My Life and the Works of Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald

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ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to examine two American novelists writing in the modernist tradition, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Much has been published about each author’s merits and their faults, but it is my intention to demonstrate that this one singular event propelled these two authors to write in such a manner (a manner that was completely new and epitomized a new generation) that cannot be separated from the actual circumstances of the war. While the bonds of male friendship may have come to rise during the war for many, I would suggest that the bonds and the stories Hemingway and Fitzgerald carried into their works, speak louder. We cannot understand either of the author’s writings without considering their respective relationships to World War I.

My central argument is that World War I put F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway on a trajectory to create a new understanding of masculinity, which is to say, a creation that propelled society to behave in a way that was commensurate with their worldview. They carried their stories and their ideas of masculinity home into their literature. They and their work were forever changed.
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Introduction

“I know myself,” he cried, “but that is all.”
F. Scott Fitzgerald in This Side of Paradise

In early October of 2012, just a couple of weeks after my second daughter was born, I began to pack my books into a large Stanley case in preparation for my upcoming deployment to Afghanistan. The rest of my SEAL team had deployed already, as I stayed home to see the birth of my daughter. Most of these guys had deployed with a kindle, as you can imagine, for as a library it can contain many more books than my Stanley case. But, there is something to the feel of the books themselves when at war. Something about being connected physically to the text that my comrades didn’t seem to understand. So, I carefully selected my library and filled it with anything by Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

There were many other selections, but works by these two authors composed the majority of the Stanley case, my portable library. I always have had some affinity towards their works and their connection to World War I, no matter how loose the connection may seem to be. I would and still do make comparisons to my own experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, through the lens of their literature. The source of this connection is simply comfort. It is their ideals of masculinity that emerge on the page that give me a feeling of safety and that everything is going to be alright. These two authors’ words make me comfortable when situations are dangerous and stressful. I can
come back from an emotional experience and utterly lose myself in the emotions of
fiction.

There is a long history of soldiers carrying books to war. Certain books, obvious
ones like Homer’s the Ililad and Odyssey. It is all about the individual’s choice though,
and I am always curious about other soldier’s choices. I wonder about the choices of
those who served in World War I, the war that spurred a generation of writers. The two
authors, whose style of writing I admire most.

In the Special Collections vault at the Lauinger Library at Georgetown University
I quite literally ran into an old green case. I bumped into it as a turned a corner in the
vault. It is a military style crate, which is to say it is merely a wooden crate that has been
painted in the U.S. Army’s Olive Drab Green color. The words are pronounced “O.D.
green” by anyone who has served in the military. Much of the paint has been worn off
through time, but the bright white stenciling still shimmers on the case. In the lower left
corner of the lid is one word that reads “BOOKS.” And then at the top of the lid,
perfectly centered it reads,

MAJOR
WILLIAM J. DONOVAN

It was striking to me that the same way I pack my Stanley case before deployment, Major
William J. Donovan did the very same thing in World War I. Major Donovan would go
on to win the Medal of Honor in that war, become a U.S. Attorney in New York, and
head the Office of Strategic Services, the precursor to today’s Central Intelligence
Agency.
Quite the career undoubtedly, but I am more interested in the tradition of books being comfort. It seems Major Donovan and I at least have that in common. I am not sure what books he would have packed into that case, but I wonder if he would agree with me on the idea that certain books make soldiers comfortable when at war? His selections would inevitably be different than mine. Hemingway and Fitzgerald were yet to emerge as authors. And Major Donovan as a U.S. Attorney in New York would aggressively pursue bootleggers. So, I do not think he would have the same passion for *The Great Gatsby* that I do. Nonetheless, I think we could agree that the tradition of books during war is an absolute necessity.

That tradition continued but changed though with the World War II Armed Services Editions. This program set up by the Council on Books in Wartime provided small paperback books to American servicemen during the war. I think about a soldier escaping from the horrors of war, in the same way I pack my Stanley case before deploying and the way Major Donovan packed his green case. The motto of the Council on Books was Books Are Weapons in the War of Ideas, and I have believed that to be a sacred truth throughout my own experiences in war.

This effort allowed soldiers to carry books of fiction that would not likely have been carried before. Examples of works produced by the council would be *Selected Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* and Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*—works that do not have a direct correlation towards war and works that are clearly immersed in the ideas of war. There is a rich history as to why certain works were selected, but the bottom line here is
that soldiers’ “capacity for wonder” was extraordinarily enhanced by the Armed Services Editions project.

I cannot forget that day when I went to the Library of Congress to view some of the Armed Services Collection’s offerings and asked to see a copy of *The Great Gatsby*. I was told that it was not there by a representative of the Special Collections Department because it was on display somewhere else. The representative assured me that there was no need to worry though because *The Great Gatsby* was available all over the place. Perhaps, he did not share my capacity for wonder? I wanted to touch a copy of that Armed Services Edition. I wanted to connect with whomever had read it, even if left alone to wonder with no conclusions. Did they make it home? What solace did that literature bring them and what connections did they make between their own experiences in war and the literature?

I was able to connect with Major Donovan because he had become so famous. Thus, he is easily identifiable in history and accessible through literature. There is something inexplicable about being able to be in touch with the actual literature. To engage the physical literature with a sense of realism that can only be acquired through reading it, touching it, and gathering a real understanding of where the author is coming from. To carry the literature to and away from war is the connective tissue between us.

When I touched down in Afghanistan I stowed my library, as well as all my other necessities and walked into the Joint Operations Command or JOC. Up until this moment, I had only experienced smaller Combat Outposts or COPs. In walked Robert Abrams, the Commanding General of the 3rd Infantry Division at Fort Stewart, Georgia,
during which he also served as Commander of Regional Command South in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

As soon as I heard his name I began to make connections. Trying to connect the dots of my own experiences with the fictional history I love to read. General Abrams’ presence sent me down the rabbit hole of literary associations. I recalled in chapter three of The Great Gatsby, that famous scene where Nick Carraway meets Jay Gatsby for the first time and Gatsby appears to recognize Nick:

“Your face is familiar,” he said politely. “Weren’t you in the Third Division during the war?”

“Why, yes. I was in the Ninth Machine-Gun Battalion.”

“I was in the Seventh Infantry until June nineteen-eighteen. I knew I’d seen you somewhere before.” (Fitzgerald 51-52)

Now a division is an extraordinarily large military unit and was essentially created for the purposes of World War I. (Prior to the war, that size of a unit would have been very difficult to mobilize.) It seemed to me rather difficult to accept the prospect that Gatsby would recognize Nick given the fact that they were not even in the same Battalion or Regiment, or Brigade for that matter. But, was it possible?

As French troops retreated away from German troops in a place in France called Chateau-Thierry, along the Marne River on 6 June 1918, the 7th Machine Gun Battalion of the 3rd Division were rushed to Chateau-Thierry. They then set up a defensive position along the Marne River. Major General Joseph Dickman, the Division
Commander, is claimed to have said, "Nous resterons la." — "We’re staying there." The Third Division still wears this phrase on their shoulders visible for me to see in the JOC.

Now, what about the historical timeline of these events? Was Fitzgerald trying to get the dates right, to make the meeting between Nick and Gatsby possible? That glorious historical association was not always part of the dialogue between Nick and Gatsby, as I came to find out by looking at early versions of The Great Gatsby.

Borne out of the lack of historicity, Fitzgerald was never quite happy with the title of The Great Gatsby and offered up a number of different titles to his editor Maxwell Perkins. One of these titles was Trimalchio based on a character (who throws lavish parties) from a work by Petronius called The Satyricon. In Trimalchio: An Early Version of The Great Gatsby edited by James L. W. West III, the exchange reads like this:

“Your face is familiar,” he said hesitantly. “Weren’t you in the First Division during the war?”

“Why, yes. I was in the Twenty-eighth Infantry.”

“I was in the Sixteenth until June, nineteen-eighteen. I knew I’d seen you somewhere before.” (Fitzgerald 40)

Deeper into the rabbit hole I went as I became obsessed with the changes Fitzgerald had made. He must have realized or someone must have pointed out to him that their meeting could not have taken place in June if they were in the First Division. I went online to Princeton University’s Firestone Library where they have a digitized copy of a handwritten first version of The Great Gatsby and that copy reads the same as Trimalchio. And it reads the first of June, opposed to the aforementioned quote above that reads
“June.” Thereby extending the possibility of a meeting for the entire month of June. Fitzgerald must have been aware of particular battles that he wanted his characters to participate in, but was unsure of the dates and precise units that would have participated in those specific battles.

I have to conclude that since Gatsby says he left the Division in June, which would make the meeting between Nick and himself possible, that Fitzgerald intentionally gives even more suspense to the character of Gatsby and even more ambiguity to the character of Nick. In other words, based on timeline alone, we are left to wonder whether either character participated in the Great War with extraordinary heroism at this point in the novel. We also see a change, this time in units from First Division to Third Division. Fitzgerald clearly wants Gatsby to have participated in the Argonne Forest battle, for this is where he receives his medals of valor. The evolution in corrections has to mean that he became aware of specific dates and specific units in specific places and makes this timeline work.

By most accounts I can find the Third Division was activated in November 1917 during World War I at Camp Greene, North Carolina. Then the Third Division went into combat in June of 1918 in France. However, it was on July 14, 1918, the Division was engaged in the Aisne-Marne Offensive, the battle that Fitzgerald wants our two Americans, Nick and Gatsby, to meet. Both characters in the Division that earned its reputation as the "Rock of the Marne." This same reputation birthed a song. A song sung unanimously by the entire unit before me in Afghanistan as General Abrams walked down the cavernous JOC. The battles of World War I were such a force as to influence
Fitzgerald’s getting the dates and units right, that before my very eyes I could see its lasting legacy almost one hundred years later.

