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War's Effect on the Idea of America

War has influenced the idea of America more than any other possible theme from our readings this semester. It is clear that war somehow affected every text we read in one way or another, whether directly or indirectly. Each of the three texts analyzed in this paper shows a different way that war affected the idea of America, and thus affected the way people wrote both during this time period, and even today. The first text, *The War Prayer* by Mark Twain shows how the majority of citizens have selfish views about war. The second text, *The Dynamo and the Virgin* by Henry Adams shows a more abstract effect of war on the idea of America through technology. Finally, the last text, *Battle Royal* by Ralph Ellison shows how war has created a violent culture in America. All of this, of course, begs the question, why do so many Americans glorify war?

In *The War Prayer* by Mark Twain the scene is introduced in a very patriotic manner. This story shows how the majority of the American population has glorified war. The soldiers' loved ones and friends parade around the idea of war and praise how patriotic and wonderful this war is. The churches and preachers also praised the upcoming war. They used religion and faith, along with patriotism to glorify the soldiers, the country, and the war. Later in the text, Twain describes a church service where the preacher says two prayers, one short and one long. The short prayer just uses the Christian faith to tell the soldiers to be prepared. The long prayer asks God to watch out for the soldiers, to guide them to victory, and to protect them from death or

injury. After these prayers, an elderly man walks up and states he has a message from God. He attempts to make the audience aware of the side effects of the war. The side effects being how a victory in this war would affect the opposing countries. This presents a different point of view on the idea of war.

This short story shows conflicted views about war and the country. It shows how the majority of the country's population has a glorified and heroic view on war. As shown by the speech of the elderly man, this is also a very selfish view. Twain even goes on to describe how the audience believed the old man was insane. The majority of American citizens only care about themselves, their country, their soldiers, and their victory. There is still a small minority, both in this time period and today, that sees war the same way as the elderly man in the story. They understand the effect of war on both sides. The majority does not care about the effects of the war on the opposing countries. This behavior still exists today. A lot of people still glorify war and do not care, even the slightest amount, about what happens to other countries. The conflicting views of this short story clearly show that Mark Twain's literature was affected by war. This just goes on to prove the point that war has shaped the idea of America more than anything else. As much as things have changed from this time period to now, some things have stayed almost exactly the same.

The main idea of *The Dynamo and the Virgin* by Henry Adams is the development of technology and how society can worship it like how the Christians view the Virgin Mary. When Adams was shown the new technology by Langley, Adams saw the dynamo as a "symbol of infinity" (Adams 366). He compared it with the relationship of the Christians to the cross. He could envision people seeing electricity as the most important thing. Langley had the same fears as Adams. Adams felt very conflicted by this technology. This was such a new "force" to him.

Aside from all the conflict and fear, the dynamo could lead to incredible new innovation. It could be used to accelerate all kinds of other forms of technology. This was shown to Adams at the 1900 Exposition in Paris, France. Adams eventually respects this technology. However, he sees this technology replacing religious faith in a large number of humans in the future. In this story, the electric dynamo is meant to symbolize not only itself, but also the numerous forms of other innovative technology showcased at the Exposition. This technology meant great things for the future of mankind, but it also could cause the opposite as well.

The relationship of this story to the idea that war has most effectively shaped the idea of America is a bit more abstract than the examples shown in *The War Prayer*, by Mark Twain. Years before this Exposition, the United States of America along with the other great powers of the world started going through what is known as the Industrial Revolution. This was not a “normal” revolution like the American Revolution or the French Revolution. This was a revolution in the space of the evolution of technology. Many great inventions that are still used today were created during this revolution. A lot of these inventions were used for manufacturing and agriculture, as well as transportation and convenience. The electric dynamo shown in this story is a prime example of how this revolution was still going on at the time that this story was written. However, even though many of these great inventions were used domestically in the United States of America, as well as the rest of the world, a lot of them were used for war. Obviously, no country wants to lose a war, so this technology was used in military advancements. Stronger and more powerful weapons were created, faster methods of travel were created, and larger quantities of ammunition and other equipment were created. The United States probably took advantage of this rapid innovation more than anyone else. War has shaped the idea of America more than any other theme. Technology has influenced the way war is

waged across the world more than anything else since even the first evidence of fighting. It is used to gain an advantage over the opposition. Thus, this story shows a great example of how innovation and the use of new technology has aided the idea of war's influence on the idea of America.

The short story *Battle Royal* by Ralph Ellison starts with the narrator explaining how although the slaves were freed a large number of years ago, there is still a large amount of inequality between the African Americans and the rest of the country. He then goes on to tell a story about how his grandfather told him to keep fighting for what is right and help others as well. This stuck with him. He said he felt the same guilt that his grandfather felt when he did something against what the white people wanted. He proceeds to talk about the night of his graduation. He was in a ballroom and "all of the town's big shots were there in their tuxedos" (Ellison 1213). He was about to enter the "Battle Royal". He is very illustrative about what he sees at this event. The white men at this event were very threatening. The Battle Royal was an entertainment event where the young African American males would box for the amusement of the white men.

Why were the white men so amused by watching the African Americans box? The answer to this question goes back to the idea that war had a huge effect on the idea of America. To this point, war has always been very glorified by the majority of the population of the United States of America. War is obviously very violent. Since so many Americans glorify war, they essentially glorify violence. This leads to a culture where violence is used for amusement. Even today, mixed martial arts has become a huge sport. Even though there is no inequality in this sport today, it is still amusement for a lot of American citizens. Mixed martial arts matches typically start with the referee yelling "let's go to war!". This quote is a great example of war

being used for entertainment purposes, just like in this short story. There is no arguing that the main theme of *Battle Royal* is how the rich white men use the African Americans for entertainment. However, this does not take away from the side theme that war has created a culture of violence. Even back in the ancient Roman times, the Roman Colosseum was used for entertainment. The ancient Romans are known for their violence in war. Throughout history, violence in war has promoted violence in entertainment, not only in America, but also in many other countries and societies across the world. This further proves the point that war has played the biggest role in influencing the idea of America, not only in this time period, but also in the time period before and present day.

The three texts analyzed in this paper argue show different, individual examples of how war has been most influential in the idea of America. *The War Prayer* shows how war has been glorified by the majority of the population of the United States of America and thus led to ignorance of how wars affect the opposing countries. *The Dynamo and the Virgin* shows a slightly more abstract example of how war has influenced the idea of America. It goes on to show how important technology has become to the majority of the world. Technology has always had a huge focus on military and war. Technology has been influenced by war and technology has influenced this literature written by Henry Adams. So, this further shows that war has affected the idea of America and thus Henry Adams' literature, albeit indirectly in this case. *Battle Royal* does not directly focus on war. Its main focus is how the wealthy white men still treat the "free" African Americans with disrespect and inequality for their own entertainment and amusement. However, it is clear that war has also indirectly affected this short story and its relationship to the idea of America. It shows that war has created a culture of violent entertainment for the wealthy. Throughout these texts, along with other texts we read during this

semester, there is usually a common theme and examples of Americans glorifying war. This proves the point that war has a huge influence on the idea of America.