Vietnam and the Legacy of Conrad

by

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Abstract

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A mixed-media study of Vietnam War literature begins in Africa with Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and travels into Vietnam with Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* and Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*. Marlow, Willard, and Herr are first person narrators on voyages of self-discovery. Their journeys into Africa, Cambodia, and Vietnam lead the audience into an examination of themes pertinent not only to the works, but the twentieth century and, therefore, history. Through an examination of imperialism, the conflict of Western and non-Western values, the interplay of fantasy and reality, and the nature of moral confession, *Heart of Darkness*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Dispatches* aim to force their audiences to confront the responsibility of all mankind for the horrors of war.
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Introduction

This mixed-media study of Vietnam War literature begins with an examination of the narrative techniques in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and the ways these techniques have been adapted in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (1977). Conrad’s novella foreshadows in style, theme, and characters many of the interests of American writers and filmmakers who have depicted America’s experience in Vietnam.

A primary concern of this study will be the role of first person narrators as they evolve from observers to participants in the lives of other characters. This study will further focus upon major themes shared by these three works. Among these themes are imperialism, the conflict between the values of Western and undeveloped societies, the interplay of fantasy and reality, and the nature of moral confession.

There is a great deal of scholarship that compares *Heart of Darkness* with *Apocalypse Now*. Similarities between the novella and the film are obvious: Marlow in Conrad’s work becomes Willard in Coppola’s film, Kurtz is basically the same character in both works, both Marlow and Willard
journey upriver in search of Kurtz, and both Marlow and Willard are on voyages of self-discovery. Coppola adapts Conrad’s work successfully in his depiction of the American experience in Vietnam:

He adopts someone else’s material or structure, absorbs and expands it by identifying it with his own experience, and thereby transforms it into his own uniquely powerful vision. (Kinder 12)

This study will also include Dispatches as a work that is not only similar in themes and character types but also in narrative technique.

In its depiction of Western imperialism and colonialism in the Congo under the reign of Belgium’s King Leopold, Heart of Darkness helps define a tradition for the literature written during and following the Vietnam War. At this point it is best to clearly define imperialism and colonialism and distinguish between the two.

Although imperialism and colonialism are closely related, they are often confused. Colonialism is a form of imperialism.

It involves the settlement of foreign territories, the maintenance of rule over a subordinate population and the separation of the ruling group from the subject population. The relationship between the "mother country" and the colony is usually exploitive. (Evans and Newnham 54)
In addition to exploitation, colonialism denotes "racial and cultural inequality" (Evans and Newnham 54), themes depicted in Conrad’s novella and later in Vietnam War literature.

Similarly, imperialism refers to "dominance by one group over another" (Evans and Newnham 173).

Derived from the Latin word "imperium" it refers to the relationship of a hegemonic STATE to subordinate states, NATIONS or peoples under its control. An imperial policy... means a deliberate projection of a state’s POWER beyond the area of its original jurisdiction with the object of forming one coherent political and administrative unit under the control of the HEGEMON. (Evans and Newnham 172).

As depicted in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, colonialism and imperialism include not only a loss of political freedom, but economic and cultural freedoms for Africans as well. While colonialism is certainly a theme in the works to be discussed in this study, imperialism is a major theme of the Vietnam War, its literature, and therefore, the twentieth century.

Conrad’s narrative design employs a first person narrator, Marlow, who tells the story of Kurtz. Marlow witnesses the imposition of Western values on the African people, the fantasy world Kurtz designs for himself, and imperialism at its worst. Although Marlow begins his tale
as a detached observer, he becomes intimately involved with, and thus a participant in, Kurtz’s life. Therefore, the voyage up the Congo into the darkness as personified by Kurtz is an inner journey as well into Marlow’s soul and psyche.

Francis Ford Coppola adapts Conrad’s narrative techniques, characters, and themes in his film Apocalypse Now. This film features a voice-over written by Michael Herr, author of Dispatches, that leaves the audience privy to Willard’s stream of consciousness as he travels into Cambodia in search of Kurtz. This stream of consciousness technique is similar to Marlow’s monologue in Heart of Darkness; however, due to the nature of film, Coppola’s work is multisensory. The audience views Willard’s evolution from observer to participant as he becomes a powerful agent in the transformation of Kurtz’s fate.

As portrayed in Apocalypse Now, the war has transformed Willard into a type of displaced person. Like Marlow, he served his time in Vietnam and has returned home, only to find he no longer belongs in either place. As he travels upriver to Kurtz, Willard observes the other soldiers aboard the boat, the troops with whom he comes in contact, and the Vietnamese people. This film, like much of the war’s literature, is very much a confession, not only Willard’s but Kurtz’s as well. Willard is driven to confess by much the same need as Marlow in Heart of Darkness.
The final work that will be discussed is Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*, a work of New Journalism. New Journalism is a synthesis of journalism, memoir, and fiction. A true account of the Vietnam War from a journalist’s point-of-view, *Dispatches* reads much like a novel. Herr traveled to Vietnam to write stories for *Esquire Magazine*, but he soon became both fascinated and obsessed with the glamour of the battle, the male bonding, and the life and death struggles he confronted daily. He, too, witnessed the power struggles and the imperialistic strategies of the United States military, and he soon became caught up in the fantasy of being part of the struggle.
Chapter 1
A Foreshadowing of Vietnam

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is a remarkable foreshadowing of literature that developed during and immediately following America’s war in Vietnam. In fact, it is often included in studies of Vietnam War literature, for it inspired Francis Ford Coppola’s film *Apocalypse Now*. Like authors of the Vietnam era, Conrad forces his audience to confront events and emotions that might not have been confronted otherwise. *Heart of Darkness* is a work in which “Conrad takes his deepest look into the human condition, and comes to perhaps his most pessimistic conclusions on the various and incompatible pressures that can be imposed on the human spirit” (Gekoski 72).

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow recounts his journey up the Congo River to find Kurtz, who has gone mad while living in an undeveloped world. Like Americans in Vietnam, Marlow in the Belgian Congo must adjust to his new surroundings, yet maintain his old values and morals. During his voyage through the dark continent, Marlow becomes more involved in Kurtz’s life. This voyage into the darkness is simultaneously a voyage into Marlow’s soul and psyche, for
as Marlow begins to understand Kurtz, the reader learns more about Marlow. This voyage into the human mind is recreated in Coppola’s film as Willard travels toward Cambodia in search of Kurtz. Like Marlow, Willard must come to terms with himself and his obsessions while completing his mission.

Conrad’s use of two first person narrators is unique, for *Heart of Darkness* is, essentially, a “tale within a tale” (Watts 22). Peter Brooks explains:

*Heart of Darkness* is again a framed tale, in which a first narrator introduces Marlow and has the last word after Marlow has fallen silent; and embedded within Marlow’s tale is apparently another, Kurtz’s, which never quite gets told. . . . (239)

Cedric Watts calls this narrative method “the ‘oblique narrative’ convention” and further explains:

Because stories employing this convention often return us in the last pages to the scene of the opening pages, it may be tempting to liken the outer and the inner narratives respectively to the frame and to the picture enclosed within the frame. (22)

With the frame removed, each narrator and tale becomes more apparent.
As *Heart of Darkness* opens, the first narrator, known only as "I," sets the scene. This anonymous narrator sits aboard the Nellie along with his companions—a Lawyer, an Accountant, a Director, and Marlow. Marlow tells his tale, and within this tale are several minor stories, "for his trip to Africa is framed at the beginning and end by important visits to Brussels, and even his time in Africa . . . the trip up the river to pick up Kurtz, and back again" (Gekoski 74). As each of these tales unfolds, Marlow moves from being a detached observer to being a participant in Kurtz’s life. Moreover, each tale has several underlying themes, including imperialism, the conflict between Western values and those of non-Western societies, the interplay of fantasy and reality, and the nature of moral confession.

Most critics agree that much of what Conrad describes in *Heart of Darkness* is based on his own experiences. However, several scholars have suggested that Conrad’s critique of imperialism as evident in *Heart of Darkness* is not based primarily on experience, "but rather his reading of the literature . . . between the time of his return to England and the composition of the novella in 1898-99" (Brantlinger 367). This belief is based on Conrad’s own travel records, and as M. M. Mahood explains, "Yet it is hard to find evidence that in 1890 Conrad witnessed much brutality and oppression . . ." (6). Regardless of whether Conrad personally witnessed the oppression of Africans or
read about the atrocities after his voyage up the Congo, imperialism is a central theme in *Heart of Darkness*. Jonah Raskin states:

Marlow makes two important discoveries on his trip. The first is that European civilization rests on the exploitation of Black people by white people, that European society rests on the annihilation of the wretched of the earth, [and] on the theft of the riches of the planet. (154)

Once Marlow witnesses the exploitation of Africans and experiences the emotions that led to Kurtz’s downfall, he becomes disillusioned with European imperialism. Similarly, Willard in *Apocalypse Now* confronts his inner self as he reads Kurtz’s dossier and discovers the truth about the military and its procedures.

Marlow begins his journey up the Congo as a casual onlooker of European imperialism in the Congo. At the same time, he is creating in his mind’s eye an abstract impression of Kurtz. As he draws closer to Kurtz, Marlow also gains a better understanding of the effects imperialism has on its victims. At the onset of his journey, Marlow believes that the European countries are in Africa hoping to colonize. In fact, Marlow recalls looking at a map of Africa and states: "There was a vast amount of red--good to see at any time because one knows that some real work is done in there . . ." (13). The red on the map symbolizes
areas colonized by England. Marlow is ironic by insinuating that England, in contrast to other countries, is a stronger and more deserving country. Hunt Hawkins, in an essay in *PMLA* entitled "Conrad's Critique of Imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*," explains that Conrad is, through this statement, defending British imperialism (286). He includes in his argument the passage in which Marlow explains the "idea" behind imperialism:

What saves us [the British] is efficiency--the devotion to efficiency. . . . They [the Romans] were no colonists, their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force . . . your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. . . . The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it . . . and an unselfish belief in the idea--something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . . (10)
Hawkins points out that Conrad, through Marlow, "appears to justify British imperialism on grounds that it is 'efficient' and conducted according to some unspecified 'idea'" (286). This is not the case, for Marlow is simply demonstrating his belief in "efficiency, a belief that the imperialist venture is justified by its bringing of greater efficiency to those lands which are brought under its sway" (Hawthorn 179). Furthermore, the European nations, by colonizing the continent of Africa and practicing imperialism, were demonstrating their belief in Social Darwinism, a belief that they and their culture were the fittest to survive. Ian Watt explains:

> Merely by occupying or controlling most of the globe, the European nations had demonstrated that they were the fittest to survive; and the exportation of their various economic, political and religious institutions was therefore a necessary step towards a higher form of human organisation in the rest of the world. (156)

As Watt points out, and as Marlow learns, such a belief supports the practice of colonialism. Marlow, however, is not in any way condoning colonialism or imperialism. Rather, he is using himself as an example of how the general public, lacking the knowledge he gains during his journey, might accept such beliefs. In addition, by using examples of idol worship, such as "bow down before, and offer a
sacrifice to," Marlow is referring to extremes of imperialism, Kurtz in particular and implicitly the West in its own form of pagan ritual. His tone is entirely ironic in an attempt to show the absurdity of the imperialistic venture. Like the company that employs Marlow, the United States practiced its own form of imperialism during its involvement in Vietnam by bringing American practices, customs, and technology to the undeveloped country. The Vietnamese, however, were unprepared for the changes the Americans left behind after the war.

Jeremy Hawthorn points out that Conrad’s character, Marlow, does not arrive in Africa "as an innocent abroad," and his knowledge of imperialism is obvious in his conversation with his aunt in Brussels (173). Marlow’s aunt refers to Marlow’s role while in charge of the river-steamboat as one of the Europeans who would civilize the backward Africans: "It appears however I was also one of the Workers, with a capital--you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle" (15). Marlow reminds his aunt that the company is making a profit in Africa. This incident describes one of the many ways Europeans, as well as others, viewed themselves as not only different from, but superior to all Africans. The Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, in his lecture "An Image of Africa," suggests:
Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where a man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. (314)

Achebe makes a valid point, for those from Western societies often view non-Western societies as inferior. However, Conrad does not advocate this practice, as Achebe insists, but rather suggests that such views are based upon ignorance and the inability to acknowledge a common ancestry. As Cedric Watts explains, "He himself [Marlow] had experienced but resisted the tug of distant hereditary kinship with the savages . . . Kurtz has succumbed . . ." (113).

