

ENGLISH 11B: UNIT 5

RESEARCH PAPER EXAMPLE

The Vietnam War in American Literature

During the late 1900's, thousands of Americans were drafted into the Vietnam War. After The United States long struggle to stop the spread of communism, in 1965 The United States decided to send its first ground troops to Vietnam. After realizing that the North Vietnamese army, or Vietcong, was much larger and had the advantage of familiar terrain, The United States issued a draft in which 500,000 troops were sent to Vietnam. 50,000 of these troops would eventually die ("Vietnam War"). This caused a massive uproar in The United States. Americans were upset that mass amounts of people were being drafted into a war that seemed like an impossible battle to fight. A sense of anger and sorrowfulness swept over the nation and affected many aspects of American life. The death and negativity surrounding the Vietnam War had a monumental impact in the development of American literature.

How Americans perceived the Vietnam War altered what was being written about in American literature. The Vietnam War was the first war that Americans watched on television and saw in the media. They proceeded to change the way they perceived the war and American writers followed. It was said that, "Americans of all ages, races, and backgrounds had come to view the war as an endless and hopeless battle" ("Vietnam War"). An abundance of Americans at home began to only associate the war with helplessness and loneliness. Writers used American's hatred as the basis for their stories. In order for authors to connect with the reader they combined elements of American's hopelessness along with fictional characters and storylines (Farrell). Anger towards the war grew as families received letters from soldiers at war. In one letter

someone states, “I’d hate to spend more than two years in the army”(Adler 11). This had an enormous impact on literature because the perspective from the soldier at war dramatically changed. What once was a man who was honored to serve his country was now depicted as a victim to The United States and forced to serve in the war. Tim O’Brien’s short story “Where Have You Gone Charming Billy?” has also demonstrated how Americans felt about the Vietnam War. He did so by portraying how the character would describe the death of his friend to his father when he returned home. He states, “A funny war story that he would tell his father of how Billy Boy Watkins was scared to death. A good joke”(O’Brien 558). O’Brien understood that when soldiers returned home from the war their family and friends would not want to hear about the harsh realities of war. O’Brien, like many other authors, began to write about the progression of thoughts soldiers had until they decided what to tell their loved ones. American literature spoke of the soldier’s mentality and what they experienced when they realized that their true stories would not want to be heard when they returned home. Americans new understanding of the Vietnam War influenced writers to include jaundiced and privative commentary from both people at home and soldiers at war.

Writers during the Vietnam War had difficulty depicting the war in their literature without upsetting the public. Americans were already in a fragile state regarding aspects of the Vietnam War and writers were careful not to upset them any more. In order to do so, “...Vietnam writers often [focused] on surface details of daily existence...rather than on larger historical or political questions about the war”(Farrell). Although authors have always done this in their writing, it suddenly became a controversial subject. Some said that women were muted in war stories because they were incapable of understanding and providing sympathy for soldiers at war (“Farrell). However, authors continued to include negative outlooks about the war.

Writers also wrote from the soldier's point of view in order to see the war from a different perspective. In a soldier's letter home to his mom he states, "And now I [lost] two of my buddies. It's hard, Mom, to get over something like this, that's why I say it's gonna be different"(Adler 8). Letters like this were able to give people at home a bit more insight as to what it was like for those in Vietnam. It caused many writers to write about the emotional pain that soldiers felt when they lost a friend. These deaths continued to reflect the amount of American lives lost because of The United States' involvement in Vietnam. Authors and poets were able to use these touching and sentimental moments to remind readers of the cost of war. Negativity is evident in almost every piece of literature from the late 1900's. "Short stories of the Vietnam War were very much against the war"(Killian). Even though Americans were very delicate about war stories still, a large majority of people in The United States were against the war and wanted to see that reflected in what they were reading. Short stories often included statements about how The United States should not be involved in the war and what it was doing to the American society. Sensitive topics began to be more widely discussed within literature. People were soon exposed to more realistic stories, which may have not been very positive and uplifting, but they were the truth. American literature would not have been affected authors ignored American's feelings towards the war.

In comparison to other wars in history, The Vietnam War effected American literature in a different way than before. Literature written about World War I and World War II involved beloved characters that were respected and honored for their involvement in the war. However, because many Americans were opposed to the war the same reaction did not follow the Vietnam War. It was said, "...America's involvement in WWII [seemed] more morally justified than [their] involvement in Vietnam"(Farrell). Returning soldiers from World War II were described

as “war heroes” because the majority of Americans supported the war. Stories written about Vietnam dramatically changed because the tragic yet gratifying theme was no longer present. Only tragedy remained in literature about the Vietnam War, followed by unethical commentary about the war’s ineffectiveness (Killian). A heroic poem of a man giving his life to protect his country quickly turned into a solemn one in which his life was taken away from him. “It is very difficult to find a Vietnam poem with a light side”(Killian). There was no longer an uplifting sense of hope and instead authors depicted the grim reality of war. It is evident that the overall tone of stories and poems written during this time became very melancholy. In the short story “Where Have You Gone Charming Billy?” an example of this depressing tone is illustrated several times when the author states, “....the fear had been bundled and tight and he’d been on his hands and knees...watching while Billy Boy Watkins died”(O’Brien 551). Death of friends and loved ones also became spoken about in a different way. Negativity and pessimism became a reoccurring theme in American literature and transformed the way war was written about and perceived by Americans. Previous wars were written about with prospect and hope and the Vietnam War negatively altered the way that American literature addressed the war.

The development of American literature was highly affected by the Vietnam War and the amount of destruction and adversity that surrounded it. The negative views Americans had towards the war changed how authors wrote about the war. Authors had to alter their writing in order to comply with how Americans now felt about war. Lastly, the Vietnam War dramatically differed from previous war stories written. They replaced hope with despair and pride with pain. Overall, American literature transformed American minds in order to discover the death and destruction that the war brought.