**WRITING SAMPLE**

The Destruction of Youth: Oliver Stone’s Platoon

Oliver Stone

*Platoon*

MGM Studios, 1986.

The Vietnam War, History 461, Section 1

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Oliver Stone’s 1986 film *Platoon* opens with the Ecclesiastes 11:9 quote, “Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth.” The remainder of the film serves as a direct contrast to the quotation. Throughout *Platoon*, young men are subjected to many of the horrors of war. While it seems unlikely that one platoon would experience everything that the soldiers in the film do, Stone does an excellent job of portraying what the Vietnam War was like. Certainly, every person who watches the film who fought in the Vietnam War can find one aspect of the plot that they are familiar with or actually experienced. Oliver Stone depicts events such as ambushes, a massacre similar to that at My Lai, drug use and class and race tensions. He also uses low military morale and division among the platoon to illustrate the absolute destruction and loss of youth and idealism that the Vietnam War brought to its American soldiers.

The viewer primarily experiences the war through the character of Pvt. Chris Taylor, who is played by Charlie Sheen. Much like Taylor, the audience is thrown into the midst of the Vietnam War without any concrete knowledge about what to expect or what they are about to experience. In the beginning of the film, Taylor is hopeful about the war and rather sure of his ability to make a positive difference in the effort. The viewer learns that he volunteered to go to Vietnam in an attempt to maintain his political and social integrity. Through the breakdown of Taylor’s belief system and his struggle with the corruption of the platoon, especially in his relationship with Sgt. Bob Barnes, Tom Berenger’s character, the audience can understand the full effect of the war on the individual soldier.

As previously mentioned, Stone portrays nearly every aspect of the Vietnam War through the experiences of one platoon. Stone shows the racial tensions among the soldiers, yet more apparent are the class struggles. It seems that Taylor is the only soldier who is college educated, and it is very obvious to the viewer that most of the soldiers realize that the people fighting in Vietnam are those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Drugs create even more divisions among the platoon. There is a group of soldiers who experiment with marijuana, among other drugs, and seem to respect and follow the leadership of Sgt. Elias Grodin, played by Willem Dafoe. The other half of the platoon, who do not use drugs with the others, are bigger supporters of Sgt. Barnes. The divisions between these two groups are based on more than drug use. Those who follow Sgt. Elias Grodin have a more philosophical attitude about the war and perhaps are more aware of their internal struggle, while the others who support Sgt. Barnes appear to be more outwardly aggressive and revenge motivated during military engagements. In this respect, the viewer also gets a sense of platoon life and cohesiveness, or the lack thereof, among soldiers.

One of the most painful and illuminating scenes in the entire film deals with a military raid on a Vietnamese village, which was most likely inspired by the massacre at My Lai in 1968. In the film, the soldiers enter the village with the intent to purge it of the Viet Cong and their weapons. Once they are in the village, as the soldiers’ frustrations with the villagers rise, their treatment of them worsens. Doubtlessly, this is also influenced by the murder of a member of the platoon just before the soldiers enter the village. For those who cannot conceptualize how the massacre at My Lai could have occurred, this portion of *Platoon* can help one to better realize the situation and see how the soldiers’ actions gradually escalated. By no means does Stone rationalize the event, rather, he gives the audience an interpretation of how My Lai or similar events might have occurred and how the actions impacted the soldiers.

Anyone seeking a visually and emotionally affective depiction of the Vietnam War should watch Oliver Stone’s *Platoon*. Stone delivers a full picture of what the Vietnam War was like, even if the events are slightly exaggerated for a single platoon. The physical experiences of the war, however, are not the most moving aspects of the film. It is Stone’s portrayal of the emotional turmoil and internal devastation of the soldiers that is the great strength and focus of the film.