CHAPTER I
WAR AS THEME IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL

War is a literary theme on the grand scale. Writers accordingly have envisioned the soldier as an image of man in society. In particular, American novelists and poets, over the last sixty years or so, have come to understand their own country, its social character, institutions and relations with the world, through metaphors of battle. Love, death and war have always been the great raw material of literature. Men still love and die in very much the same way as their ancestors loved and died. They do not, however, make war the same way; indeed we might say that in the 20th Century war is made upon them. And this change has resulted in enormous problems not only for the literary artist but for the literary critic and historian as well.

Traditionally war-as-subject has been used by the artist as a framework, much like any other, for the examination of individual consciousness both in terms of environment and in relation to other individuals. The concept of war as part of the natural growth of the human race was one to which poets and novelists no less than generals assented prior to World War I, a concept which resulted in such disparate works as Stephen Crane’s The Red Badge of Courage and Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace. These books, despite wide variations of treatment, were firmly traditional in their treatment of war as a narrative framework. And precisely, as a narrative tool, the war environment, especially in the novel offered advantages: the qualities of intensification, pathos, dramatic contrast action and crisis were ready-packaged. Critics, however, were free to concentrate on the aesthetic structure of particular books only as long as writers themselves used war as a standard literary theme. Quite
suddenly, however, war stopped being used as a standard literary theme. No longer one subordinate element among many contributing to a total aesthetic structure, environment – the war itself became the chief protagonist and along with it came the dark external shape of war emotion. Both somehow, seemed quite outside the concerns of literary craftsmanship. Ever since the young writers of World War I began producing their works of literary disenchantment – a collective record of impact rather than aesthetic balance – and readers recovered sufficiently from the moral exhaustion of the Great Crusade to read what the young writers were offering, the debate of the aesthetic limits of the war novel has continued.

The most important reason for undertaking this study is my belief in the archetypal importance of warfare as a literary theme, not only in the United States, but in all countries and at all times. In our own time we see the battles of World War I and World War II fought and refought in every medium, from pulp magazine to cinema. Warfare merits serious study as a theme in literature in general, and especially so in the case of the literature of the United States. First of all the United States of America is the most powerful nation of the world, possessing a military machine whose scope and power rank among the wonders of the modern world. Secondly, one is intrigued by the peculiarly American mentality governing the use of force. America is, after all, only very recently removed from the time when violence was the quick and simple solution to the problems of the pioneers; in some parts of the United States this frontier mentality still exists. Everywhere it lends a peculiar colour and tone to American war literature.

There are specific reasons for the essential unity of violence in American letters. It has been noted that the American Revolution engendered a certain lack of
respect for the due process of law. This tendency was fortified by the exigencies of frontier life: the process of wresting land from its rightful owners did not always permit the moral niceties to be observed. At the same time, the men who performed these acts necessarily became heroes in the eyes of the nation. Thus many an American hero was a thug whose actions were legitimized because he fought for what appeared to be a just cause. The defenders of the Alamo, almost all of whom were adventurers, became 'soldiers' in the national mind.

The real connection between the war novel and the novel of violence in America began to manifest itself in those works written towards the end of the 19th century. Upto that time almost no war novel of enduring interest had been written. The great tide of war novels began sometime after 1890 with the publication of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* (written 1888, published 1924) and Ambrose Bierce's *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (1891). That is to say the war novel began to appear at a time when the frontier as a locus of violence had disappeared. This suggests that warfare at least as it was treated in fiction, was a new *avatar* of the American spirit of violence; the soldier came to replace the cowboy or the frontiersman in the popular imagination.

There were other factors responsible for the rise of the American war novel at the end of the 19th century. For one thing the increasing complexities of international relations tended to involve the United States in more and more serious engagements. The Spanish-American war served as an introduction to the shattering effects of World War I and World War II which in turn gave way to the Cold War, Korea and Vietnam. At the same time the military establishment began to emerge as a recognisable entity. The attitude of American writers towards this element in the
national life is, therefore, necessarily a phenomenon of the 20th century. Thus the period from about 1880 to about 1960 seems to form a historical unit in which one can observe the development of certain related literary themes and historical events.

