War Literature: How the Genre Teaches us the Many Perspectives of War

War literature as a genre provides readers with the chance to examine war and its issues from the perspective of literature, letting us deal with those myriad issues personally and to better understand war and its effects on humanity. However, in order to be able to do that, the text must have certain characteristics, like war imagery, inclusion of themes typically associated with war, and a basis in personal real war experiences. The presence of these characteristics helps readers to understand what war is like by capturing those actual experiences on the page. War literature must also offer insight into the nature of war and those affected by it. “Poetry can offer thoughtful readers precious insights into war—moral, political, and aesthetic ways of understanding war that are valuable precisely because they are not simple, flat, or formulaic” (Winn 7). This is the most fundamental characteristic of war literature; a text might be lacking one of the other characteristics in a traditional sense, but if it can provide insight into an aspect of war, regardless if it of a soldier, civilian, or victim, it must be classified as war literature. That is how vastly different texts, like Homer’s *The Iliad*, O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, Wiesel’s *Night*, and Farjeon’s war poetry can all be placed in the war literature canon. On the other hand, texts like Shakespeare’s *Henry V* and Jessie Pope’s poetry cannot be in this genre because they fail to provide insight about war, as well as not having some of the other characteristics as well. For these reasons, for a text to belong to the war literature canon, it must contain some sort of war imagery, though it can vary, address thematically one of the world’s universal questions
about war, offer insight into the nature of war, and be based on peoples’ actual experiences in war as seen through an examination of *The Iliad, The Things They Carried, Night*, and WWI poets like Eleanor Farjeon.

*The Iliad*, despite it probably not being an eyewitness account of a war experience, still manages to capture the important characteristics of war literature because it addresses common themes associated with war literature, shows the issues that soldiers and civilians face, and contains substantial war imagery. Homer’s *Iliad* truly is “the primal statement on the contradictions inherent in war”, and it is one of first texts to really capture that insight of war (McDonough 24). The *Iliad* has very vivid and realistic imagery and captures the questions soldiers often have about fighting and universal themes about war, which offers insight into the nature and purpose of war. In particular, Achilles shows how the path for vengeance, when he avenges Patroclus’ death by killing Hector, is the “redressing [of] the balance of glory, too much of which has come to Hector, and he speaks of avenging shame, which now seems to be more a matter of losing men than of losing material spoils” (52). In *The Iliad*, Achilles and Hector are both faced with the challenge of people wanting them to fight in this war, for different reasons, and they must decide for themselves if they wish to fight. Achilles, in particular, refuses to fight for most of the epic because he has received the gratitude he deserves, as expressed materially as the spoils of war. Once Agamemnon insulted him by taking back Briseis, Achilles lets his personal honor and shame keep him from battle. Even when Odysseus approaches Achilles with Agamemnon’s offer of riches, he refuses because he realizes that there will never “be any thanks at all / For my ceaseless efforts against the foe” (lines 356-57). This lack of appreciation for his great prowess, Achilles is “angry at the insult to *his* honor, …withdraws from battle, and the tide of war turns against the Greeks” (Winn 40-41). Achilles is entirely focused on his own personal
stake in this war, which is often a conflict soldiers face when they must decide whether to fight in a war. Homer establishes in the text the desire for personal glory and gain, a common trope in war literature, through Achilles’ example.

Hector’s and Achilles’ fight to the death also captures the motivating emotions soldiers experience while fighting, allowing the reader to enter the soldier’s mind. When Patroclus is killed by Hector, Achilles reacts by preparing for battle to fight Hector to the death. “Now he remembers promising to bring Patroclus home safe to his father and berates himself for failing to keep that promise” (Winn 159). He is motivated by his shame in his failure to protect Patroclus. It is at this point where Hector feels fear about fighting Achilles and runs from him. Ultimately, he does turn to face him, but he still tries to convince Achilles to respect his dead body, should Hector lose, when he says:

For now my spirit says fight with you face to face,
Whether I kill or be killed. Come then, let us
Invoke our gods to sanction this pact between us,
For they will witness and guard our covenant best.
If Zeus allows me to outlast you and rob you
Of life, I’ll do to your corpse no foul defilement.
But when I have stripped off your armor, Achilles,
I’ll give your dead body back to the host of Achaean—
And you do the same for me. (lines 289-98)

Achilles replies to this request by saying, “There are no faithful oaths between lions and men, / Nor do wolves and lambs have any oneness of heart, / But they are always at fatal odds with each other” (lines 301-3). Both are facing an internal conflict—Hector and his fear of losing and
dying and Achilles’ quest to redeem Patroclus’ death. These heroes go to great lengths to avoid being shamed, one of the great motivators in war. Homer’s epic poem examines many of these internal conflicts that soldiers and leaders face during war, providing insight into their condition during war, a hallmark of the war literature genre.

