

Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly
Journal of Literature and Cultural
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

**Vol. 1, Issue 4, September
2026**

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A Literariness.org Project

DOI: 10.67147 literariness.v1i4.109

War and Literature: Aggression, Trauma, and Cultural Impact

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationships between war, aggressiveness, and cultural influence in literary discourse, contending that rather than only reflecting armed conflict, war literature actively influences how societies view, recall, and react to it. The study uses qualitative textual analysis enhanced by cultural-historical contextualization, drawing on a corpus of classic and modern war literature, including works by Wilfred Owen, Erich Maria Remarque, Ernest Hemingway, Kurt Vonnegut, Tim O'Brien, and Chinua Achebe. The analysis is structured by theoretical frameworks from postcolonial critique, cultural memory theory, and trauma studies. Four main conclusions are drawn: the field has grown significantly to include postcolonial and non-Western voices that challenge Eurocentric war narratives; it documents the profound psychological effects of armed conflict; it exposes the ideological mechanisms that states use to justify aggression; and it causes long-lasting changes in language, aesthetics, and collective memory. The study comes to the conclusion that literature is still a vital humanistic tool because of its ability to humanize suffering, prevent forgetting, and refute the rhetoric of violence.

Keywords: *War Literature, Cultural Memory, Trauma Narrative, Postcolonial Representation, Literary Witness*

Introduction

War is one of the biggest events in human history, and literature has always been a key way to understand and explore it deeply. From Homer's *Iliad* to the broken stories of today, writers from different cultures have tried to understand why wars happen, how they work, and what effects they leave behind. This involvement is not just a side effect but a fundamental part of things: war creates situations—like extreme stress, sadness, and breaking of moral rules—that push people to express themselves through writing. And at the same time, literature helps shape how society sees, remembers, and argues about war. The connection between them is really helpful, using language as a place to resist, grieve, and criticize instead of just recording things.

This paper looks at how war, aggression, and cultural influence are linked in literature, especially focusing on the tradition of writing about war during the twentieth century. The main idea is that war literature doesn't just quietly keep records of past events; it actively influences and shapes culture. The paper starts with a review of existing research, then outlines the goals of the study, explains the underlying theory, describes the research methods used, and includes a detailed analysis divided into four parts. These parts focus on uncovering hidden ideas, understanding emotional pain, changing cultural perspectives, and broadening the traditional literary list to include voices from postcolonial regions. A conclusion brings together the main points and thinks about the bigger meaning of the field for people and society.

The need to study war literature as a subject for academic research has become more important than ever. Today, with continuing world conflicts, a lot of talk about military things in public, and new media that both record and make violence look appealing, the questions that war stories have always asked—What does war do to people? Who benefits from its prosecution? Whose pain is shown and whose is hidden?—it's more urgent than ever. Literary texts don't just talk about these questions; they live them out by using style and words in a way that regular writing often can't express. The broken time structure in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the simple, direct sentences in Hemingway's war writing, and the repeated, layered stories in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*—all show how traditional storytelling isn't enough to truly understand large-scale violence. Throughout this study, the paper uses both original literary works and a lot of existing research, such as Fussell's book about the cultural aspects of the First World War, Caruth's ideas on trauma, Hirsch's writing on postmemory, and contributions from postcolonial scholars that have greatly changed the field.

Literature Review

The study of war literature in an academic setting uses ideas from literary criticism, cultural history, psychology, trauma theory, and postcolonial studies. Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) is still very important. He says that the huge loss of life during World War I broke the old literary ideas from before the war and led to a common feeling of irony in literature. Fussell notes that “the war was perhaps the last one to be thought of in terms of things like individual bravery, competition, victory, and heroism” (Fussell 18), a change that forever changed the way writers after that could use language in their work. Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) shows this change by carefully breaking down the patriotic ideas that led a whole generation into a terrible war. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) also looks into the moral questions around telling war stories. He says that “story-truth can be truer than actual truth” (O'Brien 171), which puts Vietnam War writing into a bigger conversation about doubt in how stories represent reality.

