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## **TOWARDS A THEORY OF THE WAR NOVEL**

From whence come wars and fightings among you?  
(James 4:1).

### **Introduction**

Casting real wars in the imaginative moulds of fiction, drama, and poetry is a venture posing unusual questions of method and purpose to both artist and critic. Appraised from the dual vantage points of literary criticism and historiography, we would like to know if war fiction illuminates larger cultural issues and social patterns. Within an interpretive frame, it is the duty of the critic to explain the criteria for the assessment of individual works and to apply sound critical standards in deciding what works are well-crafted and the ones that simply illuminate the historical events they incorporate. In this paper, I have attempted to survey the link between literature and war and make comments on works that qualify as the “best” war fiction. These are works that present realistic characters, actions, moral vision and innovative techniques. I have also tried to highlight similarities, contrasts, and peculiarities that exist among some works of fiction on the American and the Nigerian Civil Wars.

The formalist or the exponential critical practice in the manner of the New Criticism enables the critic to pay keener attention to technical issues such as theme, narrative, plot structure, setting, characterization, style, language, form, paradox, contrast, and irony. A careful analysis of the craft and techniques of composition would yield a special kind of insight into the texts.

## Man and Warfare

There now exists in almost every part of the world a vast body of literature on war. From the primordial tribal wars, the Greek/Trojan wars, the Israelites' wars with their neighbours, the Chinese Civil war, the American Civil War, the Vietnam War, World Wars I & II, the Nigerian Civil War - to the recent wars in Algeria, Sudan, the Congo, the Burundi-Rwanda Civil Wars; the list is endless and continues to expand by the day. Almost every society has one war story of some sort to recount in history books and in fictional works. War has been an ever-recurring theme in human affairs all through the ages. Myths, legends, epics and other manifestations of oral and written literature bequeath to us traditional stories of war in ages past. Many of the world's notable philosophers, states-men and writers have had one thing or the other to say about man and his numerous wars. A tragic conflict such as war must give rise to stories because it is an event that is capable of altering the human situation drastically and completely. War is one man-made tragedy, a primitive monster, very ubiquitous and invincible even to modern man and his superior intelligence. Rulers prosecute it while political philosophers rationalize it. Even the law under certain circumstances justifies it.

Niccolo Machiavelli in *The Prince* (1513) — one of the influential pioneering treaties on political science — asserted that the principal duty and profession of a ruler is the prosecution of warfare. He recommended that the ruler should apply himself exclusively to war and to the regulations and training it requires:

War is the sole art looked for in the one who rules, and is of such efficacy that it not merely maintains those who are born princes, but often enables men to rise to that eminence from a private station; while, on the other hand, we often see that when princes devote themselves rather to pleasures than to arms, they lose their dominions. And as neglect of this art is the prime cause of such calamities, so to be a proficient in it is the surest way to acquire power (37).

Machiavelli warned in very strong terms that the ruler must never let his mind be turned from the study of warfare, but must concern himself with it more in times of peace than in those of war:

A Prince...should have no other aim or thought, nor take up any other thing for his study, but war and its organisation and discipline . . . The chief cause of the loss of states is the contempt of this art, and the way to acquire them is to be well versed in the same (37).

It is not out of place to suspect the direct influence of Machiavelli on men such as Frederick the Great (Friedrich II of Prussia, 1712 - 86), Hitler (1889 - 1945) and Benito Mussolini (1883 - 1945).

The famous art historian and critic, John Ruskin (1819 - 1900), in a lecture to a group of young English soldiers at the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich, England, re-echoed Machiavelli's dictum that the easy life of peace leads to the decline of a nation. He told the men that war alone determines "who is the best man; who is the highest bred, the most self-denying, the most fearless, the coolest of nerve, the swiftest of eye and hand" (Ruskin 1965, 45). He contended that the only way to test these qualities wholly was to be engaged in a struggle that ends in death. Ruskin declared that war is a pre-condition for a great work of art because, no society can produce great art work except that which is based on battle. "No great art even yet rose on earth, but among a nation of soldiers. There is no art among a shepherd people, if it remains at peace. There is no art among an agricultural people, if it remains at peace" (37). As Machiavelli did years before him, Ruskin came to the same conclusion:

I found, in brief, that all great nations learned their truth of word, and strength of thought, in war; that they were nourished in war, and wasted by peace; taught by war and deceived by peace; trained by war, and betrayed by peace; - in a word, that they were born in war, and expired in peace (40).