The Abrams before me in Afghanistan was part of a long line of military history. His father, another General, got the M1 Abrams tank named after him. The elder General Abrams could have read the Armed Services Edition of The Great Gatsby during his service in World War II. I try to connect a new name to the past, connecting new Generals to older ones. And remember the absurd list of names that attend Gatsby’s parties that summer? I wondered if the General Abrams before me had ever read The Great Gatsby and seen the list? “From farther out on the Island came the Cheadles and O. R. P. Schraeders and the Stonewall Jackson Abrams of Georgia and the Fishguards and the Ripley Snells” (Fitzgerald 66). Was there any connection between the Civil War General Stonewall Jackson and the General Abrams before me?

The Third Division now resides in Georgia, though it didn’t always. Fitzgerald adds that his character Stonewall Jackson Abrams is from Georgia, an addition that first appears in Trimalchio and does not appear in Fitzgerald’s hand-written copy of Gatsby at the Firestone Library at Princeton University. Yet, from Trimalchio the line reads, “…the Stonewall Jackson Abrams of Georgia, still violently impassioned about the Civil War” (Fitzgerald 51). It seems by the time Fitzgerald completed The Great Gatsby he wanted his readers focused on World War I and how it ultimately shaped his characters.
The spirit of the past brooding over a new generation.
F. Scott Fitzgerald in This Side of Paradise

World War I or the Great War, as it is sometimes called, began on 28 July 1914 and ended on 11 November 1918. About 17 million lives, (soldiers and civilian) were lost between those two dates. The United States did not enter the war until 6 April 1917 and lost a little over 116,000 lives after their “late” entrance into the war, with respect to the other Allied powers’ entrances. I think it is necessary to frame the context of my project with an acknowledgment of the vastness of death and the hideousness of “trench warfare,” that transpired during this timeframe and the effects it had on those that fought in it, witnessed it and more importantly had to deal with it for the rest of their lives. The war itself had a profound effect on the authors within what would become, if not already was called modernism. This effect is evidenced by the “trench” warfare, the use of chemical weapons, and the general tactics used throughout the war in terms of how it was fought. The tactics never hitherto utilized previously of World War I convinced artists to reevaluate the world, as they knew it.

I intend to suggest that male relationships forged through combat, or even the prospect of going to combat, in and around World War I, however well they held up during the war, ultimately failed American authors, both biographically and fictionally, in the same manner as they did British authors. British authors were closer to World War I by virtue of geography and participation in the fateful war, and their literature demonstrates this fact. The resulting consequences are anxiety and alienation and a wish
to romanticize the relationships through an idea of masculinity post hoc. Take for instance how dancing is described by Fitzgerald in *Trimalchio*:

Daisy and Gatsby danced; it was the first time I had ever seen him dance.

Formally, with neither awkwardness nor grace, he moved at a conservative foxtrot around the platform. They were both very solemn about it, as if it were a sort of rite—perhaps they were thinking of some other summer night when they had danced together back in the old, sad, poignant days of the war. (Fitzgerald 82-83)

Here Fitzgerald remembers the days of the war and cannot let go of them and romanticizes them. This is a clear romanticizing of war unseen. Fitzgerald recalls a world that is sad before actual combat. Regardless of Fitzgerald’s lack of participation in the Great War his connection to it, by waiting on the sidelines and ready to fight but never realizing the action, compelled him and Hemingway (through actual action) to carry stories out of war and into their works.

This romanticism of war only beleaguered these relationships, specifically the relationship between Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Much work has certainly been done with masculinity in both Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Greg Forter for instance, in his essay “F. Scott Fitzgerald, Modernist Studies, and the *Fin-de-Siecle Crisis in Masculinity*” suggests, “…what counts as manly at a given moment is contingent and subject to historical revision” (Forter 293). And while that individual revision is somewhat subjective, or the knowledge of experience attained is through the eye of the beholder, he squarely puts its definition between the years of 1890 to 1920. (Indeed, Hemingway and Fitzgerald have very different ideas as to what constitutes manly in their
respective literature.) Of course these years include the Great War, but I aim to couch this project’s research on modern masculinity and its emergence by tying it directly to World War I.

In this thesis, I will examine two American novelists writing in the modernist tradition, Fitzgerald and Hemingway. Much has been published about each author’s merits and their faults, but it is my intention to demonstrate that this one singular event propelled these two authors to write in such a manner (a manner that was completely new and epitomized a new generation) that cannot be separated from the actual circumstances of the war. While the bonds of male friendship may have come to rise during the war for many, I would suggest that the bonds and the stories Hemingway and Fitzgerald carried into their works, speak louder. We cannot understand either of the author’s writings without considering their respective relationships to World War I.

My central argument is that World War I put F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway on a trajectory to create a new understanding of masculinity, which is to say, a creation that propelled society to behave in a way that was commensurate with their worldview. They carried their stories and their ideas of masculinity home into their literature. This point not only affected their work directly, but their relationship directly. They and their work were forever changed.

Not that it only changed everything for the man amongst the trenches, but the man on the periphery; the woman on the periphery, for that matter. The bottom line is that human character seemed to change and if we are to take Fitzgerald, for example, he didn’t even go overseas to fight in the war, though he was called to serve and was in a
boot camp before the war came to an end. Hemingway served as an ambulance driver on the front. Both authors experienced the war in different ways, but still carried their stories home. And so like both authors I carried my stories home, indelibly linked to a war that I had no direct connection to except that I understood life and death.

I believe that my experiences in war and my subsequent return from war uniquely qualifies me as a critic to analyze Hemingway and Fitzgerald and their respective post-war literature because certain aspects of masculinity are more readily apparent to me than to the non-participant of war. Todd W. Reeser states in his article “Concepts of Masculinity and Masculinity Studies,” “…literature can reveal aspects of masculinity that might not come out or be visible in daily life or in other types of cultural artifacts” (Reeser 11). I do not suggest that the aspects of masculinity I will discuss in this thesis cannot be seen by a critical review of the literature I mention—it is that I believe the aspects of masculinity are better revealed and underscored by a participant of war, rather than a non-participant of war.
I. Inverting Form and Structure:

War with Ernest Hemingway

*I did not care what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it.*
Ernest Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*

I am not sure when exactly I started to like Hemingway as an author, but it was a long time ago. I would carry a copy of *In Our Time* in the cargo pocket of my pants in Afghanistan because it is very light and hardly disrupts movement at all. The length of the short stories made it very easy for me to look at my own situations and reflect. The vignettes were like little snap shots of a moment in time, and I could flip open to any page and enjoy the form and structure of the several short stories and inter-chapter sketches that Hemingway employed.

One of Hemingway’s techniques in this collection of short stories and vignettes is to speak of evil and violence in a way that makes the uncomfortable understandable. Hemingway used various techniques to demonstrate an idea of masculinity and a clear anger towards the idea that American men are too fearful towards life and death in a post-World War I era. Hemingway offers an indictment of this vulnerability and insists that American men must overcome it to truly be men. *In Our Time* is well suited to reveal this essential vulnerability—that is, what it is to be a “man” from Hemingway’s point of view. Specifically, the techniques of mirroring and reversal help illuminate the central problem of masculinity and gender power struggles in the stories I am analyzing.
I think that Hemingway gives the reader a sense of heroism, particularly American heroism, in his time. Yet, the work has always had a contemporary sensibility to me. Phillip Young, in *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration*, illuminates the deceptively obvious title:

But Hemingway delighted in irony and in titles that are quotations; it is almost certain that he intended here a sardonic allusion to that phrase from the Book of Common Prayer which Neville Chamberlain was later to make notorious: “Give peace in our time, O Lord,” for the stories are mainly of violence or evil in one form or another. It is that there is no peace in them. (Young 30)

And there could be no peace for me either in the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan. World War I and the wars of my time are different wars in different times to be sure, and they began for drastically different reasons. But the outcome is still the same: stories of violence in one form or another.

The whole of *In Our Time* contains a multiplicity of nationalities and various languages. This diversity does initially make it difficult to discern Hemingway’s audience, and also for whom this anger is intended. At first, the diversity makes it unclear which nationality is going to emerge as a model of correct masculinity. Yet, it is clear to me when the text is taken as a whole that Hemingway is lamenting the weakness of American men and is disgusted with how American men might behave in extreme, as well as even in mundane situations.

Without knowing anything about the distinctness of World War I Hemingway begins in the first vignette in Chapter I of *In Our Time*, Hemingway writes, “Everybody...
was drunk. The whole battery was drunk going along the road in the dark. We were going
to Champagne. The lieutenant kept riding his horse out into the fields and saying to him,
‘I’m drunk, I tell you, mon vieux. Oh, I am so soused’” (Hemingway 13). This passage is
interesting because its technique is to juxtapose American English and French
colloquialisms. Hemingway inverts the language and then inverts the language again.
This line that combines French and English is an inversion and firstly and simply tells me
that the narrator is an American attached to a French unit, and who speaks French well
enough to understand French colloquialisms. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly,
the passage tells me that the narrator is speaking to American men. This audience is
undeniably considering and curious Hemingway’s deliberate choice to write about
characters of different nationalities and language viewed through the lens of an
American. Hemingway uses common American language, while viewing men from an
outside perspective, in order to express the drunkenness of men’s behavior during the
First World War and to introduce this behavior, which will become central to the
Hemingway protagonist in all of his later works that are similarly addressing an audience
of American men. Drunkenness seems to be important to Hemingway because it nullifies
the pain of life and death.

Milton A. Cohen emphasizes this point on diversity in his critical essay Soldier’s
Voices in In Our Time: Hemingway’s Ventriloquism, stating, “[the] lieutenant’s French
phrases show that the detachment is French and the ‘Champagne’ to which they march is
not the American battle of 1918, but one of the several French battles fought there
earlier” (Cohen 23). Cohen’s explanation highlights my point that Hemingway’s
audience is American, because what Cohen suggests here is that Hemingway is dealing with an American who has chosen to enter the war much earlier than his country did. (Similarly, in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* an American fights with the Spanish Republicans). The point here being that the British didn’t want to join the war and nor did the Americans. It took a great deal of time and circumstance for both of those situations to come to fruition.