It seems possible to show that in the period before the nation actually went to war against an external enemy, the novels were objective and idealistic; after World War I the novels reflected the horror and chagrin of a people who had tasted combat for the first time; the novels of World War II reveal a different concept of war – more sophisticated and less idealistic – and treat a different set of problems than those of World War I. In other words the American war novel tends to bear out Daniel Boorstein’s contention that “what a nation means by war or peace is as characteristic of its experience and as intimately involved with all its other ways as are its laws or its religion”.

There is, however, a notion of separateness implicit in the term “war novel” which sounds too prescriptive, as though the war novel exists in a vacuum as a genre, hived off from other forms of writing. Such a schematic interpretation of war literature clearly needs to be resisted and full recognition accorded to the interactions and dynamics of literary production, and yet the conception of a body of imaginative work centrally concerned with the presentation and problems of war is a valuable one.

Perhaps a proper definition of the term “war novel” would be any long work of prose fiction in which the lives and actions of the characters are principally affected by warfare. By this definition e.e.cummings’ The Enormous Room, in which the main characters are all civilians, is very much a war novel; Carson McCullers’ Reflections

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in a Golden Eye in which the protagonists are all in the army is not. In the former work war is the primordial fact dominating the lives of the characters, while in the latter the army merely provides a certain social structure necessary to the working of the plot; another setting would have served as well.

There is also a strong tendency in war literature for memoirs and works of reminiscence to encroach upon the field of pure fiction. The whole problem is further complicated by the rise of reportage which overlaps areas of both memoir and fiction. From this it can be seen that the term “war novel” is a rather loose one. Yet it permits a degree of flexibility that is useful in dealing with war literature as a whole. Also there seems to be an instinctive comprehension of what the term stands for; most critics use it without apology or further explanation, on the assumption that it is self-explanatory. In fact attempts to refine the term only leads to confusion. Leslie Fielder, for example, in Waiting for the End decided to call these works “anti-war novels” because of the strong element of protest characteristic of many of the novels written after World War I. His term serves only to becloud the issue, because there is actually a whole series of American novels about World War I that could more accurately be called “pro-war novels”. For all of these reasons, therefore, it seems best simply to accept the fact that the term “war novel” designates a fairly diversified body of literature, but there is no real disagreement over the extent of that body.

This inevitably brings us to the question of the writer/soldier. The suspicion here is against war writers as such who are not likely to be military paragons; the observations of a creative artist in a war environment must be suspect. But the writer

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2 Fielder, Leslie – Waiting for the End (London, 1965)
is differentiated from the vast majority of soldiers by his ability to combine observation, experience and articulation; he can both observe and articulate, where the common run of men cannot.

Offering perhaps the most reasonable defence of the artist in the army, Malcolm Cowley points to the obviously atypical status of the writer and his value quite apart from his role as a good soldier:

War novelists are not sociologists or historians, but neither are they average soldiers. The special training and talent of novelists lead them to express special moods. They are usually critical in temper and often are self critical to the point of being burdened with feelings of guilt. They are sensitive – about themselves in the beginning; but if they have any imagination (and they need it) they learn to be sensitive for others .......Most of them were rebels against discipline when they thought it was illogical – which they usually did – and rebels against the system that divides officers from enlisted men ..... Yet the war novelists were trying hard to be accurate and to tell the true story of what they saw. When we find them in substantial agreement on a number of topics, we should listen attentively to what they say. 3

It is useful to refer to the war novel as a category in 20th century literature because the apprehension of war constitutes a distinctive and central element in the modern American literary consciousness. Military terrain and situations have become familiar, often assuming mythic connotations; the mass media, of course, has contributed pre-eminently to this process of dissemination. Through the conduit of the media their textures, codes and conventions, versions of war infiltrate our homes; we consequently exploit the imagery and phraseology of battle to talk of mundane domestic situations. Paul Fussell in his seminal study of the first war The Great War and Modern Memory (New York, 1975) has shown how the impact of 1914-18 became so widely communicated that its landscapes, forms and technologies acted as a staple of language and conversation, as synecdoche or metonomy for a variety of different kinds of human experience. At present we frequently indulge in

similar conceptualisations, talking for example of "heading off another Vietnam" or of the dangers of "triggering off World War III"; such language usage enables us in this instance to structure in accessible cliches certain political options and contending theories that we believe to be part of a public debate.

