

# Gruntspeak: Masculinity, Monstrosity and Discourse in Hasford's *The Short-Timers*

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## Discourse And The Militarization Of Thought

Scholars of contemporary American literature and culture often find themselves confronted with disturbing links between dominant models of masculinity and the legitimization of violence in our cultural and social institutions. Since the seventies in particular, cultural critics analyzing Vietnam War novels and memoirs have been drawing provocative conclusions—based on the kinds of atrocities committed during the conflict—about the connections between American militarism and contemporary gender relations. For example, Jacqueline Lawson<sup>1</sup> explains that, while previous wars involved the sexual violation of women on the defeated side, “what distinguishes the war in Vietnam from other wars is the number of atrocities committed against women . . . and the fact that these atrocities are copiously documented in the memoirs and oral histories produced by Vietnam veterans” (19). Lawson goes on to offer a compelling critique of the institution of the military in the Vietnam period, arguing that the conditioning of new recruits in boot camp perpetuated a virulently misogynistic mythology of war. Gustav Hasford’s novel *The Short-Timers*<sup>2</sup> (filmed by Stanley Kubrik as *Full Metal Jacket*) is especially valuable for an analysis of this conditioning because it emphasizes both the importance of the Marine Corps’ “misogynistic mythology” to basic training and the pervasiveness of its terms to the rhetoric of marines in the combat-zone. Furthermore, though Hasford’s narrative focuses specifically on marines during the Vietnam War, it actually documents the socialization of men into a destructive form of hegemonic masculinity characteristic of postmodern American culture in general.

My thesis is that *The Short-Timers* depicts “Gruntspeak,”<sup>3</sup> a specialized discourse the Marine Corps employs as a mechanism of socialization and thought control. Rather than merely presenting examples of this discourse for purposes of realism, the novel foregrounds the discourse itself as an agent in the narrative. Hasford does not portray Gruntspeak as mere rough talk used by tough military men; he presents it as a crucial strategy deliberately employed by the Marine Corps in its basic training to program its recruits into a certain kind of submission. Furthermore, Hasford’s novel presents Gruntspeak as a specifically misogynistic discourse that operates by casting women (and, by association, members of other vulnerable “out-groups”) in the role of despised others, of objects of derision and hatred. Gruntspeak functions by persuading, simplifying, and transforming, making resistance appear either impossible or abjectly effeminate. As such, it communicates and inculcates a militaristic, male-supremacist ideology, promoting violence as a sign of an (ultimately illusory) male authority to men denied access to economic, political, or social power. Indeed, *The Short-Timers* indicates *par excellence* the role of language in the construction of militarized masculinity and exposes dominant American cultural fantasies about manhood that are fixated on the idealized figure of the warrior. Hasford’s novel demystifies these fantasies by vividly dramatizing both the discursive techniques of power necessary to produce such a figure and the logical implications of the misogynistic rhetoric of gender openly fostered by the military establishment.

In this article, I isolate various components of Gruntspeak in order to understand how they work both at the level of form and of content. Briefly, these components are the sexual, the cinematic, the fatalistic, and the abject.<sup>4</sup> These categories are not mutually exclusive, since we can easily find, for example, sexual elements that are also abject or cinematic elements that lead to fatalism. But the categories provide a useful organizing principle for working with this complex, often idiosyncratic discourse. As Vietnam War memoirs, narratives, and films in general demonstrate, the military discourse prevalent during the War was so idiomatic that a number of fictional and non-fiction works even contain glossaries. In an article for *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, Thomas Edwards<sup>5</sup> provides such a glossary, taking obvious pleasure in reviving the discourse. Edwards ties arcane terms to anecdotes about the War designed to “bring back fond or perhaps not so fond memories” (32) Nancy Anisfield,<sup>6</sup> discussing the fragmentation of Vietnam War narratives, highlights “the use of various jargons” (58)—military acronyms and slang, sixties slang and drug lingo, and “euphemisms and epigrammatic phrases which attempt to emotionally distance the speaker from the pain of the situation” (58-59). Owen W. Gilman, Jr.,<sup>7</sup> noting that “our modern wars have each spawned a new lingo” (65), relates the “particularizing tendency of Vietnam War language patterns” (68) in Vietnam War literature and memoirs to the transmission of military nomenclature by military training manuals and drill instructors. According to Gilman, the specificities of this nomenclature determine the discursive texture of Vietnam War literature:

the language of other wars was not applicable. The war demanded that it be told in its own language. (65)

Despite the obvious use of technical terminology, some elements of this language are familiar. The general sexism, racism, and fatalism these soldiers express, for example, are continuous with the bantering talk of many civilian men. Unlike civilian slang or dialect, however, the discourse of Hasford's marines is contrived and perpetuated by a particular institution, purposely designed to equip young civilian men to "function" (i.e., to kill and survive) under traumatic conditions. This discourse extends beyond the specific terminology detailed in military training manuals and includes, as Gilman asserts, "all the terms, phrases, and expressions generated by the participants—as well as any allied tendencies" (65). The marines' discourse thus constitutes a unique way of organizing experience. Hasford's incorporation of the language of the Marine Corps into the novel serves both to depict its effectiveness in reprogramming young men, and to critically expose its problematic features and effects. The novel presents the marines' discourse not only functioning to enable them to continue in a world that is incredibly hostile to them, but also necessarily exceeding its objectives, transforming them perhaps irreparably into agents of a monstrous new paradigm.

Carol Cohn,<sup>8</sup> in her essay "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," discusses "nuclear strategic thinking" and emphasizes "the role of its specialized language, a language that I call 'technostrategic'" (689). She argues that "this language both reflects and shapes the nature of the American nuclear strategic project, that it plays a central role in allowing defense intellectuals to think and act as they do" (690). I think we can identify clear parallels between technostrategic discourse and the language of Hasford's marines, which similarly reflects and shapes *their* project and enables them to do what they do. Cohn concludes that technostrategic discourse is "transformative" (716). To learn to speak this language is to "invite the transformation, the militarization, of . . . thinking" (716). *The Short-Timers* particularly focuses on the transformative potential of the discourse used by the drill instructors and later by their progeny. While the trajectory of the novel takes us geographically from Parris Island to the mountains of Khe Sanh, the ideological trajectory is circular. The novel depicts the derisive resistance of the narrator, James T. Davis (usually referred to as "Joker"), to the abusive authority of the drill instructors on Parris Island and his unwillingness to accept the role of sergeant himself. But the final scene in the novel shows Joker submitting to his status as sergeant and all that this entails. If *The Short-Timers* is a "bildungsroman," it is one in which a reluctant "innocent" is ultimately transformed into the monstrous drill sergeant who persecuted him at the outset. Despite his persistent attempts to resist the "ethos" of the Corps, Joker is finally subsumed by his role as sergeant, becoming completely petrified and annihilated as a person. Indeed, he becomes "hard" enough to inspire awe and obedience even in Animal Mother, the most rebellious marine in the Lusthag

squad. This transformative process is promoted and exacerbated by the adoption of the discourse (and therefore the mind-set) of the drill instructors.<sup>9</sup>

The use of this misogynistic, militaristic discourse for socialization could not, of course, be expected to work if it did not consist primarily in reinforcing tendencies already available in the culture at large.<sup>10</sup> But Gruntspeak enforces and exemplifies an ideology of masculinity that depends on the violent expulsion of otherness to such an extent that masculinity and monstrosity become indistinguishable. In such a system, old models of masculinity (such as the John Wayne hero) lose their exemplary power and give way to the ambivalent, new paradigm of masculinity as monstrosity.