Other men of different nationalities and languages are merely the means to this end, of audience, in Hemingway’s effort to construct his idea of masculinity in American men. Hemingway was awarded the Italian Silver Medal for Valor with the official Italian citation reading:

"Gravely wounded by numerous pieces of shrapnel from an enemy shell, with an admirable spirit of brotherhood, before taking care of himself, he rendered generous assistance to the Italian soldiers more seriously wounded by the same explosion and did not allow himself to be carried elsewhere until after they had been evacuated." (Hemingway Resource Center)

As the citation reads: Hemingway’s behavior in combat is described as juxtaposition between Italian and American soldiers. It is a dichotomy of leadership that Hemingway exposes through his own perceived actions in war. This is no different than how Hemingway describes the juxtaposition of French and American soldiers in Chapter I. It is the American man who performs admirably in life and death situations. Although, to be fair, we don’t know how many Italian soldiers may have behaved admirably in that same incident where Hemingway received his medal. I can relate to Hemingway’s experience
to my own as the spirit of brotherhood has propelled me and my comrades to perform various acts of kindness for men from other countries. In both Iraq and Afghanistan when conducting operations the numbers between Iraqi/Afghani soldiers and American SEALs always fluctuated but we were always in the minority of the force and my American comrades were always the preeminent force performing heroic and selfless acts for a country or a land not of our own.

Most American men (save the narrator himself) had not entered the war by the time Hemingway was awarded his medal for valor, and he was angry at this perceived non-masculine behavior. But what angered him the most is that the Americans’ failure to enter the war by this point was not conducive to winning the war effort. We know by way of history that it was American men’s entrance into the war that changed the tides to victory for the West. Therefore, Hemingway’s anger in *In Our Time* is with American men for not behaving honorably by entering the war. Hemingway sets out in this critique in a compilation of short stories to illuminate American men’s participation in the war through mirroring, and directs American men how to conduct themselves “properly.” In other words, Hemingway dictates, “here is the war you are not fighting.”

Everybody was drunk. The whole battery was drunk going along the road in the dark. We were going to Champagne. The lieutenant kept riding his horse out into the fields and saying to him, “I’m drunk, I tell you mon vieux. Oh, I am so soused.” We went along the road all night in the dark and the adjutant kept riding up alongside my kitchen and saying, “You must put it out. It is dangerous. It will be observed.” We were fifty kilometers from the front but the adjutant worried
about the fire in my kitchen. It was funny going along that road” (Hemingway 13).

This point is furthered by the mockery and irony Hemingway uses toward Frenchmen and their leadership in this first and very terse chapter/vignette of In Our Time. While the word “Champagne” is as enticing to me as the next person, it is, after all, firstly a city name. But the fact that that particular type of alcohol is made in this eponymous city is not lost on the author. While drinking may be an obvious trope throughout Hemingway’s later works, it does not seem to be glorified in the same way in In Our Time, his first collection.

On the contrary, he makes fun of heavy drinking in Chapter I by describing the entire battery of French soldiers as inebriated. Hemingway has flipped or reversed who the responsible soldiers should be during the conduct of war. It is the officers; the adjutant in this case, of the unit assigned the most responsibility. Yet, in this scene we see lower ranking American enlisted soldiers, the kitchen corporal, behaving with responsibility in not participating in drinking. The implication here is that drunken behavior is hardly appropriate for men at war, but the fear of the war is realized in the higher-ranking soldiers. And even if drunkenness was appropriate and effective in this context (which Hemingway does make a compelling argument for in later work), it is certainly just as precarious, from any objective standpoint, as the fire in the narrator’s kitchen, a task that presumably was assigned by the very same drunk boss who outranks him. The fact that the enlisted soldier is laughing about his non-drinking emphasizes the fact that he is not drinking.
The fire is not dangerous because of its consuming nature; it is dangerous because of the light it could give off to the enemy. This is ironic because the fire’s light not only exposes the troops’ location and vulnerability to the enemy, but also illuminates the French soldiers’ dereliction. It is after all the French lieutenant who admits to being drunk and it his French superior that is not concerned with the lieutenant’s behavior. Yet, he is concerned with the American kitchen corporal’s behavior as the approach the front line. Here we have a clear delineation between what Hemingway thinks a “man” should do versus what a “man” should not do in the rigid structure of war. Additionally, the narrator here is a “kitchen corporal,” which is to say that the only person who is sober and comporting himself in the manner in which Hemingway deems appropriate is the very low ranking American man. The corporal is willing to face death soberly as it presents itself because that is his charge and that is what masculinity means to him.

The adjutant is responsible, but responsible for the wrong things as Hemingway expresses it in this vignette. I can relate to the feeling that death is certain, as it seems to be expressed here because this is the first chapter that foreshadows the death and violence that is so prevalent in *In Our Time*. Yet, in war death is not always certain even if an individual feels as if it is so. This is why *In Our Time* must be read as a whole because the death and the violence will increase as the work continues.

This entire vignette affects me greatly and connects me to Hemingway in very real ways. No matter how technology evolves and no matter how much more advanced we are today than during World War I, the principles of fighting in the dark are still the same. The principle that light will get you killed is a fundamental truth in war. There are
times when it is necessary and times when it is just too dangerous to use light. It is easy to become flippant about the use of light, just like the kitchen corporal is, because he wants to pick a fight. Hemingway’s demonstration of masculinity and what is appropriate is very different than any ideas I hold, but I am still connected to the scene through experience.

Most of the war I have participated in is fought in the dark. I think that light represents fear in war. Human beings seem to have innate fear of the dark, no matter the circumstances, quite simply because we cannot see. The absence of light forces all creatures to use the other senses to compensate for the lack of vision and therefore increases fear because something we continuously rely on has been taken away from us. In the SEAL teams we harness that fear by using Night Vision Goggles. In other words, we exploit the fact that the enemy cannot see and thus increase the fear that comes with that inability to see. Hemingway suggests that illumination represents a type of bravado and of course *In Our Time* predates anything like Night Vision Goggles but the darkness would still have helped any unit approaching the front line. To expose your position would be to invite an earlier attack than would be tactically sound to do so. So, Hemingway suggests that since the attack is inevitable; what is most masculine is to bring it on and let the death commence.

I do not think that the damage World War I did to people fighting on all sides can be underestimated. There was a colossal waste of life, and of course, the claim that it was a “war to end all wars” has proven false. More importantly than the other wars we have fought since, is the manner in which the wars were conducted. The trench warfare, the
use of mustard gas, and the wholesale slaughter of men marching to nearly inevitable
death, rather than to survival, is what had an enormous and profound effect on the men
who waged this war and survived. They would carry these experiences home with them
and into the rest of their lives.

The horrors of World War I had a huge impact on Hemingway himself, and on
anyone else serving on the battlefield and subsequently writing at the time, for that
matter. What separates Hemingway from Fitzgerald, for instance, is that the former did
see the war up close and the latter did not. It is clear to me that the war touched
Hemingway differently. Both authors romanticize the war at various points in their
literature, but in drastically different ways; Fitzgerald romanticizes war from afar, and
Hemingway romanticizes war from up close. Everything Hemingway does is first-person
narrative of action of war, where Fitzgerald summarizes his feelings through a detached
perspective.

An example of this romanticism from afar occurs in *Trimalchio*. Fitzgerald writes
about Gatsby and Daisy dancing, “They were both very solemn about it, as if it were a
sort of rite – perhaps they were thinking of some other summer night when they had
danced together back in the old, sad, poignant days of the war” (Fitzgerald 83). Fitzgerald’s
referencing the war here is merely a generality made in the sense that
dancing is a “rite.” A rite that occurs during the epoch of World War I that comes with a
set of cultural customs. Fitzgerald’s lack of combat does not make his understanding of
the war any less sad or poignant; yet, it is a crucial distinction between the two authors in
how they utilize World War I in their respective styles of writing. Fitzgerald cannot write
about war directly because he has not seen it, but he can write about the war’s effects back home in America because he did see that up close and felt the war’s impacts still. For Fitzgerald it is customs like dancing that matter and for Hemingway it is combat that matters.

I romanticized the war to come just like Fitzgerald did; only I eventually went to war and he did not. I can remember like it was yesterday; the sad days that followed 9/11 and wondering when my time would come to serve. Fitzgerald’s romanticizing comes retrospectively in *Trimalchio* as it does in Hemingway’s *In Our Time* but in drastically emotionally ways. Fitzgerald gives us long beautiful phrases explaining the impacts of war at home where Hemingway gives us laconic phrases of what actual war is like. Timing is everything in life, but most certainly when it comes to serving in a war. Fitzgerald and Hemingway had figured out this timing by 1925 when both *The Great Gatsby* and *In Our Time* were published. They were looking back on a war gone by, just as I do now in 2016. Which is another reason why I carry both authors with me.

*In Our Time* features the grotesque violence symptomatic of that time. The reality is such that war, and especially that war, was unlike anything anyone had ever seen. As Jim Barloon concludes in *Very Short Stories: The miniaturization of War in Hemingway’s In Our Time*, “War precludes a privileged, panoramic view (a defining purpose of continuous narrative); all a portrait can do is to offer brief, disconnected glimpses, a series of miniatures” (Barloon 15). Not only does Hemingway give American readers an entirely new artistic style of depicting war, he also gives them a glimpse into World War I specifically, through his signature medium, the “vignette” or “miniature.”
This medium is how Hemingway ultimately romanticizes masculinity in war, through experiencing war directly.