Further, the idea of a 'discourse' of war literature is valid because war has supplied writers with tropes and imaginative fictions of enormous vitality and symbolic energy. Vietnam, or more precisely American military participation in Vietnam is an evident example. Literary works published during the Vietnam war years could basically be divided into two kinds, the gung-ho or hawkish stereotypes which upheld the public, official and hegemonic versions of what the war was fought for and in opposition, a vigorous equally propagandist body of dissentient writing. This protest fiction, drama and poetry often sought to instigate social action, to argue polemically against the conduct of politicians and ultimately to stop the war. In such a context war literature revealed its true political nature as ideological battleground as well as offering its readers a formal representation of warfare. Using the example of Vietnam further, the critic can observe closely the way in which war as literary subject matter retains enormous symbolic potential. War as theme acts out the great tragic visions of our time, the prime historical peripeteia and narrative. The soldier’s traumatic first encounter initiates him psychologically into new realms of experience and marks him off from his civilian counterparts who have not served an apprenticeship under fire.

In many cases writers who have been nurtured in leisured families encounter in warfare their first and perhaps only direct immersion into the industrial realities that are collectively the daily routines of millions of their fellow citizens.  

4 Walsh, Jeffrey – American War Literature 1914 to Vietnam (New York, 1982) Page 3
On the vast fields of battle too, it is likely that a young writer will marvel as the massive resources of his country are expended in the pursuit of a seemingly mistaken idealism. The army or the air force thus is transformed for him into an image of the American century, and the soldier who is also an artist takes on the role of what Frank Ross has called the "assailant-victim": he becomes an agent of war and also its martyr.\(^5\)

Since war is demonstrably the most pointless and destructive of all human activities it frequently inculcates in the frontline writer a feeling of existential loss and disorientation, a dawning awareness that the exemplary sacrifice of troops is meaningless and utterly futile. War in other ways may demonstrate the worst fears Americans have of their own culture; it may dramatise deep-rooted racial tensions or re-enact in fable a brutish violence inherited from the persecution of Indians in the old frontier days. Because of the class oppression of enlisted men by officers that is so common a theme in American war novels, war may also serve as a metaphor for the novelist of prevalent social injustice expressive of the dominance of hierarchies through what Norman Mailer in \textit{The Naked and the Dead} termed the "fear ladder".\(^6\) Taken together, then such portrayals, images and inventive fabrications compose a picture of deep angst and indeed much war literature has at its root, a trajectory of protest. It protests against certain features of modern reality and life, and can be to a certain extent, a disguised lament for the disappearance of the open plains, for vanished American innocence, for the lost idyllic frontier spirit where once flourished the pioneer virtues of self-reliance and a spirit of sturdy independence.

\(^5\) Ross, Frank – \textit{The Assailant Victim in Three War Protest Novels} (Paunch XXXII, 1968) Page 46-47
\(^6\) Mailer, Norman – \textit{The Naked and the Dead} (New York, 1948)
And yet out of such holocaustal vision come stirrings of redemption; if war can destroy a man it can also remake him in a better mould; he may for example, discover a more permanent group identity in the army, and arrive at a lasting solidarity with his fellow men. In the recurrent artistic vision of honest infantry soldiers whose love for each other transcends death in an unfailing bond, are reincarnated images of community, of frontier comradeship where man helped his neighbour, of hard times when the native American held out a helping hand to the immigrant.

There are, in the war novel, some uniquely American visions of self renewal and discovery through the exigencies of warfare and most of them draw upon the literary reworking of the writer's own experience. The most famous illustration of this type is the First World War figure of the ambulance driver (like the real Dos Passos, Cummings or Hemingway) who freely chooses to enter the war propelled by idealism and scarred irrevocably by what he sees, becomes a disaffiliated anarchist or radical afterwards. Much of American war literature incorporates similar social overtones; a common pattern of the hero's progress involves some degree of reconstruction which may be roughly summarised thus: the hero, a good and young American, volunteers or is drafted to war, he enters the combat zone and mixes with men with different social and ethnic backgrounds. In uniform he learns what it is like to be born to drill and die; thus his experience parallels that of the hero of a Bildungsroman: caught in crossfire he learns to combat his loneliness and to submerge himself in the resistance sub-culture of his fellow soldiers. Such a composite plot or narrative form is indicative of a central kind of American literary response to war; although variations
upon it and totally different reworkings are, of course, numerous and too frequent to classify.