The history of man is the history of wars and rumours of wars, and the list of men who eulogize military virtue is very long indeed.. Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Eastern, Western, Oriental, Arabian, American and African literatures supply us with countless stories of bitter encounters on the battlefield. War is not just an ancient art; in fact, it is very modern, more so than most practices inherited from antiquity. The American philosopher William James (1842 - 1910), elder brother of the novelist Henry James, in his essay "The Moral Equivalent of War", observed that progress in military apparatus far outstrip progress in civil conveniences. Houses and household appliances of the day, he observed, were just a little better than they were fifty years before. But the rifle or battleship of fifty years before was now much inferior in power, speed, and convenience to the one currently possessed. The science of destruction has risen in standard far above the sciences of production. The popular imagination, James said, feeds fat on thoughts of wars. Although James summed up by hoping that peaceful competition would gradually replace conflict and that states would find a "moral equivalent" for war by drafting young men for socially useful projects (James: 23), many authors and philosophers regard war as a biological or a sociological necessity, indeed, a permanent human obligation. The German General Hellmuth Von Moltke (1800 - 1892) in a letter to Bluntschli paid an extravagant service to war. The letter read in part:

Perpetual peace is a dream - and not even a beautiful dream - and war is an integral part [...] of God's ordering of the universe [...]. In war, Man's noblest virtues come into play [...]: courage and renunciation, fidelity to duty and a readiness for sacrifice that does not stop short of offering up life itself. Without war the world would become swamped in materialism (Moltke: 135).

This glorification of war by Von Moltke is not too different from the articles of faith adopted by Fascist and Nazist warlords. The Fascist Signor Mussolini is said to have argued that

Italy should endeavour at all costs to be a "military nation", or a "militaristic nation". In an article on "The Doctrine of Fascism in *Enciclopedia Italiana*, Mussolini wrote:

War alone brings all human energies to their highest tension and sets a seal of nobility on the peoples who have the virtue to face it. All other trials are substitutes which never really put a man in front of himself in the alternative of life and death. A doctrine, therefore, which begins with a prejudice in favour of peace is foreign to Fascism (Mussolini: 136).

War, sometimes euphemistically referred to as the "heroic" attitude to life, is applauded by millions of young men who seem to endorse General Von Moltke's opinion that "war is an integral part of God's ordering of the universe". The English Philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588 - 1679) in *Leviathan* (1657) was strongly convinced that the "bonds of words are too weak to bridle man's ambition; avarice, anger and other passions; without the fear of some coercive power" (Hobbes: 14, 15). For Hobbes, war cannot be ruled out totally in international and interracial relations. It was Robert E. Lee who once remarked, "It is well that war is so terrible. We should grow too fond of it," thereby indicating the ambivalent nature of humankind's relationship to the most destructive of its institutions. War has been portrayed variously as a heroic and glorious adventure, as an evil that destroys and kills, and as bringing out the best and the worst in individuals and societies (Deats, Lenker and Perry, 2004, 159). Deats, et al., question the "traditional" interpretation of war as an "inevitable manifestation of natural human, aggressive instincts," arguing instead that it is a human institution designed to "achieve specific societal goals at particular historic moments" (5). Few serious military historians theorize any longer that the propensity for organized violence is innate, and the conception of war as a rational instrument of policy is hardly a radical new thesis; one has to look no farther than Machiavelli or Clausewitz for that paradigm.

Some other modern theorists have even evoked Charles Darwin's theory of evolution to arrive at a view of an inescapable gruesome struggle of races and nations in which only a few of the very fittest would survive. The prevailing circumstances of perennial strife and the struggle for social and political supremacy at the national and international levels have led some political scientists to conclude that nations and races will forever be locked in constant battles with one another, just like the organisms (Hofstadter: 186). We can also detect a similar sense of peril in the psychoanalytical philosophy of Sigmund Freud (1856 - 1939), who believes that the essence of human nature consists of elemental instincts among which a destructive force features prominently. In an essay written in 1915, Freud said categorically that it was impossible to abolish war since the conditions of existence among nations are so different and their mutual repulsion so violent (Freud: Vols. 14, 17). Students of animal behaviour teach that man is innately aggressive and that he has survived because of certain inhibitory controls such as love, culture, status and religion. One of those who hold the view that the aggressive instinct is embedded in man is Sherwood Washburn (1911 - 2002):

The extent to which the biological bases for killing have been incorporated into human psychology may be measured by the ease with which boys can be interested in hunting, fishing, fighting, and games of war. It is not that these behaviours are inevitable, but they are easily learned, satisfying and have been socially rewarded in most cultures (293-303).

Those who hold the view that man is innately aggressive insist that wars are not engendered by our social systems or by conflicts among men, but by destructive forces deeply ingrained in the attitudes of the human race. Since man is believed to be biologically programmed for aggression, mankind is said to be fortunate to escape with only intermittent wars. War is an inevitable evil which can only be mitigated, but not eradicated completely. Indeed, some have even argued that war is not only inevitable but necessary. The philosopher

G.W.F. Hegel boldly proclaimed that successful wars have checked civil unrest and consolidated the power of the state. He pointed out that perpetual peace is undesirable because it would lead to corruption in the state. The Swiss historian Jacob Burkhart (1818 - 1897) was equally emphatic in his declaration in *Force and Freedom: Reflections on History*:

Lasting peace not only leads to enervation, it permits the rise of a mass of precarious fear-ridden, distressful lives which would not have survived without it and which nevertheless clamour for their "right", cling somehow to existence, bar the way to genuine ability, thicken the air and as a whole degrade the nation's blood. War restores real ability to a place of honour. As for these existences, war may at least reduce them to silence (261).