The vignette, first used by Hemingway, has also come down to our own time as a uniquely appropriate method because it denies a God-like narrative presence in a way to capture the essence of the combat experience. I can attest that it encapsulates my own experiences in war. An operation is conducted with multiple operators, and some violent action occurs. Inevitably, there are various and conflicting understandings of what exactly transpires. Each operator has his or her own snapshot or account of what he or she saw. Organizations do their very best to compile the accounts and make the most sense of them in order to get as close to the truth as possible. Hemingway’s technique through literature is to give one view—his own—of what he saw. This is Hemingway’s romantic, rather than a “God’s-eye view of battle that we get in Tolstoy or Stephen Crane. Hemingway’s view is not only subjective, but it is also romantic.

While *In Our Time* is interspersed with vignettes that are mostly about war, there are short stories in between that seem to flash back to Nick Adams’ childhood (the pairing of these vignettes with a single short story creates a mirroring effect). Whether or not the short stories and vignettes should be viewed collectively or individually is a serious—and ultimately unanswerable question. Barloon does much in the way of discrediting the idea that *In Our Time* is one “panoramic” view. But what about the stories of Nick Adams as a boy imbedded throughout the work? On the surface, some of the stories do not concern war directly. Yet, all the stories demonstrate Hemingway’s angst about American men’s vulnerability and what their response to death should be.
The war itself changed how Hemingway saw the world and how he wanted to portray masculinity in his works. In the Nick Adams stories, he creates an opportunity to demonstrate masculinity through the reflections of a young boy. By inverting a boy’s experience into what an American man “should” understand in the post-war period, Hemingway in the story *Indian Camp*, for instance, we witness a young Nick Adams in the years before the war witnessing child birth and a the dead Native American father who commits suicide:

“Do ladies always have such a hard time having babies?” Nick asked.

“No, that was very, very exceptional.”

“Why did he kill himself, Daddy?”

“I don’t know, Nick. He couldn’t stand things, I guess.”

“Do many men kill themselves, Daddy?”

“Not very many, Nick.”…

…“Is dying hard, Daddy?”

“No, I think it’s pretty easy, Nick. It all depends.” (Hemingway 19)

Here is a passage that clearly demonstrates Hemingway’s construction of masculinity in American men. At a young age Nick witnesses childbirth and a suicide. One life comes into the world, and one life exits the world. Hemingway uses this device to suggest that there is almost a *quid pro quo* in this world. The “lady’s” pain is glossed over by Hemingway. He moves right into whether or not American men (here read as “white men”) should commit suicide. I believe the Native American man in the story, like the French soldiers discussed earlier, are seen as weaker because they do not meet
Hemingway’s definition of “American man.” Hemingway’s standard American man is white and stoic. The weakness is further underscored by the fact that a woman, his wife was able to withstand the pain of this difficult labor while the father committed suicide. This became a time for Nick’s father to instruct his son on how to live and die and, in turn, the story also provided an opportunity for Hemingway to instruct American men on how to comport themselves in war. The fact that the short story is squeezed immediately in between two war vignettes leads me to believe that Hemingway meant for the reader to draw a war connection.

It seems Nick’s father suggests that suicide is alright in his view because it gives the person a certain amount of agency, whether that character admits that or not. It is supposed that it can be a “manly” act, or it cannot be a “manly” act. Hemingway therefore sets himself up for his ultimate point, which is that death can be “easy” depending on the situation. This message is juxtaposed against the rest of In Our Time where we can see death as not always so easy. Here lies the true beauty in Hemingway’s writing; he does not explicitly tell us what makes a “man,” but instead implicitly does so. The focus is not the dying that matters in this scene, rather the circumstances of death that matter. His construction of masculinity suggests to his male American readers that they should not worry about the death that will come in war. For when death comes, death itself does not truly matter, and a true man ought not pretend that it does. The text makes it clear that dying is easy, but how you die may not be easy. This masculine construct is exemplified in the ending of Indian Camp: “he felt quite sure that he would never die” (Hemingway 19). Hemingway inverts the idea that death is inevitable here by
expressing in the text that it is just as facile to deny death. This may be the fantasy of every child who has not lived long enough to understand that death is a part of life. The circumstances of Indian Camp are a stand-in for the circumstances that Hemingway witnessed in World War I: Nick Adams is being “tutored” in how to comport himself in the face of suffering and death, just as, in the vignettes in In Our Time, American soldiers had to learn how to behave “properly” in the face of war and death.

Like Nick, I find myself ruminating on childhood memories after fifteen years of preparing and going to war. I look at the outcomes after seeing war, and I cannot help but wonder backward. How does one become prepared for seeing war? I think the truth is that you do not. Yet, that does not stop me from reflecting on vignettes of my childhood and trying to locate moments when I was tested or taught about how to behave honorably. I mostly grew up in a house full of women. It never occurred to me that women could not be tough—like the new mother in Indian Camp they seemed to me to be ready to withstand anything. It seemed fairly obvious to me that they could be, since all the women I knew were tough. So, it was no surprise to me to see women perform honorably in traditionally male roles in Afghanistan.

Hemingway would not have seen in World War I what I saw in Afghanistan. But that does not mean that Hemingway did not see women behaving within the masculine construct that he demonstrates in his literature. Stephen P. Clifford says about Hemingway in his critical essay “Hemingway’s Fragmentary Novel: Readers Writing the Hero in In Our Time,” “To be anything other than masculine—either in one’s socially ascribed gendered attributes (qualities which “make a man a man”) or in the role of
central hero—is to be finally monstrous, undesirable, disposable in the progress of the narrative’s central perspective” (15). Hemingway consistently discards the feminine perspective in order to make the masculine “central” to his overall work. It is not as if female characters do not exist within the work. As I demonstrated earlier with the childbirth scene in *In Our Time*, feminine characters do exist within *In Our Time* and are used to demonstrate that “women” can be tough and American men during this time frame should take note and behave in the manner in which Hemingway suggests they should behave. I disagree with Clifford in the sense that women should be regarded as monstrous.

I think that the women in Hemingway’s work simultaneously can be praised for their masculine toughness and marginalized by Hemingway into the background. The two concepts are not mutually exclusive and when juxtaposed against male characters in *In Our Time* who behave in feminine or “weak” ways—especially in battle—they become objects of contempt. All of these efforts are techniques to demonstrate how the American man ought to behave in life and death. The Indian mother serves to embarrass her weaker husband. Hemingway is not particularly interested in praising her but using her as a character to undermine her husband and make a larger point about the his over-arching masculinity.

This point about the feminine in *In Our Time* is further addressed in Michael Hemmingson’s dissection of Chapter II in *The Explicator*. Briefly, he compares Hemingway’s communications with the *Toronto Daily Star* as a war correspondent to the scene in Chapter II. Hemingway had literally experienced this story in real time and then
decides to fictionalize the story in such a manner that fits his version of masculinity.

Chapter II reads as follows:

“Minarets stuck up in the rain out of Adrianople across the flats. The carts were jammed for thirty miles along the Karagatch road. Water buffalo and cattle were hauling carts through the mud. There was no end and no beginning. Just carts loaded with everything they owned. The old men and women, soaked through, walked along keeping the cattle moving.” (Hemingway 21)

This passage can be viewed against Hemingway’s actual correspondence with the

Toronto Daily Star:

ADRIANOPLE—In a never-ending, staggering march the Christian population of Eastern Thrace is jamming the roads towards Macedonia ….Twenty miles of carts drawn by cows, bullocks and muddy-flanked water buffalo, with exhausted, staggering men, women and children, blankets over their heads, walking blindly along in the rain beside their worldly goods. (Hemingson 264)

The two stories are remarkably similar except in one key way. Hemmingson states, “In the miniature [Chapter II], Hemingway leaves out the masculine factor—the husband—so that the woman and the girl are left alone to fend for themselves” (264). It should be recognized that “old men” is not to be confused with “young men.” This is absolutely critical because in Chapter II we see Hemingway showing the strength of a woman again through childbirth: “There was a woman having a kid with a young girl holding a blanket over her and crying” (Hemingway 21). In this vignette he seemingly and consciously omits the “masculine factor.” In other words, Hemingway omits the masculine in order to
reverse the existence or appearance of a man on the scene entirely. On the one hand he
tells the story as he “saw” it; this is his “concept of history” in his correspondence. Then
the vignette is Hemingway’s narrative and construction, as well as instruction to the
American man on what a “man” should be during this epoch. By expressing the complete
opposite of his viewpoint, Hemingway draws a complete distinction between what he
sees transpire during this exodus of the city and what he wants to construct in terms of
masculinity for the American man in In Our Time.

Hemingway also constructs and prescribes a particular type of masculinity for
American men by creating scenes in which the feminine voice appears to be completely
absent. This is to suggest that a “masculine” man during this time frame does not need
women at all. Conversely, I would suggest that while Hemingway implies men do not
need women during this epoch, in fact women do not need men when the men are
fighting the war. There is only one vignette of the interspersed stories within In Our Time
that includes any mention of women at all, and this vignette comes very early in the text.
In the interspersed short stories, women are something of a rarity as well. However,
examples do exist in the named short stories such as The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife,
The End of Something, and The Three – Blow. Take an example from The Three – Day
Blow:

“Once a man’s married he’s absolutely bitched,” Bill went on. He hasn’t got
anything more. Nothing. Not a damn thing. He’s done for. You’ve seen the guys
that get married.”

Nick said nothing.
“You can tell them,” Bill said. “They get this sort of fat married look. They’re done for.”

“Sure,” said Nick. (Hemingway 46)

Hemingway does not even need to write a woman into this scene because he constructs a character who feels emasculated in every manner, just by virtue of being married. And this is the character’s cautionary representation of masculinity to the younger Nick Adams.