The United States began to be fully aware of itself as a nation in the period after 1880. The military establishment which emerged with it can be taken as a representative of the nation as a whole for it was drawn from all parts of the country and its efforts directed against a common enemy. It seems relevant here to inquire into the principal characteristics of the American military establishment in the period before World War I and to the extent to which these facets found reflection in American literature.

It is possible to delineate five main characteristics: pragmatism, a "team" syndrome, a persistent democratic-aristocratic tension, idealism and a general lack of awareness and psychological preparedness for combat.

In contrast to the European emphasis on ceremony and tradition in military life, the United States army from its inception was based on a philosophy of pragmatism. Emphasis was on the immediately useful and practical. When President Roosevelt spoke against the push-button approach to war, he may have been thinking of a wry little novel called The Great War Syndicate, published the year before by Frank Stockton. This book deals with a naval war between the United States and Great Britain, which is resolved by farming the United States defense commitment out to a "war syndicate" which proceeds to win the war by inventing quick and efficient gadgets.

One sees the same belief in gadgetry as a means of achieving a quick and painless victory in Mark Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (1889). The Yankee stays ahead of his enemies by establishing telephonic
communications with a friend at court; when he is challenged to a joust, he employs a lasso and a revolver to defeat his opponents. Finally, he slaughters his enemies *en masse* as the iron-clad knights press forward unwittingly against highly charged fences and into the range of his machine guns. It is this same marriage of grisly humour and basic pragmatism that underlies Milo Minderbinder’s contract bombing of his own air base in Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* (1962). Although Twain, Stockton and Heller are all writing against different contexts their works are bonded together by a common parody of the characteristic American pragmatism.

The “team” syndrome is directly related to this American pragmatism. The American characteristically views any problem in terms of mass production. The key to the system lies in the fact that the parts must be interchangeable. In human terms this means that friction must be reduced, personalities must not clash, cooperation is at a premium. This factor also reveals itself in the American passion for team sports. The American people are mentally conditioned to look to the “coach” for instructions and guidance when the going gets rough, and in the armed forces this mentality has given rise to an interesting situation. The “team” generally consists of draftees, while the “coach” is usually a professional soldier; in the case of an officer he is usually a graduate of a military academy. On the one hand the American soldier is vitally conscious of his civilian status and he has also ingrained in him an antipathy towards the professional soldier. On the other hand there exists an innate admiration for the professional, the team captain, the coach.7

Within certain limits then, the American responds instinctively to the demands

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7 Aichinger, Peter – *The American Soldier in Fiction* (Iowa, 1975) Page 12
of the team, and American war literature is coloured throughout by variations on the team philosophy and the love-hate relationship with the professional soldier. John Dos Passos' three soldiers are servile or defiant in the presence of authority, but they recognise their own comparative incompetence. E.E. Cummings' tone in The Enormous Room (1922) is very much that of the spectator; in fact the tone of humorous wise cracking almost succeeds in concealing the author's profoundly personal reaction to the war.

"I was an awful dope when I went to the last war," said Hemingway in 1942, "I can remember just thinking that we were the home team and the Austrians were the visiting team". In keeping with this thought, the debacle at Caporetto and the subsequent panic-stricken conduct of the Italian officers reveals to Lt. Henry in A Farewell to Arms (1929), that he has made a mistake; the coach is incompetent, the team is disorganised and therefore, he is free to detach himself from it.

Actually the root of the basic tension that exists between officers and enlisted men in the United States' forces is embedded in the character and organisation of the country itself. Theoretically the American soldier should never have resented the professional soldier, since that officer should have been a common man raised to eminence by his own efforts. But the domination of the upper grades of the service by graduates of the service academies created a de-facto aristocratic situation which the common soldier sensed and which aroused deep anxieties going back to the revolution.

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8 Passos, John Dos – The Three Soldiers (1921)
9 Baker, Carlos – Ernest Hemingway – A Life Story (Scribner, 1970) Page 54
If the American attitude towards warfare and the military establishment before 1917 reflected a native pragmatism, paradoxically it was also highly idealistic. *Gone With the Wind* (1936) has earned a permanent place in the history of American entertainment by expressing an important part of the national mythos: what Robert A. Lively has called “the myth of a war ruled by anti bellum courtesies rather than military necessity” through which “we arrive at the scene of that frequently described war which was conducted with the formality of a duel within the bloodlines of gigantic families.” The idea that the American soldier was simply a cog in a great machine was by no means as acceptable in 1899 as it has become today. For many, war was still a matter of young men “springing to arms and fighting the issue out with bullet, butt and bayonet in a deadly personal encounter”.