### Expunging The Feminine

The opening line of the novel states that “The Marines are looking for a few good *men*. . . .” (93) (my emphasis). The Marine Corps has no interest in women recruits. Indeed, the first strategy of marine training is the physical removal of these men from their relationships and identification with women. This sexual segregation takes place both literally and symbolically. The recruits are attracted to the Corps on the basis of an interpellative slogan, which flatteringly hails them as members of the “few” who are “good men.” Once in the boot camp, however, the recruits find they have been symbolically emasculated and repositioned as “ladies” (5), hoping to regain their masculinity by surviving the course of training. The explicit function of the boot camp experience is to transform these “ladies” into “real” men through tests of courage, endurance, and, ironically, submission to the laws of their marine fathers, the drill instructors. In doing so, the Marine Corps seeks to construct an “in-group” identified by its alleged superiority to those who are excluded, in this case those who are designated “feminine” by virtue of their anatomy (i.e. women) or those men considered symbolically feminine because of perceived differences from the group ideal.<sup>11</sup> Michael Pursell<sup>12</sup> notes that “[w]hen [Gerheim] announces that their rifles will be the only pussy they’ll get from now on, he isn’t just commenting on the exclusion of women from a male group, he’s talking about the process of expunging women psychologically” (221). To this end, the Corps employs a strategy Theodor Adorno<sup>13</sup> calls “negative integration” (130) designed to displace potential hostilities within the all male in-group onto members of the “feminine” or “effeminate” out-group by presenting them as degraded or abject. Representations of women in the marines’ discourse therefore generally take the form of misogynistic slogans, which reduce women to caricatures and stereotypes. These slogans snap out like the euphonic phrases in George Orwell’s *Newspeak*. Witty in their misogynistic way, they tell us a great deal about the model of gender relations implicit in Gruntspeak. Animal Mother, whom Gerri Reaves<sup>14</sup> calls the “distilled articulation of the ideology that Joker in the novel is eventually forced to adopt” (235), exemplifies this use of misogynistic slogans. Complaining about a thirteen-year-old Vietnamese girl he was prevented from raping, for example, he

argues that “if she’s old enough to bleed, she’s old enough to butcher” (91). This quip exhibits an aphoristic use of alliteration and parallelism reminiscent of proverbs such as “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Through the alliterative linking of bleeding and butchery, it rhetorically suggests an equation between female pubescence and availability for rape. A young woman’s pubescence, in this view, automatically qualifies her as “meat” to be “butchered.” Later, Animal Mother quips that “some cunts really smell bad, and Vietnam smells really bad, so I say fuck it” (160), creating a rhythmic pseudo-syllogism depicting Vietnam as polluted female genitalia fit only to be violated. Such slogans, like so many clichés about gender, have an air of naturalness and authority to them, conferring a gruff sense of masculine simplicity and finality. They appeal to what Adorno calls “stereopathy” (133), the pathological susceptibility to propaganda and stereotypes deriving from an “infantile wish for endless, unaltered repetition” (133) of a limited number of simple ideas. These slogans particularly limit the conceptual abilities of the soldiers where gender is concerned, reducing women to sexualized body parts which are, for the most part, perceived as abject.

But the issue of gender in *The Short-Timers* is far more complex than the mere use of slogans. The denigration of women plays an absolutely crucial role in basic training, a process that reconstitutes their general attitudes about themselves and each other as men. Sergeant Gerheim teaches his recruits that masculinity must be violently won from the regressive primordial swamp of the feminine. Mere possession of a penis does not guarantee one’s status as a man, a status the recruits must win through submission to the law of their military father and ultimate acceptance of his lethal ideology. Boot camp functions to “weed out all nonhackers who do not pack the gear” (5). That the term “gear” refers to “balls” becomes clear when Gerheim instructs the “ladies” to “SOUND OFF LIKE YOU GOT A PAIR” (5). For Gerheim, the new recruits are emasculated because they are implicated in the effeminacy of civilian life. They must therefore be reintegrated into what Gene Kuperman<sup>15</sup> calls “a network of power relations which is by its constitution fundamentally homosocial” (9) before they can be considered symbolically male. When Gerheim decides to promote Joker to squad leader, he tells him, “You got the brain, you got the balls, so you get the job” (9). One’s ability to “pack the gear,” however, is transient. Private Leonard Pratt, renamed Private Gomer Pyle by Gerheim, graduates from being a “shitbird” (23) to a “grunt” (23), before finally demonstrating through his suicide that he is a “ten percenter who did not pack the gear” (31). The preservation of one’s masculinity, in this epistemological system, is dependent on one’s renunciation of the feminine and one’s acceptance of the violent masculine ethos of the Corps.<sup>16</sup>

The renunciation of the feminine ultimately demands the renunciation of specific female family members—particularly mothers and sisters. Gerheim therefore strives specifically to sever the recruits’ emotional attachments to these women by redefining mothers and sisters as mere objects of sexual exchange

between men. Early on, he tells Joker, "Private Joker. I like you. You can come over to my house and fuck my sister" (4). Gerheim's hyperbolic joke represents his "sister" (if he has one) as a sexualized possession, a trophy to be awarded to men worthy of his respect. By figuratively offering up his sister to a recruit, Gerheim simultaneously derogates family ties (especially those between men and women) and institutes in their place a homosocial bond between the men. The sister loses both her autonomy and her status as a cherished family member, becoming instead a mere vehicle of exchange. It isn't long before the recruits pick up on this imagery, integrating it into a discursive ritual in which the sister functions as the figurative object of sacrifice. This discursive ritual is an inverse version of the African American form of verbal duelling known as the "dozens." Rather than protect the honor of their own female relatives by attacking the sexual reputations of the opponent's (as in the dozens), the men figuratively besmirch the honor of sisters and mothers as a means of declaring their loyalty to each other. Shortly before graduation, for example, Joker and Cowboy are scrubbing their uniforms in preparation:

For the hundredth time, I tell Cowboy that I want to slip my tube steak into his sister so what will he take in trade? For the hundredth time, Cowboy replies, "What do you have?" (20)

Later, in the field, Joker and Cowboy run into each other again. Their joy to see each other again finds expression in precisely the same ritualistic use of the discourse:

Cowboy and I grab each other and wrestle and punch and pound each other on the back. We say, "Hey, you old mother-fucker. How have you been? What's happening? Been getting any? Only your sister. Well, better my sister than my mom, although mom's not bad." (39-40)

Similarly, when the platoon meets up with some soldiers from India Three-Five platoon, "we ask them if any of their sisters put out" (148). What all of these comments have in common is that they are elements of a process of ritualized, homosocial bonding which depend on the reduction of mothers and sisters to anonymous, interchangeable vehicles for male fantasies.

But homosocial bonding, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick<sup>17</sup> notes, offers its own dangers. Sedgwick writes, for example, of "intense homosocial desire as at once the most compulsory and the most prohibited of social bonds" (187). Members of all-male groups are particularly subject in our society to a near double bind summarized by Klaus Theweleit<sup>18</sup> as follows: "thou shalt love men, but thou shalt not be homosexual" (339). The images of mothers and sisters thus serve to affirm and enshrine the male-male bond while simultaneously denying any hint of

homoeroticism. Joker, Cowboy, and Sergeant Gerheim use these images to display affection or approval for other men while nonetheless demonstrating their heterosexuality through exaggerated references to their prowess in procuring members of the opposite sex, mothers and sisters included. Theweleit points out a comparable emphasis on sisters prevalent in the writings of the men of the pre-World War II German Freikorps, most of whose members later joined the SS. These soldiers revered their sisters with a passion born of forbidden incestuous desires. Marrying the sister to a comrade was a way of experiencing legitimate sexual connection with both the sister and the comrade. According to Theweleit,<sup>19</sup> “the brother is loved through the medium of the sister. Both men, brother and husband, are united in her” (124). Though Hasford’s marines include mothers in this economy, the substitution of female family members as objects of “affection” for a comrade similarly enables the men to express affection to each other while effectively disguising or denying any homoerotic undercurrents to their relationships.

Gruntspeak depersonalizes these women in such a way that their individual identities and desires are discursively obliterated. All girlfriends, for example, are stereotyped into the abject figure of “Mary Jane Rottencrotch,” a nickname that scorns the adolescent female sexuality of the recruits’ teenage girlfriends. Gerheim tells the recruits to give their rifles female names and informs them that “[y]our days of finger-banging ol’ Mary Jane Rottencrotch through her pretty pink panties are over. You are married to this piece, this weapon of iron and wood, and you will be faithful” (13). Gerheim’s reference to “finger-banging” and “panties” insinuates that the recruits themselves are still virgins who have not yet gone beyond fully clothed foreplay. But his demeaning epithet for girlfriends also suggests these young women are to be dehumanized and vilified so the recruits can develop new commitments to each other, to their rifles, and to their new roles as killers.

Furthermore, as this nickname for girlfriends indicates, women are associated with filth and disease. Perhaps the best indication of this link between femininity and abjection is the way in which Gerheim describes the new recruits as simultaneously female and abject. He addresses them as “ladies” (5), but also informs them that they are “not even human” (4), that they are “nothing but a lot of little pieces of amphibian shit” (4). When he forces the men to do push-ups, he kicks them, steps on their fingers and yells “Jesus H. Christ. You maggots are huffing and puffing the way your momma did the first time your old man put the meat in her” (6). Here Gerheim equates the men with “maggots” but also with their virgin mothers. The metaphor is complex: Gerheim is the father penetrating the mother (i.e. the men); the men are, however, also maggots whose mothers are presumably female flies (that is, abject carriers of disease). At the same time, basic training requires the men to metamorphose from the maggot stage and to become male flies—insects that kill without feeling. In this sense, the Marine Corps (often referred to by the men as the “Crotch”) is itself the second mother

of the men. The men's first (civilian/maternal) birth was only capable of producing female maggots, while their second (military/paternal) birth will produce male killer insects. The purpose of basic training is thus to completely eliminate all traces of that prior, "abject" femininity so that the men will become "born-again hard."