Many of the Nick Adams stories feature Nick simply learning about life, and I think, we have to remember that by the present time of this collection he is a portrayal of masculinity achieved. Hemingway shows us how that masculinity is accomplished by methodically connecting Nick’s stories. So the stories constitute a bildungsroman. This technique, and Nick’s experience, is reminiscent of the way any human being after violent experiences might wonder how they got to the place they are in.

Hemingway uses Nick Adams, the classic “American young man,” to serve as a model for how a man became a man before, during, and after the war period. Moreover, Nick goes through this transformation of becoming a man on the page in a short period of time. He moves from reluctance to the idea of becoming a man to acceptance of the idea of becoming a man very quickly. War has hastened his maturity. Hemingway expresses in totality that his ideal “man” exists on a plane apart from women, and that only when a man accepts his instructions does he meet the author’s expectation of how a “man” should behave while alive and in the death throes of war. Hemingway’s inverts reality and his understanding of how life actually transpired. In other words, life is not
necessarily quick, but it sure does seem quick when reviewing it backward and introspectively.

The ever-present threat of death in war is real and from my own experiences in war, I know that death varies in situation and in experience. There are people who die that are close to you and there are people who die that are not. Death, as it happens, cannot be fully understood by anyone, but that is not to say that it does not impact other people. Hemingway has a unique ability to show the many ways of experiencing death, but through a single lens, his own. It is his personal point of view that I enjoy because I have my own perspective, as does every human being. We know that death is not entirely inevitable in war, as some people do survive. But Hemingway suggests that there is indeed a “right” way to die, and that there is no “right” way to take a life. This may seem like a contradiction, but Hemingway shows us that there can be dignity and honor in *in extremis* moments, but there is not always. This is another example of how Hemingway romanticizes war because death is an intricate part of war. This is where the romanticizing coincides with the simple truth that death is an absolute fact in war that is unavoidable.

I can see dignity expressed firstly in the folly of German soldiers dying in Chapter III of *In Our Time*. Hemingway writes:

“The first German I saw climbed up over the garden wall. We waited till he got one leg over and then potted him. He had so much equipment on and looked awfully surprised and fell down into the garden. Then three more came over
further down the wall. We shot them. They all came just like that.” (Hemingway 29)

The narrator reveals their deaths—“We shot them”—only after describing that they “fell down.” This technique is a complete reversal of the ordinary way of speaking in military After Action Reports. Hemingway delays the word “shot,” as if there could be a comedy or simplicity of the situation. Through this delay, he describes the realness of killing the enemy and concludes the story by bringing a lack of dignity to a situation that would not ordinarily be described in that way.

Hemingway demonstrates the awkwardness of these soldiers marching towards their deaths. A close reading reveals that Hemingway expresses a lack of dignity in these deaths and reverses the hunter/hunted relationship. The German soldiers “think” they are hunting, given the equipment they carry, but alas it is they who are being hunted. Hemingway further reinforces this mode of masculinity in suggesting that all of the German soldiers are doing the “manly” action by simply showing up to their death, but they could die in a more masculine manner if they would face these vulnerabilities differently. If the soldiers recognized the onslaught and behaved in a more masculine way, (flank the enemy) this might bring dignity to their deaths.

Furthermore, it is an American soldier narrating here once again, behaving in Hemingway’s prototypical male mode by taking German lives in wave after wave. The author juxtaposes the American “man” against the credulous German soldiers, depicting the American man/soldier as one who must come to the rescue of foreign men in their own countryside during World War I. The American soldier who is narrating this story is
behaving in a masculine way by shooting the German soldiers and performing his duty. Duty for the American soldier to kill and duty for the German soldier to die as a man are both a romanticizing of war for Hemingway. This situation is an enduring one with Hemingway, demonstrated by his behavior in the Spanish Civil War and World War II and his writings that follow.

Hemingway uses the entirety of *In Our Time* to construct the overall themes of masculinity and romanticizing masculine conduct during World War I. In other words how each individual story is connected to each other and where the stories lie with respect to one another do matter. In order to further amplify vulnerability towards death in war, Hemingway demonstrates this universal danger and threat throughout World War I in *In Our Time*.

For instance, in contrasting scenes in Chapter V and Chapter VI we see a specific kind of masculinity expressed. Beginning with Chapter V contains a contrast within the vignette itself after we learn of six cabinet ministers are to be executed: “The other five stood very quietly against the wall. Finally the officer told the soldiers it was no good trying to make him stand up. When they fired the first volley he was sitting down in the water with his head on his knees” (Hemingway 51). The six men about to be executed are foreign “cabinet ministers” of an unknown government. Hemingway demonstrates the point that war does not just affect soldiers. War affects the women in the exodus of Chapter II and it affects foreign politicians in this scene of Chapter V. Hemingway exposes the fact that war affects everyone connected to it, by introducing readers to those behind-the-scenes characters.
What is infinitely more important here is the discrepancy in the manner in which these foreign politicians “choose” to die. All six of them are resigned to their fate—death. Five of the six “stood very quietly,” while the last one refuses to be complicit in his own death. And this is what I find striking, because I find myself wondering if the one set apart from the rest through his inaction has any more agency than the others. It does not seem that he does. Hemingway therefore demonstrates that there can be no agency before death by execution—at least in this instance. The manners in which they die each lack the dignity before death that Hemingway requires of real masculinity. The narrator reserves certain virtues for himself as the story-teller and once again, the vignette is told from the perspective of the American male, demonstrating that this dignity reserved pretty exclusively for the American male during World War I.

In Chapter V, in which the narrator is an unnamed American male who merely relays the situation to the reader, and Chapter VI, in which Nick Adams is the narrator in the action of the text, Hemingway forces readers to deal with an American soldier’s perspective directly. Nick is clearly wounded, “Nick sat against the wall of the church where they had dragged him to be clear of machine-gun fire in the street. Both legs stuck out awkwardly. He had been hit in the spine” (Hemingway 63). Simultaneously, we have a foreign counterpart wounded as well, when Nick the narrator says, “‘You and me we’ve made a separate peace.’ Rinaldi lay still in the sun breathing with difficulty. ‘Not patriots.’ Nick turned his head carefully away smiling sweatily. Rinaldi was a disappointing audience” (Hemingway 63). This passage clearly demonstrates Hemingway’s anger towards any man but the American man, and his injunction for how
the American man should conduct himself in the face of death. “Nick’s” method of coping with a serious wound and perhaps imminent death is to quite literally “smile” at the prospect of death. This occurs when patriotism is called into question (is the cause a “worthy” one?). Therefore, in inverting the actual cause with an supposed cause, Hemingway does not express any concern toward the supposed cause because it is not necessary for the American masculine construct to be successful.

In fact, all Hemingway needs to set up this construct is to contrast men with women, American men with foreign men, and most importantly American men handling death versus foreign men handling death. These comparisons are consistently executed in *In Our Time*, no matter if Hemingway is dealing with the masculine or the feminine he deals in humanity and the evil and violence that comes with humanity. Or as Lisa Narbeshuber puts it, “Throughout *In Our Time*, Hemingway explores the destructive power of touch and human presence” (Narbeshuber 9). Ultimately, the suggestion Hemingway makes is that American men should embrace this mode of masculinity because *in extremis* moments are rare, and a man may only get one opportunity to prove himself. According to Hemingway’s romanticized view, American men are the only ones that can prevail in these violent situations.

In Chapter VIII of *In Our Time*, Hemingway continues to ruminate on the inopportunity with which death may come and how other, non-American men sometimes do not behave in a manly way and therefore reject the opportunity for dignity before death. Hemingway demonstrates this in Chapter VIII through the apparently needless killing of two Hungarians:
“At two o’clock in the morning two Hungarians got into a cigar store at Fifteenth Street and Grand Avenue. Drevitts and Boyle drove up from the Fifteenth Street police station in a Ford. The Hungarians were backing their wagon out of an alley. Boyle shot one off the seat of the wagon and one out of the wagon box. Drevitts got frightened when he found they were both dead.” (Hemingway 79)

The apparent justification for the killings is “They’re wops ain’t they?” (Hemingway79).

Given the whole of *In Our Time*, it seems obvious that this quasi-racial justification by one of the Hungarians communicates nothing more than the cavalier killing of two “innocent” people.

Peter L. Hays, in his essay “Hemingway as Social and Political Writer,” argues, “These brief references succinctly capture aspects of American social and political life, including its wild-west, shoot first and apply the law later mind set, as well as ethnic prejudice then present in the country’s [USA’s] restrictive immigration policies” (Hays 112). Hays concludes this reasoning after admitting that the man who commits the racist atrocity within the story is an “Irish cop” and the setting is in Ireland. So, we have a story that applies to the American male without the mention of an American male; Hemingway uses dehumanizing characteristics (i.e. “wops”) to invert the dignity desired before death for the American male.

For all of the romanticizing Hemingway does on evil and violence, I am inclined to agree with Smith in his aforementioned essay “Hemingway’s Senses of an Ending: *In Our Time* and After,” in which he concludes that Hemingway ends his stories (and indeed a lot of his character’s lives) with, “That ironic opposition leaves us, as always, with the
weather, the rain that falls on the bishop and the street-walker, not because one or the other is just or unjust, but because it simply falls” (Smith 17). Death is certainly inevitable but it is still necessary to look for the subtle backdrop. The text may be simple and it may mean exactly what it says it means. Yet, it is the missing text that Hemingway leaves out that deserves explication.

Explication indeed is the reason I used to port a copy of *In Our Time* in the cargo pocket of my pants in Afghanistan. Because of its size, of course, but its size should not undervalue the impact the work had on me and continues to have on me. There are so many ruminations that the work forces me to have because the work is ultimately a compilation of Hemingway romanticizing war. The length of the short stories and in particular the vignettes force me to reflect on my past experiences and it is those experiences I aim to share with my future students at the Naval Academy.