In modern times, wars have been used as an instrument for keeping revolutionaries from destabilising the world or from destroying the prevailing socio-political arrangements. Advocates of war say that no society can be great without any civil or international war experience. Indeed, a peaceful, prosperous and pacific nation is said to be a detestable nation. Theodore Roosevelt (1858 - 1919) then the U.S. Assistant Secretary of the Navy expressed some misgivings about the activities of the American bourgeoisie who were only producing timid citizens that have no fighting spirit in them. He was quite emphatic in his opinion that:

There are higher things in life than the soft and easy enjoyment of material comfort. It is through strife, or the readiness for strife, that a nation must win greatness . . . A rich nation which is slothful, timid or unwieldy is an easy prey for any people which still retain those most valuable of qualities, the martial virtues (Roosevelt: 66-7).

Roosevelt glorified "the martial virtues" as the "most valuable of qualities". Roosevelt is not the only highly placed U. S. government official to defend or promote the cultivation of military virtues. Even the conservative Henry Kissinger, though while not promoting violence and war, argued that there must be sufficient means to ensure certain equilibrium of power if the world was to enjoy peace. He wanted sufficient power, understandably military power, to maintain the global balance against those who would seek to lord it over the others (Kissinger:

91). Another conservative theorist A. F. K. Organski (1923 -1998) extended Kissinger's notion of 'balance of power'. He argued that the "periods of balance, real or imagined, are periods of warfare, while the periods of known preponderance are periods of peace" (Organski: 292). According to him, war will usually occur when a weak state acquires enough strength that the preponderance of power can no longer be brought against it.

But it is not the case that all statesmen, philosophers and novelists have argued in favour of war. Notable writers have denounced man and his infantile instinct or insatiable appetite for war. Philip Wylie (1942) declared that war is an abandonment of sanity, an admission that reason has failed. War, according to him, reduces man to the same level as animals and reveals his inherent lack of civilization. As repugnant as war is to Wylie, concluded rather helplessly that there was no solution in sight. As long as there are men who would employ force instead of first of all yielding to "the moral nature of humanity", there would always be wars (Wylie: 103). Arnold Toynbee also came hard on war and all the negative attitudes that occasion it. In his *War and Civilization* (1950), Toynbee described war as a wrecker of civilizations and a cancerous enemy of the human race. Yet war cannot, according to him, be said to be an intrinsic and irredeemable evil in itself. He admitted that the military virtues of courage, self-denial and obedience to duty are very useful virtues in almost every human action. While some writers devote themselves to extolling the extra-ordinary utility and relevance of military virtues, others have committed themselves to explaining the causes of war.

### **Literature and War**

The link between literature and war is ancient, perhaps as ancient as the beginning of human settlement. Myths, legends, epics and other forms of imaginative literature are replete with stories of wars, of heroism, and of courage. There certainly are more volumes of literary

works on war than there are historical accounts. A particular war, for instance, may inspire more fictional accounts than mere historical records. But more than that, we notice that war with its complex and countless human involvement provides a rich source for imaginative creativity. Since man began writing as a source of intellectual entertainment, there is hardly any war in human memory that has not given rise to one fictional work or the other. War is one notable social crisis that affects and alters human affairs very drastically. And writers, as sensitive members of society, are almost, always attracted to the human dimensions and the social, economic, political and ethical issues arising from such a significant event.

The link between literature and war seems natural. Apart from the actual battlefield, the only other place where war is frequently re-enacted is in the literary field. A skillful recreation of a war scene is even more satisfying than witnessing the war in reality. In some cases, war fiction has been used as a source of historical information. War fiction often provides useful material for the study of war. Because the American Civil War, for instance, occurred about one and a half centuries ago, many young American readers have to depend on the novels of the Civil War for their understanding of that era. More Americans have read Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) than any historical account of that war. So close is the affinity between literature and war that one may be inclined to wonder how literature could proceed without war? The real beginning of Western literature is rooted in war stories. The legendary Trojan wars find artistic expression in Homer's *The Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Margites*, *Battle of Frogs and Mice*, and in Virgil's *The Aeneid*. The twenty-seven years of war between Athens and Sparta in the 5th century B. C. is the subject of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and Euripides' *The Birds*. Again we may recall that the battle for the possession of Europe, which was fought between the Saracens and the Christians in the days of Charlemagne, is depicted in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. The Italian poem of

Torquato Tasso *La Gerusalemme liberata* ("Jerusalem Delivered") dealing with the first crusade and the liberation of the Holy Sepulchre from the Saracens by Godfrey of Bouillon in 1099 brings to remembrance Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). Shakespeare used the 'Wars of the Roses' as the material for his first four history plays; the three plays on Henry VI and one on Richard III. Leo Tolstoy the Russian novelist wrote his famous *War and Peace* (1865 - 1872) on family life at a time of war in Russia between the years 1805 and 1814. The first and second World Wars, the Spanish War, Germany's thirty-year war, the Dutch people and their great struggle against Philip II, the American Civil War and the Nigerian Civil War have all given expression to a number of celebrated works of art. In *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), the German novelist Eric Remarque decries the brutality and senselessness of war. Ian Hay's *The First Hundred Thousand* (1915), Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1922) and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) are only a few of the novels on the World Wars. Many of the greatest writers and originators of literary forms saw violence on the battlefield and wished either to depict all that was noble and graceful in the experience or to denounce all that was despicable or evil in war. War stimulates the literary imagination in a particular way that other events cannot. War affects literature in a very significant way, either to stimulate or to depress the intellectual life or the literary culture of a nation. A war may add power or beauty to literary culture if it occurs during a period of great literary and artistic splendour as in Athens and in the Italian Republics during the time of Homer and of Cervantes, Lope de Vega, and Calderon.