Trauma theory has been one of the most useful ways for scholars to study and understand war literature. Cathy Caruth's book *Unclaimed Experience* from 1996 says that trauma can't be shown directly and must be dealt with through broken pieces and repeated patterns. She writes, “the history of trauma, because it happens after the fact, can only be understood by connecting it to another person's trauma” (Caruth 8). This framework shows the new writing techniques used in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and O'Brien's stories that repeat and go back on themselves. Marianne Hirsch's idea of “postmemory” looks at how memories pass down through generations (Hirsch 5), which is shown in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Samuel Hynes' *The Soldiers' Tale* (1997) also suggests that stories told by soldiers form a different kind of history, one that focuses on how war changes people by taking them away from their normal lives (Hynes 7). Postcolonial criticism has shown how the traditional list of important works is mostly focused on Europe, and it has made books like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* important examples of what war stories can include.

Objective

This study pursues four specific objectives. First, it looks at the ideas in war literature and studies how these texts show and challenge the ways governments explain and justify violence. Second, it looks at how psychological trauma is shown, paying attention to both the main themes and the way traumatic experiences are expressed through the story's structure and how time is arranged. Third, it looks at how major war literature traditions have changed culture and style, and explores how writing about war has influenced language, structure, and the way people remember together. Fourth, it looks at how writing about war from postcolonial and non-Western

countries has added to the field, showing how these traditions have questioned and broadened the mainly Western-focused approach to war writing. These goals work together to show that war literature is still important and relevant as both a type of writing and a part of culture.

An unstated fifth goal runs through all four: to show that deeply engaging with war literature—reading it carefully, in history, and with theory—still stands as one of the most strict and caring ways of learning for today's scholars. War literature is more than just a type of writing that interests military historians or experts on specific time periods; it's a key area where we can explore big questions about human aggression, how people remember the past together, the right way to tell stories about war, and the ways cultures both keep violence alive and fight against it. The pressing nature of these questions today means studying war literature isn't just about looking back at old things; it's about engaging with important ideas right now.

Theoretical Framework

This study deploys three complementary theoretical frameworks. Trauma theory, which was created by Caruth and is based on Freud's psychoanalytic ideas, is the main way to look at the psychological and structural aspects of war literature. Freud's idea about the death drive, which is the natural urge toward destruction inside the human mind, and how it conflicts with the forces that make society peaceful, is shown again and again in war stories (Freud and Einstein 203). Caruth believes that dealing with traumatic experiences can only happen through broken and scattered ways, which is why some texts use new and different forms that don't follow a normal time order.

Cultural memory theory, as developed by Jan and Aleida Assmann, offers a way to understand how war literature helps shape and change the shared memories of a group. Their difference between communicative memory, which is the shared memory of experiences passed down through a few generations, and cultural memory, which are the formalized ways that last for centuries, shows how literary works help record the experience of war over a long time. Hirsch's idea of postmemory builds on this concept to explain how memories can pass down through generations (Hirsch 5). Postcolonial criticism, which is influenced by thinkers like Edward Said and Frantz Fanon, helps us understand how war and colonial violence are connected. It looks at important literary works in the context of larger political issues like imperialism and the process of decolonization. It also pays attention to the parts that are missing or not included in the usual list of classic texts.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach that focuses on detailed examination of texts and considers the cultural and historical background. The main way to analyze literature is through literary criticism, which involves carefully looking at different parts of the text like the story structure, perspective, imagery, mood, how time is arranged, and references to other works. This is done along with considering the historical and ideological background of when the work was created and how it was received. This method is based on the belief that the way a story is structured is just as important as the story itself in expressing meaning.

The main texts were chosen because they are considered important in their original form, have had a big impact on culture, have unique writing styles, and show a wide range of different viewpoints. The collection covers over a hundred years of writing, starting from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in 1899 up to O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* in 1990, and includes literature from British, American, German, and African traditions. Secondary sources come from areas like literary criticism, cultural history, trauma theory, memory studies, and postcolonial criticism. These theories are used like tools to help understand the texts, and their weaknesses are recognized when they become clear. The process of analysis includes carefully reading each text, comparing them together, and understanding the style and themes in relation to the larger cultural and historical background.

This pluralist approach shows a strong commitment to methodology: no one theory can fully explain the wide range and complexity of war literature. Trauma theory helps explain the psychological and structural aspects of works like *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but it doesn't do as good a job explaining the postcolonial elements found in Achebe's stories. Cultural memory theory gives us ways to look at how a collection of things remembers things, but we also need to use postcolonial ideas to understand which memories are kept and which are forgotten. The study wants to use these frameworks together instead of one after another, in order to create a detailed and thoughtful analysis of war literature that truly captures its complicated and complex nature.