Whatever one may think of Hemingway and his projection of masculinity I believe that projection is a perfect place to start thinking about what war means and its impacts on humanity. I certainly do not share a number of the ideas Hemingway expresses in *In Our Time*, but I do believe dignity can be found in war, no matter how evil or violent the circumstances may be. It is therefore incumbent on me to encourage future warriors—men and women, of all different races to start ruminating on war’s effects now. The horrible effects and the traumas of war can be mitigated given the appropriate preparation and attention given to the right ideas.

The demographics at the Naval Academy I am sure would astonish and more than likely disappoint Hemingway. Yet, his myopia does not diminish a reader of his work to
contemplate complex ideas surrounding war, whether it is one’s upbringing before war, their participation in war, and ultimately the long lasting effects after war that Hemingway certainly carried until his own death. I know I carry them too and that is why I carried *In Our Time* with me to war and away from war.
II. Experience:

War with F. Scott Fitzgerald

*Experience is the name so many people give to their mistakes.*

– Oscar Wilde

Since the year 2003 I have been going to war off and on, back and forth, home and away again. That is the funny thing about my generation and our wars; they do not seem to end. I would deploy for six to seven months, and get tired and then somebody else would take my place. I would come home and readjust and sometimes that was more difficult than other times. Nonetheless, I would begin training to go back once more, which takes about a year and a half; and then go back. It was like being on a Ferris wheel with the occasional mechanical failure.

I was fortunate enough to call San Diego my home for about eleven years of that continuous cycle. In San Diego the weather never really changes and I am still not sure if that is a good or a bad thing. Scratch that, it is bad. I never got that sense of rebirth that Fitzgerald describes in *The Great Gatsby* when Jordan Baker says to Daisy Buchanan, “Don’t be morbid,” Jordan said. Life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall” (Fitzgerald 125). Whether there is any truth to that or not and I believe there is, I never quite got that sense of rebirth.

I had begun to view my life in a similar manner to how the narrator of *This Side of Paradise* describes the central character of the novel, Amory Blaine. A key passage
occurs at the end of the novel when Amory has returned from the Great War and been through a series of relationships that did not necessarily work out: “There were days when Amory resented that life had changed from an even progress along a road stretching ever in sight, with the scenery merging and blending, into a succession of quick, unrelated scenes” (Fitzgerald 174). It is a difficult recognition to realize that the decisions I have made and thought would put me on solid trajectory towards some idealistic state never have quite become complete. Yet the stories I carry away, no matter how unrelated are the stories I have and they are all mine.

When I was eighteen years old my mother was diagnosed with cancer for the second time and I wasn’t quite sure what I wanted to do in life. I am not sure that any eighteen year old does know, but I am sure we all have conversations with our parents about what those steps should be and she seemed to be trying to usher me towards a decision in a fastidious manner. I think of when the lost Amory isn’t quite sure what he wants to do either and his mother proclaims:

“Heaven knows. It seems my fate to fret away my years in this country. Not for a second do I regret being American – indeed, I think that a regret typical of very vulgar people, and I feel sure we are the great coming nation – yet” – and she sighed – “I feel my life should have drowsed away close to an older, mellower civilization, a land of greens and autumnal browns –“

Amory did not answer, so his mother continued:
“My regret is that you haven’t been abroad, but still, as you are a man, it’s better that you should grow up here under the snarling eagle – is that the right term?” (Fitzgerald 15)

I do not think my mother’s sentiments could be any closer than to that of Amory’s mother. Of course we have to fast-forward eighty years, but it was the late-1990’s for me. Or in today’s speak it was pre-9/11. Bill Clinton was still in the White House and, for a lot of people, America did seem like it was on the verge of being great again if it wasn’t already. The Navy’s recruiting motto was: “See the world.” Long story short I do did get to see the world, but I do not think my mother ever thought I would go to war as a way of doing so and I probably did not think that I would go either.

It was my mother’s wish to protect me from evil and violence as much as she could, but she was still desirous to see me become a man. This motherly desire expressed is no different than the desire Amory’s mother expresses in This Side of Paradise. Pearl James in her essay “History and Masculinity In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s This Side of Paradise” says the entire novel is “a paradigmatic expression of an unease about masculine coming-of-age that surfaces in early-twentieth-century American culture generally and in the bildungsroman in particular” (James 2). Indeed my reading of masculinity in WWI develops from her criticism of Fitzgerald and Sara Cole’s essay on “Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War.” The problems that Cole identifies in her criticism of WWI writers, I think, Fitzgerald attempts to solve. Or as James puts it, “to narrate the losses and wounds at the center of a certain kind of male subjectivity within discourses that emblematized contemporary culture” (James 25).
Returning to the aforementioned passage from *This Side of Paradise* it is clear Fitzgerald recognized the theatre of masculinity very early in his career as a writer and it shows in this passage. Amory’s mother wants very badly for her son to become a man and acknowledges that this evolution must take place, but wishes for that process to take place without the threat of evil and violence. Fitzgerald writes autobiographically to demonstrate the fear he must have felt anticipating going off to war—which is also the reason he sat down to write *This Side of Paradise* in the first place: in case he died in battle.

Yet, Fitzgerald sends his protagonist to WWI because there is an experience of war that he believes completes the process of becoming a man. The opposite state—masculinity unrealized in the absence of war—haunted Fitzgerald for the rest of his life. It is easy to see Fitzgerald’s humiliating awareness of the dividing line between those men who served overseas and those who didn’t through his character Dick Diver in *Tender Is the Night*—Fitzgerald’s last complete and perhaps his most autobiographical novel:

“He went along the trench, and found the others waiting for him in the next traverse. He was full of excitement and he wanted to communicate it to them, to make them understand about this, though actually Abe North had seen battle service and he had not.” (Fitzgerald 56)

Fitzgerald is entirely specific here in that the character Abe North has achieved masculinity because he has gone to war and Dick has not. Dick is over-wrought with emotions about the realities of the specific battles that he did not take part in. Dick can
only imagine the actual terrain as a vehicle for masculinity through evil and violence because he did not see it first-hand.

The realities of the war strike Dick regardless of him not serving. As he plays a pseudo-tour guide he explains to Abe—the one who was actually in the war—what was more manly about the soldier’s experiences and what intricacies of those experiences are different from the current generation:

“This land here cost twenty lives a foot that summer… See that little stream—we could walk to it in two minutes. It took the British a month to walk to it—a whole empire walking very slowly, dying in front and pushing forward behind. And another empire walked very slowly backward a few inches a day, leaving the dead like a million bloody rugs. No Europeans will ever do that again in this generation.” (Fitzgerald 56-57)

It is clear that what Dick describes here is the meat grinder; young men wanting to become true men by seeing what war was really like only to realize death by the millions. The scene is a slow and deliberate depiction of men literally being pushed into slaughter disillusioned by idealistic notions of becoming a man.

Abe is hardly struck by Dick’s analysis of their generation and how those who participated and survived became men; he does not see much distinction between the older generation and the new one. Abe believes that the new generation is perfectly capable of committing the same evil and violence that made his distinct achievement of masculinity possible. Indeed, Abe suggests that the very same thing is happening as they speak, sixteen years after the close of WWI. Dick responds to Abe:
“That’s different. This western-front business couldn’t be done again, not for a long time. The young men think they could do it but they couldn’t. They could fight the first Marne again but not this. This took religion and years of plenty and tremendous sureties and the exact relation that existed between the classes.” (Fitzgerald 57)

Fitzgerald insists here that not all battles are equal in their production of men and he does this from his own view as a non-participant in combat. The realities of WWI become clear in how Dick concludes his battlefield tour with, “All my beautiful lovely safe world blew itself up here with a great gust of high explosive love” (Fitzgerald 57). For Fitzgerald, masculinity is achieved through an understanding of the slaughter—to survive it or to simply grasp the concept of the war demonstrates his anger with men’s fragile vulnerability in war.

Fitzgerald opens his career affected by the grand notions of WWI and more or less closes his career in—*Tender Is the Night*—still affected by the changes in masculinity for his generation made possible by the Great War. The writing that occurs in between those two great novels is rife with the same obsession with the war. For instance, as I’ve discussed earlier, we have the two main characters in *The Great Gatsby*, Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway bonding over their shared experience of active service in WWI. Yet, when I take a closer look at characters who did not participate in the war, their projection of masculinity still emerges. Fitzgerald describes Tom Buchanan who did not serve:
“Two shining, arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face and gave him the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward. Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of that body—he seemed to fill those glistening boots until he strained the top lacing and you could see a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat. It was a body capable of enormous leverage—a cruel body.” (Fitzgerald 11)

Fitzgerald describes Tom by juxtaposing Tom’s masculinity against his feminine dress. It is as if Tom wants to disguise the fact that he is morally bankrupt and devoid of responsibility. His body is so masculine that he is capable of violence, but, evidently, he never puts his body on the line. Tom lets his power and money and superiority to create evil and violence, or at least the threat of violence. Fitzgerald writes, “Now, don’t think my opinion on these matters is final,” he seemed to say, “just because I’m stronger and more of a man than you are” (Fitzgerald 11). The reality is that Tom does not say these words, he merely appears to be saying them because he exudes masculine qualities that cannot be hidden.

Additionally, we have the character of Dan Cody who belongs to an earlier generation than Nick and Gatsby. It is as Gatsby’s mentor that Dan Cody instructs Gatsby on how to be an American man. Gatsby is selective in the qualities he ascribes to Cody and here is how Fitzgerald describes the mentor:

“I remember the portrait of him up in Gatsby’s bedroom, a grey, florid man with a hard empty face—the pioneer debauchee who during one phase of American life
brought back to the eastern seaboard the savage violence of the frontier brothel and saloon” (Fitzgerald 106).