### **Cyborgs, Tears, And The Threat Of Fluidity**

Hardness, for these marines, is clearly the foremost virtue. Early on Sergeant Gerheim tells them "[b]ecause I am hard, you will not like me" (5). The men, however, are obliged to become like him in order to survive treatment at his hands and the combat experience to come. The image of the killer insect suggests a specifically non-human hardness, as does the recurring image of the cyborg or man-machine. Klaus Theweleit (1987) explains a comparable fascination among Weimar protofascists with the image of the man of steel or the soldier who sees himself as part of a military "machine." According to Theweleit, such "soldier males" fantasize a "body armor" to compensate for the dreadful sense of unboundedness resulting from an infantile failure to properly differentiate from their mothers. Because this phantasmatic body armor is constituted by boundaries drawn "from the outside, by the disciplinary agencies of imperialist society" (418) rather than through adequate individuation, it is fragile and seems to be under constant threat of collapse. The body armor fantasy functions to deny the threatening world, which is identified as symbolically feminine (i.e., identified with the mother). The soldier male therefore feels the constant threat of being engulfed back into the primordial non-differentiation from which he never properly escaped. The entire world becomes feminized, signifying a threat of engulfment against which he must maintain the erect stature of the man of steel or man-machine.

Gabriele Schwab<sup>20</sup> argues that postmodern culture is characterized by the projection of psychic energies onto technology, which thus becomes a field of cathexis and the site of fantasies of the human body. The image of the human body as cyborg, for example, is a typical phantasmatic projection among American males. Schwab points out that "imaginary and socially sanctioned cyborgization is, as far as [modern American] childhood culture is concerned, a predominantly male enterprise in the most traditional sense" (197). The current preoccupation among American boys with robot soldiers, terminators, transformers, and hyper-masculine cyborg-GIs suggests that they too crave completion through the super-hardness of technological prosthesis. Hasford's marines, like Theweleit's proto-fascists, fantasize a technological hardness for themselves, as if their masculinity can only be confirmed by the synthesis of man and machine. Man and rifle (or man and tank) become fused into hybrid machines of death. Similarly, the soldiers lose their individuality and become "Green marines in the green machine" (Hasford, 155). They are parts of what Theweleit (1989) calls the "troop-machine" (155): "In the first instance, what the troop produces is itself—



itself as a totality that places the individual soldier in a new set of relations to other bodies; itself as a combination of innumerable identically polished components” (155). Each soldier is a component of the “macromachine” (159) which “has been made functional by the drill” (159). The marine is “a true child of the drill-machine, created without the help of a woman, parentless” (160). To be a grunt is to transcend (in fantasy) the limits of mere human existence and values (with their associations of vulnerability and, hence, of femininity) through the transformative power of real or phantasmatic technology. For this reason, Joker even admires the enemy grunts who are, in his view, “hard soldiers, strange diminutive phantoms with iron insides, brass balls, incredible courage, and no scruples at all” (153). Such soldiers can bond with each other (even across enemy lines) because of their mutual acceptance of a warrior-machine ethos and their repudiation of the human vulnerability of the woman.

The image of the man-machine in *The Short-Timers*, however, is ambivalent. On the one hand, the situation of combat marines seems to elicit the fantasized indestructibility of the cyborg; but, on the other hand, this fantasy necessarily requires the dehumanization of the individual marine and his reduction to the status of an instrument or object. This dehumanizing instrumentalization is suggested by the fact that the marines sleep, like equipment, on “racks” rather than bunks or beds. Similarly, the drill instructors inform them that they are “government property” (13). The ironic humor of these terms suggests a comically grotesque, but nonetheless disturbing, aestheticizing of the men’s dehumanization. As Schwab points out, images of the cyborg in literature and popular culture tend to be aestheticized and grotesque, though “under the harmless aesthetic form or the distance of an aesthetic response, lurks the dark side of the phantasm . . .” (195). Hasford’s *The Short-Timers*, however, explicitly explores this dark side. Although Hasford’s marines indulge in narcissistic fantasies of hypermale hardness and armored indestructibility, Joker’s surreal monologue about “a Marine of nuts and bolts, half robot—weird but true—whose every move was cut from pain as though from stone” (94) is painfully macabre rather than comic. The fictional marine-machine’s reaction to pain is, of course, to ignore it: “his stony little hide had been crushed and broken . . . [but] he just laughed and said, ‘I’ve been crushed and broken before’” (94). This soldier “was a walking word of history, in the shop for some repairs” (94), but the story’s end, the soldier’s meaningless death, is absurdist and pathetic rather than heroic or even tragic: “One night in Japan, his life came out of his body—black—like a question mark” (94). Machine-status thus does not finally guarantee even fantasized indestructibility. Indeed, during the assault on the Citadel in which the men run through a gap in a wall ripped open by machine-gun fire, the narrator stresses the vulnerability of the men, representing them as mechanical toys rather than as instruments of death:

Your legs are machines winding you up like a mechanical toy.  
 If your legs stop moving, your taut spring will run down and  
 you will fall over, a lump without motion. (100)

Hasford also presents the warrior-cyborg male as an horrific modern mythological figure, a dangerous demigod capable of the almost oblivious destruction of mere mortals. When Joker and Rafter Man hitch a ride with a blond tank-commander, the tank accidentally runs over a small Vietnamese girl. The narrator describes this tank commander later as follows:

The top half of the blond tank commander appears in the turret hatch. The lieutenant is wearing a flak jacket and an olive drab football helmet with a microphone that protrudes over his lips. He is a mechanical centaur, half man, half tank. (111)

The driver of the tank (significantly named "Iron Man") is unapologetic: "iron has entered into his soul and he has become a component of the tank, sweating oil to lubricate its meshing gears" (79). This semi-human tank commander and his iron-hearted driver function as symbols of the dehumanization implicit in the drill and the war itself. Further emphasizing the inhuman monstrosity symbolized by these men, Hasford has them reappear later in the novel when they unblinkingly run over and eviscerate Rafter Man.

In order to preserve the emotional armor of male marine identity, all traces of softness and fluidity must be abolished during the drill. Tears, in particular, represent a threat to these men. When Leonard almost drowns trying to complete the obstacle course, he comes to from unconsciousness and weeps. "Marines *do not cry!*" screams Gerheim, and forces him to nurse on a canteen fitted with a condom. If Animal Mother is masculinist ideology made flesh, Leonard's "limpid demand for love from Joker, his masochistic enjoyment of the first harsh words from the sergeant," according to Susan White<sup>21</sup> "reflect his unique inability, in this group, to shake the menace of the unmasculine" (122). Gerheim instructs Joker to train Leonard, but Joker quickly finds himself unwillingly drawn into an unacceptably maternal role. "Private Joker . . .," Gerheim tells Leonard "will teach you how to pee" (10), but Joker spurns Leonard's professions of gratitude and friendship, concentrating instead on his commitment to his rifle:

"I'm sure glad you're helping me, Joker. You're my friend. I know I'm slow. I always been slow. Nobody ever helped me...."

I turn away. "That sounds like a personal problem," I say.  
 I keep my eyes on my weapon. (11)

Leonard quickly becomes Sergeant Gerheim's main scapegoat and before long, the men adopt Gerheim's sacrificial mentality themselves. Finally, one hundred

men beat Leonard in his bed at night and the initially hesitant Joker is soon persuaded to do the same: “I beat him harder and harder and when I feel tears being flung from my eyes, I beat him harder for it” (17). Joker’s rage is all the more extreme because Leonard’s suffering makes him cry. Tears, a sign of femininity or a childish dependence on the mother, are experienced as shameful and loathsome. The sacrifice of Leonard is therefore the price the recruits must pay if they are to form a commitment to their homosocial group identity, because Leonard symbolizes the abject femininity the men must stamp out to identify as properly male soldiers.

The fear or scorn of tears is an expression of a general disgust for fluids and fluidity. Gerheim, for example, is particularly pleased because he was awarded the Navy Cross in Iwo Jima:

He got it for teaching young Marines how to bleed, he says. Marines are supposed to bleed in tidy little pools because Marines are disciplined. Civilians and members of the lesser services bleed all over the place like bed-wetters. (20)

Gerheim associates sloppy bleeding with the childish act of bed-wetting, an act that takes place during the period in which the child is primarily cared for by the mother. His ideal is “disciplined” bleeding, suggesting that the wounded or dying marine, if he is truly a man, will control his own blood flow.

