuinely connect: “He told me a little about fighting in the Marianas and about what it is like to have to kill someone or be killed. Then he asked when my father died, and when I told him, he said his died two weeks ago.... So he told me how he felt about him and said that the other girls he’d been out with since didn’t give a damn, etc” (*LH* 62-3). And, as she did in her journals, she writes about how “he seemed to think we should have intercourse,” and that “he said...that the Marine Corps wasn’t the place to be a gentleman and that ideals didn’t quite matter when you slept and lived in the mud,” and about the other women he had slept with (*LH* 63). Just as in her journals, in her letter to her mother she describes the date as beginning with her attempt to gain information about what war is like, her and Bill’s apparent bond, and then, at the end of the date, the sharp reminder of the rift between their expectations, experiences, and the mores they are each told to follow.

Neither of these passages, it should go without saying, is a straightforward report of Plath’s date. Instead, and especially in the passage in her journal, Plath describes the date and does two other things besides: first, she describes not just the events of the date

but her responses to them, particularly in her parenthetical asides; second, and significantly, she deliberately transforms those events artistically. Her use of the second person pronoun in her journal is, in my view, the clearest example of her efforts to employ artistic techniques in what might have been a more straightforward narration of the night's events. It seems safe to claim, then, that in her journals—in all of her writing that cannot be classified as “fiction” or “poetry”—Plath is still, and always, working on her art. Therefore, it seems true as well that for Plath, her curiosity about war and her conversation with Bill about his war experience, on the one hand, and their aborted tryst and her anger about gender-specific sexual mores, on the other hand, are not separable incidents. These two things are very much connected to her; apart from the simple fact that the incidents are juxtaposed on the page, Bill's promiscuity is also attributed to his being part of the military, and Plath's interest in Bill stems partly from his ability to give her the information about politics and war that she seeks.

What these passages show, then, is the intense connection in Plath's experience between seemingly “non-political” things, like dates and sex, and “truly political” things, like war. Even further: for Plath, these experiences are all, if not war-related experiences, indeed political experiences, and separating what may seem the trifles of her romantic, social, and even artistic life from the questions she ask herself and others about matters of war and the State is at best unfortunate and, at worst, a source of profoundly limited analysis of Plath's work.¹⁰ To separate them, then, leads both to misinterpretations

¹⁰ The argument that “politics” is a term that can (and should) be widely applied, used to connote “power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another”—relationships beyond those of states and states, or states and citizens, etc.—was most famously made by Kate Millet in her 1970 book *Sexual Politics*; she argues that “sex is a status category with political implications” (23-24). According to Millet's logic, then, the separation of Plath's political concerns (concerning wars and the state) and her worries over dates and other relationships is a false separation indeed. And Millet's logic here is echoed by more recent feminist scholars discussing the relationship

Plath's work and a too-hasty devaluing of her views—particularly those in the early 1950s—of state politics and war. In *Writing Back*, for instance, Robin Peel, though he offers an highly detailed analysis of the relationship between Plath's political thought and creative work in the last years of her life, establishes first that a political lens “has significance for a reading of [her] 1960s texts that is not true of Plath's pre-England 1950s writing, where the political awareness is often perfunctory” (34), and that, more significantly for my purposes here, “in the 1950s, Plath defined and discussed herself primarily in relation to imaginative writing, art, and immediate personal relationships. Her relationship to the state was secondary” (26). In Peel's view, it is important to draw a sharp distinction not only between Plath's more purely “political” thoughts and writing, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, her writing about creative work and “personal relationships,” but also between what seem, to Peel, to be Plath's more and less bona fide attempts at political thought and engagement. In my view, however, attempting to distinguish between more and less genuine, and more and less “perfunctory,” examples of political awareness in Plath's writing offers little of value for Plath scholarship. Of much more value and significance is, first, identifying where concerns about war and the state appear in Plath's writing; second, considering how those concerns relate to their contexts both in the text itself and in the world Plath lived in outside the text; and, third, considering how those concerns are or are not connected, and how they do or do not

between politics, sex, and warfare. For example, Jean Bethke Elshtain traces the link between political citizenship and participation in war throughout Western history in her 1987 book *Women and War*; the link is, of course, one based on sex: men have political power, or at least can claim citizenship, because their sex defends the *polis*. Another scholar, Kelly Oliver discusses the shifting place of women relative to warfare in her 2007 book *Women as Weapons of War*; her argument that “the rhetoric of liberating women elsewhere [through warfare] conceals women's oppression here at home while at the same time reassuring us that we are liberated” carefully illuminates the web connecting warfare, the home front, and the power structures on both fronts in which women find themselves inscribed (47). All three of these writers establish firm connections between the politics of the state and the politics of everyday life, especially the everyday life of women.

connect, across the scope of Plath's work. Further, too, readers and scholars alike would do well to keep in mind that for Plath, all questions—whether of the state, or of navigating family and romantic relationships, or of planning her future and navigating her career and educational paths—are political questions.

In light of the above ideas, then, and also in light of Plath's description of her date with the veteran, Plath's early 1952 story "Brief Encounter" becomes not merely a college exercise or even a strong attempt at fiction by a gifted writer whose creative abilities have budded but not fully flowered. Instead, "Brief Encounter" does several things at once. First, it not only continues but further sharpens the connection between the more obviously political—concerns of war and the state—and the less obviously political, concerning the presence and effects of power relationships in everyday life, particularly where gender and sex are concerned. Second, in this story, Plath emphasizes the fact that women are already, and should be, involved in the conversation about war and state politics; even further, the story shows that, while waging war drives a wedge between soldier and home front, such a rift can be bridged through relationship and the reunification of family, as Ferretter notes.¹¹ Third, and most significantly in my view, "Brief Encounter" can be read as Plath's redemption of Bill the veteran and men like him. The erotic elements the story contains, and the "brief encounter" that it details, parallel Plath's date with Bill in a way that suggests that the two can be compared. Through her art, Plath transforms her frustrated date into a story about relationship's ability to potentially overcome the alienation felt by a returning veteran.

¹¹ In his discussion of "Brief Encounter" in his book *Sylvia Plath's Fiction*, Ferretter argues that "love, marriage, home and family—these are the values the story privileges, in direct contrast to war and to the basis of America's participation in the Cold War" (100).

These first two points are so intertwined that I will discuss them, and the way they are both evidenced in “Brief Encounter,” together. First, then, the story sharpens the connection between the political concerns of war and the state, and those of everyday life; it does so through partly through its portrayal of, second, a female character with whom a recently returned, now alienated Korean War veteran finds brief connection. “Brief Encounter” takes place on a train, and as the story begins, readers are introduced to its protagonist, a young man referred to only as “the veteran,” as he returns to his seat next to a female stranger after a trip to the dining car. He offers the girl a cigarette, which she politely refuses. The veteran settles in for what he thinks will be a lonely ride. This sort of loneliness is, we quickly learn, something the veteran is used to and believes he will endure for the rest of his life; in fact, the girl’s refusal of his offered cigarette is, for the veteran, one more example of “a sort of code” (1) that people on the home front use to speak to him, keeping him at a distance while remaining unfailingly polite. Feeling cut off from the people in the warm interior of the train, the veteran looks away from the girl beside him and stares past her out the window, feeling as though he has more in common with the dark, bleak emptiness of the winter landscape outside the train than with the warmth, light, and potential for human interaction within it.

As the story’s early pages unfold, the divide between the veteran’s experience and the experiences of the people on the train—their lives on the home front—becomes clearer, more stark. The veteran sees a group of new recruits attempt lewd flirtation with the girl sitting next to him; he pities them, realizing that they think they “own the world” but will be surprised, unpleasantly so, after a few years on the front. The difference between the new recruits and the veteran parallels the difference the veteran sees between

the civilians in the early days of the war, frightened by the threat of communism and ready to rally beneath the flag as bands played patriotic songs, and the people he sees around him now. However, instead of having been changed because of experience and newfound—and hard-won—knowledge, as the veteran has, the people around him seem to have moved in the opposite direction: their early flush of involvement and investigation into the war effort has faded back into ignorance. It is difficult, the veteran thinks on the third page of the story, to remember that anything is wrong at all once a body found himself back in the States, away from the war front.

However, the division between home front and war front, between the people on the train and the lonely veteran among them, is prelude to the veteran's second, and successful, attempt to engage the girl next to him in conversation, and their conversation and brief connection stands in direct contrast to the unknowingly alienating presence of the others on the train. Further, the girl is not only willing to listen, but she is genuinely able to relate to the veteran's experiences, despite never having been to war herself. By the end of the story, though the connection forged by the veteran and the girl is short-lived and cannot fully overcome the home front / war front division the veteran so acutely feels, their brief encounter does mitigate some of that division's effects, and, most significantly for my argument here, shows that the concerns of war certainly do affect and deeply concern those on the home front. When those on the home front deny their involvement and forget, the rift between fronts is widened; however, when people, like the girl on the train, do seize hold of that involvement, they can help bridge that gap.

The conversation between the girl and the veteran does not begin with the war. Instead, the veteran asks her about her art book, confessing that he could never really

understand modern art, asking her to help mitigate his ignorance. The question, and the veteran's grin as he asks it, are flirtatious, of course, and are immediately followed by a description of the girl as the veteran sees her: a smiling face, a slender body sheathed in a gray dress, almost-blond hair, a mouth red-lipped and sweet. The girl represents to the veteran a human connection that is at once tied to the political—it might help him narrow the alienating division between home and war front, and its effects on his life—and also erotic. Significantly, the relationship between the girl and the veteran, genuine though it is short-lived, combines political concerns and sexual ones, “serious” conversation with flirtation. By having the veteran's “brief encounter” happen with a young woman, Plath deliberately intertwines the stuff of war and the state with that of relationships and everyday life; the division between home front and war front is a false an alienating one, as political questions and concerns are everywhere, and should involve everyone.

Further, it is important that the girl with whom the veteran speaks is not only female and desirable, as well as intuitively aware of the divide between home and war front that the veteran so acutely feels, but also curious about the veteran's experience in a way that serves to close, not widen, that divide. After beginning their conversation talking about modern art and where they each are traveling, and after the veteran remarks that it will be strange to be home after two years away, the girl asks him, casually and without pity or awkwardness, whether he has been “over there.” He tells her yes, that he has been in Korea; she asks him what it was like, confessing that she's always been curious about it. He tells her that it is “not much different,” a statement that could be taken two ways. First, it might be read as the veteran's attempt to shield the girl (and perhaps himself) from the stark differences between the violent war front in Korea and

the peaceful home front in the States. However, in my view, it seems more likely that the statement should be read in a second way: Plath uses the veteran's statement here to collapse the divide between war and home front, keeping readers' focus on the relationship between the girl and the veteran rather than on the perceived gulf between their experiences of war. This story, both the girl's curiosity and the veteran's statement imply, is about connection rather than difference.

The girl's curiosity about the war and the veteran's experience in it is most significant, then, because it is not self-serving, but is clearly pursued as one step towards helping the veteran find a place within his own family's home, and the home front, again. A bit later in their conversation, the veteran confides to the girl that though he is going to Providence to visit his family, especially his sister, he is very nervous to visit because he has been gone so long, and has missed milestones like his sister's wedding and even meeting her husband. He is so uncertain, in fact, about his welcome at home that he has not told his sister he will be visiting, and plans on getting a hotel for the night when he arrives in Providence, rather than going home. Clearly, the veteran feels an acute sense of separation from his family and from the pattern their lives have taken in his absence. Here, readers see that the division brought about by war does not only affect the soldier, while those at home stay safe and protected, but also profoundly affects the family to which the soldier belongs. And here as well, readers see that Plath's response to this division and its effects is also tied to family. "Brief Encounter" shows that one of war's profoundest effects is its forced separation of home front and war front, and of family members from each other. The profoundest form of healing after war is, then, the soldier's reintegration into family. The girl's angry, impassioned response to the

veteran's saying that he plans to overnight in a hotel rather than at his sister's clearly shows the centrality of family to the soldier's recovery from his war experiences and the alienation they have caused.

Thus far in my discussion of "Brief Encounter," I have shown how Plath uses the story to show how conjoined the concerns of war and the state are with those of everyday life, especially where the family is concerned, and that the possibility of healing after war comes about through relationships—again, especially family relationships. However, there is a third element to this story's presentation of the ameliorating effects of relationships upon those whom war has torn from the home front. In my view, this story can also be read as Plath's redemption of a very specific veteran, Bill, and her brief relationship with him. Read this way, the story can be viewed as more than an artistic expression of Plath's thoughts about war; it also becomes a deliberate attempt to connect her art to the world around her in a more tangible way, tied directly to her experiences and transforming them from frustrating and frightening to hopeful and restorative.

Though I acknowledge the potential pitfalls to so deliberately connecting Plath's date with Bill to "Brief Encounter," this connection is worth making for several reasons. The first of these is that such an autobiographical reading of the story is common in Plath scholarship and, if done carefully and sensitively, such readings can be quite fruitful, especially because so many of the characters and situations in her stories and poems correlate so specifically to events and people in Plath's life. The second reason I make this connection is that the veteran's clear sexual attraction to the girl, coupled with his relief at her sensitivity and willingness to converse with him, are parallel to Plath's experience with the veteran, though the way the veteran acts on his attraction is, of

course, far different. Third, Plath specifically mentions in her journal entry that Bill “was disabled. You wonder if he has a wooden leg and think how noble you would be if he had one” (*J* 41); in “Brief Encounter,” the (disabled) veteran, just released from the Army hospital and uncomfortable on a new prosthesis, walks on crutches and is offered seats by old women because he is missing his left leg. Finally, Plath’s journals and her subsequent letters to her mother about the date show how deeply the incident affected her; she finally decides to interpret Bill’s actions as springing from an acute desire for someone to listen and understand, and it is this sentiment that is so clearly expressed in the story.

It is on this last point that I want to focus in more detail here. I have already discussed how Plath details the beginning of the date in both her journal entry and in a letter to her mother, focusing on Bill’s surprise at her intelligence and the fact that she relates to and is concerned about the recent loss of his father—a sensitivity former dates and lovers have not shown him. However, in the journal entry and in later letters Plath shows that, as easily as she can interpret her conversation with Bill at the beginning of the date, figuring out what to think about the evening’s later events is much more difficult. In writing my analysis of Plath’s thoughts in these passages, I find myself struggling to find words to properly describe it: is it accurate to write that Bill attempted to rape Plath? If I do, how, then, do I interpret the tangle of disgust and desire that Plath so clearly articulates in her journal entry, and the fact that she seems to refuse Bill in part because of the sexual mores she feels constrained by, rather than because of her own lack of desire? However, what then do I do with Plath’s lingering fear, her decision not to see Bill again if he asks, and her hatred of him because his assaulting her has “deprived [her] of that: - - walks and aloneness” (*J* 43)? And how, as well, do I take into account the

reality that Plath's thinking here has been shaped by a sexual ethic that elides women's sexual desires, while at the same time not depriving her of agency and the voice to tell her own story?

This struggle mirrors—through a glass, darkly—what, it seems fair to say, was Plath's struggle when trying to articulate her experience on that date. This struggle, or at least the way it manifests itself in Plath's writing, occurs not only in her journal entry but also in two letters she wrote to her mother in swift succession immediately after the date. The first letter she sends is the one I quoted above; in *Letters Home*, Aurelia Schober Plath has dated it as "December 4, 1950," though the original letter in Plath's hand is dated "Sunday 3 p.m." and then marked "[1950, Dec. 3]" in what may be Aurelia's handwriting. Whatever the exact date was, the letter was clearly written the Sunday after Plath's Saturday date with Bill. After describing Bill for her mother and telling her a bit about him and their conversation, Plath writes: "I guess he was overwhelmed with the idea that at last someone was interested in him as a person, not just as a date, that he seemed to think we should have intercourse. Of course, I was in a rather bad position, having gaily gone on a walk, but I told him quite forcibly that I wouldn't oblige—all of which made a scene" (*LH* 63). Here, Plath is still giving her mother a rather straightforward narration of the date's events, though—in keeping with the system of sexual mores she has been taught, that "Once a woman has intercourse she isn't satisfied" and that she would be "finished at Smith" for obliging Bill (*J* 42)—she is quick to shift blame for Bill's assault onto herself and the position she has put herself in. However, immediately after this narration, Plath shifts from storytelling to analyzing:

"I came home rather in a fog. I don't know just how things will work out or whether I should see him again. I am just beginning to realize that you

can't ostracize a person for having relations with a lot of others. That doesn't automatically cancel out their worth as human beings....I would like your opinion on the matter, as I don't quite know what to make of it, never having run into anyone quite so determined before. [...] (*Why* do I always inspire males to pour out their life story on my shoulder? I guess I just ask for it.)" (LH 63)

Unlike her journal entry, which ends (appropriately, we are tempted to say) in anger at Bill for depriving her of "walks and aloneness" and hatred of him "because he is a boy" and is not bound by the same rules she feels tightly around herself, Plath's letter to her mother concludes with an incongruous mix of self-blame and compassion toward Bill. Though her statement that "I guess I just ask for it" should trouble readers, it should not blind us to Plath's dedication to community rather than alienation; she emphasizes Bill's worth as a human being, and that he should not be "ostracize[d] for having relations with others."

This same dedication to community, to seeing Bill as a troubled and worthwhile human being rather than ostracizing him for his behavior, is evident in a second letter Plath wrote to her mother, almost immediately after the first letter discussed above. This letter, which Aurelia Schober Plath did not include in *Letters Home*, was likely composed immediately after the first; Plath has written "Monday 3:30" at the top of the letter, and remarks in the first sentence how she wishes it could have been sent in the same mail as her first letter.¹² At first, it seems as though Plath has decided that her agitation after her date with Bill was silly; she writes that she has to laugh at the night's events now, rather than feeling troubled. However, immediately after she seems to write off the whole experience, she tells her mother that, after talking over the date with some of the girls at Smith, and learning that many of them have had similar experiences, she has been led to

¹² This letter can be found at the Lilly Library at Indiana University in Bloomington, IN.

conclude that Bill needed some sense of security and sympathy, and that Plath's willingness to listen affected him so profoundly that he reacted more eagerly than he might have otherwise.

Of course, of incredible significance here is the fact that Plath's seeming willingness to brush the assault by in these letters is indicative of her having been influenced by a system of sexual mores that demands tight restraint from women and that ultimately blames them if those mores are broken. However, in my view, Plath's words in her letters to her mother are hardly her final word on the subject, and thus she does not brush the incident aside, concluding that it is something that just happens to girls sometimes if they lead boys on. Plath's journal entry describing the date, which given its detail and intricacy may very well have been written *after* the letters to her mother, seems evidence of her rejection of such a sexual ethic; her words in other places in her journals, where she rails against the system of sexual mores that has been imposed upon her, provide further evidence.¹³ Instead, Plath uses her art to write past this forced gap between male and female experience, particularly as it relates to war; finally, she privileges—and honors—Bill's perceived desire for human connection rather than alienation over and above any system of sexual mores and expectations that divided them, and endangered her.

Plath's emphasis on relationships, rather than forced divisions, between human beings allows us, then, to read "Brief Encounter" as a striking reimagining of her date

¹³ For example, about half a year after her date with Bill, Plath writes: "For if a man chooses to be promiscuous, he may still aesthetically turn up his nose at promiscuity. He may still demand a woman be faithful to him, to save him from his own lust. But women have lust, too. Why should they be relegated to the position of custodian of emotions, watcher of the infants, feeder of soul, body, and pride of man?" (*J* 77). An entry a few months later refers to "the potent [female] sex drive," which "could be used for either her triumph or her downfall. It could be her most dynamic asset or her most tragic flaw" (*J* 111).

with Bill, and the kind of relationship it represents. Instead of writing from the girl's perspective, in some ways keeping the veteran at arm's length as an Other, Plath assumes the veteran's perspective. By doing so, she denies that the masculine experience of war is beyond her as a female writer, and does her utmost to sympathize with that experience. By including—frequently—the veteran's thoughts about the girl's attractiveness as they converse in the story, but by relegating those thoughts to a supporting role in what is, finally, a relationship based on both parties' interest in the other "as a person, not just as a date," as Plath writes her mother, Plath works to remove the threat of violence from sexual attraction and instead incorporates it into an ethic of relationship based on mutual respect for the other's humanness. Finally, by giving the veteran an ending past his brief relationship with the girl, where perhaps he will reconnect with his family and find relief from his feelings of alienation, Plath, in my view, gives veterans like Bill a possibility for connection and relationship, even though she emphatically wrote—in both letters and in her journal entry—that she wouldn't see Bill again. This story, finally, is Plath's way of bridging both the gap between gendered experiences of war, and the resulting—and painful—rifts that result in human relationships. A journal entry a few months after her date well sums up her emphasis on how the idea of "a man's world" not only frustrates her, but also keeps her and other women—and men—from knowing each other:

Yes, my consuming desire to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers, bar room regulars - to be part of a scene, anonymous [*sic*], listening, recording - all is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female always in danger of assault and battery. My consuming interest in men and their lives is often misconstrued as a desire to seduce them, or as an invitation to intimacy. Yet, God, I want to talk to everybody I can as deeply as I can. (J 77)

And so, in Plath's letters to Eddie Cohen and Hans-Joachim Neupert, and in her redemption through relationship of veterans like Bill in "Brief Encounter," Plath enters the conversation about war and state politics emphatically and empathetically, certain that this conversation is one in which she, and all those on and away from the home front, belongs. These writings, too, form the point from which the arrows of her later political and war-related writing shoot off.