Cody evidently carries the violence of the western frontier back to a place where it does not belong—the cities of the east. Just as our soldiers—Nick and Gatsby—carry back the idea of mass violence to another where it doesn’t belong. Tom and Cody cannot hide their hardness or their masculinity, where Nick and Gatsby can. Fitzgerald expresses the idea of masculinity disguised by their use of alcohol. Both Nick and Gatsby seldom use alcohol themselves because of its destructiveness—they’ve seen enough of that for one lifetime.

The overall behavior of Gatsby is largely representative of his idea of masculinity after WWI. Gatsby recounts his idea of what he thought masculinity achieved was during the war:

“It was a great relief and I tried very hard to die but I seemed to bear an enchanted life. I accepted a commission as first lieutenant when it began. In the Argonne Forest I took two machine-gun detachments so far forward that there was a half mile gap on either side of us where the infantry couldn’t advance. We stayed there two days and two nights, a hundred and thirty men with sixteen Lewis guns, and when the infantry came up at last they found the insignia of three German divisions among the piles of dead.” (Fitzgerald 70)

It is clear that Gatsby believes to die in war was the only true expression of masculinity and that he put himself in the most precarious circumstances to try and achieve that end.
Fitzgerald describes a very accurate size of a unit that would have been extraordinarily overwhelmed by an enemy force of three divisions and Gatsby’s smaller unit kills them all.

Nick is impressed with Gatsby’s understanding of this account of masculinity and has preceded his delight in saying: “Everyone suspects himself of at least one of the cardinal virtues, and this is mine: I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known (Fitzgerald 64). A close reading of this line reveals that Fitzgerald wants to create an unreliable narrator. After all, honesty is not even a cardinal virtue. Even if it were could a reader truly trust a narrator that proclaims to be honest, when everyone around that person is supposedly dishonest? Regardless of the answer to that question, early in the novel Nick retains his idea of the connection between masculinity and honesty, even though his overall sense of masculinity and honesty will be corrupted.

Fitzgerald throughout his career is obsessed with the disparity between how a man ought to live and how men actually live. *Tender Is the Night* as a title is an excerpt from the poem *Ode to a Nightingale* by John Keats. The epigraph of the novel is written as such:

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Already with thee! Tender is the night…
…But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.
—Ode to a Nightingale
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Fitzgerald uses light to relate to femininity to construct a real world where femininity is a desire that can never be fully realized—the war has made this so—it is the war that has taken Gatsby away from Daisy in the first place. In *The Great Gatsby* in the scene where
Daisy visits Gatsby’s mansion after meeting him at Nick’s house, Fitzgerald arranges his prose in such a manner to fit Keats’ poem, but appropriates Keats’ meaning into his own in order to make it new: “In the music room Gatsby turned on a solitary lamp beside the piano. He lit Daisy’s cigarette from a trembling match and sat down with her on a couch far across the room where there was no light save what the gleaming floor bounced in from the hall” (Fitzgerald 100). The war has removed all innocence from Gatsby and innocence is non-existent in Daisy from the outset of the story. This imagery demonstrates the disparity of the real and the ideal in that Fitzgerald makes it clear that Daisy—the feminine—is lost forever to Gatsby. All Gatsby has left is his masculinity created by the war and his search for anything outside of the parameters of masculinity are futile.

Fitzgerald’s use of the war or the war’s effects in a post-WWI era are usually subtle—indeed, more subtle than Hemingway’s. Yet, when I look at his short story *May Day*, the post-WWI affects are direct and up front. The story was published in 1920—the same year *This Side of Paradise* was published—both the novel and the short story are closest to WWI’s close in 1918. *May Day* deals with the certain realities of men coming home from the war after seeing mass slaughter.

Gordon Sterrett, an artist, is in desperate need of money after being fired from his last job. A girl named Jewel Hudson is blackmailing him and he asks his friend Philip Dean for money. This entire setup serves as a backdrop to soldiers behaving in a manly way in war, only to return home to be emasculated by women and those men who did not serve. Fitzgerald creates a sympathetic character in Gordon—in the same manner that he
does later with Gatsby—where loss of the female is a direct affront to the character’s masculinity. The other characters who surround the sympathetic character are always devoid of responsibility. Fitzgerald writes of Philip, “He felt vaguely that he was being unfairly saddled with responsibility” (Fitzgerald 100). Phillip goes on to say to Gordon, “You seem to be sort of bankrupt—morally as well as financially” (Fitzgerald 102). Fitzgerald implies that those that cannot comprehend what returning soldiers went through during WWI, while are uncomfortable with real responsibility, make a false connection between pseudo-morality and being well off financially. This connection is not a real one but it is a true phenomenon as a post-WWI affect between those that served and those who did not.

No matter if the connection between morality and finance is real or not, Fitzgerald indicts that pernicious idea in demonstrating that there are fatal consequences to this belief. The belief creates a helpless world for the returning soldiers who behaved in a manly way in war and cannot behave that way any longer in a normal functioning society. Fitzgerald writes of other returning soldiers in *May Day*:

“They were ugly, ill-nourished, devoid of all except the very lowest form of intelligence, and without even that animal exuberance that in itself brings color into life; they were lately vermin-ridden, cold, and hungry in a dirty town of a strange land; they were poor, friendless; tossed as driftwood from their births, they would be tossed as driftwood to their deaths. They were dressed in the uniform of the United States Army.”

(Fitzgerald 106)
These returning soldiers have performed what was expected of them by their nation in war, only to return and be viewed as Fitzgerald articulates here. The soldiers are now deprived of the necessary finances to survive in what was once their home and what feels like—a foreign land. The former soldiers, having been fully emasculated by their nation, are left to behave in the only way they know possible and that is cruelly. Evil and violence is what will bring these men to their deaths.

Gordon, after Phillip’s refusal to loan him the money that could pull him out of despair, takes the only way out he sees possible, since he can no longer return to the masculine life of war: “He went out half an hour later and bought a revolver at a sporting goods store. Then he took a taxi to the room where he had been living on East Twenty-seventh Street, and leaning across the table that held his drawing materials, fired a cartridge into his head just behind the temple (Fitzgerald 141). These soldiers carried home tales that they did not want to share with people that would never understand what exactly they went through. Their real world back home was forever changed by their real world at war.

While the wars I have fought in pale in comparison, in terms of casualties to WWI, these circumstances are far too familiar to me. Soldiers today face the same ostracizing when returning home from combat that for a lot of them, they’d rather not come home at all. This culminated for me in 2013 when after losing four of my teammates on a single deployment, my Commanding Officer became our fifth loss, in the same way that Gordon did, presumably because he did not want to carry those stories home.
Conclusion:

Moving On

“*You can’t repeat the past.*”
“*Can’t repeat the past?” he cried incredulously. “ Why of course you can!”*”
F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*

So, I joined the Navy at eighteen foregoing the education my mother had wished I would pursue to see the world. I did wind up seeing the world but also seeing many places I certainly did not think I would see. I saw the world but in a way I could have never imagined. I was in the chow hall eating breakfast the morning of September 11, 2001. I was in the middle of SEAL training and like a lot of people that morning I was watching the news. The first report of a plane hitting the World Trade Center was scoffed at and everyone around me pondered the idea of how that could have happened accidentally. I had similar thoughts until the second plane hit the second building. Up until that moment I was not sure where becoming a SEAL would take me, but my resolve to finish training had never been stronger. I did not know exactly how I was going to do my part, I just knew I had to do it.

It takes about two years to become a SEAL so by the time I had checked in onboard a SEAL team I had been watching the buildup to the Iraq war and its initial invasion from the sidelines. I had no idea how long it would last or if the cause was just. I just wanted the war to continue so I could play a part in it. I have thought of Amory’s
thoughts on his war and mirrored them against my own. The narrator describes Amory’s reaction to the war beginning:

“The war began in the summer following his freshman year. Beyond a sporting interest in the German dash for Paris the whole affair failed either to thrill or interest him. With the attitude he might have held toward an amusing melodrama he hoped it would be long and bloody. If it had not continued he would have felt like an irate ticket holder at a prizefight where the principals refused to mix it up. That was his total reaction.” (Fitzgerald 41)

His thoughts are cold and heartless and selfish just as mine were. Yet, they are the musings a young man in his early twenties. No matter just how autobiographical This Side of Paradise is or is not, I cannot help but wonder if these were the precise thoughts of a young Fitzgerald wanting the war to last just so he could play his part in the thing.

He had submitted his first draft of the novel under the title The Romantic Egoist to Scribners publishing house because he thought he would be going to war and that might be his only shot at getting it published before death and he would then die as a writer, not just a soldier. The facts are he did not end up going to war and the novel was rejected until a couple of revisions later post-World War I. I like to think though that he never forgot those sentiments of how he truly felt at the time—that the thoughts of Amory were indeed Fitzgerald’s own, indifferent to the war and its casus belli, just wishing to participate in any way possible.

By this point in my life I had lost my mother to cancer and become far too cynical about life in my early twenties. Yet, I remember being very optimistic about the
possibilities of democratization in those early stages of the war. The idea that says, by spreading democracy throughout the world, nations will be less apt to go to war with one another, thus making the world a more peaceful place. All nations have a vested interest in having a more secure state and the doctrine of democratic peace allows this, I thought. In a conversation Amory has with Tom D’Invilliers Tom says:

“Yes,” he agreed, “you’re right. I wouldn’t have liked it. Still, it’s hard to be made a cynic at twenty.”

“I was born one,” Amory murmured. “I’m a cynical idealist.” He paused and wondered if that meant anything. (Fitzgerald 62)

Tom is right I think that it is hard to be made a cynic at an early age but if the conditions are right, it can happen and I think it did happen to me. I had become cynical about certain aspects of the world but was not to a point of despair. I still wanted to do something to change the world and I have felt that my experience of wanting to go to war mirrors Amory’s experience. This is why I carry Fitzgerald and his works to and away from war whether my reflections upon his literature are retrospective or not.