Fluids, then, are to be despised because they are associated with femininity or “feminine” civilian life (that is, life with mothers, sisters, or girlfriends). Nancy Chodorow<sup>22</sup> argues that the rejection of the mother necessary for the male infant to form a male identity occurs at a pre-verbal, pre-oedipal stage, causing tremendous feelings of anger and abandonment, which are nonetheless inarticulate. The anger towards the mother is repressed and later reappears as a potential hatred of all women and an inability to express feelings:

Dependence on his mother, attachment to her, and identification with her represent that which is not masculine; a boy must reject dependence and deny attachment and identification. Masculine gender role training becomes more rigid than feminine. A boy represses those qualities he takes to be feminine inside himself, and rejects and devalues women and whatever he considers to be feminine in the social world. (181)

Furthermore, the aversion to the woman is uncanny because it has its origins in the pre-verbal psyche. The woman comes to represent a morass of ambivalent feelings over which men have no control and against which their only defense is rigidity—that is, hardness, or being “squared away” (Hasford, 18). This uncanny mother-image may later appear in the form of a projection of an engulfing vagina

concealing unknown and uncanny dangers. Indeed, Gene Kuperman points out that these men perceive Vietnam itself as a “vagina dentata” (23) and this is particularly true of its forests. At the end of the novel, Lusthog Squad walks point for a battalion through the forest, only to encounter an unseen sniper. Remembering that, for Theweleit’s men, fear of the woman was fear of castration and dissolution, the whole scene takes on the primal horror of a gynophobic fantasy. The sniper (not a woman, but clearly parallel to the earlier woman sniper), rips the bodies of four soldiers to pieces with rifle fire. Cowboy is literally castrated. Doc Jay’s ears and nose are also “castrated.” When the men search the forest for the sniper, they can see nothing. Joker says “it’s Maggie’s drawers . . . [t]here’s nothing to shoot at” (169). The forest is itself the engulfing swamp of “Maggie’s” vagina, a castrated sexual organ that paradoxically conceals a vicious, masterful penis.

Theweleit (1987) attempts to explain the origins of the Freikorpsmen’s violently anti-female psychology, but ultimately his argument that these murdering men were victims of a “basic fault” in their pre-oedipal development is too speculative. He ends up arguing that “the (threatening) attachment to the mother remains [in these men], because, *in all likelihood*, dissolution of the earlier symbiosis was too abrupt to allow the boy to form an independent ego” (377) (my emphasis). Theweleit is right to connect misogyny to the pre-oedipal conflicts of male children in Western culture, but doesn’t have evidence to back up his idea that these particular men had abnormal infantile conflicts. Hasford, focusing on the transformative effects of boot camp, represents such men as abnormal only insofar as their “normal” ambivalence towards women has been directed into outright aversion. The tendency to regard military discipline as the answer to feminine fluidity—the desire to be “hard”—and the capacity to see women as treacherous threats to be mastered are available psychological potentials for males which can be either accentuated or discouraged. Chodorow, however, enables us to understand why the tremendously anti-female rhetoric of the boot camp is able to “take” so well on these men. The misogynistic component of Gruntspeak is absolutely crucial in the process of “hardening” the men’s psyches because it reinforces the pre-verbal fear of women that rigidified the ego in the first place. Basic training resocializes the men by torturing them into a state of pre-verbal submission and reinforcing a pre-existing potential for repulsion toward women. Basic training as it is presented in this novel does not run counter to some real attraction the men have to women as whole beings; these men have, to a greater or lesser extent, always seen women as sex objects, prostitutes, or threatening mothers. Basic training merely confirms these prejudices because, as Krista Walter<sup>23</sup> argues, American patriarchal culture is really “pre-basic training.”

## John Wayne, Frontier Mythology, And The Horrors Of Lycanthropy

As a confirmation of dominant attitudes about gender in American culture in general, Gruntspeak, not surprisingly, owes much to American cinema. Indeed, Gruntspeak crystallizes the techniques and the ideology of the dominant media (film, TV, and advertising) of the time. The glibness of the sloganistic, cinematic aspect of the discourse operates to reframe complex, morally ambiguous, or untenable positions in terms of ethically simplistic media prototypes, suggesting the importance of cinematic modeling in the perpetuation of a male marine identity. So pervasive are the discourse of the cinema and representations of masculinity derived from the movies in Hasford's novel, that the issue of cinematic discourse is unavoidable for an analysis of Gruntspeak.

Hasford draws upon three specific cinematic genres in framing his narrative about the Vietnam War: the Western, the war movie, and the horror movie. Most obviously, Gruntspeak deploys Western and war imagery and role models, making complex, ironic use of the figure of John Wayne. For many civilian teenagers in this period, Wayne epitomized the values of both the Western and the war film, embodying certain mythic values associated with the origins of American culture, its internal history, and the development of a uniquely American style of male heroism. To a large extent, Wayne was a central symbol of American warrior-masculinity in the 1960s, a representative both of ideal American masculinity and of America's image of itself as a nation. Tobey Herzog<sup>24</sup> argues that Wayne's movies spawned "widely accepted stereotypes of masculinity, the hero, conflict, and America's foreign policy: an individual/country, while engaged in a simple and ordered conflict, firmly controlling his/its fate and the destiny of those around him/it" (18). Wayne's *The Green Berets*, though deemed ludicrous by many critics at the time, particularly perpetuates a fantasy of American infallibility and romanticism, depicting the camaraderie of unambiguously heroic Americans in their righteous struggle against the unambiguously villainous Vietnamese. The John Wayne character in this movie (as in others) is, according to Herzog, a character embodying an American male ethos of toughness, courage, patriotic duty, honor, and glory. Above all—in his posture, movements, tone of voice, and commands—he exudes an archetypal sense of immortality and control of his destiny and the fates of those around him. "Wayne's film," as John Hellman<sup>25</sup> puts it, "was showing Americans their preferred self-image: a small band of rugged yet pure-hearted individualists, on a frontier landscape, aiding pastoral natives" (92).

Despite Wayne's currency as a nationally-recognized icon, he was nonetheless an object of irony and even ridicule among military personnel. The recruits Hasford presents at the beginning of *The Short-Timers* already refer to Wayne with mild irony, perceiving him to be an outdated figure of fun. Cowboy and Joker laughingly invoke Wayne as they scoff at Gerheim in the opening scene of the novel:

“Is that you, John Wayne? Is this me?”

... I laugh. Years of high school drama classes have made me a mimic. I sound exactly like John Wayne as I say: “I think I’m going to hate this movie.” (4)

The recruits quickly learn that the reality of the Corps is completely inconsistent with the romanticized representations perpetuated by Wayne in his movies. Indeed, Hasford’s novel thoroughly demystifies these celluloid images of noble warrior-bonding and fellowship:

Beatings, we learn, are a routine element of life on Parris Island. And not that I’m-only-rough-on-’um-because-I-love-’um crap civilians have seen in Jack Webb’s Hollywood movie *The D.I.* and in Mr. John Wayne’s *The Sands of Iwo Jima*. Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim and his three junior drill instructors administer brutal beatings to faces, chests, stomachs, and backs. With fists. Or boots. . . . (7)

By the time the recruits have experienced the realities of the war itself, the mildly comic figure of John Wayne is reduced to an object of utter derision. The opening scene of Section 2 of the novel (“Body Count”) shows Joker running into Cowboy and the Lusthag Squad at a screening of John Wayne’s *The Green Berets*:

We go into a movie theater that looks like a warehouse and we watch John Wayne in *The Green Berets*, a Hollywood soap opera about the love of guns. . . . The audience of marines roars with laughter. This is the funniest movie we have seen in a long time. (38)

As Jacqueline E. Lawson<sup>26</sup> points out, “the first fire-fight—the actual combat experience—debunked the myth, purveyed by the imposter-hero John Wayne, that dying for one’s country is an ennobling experience, the ultimate act of patriotism, the rite of passage into manhood” (32). For this reason, the men finally associate the name of John Wayne with absurd acts of mock heroics or self-destructive (even psychotic) behavior in the combat zone. Crazy Earl exemplifies this notion of suicidal “heroism” when he meets his death in the assault on the Citadel:

We stand over Craze as Cowboy says, “Craze did a John Wayne. He finally went berserk. Shot BB’s at a gook machine gun. The BB’s bounced off the gook gunners. You should have seen it. Craze was laughing like a happy little kid. Then that slope machine gun blew him away.” (107)

Despite their cynicism about the specific model of masculinity promoted by John Wayne, however, the marines in Hasford's novel are nonetheless conditioned by the narrative frames prevalent in Hollywood films of the time. The Western is a particularly compelling source of cultural iconography, which uncritically reproduces traditional cultural fantasies about a mythologized frontier populated by savage Indians and brave, resourceful Indian-fighters. Indeed, the marines often jokingly refer to themselves as cowboys participating in a Western. For example, when Lusthog Squad is about to move out of a position, Mr. Shortround tells his men to "Saddle up" (41). Cowboy later suggests

that the Montagnards are actually Viet Cong Indians and that the secret to winning the war is to issue each grunt a horse. Then Victor Charlie would have to hump while Marines could ride. (89)

Similarly, during the attack on the Citadel, Cowboy hears Joker muttering to himself and says

"John Wayne? Hey, Joker's right. This is just a John Wayne movie. Joker can be Paul Newman. I'll be a horse." (98)