Family / War Stories, and War's Effects on Children

On June 19, 1953, while Plath was in New York working at *Mademoiselle* magazine, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed for espionage.¹⁴ On the same day, Plath wrote that the headlines hailing the traitors' soon-to-be electrocution made her "sick at the stomach." "I remember the journalists [*sic*] report," she writes, "sickeningly factual, of the electrocution of a condemned man, of the unconcealed fascination of the onlookers, of the details, the shocking physical facts about the death, the scream, the smoke, the bare honest unemotional reporting that gripped the guts because of the things it didn't say" (*J* 541). She is horrified by the execution itself, of course; the reality of what electrocution does to a human body, so carefully described by the report she mentions, clearly disgusts her. She is also enraged by the inhuman politics that motivate the execution: "They [the Rosenbergs] were going to kill people with those atomic secrets. It is good for them to die. So that we can have the priority of killing people with those atomic secrets" (*J* 541). However, she is most horrified not by the description of electrocution, nor by the politics that made it happen, but by the fact that the journalists who wrote it, and many of the people around her who read it, are able to distance the

¹⁴ More precisely: they were executed for conspiracy to commit espionage during wartime.

Rosenbergs' execution for treason from the callous extinguishing of human life that execution represented. The reporting is "bare honest [and] unemotional," she writes; the reactions of Americans will be, she predicts, even more blasé, to the point of being absent: "There is no yelling, no horror, no great rebellion. That is the appalling thing. [...] Two real people being executed. No matter. The largest emotional reaction over the United States will be a rather large, democratic, infinitely bored and casual and complacent yawn" (J 541-2). Plath's outrage at the Rosenbergs' execution is motivated primarily, then, by the fact that political and personal questions are so intertwined in her thinking as to be inseparable. To separate the execution of traitors to the country from the reality that such an execution means the destruction of human life is fallacious, to Plath. Further, it is dangerous: such a separation makes human beings forget the dignity and worth of their fellow human beings, urging them away from horror and toward "complacent yawn[s]."

In the works of fiction I will discuss in this section, Plath does the opposite of what the journalism report on the Rosenbergs does. Rather than distancing readers from the Rosenbergs' humanity, and therefore simultaneously dissuading them from connecting the concerns of state politics to their own lives, Plath's stories "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit" and "The Shadow," and her novel *The Bell Jar*, all deliberately contextualize within war and its effects the lives and hardships of young girls on the home front.¹⁵ In the wartime ethic Plath communicates in these works, war and

¹⁵ I must note here that Gilbert and Gubar make a similar point in their essay "In Yeats's House: The Death and Resurrection of Sylvia Plath." Gilbert and Gubar, too, recognize that both these stories, along with much of Plath's other (later) work, show that for Plath, "the 'real world' continued to be the world of 'the war,'" referring to the last line of "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit": "That was the year the war began, and the real world, and the difference" (267). Gilbert and Gubar's recognition and analysis of the war and battles images that so heavily pepper Plath's work are astute, but, in my view, approach the work in question from a perspective that does not take Plath's political thought very seriously:

violence are decidedly not the civilization-preserving efforts of a few far from home, efforts that keep the home front a safe and peaceful place in which children's innocence is protected and preserved. Rather, war and the violent reckonings of the state profoundly affect the lives of the women and children these stories portray by defining those lives based on violence. In other words, in these stories, war does not serve to help push the world toward the peacefulness modeled by the home front; on the contrary, war distorts the perceived peacefulness of the home front until the two are, if not identical, disturbingly similar. Therefore, in these stories Plath shows that women and families must be included in the conversation about war and state politics, because not only their safety but the very patterns of their lives and their interactions with other human beings are irrevocably, and detrimentally, affected by that conversation and the violence that results from it.

"The year the war began, I was in the fifth grade at the Annie F. Warren Grammar School in Winthrop," the young female narrator of "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit" begins, "and that was the winter I won the prize for drawing the best Civil Defense signs" (*JPBD* 281). Plath wrote this story in 1955, a decade after that war—the Second World War—ended, but its echoes and influence remain in her fiction, just as they remain in the mind of the story's narrator: "Even now, thirteen years later, I can recall the changing colors of those days" (281). Some of the "colors of those days," at

"Although Plath claimed in a late radio interview to be deeply concerned with war politics," they write, "she did not have an explicitly political imagination" (297). Plath's use of images and metaphors that reference battle and warfare become, finally, tools that allow Plath to express how "the savage war between men and women [is] very like a war between sovereign states. Thus the female child's fall into the real world and the difference at the very least prefigures a fall into a sex role," Gilbert and Gubar argue (297). Surely this analysis of Plath's use of such images has merit; however, to equate Plath's use of them to the use of certain poetic tools only, rather than recognizing that they contribute to a conversation about war and state politics that Plath was very clearly engaged in from an early point in her life, is short-sighted. I hope to avoid such short-sightedness here.

least at the story's beginning, come from the Logan Airport, right across the bay from where the girl lives; the airport's lights blaze across the water, its planes' droning drowns out the sound of the waves on the shore, and its presence, to her, is like that of a holy city: "The airport was my Mecca, my Jerusalem. All night I dreamed of flying" (281). At the story's opening, then, we meet a young narrator whose life is defined by the war; she's even won an award for a school project, drawing Civil Defense signs, that depends upon the war's presence for its existence. However, the narrator's world is at the same time defined by the airport, a place that, if indirectly, connects her small part of the world to other parts of it. At this point in the story, there is little conflict between the proximity of the war and the proximity of the airport. The former connects different places in the world to each other through violence or the threat of it; the latter allows those connections to happen, too, but not through violence. Instead, in the narrator's young mind, the airport represents the glory of flight, which she connects to Superman: "Superman started invading my dreams and teaching me how to fly. [...] In the magic whirring of his cape I could hear the wings of a hundred seagulls, the motors of a thousand planes" (282). War, planes, and Superman—Civil Defense signs, magical airport lights, and comic books—all these frame the narrator's world and how she wants to move in it, and none are particularly threatening.

The main reason why they are not threatening is that, for the narrator, they are all connected to her home and to her family; they are not, at this point, causes of division or pain. Two of the people closest to her, her Uncle Frank and her bookish best friend David Sterling, help bind together the narrator's experiences of war, flight, and Superman. Of the two, Uncle Frank most clearly combines her impressions of Superman and of war. In

her dreams, she explains, Superman looks “remarkably like Uncle Frank,” a connection she repeats a few paragraphs later, this time in the context of the war, as well: “At this time my Uncle Frank was living with us while waiting to be drafted, and I was sure that he bore an extraordinary resemblance to Superman incognito” (282). Soldiers who have not embarked for the war front are, in the narrator’s mind, like Superman in his Clark Kent guise: part of the home front landscape and the civilian community, yet always on the watch for danger they will set out to defeat. With her friend David, the narrator plays “Superman games” that “made us outlaws” among the other kids, whose play is, significantly, gender-specific and -segregated: “We ignored the boys playing baseball on the gravel court and the girls giggling at dodge-ball in the dell” (282). Together, she and David make up adventures in which they, like Superman, or like her Uncle Frank, get to be heroes (the villain is played by the “sallow mamma’s boy” down the street) (282). Though David doesn’t see the resemblance between her Uncle Frank and Superman as clearly as the narrator does, he is willing to admit that Uncle Frank “was the strongest man he had ever known, and could do lots of tricks like making caramels disappear under napkins and walking on his hands” (282-3).

The connection between soldiery and Superman, and the innocuous, family-friendly ways in which the narrator sees that connection in her life, shows its first signs of breaking when the reality of the war begins to affect her school and her family life in ways that Superman doesn’t fit neatly into. “That same winter, war was declared,” the narrator writes; we infer that she is referring to the attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. She continues:

I remember sitting by the radio with Mother and Uncle Frank and feeling a queer foreboding in the air. Their voices were low and serious, and their

talk was of planes and German bombs. Uncle Frank had [*sic*] something about Germans in America being put in prison for the duration, and Mother kept saying over and over again about Daddy: “I’m only glad Otto didn’t live to see this; I’m only glad Otto didn’t live to see it come to this.” (283)

The threat of war, suddenly spoken into stark reality by the voices on the radio and of her mother and uncle, directly impacts the narrator’s family; their worry begins to alter the topography of her world.

War also directly affects the narrator’s school life. Some things, of course, remain the same: when the students in her class draw Civil Defense signs, the narrator shows pride in the fact that she bested one of the boys on her block for fifth-grade prize; it’s likely she’d do the same for any other kind of prize, regardless of its connection to the war. Other things, however, are more profoundly affected, and those effects more frightening:

Every now and then we would practice an air raid. The fire bell would ring and we would take up our coats and pencils, and file down the creaking stairs to the basement, where we sat in special corners according to our color tags, and put the pencils between our teeth so the bombs wouldn’t make us bite our tongues by mistake. Some of the little children in the lower grades would cry because it was dark in the cellar, with only the bare ceiling lights on the cold black stone. (283)

In these air raid drills, familiar tools like pencils—quite useful, for example, for not only designing Civil Defense signs but also doing math problems or practicing penmanship—are tied to the threat of bombing. These drills, too, contrast starkly with the narrator’s early euphoria at listening to the Logan Airport’s planes take off and watching the ethereal lights of its runways flicker in the light: instead of being positively tied to war, signifying freedom, joy, something of the sacred, and Superman, flight is instead part of war’s threat. The planes the narrator used to watch soar across the bay and into the sky

now send her and her classmates to a dark room underground to cower with pencils in their teeth.

The new, stark reality of the war affects the families and play of her friends, too. In their Superman games at recess, Sheldon Fein, the “mamma’s boy” the narrator and David had recruited as their villain, assumes a villainous alter-ego that could have marched off a newspaper photo rather than the pages of a comic book: “Sheldon became a Nazi and borrowed a goose step from the movies,” the narrator says (283). When Sheldon leaves school, he returns to a home where “his Uncle Macy was really over in Germany,” and his mother had begun “to grow thin and pale because she heard that Macy was a prisoner and then nothing more” (283). At home or at school, no child and no family can escape it; “the threat of war,” the narrator writes, “was seeping in everywhere” (283).

Against this foreboding backdrop, the story takes an interesting—even incongruous—turn when the narrator introduces readers to Paula Brown. Immediately after we learn about Sheldon’s imitating Nazis on the playground as his mother wastes away with worry, we meet Paula, a girl nobody really likes “because she was bossy and stuck up,” and who has an annual birthday party, which the narrator (reluctantly, we’re lead to assume) always attends “because it was for all the children on our block” (283). On the day of the birthday party, Paula meets her guests at the door “in a white organdy dress, her red hair tied up in sausage curls with a satin bow” (283). Before the other children are allowed to start eating their cake and ice cream, Paula has to show them her many presents. Her favorite present is a new snowsuit, which she models for her guests: “The snowsuit was powder blue and came in a silver box from Sweden, she said. The

front of the jacket was all embroidered with pink and white roses and bluebirds, and the leggings had embroidered snaps. She even had a little white angora beret and angora mittens to go with it” (284). Now, the narrator is clearly not too fond of Paula, and describes Paula in a way that keeps us from being very fond of her too. Paula is a spoiled, bossy, arrogant child, whom readers, myself included, dislike in part because they remember children like Paula from their own childhoods. The reason, then, that Paula’s birthday party, and Paula herself, seem incongruous additions to a story that starts “the year the war began” is the fact that both are so reminiscent of normal childhood, rather than the wartime childhood the narrator has so far been describing. Despite the war “seeping in everywhere,” despite the air raid drills and the uneasy position of German Americans, Paula Brown has her annual birthday party, and receives many presents. She even has a special snowsuit, shipped internationally from Sweden—an odd but significant detail that suggests international cooperation not tied to war efforts. Paula Brown’s party, then, is a sliver of normal childhood in this story, a piece of the narrator’s life that, however much it irritates her, is irritating because of Paula Brown being Paula Brown—not because of anything more sinister than that.

However, the threat of war seeps even into Paula Brown’s birthday party. After finally getting their cake and ice cream, the party-goers are taken to see *Snow White*; unfortunately, their parents haven’t realized that the main feature would be preceded by a war film. The film, about the torture of war prisoners in Japan, profoundly disturbs the narrator; its sudden stark reality is sharply discordant with the events of Paula’s party:

Our war games and the radio programs were all made up, but this was real, this really happened. I blocked my ears to shut out the groans of the thirsty, starving men, but I could not tear my eyes from the screen.

Finally, the prisoners pulled down a heavy log from the low rafters and jammed it through the clay wall so they could reach the fountain in the court, but just as the first man got to the water, the Japanese began shooting the prisoners dead, and stamping on them, and laughing. I was sitting on the aisle, and I stood up then in a hurry and ran out to the girls' room, where I knelt over a toilet bowl and vomited up the cake and ice cream. (284)

The narrator dreams of the prisoners that night, and finds her comic book hero cannot save her from the violent images that still echo in her mind: "No matter how hard I thought of Superman before I went to sleep, no crusading blue figure came roaring down in heavenly anger to smash the yellow men who invaded my dreams" (284).

This pivotal scene, where the birthday party suddenly becomes less a stock image of American childhood and more a cruel introduction to the reality of war, portrays part of what Plath uses this story to communicate about war's effects on those on the home front, particularly children. Thus far, the evidence of war in the story came hand-in-hand, most often, with measures taken to protect children from that evidence. The air raid drills, however terrifying, are also the best example of how children were made privy to some facts of the war for their own safety. Having young students make Civil Defense signs, and holding a contest for the best ones, seems to also be an effort to engage these children in patriotic action while simultaneously shielding them from the ugliness of war through a fun activity and competition. Similarly, the conversations about German-Americans and German bombs the narrator's mother and uncle have in her presence are in "low and serious" voices, suggesting that, while they seem not to want the narrator to be entirely ignorant of what's going on in the world (and while they know maintaining such childish ignorance is impossible), they still want to protect her from many of the details. Throughout the story, then, there is recurring evidence that the adults in the

narrator's world believe their children's knowledge of the realities of war not only should, but can be controlled; war can be waged to protect these children, and these children can also remain protected from not only war's air raids but also its gory details and images. The war film shatters this belief, however: "Mother had found out that the main feature was *Snow White* before she would let me go," the narrator says, "but she hadn't realized that there was a war picture playing with it" (284).

This new, real presence of war in the narrator's life also shatters the normalcy of her relationships with the neighborhood kids. These relationships, of course, contained a measure of antagonism before that ill-fated trip to the movies—the narrator's pitying disdain for Sheldon Fein and his penchant for dismembering insects, as well as her dislike of Paula Brown's watery-eyed bossiness, are indicative of that. But this antagonism is normal, and would have existed even without the war's intrusion. The day after the film, however, when the narrator joins a game of Chinese tag with the neighborhood kids, a new kind of malice is present in the children's play. Paula Brown, in trying to escape Jimmy Lane's tag, slides into an oil slick; her snowsuit is "smeared wet and black with oil along the side," and her white angora mittens drip "like black cat's fur" (285). There is a moment of silence, before Paula fixates on the narrator, blaming her. The rest of the children join in: "Sheldon and Paula and Jimmy and the rest of them faced me with a strange joy flickering in the back of their eyes. 'You did it, you pushed her,' they said" (285). The narrator flees her taunting peers, pelted with snowballs, determined not to run. But she cannot flee the children's new cruelty: the neighborhood kids tell their parents this lie, that the narrator pushed Paula and ruined her snowsuit, and eventually the narrator's mother and uncle agree to replace the snowsuit, even though, as

the narrator tells her Uncle Frank, she is innocent: “I told you what happened, and I can’t make it any different. Not even for you I can’t make it any different” (287). The story closes with the narrator’s new awareness not just of war’s presence, but its darkness and violence, its impact on her own life, her family, and the normal patterns of her childhood:

I lay there alone in bed, feeling the black shadow creeping up the underside of the world like a flood tide. Nothing held, nothing was left. The silver airplanes and the blue capes all dissolved and vanished, wiped away like the crude drawings of a child in colored chalk from the colossal blackboard of the dark. That was the year the war began, and the real world, and the difference. (287)

In the end, war does nothing to protect the narrator from the harsh realities of the “real world,” and the narrator’s guardians are helpless to protect her from the realities of war.

Scholars have interpreted Plath’s use of war imagery, themes, and events in this story in different ways. Gilbert and Gubar, for example, and as I noted above, consider such imagery to be primarily metaphoric, used by Plath to refer to and help define other wars and battles beyond the political or military, such as the war between the sexes (297). Ferretter, in contrast, discusses this story alongside Plath’s later (and very similar) story “The Shadow” in light of both stories’ portrayal of the uncertain place of German-Americans during the Second World War, arguing that in both stories, the injustice done to a child is paralleled by the injustice done by soldiers, and the injustice done to the descendants of German immigrants in the United States (112). In my view, the effects of war on the narrator in “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit” can be read in yet another way: this story shows how war, far from protecting those on the home front, not only threatens them, particularly the children, but also detrimentally affects children to the point of teaching them violence.

Such a perspective is consistent with the beliefs Plath shared with Neupert in a letter dated August 24, 1949. Though Plath wrote this letter six years before she wrote “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit,” both the letter and the story display the belief that people—their personalities, their beliefs, the ways they respond to others similar to and different from themselves—cannot call most of their views their own, but have inherited them from their families and their cultures. This belief is particularly true, Plath writes as she closes the letter, when it comes to children and war’s effects on them. Plath does not believe that children are inclined, by nature, to hate others or fear them; rather, she has hope that they can be taught to love others. Human beings, she writes, are not born with an instinct to kill one another, and because they are not, Plath argues, wars go against the way human beings should relate to one another: in love and community. In “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit,” Plath uses story to show this belief negatively. Children, in Plath’s view, may not be born with the innate desire to fear, hate, or hurt others; however, they can and will be taught to do so by their environments and the actions of those around them. In this particular short story, the fact that the unjust blame and taunting the children inflict on the narrator occurs *after* the children see the war film gains new significance. Before this turning point, the war’s presence, while it loomed over her family and her school, lacked the stark reality it gained for her as she watched the film. Before the film, as well, the children’s play and antics contained some animosity, but lacked the violence and the “strange joy flickering in the backs of their eyes” that the narrator endures after they scorn her and blame her for Paula’s soiled snowsuit. One part—a depressing and depressingly large one—of “the war...the real world, and the difference” is the narrator’s realization that, in a world where wars happen

and are accepted as a natural part of human behavior, children will inevitably be trained in violence and hatred, despite any natural inclination toward love.

This same pattern repeats itself in “The Shadow,” a story Plath wrote in 1959 and which is so similar to “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit” that the two are almost always discussed together in criticism.¹⁶ Just as “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit” opens with the line “the year the war began,” so also “The Shadow” begins “the winter the war began” (*JPBD* 147). The former begins by juxtaposing the war’s beginning with evidence of new violence in the narrator’s formerly normal childhood: “That was also the winter of Paula Brown’s new snowsuit,” the narrator says (281). In the latter story, as well, the war’s beginning is juxtaposed with a shift in the narrator’s previously normal childhood—in fact, in this story the two events are introduced simultaneously in the first sentence: “The winter the war began I happened to fall in the bad graces of the neighborhood for biting Leroy Kelly on the leg” (147). And just as the narrator in “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit” is introduced to a new kind of cruelty and violence at the hands of her peers, shortly after they see a war movie, so, too, is the narrator of “The Shadow,” Sadie. However, in “The Shadow,” the war’s effects on Sadie’s family and on her childish innocence are much more explicitly drawn, and have much more specific ramifications in her life.

In this story, the contrast between children’s antics and adults’ interpretations of them, and between children’s ability and adults’ ability to forgive rather than demand retribution, is very clear from the story’s beginning. In the story’s opening line, Sadie introduces readers to the incident that shapes the action of the first part of the narrative:

¹⁶ For example, both Ferretter (114) and Gilbert and Gubar (“In Yeats’s House” 267) discuss these stories together in their work.

she is guilty of biting Leroy Kelly on the leg, and the neighborhood's adult population have all sided against her in regards to the incident. The details of Sadie's alleged attack on Leroy are revealed in the next few pages, and they are startling mainly because they are not at all sinister. According to Sadie, her refusal to let Maureen, Leroy's younger brother, use scissors prompts a tickle attack from Maureen, who well knows that tickling makes Sadie "have hysterics" (149). When Sadie dodges out of reach and darts to the relative safety of a nearby rug, Leroy, at his sister's urging, pulls the rug out from under Sadie's feet and sits on Sadie's stomach to pin her while Maureen tickles away with "craven pleasure written all over her face" (149). Sadie, left with no other option, does "the one thing I was free to do. I twisted my head and sank my teeth in the bare space of skin just above Leroy's left sock...and held on until he left go of me" (149). Leroy's actions, he tells Sadie later, were inspired by a scene in a *Green Hornet* comic book, which he later loans to her; Sadie thinks perhaps that she would have done the same thing if she had had Leroy's chance, and seized the perfect opportunity to act out a scene from one of her comics. The three children, as Leroy's willingness to loan Sadie comic books suggests, quickly "come to terms" after the incident (150).