Warfare is one of our oldest, most widespread, and most deeply rooted institutions. The literary artist is irresistibly drawn to respond to it because the intensity of its conflicts affords unparalleled opportunities for the revelation of human nature. War literature offers much to reflect upon because larger and hidden implications of war are unearthed. Basic human traits

such as virtues, weaknesses, hate, love, courage, sacrifice, loyalty, and devotion to duty are explored. The strife itself may be overt, violent or exciting. Thus, in the literature of war, fundamentally different points of view are thrown up for contemplation. A writer may consider the motives that drive men to fight such as in Harris Downey "The Hunters", (short story) and in W. B. Yeats' poem "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death". Other writers such as James Smith's in "Stonewall Jackson's Last Battle", or a poem by Wilfred Owen "Dulce Et Decorum Est" or still I. N. C. Aniebo's *The Anonymity of Sacrifice* may present the impact of war upon the soldier. W. H. Auden's "September 1, 1939", Ambrose Bierce's "Pacificism in Wartime", and Okpewho's *The Last Duty*, deal with the impact of war on those who wait at home. In Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, Major Saranoff upholds the romantic conception of war as glorious and heroic. The heroes of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) and Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1984) are made to learn that war has no room for illusion or self- deception. In Samuel Johnson's "The Fable of the Vultures" war is rejected as immoral and unbecoming of the Homo sapiens.

Writers of war literature relate to the events they describe in different ways; they may be struggling to understand the events, or they may lament the horror or the sadness brought about by the war. They may attempt to inspire readers to courage and action, or simply to commemorate the victory of a tribe or a nation. It was Gary North who humorously giped that since sin has a more ready market than righteousness, the rhetoric of war must have a more ready market than the rhetoric of peace. In the same vein, since the case for peace is mostly logical, the case for war should be mostly rhetorical. He counsels men to keep going to war so that we can have great and beautiful literature (North, 2005, 5). Perhaps war, and therefore the literature it stimulates, will continue to thrive until that day prophesied by Prophet Isaiah when the people

“shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4).

### **The Great War Novels**

Beginning from Homer’s *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Leon Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936), down to the recent Nigerian war novels such as Isidore Okpewho’s *The Last Duty* (1976) and Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy*, Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) we have inherited a rich tradition of excellent literature from ancient and modern battlefields, giving us acceptable standards against which we can judge subsequent war novels. What should a good war novel look like? What distinguishing characteristics must a civil war novel possess to qualify it as a war classic? First and foremost, the ideal war novel must be generally recognized for its superior artistic qualities; a wonder of the infinite ability of the human imagination to excite us with excellent stories in a most engaging manner. It must be something to applaud, something to cherish, something to spark a fire in us, (as Longinus would have us say), exhibiting the finest qualities of the genre of the historical novel. Besides exemplifying the criteria usually applied to artistic excellence, the great war novel would, of necessity, be written out of a coherent philosophy of the war it re-creates. It would be controlled by a complex artistic conception with the author imagining new techniques for illuminating ways through which the war may become part of the living essence of the reader’s consciousness. The author’s vision and objective must emerge out of the complexities of the war experience. The ideal war novel should succeed in “stimulating and engaging the emotions, the imagination, and the intellect to make the war agonizingly alive in the reader” (Madden & Bach 1991, 8). The work should embody the profound essence of the war; show a sense of society and history as well as the impact of the war

on the lonely individual soul. It should dramatize a noble theme, reveal the war either through a microcosm of a battle, the suffering of a defenseless civilian population, or present the common soldier's view. A valid meaning of the war must emerge from the materials presented. Its point of view, style of presentation and other techniques should be superbly manipulated to capture the tragedy and to create such a conception of the war that the readers' experiences are heightened and illuminated. The ideal war novel should display a keen sensitivity to human life and present critical moments through which the full weight of the tragedy comes alive to us.

### **Analyses of Sample War Novels**

In this section, we will examine very briefly, three of the novels, Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1984), and Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1976), as they exemplify the characteristics highlighted in this essay. We emphasize their thematic and technical merits as well as their social relevance as cultural documents.