As much as his aunt's comments anger him, Marlow's first encounter with imperialism in the Congo has a much greater effect on him. Marlow offers considerable detail in his description of the Outer Station, the accountant, and what he saw during his stay:

Everything else in the Station was in a muddle--heads, things, buildings. Caravans. Strings of dusty niggers with splay feet arrived and departed; a stream of manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass-wire set into the depths of darkness and in return came a precious trickle of ivory. (21)
Conrad's sarcasm is quite obvious. Marlow describes the manner in which the Africans have been treated as "criminals" (19), yet the accountant is dressed so elegantly that Marlow mistakes him for a "vision" (21). He watches the Africans die slow, painful deaths so that his fellow European colonizers can import small quantities of ivory. Marlow can only observe in awe. A similar feeling of helplessness is evident in much of the Vietnam War literature.

By the time Marlow reaches the Inner Station, Kurtz's terrain, he is no longer awestruck. He has been to the Central Station, and he has met the Manager and the brickmaker. Once again, he has witnessed the deplorable conditions under which Africans live, and he has gained further knowledge concerning Kurtz, "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress" (28), progress in the form of imperialism. Marlow is not surprised when he reads the report Kurtz has written for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs:

He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, "must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings--we approach them with the might as of a deity," and so on, and so on. (50)

Kurtz is the most extreme example of imperialism Marlow witnesses during his journey. What makes Kurtz's practices
so horrible is the fact that the man truly believes in the "idea" behind his actions. Once Marlow comes to understand this fact, he has come to understand Kurtz. Similarly, Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now* sees his actions as necessary, thus forcing the military and the CIA to send Willard on a mission to kill Kurtz—the only viable option to end Kurtz’s tyranny.

Another theme in *Heart of Darkness* related to imperialism is the conflict between Western and non-Western values. Marlow makes constant references to the behavior of Africans he observes, and it is the differences between the Europeans and the Africans that make it possible to practice imperialism in the Congo. In essence, the Congo becomes the violent interface of the East and West.

Marlow comes in contact with cannibals for the first time while traveling up the Congo. He describes his experience traveling on the steamboat toward the Inner Station:

> Fine fellows—cannibals—in their place. They were men one could work with, and I am grateful to them. And, after all, they did not eat each other before my face: they had brought along a provision of hippo-meat which went rotten and made the mystery of the wilderness stink in my nostrils.

(36)
Marlow mentions how the cannibals were given brass wire to trade for food while traveling up the Congo, and he is surprised that the cannibals did not try to devour one another, or the Europeans, while aboard the steamship. For Marlow, the cannibals represent "the beginnings of time" (42). They are inferior, though he seems to admire their restraint. Nonetheless, it is true that there is a cultural gap, a rather wide one, separating Marlow from the Africans he observes.

Another incident that shows the gap in technology occurs fifty miles from the Inner Station. Marlow describes an African acting as fireman on the steamboat:

He was useful because he had been instructed; and what he knew was this--that should the water in that transparent thing disappear the evil spirit inside the boiler would get angry through the greatness of his thirst and take a terrible vengeance. (39)

The African, lacking any prior knowledge of steam engines, could not understand the need to keep water in the boiler. Therefore, Marlow and his company created an evil spirit, something the African would understand and fear, to force him into keeping a close watch on the water in the engine.

A further example of the difference between Western and non-Western values takes place near the close of *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow vividly describes the natives' adoration
for Kurtz. In fact, he describes the kind of idol worship often directed toward godlike heroes. Despite the knowledge Marlow gains on his way up the Congo, he is surprised at the anger exhibited by the Africans as he takes Kurtz out of the Congo:

> When we came abreast again they faced the river, stamped their feet, nodded their horned heads, swayed their scarlet bodies; they shook towards the fierce river-demon a bunch of black feathers, a mangy skin with a pendent tail--something that looked like a dried gourd; they shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language; and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some satanic litany. (66)

The actions of the angry, yet frightened, Africans shock Marlow. The Africans are, in fact, reacting to the loss of their King.

A third theme that runs through *Heart of Darkness* and the literature of the Vietnam War is the interplay of fantasy and reality. James Guetti explains the term "reality" as it applies to Conrad's work:

Marlow uses the term "reality" in two ways: the primary reality is the suggested essence of the wilderness, the darkness that must remain hidden
if a man is to survive morally, while the secondary reality is a figurative reality like work, an artificial reality by which the truly real is concealed or even replaced. (21)

As Marlow repeats the journey that was previously made by Kurtz, he learns more about the man who has chosen to remain in the Congo and is forced to make decisions about himself.

It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me--and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough too--and pitiful--not extraordinary in any way--not very clear either. No. Not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light. (11)

During his voyage up the river, Marlow not only develops a greater understanding of himself and Kurtz, but he also develops a compassion for the Africans he meets. As he begins his story on board the Nellie at the mouth of the Thames, Marlow assumes the image of a spiritual figure:

Marlow sat cross-legged right aft, leaning against the mizzen-mast. He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, resembled an idol. (7)

Marlow assumes a position resembling Buddha. One can reason that "Marlow's lotus posture shows he is ready to engage in
an exercise of intense introspection . . ." (Stein 179). Marlow assumes the pose at the very beginning of *Heart of Darkness*, thus preparing himself to confront once again the horrors of his journey. Marlow is truly enlightened after his trip up the Congo, and his story is a means for Marlow to share that newfound knowledge with those aboard the *Nellie*.

An early example in *Heart of Darkness* of the interplay between fantasy and reality takes place while Marlow recalls his time at the Central Station. He asks his companions, "You wonder I didn’t go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no--I didn’t. Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments be hanged! I had no time" (38). Marlow explains that he chose to stay aboard the steamboat and make necessary repairs. Work, a priority for Marlow, enables him to hold onto what he believes is reality. Earlier he explains:

I don’t like work--no man does--but I like what is in the work--the chance to find yourself. Your own reality--for yourself--not for others--what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means. (31)

Marlow views the African world around him as life without the structure that the Western world provides. There are no boundaries in the Congo. Work provides boundaries and
something Marlow can control, for he cannot control the jungle or the Congo. Likewise in *Apocalypse Now*, Willard immerses himself in his mission and distances himself from the soldiers around him.

Upriver at the Inner Station, Kurtz’s life has taken on elements of the fantastic. According to Marlow, Kurtz has let go of his soul and succumbed to the world around him:

I saw it—I heard it. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself. I kept my head pretty well... (66)

To Marlow, Kurtz’s world represents a fantasy world—something that is not possible for Marlow. Marlow tries to explain this level of experience to his companions aboard the *Nellie*:

Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams... (30)

It is virtually impossible for Marlow to express vividly to his companions the allure of the jungle. He tries to
describe Kurtz, but that, too, is impossible. He tells the men, "'Of course in this you fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know...’" (30). Ironically, Marlow’s companions cannot see Marlow at this time, for it is dark. However, they share a friendship and have previous knowledge of one another, unlike Marlow and Kurtz. They can only try to understand the effect of Marlow’s experience through his representation of the events.

Marlow, of course, is not flawless. He, like Kurtz, is tempted by the Congo’s phantasmic jungle.

       Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his [Kurtz’s] stare that could not see the flame of the candle but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up--he had judged. "The horror!" He was a remarkable man. (69)

Marlow looks into Kurtz’s soul and sees not only the man inside, but also the fate of all mankind. Kurtz’s cry relates not only to Kurtz himself and the change he has undergone in the Congo, but to all men and the constant struggle between fantasy and reality. Marlow looks over the edge into Kurtz’s world, but he is capable of pulling himself back by continuously occupying himself with his job:
Through fear and repression, automatic responses and conscious restraint, he managed to behave as a proper Victorian hero in the face of a crisis where a soul has gone mad. He saw that soul cut loose from its moorings but went on with the job at hand. . . . (Gates 57)

Marlow uses work to distract himself from the temptation of the Congo. When he witnesses Kurtz’s world firsthand, he sees something of himself in Kurtz, something yet unknown. This conflict between the forces of fantasy and reality is a dominant theme in Coppola’s film Apocalypse Now, for Willard is compelled to finish his mission and, at the same time, he must resist the allure of Kurtz’s world.

A final theme to be discussed is the nature of moral confession. There are two levels of guilt—one implied and one explicit—Kurtz’s and Marlow’s.

Because Kurtz’s story is not completely revealed by Marlow, it is difficult to determine whether his statement, "The horror! The horror!" (68) is, in fact, a personal confession. Of this exclamation Marlow states, "He had summed up—he had judged" (69). However, Marlow is probably referring to the entire picture, the crimes inflicted in the name of European imperialism. Although Marlow states that Kurtz was admirable, for he truly believed in the idea behind his actions, it is likely that Marlow’s presence
reveals the truth to Kurtz. Kurtz dies knowing the truth and cries out in anguish for himself and for all of mankind.

A definite sense of moral confession exists throughout Vietnam War literature and is evident in *Heart of Darkness* as well. *Heart of Darkness* is a tale about Marlow, not Kurtz, for telling the story provides an opportunity for Marlow to reveal a sense of guilt for being tempted by the jungle, telling a lie to Kurtz’s fiancée, and for working with the company that colonized Africa. Many authors, such as Philip Caputo, author of *A Rumor of War*, tell their stories as a means of shedding guilt caused by involvement in the Vietnam War. The theme of moral confession is also dominant in Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*, for the book is a means by which Herr addresses his own guilt and that of others for finding the war both fascinating and exciting.

It is obvious that Marlow feels somehow tormented by his desire to explore the Congo. He must distract himself by working on the steamship. Marlow describes "truth stripped of its cloak of time" and how man "must meet that truth with his own true stuff--with his own inborn strength" (38). He describes traveling up the Congo as going back in time and the fascination and fear he experiences concerning the kinship he shares with the Africans. Marlow, in fact, admits "to feeling the mysterious appeal of primitive life" (Watt 226), but he finds the strength to resist the Congo in his work.
The story Marlow tells in *Heart of Darkness* is also, as stated earlier, a means for Marlow to relieve himself of the guilt for telling a lie to Kurtz’s fiancée. Rather than telling her the truth, Marlow tells her that Kurtz’s final words were her name. If Marlow were to tell her the truth, the harsh reality of Kurtz’s fantastic existence would destroy her love. Marlow’s obvious intention is to comfort Kurtz’s fiancée, not shock her with the true horror. As Marlow states, not telling her the truth "was a moment of triumph for the wilderness, an invading and vengeful rush which it seemed to me I would have to keep back alone for the salvation of another soul" (72). By telling his story to those aboard the *Nellie*, Marlow finally provides Kurtz with the justice he deserves: "The story resurrects the man of genius . . . and preserves his tragedy for posterity" (Meckier 373). But Kurtz’s tragedy is also Marlow’s, and sharing the story allows Marlow to admit his sins and "makes an honest man of Marlow once again" (Meckier 373).

*Heart of Darkness* is definitely about Marlow, his lie, and the confession of his lie. It is also a means for Marlow to confess his own participation in a company that promoted imperialism in the Congo. As Marlow retells his story, his companions aboard the *Nellie* can see a part of Marlow he himself has never seen, at least until now. In much the same way, the authors and filmmakers who portray the Vietnam War in their works do so to rid themselves of
guilt. At the same time, the books and films about the Vietnam War force audiences to confront their own consciences and, thus, their own complicity in the war.
Chapter 2
An Imitation of Conrad

On March 1, 1976, Francis Coppola flew to the Philippines to begin filming Apocalypse Now, an action/adventure movie that takes place in Vietnam during the late 1960’s. The film was expected to take five months to shoot and cost between twelve and fourteen million dollars (Coppola 1). However, the movie, loosely based on Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, took over three years to complete and the final budget totalled "a whopping $31 million" (Garland 28).

Apocalypse Now was finally released on August 15, 1979 by United Artists and was nominated for eight Academy Awards, including the two awards it won for best cinematography and best sound (Zuker 68-69). The film, from its inception, was designed "as a definitive statement on many things: the nature of modern war, the perilous borderline between good and evil, the impact of American society on the rest of the world" (Cowie 121). With the visual advantage of film, Coppola hoped, in the very least, "to take the audience through an unprecedented experience"
of war and have them react as much as those who had gone through the war'" (Cowie 121).


The structure of Apocalypse Now is that of a quest: the quest of one Captain Benjamin Willard (Martin Sheen) for the renegade Green Beret Colonel Walter E. Kurtz (Marlon Brando), who is waging his own private war from a Cambodian temple near the frontier with Vietnam. (146)

The film is definitely a quest, but it is more than just Willard's quest for Kurtz. It is a quest for a way to understand the Vietnam War, perhaps an unreachable goal. It is also Willard's psychological search for his self.