However, Sadie soon realizes that the adults in her world will not be so forgiving. "That Christmas we did not get our annual fruit cake from Mrs. Abrams; the Kellys got theirs," she says; she continues: "Even after Leroy and Maureen and I had come to terms, Mrs. Kelly didn't start up the Saturday morning coffee hours with my mother which she had broken off the week of our quarrel" (150). The "neighborhood cold front" extends even to Mr. Greenbloom, the proprietor of the shops where Sadie goes for candy and comic books. Mr. Greenbloom asks her, with cruelty that should be startling but in its

context unfortunately is not, whether her candy preferences lean toward a “little something to sharpen the teeth” (150); she flees the store without buying anything, overwhelmed by a sudden compulsion to apologize to Mr. Greenbloom, though he has accused her of nothing outright: “Why I felt compelled to explain my each move so apologetically I didn’t know” (150-1). Part of Sadie’s confusion is tied to her belief that “the issue of my quarrel with the Kellys [was] a pure one, uncomplicated by any flow of emotion from sources outside it”; though aware of “how mean people can be,” thanks to her love of comic books and her favorite radio program, “The Shadow,” Sadie has imbibed from the same sources a belief that “justice, sooner or later, would right the balance,” that her situation is just as self-contained and uncomplicated and painted in “elementary colors” as comics and radio programs have lead her to believe (151). And though, indeed, Sadie attributes her own innocent perspective on the whole affair to the black-and-white view of the world she has learned from comics, in light of Plath’s own writing about children’s innocence in both her letter to Neupert and in “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit,” it seems reasonable for us to attribute Sadie’s childlike perspective to the fact that she is a child, without any killer instinct or drive to hate, willing to come to terms with her friends and forget the incident while the adults around them still treat Sadie’s family cruelly.

Sadie’s struggle with the neighborhood’s prejudice, and her superhero-inspired belief that the good people will always win, no matter what, is interrupted by a war film—one she sees without her mother’s knowledge, for, like the mother of the narrator of “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit,” Sadie’s mother has sought to protect her daughter from the war-torn world outside: “I knew Mother would put her foot down

once and for all at my seeing a war movie ('It's not good to fill the child's mind with that trash, things are bad enough')" (152). Sadie, like the narrator in "Paula Brown," sees a film about a Japanese prison camp as part of a friend's birthday party, and she, too, is sickened by it; it gives her nightmares, and deeply shakes her comic-book sense of justice: "my sure sense of eventual justice deserted me" (152). After the day of the birthday party and the war film, other parts of Sadie's life show starker evidence of the war's looming presence—a difference between "The Shadow" and "Paula Brown" and a significant one, as in the earlier story, the narrator's school days were disrupted by air raids and Civil Defense sign drawing contests before Paula's fateful birthday party. "The peaceful rhythm of classes and play periods at the Hunnewell School was broken often now by the raucous, arbitrary ringing of the aid raid alarm," Sadie says (152). At home, too, Sadie notices a new solemnity and even bleakness in her parents' eyes and voices: "At home, my parents sat a great deal by the radio, listening, with serious faces, to the staccato briefs of the newscasters. And there were the sudden, unexplained silences when I came within hearing, the habit of gloom, relieved only by a false cheer worse than the gloom itself" (153). As her life had begun to be defined by the cruelty of her neighbors, it is now coming to be defined by the looming presence of the war, in her school, in her home, in her parents' gloom and forced cheer.

Connecting her neighbors' cruelty to the war's threatening presence is prejudice—hatred of a kind that, in her letter to Neupert, Plath believes children are not born to exhibit, but come to possess by soaking it up from their parents, their neighbors, and the mindset of "friend" versus "enemy" that is fostered by war. On their way to school a week after the fateful trip to the movie theater, Maureen Kelly reveals to Sadie

what her mother's told her about why Sadie bit Leroy: "'My mother says it's not your fault for biting Leroy,' she called out in clear, saccharine tones. 'My mother says it's because your father's German'" (153). Significant here is the fact that Maureen has learned the reason for Sadie's behavior from her *mother*; Maureen herself, as I noted above, had long made up with Sadie after the incident. Significant, too, is the fact that the reason Sadie and her family are so discriminated against is the simple fact of their ancestry, which ties them to a people group Americans have learned to call "enemy" because of war. Maureen's words, and the ways the other children begin to treat her at school—huddling away from her in groups, asking her in hushed whispers how she knows her father is not a spy—makes her angry, but also "a little scared" (154). Like hatred, fear is an emotion Plath believes is alien to children before they are taught it. The war has now taught Sadie both hatred and fear.

Finally, the war also teaches her to give up her trust in the justice and rightness that are tied, in her mind, to God; it does so by finally breaking her family apart. When Sadie returns home from her school day of whispered taunts and alienation, "determined to have it out with Mother" about her father's innocence, she finds her mother sitting in a chair in the dark, looking "small, almost shrunken," with "raw-rimmed [eyes], moist at the corners" (154). Sadie tells her mother what Maureen had said about her father, and to Sadie's surprise, her mother doesn't respond as usual; she is not surprised by Maureen's words, and she does not explain away Maureen's behavior because of her youth. Instead, she tells Sadie that her father is a German citizen, and though their family and their neighbors know that he would fight for the Allies if he had to, wartime has altered how their community sees her father. "In wartime, though, people often become frightened

and forget what they know,” Sadie’s mother says. She continues: “I even think your father may have to go away from us for a while because of this. [...] There are places out West for German citizens to live in during the war so people will feel safer about them. Your father has been asked to go to one of those” (155). The injustice of her father’s leaving, compounded by the fact that “it’s government order,” and that “God will let it happen,” as her mother tells her, deliver a final blow to Sadie’s childhood capacity for indiscriminate love and faith (155).

Like “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit,” then, “The Shadow” also shows how war, and wartime ways of thinking about others, twists children’s capacity for love and teaches them to hate and fear. In “The Shadow,” too, more so than in “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit,” Plath shows how war not only distorts children’s innocence, and not only disrupts neighborhood communities, but also tears families apart. Far from protecting the children, women, and families on the home front, allowing them to live in relative safety apart from war’s violence, war instead infects the very homes and families it seeks to protect with violence, discord, lack of trust, and hatred of others. In both of these stories, then, Plath again articulates her view that women and children must not be left out of the conversation about war and state politics, because the results and implications of that conversation directly affect them.

Further, these two stories, written in 1955 and 1959, bookend Plath’s time reading English at Cambridge, and the stories’ emphasis on war’s destructive effects on community shows negatively what Plath articulates positively in some of her letters to her friend Marcia Brown during these years. Both stories show the importance of human community and love by portraying the anguish the breakdown of community causes; in

Plath's letters to Brown, she expresses her joy when people from different cultures and places can come together in friendship and discuss—among other things—politics. In a letter dated March 21, 1956, Plath describes how much she enjoys Cambridge from a political point of view, and immediately segues into a description of all the different people she's met from different places and different political allegiances. She mentions arguing Arabs and Jews, communists from South Africa who plan to return to their home country to fight government-sponsored racial discrimination, and an Asian man who is translating some classic Greek literature into Persian. Cambridge, and Europe, for Plath, are places where different cultures and nations mingle and meet, and where diverse political perspectives are always enfolded, always tied to people with whom she can build friendships and community. Debates do rage around her, as she notes in a letter to Brown on December 15 of the same year, after the bombing in Egypt or the riots in Budapest; overall, though, her tone does not suggest despair over discord but rather excitement over her ability to involve herself in a political conversation, and with the people having that conversation. Further, she finds a place among a group of people bent on ending violence, war, and oppression of others in the world, rather than committed to war as an answer to any political problem. Thus, while "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit" and "The Shadow" show Plath's view that human relationships and children's innocence are casualties of the wars designed to protect them, in her letters to Marcia Brown in her time at Cambridge, Plath shows that political debate—even heated political debate—that aims to help others rather than harm them is energizing, and forms profound connections between people who otherwise might never meet.

Just as the two stories of young girls' loss of childhood innocence in "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit" and "The Shadow" are, from their first sentences, put in the context of war, so, too, Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* places the descent of the bell jar upon Esther Greenwood in the context of a major Cold War political event: the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953. And though the novel is very much an autobiographical one, reading the novel alongside the political and Cold War events it both references and was written amidst shows how Plath's own political experiences and thought heavily influence many aspects of the novel. Such is the case made by Robin Peel; in the second chapter of his book *Writing Back*, Peel argues that: "It is the fact of the novel being written among these 1960s Cold War discourses that gives it such power; the mushroom cloud, like the bell jar, can descend at any moment" (46). Later in the same chapter, Peel connects his reading of *The Bell Jar* against its Cold War context to issues of gender more specifically: "there is...some evidence that these two themes (electrocution [*sic*] and the control of women's bodies) do not simply reveal a specifically feminist critique of the patriarchy, but one that is partly inspired by geo-political concerns about the arms race" (50). Peel's argument here dovetails neatly with the argument I have been making throughout this chapter: that Plath, by combining the personal with the political, and by expanding the definition of "political" to mean more than just matters of war and the state, enters into the conversations about politics and war of her moment in history, and shows how she and other women must be involved in, rather than protected from, these conversations, because the matters they concern directly—and negatively—affect women and their families. "The Rosenbergs opening," Peel states, and I agree, "provides a metonymic [*sic*] and individualized reminder of the

arms race and its lethal consequences which is consistent with Plath's individualized but no less felt response to contemporary world events in 1961" (50). As the rest of Peel's lengthy analysis already explores, in detail, how *The Bell Jar* interacts with its Cold War context, I will refrain from repeating it here.

However, though Peel's analysis is astute, and though my views on the relationship between *The Bell Jar* and its Cold War context are largely in line with his, it is incredibly important to emphasize that the way Plath blends personal and political concerns in *The Bell Jar* is not unique in her career, nor is it evidence of an impulse unique to her late career. In Peel's analysis, for example, Plath's June 19, 1953 diary entry about the Rosenbergs, which I discussed briefly at the beginning of this section, is mentioned only to help explain the fact that the novel "has been read—and dismissed—as a thinly disguised diary. Esther's experiences not only mirror Plath's," Peel writes, "but even the political contextualization is lifted straight from the journals of the period" (49). In my view, however, discussing this passage of Plath's journals only in light of the temptation to read the novel only autobiographically, or only in order to show how Plath found a place in later writing to incorporate and articulate maturely the underdeveloped political fancies of her youth, disregards the remarkably consistent thread of political thought that is woven through Plath's work, from the diary entry of 1953, to "Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit" in 1955, to her letters to Marcia Brown in 1956, to "The Shadow" in 1959, and in *The Bell Jar* in the early 1960s. Just as the two short stories bookend Plath's letters to Marcia Brown, and all three help flesh out Plath's views on war's impact on children, family, and the world community, so, too, Plath's diary entry about the Rosenbergs and her use of it to open *The Bell Jar* also act as bookends to

the various expressions, both artistic and epistolary, of her thought on politics and war, helping to further define it.

“Nobody very much thinks about how big a human life is,” Plath writes in her journal on June 19, 1953, “with all the nerves and sinews and reactions and responses that it took centuries and centuries to evolve” (*J* 541). This meditation on the bigness and intricacy of each human life, a point Plath makes to refute the idea of war as protective, and to scold those who display a twisted pleasure at the prospect of execution, is one Plath rearticulates in each of these later stories, letters, and novel. The narrators of “Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit” and “The Shadow” both experience what happens when the precious bigness of their lives, and their families’ lives, is overlooked in favor of hatred. The men and women Plath interacts with at Cambridge, and their camaraderie despite difference, show, to her, what happens when the “bigness of human life” is more important than cultural difference, when justice for the persecuted is valued above the accumulation of power or the need to preserve oneself at the expense of others. And Esther Greenwood’s descent into madness in *The Bell Jar*, portrayed alongside her frequent meditations on how her society disregards and limits the “bigness of [female] human life,” shows again how, if people assume a political position that does not question war or the violence done ostensibly to preserve the state, rather than its citizens, they have assumed a position that is finally destructive, not just to their enemies but also to the young women in their midst.

A Crystallization of What Already Was: Plath’s Late Thoughts on War and Politics

“The issues of our time that preoccupy me at the moment,” Plath writes in a February 1962 essay entitled “Context,” “are the incalculable genetic effects of fallout

and a documentary article on the terrifying, mad, omnipotent marriage of big business and the military in America” (*JPBD* 65). In this first sentence of the essay, Plath has already connected the personal and the political, deliberately and, for those who have traced her political concerns throughout her work, not at all unexpectedly. Warfare’s effects, Plath writes, have the potential to impact humanity not in any abstract way, but down to each individual’s genetic code. Marriage, and its potential in her life for the profoundest acts of creation—poetry, stories, homes, and children—is twisted in this sentence, applied with dark irony to the “marriage of big business and the military,” a union whose potential is in its ability to destroy all that marriages like hers have created. Plath continues:

Does this influence the kind of poetry I write? Yes, but in a sidelong fashion. I am not gifted with the tongue of Jeremiah, though I may be sleepless enough before my vision of the apocalypse. My poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but about a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark. They are not about the terrors of mass extinction, but about the bleakness of the moon over a yew tree in a neighboring graveyard. Not about the testaments of tortured Algerians, but about the night thoughts of a tired surgeon. (*JPBD* 65)

Here, Plath leaves little room for doubt in the reader’s mind about the connection in her work between the political and the personal. For her, and for her poetry, the “issues of our time” cannot be abstracted from the human lives that those issues and their consequences directly affect. As she wrote to Marcia Brown Stern in December 1961, Plath strives to find ways of “putting abstract principles into groundroofs action.” Her poetry is certainly political, then, because it shows how the political touches the lives of the people who live in struggling, domineering, or otherwise warring states. The next paragraph of the essay makes this conclusion even clearer:

In a sense, these poems are deflections. I do not think they are an escape. For me, the real issues of our time are the issues of every time—the hurt and wonder of loving; making in all its forms—children, loaves of bread, paintings, buildings; and the conservation of life of all people in all places, the jeopardizing of which no abstract doubletalk of ‘peace’ or ‘implacable foes’ can excuse. (*JPBD* 65)

Thus, in Plath’s work, a thumb nearly beheaded by a knife cut connects the cook in her kitchen to a “trepanned veteran,” a “saboteur, Kamikaze man” (“Cut,” *CP* 235-6); worry over nuclear fallout and its effects provokes not interest in the political machinations behind nuclear war but its possible effects on a child, “the thing I am given, / A love / Of two wet eyes and a screech” (“Thalidomide,” *CP* 252); and the horrors of the Holocaust are horrible not only as evidence of the monstrosities states and state leaders are capable of toward other nations, but also of more particular horrors in families and relationships (“Daddy,” *CP* 222-4).

The poems I mention briefly immediately above, and the references to political concerns and images of war that figure in them (all of them are *Ariel* poems), have been heavily analyzed by Plath scholars; indeed, a large body of Plath scholarship focuses on or otherwise involves the *Ariel* poems. I mention several scholars who discuss the Holocaust imagery in the *Ariel* poems in the review of criticism. The work of one of these scholars, Al Strangeways, is worth further mention; in his book *Sylvia Plath: The Shaping of Shadows*, Strangeways spends a chapter discussing the relationship between Plath’s poetry and the political realities in which Plath lived, and though he does not limit his discussion to the *Ariel* poems, tracing the political concerns displayed in some of Plath’s earlier poems like “The Thin People,” he concludes his chapter with discussion of poems from *Ariel*, particularly “Daddy” and “Fever 103°.” The most detailed study of the relationship between the *Ariel* poems and the political landscape—and the looming threat

of the Cold War—in which they were written is, again, Robin Peel’s. In *Writing Back*, Peel examines drafts of the *Ariel* poems in detail by charting their composition along the timeline of the Cuban Missile Crisis, among other evidence of international tension during the time when Plath was writing the poems (180-198). Peel also draws an explicit connection between the poems’ composition, the Cold War events surrounding it, and the gender discourses in which it occurred, referring to Marilyn Monroe’s death and the significance of its lesson:

Monroe, who in America had appeared in Plath’s dreams, had constructed herself and performed as the woman that men demanded, but it had not brought her happiness. Plath, like many women of her generation, was becoming increasingly aware of the significance of that. Cold war events, such as the Missile Crisis, were threatening to deny women the opportunity to learn from this lesson. The voice of the *Ariel* poems protests that it should not be so. (180)

The height of the tension and urgency in Plath’s composition of the *Ariel* poems, Peel argues, almost exactly parallels the tension of the “Cuban affair”; the “madness of the world,” he maintains, “accelerated and induced her own feelings about the madness and destructive tendencies of the men and women around her” (183). Again, for Plath, the movements of states gain their significance in how they move the people who make them up.

As the intersections between much of Plath’s late writing—the *Ariel* poems and *The Bell Jar*, in particular—have already been the subject of much scholarly analysis, my focus in this section will be on the letters Plath wrote during the last half-decade of her life, particularly the ones she wrote to her mother. In her letters to Aurelia Schober Plath during her years at Cambridge, her time teaching at Smith, and her last years in England with her children and with (and without) her husband, her concerns about war and

politics are more heavily focused on the Cold War and nuclear armament than her previous writing. However, like her other writing on topics of politics and warfare, these letters again interweave her political concerns tightly, inseparably with the concerns of women, children, and families. Further, Plath again emphasizes world community and relationship as a bulwark against the threat caused by international strife.

“I really want to be informed on politics,” Plath writes to her mother in a letter dated October 9, 1955, at the beginning of her time at Cambridge (*LH* 187). Plath’s desire to be more informed about politics is something she says she will be able to fulfill by, perhaps, joining the Labour Club, as it “seems to have an excellent program” to help her do so. Joining the Labour Club will also add a social element to Plath’s political involvement, and read less charitably, it seems as if Plath’s wish to be politically informed is a thin shell over the less serious desire to have fun, make friends, and satisfy curiosity. Right after she writes that she “really want[s] to be informed on politics,” Plath continues:

I am definitely not a Conservative, and the Liberals are too vague and close to the latter. I shall also investigate the Socialists, and may, just for fun, go to a meeting or two of the Communist Party (!) here later on. Anyhow, I hope to join a group where I can meet people socially who share my interests, instead of just viewing them from afar after lectures. (*LH* 187)

Her use of the phrase “just for fun” most contributes to a reading that suggests Plath’s interest in politics is less than serious. However, given what we know of Plath and her repeated emphasis on the idea that good international relations are built on loving interpersonal relationships, this paragraph is less about girlish curiosity and more in keeping with the way in which politics has interested Plath throughout her life: it is a way

of meeting other people, of forging bonds that warfare and state politics might break, discourage, or devalue.

Plath continues to emphasize this idea in later letters; she also genders it. In a letter dated November 26, 1955, Plath writes to her mother about the Amateur Dramatic Club (ADC), one of the extracurricular activities she took on at Cambridge. “I enjoy *working* with these boys and girls to create something and not just sitting around to talk and gossip and be passive,” she writes, saying that she is “too much a part of this world to become a passive beholder” (*LH* 199). Plath’s aversion to being a “passive beholder” is, of course, tied to her decisive rejection of a scholar’s life, the life of one of the “bluestocking grotesques, who know about life second-hand” who populate the female faculty at Cambridge (*LH* 219); for Plath, “people are still infinitely more important...than books” (*LH* 195). It is also tied to her political interests, and shapes the way she thinks about politics. In the same letter in which she talked about the ADC, Plath compares her joy at receiving packages of articles from home to the joy a soldier stationed overseas would feel upon receiving letters from home:

You have no idea how I love such juicy collections of items: I understand how important it was to send letters and news of art and incidental home affairs to the soldiers overseas: it keeps the image of home alive and vital, for it is by specific details that we recreate the atmosphere of family and love (*LH* 199).

Topics like war and politics are clearly on Plath’s mind, for her to have this analogy at the ready; however, her concern is again not about large abstract matters but for the individual soldier with whose separation from home Plath now feels she can empathize. She also presents yet again the “atmosphere of family and love” as something that can ameliorate the effects of international strife upon the individual.

This perspective is even more clear in a later letter to Aurelia, dated April 26, 1956, when Plath describes going to a diplomatic party thrown by Soviet ambassadors at the “posh Claridge Hotel, with the hammer and sickle waving over the door” (*LH* 241). She meets the Nigerian Commissioner and his laughing wife, sees “Khrushchev and Bulganin from inches in a press of people” and even shakes the hand of “dear, white-bearded little” Bulganin right before joining in on a chorus of “For he’s a jolly good fellow” in his honor; a British radio man hisses in her ear, ““They’ll never let you back in the States if you sing that!”” (*LH* 242). Plath ends her time at the party by “toasting Russo-American relations in vodka with a charming blond chap working in commerce”; the two agree that “if we could meet each other as simple people who wanted to have families and jobs and a good life, there would never be any wars, because we would make such friends” (*LH* 242). At this party, and in Plath’s description of it, two things have happened. First, Plath has quite literally entered the international conversation about war and politics by entering the party and conversing with the partygoers; indeed, her presence there is only, and only potentially, odd because she is an American, not because she is a woman. And second, in addition to affirming the rightness of women’s involvement in matters of international politics, she closes her narration of the night’s events by again emphasizing the importance of human relationship and family. If people met each other as individuals who want “families and jobs and a good life,” they could make an end to war.