The enduring nature of this chivalrous element has been attested by Samuel P. Huntington’s remark that the American’s characteristically must condemn war as being foreign to liberal goals, in terms of maximum freedom for the individual, or else see it “as an ideological movement in support of those goals”. Furthermore, in the field of literature the conception of war as romance did not end with the nineteenth century. V.S.Pritchett has observed that both Stephen Crane and Ernest Hemingway are capable of suggesting that they have actually been on the scene of a given battle but were not there out of necessity. Rather they were their as “daring, romantic, half-exalted, half-melancholy connoisseurs of courage and cowardice in a folly that could never be laid at their door”.

11 Ibid, Page 47
Benedetto Croce has remarked that in Europe in the eighteenth century there arose a general impatience with "books stuffed with accounts of wars and negotiations which prepared and ended them", and an increasing demand for histories of the arts, manners, morals, science and philosophy — that is of civilisation. The same tendency cropped up in America in the nineteenth century. This interest in civilisation as opposed to war combined with native American idealism gave rise to the assumption underlying the two important American war novels written in the nineteenth century — Billy Budd (c. 1888) and The Red Badge of Courage (1895). The assumption was that war was essentially an outdated institution and therefore one that could be treated objectively. Objectivity of treatment is that quality that distinguishes these two novels from all other war novels ever written in the United States. It places them in a special category which might be called that of the "pure" war novel — the work of fiction that treats some aspect of warfare coolly and dispassionately, having no basis in firsthand experience and believing that such experience is not likely to become available in the future. Stephen Crane’s novel stands suspended, as it were, in theme and style between the chivalrous memory of the Civil War and the unforeseen reality of World War I. Henry Fleming, the hero is typical of the young volunteers bedazzled by dreams of glory. Crane’s depiction of battle is also a forecast of the formless incomprehensible, dehumanised slaughter that was to characterise the protest of the World War I novelist. The confusion felt by Fleming and his comrades in the retreats

14 Quoted by Peter Aichinger in The American Soldier in Fiction. Page 10
and counter-marches and their indignation and fear at the sight of death wounds delivered by an unseen enemy foreshadow the trauma of the American soldier who found himself in the absurd charnel house of World War I.

Yet, the despair common to most World War I authors is nowhere evident in Crane's novel. His hero is placed in the context of battle, a context which forces him to face the primordial question of personal courage. The war is a closed system - a device that permits Crane to manipulate his protagonist, to observe his reactions and to draw conclusions. Henry Fleming experiences fear, he runs away, he is ashamed, he returns to his comrades and fights bravely; in the end he marches bravely with them. The regiment is still intact; the bond of comradeship remains warm and reassuring, whereas in future American novels like Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) it was to be revealed as a bitter illusion. In the end, Henry has proved himself. The reader is sure that the war will come to a logical conclusion in the sense that a clear-cut victory will emerge and that victory will actually further the ends of the victor. This was one of the assumptions about war that was to be most severely tested in the novels of a later era. Crane could and did use war itself as symbol of life experience, of confrontation. He saw in battle an opportunity for shaping human identity. Thus Henry Fleming becomes a man through confrontation, fear, cowardice, resignation and courage. Crane includes fear and cowardice as part of the process by which courage is ultimately achieved. War, for all Crane's irony is still the magnificent proving ground. There is perhaps no sharper indication of the general naivete towards warfare than the fact that *The Red Badge of Courage* was an image of reality for
young men, especially college educated young men, setting out in 1917 to earn their own badges of courage and manhood.

If Crane takes the Civil War to serve as the frame of reference in which his character moves, Melville restricts his experiment even more severely. The dimensions of *Billy Bud* are of a classic starkness; the cramped quarters of a sailing ship suggests reassuringly that Billy’s fate, although it may have a universal significance on another plane falls within the realm of comprehension in terms of military justice. Melville treats the theme of military justice in purely idealistic terms. Billy’s trial and execution by the forces of enlightened society, embodied in Captain Vere, constitute at once a commentary on how discipline might be administered and an oblique suggestion that in the new world a new order of justice might be conceived that could transcend such harshness. Like Crane, Melville could not foresee the impact that mechanised slaughter could have on war literature.