The original script for Apocalypse Now was written by John Milius in 1969. It was revised by both Milius and Coppola prior to production, by Coppola during production, and again when the narration was added (Hagen, Heart of Darkness 47). Coppola's production company, Zoetrope, called Michael Herr, author of Dispatches, in January 1978, and with Coppola's directions, Herr wrote several narrations over the next year (Cowie 127). Herr's narration resembles Marlow's storytelling in Heart of Darkness as he recalls his journey for his companions aboard the Nellie. Similarly, the voice-over in Apocalypse Now echoes Herr's voice in
Dispatches and adopts a tone that seems fitting for Willard. As Marsha Kinder explains, "Heart of Darkness provides the structure for the inward journey; the Vietnam war provides the outward focus" (13). Coppola does not, however, adapt the novella to conform to the war. Rather, he uses Conrad’s framework for Heart of Darkness as a means to tell Willard’s story in the film. Ronald L. Bogue suggests that the film be viewed as an "imitation" of Conrad’s novella, and he further defines an imitation as "an independent text that comments on another text while insisting on its own autonomy" (612). More precisely, Marlow’s journey upriver to find Kurtz at the end, worshipped as a godlike figure by his own Montagnard army, becomes Willard’s Vietnam mission to kill a renegade Colonel during the Vietnam War.

In using Heart of Darkness to illuminate our experience of the war, the film demonstrates the extraordinary power of Conrad’s vision while making the exploration of Vietnam primary, as it should be. (Kinder 13)

It is the visual aspect of film together with Willard’s narration that successfully transfers Conrad’s story to the Vietnam setting.

Coppola employs the voice-over technique throughout Apocalypse Now as a means of first-person narration. The term voice-over is defined as "A voice heard concurrently with a scene but not synchronically belonging to any
character talking on the screen" (Konigsberg 401). Willard serves as the first-person narrator, sharing with the audience his commentary on the events taking place and often sharing his inner thoughts. William M. Hagen suggests that this technique serves "to make Willard more interesting, psychologically, without letting his character get in the way of any important action" (Apocalypse Now 236). However, Willard, like Marlow, is at the center of the action. The voice-over is a means for Willard to interpret his journey and, thus, provides crucial insight for the audience. As in Heart of Darkness, "Willard's voice-over narrative presumably reflects his state of mind after the experience with Kurtz" (Watson 37). Like Marlow, Willard is reacting to his experience, and the narration "tends to deepen and extend the significance of his experience . . ." (Hagen, Apocalypse Now 236-37). Moreover, it is through Willard's narration that the audience witnesses his transformation from merely the narrator and observer of Kurtz's life to a participant in Kurtz's destiny.

The opening scene of Apocalypse Now takes the audience into Willard's mind and consciousness. The film opens with a black screen and the sound of helicopters, followed by a view of the jungle with burning napalm and helicopters flying above the scene. The first words spoken are those of Jim Morrison and the Doors in "This Is the End." The audience first sees Willard in an upside-down close-up of
his head superimposed over the burning jungle. He is lying on his bed in a Saigon hotel room, staring at a ceiling fan superimposed over the sound and image of the helicopter, thus merging the jungle and the hotel room in Willard’s mind. The film’s opening sequence, which is not adapted from Conrad’s novella, “dissolves all boundaries between inner and outer experience, between past, present and future. It introduces a visual style . . . suggesting the multilayered nature of experience” (Kinder 14). It is Willard who merges the two experiences in his first line in the film: “Saigon. . . . I’m still only in Saigon. Every time I think I’m gonna wake up back in the jungle.”

Apocalypse Now, like Heart of Darkness, is a framed tale. As frames are removed, each story becomes more distinct, for as Willard recalls Kurtz’s story, he cannot avoid telling his own.

The inability to deal with reality, to separate oneself from combat, is a theme that predominates throughout the remainder of the opening sequence. It is also an important theme in the literature of the Vietnam War and one that is evident in Michael Herr’s Dispatches. In addition, Willard admits his own difficulty with any return to civilian life, a problem that led to his divorce. He states, “When I was here I wanted to be there . . . When I was there, all I could think of was getting back into the jungle.” Willard needs a mission and the excitement of the war to maintain
his own "reality" in much the same way that Marlow needs his work to preserve his own reality throughout his journey.

One of the most noted scenes in *Apocalypse Now* takes place in the Saigon hotel room before Willard receives his mission. As Martin Sheen explains in an interview with Emile de Antonio for *American Film*, the sequence was filmed on August 3, 1976, Martin Sheen's thirty-sixth birthday. Sheen was drunk during the filming. He had been drinking the entire day and had spent several days and nights in the same room. Coppola set up two cameras to film and let Sheen play the scene out. Sheen made a karate chop that his friend, a Vietnam veteran, had taught him. Although he hit the mirror and cut his hand, Sheen insisted that the filming continue (22). This scene, created out of pure, natural emotions, shows Willard in an emotional frenzy, caught between the jungle and civilian life. Willard is hung-over when the soldiers bring his orders to report to COMSEC Intelligence for a mission:

Everyone gets everything he wants. I wanted a mission, and for my sins they gave me one. Brought it up to me like room service . . . It was a real choice mission, and when it was over, I'd never want another.

This not only foreshadows the madness and horror that Willard will encounter during his mission, but also the confessional tone that runs through the movie--a tone that
echoes Marlow's tone in *Heart of Darkness* and resonates in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*.

The final scene before Willard begins his mission takes place at the General's quarters at Nha Trang. As he arrives to meet the General (G. D. Spradlin), Willard reveals the truth about his mission:

I was going to the worst place in the world and I didn't even know it yet. Weeks away and hundreds of miles up a river that snaked through the war like a main circuit cable plugged the strait into Kurtz. It was no accident that I got to be the caretaker of Colonel Walter E. Kurtz's memory any more than being back in Saigon was an accident. There is no way to tell his story without telling my own, and if his story is really a confession, then so is mine.

*Apocalypse Now* draws on *Heart of Darkness* for the imagery in Willard's words. One of the more obvious examples is the metaphor of the river being a circuit cable. Marlow describes the river as "an immense snake uncoiled" (12). In addition, Willard's statement regarding Kurtz imitates that of Marlow as he begins his tale aboard the Nellie. Both men are telling their stories after the fact, reacting in a sense to their past, and suggesting that their own guilt is that of association. As Marlow explains to his companions aboard the Nellie, the experience is one of enlightenment:
I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally . . . yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was . . . the culminating point of my experience.

Both Marlow and Willard identify with Kurtz and become the guardian of Kurtz's story and memory. But just as Heart of Darkness is really about Marlow and not Kurtz, Apocalypse Now is about Willard; it is about the madness and horror of the Vietnam War, and the difficulty in finding a way to survive its madness and horror. Like Heart of Darkness, Apocalypse Now concerns the relationship between chaos and control. Willard, like Marlow, must repress those qualities he admires in Kurtz in order to survive.

Many similarities exist between Heart of Darkness and Apocalypse Now in terms of characters, plot, and style. For example, the crew members from the Nellie have their counterparts in Apocalypse Now, though they are more developed in the film. Aboard the Navy PBR, "a type of plastic patrol boat," are Chef (Frederic Forrest), Lance (Sam Bottoms), Clean (Larry Fishburne), and Phillips (Albert Hall), the Chief. The personality of each character develops throughout the film, "Thus two perspectives of the Vietnam War are offered in the film--the events seen from
the riverboat and the life of the characters on that boat" (Dorall 21). Moreover, the crew assists in developing the many underlying themes that exist in Vietnam literature, including imperialism, the conflict between Western values and those of non-Western societies, the interplay of fantasy and reality, and the nature of moral confession.

*Apocalypse Now* portrays a time when Americans were caught up in the forces of colonialism/imperialism. The audience is privy to "a world from which every trace of genuine civilization has been mercilessly expunged and replaced by its grotesque parody" (Adair 155). Coppola creates scenes in which Vietnam is a picture of America and American culture, from Lance’s waterskiing and Kilgore’s beach party, to a scene involving Playboy Bunnies. Although some of Coppola’s scenes are elaborate, they are accurate representations of American culture that was transplanted to Vietnam.

Obvious portrayals of American cultural imperialism are presented in scenes such as the first glimpse of Lance waterskiing down the river as Clean dances to music on Armed Forces Radio Network broadcasting out of Saigon. The waves created by Lance’s skis hit the shore where the Vietnamese are doing laundry. This is just one example of American culture brought to Vietnam by United States soldiers.

Another scene shows Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall), wearing a black-felt Stetson and a yellow Flying
Corps scarf around his neck, and his men cleaning up after an air assault on a Vietnamese village. Photographers are taking pictures, villagers are being loaded into a large landing vehicle, Kilgore is placing death cards atop each Vietnamese corpse, and a minister is holding a memorial service amid all the chaos. Coppola himself appears in a cameo role of a television producer yelling "Don’t look at the camera . . . Don’t look at the camera! Just go by like you’re fighting . . . Like you’re fighting!" As Peter Cowie suggests, Willard’s expression is one of "If this isn’t the war, what is?" (137). Coppola’s role and the later appearance of Dennis Hopper’s character, a photo-journalist, serve to "remind the viewer that the Vietnam war was the most photographed, reported, and even staged war in history" (Hagen, Apocalypse Now 235). In his book Dispatches, Michael Herr also reminds his readers of the theatrical atmosphere created by the constant presence of the media.

Kilgore is a good officer, one who protects his men, yet gets the job done. He is also the kind who rewards his men for a job well done. As Willard explains, "They choppered in the T-bones and the beer and turned the LZ [Landing Zone] into a beach party. The more they tried to make it just like home, the more they made everybody miss it." This is yet another common mistake made by the Americans stationed in Vietnam.
One of the most unforgettable scenes takes place when Willard and the crew arrive at Hau Phat, a supply station. The men join thousands of others who are entertained by a USO show presented by Playboy Bunnies (Cynthia Wood, Colleen Camp, and Linda Carpenter). The stage decorations are phallic, in the form of missiles and bullets, surrounded by bright lights. The Bunnies arrive in a helicopter and land on a circular stage with a moat around it. The girls dance erotically to the rock song "Suzie Q" while the men respond (out of frustration) to their taunts and teases. Throughout their performance, Vietnamese men, women, and children witness this form of American entertainment from behind a wire fence. When the agent/MC (Bill Graham) is forced to send out smoke bombs to deter the soldiers who are in a frenzy, Willard’s voice can be heard summing up the entire situation:

Charlie didn’t get much USO. He was dug in too deep or moving too fast. His idea of great R & R was cold rice and a little rat meat. He had only two ways home—death or victory.

Once again, the United States military tried to appease the soldiers "by not denying the soldiers the pleasures they were accustomed to having back home, which only made them more unhappy" (Chown 136). Coppola’s portrayal of a USO show that allows Vietnamese to experience American "R & R,"
coupled with Willard’s narration, illustrates the extent of American cultural imperialism in Vietnam.

The conflict between Western and non-Western values is a lesser theme in *Apocalypse Now*, except for the last sequence that centers around Kurtz. As Willard moves toward Kurtz’s compound, the villages he passes through become more and more primitive. A perfect example is the scene where Chief is hit through the heart by a spear during what first appears to be an attack by Kurtz’s tribesmen. This scene is taken from *Heart of Darkness* in which the helmsman, also Black, is hit only after he responds by firing a Martini-Henry. The fight, fought on one side by the military armed with powerful weapons and on the other side by the tribesmen armed with primitive, yet deadly, arrows and spears, merges two obviously different cultures and value systems.

The entire sequence at Kurtz’s compound is a contrast between the values of the military, represented by Willard, and the values of Kurtz and his Montagnard army. Kurtz has left the world of the American army and entered the world of the native Vietnamese and Cambodians. Kurtz makes himself a godlike King of the native Montagnards, and they become, according to the photo-journalist, "his children." He controls those around him through primitive and hostile actions. His compound is surrounded by dead bodies hanging from trees, partially buried underground, or in chopped pieces, the heads standing out on steps. However, Kurtz has
his reasons for straying from the military; "Kurtz understands that the war can only be won by a similar violence freed of all passion and judgment" (Bogue 619), similar to the methods employed by the Viet Cong.

A final example of the contrast between Western and non-Western values is the scene in which the killing of the water buffalo is interchanged with Kurtz's assassination. The Montagnards kill the water buffalo as a sacrificial act which suggests that Kurtz's murder is also a sacrifice, for both the military and the natives. As Willard makes his way down the steps of Kurtz's compound, the natives stare up at him. Their leader has been killed and they can only look to Willard as his probable replacement. Ironically, Kurtz could have had Willard killed at any time, for as the photojournalist tells Willard:

He likes you 'cause you're still alive, and he's got plans for you. No, no . . . I'm not gonna help you. You're gonna help him, man. You're gonna help him.