After assigning parts to other members of the Lusthog Squad, someone asks "Who'll be the Indians?" (99), to which the narrator responds, "The little enemy folks audition for the part— machine-gun bullets rip across a wall to the starboard" (99). This interchange, though glib and ironic, reveals a persistent American reliance on the cultural myth of the frontiersman/Indian-killer to simplify and make sense out of morally and politically complex situations. According to Col. Daniel M. Smith,<sup>27</sup>

[t]o 20th century Americans "the frontier" is magical, whether it's the Old West, Kennedy's New Frontier, Ronald Reagan's High Frontier, or the fictional "final frontier" of *Star Trek*. . . . The magic lies in the sense of challenge, of adventure, of danger and in the opportunity to triumph just as our ancestors did. This viewpoint . . . has . . . dominated all forms of visual mass media in America since World War II. (2)

The figure of the frontiersman/Indian-fighter is central to the American mythos of masculinity, as is the figure of the treacherous, scalping Indian, supposedly capable of unspeakable acts of violence and horror. The Vietnam War was—perhaps inevitably—recast in the mythic form of the captivity narrative: the marines (cavalry) attempted to preserve the South Vietnamese (settlers) from the savagery of the Viet Cong (Indians). Richard Slotkin,<sup>28</sup> for example,

offers the example of General and Ambassador Maxwell Taylor who testified before Congress on the difficulties of “pacification” in Vietnam by arguing that

“It is very hard . . . to plant corn outside the stockade when the Indians are still around. We have to get the Indians farther away . . . to make good progress.” (71)

Given the deep-seated, symbolic-ideological power of this mythic view of both American national identity and of the war in Vietnam, it is hardly surprising that the men fall first into a measure of compliance with the narrative and then into an (ultimately equally compliant) cynical and fatalistic disillusionment. Hasford’s novel depicts from the outset the destruction of romantic illusions based on mythological traditions about the nation and its military mission in Vietnam. The inadequacy of the mythic master-narrative as a meaningful conceptualization of the war, as well as the lack of a viable alternative model of masculine heroism, thus lead the recruits from attachment to the dominant model of mythic self-construction to a cynical, reactive counter-model. In this respect, *The Short-Timers* confirms John Hellman’s conclusion that, underlying veterans’ literary memoirs and novels is “a common allegory, an ironic antimyth in which an archetypal warrior-representative of the culture embarks on a quest that dissolves into an utter chaos of dark revelation” (102).

Given the failure of both the John Wayne war movie and the Western to provide adequate models of masculinity or national purpose, Hasford’s narrator draws increasingly on another Hollywood genre—the horror film—to frame the War. This genre is itself dependent on mythic narratives that actually pre-date the myth of the frontier. The horror genre draws on European folk traditions concerning animal-people, ogres, and the undead. From the outset, the narrator describes people in the military world as if they were participants in a low-budget horror film. Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim is “an obscene little ogre” (4) whose admitted goal is to dehumanize and refunction the men into savage killers. The purpose of boot camp is to eliminate the “civilizing” influence of women and to unlock animal instincts (identified in this discourse with masculinity), to make the men “fearless and aggressive, like animals” (14). Indeed, the most appropriate metaphor the narrator can find for the model of masculinity promoted by the Marine Corps is the werewolf, a mythic, hybrid figure—part-human, part-beast. The exemplar of this brand of masculinity is Gerheim himself. When Leonard aims his loaded weapon at Gerheim, Gerheim’s

. . . face is cold and beautiful as the dark side surfaces. He smiles. It is not a friendly smile, but an evil smile, as though Sergeant Gerheim were a werewolf baring its fangs. (29-30)



By the end of the boot camp section of the novel, the recruits have themselves been transfigured into werewolves:

Silence. In the dark, a hundred men are breathing in unison.

I look at Cowboy, then at Private Barnard. Cold grins of death are frozen on their faces. They nod.

. . . The Marines wait, a hundred young werewolves with guns in their hands. (32-33)

Like the werewolf of legend, the recruits have been consigned to a cursed non-life, unable properly to rejoin society even at the end of the war.<sup>29</sup> The metaphor of the undead seems all the more appropriate since the marines in the field are, in a sense, already dead to the world. The narrator describes them in their trenches, awaiting an attack:

We sleep in holes we have dug with entrenching tools. The holes are little graves and hold the rich, damp odor of the grave. (143)

*The Short-Timers* thus depicts the socially sanctioned transformation of immature young men into monsters. According to Robin Wood,<sup>30</sup> the 1970s saw a shift in the *mise-en-scène* of the horror film from the foreign terrain of Europe to the heart of America itself. The postmodern American horror film represents the “monster” as a repressed element of American civilization itself. According to Wood, “since *Psycho*, the Hollywood cinema has implicitly recognized Horror as both American and familial” (87). Rather than depicting *sui generis* monsters or those spawned by insane geniuses on foreign soil, postmodern American horror movies indict the institutions of American civilization—the family, the government, the military, or the scientific community—for having gone awry and for producing the instruments of their own demise. Hasford’s *The Short-Timers* similarly affirms that American cultural institutions have become dangerous and perverse, breeding monsters instead of human beings. Like refugees from a collective nightmare, the grunts are members of what Wood calls a “monstrous family” (93), specifically an all-male family of vicious, nightmare-like brothers. Joker wakes up in his “grave” to the sound of shrapnel and listens to “the breathing of my squad of brothers, nightmare men in the dark” (144). The men are depicted as barely human. They “look like pale lizards” with “lizard eyes” (145). They hump through an archetypal rain forest which resembles “an enormous green room constructed by ogres for the confinement of monster plants” (149). In order to survive in the jungle, the marines struggle to develop a macabre “ethos” to give meaning to their existences. Animal Mother sums up his solution to his ethical dilemma:

These guys will tell you that I am a monster, but I'm the only grunt in this squad that doesn't have his head up his ass. In this world of shit, monsters live forever and everybody else dies. (158)

In the context of the inadequacy and disintegration of the traditional cultural mythos, *The Short-Timers* thus functions as a fictional meditation on the construction of masculinity as monstrosity.

Hasford's novel presents three full versions of the transformation of man into monster: the metamorphosis of Leonard, the initiation of Rafter Man, and the conversion of Joker himself. In the cases of both Leonard and Rafter Man, Joker functions as an unwilling agent of their "education" into horror. Leonard fits the mold of the innocent transformed into a psychotic monster as a reaction to the abusive military "family." By the time he has completed boot camp, Leonard has become the monstrous double of the ideal marine, truly wedded to his rifle and willing to kill anyone to preserve his "bond" with it. Rafter Man, like Leonard, is an innocent too vulnerable to survive the horrors of military experience. He is a paradigmatic "New Guy" (66), an ingenuous boy whom Joker educates in the protocols of the War. Hasford comically emphasizes his vulnerability through the story of his name: he becomes so drunk that he falls out of the rafters at the Thunderbird Club onto the table of a marine general. Thereafter, Joker trains Rafter Man in the law of the jungle, teaching him that

"... this is a slaughter. In this world of shit you won't have time to understand. What you do, you become. . . ." (55)

Rafter Man explores the excitement of his newly acquired monstrous identity after killing the young, female sniper responsible for decimating the squad. Despite his enthusiasm for the kill, however, he is horrified to see the reflection of the "new smile on his face" (122) as the men move out from the shattered ruin: "Rafter Man stares at himself for a long time and then, dropping the carbine, Rafter Man just walks off down the road, not looking back, not responding to our questions" (122). Later, he is accidentally run over by an American tank and eviscerated. The climax of section II of the novel is thus the final transformation of the man-monster into "a crushed dog, spilling out of its skin" (129), an horrific image of exposed viscera:

Rafter Man has been cut in half just below his new NVA rifle belt. His intestines are pink rope all over the deck. He is trying to pull himself back in, but it doesn't work. His guts are wet and slippery and he can't hold them in. He tries hard to reinsert his spilling guts back into his severed torso. He tries very hard to keep the dirt off of his intestines as he works. (129)

Hasford's use of this final image of Rafter Man invokes the principle of ambivalence typical of the horror movie. As Robin Wood notes, "[f]ew horror movies have totally unsympathetic monsters . . . ; in many . . . the Monster is clearly the emotional center . . ." (80). Rafter Man's life ends with the pathos typical of movies like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Frankenstein*, *The Wolfman*, or *The Fly* which depict the dying monster as a tragic victim of his own monstrosity. In plotting Rafter Man's trajectory from New Guy to monster to crushed dog, Hasford offers an alternative, critical view of the military *bildungsroman* (Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, for example) with its typical representation of the protagonist's ascent from boyhood, through the crucible of combat, to manhood.<sup>31</sup>

Hasford thus resorts to a number of cinematic references in order to characterize the War. He depicts the marines referring to celluloid heroes from both Westerns and war movies, though these references tend to be ironic and parodic. Despite this irony, the grunts nonetheless engage in the kind of tough-guy rhetoric typical of these genres, a rhetoric which serves to reinforce their own incapacity either to examine their behaviors and values or to express the pain brought on by their situation. References to horror films, however, tend to be far more serious—the narrator and the characters in the novel invoke them to describe the moral and existential crisis implicit in the War, as well as their own self-representations as social outcasts and victims of a mercenary Establishment. The discourse of the monster, however, is ambivalent. On the one hand, the narrator deploys this discourse to illustrate the horrors of war and the horror at the heart of civilization itself. In this sense, *The Short-Timers* is heir to the literary tradition of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a tale which, according to Tobey C. Herzog,

explore[s] the nature of imperialism . . . ; the impact of technology and civilization on nature and so-called primitive societies; individuals tested by alien experiences and a jungle environment; saving illusions; the dissolution of moral certainties; and evil's fascination and repulsion—Conrad's "the fascination of the abomination." (22-3)

On the other hand, the men presented in *The Short-Timers* see the image of the monster as a perversely appealing response to the horrors of the war. The marines take an ambivalent pleasure in their willingness to kill and to commit acts of atrocity. In a world of horror, Hasford suggests, some men make abject monstrosity a virtue.