#### **Crane's *The Red Badge Of Courage***

Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), which appeared thirty years after the end of the tragedy, stands out as a masterpiece of the American Civil War fiction. Part of Crane's success can be attributed to the choice of a very sensitive young hero in whose mind the entire drama of the war is staged. The youth's soul is truly drawn, and the impressions made on that soul faithfully rendered as Crane presents the analysis of the emotions in the inward moral struggle going on in the breast of this inconsequential young soldier. The novel tells the story of this young Union soldier, Henry Fleming, as he becomes accustomed to the vagaries of war during the heat of a two-day battle in the middle of the American Civil War, or the War of Rebellion, as it is sometimes called. The boy has pumped up his little mind with boyish visions

of the military glory he will acquire in a kind of battle that looks like the Homeric types. He had burned several times to enlist in the glorious Army of the North. "One night",

as he lay in bed, the winds had carried to him the clangoring of the church bell as some enthusiast jerked the rope frantically to tell the twisted news of a great battle. This voice of the people rejoicing in the night had made him shiver in a prolonged ecstasy of excitement. Later, he had gone down to his mother's room and had spoken thus: "Ma, I'm going to enlist." ...the next morning he had gone to a town that was near his mother's farm and had enlisted in a company that was forming there (Crane, 6).

Like Mene in Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1984), the hero of this novel is an untried and an inexperienced young recruit who dreams of great exploits in battle. Crane's picture of war is done completely from the inside, from the point of view of this youth with a very sensitive mind. We experience the actions, thoughts and feelings of this recruit and it is through him that we see the entire battle. The travails which Henry Fleming experiences: extreme isolation, fear of death, lack of self-identity, failure, guilt, disillusionment, shameful discovery of self; are the travails of the average man, of the common soldier. Crane juxtaposes courage, ignorance, vainglory, craven fear, cowardice and heroism in the life of this individual. This youth does not possess any special courage or knowledge of the causes of the struggle in which he is engaged. He has never even seen a war before, though he has dreamt of real battles all his life: "He had of course, dreamed of battles all his life- of vague and bloody conflicts that had thrilled him with their sweep and fire. In vision he had seen himself in many struggles ..." (Crane, 6). He enters the world of war with a dream of glory in battle, but flees from the reality of war and of death when they stare him in the face.

The young private is seen in the camp listening to the rumours and torturing himself with questions about whether or not he would stand and fight or turn his back and flee in the face of the vibration and roar of booming guns. He feels courageous, but will his courage stand the test

of hard battle? For days he discovers that there are only the routines of camp life: gossips, boasting and jokes. When the narrative begins, the army is simply immobilized, with its restless men waiting for orders to move. Henry is very unhappy and is disillusioned because the army has done nothing since he enlisted as a recruit. He had been drilled, inspected, marched for months, and now he has despaired “of ever seeing a Greek-like struggle (5). Even before he participates in the first battle, he tries to prove to himself “mathematically” that he would not run from a battle (9). He ensures that every conversation leads to the concept of courage so that he can gauge the confidence of his colleagues. After what seems to be a very long time of waiting, the regiment eventually moves into action. Experiencing crossfire in the first battle, Henry throws down his rifle and flees in blind panic.

After his despair and dejection following his cowardly desertion, he redeems himself by fighting hard at the second battle. With a renewed rage, he fearlessly plunges into battle charging the enemy like “a pagan who defends his religion” (21). He has suddenly become a marvel, a warring demon, and a veteran of the Civil War. With this simple story, Crane explores themes such as the hasty enlistment of Henry, shameful desertion, foolish bravery, false heroism, intense isolation, vainglorious illusions, the quest for virtue, spiritual growth, self-discovery, fear and disillusionment. Rather than the crucial struggle of the main war, the novel chronicles the crucial struggle going on in the bosom of this Unknown Soldier. We learn about the waiting, the rumour, the frustration, the anxiety, the fatigue, the panic, and the hatred of the enemy and of the officers. For a long time in the narrative, the protagonist is not named, but simply referred to as “the young man”.

Henry Fleming, the hero of the novel, is a new type of soldier. He is an ordinary individual with the usual shortcomings of the average man. Faced with the stark realities of

battle: the vibration and roar of booming guns, the choking smell of gun powder, the red flames of crackling rifles, the sound of whistling bullets, the whirling clouds of smoke, explosions and cries, dead horses and soldiers in agony, men and animals “drawn helplessly into a maelstrom of desperate confusion”, Henry, like his offspring Mene in Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy*, flees. Mene swears never to fight again, but Henry returns to the battle and develops into a real war hero. We can deduce from Crane’s tone in *The Red Badge of Courage* that he does not subscribe to the Aristotelian notion of heroism as offered by romantic fiction. Crane shows us in this novel that the performance of a hazardous action in itself does not constitute heroism.

Apparently, just like Mene’s in *Sozaboy*, Henry’s father is dead and he is being raised exclusively by his mother. His mother has very strong influence on him, and like Mene, he too has to disobey his mother’s authority in order to pursue his dreams of Homeric glory. What distinguishes Henry from other young soldiers in the Union Army is that Henry is basically an introspective person. He feels that he must find out all that he can about himself and about the army that he has joined. Thus throughout the story, we see him analyzing his thoughts, emotions, and actions. Even at the end of the novel after his brave performance in battle, he takes time to “study his deeds, his failures, and achievements” (122).