Willard is going to help Kurtz by allowing him to die with some dignity intact. As Willard states, "He just wanted to go out like a soldier, standing up. . . ." He will also help Kurtz by delivering a message--the truth about what happened to the Colonel in Vietnam--to his son in the States.
As John Tessitore explains in his New York Times article "The Literary Roots of 'Apocalypse Now,'" Francis Coppola based his film on Conrad's novella, but could not have adapted the ending from Heart of Darkness. Kurtz in Conrad's story is not killed as he is in Apocalypse Now. Rather, the ending that Coppola includes is drawn from Sir James George Frazer's The Golden Bough, one of the three books seen in Kurtz's compound during the final sequence. The other two books are Jessie L. Weston's From Ritual to Romance and a volume of poetry by T. S. Eliot. Of course, one recalls Kurtz's recitation of Eliot's "The Hollow Men," the "Hollow Men" being the military, including Kurtz, who are involved in the war. Weston's book, which describes the quest for the Holy Grail, includes a chapter entitled "The Fisher King" and has its roots in Frazer's The Golden Bough. As Tessitore clearly explains, The Golden Bough is "'A Study in Magic and Religion'" and "Originally published in 12 volumes from 1890 to 1915, it is most popularly known and read in its edited, single-volume edition of 1922, the form in which it is shown in the film" (21). In this 1922 version, Frazer begins his study by describing J. M. W. Turner's painting The Golden Bough. The painting, as described by Frazer, is a scene of two Italian villages, Alban hills, and an Italian palace with gardens descending into the lake of Nemi. The sacred refuge of Diana Nemorensis (Diana of the Wood) was located in this
countryside, and the lake was known as "Diana’s Mirror" (1). The painting itself shows Deiphobe carrying the Golden Bough (Butlin and Joll 1: 204). Frazer details the history of the goddess Diana’s sanctuary in Italy, but it is the myth of the Golden Bough that is explained in Frazer’s book:

In this sacred grove there grew a certain tree round which at any time of the day . . . a grim figure might be seen to prowl. In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if at every instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy. He was a priest and a murderer; and the man for whom he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead. . . . A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest, and having slain him, he retained office till he was himself slain by a stronger or a craftier. (Frazer 1)

As Tessitore explains, Frazer’s study seeks an answer to the question "Why were supposedly divine kings so frequently and unchangingly murdered at the hands of those who professed to adore them?" (21).

Frazer investigates Contagious Magic (Law of Contact), or "the magical sympathy . . . between a man and any severed portion of his person . . ." (Frazer 43). As Tessitore points out, the practice described by Frazer has been termed
"'the killing of the father’" (21), thus the Greek tragedy of Oedipus Rex. It is Oedipus who kills his birth father, Laius, thus proving the prophecy true, despite Laius’s efforts to change the course of destiny. By killing Laius, Oedipus assumes his father’s fate, and as Tessitore recalls, "when the divine king is murdered by one who is himself stronger or craftier, those powers of divinity which were the king’s are Sympathetically and Contagiously transferred from the vanquished to the victor" (21). More exactly, Frazer describes a situation in which the god-king is ill and must be killed:

Now primitive peoples . . . sometimes believe that their safety and even that of the world is bound up with the life of one of these god-men or human incarnations of the divinity. . . . But no amount of care and precaution will prevent the man-god from growing old and feeble and at last dying. . . . The danger is a formidable one; for if the course of nature is dependent on the man-god’s life, what catastrophes may not be expected from the gradual enfeeblement of his powers and their final extinction in death? There is only one way of averting these dangers. The man-god must be killed as soon as he shows symptoms that his powers are beginning to fail, and his soul must be transferred to a vigorous successor before
it has been seriously impaired by the threatened decay. (309)

In addition, Tessitore finds greater support for the influence of Frazer on Coppola:

The mystic kings of Fire and Water in Cambodia are not allowed to die a natural death. Hence, when one of them is seriously ill and the elders think that he cannot recover, they stab him to death.

(Frazer 310)

As Tessitore suggests, the location of Kurtz’s compound and his means of death are, in fact, adapted from The Golden Bough, and not from Conrad. In addition, Tessitore asserts that while fire has little importance in Conrad’s novella, in Coppola’s film “it operates on several levels—firepower, napalm, burning villages” (21). Finally, although Kurtz is ill in Heart of Darkness, his sickness does not suggest assassination. In contrast, Kurtz in Apocalypse Now is definitely ill. The military describes Kurtz as “insane” and the photo-journalist explains that “The man is clear in his mind . . . but his soul is mad. (pause) Oh yeah. He’s dying, I think.” Furthermore, unlike the natives in Heart of Darkness who are in a frenzy when Marlow takes Kurtz away from them, Kurtz’s followers in Apocalypse Now are accepting of his fate. Perhaps Willard is correct when he says “Even the jungle wanted him dead, and that’s who he really took his orders from, anyway.”
As Tessitore asserts, "Mr. Coppola has thus nicely linked together two seemingly disparate cultures, the so-called civilized and barbaric, in a manner not unlike Conrad’s, while arriving at an anthropological conclusion in perfect harmony with Frazer’s own" (21). Coppola himself, in an interview for Rolling Stone, suggests the myth of The Golden Bough as a source for the ending of his film:

He [Willard] goes into the temple, and he goes through a quasi-ritual experience, and he kills the king. The native people there were acting out in dance what was happening. They understood, and they were acting out, with their icons, a ritual of life and death. Willard goes in, and he kills Kurtz, and as he comes out he flirts with the notion of being king, but something . . . does not lure him. (Marcus 55)

Moreover, the idea that Willard might, in fact, assume Kurtz’s role as god-king was definitely considered:

I always tried to have it be implied in the movie that the notion of Willard going up the river to meet Kurtz was perhaps also a man looking at another aspect or projection of himself. I always had the idea of Willard and Kurtz being the same man. . . . And I feel that Willard arriving at the compound to meet Kurtz is like coming to the place
that you don’t want to go—because it’s all your ghosts and all your demons. (Marcus 55)

As Greil Marcus points out during the interview with Coppola, Willard throws down the scepter after killing Kurtz, thus rejecting the priesthood he has won, according to the myth described in The Golden Bough (55). Coppola did, in fact, toy with the idea of having Willard assume Kurtz’s position in Cambodia, but it did not receive public support (Marcus 56).

With the knowledge that Coppola himself supports the theory that the concluding sequence of Apocalypse Now is derived from The Golden Bough, one can only assume that he also considered Turner’s painting. Kurtz’s compound resembles the temple in the painting, Willard carries a scepter and Deiphobe carries a sickle (both weapons somehow offering a position of power), and the ritual dance in the center of the painting bears an uncanny resemblance to the one performed during the killing of the water buffalo in the film. Obviously, the ending to Coppola’s film stems from The Golden Bough and not from Heart of Darkness.

A third theme running through Apocalypse Now is that of the conflict between fantasy and reality. For example, Kurtz’s world is, to Willard, a world that without some restraint, he, too, would be tempted to enter. This is most obvious in the last scene, after he has killed Kurtz, and Willard chooses to leave the compound. Although Willard is
attracted to Kurtz's world, he is skeptical. Earlier, when asked by Kurtz if his methods are, indeed, unsound, Willard can only answer, "I don't seen any method at all, sir."

Willard can not stay with Kurtz's army, for "he has not embraced the Kurtz philosophy, just as Conrad's Marlowe never embraced it" (Chown 133).

As stated earlier, the other characters, in particular Kilgore and the crew members, have a great effect on the development of themes in *Apocalypse Now*. Kilgore is the lieutenant colonel who knows for sure, according to Willard, that he is going to leave the war without a scratch. He stands in the middle of the Landing Zone, almost oblivious to the warfare going on around him. According to Eleanor Coppola, Robert Duvall based Kilgore on an officer from West Point, "a guy whose life only made sense if there was a war" (30). This seems fitting to the character of Kilgore, for Vietnam is almost a game for him. He plays Wagner's "The Ride of the Valkyries" during air attacks, and the adage on his helicopter reads "Death From Above." In a memorable quote, Kilgore explains his view of war to Willard:

> I love the smell of napalm in the morning . . .
> the smell, you know, that gasoline smell . . .
> smells like . . . victory. (pause) Someday this war's gonna end.

The expression on Kilgore's face after that statement is almost one of disappointment.
The crew members aboard the PBR are described by Willard as "Rock-n-Rollers with one foot in their graves." They seem new to the war, but the journey down the Nhung River is certainly going to bring them back to reality by giving them a sample of the madness and horror contained in war.

Chef, the saucier from Louisiana, decides to go ashore into the jungle in search of mangos, a simple yet dangerous task. He is accompanied by Willard who, when he hears something moving, prepares for a possible attack. The Viet Cong are nowhere in sight. Suddenly, "A tiger bursts into sight with a snarl, and sends Willard and the Chef flailing back to the boat" (Cowie 138). The crew begins firing into the jungle. The scene not only frightens Chef, leaving him convinced that he can "Never get out of the boat!", but "It demonstrates just how ‘tight’ Chef and the rest of the crew were ‘wrapped’ and relates that tension and the resultant craziness to the enclosing environment" (Hagen, Apocalypse Now 239).

The crew is once again forced to confront the reality of the Vietnam War and its severe effects on those directly involved. In one of the film’s most shocking and emotional scenes, the Chief orders a routine check of a sampan filled with livestock, fruits, and grain. Chef is sent on board, thus leaving the boat, despite his own fears and hesitations. When a Vietnamese woman runs to a covered
basket, Clean opens fire, simply based on paranoia--the crew is "unable to tell 'friendlies' from Viet Cong" (Wilson 89). Chef breaks down emotionally when he finds what the woman sought--a puppy--and again when Clean is killed during an attack. But Chef does eventually have to leave the boat again when they reach Kurtz’s compound.

Chief, too, is faced with the harsh reality of the Vietnam War. After power struggles with Willard in an attempt to end what Chief is sure is a dangerous mission, Chief is killed. Lance is the only crew member who survives Willard’s mission, and he does this by altering his reality; "he camouflages his face with tribal warpaint, drops acid as he wanders the trenches at the Do Long Bridge, and puts on a loincloth to join the Montagnard dances" (Bogue 617). Escaping reality, or failing to acknowledge it, can only deter the inevitable. Lance will eventually need to face the results of war; the loss of friends and relatives and the nightmares of his own experiences.

The nature of moral confession is yet another theme that plays a major role in the literature of the Vietnam War. There are two levels of guilt evident in Heart of Darkness, and there are three levels of the guilt that run through Apocalypse Now. As in Conrad’s novella, Kurtz’s is an implied guilt and Willard’s is an explicit guilt. The one guilt that is not overtly expressed but is, nonetheless, as valid as that of Kurtz and Willard is the audience’s
guilt. The movie compels the audience "to experience the horror of the war and to acknowledge our own complicity in it . . ." (Kinder 13).

As discussed earlier, Willard states from the very beginning that he is about to tell both Kurtz’s story and his own. He explains that if Kurtz’s is a confession, then so is his. Willard has been ordered to "Terminate . . . with extreme prejudice," and this mission forces him to recall previous missions and his own uneasiness with his orders:

How many people had I already killed? There were those six that I knew about for sure. Close enough to blow their last breath in my face. But this time it was an American and an officer. That wasn’t supposed to make any difference to me, but it did. . . . Charging a man with murder in this place was like handing out speeding tickets at the Indy 500. I took the mission, what the hell else was I gonna do? But I really didn’t know what I’d do when I found him.

Kurtz had ordered the execution of Vietnamese intelligence officers that he believed were double agents. He had an army of Montagnards, and he was fighting the Vietnam War on his own terms. The CIA and the military believed Kurtz had gone insane. But as Willard learns more about the man, he cannot understand why the government wants him dead. In
fact, Willard begins to relate to Kurtz; "The more I read and began to understand, the more I admired him."

In addition to bringing the war home for everyone to experience, Coppola’s aim is to have the audience connect with Willard:

We are clearly meant to identify with Willard, to see with his eyes and think his thoughts; and the great shock of the film is that this journey on the river of human nature leads us with Willard into the hollow heart of Colonel Kurtz.

(Dorall 26)

As Willard completes his journey and learns more about Kurtz, he begins to see himself in the man. For example, Willard is against Chief’s decision to inspect the sampan, and he is ultimately forced to kill the Vietnamese woman in order to continue his mission. Afterwards, he senses the shock and fear on the crew’s faces.

It was the way we had over here of living with ourselves. We’d cut them in half with a machine gun and give them a band-aid. It was a lie, and the more I saw of them, the more I hated lies. Those boys were never gonna look at me the same way again, but I felt like I knew one or two things about Kurtz that weren’t in the dossier. Willard experiences a growing disgust and disillusionment with American participation in the Vietnam War. It is this
enlightenment that helps him to understand Kurtz and his motives.