One can appreciate the academic quality of Crane’s and Melville’s treatment of the theme of war if one contrasts *Billy Bud* and *The Red Badge of Courage* with the stories of Ambrose Bierce. *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* was written about the same time, but in tone, attitude and appreciation of the true nature of warfare, it was generations ahead. Where one can observe certain links between *The Red Badge of Courage* and the novels that were to come out of World War I, one is struck by the manner in which Bierce’s stories prefigure the novels of writers of the fifties like Norman Mailer. The desperate pessimism that tends to disfigure Bierce’s work is perhaps paralleled in American letters only by that of James T. Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan* series, but in the treatment of war itself Bierce adumbrated the attitudes of the generation that came to maturity in the shadow of nuclear warfare. Certain
passages — like that in “An Affair of the Outpost”, in which a civilian caught in the midst of a battle, realises that “it was an ugly and sickening business: to all that was artistic in his nature, revolting, brutal, in bad taste”\textsuperscript{15} — suggests the tone of the novels that were to come out of World War I. Even more striking are passages like that in “The Coup de Grace”:

\begin{quote}
The enemy’s fallen had to be content with counting. But of that they got enough: many of them were counted several times, and the total as given afterwards in the official reports of the victorious commander denoted rather a hope than a result \textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

This could easily have been written about the war in Vietnam. In other words, the American writer who had been in action adopted an attitude similar to that of subsequent generations who had shared his experiences; Crane and Melville, writing at least once removed from the facts of war, tended to structure those facts in accordance with a national mythos.

In one of his essays George Santayana implies a symbolic relationship between the Robinson Crusoe myth and American society,\textsuperscript{17} a metaphor that is particularly appropriate in relation to the history of American military and foreign policy. The pioneer, cast ashore with the wreckage of old beliefs and policies, tried to live peacefully in the wilderness, at the same time, the exigencies and the freedom of the frontier inculcated in him a spirit of innovation and independence that would characterise his reaction to new circumstances when they arose. In this context Hiroshima was the footprint in the sand. From that point onwards the American had to live permanently with the threat of danger and help solve the problems that face the entire world. In a nation where tradition and aristocratic privilege count for nothing, it

\textsuperscript{15} Bierce, Ambrose — \textit{In the Midst of Life and Other Stories}, Page 98
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, Page 79
\textsuperscript{17} Santayana, George — \textit{Character and Opinion in the United States}, (Garden City, 1956) Page 141
was to be expected that the familiar theme of men in arms would be treated in a new light.

Since 1880 the theme of warfare has attracted the attention of practically every major novelist in the United States; the writing of a war novel has become a form of apprenticeship uniting authors whose prime interests lay in other areas. As Leslie Fiedler has noted, since the 1920s at least, the war novel has become a standard way of starting a literary career. In some cases the war novel has been the springboard from which a successful literary career was launched. The first achievements of Stephen Crane, John Dos Passos and William Faulkner lay in this field, as did those of James Jones, Herman Wouk, Irving Shaw and Norman Mailer. In other cases – like the work of Herman Melville, Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, John Marquand and James Gould Cozzens – the war novel was a significant addition to an already established reputation.

In any case actual wartime service was not a necessary qualification for authorship; the theme was familiar and important enough to merit attention of combatant and non-combatant alike. Crane established the precedent of non-combatant authorship in *The Red Badge of Courage*. If only one American writer, James Jones, can be regarded solely as a war novelist in a sense that all his major works (*From Here to Eternity, Some Came Running, The Pistol and The Thin Red Line*) touch on the subject to a greater or lesser degree, it should also be noted that Jones is one of the most enduring authors to appear in the United States in the last

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thirty years. At its peak the theme was good for more than a single effort on the part of a given author.