Plath repeats this sentiment in a letter on November 6 of the same year. The letter begins with a long paragraph cataloging the “Hungarian and Suez affairs,” how “Britain’s crazy hope for success [in Hungary]...covers the real cry of the Hungarians” and disgusts

her, and how Britain's actions (or lack thereof) both in the case of the Hungarian revolution and its bloody aftermath, and in the occupation of the Suez canal, have sparked "riots in London" and have made Plath feel "stunned and sick. The whole world...was utterly mad, raving mad" (*LH* 284). Plath's response to the world's madness is to live a life dedicated to peace and creation:

We will come to work in American and then want to find some corner of the world...and go there and try to live a creative, honest life. If every soldier refused to take arms, there would be no wars; but no one has the courage to be the first to live according to Christ and Socrates, because in a world of opportunists they would be martyred. Well, both of us are deeply sick. The creative forces of nature are the only forces which give me any peace now, and we want to become part of them; no war, after these mad incidents, has any meaning for us. All I think of are the mothers and children in Russia, in Egypt, and know they don't want men killed.... It is wrong to kill; all rationalizations of defense and making peace by killing and maiming for decades are crazy... (*LH* 284)

In this letter, we read again of Plath's conviction that killing is wrong and unnatural, something that people, particularly women and children, do not want others to do in their name, a conviction she also put to paper as a high school student writing to her German pen-pal. Plath also emphasizes the "mothers and children in Russia, in Egypt," saying that they are "all I think of"; again, she points out that the real victims of warfare are those that "rationalizations of defense and making peace" actually end up threatening. And here, we also read of an emphasis on creation over destruction that she repeats in the "Context" article discussed above, where she includes childbearing in her list of "making in all its forms." Warmongering threatens women and children, but women and children and families can resist it and create instead.

The intersections between Plath's political concerns and her concerns about the future of family and love in a post-nuclear world are drawn most clearly, in her late

writing, in a letter she wrote to her mother on April 21, 1960, about a protest she attended in London with Ted and her infant daughter Frieda. “Last Sunday...I had an immensely moving experience and attended the arrival of the Easter weekend marchers from the atomic bomb plant at Aldermason to Trafalgar Square in London,” she writes to Aurelia (*LH* 378). The people gathered at this protest are an astonishing mixture of races, ages, and walks of life—the kind of international community Plath had longed for and written about for over a decade:

I saw the first of the 7-mile-long column appear—red and orange and green banners, “Ban the Bomb!” etc., shining and swaying slowly. Absolute silence. I found myself weeping to see the tan, dusty marchers, knapsacks on their backs—Quakers and Catholics, Africans and whites, Algerians and French—40 percent were London housewives. I felt proud that the baby’s first real adventure should be as a protest against the insanity of world-annihilation. Already a certain percentage of unborn children are doomed by fallout and no one knows the cumulative effects of what is already poisoning the air and sea. (*LH* 378)

Plath is emotionally affected to the point of weeping by not only the purpose all of these protesters are gathered to pursue, but also, and more significantly, by the people who make up this group of protesters. The group is composed of people of at least two religious leanings, of different cultures and races, of London housewives, and of children like Frieda. The Cold War’s threats still loom; short months later, Plath would write to her mother about her worry of the Strontium 90 level in milk, of the “fallout-shelter craze” in the States (*LH* 434), of the “ghastly H-bomb sermon” preached at a local church she has begun attending so Frieda can go to Sunday school (*LH* 449). However, the kind of gloriously intercultural community, one of which women and children were an integral part, that gathered in Trafalgar Square had to seem like a shining example of human beings united together for “the conservation of life of all people in all places, the

jeopardizing of which no abstract doubletalk of ‘peace’ or ‘implacable foes’ can excuse”—or silence (“Context,” *JPBD* 65).

Complications: Writing against the Home Front / War Front Dichotomy from within It

Throughout her work, then, Plath frequently and emphatically asserts that women and children are always implicated in and threatened by war and the concerns of the state, strongly urging readers to recognize that women and children must therefore not be kept out of the conversations about these issues, but rather involved and able to voice and pursue their concerns. Despite this strong thread in Plath’s work, a thread I have spent this chapter tracing, alongside it exists another: she values, consistently, some elements of traditional femininity that often seem at odds with her frequent protests against the unfair demands—and, in some respects, the depressing lack of demands—her society placed on women. While the complexity, and sometimes interestingly contradictory nature, of Plath’s feminism has implications for all scholarship her work, it has particular implications for this study. In my view, all of Plath’s responses and challenges to the myth of a feminine war front and masculine war front are complicated by the fact that these challenges are written from within that myth rather than against it. In the end, then, despite her position that women (and children) must be involved in the conversation about war because they are always implicated in it, a position she consistently expresses across her life in journal entries, letters, fiction, visual art, and poetry, that position always exists in tension with her allegiance to certain aspects of femininity that in many ways fit neatly within the gendered home front / war front paradigm. Because of this tension, Plath’s writing about politics and war succeeds if its goal is to affirm some aspects of the separation of society into “feminine” and “masculine” spheres, while

giving challenge to aspects of the gendered home front / war front dichotomy. Plath does not succeed, however, in writing past this dichotomy.

Other scholars have discussed the complex relationship Plath has with the expectations for men and women's behavior, work, and desire during her lifetime. Ferretter, for example, discussing Plath's writing for *Mademoiselle* as a guest editor in 1953, notes that Plath had a "complex relationship to the gender discourses in which she grew up," and that "she could write fluently, indeed appear with her entire person, in precisely the kind of discourse against which her work is also a protest" (116). Ferretter also notes Plath's apparent refusal to discriminate between women's magazines like the *Ladies' Home Journal* and more "serious," literary magazines when writing and marketing her work. Marsha Bryant makes a similar point when she argues that Plath scholars should consider Plath's work for the *Ladies' Home Journal* as "an alternative archive for Plath" (212), rather than evidence of what critics like Zoe Heller calls "a fake, *Ladies' Home Journal* Sylvia" (30). Bryant is critical, as the above statement suggests, of critics and scholars who "tend to see the everyday world of cooking and cleaning as diametrically opposed to her writing," who, like A. Alvarez, would overlook parts of Plath's body of work because they feel "that housewifery 'effaced' her true self" (213). Diane Middlebrook, too, offers a similar perspective, noting in her book *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath—A Marriage* that Plath "viewed cooking as a practice that advanced her aim of developing a writing style grounded in womanly experience" (90). There is in Plath scholarship, then, a distinct camp that sees Plath's creative pursuits as occurring both within and against the gender discourses she was influenced by and grew up in,

rather than occurring despite those discourses, and sometimes unfortunately under their influence.

However, despite the fact that it is crucial to give credence to the ideas of gender and gender roles present in Plath's work—and to *all* aspects of those ideas—especially if our scholarship aims to consider Plath seriously as a writer and a thinker, there are discrepancies and contradictions in those ideas that we cannot overlook. Further, we must consider what such discrepancies mean for our discussions of Plath's thought on various issues. In the case of the argument at hand, I must examine how these contradictions influence Plath's writing about politics and war, and how these issues relate to the gender discourses she write within. For example, how can Plath write in one place in her journal of her intense frustration with the demands placed upon her, while writing pages later of her need to conform to those demands? Expressing her frustration, Plath writes in her notes on her meetings with her psychologist: "Who am I angry at? Myself. No, not yourself. Who is it? It is my mother and all the mothers I have known who have wanted me to be what I have not felt like really being from my heart and at the society which seems to want us to be what we do not want to be from our hearts: I am angry at these people and images" (*J* 437). A few months later, however, Plath seems to want—and to want desperately—some level of conformity:

Suddenly everything is ominous, ironic, deadly. If I could not have children- - - and if I do not ovulate how can I? - - - how can they make me? - - - I would be dead. Dead to my woman's body. Intercourse would be dead, a dead-end. My pleasure no pleasure, a mockery. My writing a hollow and failing substitute for real life, real feeling, instead of a pleasant extra, a bonus flowering and fruiting. Ted should be a patriarch. I a mother. (*J* 500)

The overwhelming consistency throughout Plath's life of her perspective on the relationship between discourses of gender and discourses of war and politics makes the strange, apparent *inconsistency* of her views on those gender discourses in particular all the more striking. How is it that Plath can so passionately, and from multiple genres, attack the gendered home front / war front dichotomy that demands a masculine violence to protect a peaceful feminine home front, while simultaneously valuing the kind of domestic peace that partially sustains such a dichotomy?

Elshtain's words in *Women and War* can help further define just what is happening in Plath's work where this dichotomy is concerned. War, and war stories, are seductive, Elshtain writes:

War seduces us in part because we continue to locate ourselves *inside* its prototypical emblems and identities. Men fight as avatars of a nation's sanctioned violence. Women work and weep and sometimes protest within the frame of discursive practices that turn one out, militant mother and pacifist protester alike, as the collective 'other' to the male warrior. These identities are underpinnings for decision and action, nonetheless real for being symbolic. It is my contention that such 'constellations of enshrined ideas' ...entangle us in webs of anticipated actions and reactions. (3-4)

Elshtain argues that gendered "prototypical emblems and identities" persist in Western culture as part of the mythos surrounding war and its stories,¹⁷ and we in turn fit ourselves within those predetermined identities, perhaps because they are so persistent as to seem all-encompassing, without any option outside of them. The persistence of this myth of gender as it relates to war is, in my view, at the very least one of the main reasons why a woman like Plath, so certain in so many places across her work that women's experiences and voices are related to, valuable to, and must be included in, any discussion of waging war, can also write in her journal a sentence like this one: "I can not

¹⁷ On the relationship, deeply intertwined, between war and war stories, Elshtain notes Nancy Hurton's point that "war imitates war narrative imitating war" (48).

draw on James' [a friend and war veteran] drama: war, nations, parachute drops, hospitals in trenches - my woman's ammunition is chiefly psychic and aesthetic: love & lookings" (*J* 343). Plath insists, throughout her work, that matters of war and state politics implicate women and children and therefore should involve them. However, at the same time she continues to locate herself "within the frame of discursive practices that turn[s her] out" as an "'other' to the male warrior" (Elshtain 3-4); she simultaneously writes herself and women like her into and out of the conversation about war and state politics of her day.

Passing judgment on Plath for some perceived lack of progressivism, or perceived inability to embrace some tenet of feminism, that would have enabled her to see and write past this contradiction would be, at best, both uncharitable and ill-advised; at worst, it robs Plath of the agency to articulate her own views and of the intelligence and biting wit she uses to do so. Doubtless, this contradiction has implications for the study of the relationship between Plath's work and the views on war and state politics that emerge from it. For Plath, the divide between the masculine space of the war front and the feminine space of the home front is one that can (and should) be bridged, and talked over, but not one that can be closed—or not, unless all of humanity embrace a humanitarian pacifism that itself fits into the gendered dichotomy Elshtain identifies. However, the most striking element of Plath and her community-focused pacifism is that, in it as in many others of her views, Plath is consistently, irrefutably convinced that it is possible for all people to empathize with others who are different from them, though those differences may be immutable. Such empathy is possible, for Plath, through relationships, and through simple human love.

In her collage of Cold War images, a piece of visual art she composed in 1960, Plath shows the necessity of such empathy by constructing an image of its failure.¹⁸ In one corner, part of an ad for a model train set (aimed at adult men, not young boys) shows two eager men in business attire leaning excitedly over a toy train track. They seem to be cheering on what lies at the end of the track: the cutout image of a bomber jet, pointed at the womb of a demure woman in a swimsuit, eyes downcast, also part of an advertisement; her tagline reads “Every man wants his woman on a pedestal.” In the upper left-hand corner, opposite the man-boys playing with their train set, are pasted the images of a man and a woman, each in a sleeping mask, their faces turned away from each other; the legend next to them reads “It’s ‘His and Her Time’ all over America.” Plath’s work shows a distinct difference between “His” and “Her” concerns in matters of state politics and war. In this collage, Plath uses an image composed of fragments to portray the disastrous effects not necessarily of this difference, but of the failure, particularly on the part of men, to recognize the threat one poses to the other. While boys play games with their wartime toys, she suggests, blindfolded against the concerns of those around them, they annihilate that which they claim to be protecting: the women on their pedestals, and the potential for human creation rather than destruction that they carry within themselves. This collage, as Peel has argued, is representative of Plath’s late, mature political thought; she uses a complex arrangement of found images to portray a complex cluster of ideas about the Cold War, its players and its pawns.

However, this collage is also representative of the thoughts of war and politics that she had had for much of her life, one that sees blindness to others’ concerns as the chief cause of war and its destructive, and empathetic relationship as the chief building

¹⁸ This collage can be found in the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College.

block toward peace. This collage, which shows the necessity of such empathy negatively, illustrating what happens when it does not exist, finds a correlating, positive image in another piece of Plath's visual art: the cover of her eighth grade history project on the First World War. This art piece is primarily watercolor, its lines and colors soft and vibrant where the collage's were sharp and black-and-white. In it, a young girl in a red sweater sits at a table, a book open before her, her face turned away, a tear running down her cheek. A thought bubble, comic-book style, hovers about her head; imagining warfare, she sees a soldier in a trench with a gun, fire blasting from it, while another soldier lies bleeding on the ground nearby. While the girl's image is clear, outlined in black so that she does not fade into the background or become muddy (as watercolors might), the images of the soldiers are less distinct and more impressionistic: they are the girl's impressions of a war she has never seen, and only read about. The division between her experiences and those of the soldiers in her book and in her mind is, in many ways, impermeable. However, this division does not make empathy impossible, as shown by the tear on her cheek. She can care about, and weep for, people she has never met, whose experiences she can never live.

It is this possibility of empathy that Plath emphasizes throughout her work. War, and the games of state men play waging it, are ultimately destructive; moreover, they destroy the very stuff of the feminine home front, of human life, they purport to defend. Empathy, and the human relationships in which that empathy begins, are both challenge and answer to that destructive power. However, Plath's pacifistic emphasis on human relationships, her trust in what Elshtain calls "utopian fantasies of world government or total disarmament," fit neatly into the very gendered discourses that perpetuate war

because they conceive of international relations as a fight—either through the use of violence or by battling for the renunciation of violence. Despite this, Plath’s consistently, and often emphatically, articulated perspective on the relationship between the home front and the war games that threaten it indeed proves that we should read Plath’s words to Peter Orr without irony. She is indeed a “rather political person,” and one whose views and values on issues of politics and war emphasize, over and over again throughout her life, that the concerns of women are the concerns of all humanity; indeed, only by considering those concerns will the destructive possibilities in a Cold War world be pacified.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Some quick, however slight, therapy”: Writing War Obliquely and Rebuilding Community in J.D. Salinger’s War Stories

When Holden Caulfield decides to kill some time by going to see a war movie, he reflects that “It was probably the worst thing I could’ve done” (*The Catcher in the Rye* 137). The movie is about an English soldier “that was in the war and loses his memory in the hospital and all,” a soldier who falls in love with a girl over a shared interest in *Oliver Twist* and starts a publishing company with her, learns he is a duke along the way, recovers his memory, and inadvertently sets his ex-fiancée up with his new girl’s alcoholic brother; the film “ends up with everybody at this long dinner table laughing their asses off” (139). Holden tells the whole story because “it isn’t that I’d *spoil* it for you or anything. There isn’t anything to *spoil*” (139). Holden, and many of Salinger’s readers as well, have heard this phony kind of story told many times, in many places, before.

The worst part about his cinematic experience is not the movie, however; it is the “lady sitting next to [Holden] who cried all through the goddam picture. The phonier it got, the more she cried” (139). Though her tears might suggest she’s “kindhearted as hell,” to Holden, she’s just the opposite, ignoring the boredom—and need of a bathroom break—of the little kid with her so as not to miss any of the movie. She prefers the phony story, disregarding the discomfort of the person in her care.

Holden’s contempt for this phony kind of war story, and for listeners who react like this woman, reflect a view of these kinds of war stories and these kinds of listeners

that permeates Salinger's fiction. For many readers, this kind of storytelling about war might see normal: an ex-soldier, or even a filmmaker's depiction of an ex-soldier, tells an uplifting tale of hope wrested from war's hardship, as a female audience listens raptly, tears spilling from her eyes. However, throughout his work, Salinger excoriates this (explicitly gendered) pattern of telling and hearing war stories. In its place, his work suggests a different view, one that refuses to divide war experience along gender lines, eschews phoniness, and ultimately promotes healing instead of sentimental tears.

J.D. Salinger's writing about war, unlike that of many other writers, is uniquely egalitarian; it does not discriminate along gender lines where the ability and authority to tell war stories is concerned. Across the pages of Salinger's novel and short stories, men, women, and children all have war experiences, and all of them face grief and trauma as a result of those experiences. This shared experience, indiscriminate of gender or age, allows men and women, adults and children, families and friends, to unite in and communicate their grief in ways that promote healing—or at least “some quick, however slight, therapy” (*Nine Stories* 169).

Coupled with this view, however, is the fact that Salinger's work also excoriates two specific gender constructions, one of self-obsessed femininity and one of warmongering masculinity. They are depicted as harmful, and these gender constructions are incarnations of phoniness; those characters who embody them cause grief and division rather than fostering understanding and healing. These characters are also, in almost every case, closely related to, married to, or supposedly good friends of people who have had traumatic war experiences, and part of their devastating phoniness is their failure to relate to their close family and friends in ways that alleviate rather than

exacerbate grief. They are responsible, even primarily responsible, for driving a wedge between soldier and civilian, between war front and home front, because their very phoniness keeps real human connection and communication from happening.

Connecting these ideas is a view on war stories that, first, rejects any idea that they are told to advance this warmongering brand of masculinity and, second, rejects a hearer who either personifies this self-obsessed femininity or expects a war story full of glorious soldiery. Telling war stories, in Salinger's work, should be done in the right context—the family or close relationship, every member of which can claim some form of war-related experience. Such stories should also be told honestly and obliquely, relating truly the traumatic effects of war experience without narrating those experiences explicitly. Salinger's work emphasizes the idea that war experience affects a community, and that war stories told within that community—and in the right way—can help people in those communities reunite and recover.

Review of Criticism

Salinger's war experience and the ways in which it shaped his writing are topics seldom addressed in the scholarship about his work. The extent to which Salinger was involved in the Second World War is a subject most thoroughly investigated by his biographers, most notably Ian Hamilton and Kenneth Slawenski. Those scholars who do discuss Salinger's war experience, relating it to his fiction, do so with some variety, though all agree that the strongest link between Salinger's fiction and his war experience is that of trauma and recovery. One critic, Eberhard Alsen, connects the nervous breakdowns of Sergeant X in "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor" and Seymour Glass in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" to Salinger's own nervous breakdown, which Alsen

connects not to “shell shock” but to Salinger’s involvement in liberating one or more concentration camps (107). Another scholar, John Wenke, in his book *J.D. Salinger: A Study of the Short Fiction*, emphasizes the distinct difference between Salinger’s war writing and that of other writers: “Unlike Mailer, Heller, and Vonnegut, J.D. Salinger is rarely associated with the art of the war story,” he writes. This may be because, Wenke continues, Salinger’s work primarily “explore[s] the physical and psychological losses war inflicts on the soldier” (15), insistently “debunk[ing] the sentimentalized popularizations of war” (16). Similarly, Bradley R. McDuffie calls Sergeant X and Esme’s meeting a “half-hour conversation with a young woman who has lost her parents [that] becomes the basis for the fiction and the soldier’s recovery” (96). William F. Purcell, in an essay with the rather direct title “World War II and the Early Fiction of J.D. Salinger,” also distinguishes deliberately between the same group of war writers—Mailer, Vonnegut, and Heller—and Salinger; unlike the former three, “in which the insanity, immorality, and brutality of war is the subject, in Salinger’s stories the war is more an unavoidable circumstance,” which “intrudes into the character’s private world and forces him to consider those things about life that he values most” (79). For Purcell, Salinger’s war writing is “less a reflection on the debasing inhumanity of war than it is an insistence on maintaining hope in the face of dire adversity” (79). Other scholarship on the relationship between Salinger and war tends to focus on the intersections between *The Catcher in the Rye* and the Cold War period.¹

¹ See, for example, Alan Nadel’s analysis of Holden Caulfield’s rhetoric in his essay “Rhetoric, Sanity, and the Cold War: The Significance of Holden Caulfield’s Testimony,” Pamela Hunt Steinle’s book *In Cold Fear: The Catcher in the Rye Censorship Controversies and Postwar American Character*, as well as Leerom Medovoi’s essay “Democracy, Capitalism, and American Literature: The Cold War Construction of J.D. Salinger’s Paperback Hero.” As these works concern the culture of paranoia, conformity, and resistance to conformity during the Cold War, and discuss Salinger’s involvement in WWII little to not at all, I will not address them in depth here.

Though Purcell and Wenke are right to distinguish sharply between Salinger and other well-known WWII writers, and though all three of these scholars are correct to point out that Salinger's work concerning the war deals much more with its traumatic effects on the soldiers involved rather than the brutality and inhumanity of war itself, none of the scholarship concerning Salinger and war discusses it in light of its distinctly egalitarian view of war experience and its effects on individuals and communities. A more complete understanding of the role of war and war stories in Salinger's work must consider the role of three things in that work: first, what specific gender constructions perpetuate war and prevent communication and healing between war front and home front; second, who has war experiences and thus the authority to narrate those experiences; and third, what those stories should look like. These three concerns form the tripod upon which my argument in this chapter rests, and are, in my view, necessary to understand not just Salinger's soldiers, but the relationship between his stories and the far-reaching effects of the Second World War on the larger communities surrounding—and sometimes embracing—those soldiers.