The Do Long Bridge is the last Army outpost on the Nhung River. In this powerfully shocking and upsetting scene Willard realizes just how close he is to completing his mission; he is nearing the heart of darkness, Kurtz’s compound. The crew is greeted by soldiers in the river yelling "Take me home!" and "You’ll get what you deserve!" It is Lieutenant Carlsen (Glen Walken), the solder awaiting Willard’s arrival with mail for the crew, that puts it straight for Willard: "Now I can get out of here, if I can find a way." Willard’s exchange with Roach, the softspoken African American wearing native African jewelry, only supports Carlsen’s statement. When asked if he knows who is in charge, Roach can only respond "Yeah." The Do Long Bridge scene suggests the absurdity of war and the unnecessary losses that result from situations in which no one assumes control or responsibility.

The exchange eerily suggests that something other than military discipline is in charge of this particular situation. In the Coppola version we are not so much in awe of the proficiency of this deathly specialist, but rather in horror at the desperate circumstances in which war can place men. (Chown 135)
Despite the desperate tone of the Do Long Bridge scene, it serves its purpose in *Apocalypse Now*:

> No one commands at Do Long; all order, all discipline, and all purpose have broken down in a nightmare world of pointless destruction. . . .
> The Do Long Bridge concludes Coppola’s portrait of the war—futile, meaningless, and as horrifying as the pits of hell. (Wilson 92)

The audience is forced to acknowledge the war and the guilt Willard experiences. As with Marlow, this is guilt for being involved.

Just as Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* develops the need to meet Kurtz in person, Willard needs to see Kurtz. He has been reading the dossier, learning more about the man and his career in the military, "and developing a psychological attraction to the concept of a man who had reached his limit" (Chown 128). While destroying Kurtz’s dossier, Willard prepares for his upcoming meeting with Kurtz:

> Part of me was afraid of what I would find and what I would do when I got there. I knew the risks, or imagined I knew. But the thing that I felt the most, much stronger than fear, was the desire to confront him.

As Marsha Kinder explains, Willard becomes obsessed with Kurtz’s dossier, as Marlow is obsessed with his work and learning about Kurtz.
In hunting him, he moves deeper into himself for in Kurtz he sees a reflection of his own madness at a more advanced stage. Eventually he decides to reject the armed forces and pursue his own will like Kurtz.  

Willard decides to follow through with his mission, for he needs to come face to face with the Kurtz within himself. Eventually, Willard fulfills his mission as much for Kurtz as for himself, for he, like Marlow, assumes responsibility for Kurtz’s memory.

Willard does confront the Kurtz within him--the part of himself he has not allowed to surface. And, like Marlow, Willard must bring about justice for Kurtz, this time by telling Kurtz’s son the truth. Kurtz is ready to die and Willard is the one to commit the assassination, but this time on Kurtz’s terms. As Kurtz explains, the ultimate soldier is more like the Viet Cong:

If I had ten divisions of those men, then our troubles here would be over very quickly. You have to have men who are moral, and at the same time, who are able to utilize their primordial instincts to kill without feeling, without passion, without judgement, without judgement! Because it’s judgement that defeats us.

Willard is not there to judge Kurtz, for he did not see what Kurtz saw, but he is there to complete a mission, a mission
Kurtz expects him to complete. Although Willard is aware that Kurtz wants to die, he seems to rationalize his own actions.

They were gonna make me a major for this, and I wasn’t even in their . . . army anymore. Everybody wanted me to do it, him most of all. I felt like he was up there, waiting for me to take the pain away. He just wanted to go out like a soldier, standing up, not like some poor, wasted, rag-assed renegade. Even the jungle wanted him dead, and that’s who he really took his orders from, anyway.

Kurtz does die standing up, and Willard is the protector of his memory. Marsha Kinder explains the result of Kurtz’s death perfectly:

But in the end, Willard discovers that he is the instrument of Kurtz’s will—the means of his suicide and the embodiment of his reincarnation. He survives as a reflection—refusing to replace Kurtz as a false god, but echoing his dying words of horror. (18)

Like Marlow, Willard wanted a mission; however, the mission proved horrifying. Telling his story is a means of confessing his sins—his participation in the war, the fact that he enjoyed the thrill of a good mission, and the murder of Kurtz. It is also a way for Willard to provide Kurtz
with the justice he desired. The confessional tone, most evident in the voice-over, is a constant theme in Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*.

There are several techniques that Coppola uses that make *Apocalypse Now* a success in bringing the Vietnam War to the screen. As mentioned, Michael Herr’s narration helps by bringing Willard’s inner thoughts and perceptions to the front and forcing the audience to connect with him. In addition, the mere fact that it is a film, that it is visual, brings the audience into the story and, thus, into the war. As Jeffrey Chown explains, "the strongest and most consistent vision of the film is in the control of the imagery" (127). With the several close-ups, wide shots, and scenes that are either transposed over one-another (as in the opening scene) or interchanged with one another (Kurtz’s murder), Coppola manages to create a sense of horror, fear, and disgust. Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* goes a step further by bringing to the forefront genuine stories told by soldiers. Herr’s goal is not to relate exaggerated facts, but to share actual stories as only those involved could tell them.
Chapter 3
Finding Glamour in War

In November 1967, Michael Herr, then twenty-seven years old, went to Vietnam as a correspondent for Esquire Magazine. He spent eleven months there before he returned home in October 1968. Herr wrote several articles based on what he had witnessed and on what he had heard (Jones 309). His stories deal with the Tet Offensive and the siege of Khe Sahn, and many were published in Esquire, Rolling Stone, and New American Review (Hellmann 126). After Herr returned from Vietnam, he revised these and other stories for his book Dispatches, a work that took more than seven years to complete. Dispatches is not just a journal, nor is it an objective report of the Vietnam War. Dispatches is a work of journalism, written in the format of a personal journal, that reads like a novel:

Dispatches, however, is not simply the result of a random camera eye impersonally recording events, but it is, like most journals, thoroughly infused with the thoughts and emotions of its author. Dispatches is an interpretation of what Herr
experienced in Vietnam. It is not exactly history; it is not exactly fiction either.  

(Jones 309)

More precisely, Dispatches is a work of New Journalism, a genre that developed out of the works and ideas of such writers as Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, and Tom Wolfe. Dispatches was well received when it first appeared in 1977; in fact, it was regarded by many to be the best book written about the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam War differed from all other wars in many ways, two in particular:

It was a media war, highly visible in the morning papers and on the evening news; paradoxically, it was an unreal war, characterized by recurring images of destruction, power, and speed in place of any visible enemy, geographical objectives, or lines of conflict. (Hellmann 127)

The media was everywhere and Michael Herr was one of those correspondents who went to Vietnam seeking adventure and a good story:

"I went because I wanted to write a book," says Michael Herr. "But also, like a lot of Marines, I went because I had never been and wanted to go. It was my subject, man. I had some deep interest in it." (Morgan 52)
Herr’s approach to writing about the war met the needs of his audience—the Americans at home. Vietnam literature, fiction and nonfiction, is concerned with one thing in particular:

they aim to make sense of the experience, to contain the war within some comprehensible, graspable context, to give geographical and historical coordinates to the landscape it occupies in the author’s mind. (Bryan 70)

For those in search of a way to understand the war, *Dispatches* helps by bringing the reality of the war home.

Michael Herr entered the war as a spectator:

He was not a naive adventurer . . . but a relatively sophisticated observer who, one suspects, was quite hip to the insanity of Vietnam: the politics; the Catch-22 mentality of the war office; and the drugs, music, language, and protest of the late-sixties culture transported by the soldiers to Vietnam. For all that, he was also innocent of the realities of war and its dark revelations. (Herzog 687)

*Dispatches* presents the reader with a sequence of stories that appear in no particular order within the structured chapters. These war stories are intertwined within a larger framework; Herr’s own mind as he attempts to find meaning in the war through his experiences (Hellmann 128). As in *Heart
of Darkness and Apocalypse Now, Herr's story is a "tale within a tale" (Watts 22). Moreover, this transformation "from innocence to experience" (Hellmann 128) is, like those made by Marlow and Willard, a transformation from observer to participant. Although Herr was a correspondent and, therefore, not a direct participant in the war (reporters, unlike soldiers, can return home at any given time), he was thoroughly obsessed with the people he met and the stories they told, as well as the events he witnessed firsthand. Like Marlow and Willard, Herr must tell the stories of others in order to tell his own.

Michael Herr utilizes New Journalism as a means of presenting his story. In the early 1960's many writers realized that it was possible to present journalism in a form similar to that of a novel (Wolfe 9). New Journalists could adapt various qualities of the novel to their writing, thus creating a distinct genre of literature. Tom Wolfe singles out four means through which New Journalists grasp the reader's interest. The first device is "scene-by-scene construction" (31). Rather than presenting the events in an ordinary narrative, the writer presents them in the dramatic order in which they happen. By doing so, the original dialogue is preserved, thus the second device (31). As Wolfe explains, "realistic dialogue involves the reader more completely than any other single device. It also establishes and defines character more quickly and
effectively than any other single device" (31). A third technique is the '"third-person point of view"' (Wolfe 32). This technique enables the reader to enter the mind of one character and truly experience the scene along with that character (Wolfe 32). The fourth device, Wolfe explains, is perhaps the most difficult to grasp (32). It includes the following:

the recording of everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of traveling, eating, keeping house, modes of behaving toward children, servants, superiors, inferiors, peers, plus the various looks, glances, poses, styles of walking and other symbolic details that might exist within a scene. (Wolfe 32)

Such "symbolic details" reveal the "people's status life" or their roles in society (32). These are the four major techniques used by New Journalists to create a sense of realism in their works.

John Hollowell identifies two additional conventions that are often used by New Journalists. The first is "interior monologue" or the portrayal of a character's ideas and emotions without repeating the exact words (25-26). The second device is "composite characterization," which draws from various resources to present a combined sketch of a character (26). Literary techniques such as these are used
in New Journalism "to reconstruct the experience" (Hollowell 25) and, thus, create the kind of writing often associated with fiction.

Herr's *Dispatches* is chiefly a journal and is centered around his consciousness. Herr left Vietnam a different man from the one who arrived there only eleven months earlier: "'I went in like a lion,' he said, 'and came out like a lamb. Totally pacified, man'" (Morgan 52). Like many who joined the war effort, by choice or not, Herr wanted to go to Vietnam, only to realize later that he would never want to go to another war. Nevertheless, one of the themes in *Dispatches* is the discovery that a part of him loved war, and the guilt associated with that discovery. The theme of guilt that permeates *Dispatches* is, likewise, important in *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*, and, therefore, central to the genre of Vietnam War literature.

Because *Dispatches* centers around Herr, it most often takes the first person point of view. For this reason, it is predominantly subjective. The reader is immersed in the war. Similarly, Conrad’s novella and Coppola’s film are basically subjective.

Ultimately, Herr seeks to represent the Vietnam War as a heart-of-darkness style confrontation with the spiritual void at the center of American life, an encounter with mass insanity, a confrontation in which Herr, oscillating between
the roles of witness and protagonist, plays Marlow to half a million crazed American Kurtzes while fearing that he may become another lunatic Kurtz himself. (Jones 315)

Herr is then transformed from observer to participant, and likewise aims to transform the reader.

The New Journalism approach to the Vietnam War makes it possible to develop many of the themes evident in the literature of the time period. These themes include imperialism, the conflict between Western values and those of a non-Western society, the interplay of fantasy and reality, and the nature of moral confession. Michael Herr’s Dispatches succeeds in presenting these themes in their natural context and, thus, provides a means to understanding the war.

Like Apocalypse Now, Dispatches vividly describes scenes during the Vietnam War that illustrate American imperialism in Vietnam. Americans brought everything including literature, music, technology, and live entertainment into the non-Western country. One should note that as a precursor to Vietnam War literature, Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness is a work of fiction that analyzed the imperialistic methods of Western countries imposed on the Africans during the reign of Belgium’s King Leopold. The novella served as the foundation for Francis Coppola’s film Apocalypse Now, also a work of fiction that
displays some of the same imperialistic tactics, only this time they are imposed upon the Vietnamese and Cambodians. Herr’s *Dispatches*, unlike the works of Conrad and Coppola, is nonfiction, presented in the form of fiction, that exposes similar forms of imperialism in true accounts that he, himself, witnessed or learned about during his stay in Vietnam.

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* describes Western imperialism as dangerous not only to the Africans but also to the countries practicing imperialism. Imperialism creates a mere illusion of unity among the imperialistic countries that results in a loss of both power and individual culture for the Africans under control. Francis Coppola depicts this same idea in *Apocalypse Now*, for the Americans in Vietnam saturated the country with Western culture; American music, food, media, and entertainment are only examples of imperialism presented in the film. Unfortunately, as Willard recalls through the voice-over, the more examples of American cultures were brought to Vietnam, the more everyone missed home.