Analysis

Ideological Demystification: War Literature and the Critique of State Aggression

One of the main things war literature does is clearly shows the ideas and beliefs that countries use to explain and support their use of organized violence. War needs more than just things like weapons and money. It also needs a way of talking and thinking that makes killing in an organized way seem okay. This usually comes from ideas like loving your country, being brave, having a religious purpose, and believing in strong, manly values. Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et

Decorum Est” from 1920 is the most famous example of this process of making things less mysterious. Owen shows that the idea that it's noble to die for your country is wrong by putting that old saying next to a very real and scary description of a gas attack. The way the dead bodies are described, like “the white eyes writhing in his face,” clearly proves that the idea of dying for your country is a lie. This painful truth is more powerful than any abstract words could ever be.

Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) uses its writing style and the way the story is told to show a similar kind of criticism. Lieutenant Henry said he was “always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice” (Hemingway 184), which shows more than just his own feelings—it reflects a bigger doubt about the way war is talked about using those kinds of words. Hemingway's simple, direct writing style, which avoids complex ideas, shows this distrust in a clear way. His writing creates a different kind of conversation that challenges official violence. Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* takes the criticism further to include school and social leaders, showing the schoolteacher Kantorek as a typical example of someone who loves patriotic speeches and uses the young to fight, without facing the real dangers himself. The destruction caused to Paul Bäumer's generation is not just physical but also affects their understanding of the world: the war ruins the whole way they used to make sense of their lives.

Psychological Trauma: Representing and Enacting the Wounds of War

Before PTSD was officially recognized as a mental health condition, writers who wrote about war were already showing how deeply violence could hurt people's minds. They were also trying to find ways to properly describe and deal with these emotional injuries. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* from 1969 is the most formally radical American answer to this challenge. Billy Pilgrim, who is “unstuck in time,” has his mind constantly broken up by the Allied firebombing of Dresden. In the novel, he shows exactly what Caruth talks about: the struggle to fit a terrible experience into a normal story, the need to keep going back to the painful event, and the late realization of what happened (Vonnegut 23). The phrase “So it goes,” said every time someone dies, acts as both a way to accept things numbly and a strong criticism. It shows the mental harm that war causes.

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* deals with trauma in a unique way by carefully looking at the line between what is real and what is made up. His argument that “story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (O'Brien 171) makes a strong point about how we understand traumatic experiences. He suggests that the actual facts of what happened in Vietnam might not fully capture how it felt or what it meant emotionally and morally. Instead, a story that isn't strictly based on facts might better show the real feelings and deeper meaning of those

experiences. The soldiers carry more than just physical burdens; they also carry the emotional weight of all the feelings that men might face if they die—like grief, fear, love, and longing (O’Brien 20). The way these feelings are connected shows how physical and mental experiences are closely linked in war.

Cultural Transformation: War Literature and the Reshaping of Language and Memory

War literature has acted as a strong force for changing culture, influencing language, artistic styles, and the shared memories of a group. Fussell's analysis shows how the irony, understatement, and anti-heroism that came from the trenches became key features of modernist and postmodernist styles. These elements changed the way words like “sacrifice”, “glory” and “hero” are used, making their meanings seem doubtful and revealing the underlying ideas behind them (Fussell 21). The Vietnam War represents a similar change in how American literature and cultural memory are understood. O’Brien’s use of storytelling that plays with the idea of fiction, the broken accounts in *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial’s careful listing of every person who died all show how the war changed culture deeply. These examples also show that the new ways of writing about war have become tools that writers use to tell stories about later conflicts.

Hynes's analysis shows another important part of this cultural role: war literature acts as a different kind of historical writing. Soldier stories offer a different look at military history, focusing not on plans and wins, but on how regular soldiers really felt during war. (Hynes 7) This function is especially important when official military history is created by organizations that have a strong desire to control how wars and conflicts are portrayed. War stories focus on the real, physical experiences of fighting. This helps capture parts of what soldiers actually feel and go through, which other ways of recording history can't fully show. Because of this, war literature isn't just extra information—it's actually a key part of understanding history.