Two "Goddam Phonies" of Masculinity & Femininity

Although there is a disinclination to divide legitimacy of war experience along gender lines in Salinger's work, in several places there is harsh judgment of some elements of gender norms as they are proximal to war and suffering war veterans. Characters who embody these gender norms, or aspects of them, are almost always the same characters who cannot relate to other persons in their lives who have had war experiences, and whose reactions and interactions cause pain and loneliness. Salinger's

work suggests—loudly—that these gender norms keep veterans from recovering from, and even perpetuate, war.

The type of masculinity, and how it is particularly evidenced in war, of which Salinger is extremely critical has several characteristics. First, this masculinity connects itself integrally to warfare; waging war becomes something boys hear about and in which they later participate in order to become men and to connect with their fathers and grandfathers.² Second, this masculinity becomes the primary facet of the identity of the man in question; he becomes a soldier above all else. This masculinity, then, is surface without depth, without interiority; like a flag draped over a coffin, it covers the men it is to characterize and smothers their ability to communicate and reintegrate themselves with people on the home front, many of whom they love.

The type of femininity Salinger criticizes through his characters also features a lack of interiority; this femininity, too, is evidenced by characters so preoccupied with the surface of their bodies and their lives that they pay little attention to the struggles of those close to them, and even to the unplumbed depths within themselves. To borrow Salinger's oft-cited word, these types of masculinity and femininity are both *phony*; it is when characters adopt these phony gender norms that communication and healing after war become impossibilities.³

² Deliberately connecting definitions of masculinity to warfare and violence is a common theme in masculinity studies. Raewyn Connell (cited, below, as R.W. Connell), for example, writes of how armies and officer corps, as they developed over time, "became repositories of gentry codes of masculinity," and so reinforce masculinity defined by male supremacy in particular that militaristic movements like fascism are "naked reassertion[s] of male supremacy in societies that had been moving towards equality for women" (192-3). "European/American masculinities," including, in my view, the ones that figure in Salinger's work, "were deeply implicated in the world-wide violence through which European/American culture became dominant," she argues (186).

³ Here, I must acknowledge that "phony" is not an altogether consistently defined term in Salinger's work, especially given the fact that Holden Caulfield, himself not the most precise or reliable of

First, Salinger's work rejects a particular brand of masculinity that perpetuates wrong views of war and, in so doing, also perpetuates war itself. This type of masculinity is most clearly depicted in Salinger's short story "The Last Day of the Last Furlough." Significantly, this story was written around the time Salinger learned he would be, after a year and a half of frustratingly mundane service in the Air Corps, an agent in the Counter Intelligence Corps, and would soon be shipped out to Europe (Slawenski 69-71). His posting came through in January of 1943, and "The Last Day of the Last Furlough" was originally published in *The Saturday Evening Post* in July of 1944; Salinger had sent it to the *Post* not long before his departure for Europe. Its main character, Babe Gladwaller, has the same army number as Salinger did: 32325200. Ian Hamilton, one of Salinger's biographers, proposes that "the story can be read as a kind of letter home, a last letter, possibly"; by giving Babe his own army number, Salinger suggests—strongly—that those close to him "should attend to this story with special care" (Hamilton 77).

To what, then, should these readers attend with such care? In my view, and in the views of other scholars and biographers of Salinger (Slawenski and Hamilton among them), it is Babe's speech to his father, a pivotal speech in the story, a speech that another of Salinger's biographers, Kenneth Slawenski, calls "Salinger's statement on war" (73). This speech is more than a "statement on war," however; it is also Salinger's indictment of a kind of masculinity that perpetuates war. Babe gives his speech in response to his father's. The Gladwallers and Babe's friend and fellow soldier Vincent Caulfield have just finished dinner when Professor Gladwaller begins to hold "forth at the dinner table.

narrators, is the character who uses "phony" the most. For the sake of my argument here, however, I do want to use the term consistently: in this chapter, "phony" refers to behaviors or talk that indicates a character's preoccupation with surface rather than depth, with appearance rather than reality—with, to use a specific example from Salinger's work, the number of medals collected on one's lapel rather than the honorable ways one behaves or thinks.

He had been in the ‘last one,’ and he was acquainting Vincent with some of the trials the men in the ‘last one’ had undergone” (*Uncollected Short Stories* 47). Chief amongst these trials seems to be “cockroaches,” or so Professor Gladwaller said, “impressively”:

“‘Everywhere you looked, cockroaches.’ [...] ‘They must have been a nuisance,’ Vincent said” (47). Babe interrupts his father’s holding forth with a speech of his own. In it, Babe derides his father’s example of telling stories of his service in the “last one,” refusing to become one more link in a generational chain of stories that, Salinger’s story suggests, crafts a certain kind of masculinity and perpetuates war. Babe tells his father:

Daddy...sometimes you talk about the last war—all you fellas do—as though it had been some kind of rugged, sordid game by which society of your day weeded out the men from the boys. [...] It seems to me that men in Germany who were in the last one probably talked the same way, or thought the same way, and when Hitler provoked this one, the younger generation in Germany were ready to prove themselves as good or better than their father. [...] But if we come back, if German men come back, if British men come back, and Japs, and French, and all the other men, all of us talking, painting, making movies of heroism and cockroaches and foxholes and blood, then the future generations will always be doomed to future Hitlers. It’s never occurred to boys to have contempt for wars, to point to soldiers’ pictures in history books, laughing at them. (47)

Babe rejects this kind of masculinity and the stories that perpetuate it. It contributes, in his view, to war’s continued presence in human history, as new generations of boys fight other boys to prove themselves men. Unfortunately, the fact that Babe’s father not only buys into this type of masculinity but seeks to advance its cause through Babe and Vincent indicates that he does not share Babe’s—and, in my view, Salinger’s—view of this type of masculinity. In fact, he mocks it: “Professor Gladwaller grinned. ‘I didn’t mean to romanticize the cockroaches,’ he said. He laughed and the others laughed with him, except Babe, who resented slightly that what he felt so deeply could be reduced to a humor” (48).

This is not to say that war, and certain aspects of the type of masculinity it defines and perpetuates, are rejected in Salinger's work—or, at least, in this story. "I believe in this war," Babe tells his father in the same speech. Later in the story, Babe's belief becomes clearer, and he speaks it only to himself, his thoughts italicized for the reader so there can be no doubt that Babe does not plan to turn these ideas into stories like his father's. While Professor Gladwaller's grandiose "holding forth," and the movies of cockroaches and heroism, are to Babe detestable perpetuators of violence, the desire to protect—with one's gun, or with one's life—the people one loves is a trait both admirable and traditionally considered masculine. "*This is my home,*" Babe thinks to himself as he watches his little sister Mattie sleep. "*This is where Mattie is sleeping. No enemy is banging on our door, waking her up, frightening her. But it could happen if I don't go out and meet him with my gun. And I will, and I'll kill him. I'd like to come back too. It would be swell to come back*" (50, italics in original). In Salinger's work, then, some traditionally masculine traits brought out by war—protectiveness, and the desire to preserve one's home and return to it—are depicted positively; they are even right responses, things to be believed in. However, other masculine traits brought to the forefront by war do nothing but perpetuate violence; they even undermine the preserving, protective masculinity Salinger characterizes positively in that they contribute to a justification of war based on a boyish longing for blood and violence and heroics, not based on love.

Salinger negatively depicts this particular kind of masculinity, and its relationship to war, in other works as well—works that he wrote after his tour of duty in the Second World War was over. The first is an unpublished story, "The Magic Foxhole," worth

mention here because it too depicts the generational chain of soldiery Salinger criticizes in “The Last Day of the Last Furlough.” Ian Hamilton, one of Salinger’s biographers, summarizes this story in *In Search of J.D. Salinger*:

“The Magic Foxhole” is set mainly in France. The hero’s name is Gardner this time, but he is Gladwalleresque in all essentials. Gardner is wrecked by the war. In combat, he keeps on meeting a ghost soldier dressed in a strange, futuristic uniform. Gardner interrogates him and discovers that the “soldier” is his own yet-to-be-born son, a boy called Earl. Earl is now aged twenty-one and is a combatant, it seems, in World War III. Gardner decides that he must kill this phantom offspring: If Earl dies, maybe the next war will never happen. (92).

The horror in this story is not only the war Gardner is fighting, but the potential for future wars, and the idea that whatever he does on the battlefield now, it will do nothing to prevent his son from having to fight—or, we might say, from having to prove his masculine identity—in the same violent way. Each generation will enter the battlefield anew. Again, for Salinger, this kind of masculinity is destructive, perpetuating war and destroying the families and minds of those who fight in it; the story ends with Gardner, still trapped in his nightmare of war and filicide, in a military hospital suffering from battle fatigue (92).

The second work in which Salinger negatively depicts this type of masculinity is comparatively lacking in war-related detail when we consider it alongside “The Last Day of the Last Furlough”; this story, “Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut,” was originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1948 and later included in *Nine Stories*. Similar to “The Last Day of the Last Furlough,” however, the story contrasts a negative kind of war-related masculinity with a positively depicted male character who is also a soldier. This negative type of masculinity is that which Lew and Mary Jane, the husband and old college friend of the story’s protagonist, Eloise, both value. Eloise has lost her first love,

Walt, in the war; when Mary Jane asks whether Eloise ever speaks to Lew about Walt, Eloise says: “I started to, once. But the first thing he asked me was what his rank was” (*Nine Stories* 44). Mary Jane’s reply is to ask, “What was his rank?” (44). Here, Mary Jane and Lew both place value on Walt’s military rank, even tying his identity to how the military might categorize him. Walt becomes not a person, but an insignia and, we might presume, whatever list of war-related deeds of heroism he might have accomplished in order to receive that insignia. Eloise herself seems to have given up on getting others—or, at least, her husband Lew—to see Walt as anything else; she says later in the story that though “the last thing[*she would*] do would be to tell him [Walt] was killed,” if she did tell Lew that Walt died, she would “tell him he was killed in action” rather than in an accident with a camp stove, substituting the story of a soldier falling valiantly in war for the absurd truth. Here, again, we see in microcosm the type of masculinity, valued and storied because heroic in war, that Babe decries in “The Last Day of the Last Furlough.”

Walt himself provides an alternate view, however, and thus so does Salinger. Eloise tells Mary Jane a story about Walt’s view of military rank—and just how much it means to him—immediately after Mary Jane has asked for that rank. “You know what he said once?” Eloise asks Mary Jane:

“He said he felt he was advancing in the Army, but in a different direction from everybody else. He said that when he’d get his first promotion, instead of getting stripes he’d have his sleeves taken away from him. He said when he’d get to be a general, he’d be stark naked. All he’d be wearing would be a little infantry button in his navel.” Eloise looked over at Mary Jane, who wasn’t laughing. “Don’t you think that’s funny?” (44-45).

For Walt, and for Eloise, rank means little; what matters here is Walt’s sense of humor, a trait that, instead of characterizing Walt as a particular type of military man, makes him

beloved and human. Walt's soldierly striptease, while funny, is also a poignant symbol of what readers should do with the type of masculinity Salinger criticizes here: we should peel off the surface film of heroic soldiery to reveal the man underneath.

In "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor," published in *The New Yorker* in 1950 and later included in *Nine Stories*, Salinger again excoriates this brand of masculinity that sees war as a proving ground for men. Again, as well, he also weighs this negative view of a particular brand of masculinity against a trivializing view of warfare; he seems to seek neither to glorify war and what men do in it, nor to reduce the "squalor" of it. Corporal Z—Clay—embodies the masculinity Salinger despises most perfectly out of any of the characters I've discussed so far. He is a "huge, photogenic young man of twenty-four" who had been photographed for a national magazine in which he'd posed, "more than just obligingly, with a Thanksgiving turkey in each hand" (*Nine Stories* 161). When he walks into Sergeant X's room, interrupting his letter-writing, "his brick-red hair, just combed," drips with the amount of water he requires "for satisfactory grooming"; he carries a comb in his pocket instead of a fountain pen. On his olive-drab shirt, he wears "the Combat Infantrymen's Badge (which, technically, he wasn't authorized to wear), the European Theatre ribbon, with five bronze battle stars in it (instead of a lone silver one, which was the equivalent of five bronze ones) and the pre-Pearl Harbor service ribbon" (162). One of the reasons Clay has interrupted Sergeant X is, it turns out, to tell him that they should drive to Hamburg "or someplace" early the next morning to "pick up Eisenhower jackets for the whole detachment," because "they look good" (164). Clay is a heroic, photogenic surface without depth; well-groomed and festooned with honors, the image of a healthy young soldier seen by many in a national magazine.

Clay is also stupid and cruel. While he wears many medals, he doesn't deserve all of them. He also "took a pot shot" at a cat that jumped up on the hood of his and Sergeant X's jeep, an incident that his psychology-student girlfriend tells him is a result of temporary insanity "from the shelling and all" (167), but which Sergeant X recognizes is an act as senseless as any other type of killing. "You weren't insane," X tells Clay. "You were simply doing your duty. You killed that pussycat in as manly a way as anybody could've, under the circumstances. [...] That cat was a spy. You *had* to take a pot shot at it. It was a very clever German midget dressed up in a cheap fur coat. So there was absolutely nothing brutal, or cruel, or dirty, or even—" (167). X, unable to finish his sentence, vomits, but not until Clay swears at him and pleads, "Can't you ever be *sincere*?" (167). The irony is, of course, that it is X who is sincere, and Clay whose soldiery—and the masculinity closely tied to it, the "manly" killing of cats—is phoniness, a photogenic surface of heroism without anything at its core.

However, while Salinger does lambaste the type of masculinity-in-war exemplified in Clay, characterizing it as a gaudy cloak of good looks and medals shrouding imbecility, he also criticizes a view of warfare that trivializes soldiery. In "The Last Day of the Last Furlough," Babe's prewar drive to protect his sister and his home was a positively depicted, traditionally masculine trait that readers were encouraged to value rather than discard. In "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor," it is the seriousness of Sergeant X's postwar trauma, tied to the gravity of the situations he's lived and fought through, that readers should take seriously, and not discard or trivialize. And Salinger passes judgment on those who do trivialize it, just as he passes judgment on soldiers like Clay. When Sergeant X begins to read a letter from his older brother, for example, he

stops after the words, “Now that the g.d. war is over and you probably have a lot of time over there, how about sending the kids a couple of bayonets or swastikas...” (160). X tears up the letter and throws the pieces into the wastebasket. While Clay’s behavior and grandstanding trivializes the gravity of warfare by contributing to a phony brand of masculinity—one that even perpetuates war—X’s brother’s letter evidences a view of war that equates it not to a proving of manhood but an extended overseas trip, from which one might bring home swords and swastikas as souvenirs. Both are constructions of warfare and masculinity that overshadow the genuine suffering of Sergeant X; X instead writes a story of “love and squalor” for a preteen girl who somehow understands.

Finally, in *The Catcher in the Rye*, published in 1951, Salinger again disapproves of this particular brand of masculinity. He does so through the character of D.B., and D.B.’s reaction to Holden and Allie’s questions about war. D.B. objects not to the war or its cause; instead, he despises the men he was with in the Army. “My brother D.B. was in the Army for four goddam years,” Holden says. “He was in the war, too—he landed on D-Day and all—but I really think he hated the Army worse than the war” (140). Though D.B. was not involved in combat—“all he had to do was drive some cowboy general around all day”—if he did have to shoot anybody, Holden writes, “he wouldn’t’ve known which direction to shoot in. He said the Army was practically as full of bastards as the Nazis were” (140). Considering his brother’s words, Holden remarks later, “I *do* know it’d drive me crazy if I had to be in the Army and be with a bunch of guys like Ackley and Stradlater and old Maurice all the time, marching with them and all” (140). Though the type of masculinity both D.B. and Holden object to is less explicitly displayed in *The Catcher in the Rye* than it is in Sergeant X’s view of Clay in “For Esmé—with Love and

Squalor,” comparing Clay to uniformed versions of Holden’s classmates is not a difficult task.⁴ All these young men are, or seem like they would be, preoccupied with the image of soldiery, the very kind of masculinity of which Salinger is so critical.

In addition to critiquing—often harshly—in his stories a particular brand of masculinity as it relates to war, Salinger also criticizes a particular brand of femininity. Like the type of masculinity he so unfavorably portrays, this type of femininity is also preoccupied with surface. Those who embody the phony type of masculinity were preoccupied with the heroic surface of a decorated soldier; they were kept from seeing the man beneath. Those who embody the phony type of femininity are preoccupied with a carefully primped and ordered self and lifestyle; they are kept from recognizing others’ struggles because they can see nothing but themselves. Both constructions of gender keep people from forging bonds of care and communication that could engender healing after wartime.

Several characters in several of Salinger’s stories embody this type of femininity, but none of these characters display it as perfectly as does Muriel Glass. Muriel is Seymour Glass’s wife, and the first character readers meet in “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” published first in the *New Yorker* in January of 1948, shortly before “Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut,” and later included in *Nine Stories*. Muriel, we are told as the story begins, is “a girl who for a ringing phone dropped exactly nothing” (*Nine Stories* 3-4), one who uses her time waiting for a call to go through primping the surface of her

⁴ One thinks, for example, of Stradlater, Holden’s roommate who thinks “he was the handsomest guy in the Western Hemisphere,” and “the kind of handsome guy that if your parents saw his picture in your Year Book, they’d right away say, ‘Who’s *this* boy?’, but whose well-groomed exterior belies “crumby” personal habits. Holden despises Stradlater for many reasons, the least of which is the fact that he doesn’t deserve to date—and potentially lead astray—Jean Gallagher, an old friend of Holden’s who he remembers as significantly *not* phony (26-35).

body and the things that she uses to coif and lacquer that surface: “She washed her comb and brush. She took the spot out of the skirt of her beige suit. She moved the button on her Saks blouse. She tweezed out two freshly surfaced hairs in her mole. When the operator finally rang her room, she was sitting on the window seat and had almost finished putting lacquer on the nails of her left hand” (3). When the call, to her mother, finally does go through, she and Muriel discuss Seymour, who, we learn, has been recently discharged from an Army hospital, is unbalanced, and “may *completely* lose control of himself” (9). Muriel’s mother is worried not for Seymour, but for Muriel’s safety; such a worry is, perhaps, understandable and significant, but any significance it might have had is undercut repeatedly as the two women’s conversation continues. When Muriel’s mother begs her to come home from her and Seymour’s trip to Florida, fearing that Seymour might become violent, Muriel refuses, not out of concern for Seymour but at least partly because she “couldn’t travel now anyway. I’m so sunburned I can hardly move” (9). The two women’s discussion of Seymour’s trauma is then derailed by a discussion of proper sunbathing practices. When her mother asks if she has talked to the hotel psychiatrist, Muriel mentions that he had asked about Seymour’s health before inviting her to join him and his wife for a drink. The women’s discussion of Seymour’s psychiatric health is again derailed when Muriel brings up the psychiatrist’s wife, who “was horrible.” Muriel tells her mother: ““You remember that awful dinner dress we saw in Bonwit’s window? [...] She had it on. And all hips” (10-11). The overall impression the reader gets of Muriel is that she is a woman whose concern for her husband—and about the effects of the war on her life—begins and ends with how her husband and the war affect her own comfort and disrupt the way she appears to others. She won’t leave

the hotel for Seymour's health because "this is the first vacation I've had in years" (9). The war has upset her life not because it causes her husband's withdrawal and eventual suicide but because her room is "*just* all right, though. We couldn't get the room we had before the war. [...] The people are awful this year. You should see what sits next to us in the dining room. At the next table. They look as if they drove down in a truck" (12). Preoccupied with surface, the phony femininity Muriel wears like one of that season's sequined fashions keeps her from meaningfully relating to her suffering husband.

This type of femininity, obsessed with surface, with looking the right way and being with the right people, comes up elsewhere in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" and in other stories as well. For example, after Muriel's conversation with her mother is over and we move from her hotel room to the beach, and before we meet Seymour and delve into the second half of the story, we listen in on Sybil Carpenter's mother's conversation with another sunbathing woman: "It was really just an ordinary silk handkerchief—you could see when you got up close. [...] I wish I knew how she tied it. It was really darling" (15). Muriel's preoccupation with surface is, in this story, hardly unique; other women at the hotel are just like her.⁵

Sergeant X's mother-in-law and wife are the same way, we can infer from several passages in "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor." The story begins with X telling readers that he will not be going to a wedding he's been invited to because his wife, "a

⁵ Here, we must recognize that the kind of femininity Salinger condemns here bears a striking resemblance to the type of femininity women were encouraged to adopt in the 1950s: carefully dressed and coiffed, preoccupied with appearance and status. In a way, then, the women who embody this type of femininity are doubly condemned: Salinger's work disparages them for assuming it, while their society would do the same if they renounced it. Readers might assume this indicates a distinct sexist, or even misogynistic, streak in Salinger's work. However, and as I show in earlier and in later parts of my argument in this chapter, Salinger is as critical of certain types of masculinity, and of the male characters who embody it, as he is of certain types of femininity; further, his work is also as populated with sympathetically rendered female characters (Boo Boo and Franny Glass, Eloise, and Vincent Caulfield's ex-fiance Helen among them) as it is with similarly rendered male characters.

breathhtakingly levelheaded girl,” has discussed it with him and impressed upon him the trip’s impossibility, mainly because his mother-in-law will be spending time with them during those weeks. This wedding, we presume, is Esmé’s, and X had believed for a few shining moments that he might possibly attend. This opening sets up a conflict between the things that could bring, and have brought, comfort to Sergeant X, and his wife’s failure to understand their significance to him; X’s brief meeting with Esmé and her brother is the centerpiece of the story, but does not register as important in his wife’s mind.⁶ Later in the story, we learn the reason why: his wife, and her mother, like Muriel, display a femininity preoccupied with surface, with the phony, rather than with the depths of human feeling and sorrow. This is shown most clearly in the content of the “stale letters” Sergeant X finds in his pocket as he sits in the tea room after hearing Esmé’s choir rehearse: “I then looked through all my pockets...and found a couple of stale letters to reread, one from my wife, telling me how the service at Schrafft’s Eighty-eighth Street had fallen off, and one from my mother-in-law, asking me to please send her some cashmere yarn first chance I got away from ‘camp’” (137).