Many of the examples of American imperialism in Vietnam are obvious in *Dispatches*. For example, music was an important motivator and form of comfort for the soldiers during the war and a means of bringing a part of home over to Vietnam. Herr quotes seven lines from "For What It’s Worth" by Stephen Stills in a scene where he is spends the
night in a bunker in Khe Sahn with Mayhew, Day Tripper, and several other Marines. As the men listen to the radio, the song gains meaning for them:

There’s something happening here,
What it is ain’t exactly clear.
There’s a man with a gun over there,
Tellin’ me I’ve got to beware.
I think it’s time we stopped, children,
What’s that sound?
Everybody look what’s goin’ down. . . . (147)

But music was not restricted to the radio. It often appeared on cassettes, almost like mail, from home. Herr includes a scene in which a soldier plays Jimi Hendrix during a firefight. One can see the vague similarity between the tape of Hendrix and the tape Clean receives from his mother in Apocalypse Now. Both are a form of inspiration from home.

That’s the story of the first time I every heard Jimi Hendrix . . . it was more than a story; it was Credentials. "Say, that Jimi Hendrix is my main man," someone would say. "He has definitely got his . . . together!" Hendrix had once been in the 101st Airborne, and the Airborne in Vietnam was full of wiggly-brilliant spades like him, really mean and really good guys who always took care of you when things got bad. That music meant
a lot to them. I never once heard it played over the Armed Forces Radio Network. (194)

Such scenes are abundant in Vietnam War literature, including *Apocalypse Now*. Coppola’s scenes include Armed Forces Radio Network blaring over Clean’s radio as the PBR heads upriver, as well as a cassette player blaring Jimi Hendrix at the Do Long Bridge. The music was not only comforting, but inspirational for everyone in Vietnam, including Herr.

In *Apocalypse Now*, the PBR scene mentioned above also shows Lance waterskiing. Although it might appear unlikely, after all, Americans were in Vietnam to fight a war, such extra-curricular activities were available to soldiers on leave. Herr describes China Beach, a beachfront off the Bay of Danang where many Marines spent at least a few days during a thirteen-month tour:

It was a place where they could go swimming or surfing, get drunk, get stoned, get laid, get straight, groove in the scivvie houses, rent sailboats, or just sleep on the beach. . . . They would splash in the surf, giggling and shouting, riding beach disks along the shoreline, playing like kids. (175)

The beach provided a means of relaxation with many of the comforts of home and vacation; it was a place where one could escape the war.
Additional examples of imperialism described in Dispatches are recreated in Apocalypse Now. Herr briefly mentions the worn copy of Playboy that a Black soldier, his helmet labelled Love Child, studies in detail. This aspect of Western culture is brought to the theater screen in the USO scene of Apocalypse Now. In addition, the supply depot from the film resembles Herr’s description of the A Shau supply depot where the military kept “tanks and trucks and heavy anti-aircraft guns” (206). Western imperialism in Vietnam took many forms, but two of the most obvious were entertainment and military technology.

Western journalism was another aspect of imperialism brought to Vietnam during the war. With and without cameras, correspondents traveled the country in search of stories to send home. The soldiers offered their stories in an effort to relate true experiences, rather than the facts provided by the media, to those at home. Sometimes the stories were short, yet complete: "'Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened’" (5). Other times, even the soldiers’ stories were altered for dramatic purposes:

"What . . . do you think happened? We got shot to pieces." The correspondent started to write that down and the paratrooper said, "Make that 'little pieces.' We were still shaking the trees for dog tags when we pulled back out of there." (25)
Correspondents were not only present after firefights. In fact, they were often seen during battle, as Herr describes in full detail. Sometimes correspondents went into battle just to get the story, despite warnings from another reporter, soldiers, and even commanders.

He told me I was too new to go near the kind of . . . [action] they were throwing around up in those hills. ("You a reporter?" he’d asked, and I’d said, "No, a writer," . . . and he’d laughed and said, "Careful. You can’t use no eraser up where you wanna go.") (180)

This same sergeant attempted to keep Herr from going into battle by showing him the dead Americans lined up in two rows to be sent home. His final statement outlines the degree to which correspondents risked their lives in order to complete a story: "'Okay, man,' the sergeant said. 'You gotta go, you gotta go. All’s I can say is, I hope you get a clean wound’" (180-81). Like Marlow and Willard, Herr’s focus is his work, despite the dangers and disappointments confronting him daily.

The media played a major role in the Vietnam War, but few people realize how many reporters and photographers were in Vietnam during the war. Coppola provides examples in his film, such as the TV producer (played by Coppola himself) directing battle, the female photo-journalist (also in the Kilgore sequence), and Dennis Hopper’s photo-journalist.
However, Herr is much more effective by simply relating facts gathered through his experiences:

At the height of the Tet Offensive alone, there were between 600 and 700 correspondents accredited to the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. Who all of them were and where all of them went was as much a mystery to me and to most of the correspondents I knew as it was to the gentle-tempered bull-faced Marine gunnery sergeant assigned to the department of JUSPAO which issued those little plastic-coated MACV accreditation cards. (237)

As Herr explains, it was amazingly easy to remain in Vietnam and complete an assignment. The military and the government did not control the whereabouts of correspondents during the war, and, as Herr continually describes, members of the media often took part in dangerous missions.

It is obvious that the Western world not only came to Vietnam to fight the war, but it came to transplant in Vietnam mini-worlds and cultures. After America pulled its soldiers out of Vietnam, traces of American culture, in the form of music, food, and the like, were left behind. The Vietnamese were "Westernized" and lost, to some extent, their own culture.

Closely related to imperialism is the conflict between Western values and those of non-Western societies, a theme
in *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*. In Conrad’s novella, Marlow is caught within the conflict between the European cultures and the traditional culture of the Congo. Coppola’s film brings to the forefront the contrast between American values and those of the Vietnamese, as well as the contrast between Kurtz’s new beliefs and the standard ideas of the military. Similar conflicts in values are introduced in Herr’s *Dispatches*, for the reader can view the Vietnam experience from both the inside—that of the soldier—and the outside—that of the reporter; thus, Herr exposes the collision of values at both the personal and universal levels.

Religion in Vietnam created a kind of conflict, not only between the countries involved, but also within the people themselves. Coppola portrays a memorial scene in *Apocalypse Now*, but it is lost within the larger scene. As Kilgore’s men are cleaning up after their victory, one of the many things taking place is a memorial service for soldiers lost in combat. Within the chaos, one might wonder if the dead are receiving the respect they deserve. Herr describes a very similar memorial service early in *Dispatches*:

> When the 173rd held services for their dead from Dak To the boots of the dead men were arranged in formation on the ground. It was an old paratrooper tradition, but knowing that didn’t
reduce it or make it any less spooky, a company's worth of jump boots standing empty in the dust taking benediction, while the real substance of the ceremony was being bagged and tagged and shipped back home through what they called the KIA Travel Bureau. A lot of the people there that day accepted the boots as solemn symbols and went into deep prayer. Others stood around watching with grudging respect, others photographed it. . . . they wouldn't have looked around for holy ghosts if some of those boots filled up again and walked.

Herr suggests a conflict between the respect the solders deserve from the military and the military's need to get on with business, as well as the conflicts within each soldier regarding the purpose of war, the unnecessary death and destruction, and the need to continue fighting without emotional distractions.

Although some in Vietnam were not concerned with religion, many grasped anything that might offer spiritual support. As Herr points out, the men he met cherished anything that might give them the luck needed to survive and return home:

Guys dressed up in Batman fetishes, I saw a whole squad like that, it gave them a kind of dumb esprit. Guys stuck the ace of spades in their
helmet bands, they picked relics off of an enemy they'd killed, a little transfer of power; they carried around five-pound Bibles from home, crosses, St. Christophers, mezuzahs, locks of hair, girlfriends' underwear, snaps of their families, their wives, their dogs, their cows, their cars, pictures of John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Martin Luther King, Huey Newton, the Pope, Che Guevara, the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, wiggier than cargo cultists. One man was carrying an oatmeal cookie through his tour, wrapped up in foil and plastic and three pair of socks. . . .

his wife had baked it and mailed it to him, he wasn't kidding. (59)

The need to believe in something and be assured that one would return home alive was more powerful than the ability to reason. Furthermore, if a soldier survived a dangerous mission, that soldier was the one man who had the good fortune all others craved, and for whom they had a great respect:

On operations you'd see men clustering around the charmed grunt that many outfits created who would take himself and whoever stayed close enough through a field of safety, at least until he rotated home or got blown away, and then the outfit would hand the charm to someone else. If a
bullet creased your head or you'd stepped on a dud mine or a grenade rolled between your feet and just lay there, you were magic enough. (60)

As seen in these examples, religion took many forms in Vietnam, from the traditional brought from home, to the non-traditional created by the soldiers in need of comfort.

In dark contrast to the unstructured "religions" created in Vietnam, the Vietnamese, as well as some Americans, maintained their faith in more traditional religions. Herr describes how "the emperor’s mother sprinkled rice in her hair so the birds could fly around her and feed while she said her morning prayers" (46). Similarly, Herr recalls the alleys where one "could hear small Buddhist chimes ringing for peace, hoa bien; smell incense in the middle of the thickest Asian street funk" (47). Like the Vietnamese who practiced these traditional forms of religion, some Americans maintained their faith in more conventional Western religions, such as a young Marine who carried a Bible with him through the war:

Once on a Chinook run from Cam Lo to Dong Ha, I sat next to a Marine who took a Bible from his pack and began reading even before we took off. He had a small cross sketched in ballpoint on his flak jacket and another, even less obtrusive, on his helmet cover... He wasn’t a chaplain’s assistant or anything, just a grunt who happened
to be fat, pale and religious. (You didn’t meet that many who were deeply religious, although you expected to, with so many kids from the South and the Midwest, from farms and small rural towns.) . . . He passed over the open Bible . . . and pointed to a passage. It was Psalms 91:5. . . .

(163-64)

For the marine aboard the Chinook, the Bible gave him the courage and strength he needed during Vietnam. Psalms 91:5, he believed, provided the comfort he required and the assurance that he would make it home safely:

Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day.

Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.

A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee. (164-65)

Herr recalls the urge "to run through Psalms and find a passage . . . the one that talked about those who were defiled with their own works and sent a-whoring with their own inventions" (165). Perhaps it was Herr who lost faith, not only in himself and his reasons for being in Vietnam, but in America and its military.
As seen in *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*, there is a conflict between Western and non-Western values, particularly between the Americans in Vietnam and the Montagnards, "a kind of upgraded, demi-enlightened Annamese aborigine, often living in nakedness and brooding silence in their villages" (99), as well as between the Montagnards and the Vietnamese. As Herr points out, "Most Vietnamese and most Montagnards consider each other inferior" (99). In addition, the Americans looked upon the Montagnards as inferior to themselves:

Many Americans considered them to be nomadic, but the war had had more to do with that than anything in their temperament. We napalmed off their crops and flattened their villages, and then admired the restlessness in their spirit. Their nakedness, their painted bodies, their recalcitrance, their silent composure before strangers, their benign savagery and the sheer, awesome ugliness of them combined to make most Americans who were forced to associate with them a little uncomfortable over the long run. (99)

This description recalls Marlow's memory of the Africans he came in contact with in the Belgian Congo:

They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity--like yours--the thought of your
remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough . . . a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you . . . could comprehend. (Conrad 37-38)

The reluctance to have any contact with natives of the land, African, Vietnamese, or Cambodian is central to the conflict between values. This idea is further developed in Apocalypse Now, for as in Heart of Darkness, Kurtz builds an army of Montagnards. Unlike Conrad’s written word, Coppola’s film provides the audience with an opportunity to experience, through Willard, Kurtz’s compound, including the dead bodies that are scattered around his compound in trees, underground, or lying in pieces on the steps.

Another example of the conflict between Western and non-Western values concerns the deaths of Americans in Vietnam. While Americans back home were rallying to end the war and save lives, it appeared that the American military was doing its best to destroy those same lives:

There was a joke going around that went like this:
"What’s the difference between the Marine Corps and the Boy Scouts?" "The Boy Scouts have adult leadership." Dig it! . . . the Corps came to be called by many the finest instrument ever devised for the killing of young Americans. There were always plenty of stories about entire squads wiped out . . . companies taking 75 percent casualties,
Marines ambushing Marines, artillery and 
airstrikes called in on our own positions, all in 
the course of routine Search-and-Destroy 
operations. And you knew that, sooner or later, 
if you went with them often enough, it would 
happen to you too. (108-09)

Even if the missions described were accidental losses, it 
often appeared as though the military command had devalued 
the lives of soldiers. As seen in literature and movies, 
the deaths were referred to as numbers, as though considered 
individually the losses were minimal. Similarly, failed 
missions were referred to as monetary losses:

It was admitted at the time that a lot of our 
helicopters had been shot down, but this was 
spoken of as an expensive equipment loss, as 
though our choppers were crewless entities that 
held to the sky by themselves, spilling nothing 
more precious than fuel when they crashed. (206)

The loss of human life was less important than a lost 
mission, as described earlier, or a monetary loss, as 
described above.

