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### Life and Death

During the course of a war, soldiers become witnesses to various atrocities that can change their perspective. Within their experiences of the horrors of war lies a certain truth and reality about life. The truth of war, depicted in Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*, is that although war involves death and destruction, it is also inexplicably linked to life. In the film, Cimino portrays the lives of the steel mill workers Michael, Nick, and Steven as they go to war. As the war progresses, these three men find themselves fighting in a war that is neither honorable nor glorious – two factors that change their understanding of the things that are important in life. Through Michael's estrangement from society and its social values such as harmony and civility, he is able to gain a greater awareness and insight of the things that he no longer has because of the war. In the film, Cimino reflects O'Brien's guideline in *The Things They Carried* that:

“To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true. At its core, perhaps, war is just another name for death, and yet any soldier will tell you, if he tells you the truth, that proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life ....In the midst of evil you want to be a good man. You want decency. You want justice and courtesy and human concord, things you never knew you wanted. There is a kind of largeness to it, a kind of godliness. Though it's odd,

you're never more alive than when you're almost dead. You recognize what's valuable. Freshly, as if for the first time, you love what's best in yourself and in the world, all that might be lost." (O'Brien 87-88).

As Michael experiences a war that threatens to take everything from him, he recognizes the value of his experiences and of human decency.

Cimino's portrayal of the group of friends follows O'Brien's guideline that "To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace" (87-88). He shows the inherent complexity of war through the three friends' differing reactions to their experiences during the war. Through his illustration of Michael and Nick's interaction at the hospital, Cimino proves that war cannot be generalized as it "depends primarily on individual acts of will" (Kinder 16). When Michael visits Steven at the hospital, he discovers that Steven has lost his feet and therefore cannot wear his socks. After a short conversation, Michael tries to convince Steven to come home. To dissuade Michael from forcing him to return home, Steven tells him that he fears returning home because he does not "fit". After Michael persists in his endeavor, Steven tells him to "do as his heart tells him" (Cimino). Cimino shows that despite encountering a similar feeling of distance after the war, Michael returns home and attempts to bring both Nick and Steven home as well. In doing so, he demonstrates that the ultimate outcome of the war truly depends on the individual's actions, and that war can affect people in very different ways. For Michael and Steven, the war is not only about death and ruin but it is also about friendship, loyalty, and understanding.

Through his depiction of the interactions of Michael, Nick, and Steven as they are taken as prisoners of war by the North Vietnamese soldiers, Cimino supports O'Brien's statement that

in “the midst of evil you want to be a good man” (87-88). Before Michael goes to war, he refuses to give boots or thermal socks to Stan, and shoots a deer with “one shot” without the others. When Michael, Nick, and Steven are taken captive as prisoners of war, however, Michael exhibits a different behavior. Hearing the sounds of gunshots above him, he quickly realizes that their captors are forcing the prisoners to play Russian roulette and gambling on the results. Steven quickly becomes distraught and he begins to cry as he awaits the inevitable. Knowing that they will be soon forced to play the game by their captors, Michael tries to reassure Steven. As “the prisoners shriek and the bettors torment them sadistically” (Dempsey 11), Michael tells him to “calm down” and that the situation is okay (Cimino). Michael demonstrates that despite being surrounded by the evils of war, he wishes to be a good man. He recognizes this good quality in himself, and later saves Steven two times – from the water pit after escaping their capture by North Vietnamese soldiers, and from the river after Steven falls from the helicopter.

When Michael discovers Stan pointing a revolver at Axel, he exemplifies O’Brien’s guideline that “You want decency. You want justice and courtesy and human concord, things you never knew you wanted” (87-88). Putting a single bullet in the revolver, Michael tells Stan that he has a game for him. To “teach Stan a lesson about fooling around with guns” (Callenbach 21), Michael points the revolver at Stan’s head and fires a single shot as Stan fearfully cries beneath him (Cimino). For Stan and Axel, Michael’s sudden and severe reaction comes as a surprise. Michael’s reaction can be explained by his desire for justice and humanity. Michael has learned to recognize the value of life and camaraderie because of his proximity to death during the war. After playing Russian roulette with Nick and experiencing its dangerous consequences, Michael can no longer tolerate seeing others play with guns. From Michael’s

perspective, Stan represents the injustice and lack of human decency that Michael has learned to despise. As a consequence of the war, Michael wants justice. Cimino illustrates the contrast between the behavior of Michael, who has experienced the horrors of war, and the behavior of his friends.

The portrayal of Nick at the Russian roulette table supports O'Brien's belief that "Freshly, as if for the first time, you love what's best in yourself and in the world, all that might be lost" (87-88). As Michael continues his pursuit of Nick, he offers the Frenchman money in exchange for information regarding Nick's whereabouts. He discovers Nick playing a game of Russian roulette with gamblers betting on the outcome, explaining the source of the money that Nick has been purportedly sending to Steven. When he confronts Nick, he discovers that he, like the other "heroin-addicted 'champions'" (Dempsey 11), has become completely amnesic, and that he has no recollection of Michael or his life before the war. As Michael begins to play, asking Nick "Is this what you want?", he tells Nick that he loves him before pulling the trigger (Cimino). This shows that at the threshold of life, Michael recognizes his love for Nick. To show Nick that he cares, Michael is willing to engage Nick in a dangerous game of life and death. As a result of the war, Michael acknowledges and becomes aware of his emotional connection with Nick. Although Nick finally dies playing Russian roulette, he remembers Michael in the moment before he shoots himself, recalling Michael's phrase "one shot" (Cimino).

The stories told by Cimino in *The Deer Hunter* and those of O'Brien in *The Things They Carried* both illustrate the complexity of war and its consequences on the individual. War often involves a great deal of trauma for those who have experienced it firsthand. However, war

cannot be defined by the death of soldiers. It does not merely inflict destruction on the lives of those who fight in it, but it has the potential to destroy the lives of many others as well. For those who fight in war or find themselves in close proximity to those who fought in war, war has lasting effects. It brings about great changes in people, and allows them to understand the value of life. In war, soldiers realize the things that they value the most and that they might lose, and the common soldier understands this quality of war to be the truth. The character Michael in *The Deer Hunter* exemplifies this to the greatest degree, as he realizes that war is not merely about death but about friendship, and that one shot can make the greatest difference between life and death. Through their experiences of the war, Michael and Steven learn to value their friendship and live.

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