In “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters,” the Matron of Honor in Seymour and Muriel’s abortive attempt to marry also displays this type of femininity, preoccupied with surface matters to the point of overlooking trauma and sorrow. The Matron of Honor speaks the most of any character in the story; she is upset because Seymour did not show up to the wedding and has hurt poor Muriel, her friend. Understandably, the Matron of

⁶ John Wenke, in “Sergeant X, Esmé, and the Meaning of Words,” calls Sergeant X’s breach in understanding with his wife and mother-in-law “a problem that appears elsewhere in other forms—the sterility of conventional relationships” and connects it to Sergeant X’s lack of fellowship with his fellow troops at the training camp (71). Wenke is right to identify Sergeant X’s alienation from both groups. However, in my view, the gulf between Sergeant X and his wife and mother-in-law, and between X and his fellow soldiers, is very much informed by the phony types of femininity and masculinity embodied, respectfully, by each of these groups, and this gulf should be discussed in that light.

Honor blames Seymour and is angered by the apparent jilting of her friend, and it would be far too much to expect a bride's best friend to try to find sympathy for the groom in such a situation. However, the chief reason why she is so angry is not that her friend is hurt; it is that her friend has been embarrassed, and publicly:

“I’ve heard about grooms getting cold feet, and all that. But you don’t do it at the *last minute*. I mean you don’t do it so that you’ll embarrass a lot of perfectly nice people half to death and almost break a kid’s spirit and everything! If he’d changed his *mind*, why didn’t he write to her and at least break it off like a gentleman, for goodness’ sake? Before all the damage was done.” (27)

The Matron of Honor is angriest at Seymour not for breaking her friend's heart but for sullyng her and her family's respectable appearance in front of their guests. It comes as no surprise that it is the Matron of Honor who makes Buddy Glass, the narrator of “Raise High the Roof Beam” whose conspicuous Army uniform already singles him out, feel most alienated from the rest of the group: “Unofficially but unmistakably, she was appointing me odd-man-out again, and at that moment, for no reason worth going into, I felt a sense of isolation and loneliness more overwhelming than I’d felt all day” (59). The type of femininity the Matron of Honor evidences, her preoccupation with surface over and above any care for emotional trauma or pain, exists simultaneously with the way she alienates Buddy. For her, and for all of these women, concern and care for the soldier in their family—or their soon-to-be close acquaintance—is pushed to the margins by their preoccupation with the shallow surface details of their lives.

Salinger's indictment of this type of femininity, characterized by its devotion to the phony, is evident in one other character: Eloise, the protagonist of “Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut.” Eloise, however, is a hybrid character; while she does exhibit this criticized type of femininity, she recognizes the destructiveness of the life she has settled into, and

the story closes with her mourning the potential for meaning her life once had, now lost. She is also, of Salinger's female characters, the one who most clearly suffers from trauma as a result of war experience, and she is given the agency to narrate that experience with authority. Eloise, then, straddles the border between Salinger's indictment of a particular brand of femininity and the insistence in his work that the gravity and traumatic experiences of war affect both women and men, and that both should narrate, and have the authority to narrate, those experiences to the people they are closest to.

"Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut" begins much like "A Perfect Day for Bananafish"; in fact, "Uncle Wiggly" appears immediately after "Bananafish" in *Nine Stories*, arguably inviting the reader to directly compare them. The former, like the latter, opens by introducing readers to a character who exemplifies, or seems to, the type of femininity of which Salinger is so critical. Eloise waits outside the house for her friend Mary Jane to come in from her car, having "turned up the collar of her camel's-hair coat" (27); this descriptive phrase, focused not just on Eloise's appearance but the fine things she attires herself in to achieve that appearance, is immediately reminiscent of readers' introduction to Muriel, who has just sewn a button onto her Saks blouse and taken a stain out of the skirt of her beige suit while waiting for her phone call to go through. Eloise and Mary Jane spend the first part of the story in a conversation much like the one Muriel has with her mother, only without the intrusion of Seymour's troublesome mental health. The two women drink their first highball (in twenty minutes flat), they debate the color an old roommate dyed her hair the night before marrying an ugly "little old private," and Eloise complains about "that dopey maid" who never puts the cigarettes in the correct place. Mary Jane's story of meeting another college friend in Lord and Taylor's begins with a

description of the woman's forty-seven room house and ends with the friend's story of almost getting raped by her husband's chauffeur—a story that Mary Jane responds to with horror not because of its content, but because it was told “*right* on the main floor of Lord and Taylor's,” and which is interrupted and forgotten when Eloise's young daughter, Ramona, comes in from playing outside (34). Eloise continues to exhibit this type of femininity while she, Mary Jane, and her daughter talk together briefly. Mary Jane exclaims over Ramona's pretty dress; Eloise scolds Ramona three times for actions that make her look less than well-behaved and ladylike: for scratching herself (36), for sticking “a finger into her small, broad nose” (37), and for not standing still (37) or straight (38). Eloise, in this first part of the story, embodies a femininity different from Muriel's only in that Eloise's involves her treatment of a child rather than a husband; nothing else about her leads readers to distinguish significantly between her character and Muriel's. Both women are preoccupied with appearance rather than relationship. Readers might assume, then, that this story will be a variation on the theme presented in “A Perfect Day for Bananafish”: an indictment of this kind of femininity, its phoniness, and its effects on others, particularly soldiers.

However, Eloise is *not* Muriel. In fact, she has more in common with the likes of Seymour and Sergeant X than she does with either of their wives. In the second part of the story, it becomes clear that Eloise has been deeply hurt by the war, and that beneath the veneer of this femininity of phoniness is pain and grief she has been unable to overcome. “I mean you didn't really *know* Walt,” Eloise says to Mary Jane; these words open the second part of the story, and the difference between Eloise, who *knew* Walt, and Mary Jane, who did not and does not seem to want to, becomes clear, dividing the two

friends and thwarting Eloise's attempt to recover even a little by sharing her grief with her friend. Walt, we find out later in the story, was Eloise's first love; he was a soldier, and he was killed overseas. The story of Walt's death, however, is not the first thing Eloise wants Mary Jane to hear about him, and not the aspect of him that she most remembers and misses. Eloise values Walt not because he was a soldier—not because, to readdress a point made earlier in this chapter, of his adherence to a phony type of masculinity tied to decorated service in war—but because he was funny, and nice, and sweet. “He was the only boy I never knew that could make me laugh. I mean *really* laugh,” Eloise tells Mary Jane a few lines into the second section of the story (41). “He could do it when he talked to me. He could do it over the phone. He could even do it in a letter. And the best thing about it was that he didn't even try to be funny—he just *was* funny” she continues (42). That Walt “just *was* funny,” not trying to be funny, is significant because it suggests that Walt's humor was a genuine trait rather than a phony one he tried to adopt. Walt was sweet, and nice, in the same way: ““Ah, God, he was nice,”” Eloise said. ‘He was either funny or sweet. Not that damn little-boy sweet, either. It was a special kind of sweet’” (43).

Walt's honest humor, sweetness, and niceness stand in sharp contrast to the traits Eloise's husband, Lew, exhibits. While in many ways Lew is a normal guy, not a particularly bad one, he doesn't seem to want Eloise to be honest with him about her relationship with Walt, and he himself has been dishonest in his relationship to Eloise in ways that Walt, we gather, never would have been. “If you ever get married again, don't tell your husband *anything*. Do you hear me?” Eloise tells Mary Jane after she's described Walt, but before talking about Walt's death. “They wanna think you spent your

whole life vomiting every time a boy came near you. I'm not kidding, either. Oh, you can tell them stuff," she continues, "But never honestly. I mean never *honestly*." The fact that Eloise is discouraged, because of childish jealousy, from talking to Lew about the depth of her feelings for and sorrow over Walt has kept her from healing after his death. Lew's inability—or even refusal—to try to understand of Eloise's attachment to Walt is as shallow and selfish as Sergeant X's wife's "levelheaded" response when he is invited to Esmé's wedding. Neither character is willing to step outside of their expectations for how things should be and to recognize, and try to alleviate, the trauma and pain their loved ones are experiencing.

Lew not only discourages Eloise's honesty, but acts dishonestly himself. After Eloise has talked at length about Lew's lack of intelligence and willingness to listen to her stories about Walt, Mary Jane asks Eloise, "Well, wudga marry him for, then?" Eloise responds: "Oh, God! I don't know. He told me he loved Jane Austen. He told me her books meant a great deal to him. That's exactly what he said. I found out after we were married that he hadn't even read *one* of her books" (46). Lew, while courting Eloise, had been phony in a way that, we infer from the text, Walt never was, though we learn nothing about Walt's reading habits. Lew's dishonesty about loving Jane Austen, and the fact that (we infer) Jane Austen's books mean a good deal to Eloise, point back to a detail in the beginning of the story that is worth mentioning here: twenty minutes into her visit to Eloise's, Mary Jane passes "two heavily stocked bookcases without glancing at any of the titles" (31-2). Mary Jane is clearly not particularly interested in literature, and neither is Lew, as we can infer from his lies about Jane Austen and his preference for, Eloise says, an author named L. Manning Vines who "wrote a book about four men that starved

to death in Alaska,” the title of which Lew doesn’t remember (46-7). We can infer, then, that the books are not Lew’s and not just there for appearance’s sake; it is highly likely that they are Eloise’s, and that while their presence indicates that Eloise has not lost this particular interest, she does live among people who do not genuinely share it or think to encourage it. We can also infer that Walt, whether or not he enjoyed Jane Austen or books in general, would have been honest about his interest in a way that Lew is not.

“Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut” ends with Eloise both back beneath, and struggling out from under, the brand of femininity she appeared to wear at the beginning of the story, and of which Salinger’s work is so critical. The most convincing evidence that she is more like than unlike Muriel is her refusal to allow her maid’s husband to spend the night in bad weather because she’s “not running a hotel” (53); she also treats her drowsy daughter rather cruelly, urging her to lie in the center of her bed. However, there is more evidence here of Eloise’s still-sharp, unalleviated grief over Walt’s death and her own loss of herself. When Ramona tells her mother that her imaginary friend Jimmy was killed, she seems to be imitating her mother’s story of Walt’s death. Ramona soon replaces Jimmy with a new imaginary friend, Mickey, and continues to sleep at the edge of her bed to avoid squashing her imaginary bedmate. When Eloise shrieks at Ramona to move to the center of the bed, it is not out of a lack of compassion but a reaction to the fact that Walt, unlike Jimmy, was not and is not imaginary; his replacement could not be dreamed up minutes after his death, and the replacement that did come along—Lew—cannot occupy the same space. Eloise has lost something she can never retrieve, and she—unlike Muriel, or any of the other women I have discussed so far in this section—recognizes her own phoniness for what it is: a poor screen to use to

shield herself from her own grief as a result of the war, and from her lack of connection to the people who are supposed to be her closest friends and family. “I was a nice girl,” she pleads at the end of the story, sobbing and shaking Mary Jane’s arm, “wasn’t I?” (56).

Salinger’s Egalitarian View of War Experience

Eloise’s character, and the grief she still feels as a result of the war, is one example of the way Salinger does *not* gender the divide between home front and war front, or, at least, does not gender the ability of a person from one front or the other to experience trauma as a result of war. Men, women, and children all have war experiences in Salinger’s work, because Salinger seems to make little—or at least little meaningful—distinction between the war experiences of men (in battle and as actual members of the military) and the resulting trauma and sorrow of the women, children, and men who do not fight. Several characters across Salinger’s body of work have these kinds of war experiences; Eloise is one of these characters, as is what may be her first incarnation in Salinger’s work, Vincent Caulfield’s ex-fiancée Helen in “The Stranger.” Boo Boo Glass, the third-oldest child in the Glass family, is another; her character is interesting because she experiences sorrow and grief after war as a sister, as a mother, and as a directly involved party herself as a member of the Waves. Boo Boo’s son Lionel is also torn by an anti-Semitic slur against his father that is immediately evocative of the militant anti-Semitism that brought about the Holocaust.⁷ The experiences of Esmé and her brother,

⁷ Salinger’s biographers, Slawenski in particular, note that Salinger, as an intelligence officer, was likely among the first American soldiers to discover the Nazi concentration camps (133). In her memoir, *Dream Catcher*, Salinger’s daughter Margaret also describes her father’s telling her, albeit indirectly, about his experience finding the camps and the resulting trauma of that experience: “as my father told me when I was a little girl: ‘You never really get the smell of burning flesh out of your nose entirely, no matter how

Charles, whose father helped his children evacuate but was later killed, are as much war experiences as those of Sergeant X, whom Esmé charms at a tea house. And the entire Glass family—not just Seymour, Buddy, Boo Boo, and Walt, those with direct involvement in war efforts—shares a collective trauma, tied to the war-related deaths of two of their number.

Because her character is in many ways so similar to Eloise's, I want to begin by discussing the character of Helen Polk in "The Stranger." "The Stranger" was published a year and a half after "The Last Day of the Last Furlough," in *Collier's* in December of 1945. Slawenski discusses how "The Stranger" is doubtless Salinger's response to, and attempt to write his way through, the trauma and grief he and the rest of the 12th Infantry Regiment endured as a result of the carnage in Hürtgen Forest, the Battle of the Bulge, and liberating an Allied Prisoner of War camp and several subcamps of Dachau.⁸ The protagonist—perhaps the "stranger" of the title—of this story is Babe Gladwaller, the same Babe of "The Last Day of the Last Furlough." Recently returned from his military service overseas, Babe travels with his little sister Mattie to the home of Helen Polk to tell Helen that Vincent Caulfield, her ex-fiance, was killed in Hürtgen Forest. Helen is married to someone else now, and she lives in an "ugly, expensive little New York apartment of the kind which seems to rent mostly to newly married couples" whose living

long you live'" (55). She also points out that anti-Semitism pervaded American culture during WWII—that, based on her own research, "anti-Semitism in America appears to have been at its apogee from 1939 to 1945" (54). Thus, though Lionel's experience is not explicitly connected to WWII in the text of "Down at the Dinghy," given Salinger's experience, such a connection is probable.

⁸ After D-Day, Salinger's regiment left Normandy and traveled to Germany to cross into the Third Reich, breach the Siegfried Line, and sweep up lingering Nazi resistance. Carrying out these orders, which Slawenski notes must have seemed to the soldiers to consist mainly of cleanup work after the worst of the war was over, turned out to be a great, bloody, and pointless mess; the troops involved were fighting over a "useless piece of ground under...impossible conditions." Slawenski also notes that "Hürtgen is viewed by historians as a military failure and a waste of human life"; it was "among the greatest Allied debacles of the war" (113).

room has “one Morris chair too many” and is filled with so many reading lamps that they look as though they have been “breeding at night” (*Uncollected Short Stories* 73). Babe’s impression of the apartment’s cluttered ugliness is altered slightly, however, when he notices that “over the crazy artificial fireplace there were some fine books,” and when he takes the top record off the Polks’ “interesting, messy stack of phonograph records” he sees that it is “an old Bakewell Howard—before Howard had gone commercial”; the dirty piece of tape stuck to the title sticker tells Babe the record is Helen’s (73). In this run-of-the-mill apartment, Babe sees bits of authenticity, of personality, that color his and reader’s impression of Helen. Helen, we infer, does not conform to the kind of surface femininity Salinger so criticizes in others of his stories.

Neither does Helen seem to expect Vincent—or Babe himself—to conform to the type of war-forged masculinity Salinger is also critical of. She does not seem to care much whether Babe is in or out of the army, or about any medals he has possibly earned; her interest is in the story of Vincent’s death, which Babe later tells her. While Vincent’s father told Helen he had been killed, he did not tell her how. Babe is hesitant to do so as well, at first, thinking her beautifully inscrutable as he sneezes from hay fever: “I can’t tell you he was happy or anything when he died. I’m sorry. I can’t think of anything good” he begins (75), perhaps thinking that Helen wants a tale like Babe’s father’s, one of “heroism and cockroaches and foxholes and blood” (*Uncollected Stories* 47). Her reply indicates that she wants not heroism, but authenticity: “Don’t lie to me at all. I want to know” (75). The fact that she says this while sitting next to Mattie, staring at Mattie’s right arm, which is “bare and brown and young,” is significant; many scholars discuss the

motif of children in Salinger's work as symbols of hope and innocence.⁹ Helen's almost awed treatment of Mattie shows her attraction to, and even appreciation of, this hope and innocence; Mattie means something to both Babe and Helen, and she connects them to each other as much as their shared sorrow over Vincent's death.

Babe tells Helen the truth about how Vincent died after she tells him to be honest.

"He died in the morning," Babe begins. He continues:

"He and four other G.I.s and I were standing around a fire we made. In Hürtgen Forest. Some mortar dropped in suddenly—it doesn't whistle or anything—and it hit Vincent and three of the other men. He died in the medics' CP tent about thirty yards away, not more than three minutes after he was hit. [...] I think he had too much pain in too large an area of his body to have realized anything but blackness. I don't think it hurt. I swear I don't. His eyes were open, I think he recognized me and heard me when I spoke to him, but he didn't say anything at all. The last thing he said was about one of us was going to have to get some wood for the lousy fire...you know how he talked." (75)

Babe stops there "because Vincent's girl was crying and he didn't know what to do about it" (75).

Two things have happened in this passage, and both work against the phony gender constructions Salinger is so critical of, and work towards building genuine connection between Babe and Helen over their shared grief. First, Babe has been honest with Helen; he's relayed the story of Vincent's death as near as he remembers it without prevaricating or making Vincent sound heroic.¹⁰ He has avoided telling what he describes to himself later in the story as "comfortable lies":

⁹ See, for example, Gloria Emerson's "The Children in the Field," Changrong Wang's "The Brightness of Children's Innocence or the Darkness of Man's Heart: A Comparative Thematic Study of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Lord of the Flies*," Warren French's "The Phony World and the Nice World," and Anthony Kaufman's "'Along this road goes no one': Salinger's 'Teddy' and the Failure of Love."

¹⁰ This task is made especially easy—or more difficult—because of the senseless nature of Vincent's death; he has been killed while chewing the fat with some buddies around a fire, not in action.

“So far as details went, you wanted to be the bull’s-eye kid: Don’t let any civilian leave you, when the story’s over, with any comfortable lies. Shoot down all the lies. Don’t let Vincent’s girl think that Vincent asked for a cigarette before he died. Don’t let her think he grinned gamely, or said a few choice words. These things didn’t happen. These things weren’t done outside movies and books.... Don’t let anybody good down.” (75)

Second, Babe has not only stopped himself from telling heroic tales or otherwise twisting the truth of Vincent’s death. He has ended his story not at Vincent’s death, but with his last few moments alive, when Vincent was still acting like Vincent always had: “You know how he talked,” Babe says. It is then that Babe realizes Helen is crying. Of course, Helen likely began crying while hearing about Vincent’s death, but it is significant that it is after talking about who Vincent was as a person—not as a soldier—that Babe notices Helen’s emotional reaction. These two are brought together, then, not only by their shared grief, but their shared attachment to Vincent as a human being. Theirs is a bond—albeit a fleeting one—based on their shared love of a person rather than their devotion to a cause. And because of both Helen and Babe’s love for Vincent and their shared commitment to honesty rather than “comfortable lies,” they are able to briefly connect in this story in a way that alleviates at least some of their grief.

Eloise’s grief because of Walt’s death is given central significance in “Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut.” Her situation is similar to Helen’s, and though Eloise is not visited by one of Walt’s Army buddies, her trauma and sorrow are as weighty not just as Helen’s is, but as Babe’s is as well. The connection between the two stories, and between Eloise’s grief and that of Babe and Helen, is strongest where the description of Walt’s death is concerned. Walt’s death in the war, like Vincent’s, is senseless and does not happen in action. Eloise tells Mary Jane:

Indeed, the senselessness of Vincent’s death leads Slawenski to argue that it was “doubtless the basis of the death of Walt Glass” in “Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut” (138).