The military was not the only group to devalue human 
life in Vietnam; the press was also responsible. In an 
effort to bring the story home, correspondents often 
resorted to the mere facts, rarely letting emotions enter 
into their stories.
There was a well-known correspondent of three wars who used to walk around the Danang press center with a green accountant’s ledger. He’d sit down to talk and begin writing everything you’d say, entering it in, so to speak. . . . I was sitting with Lengle, and we recalled that, at the very least, 200 grunts had been blown away there [Khe Sanh] and around 1,000 more wounded. He looked up from his ledger and said, "Oh, two hundred isn’t anything. We lost more than that in an hour on Guadalcanal." (240)

As Herr explains, the statistics refer to Americans, not Vietnamese, suggesting racism and a lack of respect for human life and perhaps the inhuman way the press might describe Vietnamese losses.

As the values of the Americans in Vietnam changed, so did their ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow’s reality lies in his work, for work provides "the chance to find yourself" (31). Kurtz’s world, a world where one can give in to the lure of the jungle, is fantasy; Marlow cannot allow himself to succumb to the temptation of the jungle and relinquish his soul. Similarly, in *Apocalypse Now*, Willard is tempted by a world without restraint—Kurtz’s world. This same struggle between fantasy and reality carries over into the lives of other characters in Coppola’s film, such as Kilgore and the
crew members aboard the PBR. Dispatches, too, provides insight into a world where there exists an interplay between fantasy and reality, a world in which one cannot always discern between the two. Because Dispatches is a work of New Journalism, its resemblance to fiction, as in its novel format, might make it more difficult to accept its stories as reality.

Apocalypse Now presents a major issue relating to many Vietnam veterans--the inability to return home after a tour. As Willard explains at the opening of the film: "When I was here I wanted to be there . . . When I was there, all I could think of was getting back into the jungle." This feeling of powerlessness after returning to the reality of civilian life, and the eventual need to return to Vietnam--a place where men could enter the fantasy world of war movies--is true of at least one soldier Herr met in Vietnam: "This was his third tour. . . . 'I just can't hack it back in the World,' he said" (3-4). Moreover, this inability to return home did not pertain exclusively to the troops, but to everyone who spent time in Vietnam. As Herr explains, he and other correspondents experienced a disassociation from civilian life after leaving Vietnam:

Back in the World now, and a lot of us aren't making it. . . . Because (more lore) we all knew that if you stayed too long you became one of those poor bastards who had to have a war on all
the time, and where was that? We got out and became like everyone else who has been through a war: changed, enlarged and (some things are expensive to say) incomplete. . . . A few extreme cases felt that the experience there had been a glorious one, while most of us felt that it had been merely wonderful. I think that Vietnam was what we had instead of happy childhoods. (263)

But the inability to deal with civilian life did not develop solely out of the horror of war. Actually, those in Vietnam acquired a love for the war and an earnest belief that war was, in fact, glamorous. Michael Herr was one of the many correspondents who found the war appealing. Dispatches recalls his conversation with fellow correspondents about the possibility of writing a book that would describe war as anything but appealing:

"Take the glamour out of war! I mean, how the bloody hell can you do that? . . . Ohhhh, war is good for you, you can't take the glamour out of that. It's like trying to take the glamour out of sex, trying to take the glamour out of the Rolling Stones." He was really speechless, working his hands up and down to emphasize the sheer insanity of it.

"I mean, you know that, it just can't be done!" We both shrugged and laughed, and Page
looked very thoughtful for a moment. "The very idea!" he said. "Ohhh, what a laugh! Take the bloody glamour out of bloody war!" (268)

While there are probably many reasons people consider war to be glamorous, the most obvious reason lies in its portrayal by the Hollywood movie industry. People enjoy being frightened, and the movie industry provides a thrill that satisfies the craving for danger. Moreover, many people—especially young men—want to be heroes, and the Vietnam War, with the constant presence of the media, provided the appearance of a movie set. Such an environment makes it difficult to discriminate between fantasy and reality, even for soldiers. As Herr explains, the young men fighting in Vietnam were, in fact, imitating war movies from home:

I kept thinking about all the kids who get wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good. You don't know what a media freak is until you've seen the way a few of those grunts would run around during a fight when they knew that there was a television crew nearby; they were actually making war movies in their heads, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire, getting their pimples shot off for the networks. . . . We'd all seen too many movies, stayed too long in
Television City, years of media glut had made certain connections difficult. (225)

Because the Vietnam War was not experienced by everyone first-hand, but through magazine, newspaper, and television reports, it sometimes resembled fiction. A certain level of reality was missing, even for some who were directing the movie. For example, after learning that a group of men were correspondents and not soldiers, a commander quickly changed his attitude toward them:

When the commander heard that [we were reporters], he wanted to throw a spontaneous operation for us, crank up his whole brigade and get some people killed. We had to get out on the next chopper to keep him from going ahead with it, amazing what some of them would do for a little ink. (6)

The presence of correspondents, photographers, TV producers, and film crews definitely affected everyone’s perspective of the war, sometimes making it impossible to face its reality.

Other contributors added to the conflict between fantasy and reality. One example is faith, in the form of superstition rather than religion. Although many in Vietnam retained their conventional religions, others created charms that provided the confidence they needed and created the belief that anything is possible. A good example is the story of Orrin, the Marine who learned his wife was pregnant with another man’s baby. After receiving the letter from
his wife, Orrin vowed to kill her when he arrived home after his tour. Orrin’s promise alone made him stand out among the other men in the Company:

It made a lot of guys think that he was lucky now, that nothing could happen to him, and they stayed as close to him as they could. I even felt some of it, enough to be glad that we would be in the same bunker that night. It made sense. I believed it too, and I would have been really surprised if I had heard later that anything had happened to him. (135)

In Vietnam, anything could happen, and what was reality in the United States was not necessarily reality in Vietnam. Orrin might not make it home alive, nor would he definitely kill his wife. Nevertheless, his feelings were hurt and he had a real reason to live. This was enough to reassure the other men. Similarly, one soldier wanted to believe that if another soldier from his hometown died in Vietnam, he himself would make it home alive:

He didn’t even know if there was anyone else from Miles City in Vietnam, but he checked anyway because he knew for sure that if there was someone else and they got killed, he would be all right. "I mean, can you just see two guys from a raggedy-ass town like Miles City getting killed in Vietnam?" he said. (195)
Whether the interplay between fantasy and reality developed out of the film industry’s depiction of war or merely the needs of the participants, many had a difficult time accepting the war’s harsh realities. Nevertheless, it is necessary to note that like Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* and Willard in *Apocalypse Now*, Herr used *Dispatches* to look back upon his own experiences in Vietnam. As John Hellmann points out in *Fables of Fact*, Herr, in *Dispatches*, explains his difficulty recognizing what he witnessed; he never truly grasped the reality of his experiences until much later:

Herr goes on to say that, even when he experienced such scenes at first-hand in Vietnam . . . he was unable to comprehend the actuality before him, as his consciousness seemed to protect him from the reality of the experience. Herr knows that, if he is to capture the reality, he must then go beyond reporting, for the struggle is as much with his and the reader’s consciousness as it is with the facts. (130)

*Dispatches* separates fantasy and reality in Herr’s mind and, thus, helps the reader to accept the reality of Vietnam.

The final theme to be discussed, the nature of moral confession, draws upon Herr’s experience in Vietnam and reflects on many of the topics already discussed. Like *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*, *Dispatches* suggests more than one level of guilt. Herr’s guilt is the most

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obvious, for the book serves as a means for him to render his confession. Moreover, as in *Apocalypse Now*, the implied guilt is that of the audience. Herr aims to convince his audience that everyone bears the burden for Vietnam; one is culpable whether in Vietnam for the war or at home waiting for the troops to return. Because Herr’s work is not fiction, and because it is filled with his emotions, the message to his audience is direct and, thus, effective.

Marlow’s journey in *Heart of Darkness* is described as one where he moves from being a detached observer to being a participant in Kurtz’s life. Similarly, Willard’s journey in *Apocalypse Now* is described as a quest; Willard is in search of Kurtz, a means to understand the Vietnam War, and his true self. Both Marlow and Willard use Kurtz’s story as a framework for telling their own stories. Like Conrad’s novella and Coppola’s film, Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* is a journey; Herr moves from being an observer to a participant not only in the war but in the lives of each and every person he meets in Vietnam. He, too, uses other people’s stories as a framework for telling his own. Moreover, Herr, like Marlow and Willard, moves from innocence to experience; he begins with the intention to do only his job, but in time, gains a greater understanding of the world around him and, thus, himself.

Innocence can be defined in two ways. One definition bases innocence on "a lack of worldly knowledge" (Bellhouse
and Litchfield 157). This interpretation, however, does not apply to Vietnam War literature as easily as does the second definition:

One meaning conveys some sense of freedom from sin, moral wrong or guilt, including legal guilt. It includes the sense of innocence of intention as well as of action, a freedom from guile or cunning, a virtuous simplicity of soul.

(Bellhouse and Litchfield 157)

As Bellhouse and Litchfield explain, prior to the Vietnam War, Americans labeled themselves innocent based upon this second definition. Perhaps Michael Herr used this same definition as a foundation for his own innocence. Herr did go to Vietnam for the same reasons many Americans went there--to capture a story and experience the excitement. However, he, like other Americans, journeyed from innocence to experience and continues the journey through *Dispatches*.

Michael Herr's *Dispatches* is, as much as anything, a quest for self-discovery. As stated earlier, Herr's experiences in Vietnam contained an element of the fantastic; he was unable to accept them as real until later. The book itself is a search for truth and understanding--of the war, and of his own being. Perhaps the greatest truth Herr was to discover is his own love of war and the thrill attached to it. As Bellhouse and Litchfield suggest, this is a theme that permeates all war literature:
This is what might be termed the addictive aspect of war, the discovery that part of oneself loves war. This theme, in various forms, is so frequently expressed that it brings into serious question the democratic myth that nobody likes war, that good-hearted G.I. Joe simply recognizes the need to get the dirty job over with and come home. (167)

It has already been suggested that human beings find a certain thrill in being frightened, and this thrill is found in war. Kurtz is *Heart of Darkness* builds an army of sorts to bring ivory out of Africa. Similarly, Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now* forms an army to fight the Vietnam War on his own terms. Willard tells the audience that he could not return home after spending time in the jungle. In essence, he could not identify with life at home or at war, though he seems most comfortable when he has a military mission to keep him occupied. Most of all, Willard loves war. He finds it exciting, and completing his missions is a means of giving in to his obsessive need for the sensational.

As stated earlier, *Dispatches* is a series of stories, each representing something Herr heard or witnessed personally. As Herr tells these stories, he delves into his own consciousness and learns about himself. The nature of moral confession as a theme in *Dispatches* is most obvious as Herr describes the troops who risked their lives in Vietnam,
often to die or witness the deaths of others. This had a
great impact on everyone in Vietnam, including Herr.
Dispatches becomes a confession for Herr and, thus, for his
readers. For many, including Herr, war remains exciting
long after the fighting ends.

Everyone in Vietnam lost someone to the war, whether
that someone was a new friend, an old friend, or a relative.
Often what began as an adventure turned into a frightening
memory. Herr is reminded of the marine who complained about
the C-rations, and he recalls the marine’s fear that those
directing the war really did not care about those fighting
the war:

Specifically, he was just talking about a couple
of C-ration cans, "dinner," but considering his
young life you couldn’t blame him for thinking
that if he knew one thing for sure, it was that
there was no one anywhere who cared less about
what he wanted. . . . He hadn’t been anything but
tired and scared for six months and he’d lost a
lot, mostly people, and seen far too much, but he
was breathing in and breathing out, some kind of
choice all by itself. (15)
The marine’s concerns suggest the universal guilt that
countries experienced, or should have experienced, while
young people fought and died for countries that forgot they
ever existed. Even those who survived to return home felt
alienated by the very people they fought to protect. Herr's words, "breathing in and breathing out" became the titles for the first and last chapters of *Dispatches*, and they say everything without saying much at all. They suggest his own choice to go to Vietnam, as well as his decision to write *Dispatches*. He begins by "Breathing In" and taking that deep breath before pouring out his soul to his audience. The final chapter, "Breathing Out" is the exhalation that comes when one feels the relief of a difficult task finally completed.