Expanding the Canon: Postcolonial and Non-Western War Literature

The traditional way of writing about war in the West has been greatly changed and made better by stories about war from postcolonial, feminist, and non-Western writers. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) isn't a traditional war story, but it deeply explores the destructive power of colonial rule. Achebe shows how British missionaries and colonial rulers destroyed Igbo society, which makes him see European imperialism as a planned and harmful force that caused serious damage to culture. This goes against the usual view that sees war mainly as something from modern Europe. The book's way of writing—using the Igbo language, saying proverbs, and

telling the story in a certain way—makes a point about how colonial rule tried to say African history and culture weren't important.

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000) brings the violence of Sri Lanka's civil war into the global literary discussion. The novel focuses on the dignity and individuality of those affected by the conflict, through the perspective of its main character, who is a forensic-anthropologist trying to find and identify the missing people. Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) brings the Afghan experience to life during many years of war, challenging the simple and often unfair portrayals that Western media and politics commonly use. These texts show that the effects of modern war on culture can't be fully understood just by looking at Western experiences. To properly study war literature, scholars need to take a truly global approach that includes many different countries and cultures. As Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the responses to it—like Achebe's famous criticism of its place in literary tradition—show, the idea of what makes a work “war literature” has been shaped in ways that hide the long history of colonial violence (Conrad 69). Studying postcolonial war writing isn't just about adding more works to the existing list of important texts; it also means questioning and changing the basic ideas that shape the whole field.

Conclusion

This study says that war literature is one of the most important and complicated areas for literary and cultural research that modern scholars can explore. The paper shows that war literature isn't all the same. By looking at a wide range of works—from Owen's poems about war trenches to Vonnegut's funny and critical stories, from Conrad's scary tales about colonial rule to Achebe's stories that challenge colonial ideas—the paper explains how war writing is varied and full of different viewpoints. These differences come from history, beliefs, gender, race, and the country each writer comes from. What connects these works is a common effort to see: a willingness to resist letting war's experience be completely controlled by official stories or forgotten by everyone.

The four main findings show different but connected ways that war literature serves culture. Ideologically, it shows how governments use words to get people ready for violence; Owen's challenge to the idea of heroic lies, Hemingway's doubt about patriotic speech, and Remarque's look at how military systems work are three strong examples of this way of uncovering hidden truths. Psychologically, it records traumatic experiences with great accuracy, creating new storytelling techniques like breaking time into pieces and making the story reflect on itself. These methods are needed to show things that regular stories can't easily handle. Culturally, it often starts the change instead of just being a result of it, giving communities the

symbols they need to deal with big, painful events from the past. In an official sense, the field has had to include more voices from postcolonial and non-Western backgrounds, which means it's not just about adding more books to the reading list, but also about completely rethinking the basic ideas that the field is built on.

The ideas used here—like trauma theory, cultural memory theory, and postcolonial criticism—each offer important tools for understanding, and when used together, they help create a deeper, more thoughtful analysis of war literature that considers its structure, history, and political context. Future studies should keep using these frameworks to examine the growing collection of war writing that came about because of conflicts in the 21st century. This includes new forms of testimony created through digital and multimedia platforms, which bring up new questions about what counts as literary witness. Ultimately, looking at war through the lens of literature helps us see how human groups try to make sense of and cope with the worst actions they take against each other. Literature can't stop wars from happening, but it can keep fighting against the ideas in society that make wars possible. These ideas include seeing the enemy as less than human, praising violence, and forgetting the pain people go through in public memory. In a time when talk about war still gets people excited and stops people from speaking out, literature's ability to show the human side, make things more complex, and express sadness is more important than ever.

The effect of war literature on culture isn't straightforward or one-way. These texts are influenced by the societies that create and use them, and they also help shape those societies. They show what is happening in language, style, political ideas, and how people remember events together. As wars continue around the world and new ways of sharing stories appear along with older forms of writing, war literature will keep changing and growing. Its main job is still the same: to watch and remember, to stop people from forgetting, and to show the harm that violence does to people. Fussell's idea about ironic tone, Caruth's view on trauma coming later, Hirsch's thoughts on postmemory, and Achebe's call for a counter-story in postcolonial writing all point to one main belief—that even when it's not perfect, the act of being a literary witness is something that can't be replaced. In a time when conflicts are happening faster, people's attention is shorter, and suffering is turned into numbers by algorithms, the tradition of war literature keeps focusing on specific, real, and feelable experiences. This isn't just about good writing—it's also about doing the right thing and having a strong political stance. The study of war literature, done with careful attention to history and a respectful, questioning mindset, is one of the most important ways the literary humanities can help us understand and stand up against the violence that keeps shaping human history.

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