“Oh,” said Eloise, “his regiment was resting someplace. It was between battles or something, this friend of his said that wrote me. Walt and some other boy were putting this little Japanese stove in a package. Some colonel wanted to send it home. Or they were taking it *out* of the package to rewrap it—I don’t know exactly. Anyway, it was all full of gasoline and junk and it exploded in their faces. The other boy just lost an eye.” Eloise began to cry. (48-9)

Like Helen, Eloise was told this story by a friend of her old sweetheart, though in a letter rather than in person. Like Babe, Eloise wants to tell someone the story honestly, not trying to make Walt and his death seem heroic or meaningful, as she would with Lew.¹¹ And like Babe, Eloise finds it necessary to share the story with someone who, she thinks, is close enough to her and to her situation (Mary Jane was also involved with, and married briefly to, an aviation cadet) to understand her grief. Unlike Babe and Helen, however, Eloise does not find someone who will listen to her honest story, her narrative of war experience. When Helen begins to cry after Babe finishes the story of Vincent’s death, their conversation continues; Helen tells Babe why she broke off her engagement with Vincent, Babe gives Helen a poem Vincent wrote her, which visibly moves her, and at the end of the visit, Helen says, “I’m very glad you came, Babe,” which makes Babe cry (76). When Mary Jane moves to comfort the weeping Eloise in “Uncle Wiggly,” however, she strokes her forehead and tells her, “Don’t cry. [...] I mean it isn’t worth it or anything” (49). And while Helen and Babe make a series of awkward attempts to extend their connection beyond this one conversation, Babe and Mattie inviting Helen to see a movie with them, and Helen entreating Babe to look her up in the phone book sometime, “Uncle Wiggly” ends with Mary Jane passed out facedown on Eloise’s couch,

¹¹ As I discussed above, Eloise tells Mary Jane that she has not told her husband that Walt was killed in the war; she says it is “the last thing I’d do.” But if she did, she says, “I’d tell him he was killed in action” rather than in a senseless camp stove explosion (48).

as Eloise is weeping in Ramona's room, saying "Poor Uncle Wiggly" over and over again (55).

However, despite her tragic lack of a listening ear or a friend of Walt's to grieve with her, Eloise's trauma and grief are real and significant war experiences, like Babe's and Helen's; Salinger's depictions of them in "The Stranger" and "Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut" give them that weight and do not discriminate between the war experiences of men and of women. Another pair of characters depicted in this way is Boo Boo Glass and her son Lionel in "Down at the Dinghy," a story published in *Harper's* in 1949. Ian Hamilton, one of Salinger's biographers, does not mention the story in *In Search of J.D. Salinger*, let alone remark upon its connection to Salinger's own war experience; neither does Warren French, in his 1963 biography *J.D. Salinger*. Slawenski, however, does deliberately connect "Down at the Dinghy" to Salinger's involvement in the war, particularly where the Nazi concentration camps are concerned, and it is this reading I find most persuasive. Slawenski points out that in the year before the publication of "Down at the Dinghy," Salinger had been reading—and taking notes on—two works in particular: "a chilling endorsement of ethnic cleansing contained in the Nazi treatise *New Bases of Racial Research* and a May 1 article from *The New Yorker* entitled "The Children of Lidice," about the "savage slaughter of children during the war and the enslavement of those who had managed to survive because they looked German" (173). The *New Yorker* article ended, Slawenski notes, on a hopeful note; Slawenski postulates that this article may have prompted Salinger to "put away his notes on Nazi atrocities and [begin] a new story...that would address the question of anti-Semitism but would...deliver its players to salvation through love rather than damnation through

hatred” (174). It is on these themes of anti-Semitism and hope through love that I will focus in “Down at the Dinghy”; however, I will discuss them in the context of gender, or rather, Salinger’s lack of gender or even age discrimination where the effects of war are concerned, as well as the story’s emphasis on the possibility of healing through the understanding of close family members.

Boo Boo, Lionel, and their husband and father (who is insulted but off screen for the entire story) are all victims of anti-Semitism in this story: Lionel by a maid’s insults, his father as the indirect recipient of those insults, and Boo Boo as she consoles her son. In the first section of the story, during which the Tannenbaums’ maid and housekeeper gossip together about the family they work for, the maid snidely remarks that Lionel is “gonna have a nose just like the father” (114). We learn also that Sandra, the maid, is worried that Lionel will tell his mother something, and that she’ll have to look for a new job. Prepared as we are in this scene, it does not come as a surprise to read later in the story that Lionel, who has “run away from home” by hiding in the dinghy tethered to the dock at the Tannenbaums’ lake house, is hiding because he overheard Sandra insulting his father. “Sandra—told Mrs. Smell—that Daddy’s a big—sloppy—kike,” he tells Boo Boo, sobbing in his mother’s lap (129).

Part of what this story depicts is, clearly, the anti-Semitic sentiment that still holds sway in some people even after the end of WWII and the revelation of the horrific results of anti-Semitism in the Holocaust—results that Salinger witnessed firsthand. However, just as significant as the fact that anti-Semitism still holds sway is the way in which Lionel is affected by it despite his childish ignorance, and the way Boo Boo’s attempts to console Lionel are characterized. Boo Boo attempts to cajole and cheer up Lionel by

using language that connects her to warfare. And the fact that Lionel is gravely upset by a slur he does not understand connects him, as well, to war despite his own lack of understanding.

When Boo Boo walks down the pier to speak with Lionel, trying to keep Lionel “in steady focus” as the sun distorts her view, she’s described as “peel[ing] down her cigarette Army style” before she reaches her son in the boat. This descriptive detail is hardly insignificant; it sets the tone for the character she assumes when she reaches the end of the pier. “It is I,” she intones, squatted down at the end of the pier and looking at Lionel, “Vice-Admiral Tannenbaum. Nee Glass. Come to inspect the stermaphors” (121). Lionel protests immediately: “You aren’t an admiral. You’re a *lady*” (121). Boo Boo tries to convince Lionel she’s an admiral, and Lionel continues to protest, until finally Boo Boo tells him, “*Many* people think I’m not an admiral. [...] Just because I don’t shoot my mouth off about it. [...] I’m almost never tempted to discuss my rank with people” (122). She ends her short speech with a mock bugle call. Hearing it, “Lionel instantly looked up. In all probability, he was aware that the call was bogus, but nonetheless he seemed deeply aroused; his mouth fell open” (123). In the end, it does not matter whether or not Boo Boo is actually an admiral or a lady, or both. What is significant is that she is connected to war whether or not she has any “real” war experience or rank, and regardless of her gender.¹² And that connection is what helps her get Lionel to open up about his experience, which is also tied to war.

Boo Boo’s act as “Vice-Admiral Tannenbaum,” and its effectiveness for Lionel despite the fact that it is an act, sets up the reader to see Lionel’s reaction to hearing his

¹² As a matter of fact, Boo Boo was involved in WWII in a military capacity, albeit a very gender-specific one. In “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters,” Buddy Glass remarks that in 1942, Boo Boo “was an ensign in the Waves, stationed, off and on, at a naval base in Brooklyn” (7).

father called a “kike” in a similar way. Boo Boo’s war experience does not need to be tied to the military in order to be real. So, too, Lionel’s war experience—hearing his father be made a victim of anti-Semitism—is also real, despite the fact that Lionel doesn’t recognize the slur for what it is. “Do you know what a kike is, baby?” Boo Boo asks Lionel after his tears have subsided a little. Lionel replies with his face still buried in his mother’s neck: “‘It’s one of those things that go up in the *air*,’ he said. ‘With *string* you hold’” (129). Through the war experiences of Lionel and Boo Boo, then, Salinger shows in “Down at the Dinghy” that war affects people regardless of their level of “actual” involvement in war, or even their knowledge about it. War’s violence and prejudices affect families and communities, not just individuals.

This story does not end with the sharing of war experiences, however; it continues, and ends on a positive note. After Lionel confesses that he’d thought his father was being called a kite, Boo Boo looks at her son, tucks in his shirt, and proposes that they drive to town, get some food, pick up Lionel’s father, and “then we’ll bring Daddy home and make him take us for a ride in the boat” (130). As in “The Stranger,” where the sharing of war experiences led to the forming of a bond, however briefly, between characters who share the same grief, so in “Down at the Dinghy” the sharing of war experiences is also followed by a reminder of the bond between people. The grief endured as a result of war, these stories suggest, can be ameliorated through the bonds of an understanding community who shares that grief.

This motif is repeated in “For Esmé—with Love and Squalor,” when Sergeant X meets a young girl and her little brother at a tea room. Esmé and her brother, whose father has been “s-l-a-i-n in North Africa” (146), form, however briefly, a community of

shared grief and quiet joy with Sergeant X based on their shared experiences.¹³ Of course, Esmé and Charles's healing effect on Sergeant X can be in part, and most often is, attributed to the fact that they are children, and children's innocence as a symbol of hope pervades Salinger's work and the scholarship about it.¹⁴ However, it is also significant that all three of these characters are people who have had war experiences of one kind or another, and this shared experience transcends boundaries of gender and age. Sergeant X is in Devon, England where he and sixty other enlisted American men were taking "a rather specialized pre-Invasion training course, directed by British Intelligence" in the spring of 1944; he is, "rumor had it," about to be "assigned to infantry and airborne divisions mustered for the D Day landings" (132-33). Esmé displays no youthful or feminine ignorance of the war, nor is she in any way indifferent to it; she knows immediately why X is in Devon: "You go to that secret Intelligence school on the hill, don't you?" she asks Sergeant X shortly after introducing herself (142). As for her and her brother, they are in Devon, we infer, having been evacuated from wherever they were living before; their father has been "s-l-a-i-n in North Africa," and their mother is dead (146). Though Sergeant X does not talk to Esmé about his experiences in the Army (partly, perhaps, for security reasons), and he keeps his black G.I. filling hidden from her and her brother throughout their conversation, Esmé is quite forthcoming about her own war experiences, sharing with X some details about her father. "He was an exceedingly

¹³ Though his focus is on the breakdown of language, John Wenke raises a similar point in his essay "Sergeant X, Esme, and the Meaning of Words," arguing that Esme and Sergeant X's meeting forms an instance of "love based on sympathetic understanding and shared experiences" not evident in the other relationships Sergeant X has with family or fellow soldiers (70). Wenke is correct to point out that "shared experiences" form the backbone of Esme's ameliorating effect on Sergeant X. I would add, however, that it is of utmost significance that *war* experience is what these characters share, and that Esme and Sergeant X's shared war experience contributes to a larger theme in Salinger's work, of war experience not being restricted only to soldiers.

¹⁴ See note 6 above.

loveable man,” she says. “He was extremely handsome too. Not that one’s appearance matters greatly, but he was. He had terribly penetrating eyes, for a man who was intrinsically [*sic*] kind” (148-9). Esmé’s malapropisms are endearing, but more significant here is her emphasis on her father’s character rather than on the kind of soldier he may have been. This emphasis continues the motif I’ve traced through others of Salinger’s works: people can connect over shared experiences of grief caused by war, but when those shared experiences involve particular people, not soldiers who exhibit a certain brand of masculinity.

Sergeant X and Esmé were initially bonded together by shared experiences related to war, but, just as Esmé’s description of her father moves away from war and closer to his personality and uniqueness as a beloved human being, so do her questions to Sergeant X move away from his involvement in the war and towards his own uniqueness. “May I inquire how you were employed before entering the Army?” Esmé asks later in their conversation. “I said I hadn’t been employed at all, that I’d only been out of college a year but that I liked to think of myself as a professional short-story writer,” X narrates (150). This detail connects Esmé and Sergeant X more closely together, for it turns out that Esmé’s “father wrote beautifully,” and that she is “saving a number of his letters for posterity” (150-1). She later asks if Sergeant X will write a story “exclusively for me sometime,” a story that “isn’t childish or silly” because she “prefer[s] stories about squalor” (151). This request is answered in the form of the second part of the story, the “squalid, or moving, part of the story” where “the scene changes” and we read about Sergeant X, this time “cunningly” disguised.¹⁵ This Sergeant X is an intelligence officer

¹⁵ The first section of the story is written in first person; the narrator of the first section is not referred to as “Sergeant X” until the second section, which switches to third person. It seems very clear that

trying to write “several weeks after V-E Day,” a “young man who had not come through the war with all his faculties intact” (157).¹⁶

The traumatic effects of the war on Sergeant X—exhibited by his shaking hands, his inability to write, his distance from the other people in his regiment—are clear in this section; this is, perhaps, the “squalor” Esmé requested. Significantly, Sergeant X attempts to find relief through communication with a person close to him: toward the end of the story, he thinks that “if he wrote a letter to an old friend of his in New York there might be some quick, however slight, therapy in it for him” (169). However, “he couldn’t insert his notepaper into the roller properly, his fingers were shaking so violently now” and he eventually gives up trying and closes his eyes (169-70). When he opens them, he sees an unopened package on his desk—a package that, it turns out, is from Esmé, and which contains a letter and her father’s watch. It is Esmé’s letter, not the abortive attempt to write to his friend, that helps Sergeant X find “some quick, however slight, therapy,” and she writes to him about their shared war experience:

We are all tremendously excited and overawed about D Day and only hope that it will bring about the swift termination of the war and a method of existence that is ridiculous to say that least. Charles and I are both quite concerned about you; we hope you were not among those who made the first initial assault upon the Contentin Peninsula [*sic*]. Were you? Please reply as speedily as possible. My warmest regards to your wife. (171-2)

After reading Esmé’s letter, and looking at the watch she has sent him, Sergeant X finds that “suddenly, almost ecstatically, he felt sleepy” (173). The story closes with Sergeant X’s first-person address to Esmé, one that evidences the “slight therapy” Esmé’s letter

the narrator’s saying “I’ve disguised myself so cunningly that even the cleverest reader will fail to recognize me” is ironic, and that the narrator of the first section is indeed the Sergeant X of the second (156-7).

¹⁶ In saying goodbye to Sergeant X, Esmé had told him, “I hope you return from the war with all your faculties intact” (156).

has allowed him: “You take a really sleepy man, Esmé, and he *always* stands a chance of again becoming a man with all his fac—with all his f-a-c-u-l-t-i-e-s intact” (173).

Three things in particular are significant about this part of the story. First, Esmé’s letter again makes clear that she, Charles, and Sergeant X *share* war experience; war experience isn’t the unique province of Sergeant X, the man and “real” soldier, but is endured by people regardless of gender or age. Second, that shared experience is part of what allows Esmé’s letter to give Sergeant X some “slight therapy”—to even make him sleepy, a sign that he might still recover at least some of his faculties. Not only can war experience be shared between people of diverse ages and genders, but that shared grief can help the parties involved recover. Third, and finally, part of what makes this hint of recovery possible is the fact that Sergeant X and Esmé’s connection extends beyond their shared war experience and into who they are as people. Esmé’s remarks about the success of the D Day invasion quickly segue into her and Charles’s concern for X’s welfare—and she remembers, and extends polite regards to, his wife. Sergeant X’s functional role in the war as a soldier does not matter so much as how that war has affected him as a person. The watch that Esmé sends to Sergeant X is similarly significant. Though it has broken in transit, and Sergeant X doesn’t know—and doesn’t try to find out—whether it is irreparably damaged, whether or not the watch performs a prescribed function does not matter. The fact that it meant a lot to Esmé, that it was her father’s, allows it to be the “lucky talisman” that she wished it to be for him, and perhaps even more: “He just sat with [the watch] in his hand for another long period. Then, suddenly, almost ecstatically, he felt sleepy” (173). The story closes with Sergeant X’s first-person address to Esme, one that evidences the “slight therapy” Esme’s letter has allowed him: “You take a really

sleepy man, Esme, and he *always* stands a chance of again becoming a man with all his fac—with all his f-a-c-u-l-t-i-e-s intact” (173). Again in Salinger’s fiction, we see that Salinger does not discriminate between the war-related experiences of men and women, young and old, and that the sharing of war experience is possible and can facilitate healing among people who have had those experiences.

Writing War Obliquely

So far in this chapter, I have argued that J.D. Salinger’s fiction presents a uniquely egalitarian view about who has war experiences, and a positive view of the possibility that those experiences can be shared, the grief they cause somewhat alleviated. His work does so, I have argued, by, first, harshly criticizing two particular and phony brands of masculinity and femininity that are preoccupied with surface rather than depth, and second, by displaying over and over again situations where men and women, young and old, are able to share war experiences in ways that help them heal. These two points lead into a third: Salinger’s fiction does indicate that war experience can be shared, and that those who have endured it can recover from its traumatic effects; however, this occurs only in certain situations and with certain people, and the experiences themselves—the “war stories”—must be told in a specific way. It is to this way of telling war stories that I turn now.

To do so, I return to the scene from *The Catcher in the Rye* with which I opened this chapter, in which Holden Caulfield sees a phony war movie about an English soldier who loses his memory in the war, only to regain it. Holden’s judgment of the film is typical for him: “It was so putrid I couldn’t take my eyes off it” (138). This movie, as I said in the introduction to this chapter, is the incarnation of the *wrong* way to

communicate a war experience, and the reaction of the lady sitting next to Holden is the *wrong* response to war experience incarnate, as well. Later on in this passage in *Catcher*, however, we read a description of a *right* way, in Salinger's work, to communicate war experience. This "right way" is not dependent on "actual" war experience as a soldier; neither is it phony, seeking to reaffirm the kind of war-forged masculinity Salinger so despises. It is, instead, both honest and oblique.

D.B.'s conversation with his and Holden's little brother, Allie, brings all of these ideas together and to light. "I remember Allie once asked [D.B.] wasn't it sort of good that he was in the war because he was a writer and it gave him a lot to write about and all," Holden says. Allie's question seems a reasonable one, especially given the number of stories and books that grow out of soldierly experience. One of them, *A Farewell to Arms*, is one of D.B.'s favorite books, in fact (141). However, D.B.'s response to Allie's question contradicts Allie's—and our—expectation. Holden continues: "[D.B.] made Allie go get his baseball mitt and then he asked him who was the better war poet, Rupert Brooke or Emily Dickinson. Allie said Emily Dickinson" (140). Allie's response, and D.B.'s tacit approval of it, is surprising; Rupert Brooke was a soldier in the Royal Naval Division in England during WWI, and his poems concern the war directly. Emily Dickinson was, of course, a woman, and while she lived through the American Civil War, she did not fight in it. Further, none of her poems directly address the war—or, at least, the argument could be made that they do not. D.B., and Salinger as well, seem to value something different where good war poetry—and good war writing in general—are concerned.

What is it, then, that they value? What makes Emily Dickinson a better war poet than Rupert Brooke? The answer is in keeping with the elements of Salinger's view on war, and its relationship to gender and to communication across the home front / war front divide, that I have discussed so far. In short, Emily Dickinson is the superior war poet because she communicates war experience honestly and obliquely, while Rupert Brooke writes about war experience in a phony way akin to Professor Gladwaller's in "The Last Day of the Last Furlough." For example, here is Rupert Brooke's most famous war poem, "The Soldier," a sonnet written in 1914 in the beginning of the First World War:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.
And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Give somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven. (*Collected Poems* 105)

Brooke's poem is nationalistic, affirming the value of the soldier's sacrifice by tying it to England, and making dying for one's country a meaningful gift of gratitude for all England has given him. The tone of this poem is completely antithetical to the kind of war writing Babe describes in "The Last Day of the Last Furlough." After criticizing his father's impressive holding forth, Babe clenches his hand under the table and says, "It's time we let the dead die in vain. It's never worked the other way, God knows" (47).

Emily Dickinson, however, does not write poems of nationalistic sacrifice in war; she does not write poems that explicitly mention war at all. The poem below, composed in 1864, in the latter years of the American Civil War, instead obliquely communicates the profound confusion brought about by war experience that is not a soldier's experience, but that is nevertheless significant and devastating.¹⁷

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind—
As if my Brain had split—
I tried to match it - Seam by Seam—
But could not make them fit.
The thought behind, I strove to join
Unto the thought before—
But Sequence unravelled out of Sound
Like Balls—upon a Floor. (*Complete Poems* 440)

Dickinson's poem, though it does not explicitly mention the war, is honest; it communicates confusion and pain rather than a nationalistic passion that is, in Salinger's work, phony and dangerous, perpetuating the horror of war rather than honoring its victims or helping them heal. This oblique way of writing about war, of fully articulating the grief it causes without explicitly discussing its events, is the method of war writing D.B.—and Salinger—have chosen. Good war writing is oblique, but it is honest.

Walt Glass and His Family as Salinger's Truest War Story

Thus far in my discussion of Salinger's fiction about war, I have touched on a variety of different works across his writing career, from his early magazine stories to his later fiction. However, my discussion of Salinger's most beloved family of characters, the Glass family, has been, if not as oblique as Emily Dickinson's discussion of war in her

¹⁷ There has been some scholarly consideration of Dickinson as a war poet; the two best examples are Shira Wolosky's 1984 book *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War* and Randall Fuller's treatment of Dickinson's work in his 2011 book *From Battlefields Rising: How the Civil War Transformed American Literature*. Wolosky's book, in particular, defines and discusses "I felt a Cleaving in my Mind" as a war poem.

poetry, comparatively sparse. The Glass family is crucially important, however, to the view Salinger's work presents about war experiences, who shares them, and how they should be shared. Though not all of them have been soldiers, just as Helen and Eloise and Lionel and Holden have not been soldiers, the Glass family shares a common war experience: they have lost sons to war and to the traumatic effects of war. More than any of Salinger's other characters and connected stories, the stories of the Glass family, and one particular thread that connects them—the war story of Walt Glass—express Salinger's stance on telling war stories. If Emily Dickinson's poetry is an example of Salinger's stance on writing war stories, then Walt Glass is its embodiment. Salinger communicates through the often absent and always silent character of Walt what he communicates through the speeches of characters in other stories: that war and one's experience in it is not a thing that should figure in stories or in speech, but should instead be kept behind closed lips or figured only in a shaken fist.