### **Payback And The Inevitability Of Slaughter**

Ironically, the ambivalence of monstrosity is actually inherent in the mythos of the American frontier. As Carol Clover<sup>32</sup> points out, the frontier mythology is

based on a “revenge drama” in which the Indians are portrayed as so malevolent that only a figure of equal malevolence can hope to deter them. The frontiersman/Indian-killer was, according to Louis J. Kern,

an ambivalent, paradoxical figure—a savage instrument of civilization, who had “developed a monomania for vengeance; who dedicated his life to destroying Indians; left civilization and became a savage himself, and perhaps even went insane; who, in any case, was cut off by his monomania from all proper contact with family, home, and the good society.” (39)<sup>33</sup>

As Philip G. Terrie<sup>34</sup> puts it, he embodies both American male “admiration and envy of the ‘savage’s’ skilled survival in the wilderness combined with our impulse to destroy the same ‘savages’ that appear to threaten American progress” (31). Similarly, the marines in Hasford’s novel are called upon to become avengers in the name of civilization, despite the alienation from the espoused moral codes of the society that this calling ultimately entails. The moral-ideological incongruity between idealistic, heroic, nationalistic myths, and the routine horrors expected of them in the war-zone explains the marines’ lapse into the fatalistic outlook manifested in statements like “There it is,” “Payback is a motherfucker,” and “No slack.” Such statements sum up the marines’ surrender to the inevitability of the situation and terminate any real discussion of alternatives. Chili Vendor crystallizes the fatalism of men who cannot identify a meaningful purpose for American involvement in the War when he says,

No Victor Charlie ever raped my sister. Ho Chi Minh never bombed Pearl Harbor. We’re prisoners here. They’ve taken away our freedom and they’ve given it to the gooks, but the gooks don’t want it. They’d rather be alive than free. (67)

These soldiers do not fight in the name of freedom or any other ideal. They fight merely because, for them, there appears to be no other choice. They perceive themselves as slaves incapable of resisting their military masters. We would expect the other men to rally round in anger at this situation, but Joker can only grunt “There it is” (67). For Joker, the war is less an historical series of events than a state of mind in which the men are forever imprisoned:

Those of us who survive to be short-timers will fly the Freedom Bird back to hometown America. But home won’t be there anymore and we won’t be there either. Upon each of our brains the war has lodged itself, a black crab feeding. (176)

Joker's existential philosophy is summed up by his ironic appropriation of one of Gerheim's boot camp slogans. Gerheim pays tribute to his graduating recruits by officially announcing their entry into the honored ranks of the Marine Corps:

Standing at ease on the parade deck, beneath the monument to the Iwo Jima flag raising, Sergeant Gerheim says, "the smoking lamp is lit. You people are no longer maggots. Today you are Marines. Once a Marine, always a Marine. . . ." (25)

Later, in the final section of the novel, Joker rearticulates the notion of interminable Marine identity in his own gothic version of Marine creed:

The squad is silent, waiting for orders. Soon they won't be afraid. The dark side will surface and they'll be like me; they'll be Marines.

Once a Marine, always a Marine. (176)

Joker here espouses a fatalistic theory of human psychology in which subjects are permanently transfigured into monsters by the evil they do ("What you do, you become" [55]), forever dominated by "the dark side." Joker's view of the war is apocalyptic, a view that is reinforced by his perception that he is already dead. A sign on the edge of the forest reads "ALL HOPE ABANDON, YE WHO ENTER HERE" (148), suggesting that the Marines are consigned to the Inferno and are therefore beyond redemption. Such a view allows no resistance.

If, as Chili Vendor suggests, freedom is not their cause, then what is? We find out later when Animal Mother berates the New Guy during the jungle scene in the final section:

"Fuck freedom," says Animal Mother. ". . . You think we waste gooks for *freedom*? Don't kid yourself; this is a slaughter. . . . They waste our bros and we cut them a big piece of payback. And payback is a motherfucker." (159)

The notion of payback, then, serves to legitimate an inexcusable military/political situation in which the men have no personal investment. Animal Mother here invokes the "lex talionis" or law of retribution. In this sense, the war can be understood, like the frontier/vengeance drama, as a blood feud structured by a pattern of reciprocal violence. As René Girard<sup>35</sup> argues, the initiation of violence in such cases institutes a pattern of reciprocal, mimetic violence in which neither side can claim ultimate moral authority or even individuation:

The faster the blows rain down, the clearer it becomes that there is no difference between those who strike the blows and those

who receive them. On both sides everything is equal; not only the desire, the violence, the strategy, but also the alternation of victory and defeat, of exaltation and despair. (158)

Whatever the original moral intent of the violence, and whatever idealistic narratives are summoned up to legitimize it, the ultimate effect of this seemingly interminable contest is to proliferate monsters by turning the participants into monstrous doubles. The cycle of revenge is endless. There will always be more Vietnamese to kill because there will always be more American “bros” dead. Hasford represents both Americans and Vietnamese as caught up in a crisis in which the logic of revenge reduces all participants to monsters. Indeed, Hasford does not hesitate to present the Vietnamese as equally vicious as the Americans. The Vietnamese snipers who deliberately shoot off the feet or genitals of American marines for target practice are no less monstrous than the Americans who thoughtlessly crush children under their tanks, rape Vietnamese women, and demolish the Vietnamese land and holy places. Perhaps this is why the Americans in this novel look upon their Vietnamese enemies as doubles or blood brothers, serving the cause of the same violent system of belief. Crazy Earl, for example, espouses a philosophy of fraternalism through violence, a belief in the power of violence to form bonds between marines and their Vietnamese counterparts:

“The gooks are grunts, like us. They got lifer poges running their country and we got lifer poges running ours. But at least the gooks are grunts, like us. Not the Viet Cong. The VC are some dried up old mamasans with rusty carbines. The NVA, man, we are tight with the NVA. We kill each other, no doubt about it, but we’re tight. We’re hard. . . . Grunts understand grunts . . .” (93)

Crazy Earl’s speech suggests the identification he feels with an enemy he imagines to be his own mirror-image. In his view, both have attained the masculine status of monsters in contrast to the “dried-up old mamasans” of the Viet Cong.

Given the escalation of reciprocal atrocity, war begins to seem like destiny and the killing inevitably endless. When Donlon says the point of it all is to “get back to the land of the Big PX in one piece,” Joker retorts

“Why go back? . . . Here or there, samey-same. Home is where my sergeant is—right Cowboy?” (159)

Once inserted into the economy of reciprocal violence, the individual marine cannot imagine a return to the normalcy of “home.” Indeed, this notion of war as a reciprocally violent crisis in which monsters proliferate helps to explain the

prevalence of violence among the Americans themselves. Not only do they seek to avenge their fallen brothers in arms by attacking the Vietnamese, but they also resort to reciprocal violence against each other. Once again, Animal Mother provides the quintessential and explicit example of the implicit ideology of Gruntspeak. Animal Mother “frags” (i.e., assassinates) Mr. Shortround for refusing to allow the squad to rescue nine marines wounded by a sniper. Animal Mother also illustrates the pattern of reciprocal violence in his verbal duelling contests with Joker that threaten to escalate at any moment to physical assault. This verbal duelling suggests that violence among the Americans is often closely associated with the need to secure masculine “kudos.” According to Girard,

Kudos is best defined in terms of semi-divine privilege, of mystical election attained by military victory. It was the reward sought by both Greek and Trojan, particularly in single combat. (152)

Joker and Animal Mother compete with each other for masculine authority in ritualized verbal combat. When Joker first meets Animal Mother, for example, Animal Mother immediately initiates the contest through jeering comparisons of combat experience:

. . . “I’m a combat correspondent.”  
Animal Mother sneers, exposing rotten nine teeth. “You seen much ‘combat’?” . . .  
“Hey, don’t give me any shit, asshole. My payback is a motherfucker.” (40)

Animal Mother and Joker run the risk of pursuing their own private war in the midst of the war-zone because the oscillating rhythm of reciprocal violence leads to further, more dangerous confrontations. The final showdown occurs when Animal Mother insists on saving the fatally wounded Cowboy from an invisible jungle sniper. Joker refuses to allow the rescue and he and Animal Mother face off in a paradigmatic moment of sacrificial crisis:

Animal Mother raises his weapon. He holds the M-60 waist-high. His eyes are red. He growls deep in his throat. “This ain’t no Hollywood movie, Joker. Stand down or I will cut you in half. . . .”