The narrative perspective is that of the hero, as the omniscient narrator describes the scenery, the atmospheric effects, overheard conversations, action, gestures, and sufferings, all from the point of view of Henry. Crane confines his descriptions and all his reports only to such things as Henry can hear and see, and even these, only to such an extent that they are influenced by Henry’s emotions. With Crane, war is treated as something that tests the mind and the spirit of a man in a situation of great tension. Indeed, Crane succeeds very well in portraying the experience of modern warfare. The aesthetic qualities that set this work off as a masterpiece

include its compact and unified plot and setting, the aforementioned narrative techniques, its universal theme, the timelessness of the tale, the simple but greatly controlled vocabulary, its naturalistic view of man, and its pleasing shape, which combine to exude sheer aesthetic pleasure.

### **Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy***

Saro-Wiwa's civil war novel, *Sozaboy* (1984), achieves distinction on account of its poetically unorthodox syntax, narrativity, comicality, as well as, its choice of a raw ebullient recruit soldier as protagonist-narrator. Like Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, it employs the comic approach to explore a national experience as grave as war. We are familiar with Shakespeare's interpolation of comic scenes before or immediately after moments of extreme tragic tension. Saro-Wiwa uses the comic mode as an entry into a profound area of human experience. The comedy here is not the mere chastisement of folly, but a means of gaining intellectual and spiritual insight, giving rise to a work much profounder than many tragic treatments of the same theme in numerous works on the Nigerian Civil War.

We are able to see and feel the full weight of the tragedy through the perception of the protagonist-narrator; the perception of a naïve and lonely individual foot soldier. We follow this green street boy from his apprenticeship as a driver, through to his marriage to a young beautiful damsel, his voluntary enlistment in the army, his war-time ordeals on both sides of the war, and his unsuccessful attempt to re-unite with his family and re-integrate himself into a settled post-war family life. This is made possible both by Saro-Wiwa's chosen literary style and by the fact that the novel is concerned with the fundamentals of life; especially the problems of the ordinary man in the street, especially during the Nigerian Civil War.

The plot revolves round the young hero whose real name “Mene” is introduced by the author through the technique of delayed emergence. This means that we do not get to know his real name till much later in the narrative. We also notice that in this novel, the emphasis is not on action, but on character. It is not the events, but the man that makes the events possible. Like in Okpewho’s *The Last Duty*, Saro-Wiwa’s central theme is the disastrous effects of war on the individual, the family and the society. It is through the hero that we see events and action in the story. He is our rumbustious “reflector” and “guide” in this bumpy ride through the Nigerian Civil War. At the beginning of the story, we see him as an apprentice lorry driver, looking forward to his enhanced status as the only professional driver in his hometown and its environs. He gets close to realizing this dream before the catastrophic social disorder catches up with, and destabilizes him. Attracted by fine uniforms, glittering buttons, and the glamorized life of a soldier, he yields to his young wife’s pressure to join in a war he knows nothing about. He becomes so confused that he ends up fighting unwittingly on both sides of the conflict without noticing any difference between the two. His metamorphosis from an apprentice-driver into a “sozaboy” (soldier-boy) marks a significant phase in the development of his character and life.

He undergoes a physical, as well as a spiritual journey and plies the route from innocence to maturity. Because he is constantly on the road and because of his garrulous nature, he sees everything and tells us everything he knows about the two sides of the conflict. The journey motif is symbolically linked with the quest motif in the story. The quest motif manifests in various ways: the quest for manhood which is also linked with the quest to become a combatant soldier. His perception develops gradually, with each experience, each incident, each encounter, each trip, helping him to gain a clearer insight into the true nature of things. Along the line, he marries a young beautiful city-wise Lagos girl whose beauty, femininity, pragmatism and

boldness intoxicate him. To earn and maintain her love, he enlists in the army to become a “sozaboy”: “I will do anything so that this fine girl can be my wife and I can be sleeping with her on one bed every night,” he says (Saro-Wiwa, 37). The corrupt recruitment officers in the army extract a large fee from him before enlisting him. As a new recruit, he is very proud of his uniform and his gun. His gun almost becomes an object of worship. He cuddles it, adores it just as he does his wife Agnes.

But as he is unable to raise up children by his wife because he has to dash off to war soon after marrying her, he is also not able to fire his gun because the rifle assigned to him is faulty. He does not quite succeed in realizing the three ambitions he sets his youthful heart and energy to accomplish. The war thwarts his plan to become the first licensed driver in his hometown, a task he has committed everything in life to accomplish. His honeymoon with his beautiful bride is also cut short by his enlistment in the army. His efforts, vision, passion and money are wasted as the war claims his wife and his mother- the two people that matter most to him in life. And having joined the army at a great cost, he is unable to experience the fulfillment of an accomplished soldier. He loses all that is dear to him in life in order for him to gain full awareness of himself, his environment, and life generally. Both as a civilian and as a soldier, Mene is not a violent person. He never even fires a shot throughout his stint in the army. In *A Farewell to Arms* and *Three Soldiers*, two well-known American novels on the First World War, the only violence perpetrated by the protagonists is against characters who are not enemies at all. Chrisfield, in Dos Passos’ *Three Soldiers*, takes out his enormous frustration and rage on a sergeant in the American army whom he believes to be persecuting him. Hemingway’s Lieutenant Henry fires a gun only once, at two Italian soldiers who had ridden with Henry’s

retreating unit and had run off when one of the vehicles stuck in the mud. Mene is not the aggressor, but a victim. He does not find any kind of fulfillment in violence.