Before I discuss Walt's character, and his place within the Glass family's narrative of war experience, I want first to review and clarify Salinger's view on telling war stories. Salinger's perspective on the possibility of telling war stories has two distinct parts; both can be inferred from two of Salinger's works in particular. One, which I have already discussed at length, is "The Last Day of the Last Furlough." In this story, Babe Gladwaller objects forcefully to his father's talking about the First World War "as though it had been some kind of rugged, sordid game by which society...weeded out the men from the boys," and instead endorses silence:

"I believe...that it's the moral duty of all the men who have fought and will fight in this [second world] war to keep our mouths shut, once it's over, never again to mention it in any way. It's time we let the dead die in vain. It's never worked the other way, God knows. [...] But if we come

back...all of us talking, writing, painting, making movies of heroism and cockroaches and foxholes and blood, then future generations will always be doomed to future Hitlers.” (47)

Babe objects, as I argued above, to the phony kind of masculinity his father’s storytelling supports, yes—but he also objects to telling war stories at all. Through Walt Glass’s obliquely-told war story, Salinger lets the (war) dead die in vain.

However, Babe’s words are only one half of Salinger’s view on speaking about war. Silence, rather than storytelling, is part of this view; the other part makes clear that this silence need not, and must not, be passive. This second part of Salinger’s perspective on telling wars stories is illustrated in Seymour’s response to the Gettysburg Address in “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters.” In this story, Buddy Glass comes across these words in Seymour’s diary; they concern what Seymour believes is the dishonesty of this famous speech:

He [a psychoanalyst Seymour was seeing] also had the impression I’d said [the Gettysburg Address] was a dishonest speech. I told him I’d said that 51,112 men were casualties at Gettysburg, and that if someone *had* to speak at the anniversary of the event, he should simply have come forward and shaken his fist at the audience and then walked off—that is, if the speaker was an absolutely honest man. (86)

Seymour’s words in this passage imply that Salinger’s vow of silence about the war does not indicate a lack of protest or action; the shaken fist is mute, but acts as its own testament. So, rather than parading obnoxiously through his works, Walt Glass, both present and silent throughout the fiction in which he is mentioned, is instead just such a mute testament.¹⁸ In “Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut,” which I have already discussed at

¹⁸ The reader has no doubt noticed that I am favoring Walt over Seymour Glass, doing quite intentionally the opposite of what Buddy does in “Seymour—An Introduction.” My choosing not to comment in-depth on Seymour, though Seymour himself is a veteran of WWII and suffers a nervous breakdown from (presumably) his involvement in that war, does have a purpose. While Seymour begins his life in Salinger’s fiction as a suffering veteran, the place he comes to assume in Salinger’s fiction about the

length, Walt and his death are things that deeply affect his former girlfriend Eloise, but she finds herself unable to speak adequately about either. In “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters,” Buddy mentions Walt’s death briefly in a story otherwise overtaken by Seymour’s wedding and diary. In “Zooey,” Walt is one Glass child in a list, an unmentioned ghost haunting the Glass apartment, and a soldier whose death was “freakish.” And finally, in “Seymour—An Introduction,” Walt is mentioned as having been a “very elegant young man while he lived” (216), but is also—and deliberately—avoided as a topic. In all of these works, Walt, his army involvement, and his death in war are present but not commented upon. The overwhelming impression is that Salinger holds to his “oath” through Walt by not making him a hero, and also by refusing to allow readers to forget that Walt died in vain. Walt’s story is not phony, but as honest as Seymour’s shaken fist.

However, in all four of these stories, another theme also develops. As Salinger tells us less and less about Walt the soldier, he gives us a clearer and clearer image of Walt the person, and as Walt’s military career and death fade into the background, Walt’s family and his place in it are brought to the fore. Salinger replaces any preoccupations we might have had with Walt’s soldiery and death with a lively picture of who Walt was in life, the way he is chiefly remembered by his family. He is a soldier, yes, but one reinscribed within the circle of community, not a detached avatar of patriotism or manliness.

Glass family is very definitely not that of a soldier; as David Seed writes, Seymour takes on more and more importance throughout the stories in which he figures until, finally, he has been “transformed into a sage” (81); Anthony Quagliano even compares “Hapworth 16, 1924” to a hagiography, the biography of a saint. Seymour is, in this reading, significant in Salinger’s fiction primarily as a religious figure—the avatar of Salinger’s own spiritual thought, we might go so far to say. Where war and war stories are concerned, however, Walt Glass is the more significant brother; therefore, my focus here remains on him.

I have already discussed “Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut” at length, focusing on how Lew and Mary Jane expect Walt to fit into a brand of masculinity Salinger criticizes; I have also discussed how Eloise deviates from the brand of femininity Salinger criticizes and, instead, shows how, in Salinger’s fiction, war experience and trauma is not limited to men’s experience as soldiers. Here, I want to alter my focus again, focusing not on Lew, Mary Jane, or even Eloise, but on Walt. Eloise’s stories about Walt are not about Walt the soldier, but instead about his idiosyncrasies, the little personal things she loved him for: he was a special kind of funny, he was honest, he was sweet, and he was nice. Eloise describes two memories of Walt that have nothing to do with the war, and everything to do with Walt himself. The first is the passage the story gets its title from: “Once...I fell down. I used to wait for him at the bus stop, right outside the PX, and he showed up late once, just as the bus was pulling out. We started to run for it, and I fell and twisted my ankle. He said, ‘Poor Uncle Wiggly.’ He meant my ankle. Poor Uncle Wiggly, he called it...God, he was nice” (42). The second, shortly after, is another memory of traveling; it happened “just right after he was drafted.” Eloise tells Mary Jane:

“We were on the train going from Trenton to New York... It was cold in the car and I had my coat sort of over us. [...] Well, he sort of had his hand on my stomach. You know. Anyway, all of a sudden he said my stomach was so beautiful he wished some officer would come up and order him to stick his other hand through the window. He said he wanted to do what was fair. Then he took his hand away and told the conductor to throw his shoulders back. He told him if there was one thing he couldn’t stand it was a man who didn’t look proud of his uniform. Then conductor just told him to go back to sleep.” Eloise reflected a moment, then said, “It wasn’t always what he said, but how he said it. You know.” (43-44)

Barring Eloise’s offhand mention that the memory in the train happened after Walt was drafted, and perhaps also Walt’s talk about taking pride in a uniform, Walt’s affiliation with the war is secondary to his strange, caring humor, and the latter is the centerpiece of

both memories. Indeed, despite her eagerness to share her memories of Walt with *someone*, since she cannot share them with Lew, Eloise is very reluctant to share the story of Walt's senseless death in Japan. For her—and, we may infer, for Salinger—the important details of Walt's life do not involve the war; those stories are not the stories that need to be told.

Walt Glass is next mentioned in “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters,” but unlike his comparably major role in “Uncle Wiggly,” his role in this story is brief; in fact, he is only mentioned once. However, Buddy's description of him, and of his death, are worth remarking upon, and Walt's absence itself is more evidence of Salinger's fulfilling his “oath” of silence about the war. Buddy mentions Walt a few pages into the story as one of the many (seven) Glass siblings. Though “Raise High the Roof Beam” concerns the date of Seymour's wedding in 1942, Buddy tells it as one looking back upon it from 1955, after both Seymour and Walt have died. “In late May of 1942,” Buddy writes, his siblings were “flung...all over the United States”; as for Walt:

Walt was somewhere in the Pacific—or on his way there—with a field artillery unit. (We've never been altogether sure where Walt was at that specific time. He was never a great letter writer, and very little personal information—almost none—reached us after his death. He was killed in an unspeakably absurd G.I. accident in late autumn of 1945, in Japan. (6-7)

Walt is mentioned in this story as part of a list of the Glass siblings—as he will be every other time he is mentioned in Salinger's fiction. Walt's significance to Buddy lies in his place in the Glass family, after Boo Boo and before his twin brother Waker, not in his military rank. Further, in this passage, we receive new information about Walt; not only was he funny, honest, and nice, but he was also a poor letter writer. This detail, like Walt's identity as a sibling, fleshes out our image of Walt as a person.

It also ties Walt to Babe's speech about telling war stories: Walt does not write them. The significance of Walt's own silence, as well as of Buddy's calling his death absurd to an *unspeakable* degree, point again to Salinger's stance, through Babe and Seymour, that war not be spoken about, nor stories told of it. Therefore, Walt keeps silent, and does not send letters home to his family allowing them to turn his experiences into a war story; therefore, the manner of Walt's death is also unspeakable, a tragedy that does not translate into a story but rather testifies to the fact that Walt died absurdly. Seymour's remarks about the Gettysburg Address, which appear later on in "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters," mirror the way Buddy describes Walt and his death: rather than making even a very short, moving speech on his brother's sacrifice, Buddy instead describes his death as just that: a death, a senseless loss.

Walt is mentioned several times in "Zooey" (though he is not mentioned in "Franny"), and often in ways similar to Buddy's mention of him in "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters." The first place he is mentioned is, again, as part of the Glass family: he is part of a long list of the Glass siblings contained in a footnote five pages into the story. His brief biography is two sentences long: "Walt had been dead just over ten years [at the time in which 'Zooey' takes place, in 1955]. He was killed in a freakish explosion while he was with the Army of Occupation in Japan" (53). The details of Walt's death in "Zooey" are in keeping with the details we already know from "Uncle Wiggly" and "Raise High the Roof Beam," but there has been a progressive reduction in detail in each story's description of his death. Eloise's explanation of the exploding stove that killed Walt is by far the most detailed. Buddy's description of it in "Raise High the Roof Beam" cuts Eloise's paragraph-long description, which attempted to assign a cause and even

blame to the accident, down to four words: an “unspeakably absurd G.I. accident” (7). Now, in “Zooey,” Walt’s death has been whittled down to two words in a footnote: a “freakish explosion” (53). The story of Walt the soldier’s death should not be expounded upon or assigned greater significance; the words required for its telling are ever more sharply reduced. Readers are reminded of Walt’s description, as related by Eloise, of how it felt to advance in the Army, being gradually stripped of his bars and uniform until he was finally “stark naked” with only “a little infantry button in his navel” (“Uncle Wiggly” 45).

However, as Walt’s affiliation with the Army and his death in war are gradually stripped of detail and significance, his place in the Glass family and his significance as a brother and son become more detailed. For example, when Mrs. Glass is talking to Zooey in the bathroom at the beginning of the story, a description of Walt’s death is followed immediately by a description of Walt that has nothing to do with war: “one [of Bessie Glass’s sons was] killed in World War II (her only truly lighthearted son)” (90). Another example occurs later in “Zooey,” while Zooey tries to console his sister Franny. This time, a description of Walt makes it way outside footnotes and parentheses. Zooey remarks upon the Glass children’s strange religious leanings; Walt, apparently, “was a hot one” who once told Waker that “everybody in the family must have piled up one *helluva* lot of bad karma in his past incarnations. He had a theory, Walt, that the religious life, and all the agony that goes with it, is just something God sick on people who have the gall to accuse him of having created an ugly world” (153). This second passage has nothing to do with Walt’s death, and that is just the point. Rather than urging readers to remember his the absurdity of his death, and the brief snippets of it that they have been

given in “Zooney” and in others of Salinger’s stories, this passage about Walt’s “hot” religious philosophy not only connects him to his family but also continues to flesh out characteristics of Walt in life: his sense of humor, his niceness, his honesty, the fact that he was Bessie’s “only truly lighthearted son,” and now his tongue-in-cheek religious philosophy, which brings a “titter of appreciation” from Franny. The bare-bones nature of Walt’s story as a soldier leads readers to concentrate more on the details of Walt’s story as a son and brother in “Zooney,” and remember those details already given in “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters” and “Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut.” Walt may have died in vain, but here we remember that he lived, too.

Finally, in “Seymour—an Introduction,” Walt is mentioned four times; all are in keeping with Salinger’s stance on telling war stories. All of them also reinforce the idea that Walt’s war story is far less important than his place in the Glass family, and the memories the Glass siblings have of him as a brother. The entirety of “Seymour” is Buddy’s attempt to write an introduction to Seymour’s poems, to be published posthumously. Buddy’s preoccupation with Seymour, his person, and his suicide are really the subject matter of the story; none of the Glasses, and not even Salinger, can let Seymour rest. However, Buddy seems all too willing to allow Walt to rest; he writes: “My late younger brother Walt, who was killed in a postwar accident in Japan (and of whom I plan to say as little as possible in this series of sittings, if I’m to get through them) was a dancer, too” (170). Buddy patently refuses to say any more than he absolutely must about Walt. And included in the “little as possible” he will say is, again, a very brief account of Walt’s death—Walt’s death in the war is once again worth mentioning but not worth turning into a narrative. The story of Walt’s death remains that

mute, shaken fist. However, another detail—that he was a dancer—is added to his life, strengthening our image of Walt the person, the younger brother, just as our image of Walt the soldier becomes less defined. And, in the other three places Walt is mentioned in “Seymour—An Introduction,” he is not a soldier either. Instead, he is a child, fascinated by Seymour’s wrists in one instance (192), wanting to dress elegantly and making up stories about how his mother found a clothing shop in another (217), and, finally, as the proud owner of one of two red-and-white-striped bicycles; he, unlike his brother Waker, refrained from giving his away (239). In the end, Buddy—and Salinger—choose to remember Walt as a precocious child and Glass brother rather than as a soldier whose death was “unspeakably absurd.”

Walt’s war story—or rather, its absence—forms the third leg of a tripod upon which stands the relationship between gender and war stories displayed in Salinger’s fiction. Salinger’s work, first, criticizes two particular gender constructions, one of femininity and one of masculinity, that both seek to cloak real human suffering as a result of war with a stifling veil of soldiery heroism or societal image. Second, Salinger’s fiction works against ideas of a gendered division between war front and home front by portraying war experience not as something experienced by soldiers, but by communities: women, children, friends and family, soldiers and those in their communities, regardless of the level of “real” knowledge the people in those communities have of the action at the front. Further, all of these people, regardless of gender, age, or military status, are given agency as narrators of their war experiences. However, *how* those experiences are narrated, and for what purpose, is significant. Third, then, through the character of Walt Glass, Salinger’s work illustrates how—and why—war stories should be told: they

should be implicit, not explicit, not lingering on acts of soldiery and intent on communicating what battle is like. War wrests men from their communities and loved ones to make them former soldiers, as Salinger's work shows through Walt's presence in and absence from it. War stories, told the right way, re-inscribe soldiers like Walt within their communities and families. In the end, Walt's light-hearted nature, his humor, his strange religious leanings, and his place in the list of Glass siblings, means far more than his rank.

Conclusion: Salinger's "Glorious Imperfections"

In a blurb in the October 24, 1945 issue of *Esquire*, grouped among similar brief notes about other WWII soldiers on a page entitled "Backstage with *Esquire*," Salinger gives his opinion of the books that have come out of WWII so far. After stating that "it is probable that I will never write a novel," he writes: "So far the novels of this war have had too much of the strength, maturity and craftsmanship critics are looking for, and too little of the glorious imperfections which teeter and fall off the best minds. The men who have been in this war deserve some sort of trembling melody rendered without embarrassment or regret. I'll watch for that book" (34). Slawenski suggests the these words indicate Salinger's simultaneous refusal to author a novel about the war—keeping the vow of silence Babe introduces in "Last Day of the Last Furlough"—and his recognition that such a novel does need to be written (135). I agree, to a point. Certainly, Salinger never wrote a war novel,¹⁹ neither one with this sought-after "strength, maturity

¹⁹ Worth noting here is the promise, however questionable, that J.D. Salinger approved additional works for publication—including works about World War II—before his death. According to David Shields and Shane Salerno's 2013 biography *Salinger*, and repeated in their documentary of the same title, these works will be published between 2015 and 2020, and at least two will be directly concerned with

and craftsmanship,” nor the “trembling melody” that seems an ideal many reach for only to grasp at nothing. However, Salinger *did* write about war, and few phrases better characterize that writing than “glorious imperfections which teeter and fall off the best minds.” Salinger’s war writing does not meet our expectations for a “war story”; we may respond initially like Lew or Mary Jane, wanting details of rank; like Sergeant X’s brother, wanting souvenirs; or expect something like Professor Gladwaller’s holding forth about heroism, blood, and cockroaches. What we read in Salinger’s work is different; it is fraught with “glorious imperfections” but also with the conviction that war affects families and communities, imperfect humans all. War and many of its stories grow out of and even create division—between soldier and civilian, between men and women, between soldiers and their families. Salinger’s stories, though they are often silent when it comes to detailing the events of war, reject phoniness in favor of honesty when they do investigate war’s effects on his character. His work is emphatic about the extent of war’s effects on all those involved, and the honest need for family and community to heal the divisions it causes.

World War II (575). However such news might delight Salinger fans, there is little evidence outside of Shields and Salerno’s book that such works, even if they do exist, will be published.

CHAPTER SIX:

Conclusion

It is commonplace—for writers, for readers, for scholars, for Americans more generally—to consider and define the twentieth century’s wars quite differently, and to remark chiefly upon their vast differences when comparing them. In fiction, Tim O’Brien remarks upon the differences between the WWII veterans he grew up with, who sit around comparing scars and telling stories of valor and heroism, and his own war experience, which left him doubting the existence of valor and left him with scars in humiliating places.¹ Salinger’s Babe Gladwaller, rather than sympathizing with a fellow soldier’s experience, protests his father’s “holding forth” about his experiences in WWI, claiming that his father’s grand stories will only bring new wars for each new generation. In scholarship, writers like Susan Schweik and Stacey Peebles examine literature from particular wars in particular points in history; Schweik discusses WWII women poets in *A Gulf So Deeply Cut*, while Peebles focuses on the more recent wars in Iraq in *Welcome to the Suck*. While these examples from literature and scholarship are admittedly few, and while exceptions certainly exist,² the tendency to categorize wars and war writing persists. Thus, finding ways to consider these conflicts, and the literature that comes out of them, together without ignoring their distinct differences is a difficult task.

¹ The scar in question results from a shot to the buttock that results in borderline gangrene and humiliation, and makes it necessary for O’Brien to sleep flat on his stomach for a month and drop his trousers a few times a day to apply an ointment that stains his pants. The nurses call it “diaper rash.” “Getting shot should be an experience from which you can draw some pride. [...] Humiliation shouldn’t be a part of it,” O’Brien writes (191).

² I cite one, in fact, in this dissertation: Alex Vernon’s 2004 book *Soldiers Once and Still*.

In the preceding pages, I have offered one way in which fruitful comparisons among the twentieth centuries' vastly different wars, and different war stories, can be made. Amidst the twentieth century's very different—and increasingly bloody—wars and its social upheavals, at least two things have largely remained the same: first, the gender-specific ways in which we fit ourselves into a narrative of war, what Elshtain calls “sedimented lore—stories of male war fighters and women home keepers and designated weepers over war's inevitable tragedies—[that] have spilled over from one epoch to the next (4); second, the need, clear in much war literature, for reconciliation between war front and home front after the official conflict has ceased.

Thus, American war writers in the twentieth century stand poised at a significant moment in history. These writers endure war experiences during the bloodiest century of human history, when the destruction possible at the hands of armies and weaponry has reached new heights; they also endure war experiences as waging war is becoming less and less personal, distancing the soldier from his opponent bodily and mentally. The twentieth-century soldier finds himself in the business of destroying the lives of other human beings whose humanity draws further and further out of range. Twentieth-century war writers, then, seek to renew community, and to rebuild connections between home front and war front, in a century whose wars exaggerate the destructive, divisive effects of war, and which distance the soldier more than ever from humanity and the good of human community away from the war front.

At the same time, these war writers' experiences occur simultaneously with social movements and changes that question, unsettle, and even upset traditional ideas of gender roles. Among these traditional gender roles are the gendered positions of men and women

relative to war, the “Just Warriors” and “Beautiful Souls” Elshtain describes in *Women and War*. Though a gendered understanding of the divide between war front and home front is a persistent myth in Western culture, and yet retains its hold, the twentieth century has also seen a surge of scholarly recovery of women’s war writing and discussions of women’s—and men’s—diverse roles in wartime, and women have assumed more (and more traditionally masculine) roles in the military.

Twentieth-century American war writers thus have a difficult challenge, and a unique opportunity. While they write about experiences in wars of unprecedented destruction, experiences that leave them distant from the communities they left on the home front, potentially exaggerating the gendered boundary between home front and war front, they also write in a century where the possibility to write past these boundaries has never been greater. Twentieth-century feminist scholars give these writers a language to use, and the shifting of men’s and women’s roles relative to war in reality—if not necessarily in cultural myth—strengthen the possibility that they can write past these boundaries and write into being the “chastened patriot” figure Elshtain describes.

Twentieth century war writing still evidences the “grand narrative of women and war” that divides war front from home front and makes rebuilding community difficult for veterans and noncombatants postwar. However, it also presents the strong possibility that this narrative can be transcended, the divisions it creates healed.

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