I look into Animal Mother’s eyes. I look into the eyes of a killer. He means it. I know that he means it. I turn my back on him.

Animal Mother is going to waste me. The barrel of the M-60 probes my back. (177)

Such a crisis calls for a sacrificial act with which to “quell [the] violence within the community and to prevent conflicts from erupting” (Girard, 14). Joker’s solution is to “mercy kill” Cowboy. In doing so, he (willingly or unwillingly) affirms both his male authority as sergeant and the unanimity of the squad under his command. Through an act of apparently inhuman violence, the coherence of “civilization” is once again confirmed.

### Abjection And The Politics Of Style

The self-image of the marine as monster suggests the men’s status as outcasts. Like the frontiersman/Indian-killer, their experiences in the “wilderness” of Vietnam have made them savage and therefore incompatible with the civilization they have been sent to defend. The Indian-fighter at least had certain supposedly redeeming qualities—resourcefulness, a kinship with nature, a sense of loyalty to his cause. But these marines find themselves bereft of any discourse of moral redemption, hence their ultimate identification with monsters. Nonetheless, Hasford depicts them attempting to construct an affirmative identity despite their underlying sense of moral bankruptcy. They do this through the use of a gender hierarchy which privileges an acceptable form of monstrous masculine abjection over an unacceptable, degraded, feminine abjection. Images of male abjection serve to “harden” the soldiers and render them immune to the self-hatred they would otherwise feel as they go from recruits to professional killers. The constant insulting and name-calling that goes on, for example, not only shows wit through one’s ability to come back with a quick answer, but also reinforces one’s view of oneself as in every way abject, different from the people back home, finally non-human. Thus, the soldiers identify more with the rats in the rat-fight (in which they set fire to the rats with lighter fluid, beat them to death with boots and knives, and then “bury the enemy rats with full military honors” [70]) than with the people of Vietnam. By seeing themselves as monsters or vermin, they can legitimize their own acts of savagery, acts that further reinforce their abject status.

In fact, the abject even becomes a new standard by which to judge others. Grunts, for example, though the lowest in the Marine hierarchy, are considered the hardest of the hard. The expression “He’s a grunt” is a compliment. Abject monstrousness becomes a subversive style for these men, a gesture of defiance that signals a rejection of the Establishment responsible for the war. Dick Hebdige<sup>36</sup> discusses the way in which certain objects or behaviors “become signs of forbidden identity, sources of value” (3). Hebdige’s paradigmatic example is that of the tube of Vaseline Jean Genet is obliged to hand over to the Spanish police during a raid described in *The Thief’s Journal*. Though the police abuse Genet for possessing this “dirty, wretched object” which proclaims his homosexuality, Genet decides “this puny and most humble object would hold its own against . . . all the police in the world” (2). When Joker goes to the movie theater



to watch John Wayne's *The Green Berets*, he notices some "grunts" at the front of the theater:

The grunts are sprawled across their seats and they've propped muddy jungle boots onto the seats in front of them. They are bearded, dirty, out of uniform, and look lean and mean, the way human beings look after they've survived a long hump in the jungle, the boonies, the bad bush. (38)

Like Genet's tube of Vaseline, the muddy boots, lack of uniforms, dirtiness and beards of these men "take on a symbolic dimension, becoming a form of stigmata, tokens of a self-imposed exile" (Hebdige, 2). As if to emphasize the noble abjection of these marines, Hasford compares them not only to the figure of John Wayne on the screen ("a beautiful soldier, clean-shaven, sharply attired . . .," etc. [38]) but also to the "clean-shaven office poges who never go into the field" in "spit-shined boots and starched utilities and Air Force glasses" (39) who ridicule the grunts at the end of the movie. Animal Mother responds to their mocking comments and faces by approaching the poges with a smile demonic enough to send them walking backwards out of the movie theater. Animal Mother's smile is the smile of "a man who knows a terrible secret" (39), the same smile as that of "Sorry Charlie," a charred skull Animal Mother mounts on a stake in the kill zone which Joker later adorns with Mouseketeer ears:

The dark, clean face of death smiles at us with his charred teeth, his inflexible ivory grin. Sorry Charlie always smiles at us as though he knows a funny secret. (148)

The Marines learn this "funny secret" in the field from Death itself:

Each shot becomes a word spoken by Death. Death is talking to us. Death wants to tell us a funny secret. (98)

The smiling Animal Mother outfaces the poges because his face shows he has learned first-hand that "What you do, you become" (55). His smile signifies that he has become willing to kill over the slightest insult. Joker demonstrates the same contempt for societal taboos in his confrontation with a Military Police officer (also characterized by his "black spit-shined stateside boots" [53]):

I'm smiling now. I'm smiling as I jam the flash suppressor into the big dumb M.P.'s jelly belly and then I wait for him to make one sound, any sound, or just the slightest movement and then I'm going to pull the trigger. (54)

Joker and Animal Mother confront the petty institutional propriety of lifers, poges, and other “soft,” “jelly-bellied” types with the deathly, monstrous smile of the hardened killer who is beyond good and evil. Hasford’s grunts thus identify themselves as amoral rebel outcasts, defining themselves against the spit and polish of the military Establishment. Ironically, however, the rebellious stance of these marines has already been authorized and programmed by the Corps since boot camp. As the narrator puts it at the end of the boot camp section,

[t]he drill instructors are proud to see that we are growing beyond their control. . . . The Marine Corps does not want robots. The Marine Corps wants killers. The Marine Corps wants to build indestructible men, men without fear. (19)

The defiant, abject stance of the recruits is thus a necessary feature of their Marine-issue identities.

Hasford also depicts the marines in the combat zone engaging in abject acts of cannibalism or conscienceless murder as rites of passage or guarantees of excellence. Mr. Payback, for example, swallows the tip of a dead rat’s tail to impress Lance Corporal Winslow Slavin. Later, after Slavin himself has been killed in a bombing raid, Rafter Man forces himself to swallow a piece of the dead Slavin’s flesh as a demonstration of his inclusion in the abject brotherhood of violence. This bizarre inversion of the notion of abjection separates the men from civilians or anyone else still governed by taboos. It enables the men to bond around their own cynicism and self-hatred, each man reinforcing the other’s feelings of transgressive virtue by affectionate (or threatening) ritualized cut-downs. These acts of abjection, much like Genet’s tube of Vaseline or the nihilistic, punk fashion-statements Hebdige studies, are far cries from any critique or analysis of the politics and history of official culture (in this case of American involvement in Vietnam). Abject style, for these marines, symbolizes the bond they have formed in the face of their own violations of taboos and out of opposition to their superiors and those they consider weak and feminine. Unlike the North Vietnamese who fought for a more coherent cause and thus were able to form military organizations characterized by unity of purpose, a sense of the historical urgency of combat, and nationalist sentiments, the U.S. troops depicted in this novel have no sense of moral or political viability. Given their moral confusion and the programming implicit in the rhetoric of the Corps itself, Hasford depicts soldiers in the combat zone producing a form of masculinist community based on their own alienation from everyone except (and sometimes including) each other. Owen W. Gilman, Jr.<sup>37</sup> sympathetically argues that Vietnam-era marines faced “horribly competing impulses—on the one hand, a natural need for community; on the other, a natural need for self-

preservation" (135). Gilman sees the marines in Hasford's novel as bonded together by a commitment to the Marine ethos—an unwillingness, for example, to abandon their wounded (which the final sniper in the novel exploits). Hasford's novel presents the shattered authority of even this unambiguous moral standard, depicting Joker sacrificing it to save himself and his squad. As Gilman puts it, "Hasford's *The Short-Timers* reveals unequivocally the despair that prevails when the community disintegrates into a nihilism of selves in isolation" (139).