So I waited about a year and a half on the sidelines arduously training with my platoon in the hopes that the war would continue. Well the war did continue and it looked like it was only getting worse. By early 2004 four U.S. contractors were killed and hung from a bridge in Fallujah, Iraq. One of those contractors was a former Navy SEAL and I can still picture those gruesome images wondering when I would go. This event prompted the first battle of Fallujah and then my platoon finally got the call. With my mother gone I could only contemplate what her thoughts of my going would have been,
but I did have a conversation with my father and I have thought of the mirroring of the conversation Amory has with the quasi father figure Monsignor Darcy as he considers his options in going to war:

“Amory talked; he went thoroughly into the destruction of his egotistic highways, and in a half-hour the listless quality had left his voice.

“What would you do if you left college?” asked Monsignor.

“Don’t know. I’d like to travel, but of course this tiresome war prevents that. Anyways, mother would hate not having me graduate. I’m just at sea. Kerry Holiday wants me to go over with him and join the Lafayette Escadrille.”

“You know you wouldn’t like to go.”

“Sometimes I would – tonight I’d go in a second.” (Fitzgerald 76)

It is hard to explain to the people that love you why you want to go to war and chance life for the experience. At this point in my life though I had been training for years to do just that. I did not really comprehend any other options. I remember my father striking a very similar tone to that of Monsignor Darcy where he implies that he knows Amory would not want to go. Maybe that amounts to wishful thinking on the part of people who care about you. They simply wish it were not true that you want to go to war and moreover, you are going to go. Regardless of one’s parents’ wishes, young men make their own decisions.

I went to war that year and as I look back on it my platoon came back relatively unscathed. Only one of my platoon mates was injured badly enough to require medical
evacuation. A mortar round had impacted just near his position and did significant
damage to the entire right side of his body. He would go on to make a full recovery and
deploy a number of times in the years to follow, only eventually to be shot down in a
helicopter by a Rocket Propelled Grenade, killing everyone on board in 2011. In those
early days I was still very unsure how long the wars would go on and I was still a cynical
idealist, but if that phrase is a spectrum I would have placed myself closer to idealist. The
SEAL teams had not lost enough people yet.

In early of 2005 upon returning from deployment in Iraq I decided to go to Paris. I
think I wanted to see a better side of the world. Since my tiresome war did not prevent
me from going like Amory’s World War I did, I went. With Fitzgerald and Hemingway
in my pocket I tried to imagine what it was like to have been part of the Lost Generation
in post-war Paris. This was years before Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris* (2011) where
that dream is realized for Owen Wilson’s character in the film. In that movie the great
divide between the decisions to go to war in Iraq or not are faintly highlighted. When I
was there in 2005 however, the conversation was at a fever pitch. I had wondered what
my experience there would be like. There were constant protests throughout the streets
and it was kind of nice to see. People seemed to care in Paris whereas in America,
everyone seemed to just want to “support” the troops. I walked those streets and while I
found no portal at midnight to connect me with the Lost Generation, it was curious to
think about the West being united in the cause to fight World War I. That would have
been a much different scenario than what I was experiencing. What had that first tour in
Iraq done to me if anything at all? I thought of another conversation Amory has with his dear friend Tom D’Invillers:

“Why shouldn’t you be bored,” yawned Tom. “Isn’t that the conventional frame of mind for the young man of your age and condition?”

“Yes,” said Amory speculatively, “but I’m more than bored; I am restless.”

“Love and war did for you.”

“Well,” Amory considered, “I’m not sure that the war itself had any great effect on either you or me – but it certainly ruined the old backgrounds, sort of killed individualism out of our generation.” (Fitzgerald 158)

The things I carried away from that first deployment back home and to Paris were the same for me as they were for Amory. I felt more than bored and I felt restless. Amory seems to think that World War I did not have that great of an impact on him. I felt very similar in 2005. I had no real concept of what I saw or the effects it would have on me years down the road. To discover that would take a great number more years and a great number more deployments. Though I could not recognize the effects to come as many people that go to war do not, I was in perfect agreement with Amory that whatever individualism had existed in my generation had seemed to disappear. Whether for the wars or against them, it seemed to me that one would pick a side and then go along for the ride. Whether in America or in France individualism seemed dead.

About seven years later America had “completely” withdrawn from Iraq and I was headed to Afghanistan, where I began this thesis. It seemed as if the war in
Afghanistan was coming to a close in 2012. The number of Navy SEALs Killed In Action was slowly creeping towards triple digits and I had just hoped there would not be any more on my deployment. We seemed to be fighting a war with our hands tied behind our backs and for various reasons we lost three SEALs on that deployment, pushing us even closer to triple digits. It became clear to me that the wars would not truly come to a close, not in the near future anyways. I found myself declaring as the narrator in *This Side of Paradise* does: “There were no more wise men; there were no more heroes” (Fitzgerald 198). I had drifted towards cynicism, rather than idealism with respect to war and its consequences and as the novel concludes:

“Here was a new generation, shouting the old cries, learning the old creeds, through a revery of long days and nights; destined finally to go out into that dirty gray turmoil to follow love and pride; a new generation dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success; grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken.” (Fitzgerald 213)

No matter how cynical the passage may sound there is optimism to be found within the text. Fitzgerald is describing his generation as he sees it; a generation completely affected by World War I. Granted my generation has been affected by our wars on a much smaller scale, but it seems these exact sentiments are the ones that persist in the SEAL teams, as I see it. What Fitzgerald captured almost one hundred years ago still applies to new generations with similar experiences. This is why I carry his literature with me wherever I go. It captures me.
I have lived my entire adult life as a Navy SEAL, for better or for worse, with two significant academic interruptions. They were two significant breaks that have done me much good in the long run. One was to study English at the University of San Diego and the second was to study English at Georgetown University. I can say that not nearly enough of my counterparts have been fortunate enough to receive those opportunities. Yet, I bet if you were to poll them in some successful manner, you would find that the overwhelming majority of them wouldn’t want those opportunities anyway. The simple truth is that most of my counterparts enjoy what they do and have enjoyed what they have done with great passion. They probably have no real desire to see their experiences expressed in the pastoral metaphors of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Mostly, they just want to go about their lives keeping to themselves and have no interest in “repeating the past.”

Yet, as I peruse the litany of books written by former Navy SEALs, the availability in terms of selection is almost endless. They range from accounts on Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL Training (BUD/S) which is the crucible and first test for all future SEALs. They extend to the fiction of Dick Marcinko. (The word fiction used loosely here because he aims to suggest that his works really are not fiction at all.) Marcinko is a Vietnam veteran that traded in his illustrative career to proliferate nonsense. I am even slightly ashamed to see that there are a great number of romance novels with titles such as: A SEAL’s Surrender and A SEAL’s Seduction. I could go on but I would prefer not to. The many covers of these novels at least have one thing in
common: they are all adorned with a physically fit male who is conspicuously absent a shirt.

And for my generation of Navy SEAL, my colleagues who do not view literature through the same lens as me continues to grow. Since the killing of Osama Bin Laden there have been a few “tell-all” books published. I put the words “tell-all” in quotation marks because the accounts do not seem to be congruent with one another. This of course, is always the case in war. It is no different than how Hemingway describes his snapshots of war or how Amory Blaine views the world. It is almost impossible to agree on every detail of war. Nonetheless, these books that have been published most recently have come under intense scrutiny for security reasons but have also shed negative light upon the SEAL teams.

On November 7, 2014 the satirical magazine *The Onion* published a column on a fictional SEAL team created:

“WASHINGTON—Describing the group as one of the most advanced and highly skilled special operations units in the world, sources within the Defense Department revealed Friday that the U.S. Navy had formed an elite new SEAL team dedicated solely to writing best-selling tell-all books.”

“We have conditioned these soldiers, who already possessed remarkable natural writing abilities, to publish sensational battlefield stories far beyond what an ordinary serviceman is capable of producing,” said a
Pentagon official, adding that the elite commandos can complete a stirring first draft revealing advanced and confidential special forces methods in as little as six weeks. “Whether it’s about a top-secret mission to assassinate the leader of a terrorist cell in Yemen, or the amazing story of a midnight raid in Libya that supposedly never happened, these guys can sell 1 million copies without breaking a sweat.”

Of course the real irony in this article is that there probably is no such thing as a natural writing ability. It takes hard work just the same as there is no natural ability in becoming a Navy SEAL. Even though the nicest thing Hemingway ever said about Fitzgerald did come in A Moveable Feast when he said about the man: “His talent was as natural as the pattern that was made by the dust on a butterfly’s wings” (Hemingway 125). All there is experience and that is what I aim to share and to share it without compromising any of the contradictory items mentioned above.

I think the real beauty in literature is that we do not always necessarily agree on our interpretations of a work. For some readers may only see despair where other readers may only see hope. I had a Professor who told me, “Do not despair and do not presume.” The tension between the two ideas is the human condition defined. That is the essence of why Fitzgerald and Hemingway mean the world to me. As authors they put me squarely in the middle of that tension, pulling me both ways, but never too drastically to one side. And if I can hope to convey one idea to my students and future Naval Officers; it will be that.
I believe that my experiences in war are my own—I do not pretend to make a direct correlation to either Hemingway or Fitzgerald’s experiences and their respective post-war literature. My aim in sharing my experiences and how I have made connections to their literature is to demonstrate what I have learned through my interpretations of their works. To attempt to comprehend the human suffering of the participants of any war is to better understand the human condition. The sacrifices of any previous generation can never be fully appreciated by those that were not there. Yet, the simple attempt to appreciate a previous generation’s experience can illuminate the current generation’s experience and suffering.
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