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Two Ghosts of War: Post-Traumatic Isolation in *Fences* and *The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong*

War never truly ends for those who fight it. Even when the gunfire stops, many soldiers carry the war within them. In August Wilson's play *Fences*, Gabriel Maxson is a World War II veteran who lives with visible and invisible wounds. In Tim O'Brien's short story *The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong*, Mary Anne Bell transforms into a silent warrior, disappearing into the jungle after her psychological descent. While their paths and personalities are different, both characters experience a kind of post-war emotional trauma that sets them apart from the rest of society. They become symbols of how war can reshape identity and how peace can feel unreachable after surviving conflict.

Both Gabriel and Mary Anne begin as vibrant, energetic people. Gabriel is vocal and cheerful; he sings, dances, and speaks about heaven with confidence and joy. He brings light into the Maxson household, even as his mind has been damaged by a wartime head injury. Similarly, Mary Anne arrives in Vietnam as a curious, beautiful, and encouraging young woman who brightens the atmosphere of the medical outpost. She asks questions, learns quickly, and even helps treat wounded soldiers. Both characters have an almost glowing spirit. They inspire others around them and seem filled with a desire to help.

However, the war changes them. Gabriel's injury is physical and neurological—he now believes he is the angel Gabriel, blowing his trumpet to open the gates of heaven. Mary Anne's transformation is psychological and spiritual—she falls in love with the mystery and violence of the jungle, choosing the life of a soldier over returning home. In both cases, the war creates a split between the character and society. Gabriel lives alone in his own mental world, often misunderstood by others. Mary Anne cuts off all contact, eventually vanishing into the wilderness entirely. These changes suggest deep emotional trauma, possibly PTSD or other dissociative mental disorders, though their stories express it in symbolic ways.

It is important to understand that Gabriel is not “crazy.” His behavior often causes confusion or gets him into trouble, not because of madness but because he is placed in situations that are unfair and humiliating for a man who served his country. As a veteran, Gabriel knows he deserves dignity and respect, yet he is often treated like a burden. In earlier incidents, his brother Troy was able to pay fines to get Gabriel released from custody, but later offenses became more serious. Eventually, Gabriel was given a choice: long-term prison time or confinement in a hospital under the assumption of mental illness. Due to his veteran status, authorities may have taken a less aggressive approach, allowing him to “pretend” to be mentally unstable as a form of escape. This shows not just Gabriel's survival instinct, but the failure of the system to care for those it once called heroes.

After the danger is over, both characters seek peace in isolation. Gabriel, though cared for by his brother Troy, eventually moves into his own apartment, where he can live more quietly in his visions of heaven. Mary Anne, on the other hand, leaves behind human connection entirely. She joins the Green Berets on ambush missions and ultimately disappears into the forest. Her silence becomes permanent. From a personal perspective, I can understand this need for distance.

When you take an oath to serve and protect as a soldier, your mindset shifts. You begin to care more about big responsibilities and worry less about small daily concerns. But when civilians treat you poorly after you risked your life for them, frustration can grow. Isolation may become the only way to avoid hurting yourself or others.

Gabriel speaks constantly of heaven. To many, this may seem like madness, but it is also a way of coping. He needs to believe that his friends who died in the war did not die for nothing. Heaven becomes his truth, a place where those friends are still laughing and waiting for him. Mary Anne, in contrast, stops speaking. She finds meaning in the jungle itself—in the feeling of her blood, her body, and the darkness around her. She, too, wants to believe in something beyond the emptiness of war. For both characters, silence and belief are ways to survive.

In conclusion, Gabriel Maxson and Mary Anne Bell are two sides of the same coin. Gabriel carries his trauma openly, expressing it through song and vision, while Mary Anne internalizes hers, becoming a ghost in the jungle. They show us how war reshapes not just the body but the soul, leaving even the strongest people unable to return to “normal.” Their courage is undeniable, but so is their need for distance from others. They remind us that healing is not always loud or visible—and that peace, for some, can only be found in isolation.

Works Cited

O’Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Mariner Books, 2009.

Wilson, August. *Fences*. Plume, 1986.