The short stories in *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien also highlights these common themes about war and contains war imagery, while they also offer understandings into the soldier’s psyche in modern warfare. In these short stories, the protagonist faces the same “dilemmas posed by the warrior mentality [which] force unsettling questions about their societies and themselves”, rather like Hector’s and Achilles’ own experiences in *The Iliad* (McDonough 23). While these stories often deal with themes about war slightly differently than *The Iliad*, ultimately, they are addressing the same or very similar themes because “in many ways it has remained essentially the same at all times and in [all] places” (Meilinger 25). O’Brien especially focuses on certain themes like shame and brotherhood, which are common in war literature. For example, in “The Things They Carried,” O’Brien juxtaposes war imagery with these themes of shame and embarrassment. He first describes them as carrying things like “the three standard weapons—the M-60, M-16, and M-79” and other weapons and supplies that they need to fight a war (7). However, he also shows that these men carry the burden and fears of fighting a war, capturing the insight of these soldiers’ experiences. He writes:

> They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing—these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight. They carried shameful memories. They carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down, it
required perfect balance and posture. They carried their reputations. They carried the soldier’s greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory and honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor. (20)

O’Brien here shows “shame being the greatest of all burdens” that a soldier must carry (Winn 39). In this way, O’Brien helps to capture a major theme in war literature—shame as a motivator for soldiers—while combining it with the images of them carrying the weapons they need for war. These soldiers do not want to be embarrassed by not living up to their fellow soldiers’ and their nation’s expectations, so they keep fighting even when they are desperately afraid of it and death. It is this fear of embarrassment that keeps them going rather than any noble desire to protect their country or to obtain everlasting glory by fighting and winning. These are all characteristics of war literature, demonstrating that O’Brien’s short stories belong in the war literature canon.

O’Brien’s stories also belong in the canon due to the various ways he investigates traditional themes associated with war and providing insights into the experiences of soldiers both before, during and after their tours, such as in “Speaking of Courage.” In this story he captures the challenges these soldiers face at home both before they enter the war and when they return from it, irrevocably changed by it. For them, home becomes “an ethical Gordian knot, that the ideological and social nature of the very domestic bliss they idealize is the origin and the justifier of the war from which they are trying to escape” (Risquez 244). These soldiers are caught between the fantasy of war that the people back home view it as, of soldiers just on an adventure, and the actual grimy and harsh reality of their own experiences during war. This is explicitly clear in “Speaking of Courage,” where Norman Bowker feels unable to connect with
everyone in his hometown after the war. He thinks now that “the town seemed remote somehow” (O’Brien 133). His experiences during war have made him incapable of connecting with those he was once closest to. Instead of the glorious victor returning from battle, Norman is lost and isolated in a town full of people. He drives alone in a “seven-mile loop” (131). There is a barrier between the town and him since the town and its people refuse to give Norman a chance to relieve himself of the guilt he feels and let go of the horrors that he has experienced at war. As he drives around his town, he longs to tell anyone his war story, but he knows deep down that none of them want to hear about how he failed to save his friend Kiowa’s life. While he contemplates how he would tell it, he thinks, “‘I didn’t flip out,’ he would’ve said. ‘I was cool. If things had gone right, if it hadn’t been for that smell, I could’ve won the Silver Star.’ A good war story, he thought, but it was not a war for war stories, nor for talk of valor, and nobody in the town wanted to know about the terrible stink” (O’Brien 143). Norman feels alone mainly because he cannot share these feelings of guilt with his family and friends—they are not interested in hearing about the ugly side of war. His “ethical Gordian knot” is his inability to share both his story, the reality he has experienced, to his current reality, his hometown, who in part forced him into war (Risquez 244). Norman has to bottle it up and let it fester until it destroys him. That inability to resolve his internal quandary is what leaves him isolated. This story provides insight into the soldier’s return to home and supposed normalcy, which is as fundamental to war literature as the stories set in the war.