Hasford's novel suggests that the marines' quandary should be seen as a logical product of insistent American cultural norms emphasizing violent models of masculinity and gendered narratives of national supremacy. Though Hasford's narrative focuses specifically on the Vietnam War, it actually documents the emergence of a form of hegemonic masculinity as institutionalized monstrosity in postmodern American culture. The novel demonstrates the ways in which this abject, monstrous male identity, so consistent with the tradition of misogynistic thought in Western culture, can be embraced and celebrated by men who nonetheless claim to rebel against the dominant values and authority structure of the culture. The popularity of the *Rambo* series, the Terminator films, and other culturally endorsed militarized male monster narratives (whether fictional or real, whether set in the barracks, the militia, or in the "hood")<sup>38</sup> suggests that the anti-Establishment, male monster-machine, that unruly postmodern descendent of the half-civilized Indian-killer, has escaped from the American nightmare of Vietnam and is now entrenched deep in the citadels of the American dream.

## Notes

1. Jacqueline E. Lawson, "'She's a Pretty Woman . . . for a Gook': The Misogyny of the Vietnam War," in Philip K. Jason, ed., *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature* (Iowa City, 1991), 15-37.

2. Gustav Hasford, *The Short-Timers* (New York, 1988).

3. I have named this discourse "Gruntspeak" as an allusion to *1984*, in which George Orwell imagines a language called "Newspeak" especially designed to limit thought. Hasford's novel similarly foregrounds a specialized language that transforms, limits, and controls thought. The word "Grunt," of course, refers specifically to infantrymen, but all other soldiers use the same rhetoric in order to present themselves as equally "hard." For elaborations on other special uses of language, see George Orwell, "The Principles of Newspeak," appendix to *1984* (New York, 1961), 246-256 and William Lutz, ed., *Beyond Nineteen Eighty-Four: Doublespeak in the Post-Orwellian Age* (Illinois, 1989).

4. For more detailed discussions of these components as well as the 'domestic' and 'religious' rhetoric of the marines, see Chapter 4 of Ray Bourgeois Zimmerman, "Masculinity and Violence in 20th Century American Literature," unpub. dissertation (University of California, 1994). Briefly, the domestic component involves both the trivialization of domestic attachments—"home" is reduced to a set of comical clichés and stereotypes—and the euphemistic domestication of violence—a rifle, for example, becomes a tool "like an ax on the farm" (11). The religious component involves, on the one hand, pseudo-monastic, ascetic discipline, and violent male mysticism, and, on the other, utter derision of authentic religious values.

5. Thomas Edwards, "G.I. Jargon: Vietnam War Wordbook," *Soldier of Fortune* (Oct. 1983), 28-32.

6. Nancy Anisfield, "Words and Fragments: Narrative Style in Vietnam War Novels," in William J. Searle, ed., *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War* (Ohio, 1988), 56-61.

7. Owen W. Gilman Jr., "Vietnam Fiction and the Paradoxical Paradigm of Nomenclature," in *Search and Clear*, 62-73.

8. Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," *Signs* 12.4 (1987), 687-718.

9. Philip H. Melling, in *Vietnam in American Literature* (Boston, 1990), characterizes Joker as "an authoritarian street-wise bully" (8) and "social controller" (10), whose "reason for being a war correspondent . . . is not to expose the absurdity of war but to exercise power and control over those he lives with and subsequently writes about" (9). Melling reminds us of Joker's complicity in perpetuating destructive institutional values. I argue, however, that Hasford also offers a sharply drawn critique of the institutional and traumatic forces that transform a sardonic, "phony-tough" teenager into a numbed, hardened, and amoral killer.

10. American culture, like any other, provides alternative discourses which enable resistance to the transformative power of a dominant ideology. See, for example, Brian Di Palma's movie *Casualties of War*, which dramatizes the true experiences of Private Sven Eriksson who refused to join in the group violation in November, 1966, of Phan Thi Mao, a young Vietnamese woman, on religious and moral grounds. He subsequently took legal action against the other four men in his squad. Not surprisingly, Eriksson's manhood was brought into question by the defense. See also David Langness, "A Bahá'í Goes to War," in Anthony A. Lee, ed., *Circles of Peace: Reflections on The Bahá'í Teachings* (Los Angeles, 1985), 145-184, which shows Langness's dependence on the power of his spiritual commitments to resist military indoctrination, even in the face of numerous beatings and almost universal disdain.

11. For a compatible treatment of issues of sexual segregation and misogyny as they relate to *Full Metal Jacket*, see Cynthia J. Fuchs, "Vietnam and Sexual Violence: The Movie," in Owen W. Gilman, Jr. and Lorrie Smith, eds., *America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War* (New York, 1990), 120-133. According to Fuchs, "*Full Metal Jacket* underlines the discursive means by which the military uses sexuality to establish and elaborate its power to name the other" (126-27).

12. Michael Pursell, "*Full Metal Jacket*: The Unravelling of Patriarchy," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 16.4 (1988), 218-225. Pursell discusses Stanley Kubrick's movie version of the novel, and therefore refers to Sgt. Gerheim as "Sgt. Hartman." Given the similarities between the two characters, I have substituted Hasford's original name for Kubrick's.

13. Theodor W. Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds., *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York, 1987), 118-37.

14. Gerri Reaves, "From Hasford's *The Short-Timers* to Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*: The Fracturing of Identification," *Literature/ Film Quarterly* 16.4 (1988), 232-237.

15. Gene Kuperman, "'Into the Shit' of History: The Body of the Soldier Male in *Full Metal Jacket*," a paper presented at the University of California, Irvine in 1989.

16. In "'She's a Pretty Woman . . . for a Gook': The Misogyny of the Vietnam War," Jacqueline E. Lawson offers a thorough and powerful analysis of the continuities between culturally dominant American attitudes towards gender and the misogyny of Marine Corps rhetoric and socialization. She particularly emphasizes the fear of emasculation and subsequent adoption of a "supermasculine persona" (19) that characterizes military ideology. Lawson's analysis of non-fiction accounts of the Vietnam War, in this sense, confirms the importance of Hasford's novel for cultural criticism of the Vietnam period.

17. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, 1990).

18. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies Volume 2: Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*, Erica Carter and Chris Turner, trans. (Minneapolis, 1989).

19. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies Volume 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, Stephen Conway, Erica Carter and Chris Turner, trans. (Minneapolis, 1987).

20. Gabriele Schwab, "Cyborgs and Cybernetic Intertexts: On Postmodern Phantasms of Body and Mind," in Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis, eds., *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction* (Baltimore, 1989).

21. Susan White, "Male Bonding, Hollywood Orientalism, and the Repression of the Feminine in Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*," *Arizona Quarterly* 44.3 (Autumn 1988), 120-144.

22. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, 1978).

23. Krista Walter, "Charlie is a She," a paper on *Full Metal Jacket* presented at the University of California, Irvine in 1989.

24. Tobey Herzog, "John Wayne in a Modern Heart of Darkness: The American Soldier in Vietnam," in *Search and Clear*, 16-25.

25. John Hellman, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York, 1986).

26. Jacqueline E. Lawson, "'Old Kids': The Adolescent Experience in the Nonfiction Narratives of the Vietnam War," in *Search and Clear*, 26-36.

27. Col. Daniel M. Smith, "The Media and Images of War: Perception Versus Reality," *The Defense Monitor* 23.4 (1994).
28. Richard Slotkin, "Myth and the Production of History," in Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen, eds., *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (New York, 1987), 70-90.
29. For a fascinating discussion of the "zombie cannibal veteran" horror sub-genre, see Louis J. Kern, "MIAs, Myth, and Macho Magic: Post-Apocalyptic Cinematic Visions of Vietnam," in *Search and Clear*, 37-54, especially footnotes 6 and 7.
30. Robin Wood, "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s," in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York, 1986), 70-94.
31. For a detailed discussion of the parodic relationship between Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* and Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, see James A. Stevenson, "Beyond Stephen Crane: *Full Metal Jacket*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 16.4 (1988), 238-43.
32. Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (New Jersey, 1992).
33. Kern here quotes from Roy Harvey Pearce, "The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating: Leatherstocking Unmasked," in *Historicism Once More: Problems and Occasions for the American Scholar* (Princeton, 1969), 111.
34. Philip G. Terrie, "Last of the Breed: Louis L'Amour's Survivalist Fantasy," *Journal of Popular Culture* 25.4 (Spring 1992), 23-34.
35. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Patrick Gregory trans. (Baltimore, 1989).
36. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York, 1979).
37. Owen W. Gilman, Jr., "Vietnam and John Winthrop's Vision of Community," in *America Rediscovered*, 124-140.
38. See James William Gibson, "American Paramilitary Culture and the Reconstitution of the Vietnam War," in Francesca M. Cancian and James William Gibson, eds., *Making War, Making Peace: The Social Foundations of Violent Conflict* (Belmont, California, 1990), 86-99. Gibson offers a powerful analysis of post-Vietnam paramilitary culture, arguing that for men subscribing to the values of what he calls the "New War," "being a warrior is not an occupation but an identity" (96).