

Dean Gladish

Bailey

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Life and Death

During the course of war, soldiers witness atrocities the likes of which cannot be understated. Within these atrocities lies a certain truth and reality about life. This fact about war, depicted in Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*, proves that war is not only about death, but that it is also about life. Through their estrangement from society and its social values such as courtesy and concord, soldiers can gain a greater awareness and insight into those things that they had at home. 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 lifeIn 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, Michael recognizes the value of his experiences and of human decency.

Cimino's portrayal of the group of friends supports O'Brien's guideline that "To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace" (87-88). He shows the complexity of war through the three friend's differing reactions that they had to their experiences during the war. Steven, who believes that he should stay at the hospital because it is "like a resort", fears returning home. In contrast to this, Michael shows that he will sacrifice himself in order to fulfill his promise to Nick that he would not leave him there (Cimino). Through his illustration of these three characters, Cimino shows that war is uncertain and cannot be generalized. Cimino shows that there is both glory and lack thereof in war. Although Nick finally dies playing Russian roulette, he remembers Michael before he does so, recalling Michael's phrase "one shot" (Cimino).

Through his depiction of the three men's interactions 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). When Michael knows that Stan does not have any boots or thermal socks, he does not give them to him. However, when Michael, Nick, and Steven are taken prisoner, Michael tells Steven to "calm down" despite their being trapped. Michael demonstrates that due to his being surrounded by war and death, he wishes to be a good man. He recognizes this in himself, and 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 gun 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). Michael tells Stan that he has a game for him, putting a single bullet in the gun and shooting it, disregarding Stan’s fearful cries (Cimino). Stan represents the indecency that Michael comes to despise, and Michael sees his actions as dignified and representative of justice. Cimino illustrates the contrast between the behavior of Michael, who has gone to war, and his friends Stan and Axel, who are both taken by surprise by Michael’s severity.

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 to pursue 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. When he confronts Nick, he discovers that he has become completely addicted to heroin, 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. This recognition, proven by Michael’s willingness to engage Nick in a dangerous game of life and death, demonstrates the effect of war on Michael’s awareness and his emotional connection with Nick.

The stories told by Cimino in *The Deer Hunter* and that of O’Brien in *The Things They Carried* both illustrate the consequences of war on the individual. In war, soldiers realize the things that they value the most and that they might lose. The character Michael in *The Deer Hunter* exemplifies this to the greatest degree, as he realizes that war is not merely about death

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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.

Works Cited

Cimino, Michael, dir. *The Deer Hunter*. London: EMI Films, LTD., and Hollywood:

Universal Pictures, 1978.

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. New York: Broadway Books, 1998. Print.