There existed extra pressure being a correspondent in Vietnam during the war. As Herr explains, someone was always ready to question his presence there, causing him to question himself:

Sometimes an especially smart grunt or another correspondent would even ask me what I was *really* doing there, as though I could say anything honest about it except "Blah blah blah cover the war" or "Blah blah blah write a book." Maybe we accepted each other's stories . . . the grunts who "had" to be there, the spooks and civilians whose corporate faith had led them there, the correspondents whose curiosity or ambition drew them over. But somewhere all the mythic tracks intersected. . . . you could also hear . . . some young soldier speaking in all bloody innocence, saying, "All
that's just a load, man. We're here to kill gooks. Period." Which wasn't at all true of me. I was there to watch. (19-20)

It was not until later, perhaps after completing *Dispatches*, that Herr understood the truth about himself. As he explains in one of the more memorable quotations from the book, the word "correspondent" was only a label for Herr. He was also an adventure seeker. However, like many others, Herr received more in return than he anticipated:

Talk about impersonating an identity, about locking into a role, about irony: I went to cover the war and the war covered me; an old story, unless of course you've never heard it. . . . it took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did. The problem was that you didn't always know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later. . . . (20)

This quote that appears very early in *Dispatches* clearly outlines one of Herr's primary purposes for writing his book. He aims to point out that he, as well as his audience, is responsible for what happened in Vietnam.

What appears to be one of Herr's greatest problems is that he, even after recalling all of the events detailed in *Dispatches*, still finds some thrill in Vietnam. This concept is another one of his many confessions: "Of course
coming back was a down. After something like that, what could you find to thrill you, what compared, what did you do for a finish?" (264). The attraction to war is, to some people, incomprehensible. In the chapter about Khe Sanh, Herr goes so far as to compare the nights he sat up with the troops to a man’s first experience with sex:

And every time, you were so weary afterwards, so empty of everything but being alive that you couldn’t recall any of it, except to know that it was like something else you had felt once before. . . . It was the feeling you’d had when you were much, much younger and undressing a girl for the first time. (144)

There is definitely an attraction to war, especially for the correspondent who is aware at all times that he is not required to be there, that he is free to leave. Bellhouse and Litchfield explain the phenomenon so obvious throughout Dispatches:

The excitement of combat, of living on the edge, of being free to release without any constraint all of one's aggressive energy, all so different from the task of making one's way in the often pulverizingly boring, stultifying and bureaucratic world of industrial society constitutes part of the attraction of war. (168)
Of course, there are other qualities that attract men to combat, such as the chance to bond with others and form alliances that are made only under the dangerous circumstances of war.

One point that Herr repeats continually is that he was a correspondent who chose to be in Vietnam during the war. Because they had the privilege to leave the front lines at any time, correspondents often traveled from a Landing Zone to a safer place, such as Saigon, within a given day. Moreover, despite the hazards involved with being a journalist in Vietnam, Herr found he was constantly reminded that his experiences could never compare with those of a soldier:

Obviously, what they really wanted to tell you was how tired they were and how sick of it, how moved they'd been and how afraid. . . . After a year I felt so plugged in to all the stories and the images and the fear that even the dead started telling me stories, you'd hear them out of a remote but accessible space where there were no ideas, no emotions, no facts, no proper language, only clean information. However many times it happened, whether I'd known them or not, no matter what I'd felt about them or the way they'd died, their story was always there and it was always the same: it went, "Put yourself in my place." (31)
As much as Herr wanted to put himself in a soldier’s shoes, if just to understand that point of view, he could not. The most he could do was tell the soldiers’ stories.

As Herr explains what it was like being a correspondent during Vietnam, he describes the many ways he and others were guilty for being involved. They took chances when they did not need to and attempted to fit in with the G. I.’s, yet everyone knew that correspondents had a greater chance of making it home. Because the correspondents chose to be in Vietnam, their presence was often enough to make the troops uneasy:

Then, it didn’t matter that we were dressed exactly as they were and would be going exactly where they were going; we were as exotic and as fearsome as black magic, coming on with cameras and questions, and if we promised to take the anonymity off of what was about to happen, we were also there to watchdog the day. The very fact that we had chosen them seemed to promise the most awful kind of engagement, because they were all certain that war correspondents never wasted time. It was a joke we all dug. (205)

Because soldiers were often uneasy, it took a while to develop a rapport with them. Nonetheless, Herr reports enjoying his time with the troops and, thus, having the
opportunity to see some real action. This was why Herr went to Vietnam:

All right, yes, it had been a groove being a war correspondent, hanging out with the grunts and getting close to the war, touching it, losing yourself in it and trying yourself against it. I had always wanted that, never mind why, it had just been a thing of mine. . . . (222)

As John Hellmann explains, this final realization is the truth that Herr was seeking:

But by constructing his work as a dramatization of his remembering consciousness, probing and searching for the true meaning of his experience, Herr has from the beginning been leading us toward the "heart of darkness" he finally came to see. . . . Herr, who as a new journalist looks directly at external facts and at himself, brings back the news that war is hell—but an all-too-attractive playing ground for fantasizing heroes nevertheless. That may be the final, most awful discovery of his experience. (136)

And, as Hellmann suggests, there exists a similar discovery to be made by Herr’s audience as well (136).

The Vietnam War became, for correspondents, soldiers, and the nation something rather like a huge movie set. It was a place where heroes could come to life and the truth
was hidden within fantasy, as described earlier. Being a part of the group largely responsible for this digs into Herr's consciousness as he describes the majority of reporters during the war:

And just-like-in-the-movies, there were a lot of correspondents who did their work, met their deadlines, filled the most preposterous assignments the best they could and withdrew, watching the war and all its hideous secrets, earning their cynicism the hard way and turning their self-contempt back out again in laughter. . . . They knew that, no matter how honestly they worked, their best work would somehow be lost in the wash of news, all the facts, all the Vietnam stories. Conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it. . . . (234)

The truth about Vietnam did not make it into the papers, simply because the audience did not want the truth. The people wanted to see what is shown in the movies. Dispatches reveals the truth by delving into the consciousness of not just its author, but the consciousness of each and every reader.

Michael Herr's Dispatches is truly one of the most effective works to come out of the Vietnam War. As a work of New Journalism, it uses a relatively new literary form to
communicate with his audience and discover the truth behind the Vietnam experience. As John Hellmann suggests, *Dispatches* is more than a self-discovery for Herr alone:

By so ordering a work of reportage, of "nonfiction," Herr has contributed to our comprehension of the Vietnam war as, in part, a product of the American consciousness. He has also affirmed the power of a new journalism that is a genre of the new fiction. (138)

Herr tells the stories he heard and recalls the events he witnessed to disclose the reality of Vietnam and his involvement there. In the end, Michael Herr aims to convince his audience that everyone must assume the burden of Vietnam.
Conclusion

The literature that developed out of the Vietnam War is a distinct genre separate from all other war literature. Although the Vietnam War is not the only subject for a mixed-media study, the themes that predominate in its literature are the same that prevail throughout history as different cultures collide in deadly power struggles. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, written more than sixty years before the start of the Vietnam War, is a precursor to Vietnam War literature, for many of Conrad’s goals were the same as those of the writers and filmmakers who reconstruct the Vietnam War in their work. A mixed-media study including Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* and Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*, therefore, begins in Africa with Conrad.

The imperialistic strategies utilized by the Belgian trade company that employs Marlow in *Heart Of Darkness* are similar to those adopted by the United States in *Apocalypse Now* and *Dispatches*, for the victims lose their identity as the more powerful take advantage of them. Similarly, Conrad’s representation of the conflict between Western and non-Western values is reproduced in the works of Coppola and Herr; like Marlow, Willard and Herr witness the collision of
two different cultures during their stay in a strange and distant country. Moreover, Marlow, Willard, and Herr all experience similar difficulties in distinguishing between fantasy and reality. Africa and Vietnam offer worlds where one can let loose of all restraint and give in to temptation. These fantasy worlds are unacceptable, and reality always exists in work. These three themes seem to travel through time in literature. When connected to Vietnam War literature, they are always associated with the theme of guilt and the nature of moral confession. What does it all mean?

Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* reveals the guilt of both Kurtz and Marlow, though it focuses more clearly on the latter character. Marlow is guilty of being tempted by the Congo, telling a lie to Kurtz’s fiancée, and working for a company practicing imperialism in Africa. Perhaps his story is a lesson to be learned by the readers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century; it is all too possible that Conrad was suggesting the guilt of all mankind for condoning the practices of companies like the one that employs Marlow.

Today’s readers should conclude that similar lessons can be learned in Conrad’s novella, but contemporary works provide those same lessons through more direct means. Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*, like *Heart of Darkness*, depicts both Willard and Kurtz as being among the guilty, but the film extends this emotion to include the guilt of the
audience as well. This, conceivably, is Coppola’s goal as a
director. His film, most effectively viewed on a wide
theater screen, forces the audience to witness the horrors
of the Vietnam War and accept them as the true experiences
of veterans. The audience is expected to identify with
Willard by listening to his thoughts and witnessing his
actions; the audience is a companion on Willard’s journey
into Cambodia and, in a way, becomes Willard. When Willard
decides not to assume Kurtz’s role as King, the audience has
made that same decision. Coppola’s goal is to have the
audience accept the blame for the Vietnam War, all its
horrors and crimes, and acknowledge that it is society’s
duty to understand and prevent similar situations in the
future.

Finally, Michael Herr’s Dispatches, a work of reportage
that uses the methods of New Journalism, presents the nature
of moral confessions in, perhaps, its most natural state.
Although one can assume that Heart of Darkness and
Apocalypse Now both suggest the guilt of all mankind,
Dispatches is more than a means for Herr to free himself of
guilt; Herr’s book is a reminder to all readers that Vietnam
is a burden all Americans must assume. This obvious, yet
not overtly stated, suggestion differentiates the book from
the other two works. Although many works of Vietnam War
literature, including A Rumor of War and Bloods, detail
personal experiences in Vietnam, Herr’s book presents many
perspectives from which to experience the war. He uses short, yet complete, vignettes to tell each story that successfully force the reader to experience the war along with the characters. Unlike Heart of Darkness and Apocalypse Now, Dispatches is not a work of fiction and, therefore, is not an imaginative interpretation of the war. Herr presents only the harsh reality of experience without hiding his own ideas, beliefs, or emotions.

If all three works, spanning decades of history, address their audience and suggest the guilt of all humankind, what do they indicate about human nature? If anything, each work suggests lessons to be learned about ourselves and the cyclical nature of history that can be broken if we are to acknowledge our own mistakes and make changes that can improve the future. If the same mistakes made in the late 1800’s, at the time when Conrad first wrote Heart of Darkness, were being made at the time Coppola began filming Apocalypse Now and again when Herr published Dispatches, one can only surmise that the similar errors are to be made again. Perhaps this proves that we are reluctant to acknowledge our own complicity in the affairs of the world. Do we have the power to change what we do not believe is right? To what extent can we use that power? Will we use it to make practical changes?

But what place does each of the three works have in the lessons to be learned from the Vietnam War? Each work, as a
distinct form, serves to address an audience, suggesting that the collective consciousness of mankind is not suited to only one form of media. As indicated earlier, *Heart of Darkness* is not very direct in implying the guilt of all mankind in the Western colonization of Africa. *Apocalypse Now*, by thrusting the audience directly into the Vietnam War on wide theater screen is more direct in its approach, though not as straightforward as *Dispatches* in suggesting our complicity and responsibility for the war.

Each work depicts imperialism as wrong, and the collision of Western and non-Western values, as well as the interplay of fantasy and reality, as one part of the world pursues hegemony over another. Moreover, they suggest that any war, be it an attempted colonization or an effort to prevent a hostile takeover, such as communism, guilt is a psychological by-product. Each work serves to explain that lack of direct participation does not exclude one from the collective guilt of a nation--we are all guilty for condoning and permitting a war to take place. As Coppola and Herr imply in their works by showing us time and again what our youth experienced in Vietnam, we must admit that we allowed Vietnam to take place--we allowed the deaths, injuries, and destruction to exist and we must help to reconstruct our national consciousness.

*Heart of Darkness*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Dispatches*, while they are three different forms of literature, employ
similar themes and tell us similar stories. Each work addresses our consciousness and attempts to show us that while the stories being told are not our own, they are a part of our world. We can alter fate if we realize our own moral responsibility in the affairs of the world that seem to recur as history repeats itself. Perhaps, if we finally learn the lessons taught by Joseph Conrad, Francis Ford Coppola, and Michael Herr, we may never again need to echo Kurtz's words: "The horror! The horror!"
Works Cited