At first he is unable to distinguish between his heroic dreams and the actual realities of war. He goes through a period of desperate but futile struggle to realize the pseudo-heroic image of himself in relation to the war. As yet he does not even know why this bitter-armed struggle is taking place, or even who the enemy is. He only has the egoistic assumption of what will accrue to him now that he is a combatant (sozaboy). He keeps on asking why the war is being fought, but no one either within or outside the army is able to give him any answer. But at the end he learns when his romantic ideas collide with his painful experiences, that war and military life involve death, suffering and pain. Things, events, actions, people and the war must now be seen in their correct and realistic perspectives. It is bygone to those alluring “sweet dreams”. He sees the meaninglessness and the futility of war in one instant not as preached by pacifist or by a senior adult, but as it really is when all the officers and many of the company boys are butchered in the first air raid. Now every instinct in him tells him to desert. He runs through forests and creeks not minding “Whether tiger or snake or leopard or any dangerous animal is in the forest” (113). Saro- Wiwa uses the new maturity and insight that Mene has just gained to undercut the glory of war by making him experience hardship, danger, disappointment and bereavement. He gains maturity from the ordeals and stresses he undergoes. With the benefit of experience he tries to redefine war, throwing into the ditch his earlier fanciful notions about warfare. War is a double-edged sword, capable of cutting this way and that way. The tragic death of his mother, wife and the destruction of his house in a bomb blast inflict a permanent injury on his psyche. He discovers that he has given too much of himself to the machinery of war.

Mene would have loved to return to the protective arms of his mother and his wife and continue his life. But he realizes that the old life has passed away. The war has ended, but not until it swept away the nature and texture of the pre-war society. The search for his mother and his wife through all the refugee camps enables him to see at first hand the tragedy occasioned by a war in which he was an enthusiastic participant. He witnesses for himself the sufferings of the civilian population, the loss of life and property and the ruthless annihilation of many communities. One very important theme of this novel is the experience of the common people who are caught up in the war. The war which had promised to build up Mene's personality ends up destroying his dream and hopes: "...war is useless ...uniform and everything is just to cause confusion ...(172). "War is a very bad and stupid game," he concludes (151).

As in Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, the novel does not only deal with the combat of two armies, but also with the self-combat of a youth who breaks through the walls of ignorance to knowledge. Saro-Wiwa has chosen this young hero to make his comments on the Nigerian Civil War and to offer a deep and direct insight into the fate of the common people who were caught in this tragic drama of destruction.

The young loquacious soldier is beyond embarrassment in his chosen idiolect as he strives to communicate in a language he has hardly mastered. But he gets by in a very funny and interesting way. He distorts, concocts, breaks, remolds and transfer words and phrases from British English to Pidgin idiolect without guilt and without sensitivity to the established grammar of the language. He is completely excited by the language he has fashioned to express himself in.

There is no doubt that the novel embodies the profound essence of the Nigerian Civil War experience. It reveals the tragedy to us in a refreshing way, first as a personal tragedy of an

innocent victim, and second, as a national tragedy involving everyone in the society. Its sense of history and society is sharp and accurate. The futility of the war is revealed in a very personal way. The author concentrates on the downtrodden, the class of people on which the war and any war for that matter has its most devastating effects. The success of the novel rests on the innovative stylistic and narrative techniques the writer has chosen to objectify the experience he expounds in the text. The narrative captures the shock, confusion, and dehumanization that the war produces in the young, the helpless and defenseless population. The novel shows the personal and social consequences of war in a way that many other novels about war do not.

### **Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty***

*The Last Duty* is an outstanding war novel in terms of its stylistic structuring, organic unity, artistic conception, narrative patterning as well as the author's passionate concern with the effect of the tragedy on the lives of ordinary people. In this novel, the Federal and the Secessionist armies are locked in a fierce battle. But the author plays down the drama of external violence and concentrates fully on its deeper human dimensions. By adopting the "collective evidence/confessional statement" technical style of narration, we watch without any inhibition, the adventures, the feelings, the hopes, the fears, the emotional burden and the moral state of the characters in their process of formation. It is like a mirror held up to the characters' consciousness as each of them is made to act as a "commanding sensibility." Each character's narrative portion and perspective is proportionate to his degree of 'knowingness', involvement, and response to the conflicts. By presenting action from many points of view, the writer allows the reader to judge the entire situation himself. The dramatized or pictorial adopted allows Okpewho to give full and free verbal expression to his characters' emotions, even those that will normally be suppressed as a result of public consciousness.