O’Brien manages to capture the same moral and ethical quandaries these soldiers face, this time before a soldier’s tour, in his short story, “On the Rainy River.” When the protagonist of “On the Rainy River” receives his draft notice, he is faced with the choice to go to war or run away from it. He grapples with the shame that he feels in trying to avoid Vietnam, while he also
has the desire to be a hero as well. For example, Tim says that he “couldn’t make up his mind. I feared the war, yes, but I also feared exile. I was afraid of walking away from my own life, my friends and my family, my whole history, everything that mattered to me” (O’Brien 42). He does consider fleeing the country and going to Canada, going so far as to sail twenty yards away from the border. However, when he reaches that far, he freezes and cannot take that final step. He says, “what embarrasses me much more, and always will, is the paralysis that took my heart. A moral freeze: I couldn’t decide, I couldn’t act, I couldn’t comport myself with even a pretense of modest human dignity. All I could do was cry” (O’Brien 54). Shame is obviously a huge motivator for entering the war for him since he does not want to disappoint those in his life by not living up to their expectations. He is caught, as Risquez puts it, in that “ethical Gordian knot” of desiring both to live up to his own personal and his nation’s ideals as a soldier while simultaneously hating his nation for putting him into this position (244). Tim, like Norman in “Speaking of Courage,” suffers from this dual perspective of war, of knowing how their friends and family view it while being intimately informed of the harsh realities of war, so their shame and their fear keep them going. O’Brien’s stories perfectly capture that dualistic view of war soldiers have while examining universal themes of war literature, necessary characteristics for the war literature canon.

Wiesel’s *Night* is not typically viewed as a piece of war literature; however, it does offer insight into an often unexamined perspective of war—that of the victim. It also portrays unique war imagery, since it contains imagery dealing with the victims of war. For example, Wiesel describes the suffering and death that he and many other Jews faced during WWII in concentration camps. In one instance, he writes of the hanging of a young boy by the SS. He writes, “One day, as we returned from work, we saw three gallows, three black ravens, erected
on the Appelplatz. Roll call. The SS surrounding us, machine guns aimed at us: the usual ritual. Three prisoners in chains—and, among them, the little pipe, the sad-eyed angel” (Wiesel 64).

While this scene is not taking place on a battlefield, is still imagery of war. There are still soldiers and guns; it is just that it is focusing on a different side of war, that of the victim. Additionally, it addresses the same questions that other war texts try to answer. For example, Wiesel is frequently concerned with the question why he and his people are suffering—he questions the purpose of all of this pain. When a man questions where God is while this boy is hanging, Wiesel writes, “And from within me, I heard a voice answer: ‘Where He is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows…’ That night, the soup tasted of corpses” (Wiesel 65).

Not only is Wiesel addressing one of the major questions about war and suffering that most writers grapple with in war literature, he is also providing insight from his own personal experience to answer these questions. By having all of these characteristics present in his text, Wiesel’s Night can be classified as war literature.

William Shakespeare’s Henry V, while it does address common themes that appear in war texts, it does not truly provide insight into war issues, highlights real experiences, or showcase significant war imagery due to the limitations of the stage, so it cannot belong to the war literature canon. While this play is set during a war, its ultimate focus is not really on the war, but rather on the leader, and his decisions about how to lead his country in general, not just during war. The play focuses on Henry’s reaction to various events, including how to prepare his men for battle, but that is not the play’s ultimate focus. Additionally, the play suffers because it is not able to convey war imagery, like these other texts, effectively because of the limitations of the stage. This is even addressed in the play in the various prologues. The Chorus asks in the first prologue for pardon since the stage could not possibly hold as grand a scene as the battlefields of
France. He says “can this cockpit hold / The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram / Within this wooden O the very casques / That did affright at Agincourt?” (lines 11-14). He goes on to beg to let our “imaginary forces work” (lines 18). The audience has to imagine what this fighting was like because the stage cannot actually show all of it. However, this means that the play is lacking in substantial war imagery, which is one of the major characteristics of war literature.