What are the reasons for America's preoccupation with war literature? This obsession seems to have derived partly from the manner in which the American continent itself came to give expression to some aspects of the human character. Many writers have insisted on the primacy of the hunting instinct in man, as opposed to the tendency to become domesticated and agricultural. Lewis Mumford has developed the argument that America provided an outlet for man's desire to return to nature and that once freed of the bonds of European civilisation the settler quickly succumbed to the irrepressible hunting instinct.\(^19\)

Certainly America is one of the few technologically advanced countries in the world where hunting is widely practiced. It seems reasonable to argue that since war is only a specialised form of the hunt, the two should hold a special interest for the people of the United States. One critic has said "the novels of World War II like the literature of any war have for the most part been attempts to give artistic form to experiences which magnify the violence and chaos of human existence".\(^20\) In a country where for three hundred years the relaxation of traditional restraints combined with a positive need to wrest a living from the wilderness, the elements of chaos and violence have come to be specially pertinent. One sees the duality of hunting and warfare presented with special clarity in a work like Hemingway's *In Our Time* or in Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* Where the question posed by the title is explored

\(^{19}\) Mumford, Lewis - *The City in History* (New York, Harper, 1961)

\(^{20}\) Muste, John W - "Better to die Laughing: The War Novels of Joseph Heller and John Amstead" (Critique Vol. 7)
in the atmosphere of a Alaskan big game hunt. Another aspect of warfare that corresponds to the frontier instinct is the element of simplicity vis-à-vis problems of morality. Saul Bellow's waspish comment that Americans "are unpracticed in introspection and therefore badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game or outdo in daring", focuses attention on the American tendency to seek the simple solution. This tendency is also reflected in the standard denouement of the western movie, where the sheriff solves the most complicated issues of the community with a blazing six-shooter. The most bewildering paradox is reduced to a simple test of strength and courage.

**War literature is also reminiscent of the masculinity of pioneering life.** Edmund L. Volpe has noted that James Jones' fictional terrain is limited to that peculiar all male world governed by strictly masculine interests, attitudes and values. This observation is in keeping with Leslie Fiedler's comments in *Love and Death in the American Novel* on the curiously strong element of celibacy in American letters. Volpe adds that in Jones' novel the army is treated as the last frontier of rugged masculine individualism:

> Prewitt wants to be a thirty year old man because the raw violence, the drunken sprees, the sex without responsibility, the demands on physical endurance and technical skill express and challenge his maleness.

The disappearance of the frontier, a larger involvement in foreign affairs and the rise of the military establishment as a separate entity all contributed to the emergence of the war novel as an identifiable genre in the period after 1880.

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21 Bellow, Saul – *Dangling Men* (University of Chicago, 1987) page 8
23 Ibid, Page 109
Fundamental to my approach in this study is the idea that literature may be beneficially examined as one of the many components of national life, all of which interact with each other: i.e., it is important to discuss works of literature in relation to the historical, economic and political events that accompanied or preceded their appearance on the scene.

This thesis is an attempt to study modern American war fiction between the two wars. Although there have been perceptive studies of some of the areas of fiction discussed here, it is fair to say that there is no critical consensus about what constitutes a distinctive body of knowledge or canon of modern American war fiction. Because of this it is particularly difficult to decide upon a formula which will enable individual works to be analysed while evaluating a tradition of war writing, one which implies reworking and reconstituting into a living order. Other problems relate to the matter of historical perspective, since it seems that certain writers and works, viewed in broadly cultural terms, are more central and representative than others.

Inevitably, in the last resort I have had to rely on my own judgement about what is important. In making selections I have kept in mind the overall design in two ways: first through employing chronological methods of study and secondly by treating representative issues and themes. This thesis moves historically from the First World War to the Second World War and attempts to focus upon writers and verbal modes that demonstrate authentic literary and socio-cultural significance in the American imagination of war. I have tried to structure individual chapters in such a way that they are both autonomous and complementary.

Of the hundreds, perhaps thousands of war novels written since 1880 only a very few have earned a permanent place in the nation's literature. As Norman Mailer
has observed “war is as full of handbooks as engineering but it is more of a mystery, and the mystery is what separates the great war novels from the good ones”. I have chosen three representative pieces of writing. A Farewell to Arms, The Naked and the Dead and Catch 22. The choice has been more or less arbitrary, but I believe that these three novels share a common ring of truth about them – the quality of accurately rendering a significant experience in a manner that has appealed to an enormous number of readers.

Above all, I have attempted to perceive war as a flow of contending energies, a historical process. This study is based on the premise that modern American war literature shares the nature of debate, discourse and consciousness rather than static form.

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