Starting with Major Ali, both the narrative and the plot structures expand gradually as if from an aperture into a wider channel until the climax is reached when the three main characters lose their lives tragically over a woman. The themes also come tumbling in one by one, one linking the other until there is a complex network of themes: the disruption in communal life, the mischievous manipulation of military authorities for the settlement of private scores, the sexual oppression of a destitute and forlorn woman, the abuse of children and the handicapped, the heroic assertion of personal integrity in the face of daunting odds, moral chastity pulverized by destitution, domestic crises, psychological depression, sexual impotence, etc. The plot benefits from a simple design that acquires complexity and compactness as it progresses, each character contributing his own quota to the main issue. The main issue is not the civil war demon that is currently devastating the land as this is only a catalyst for the internal psychological crises plaguing all the major characters. The war only reverberates at the background and remains peripheral to the main plot of the narrative. The writer's emphasis is on the series of micro and individualized "civil" wars that each individual has to confront: the desperate tug-of-war between Chief Toje and his failing manhood, his death-knell struggle with his business rival, the fratricidal war between him and his servant over the beautiful wife of another citizen who has been jailed on trumped up charges, his monomaniacal pursuit of his pre-war social and financial privileges, Oshevire's struggle against war time wickedness, Aku's moral battle with destitution and unlawful sexual urges, Major Ali's fight to maintain law and order, etc.

In the novel we see that there is much emphasis on honor, honesty, integrity and fellow feelings. The novel does not celebrate any heroic exploits in battle, but a heroic resolve to be just and compassionate under impossible circumstances. The series of micro "civil wars" are bitter, more destructive and more physically and spiritually agonizing than the macro civil war.

The narrative action is as pitiless and tragic in its magnitude and intensity as in Greek drama. There is economy, not only of words and action, but also of details. The plot itself is free from distracting digressions, bringing about the compactness, seriousness, organic wholeness and the cathartic effects of Aristotelian tragedy. There is intense concentration on the central characters and the events that directly affect them. The tragedy is worked out within the strategic temporal space of a border town. By selecting a small border town as setting, we are offered the sense of an enclosed arena, which allows no intrusion, or escape from this world of tragedy.

Okpewho chooses appropriate characters to dramatize the tale, from the peasant to the noble, from the honorable to the villain. The nature of the human problem presented in the narrative is as complex, touching and realistic as the deft technical construction of the work. Okpewho displays an impressive understanding and insight into the subterranean world of his characters' inner lives. Their experiences, just like those of Henry and Mene, can be said to have universal validity. Complex questions are posed about man's relationship with the others, who in personal and social relations constitute his ties to humanity. Okpewho explores this grave human situation with responsibility and sympathetic understanding. Each character makes his choice and bears the consequences of his decision. In Okpewho's artistic vision, choices stem from the characters' inner selves; thus he explores the characters' thoughts fully. He focuses his tragic vision on a closely-knit series of events and maintains this vision through a supremely controlled authorial distance as well as a dramatized angle of observation. There is an effective combination of emotional detachment and an incisive display of sympathy and fellow feelings.

*The Last Duty* is marked by structural and thematic cohesion, economy of language, organic plot, noble theme, elegant style, perceiving characters, technical dexterity and moral perception, and artistic design. It is certainly the best Nigerian Civil War novel to date.

Okpewho has helped to make the war alive to us in a new and fresh way. He succeeds very well in deploying techniques to make the reader a collaborator with him and with the characters in creating a conception of the Civil War that leaps out of the text. The novel enlarges our sympathy and opens our eyes to areas of civil war experience we never really knew well. The novel explores the dark places of human nature, the ethical and moral values of both pre-war and during-the-war Nigerian society.

## CONCLUSION

One basic tendency in some of the best war novels is that many of the narrators see war in more personal than social terms. They seem to have concentrated on the fate of the innocent individuals who are trapped by a destructive machine whose magnitude they cannot even imagine and whose power they are helpless to oppose. Not even children are immune. The extent to which children are affected by war is driven home by the experience of the little Oghenevo in *The Last Duty*. War is an organism that consumes all who come in contact with it. The pervasive effects of war and the extent to which it is part of everyone's life are demonstrated by writers who reflect the manner in which war disrupts ordinary lives.

This approach contrasts sharply with novels that focus on groups of men, on the platoon, the crew, the squad, and the staff, rather than on one or two selected figures. In WW II novels such as *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Thin Red Line*, *Guard of Honor* and *Catch-22*, the focus is on the larger society. Even in novels with relatively few major characters, such as Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions* and Anton Myrer's *The Big War*, the characters are shown to be representative of the societies that produced them; they are not isolatoes.

In the best war novels, the characters with whom the reader is invited to sympathize have no desire to take part in the violence and in the cruelty around them. Mene, the eponymous hero

in Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* recoils from violence and runs away from fighting because he is repelled by the brutality he sees on the battlefield. Henry Fleming in Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* is described as a 'war devil', but he is not really a bloodthirsty character or a monster in any sense. He is not like, in Glen Sire's *The Deathmakers*, Chico, the Barman, whose only fulfillment is in destroying human life, or Sam Croft, who kills a man for the first time when on duty with the National Guard just to see how it feels, who would seem to exemplify the arguments for man's propensity for violence.

It is expected that these new literary developments will force writers to become more experimental in motivating character, in fashioning new techniques in the fictional use of history to portray the evil effects of war on ordinary lives, and more war novels will focus on the common soldier or civilian rather than the general on horseback. The great war novels in this trend deal with ordinary heroes such as the recruit soldier in Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, Aniebo's *The Anonymity of Sacrifice*, and in Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*, the man of integrity and the defenceless forlorn woman in Okpewho's *The Last Duty*, and the ordinary country girl in Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*.

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