While *Henry V* provides some insight into the responses people have to war, it is really limited by its focus on Henry and his reactions to all of responsibilities as a leader, so it cannot be considered a full war text. The play is more the story of Henry’s Machiavellian dealings to consolidate his power, and the war he begins in France is just a part of that. Rather than highlighting the conditions of war and how it affects people, the war is a plot device for Shakespeare to make a statement about how Henry is capable of being “Machiavelli’s ideal of political virtu” (Plaw 35). Henry instigates war to help solidify his claim to the English throne, since that in itself is shaky. This play is truly “the story of Harry’s process of maturation into a great King who unifies England in a glorious war of conquest” (Plaw 35). However, at the same time, Shakespeare is highlighting the way that this embrace of political ambition to unite his country is in turn fracturing him and his people implicitly. Even when questions about war arise in this play, they focus on Henry’s responsibility for them and for his men, and not necessarily the experiences war is bringing to those who are experiencing it. A soldier, Williams, tells Henry, who is in disguise, that “if the cause be not good, the King himself / hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs / and arms and heads chopped off in a battle shall join / together at the latter day, and cry all” (4.1.133-36). Even the night before these men might go and meet their deaths, they and the play focus on what that means in terms of Henry’s responsibility. While this focus on politics and a ruler’s responsibility for his or her people are
excellent themes for texts to examine, and Shakespeare’s history play is one of the finest examples of a political play, it does not examine the issues of war and provides little insight into war itself, so accordingly, it cannot belong to the canon of war literature.

Jessie Pope’s poetry also does not meet the requirements of the war literature canon, due to its lack vivid war imagery, honest representation of soldiers’ experiences, and the presences of insight into war and its effects. Pope’s poetry is primarily propaganda, so it cannot capture the true nature of war. Pope, who was a British civilian during WWI, but prior to the war she had no real experience with war, and this shows in her early WWI poems. In “The Call,” she fails to truly grasp the nature of fighting in a war and only deals superficially with typical war themes, so it cannot be considered war literature. She includes some war imagery, but it does not get far past “the khaki suit” (line 9). She does ask “Who longs to charge and shoot”, but this line is as violent as the entire poem gets (line 11). Rather, Pope is trying to shame men into joining the armed forces, so it is really more of a type of propaganda. She asks things like “Who’ll earn the Empire’s thanks” and “Who’ll swell the victor’s ranks” (lines 17, 19). She offers her readers a glimpse of that glory, which is a typical theme of war literature, but she does not really explore it, which war literature should do. It also does not provide true insight into the soldiers’ or even the civilians’ experiences at war, thereby failing to meet the characteristics of the war literature genre.

Eleanor Farjeon, on the other hand, demonstrates how female civilians are capable of writing war literature in her poem, “Easter Monday.” In this poem, she captures the experience of those on the home front who are separated from their loved ones in the armed forces. The speaker of the poem shows that she and other women liked her still had the duty of keeping home alive, both literally and in the soldiers’ minds. The speaker sends a soldier a “silver Easter
egg / Which I had hidden in the box of apples / You liked to munch beyond all fruit” (lines 2-4).

Additionally, this speaker now also has the responsibility to take care of the land at home because the men are away fighting. It literally is showing how these women’s lives have changed due to war when Farjeon writes, “In our garden / We sowed our earliest seeds, and in the orchard / The apple-bud was ripe” (lines 11-13). Besides using the nature imagery to capture the sense of the unchanging home front, it also indicates the changing role of female civilians because of war providing some insight into the war. However, Farjeon provides the most insight into war and examines common themes of war literature when she writes, “There are three letters that you will not get” (line 14). This understatement is gut-wrenching in the realization that the soldier will not receive these three letters because he died before they could reach him. In this way, Farjeon highlights the trauma of losing a loved one, which many civilians go through when their nation is at war. When this line is juxtaposed against the beautiful spring imagery in the previous lines, it also helps to capture the senselessness of the death as well. These are definitely major themes of war literature, and for that reason, Farjeon’s poem can be included in the war literature canon.

In conclusion, the war literature canon must continue to include and find new texts that have war imagery, themes associated with war, a basis in real war experiences, and insight into the nature and effects of war on us in order to educate and show readers the full nature of war. War literature really has the chance to illustrate “the effect of the war on the soldiers—wounds, pain, mutilation, death” (Santianez 308). War literature though can actually show the effect of war on everyone touched by it, highlighting experiences to help the rest of us understand what occurred. When texts like *The Iliad*, *The Things They Carried*, *Night* and Farjeon’s war poetry are read, they are offering their readers a glimpse into a unique war experience that they would never get to see otherwise. The presence of these characteristics helps to make the experiences
real in a way other sources of information cannot do. These characteristics also help guide us to recognize these texts, and others in the canon, as part of the war literature genre because, through their insight into war and other characteristics, they teach us the real effects that war has. The genre of war literature provides us with a mirror to examine the nature of war and the problems and issues that are associated with it. Without it, we would lack a fundamental resource in understanding how war ultimately affects all of us.
Works Cited


