

A Study of Veteran Writing in American Civil War Novels

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Abstract

Situated within the broader context of postbellum American cultural politics, this study investigates how late-nineteenth-century veteran writing shaped national identity and military discourse. Utilizing a historical and textual analysis of Civil War veteran literary works, the research reveals how aging soldiers constructed the Civil War as the nation's last authentic war. In doing so, veterans asserted a privileged claim to martial citizenship while restricting younger generations from acquiring comparable masculine legitimacy. This intergenerational contest over memory, heroism, and identity extended beyond literature into public discourse, political culture, and military ideology, continuing to influence understandings of military service through the era of overseas expansion and World War I. Ultimately, the study reinterprets veteran writing as a crucial site in the cultural production of postbellum American identity and historical memory

Keywords: Veteran writing, American Civil War; Identity

I. INTRODUCTION

Veteran soldiers, or simply veterans, have existed since there has been war. Due to the heavy casualties of the American Civil War, American literary focus on writing about veterans began after the Civil War ended. The American Civil War fundamentally transformed the cultural status and literary representation of military veterans. While previous scholarship has largely interpreted Civil War veteran writing through two dominant paradigms: the Whitmanian assumption that war ultimately resists linguistic representation and the Reunion Road model emphasizing sectional reconciliation, this paper argues that these approaches overlook the active role veterans played in reconstructing their identities through literary discourse. By examining memoirs, novels, and autobiographical writings produced by both Union and Confederate veterans, this study demonstrates that veteran literature functioned not merely as a record of wartime experience but as a powerful means of negotiating postwar citizenship, masculinity, and historical authority.

Drawing upon works by John William De Forest, Sidney Lanier, William T. Sherman, and Herman Melville's critical reflections on war writing, the paper traces the transformation of the veteran image from the romanticized hero of the Mexican-American War to the realist witness of the Civil War. It argues that Civil War veterans rejected romantic conventions in favor of literary realism, insisting that only those who had experienced combat possessed the authority to narrate war authentically. Through this realist aesthetic, veterans sought to legitimize their wartime actions, articulate the psychological consequences of combat, and reconstruct public perceptions of military service in a rapidly changing postwar society. Civil War veterans actively reconstructed their social identity through literary writing, reshaping American realism, historical memory, masculinity, and postwar citizenship.

II. ANALYSIS OF TWO SCHOLARLY PARADIGMS OF VETERAN WRITING

Scholarly research on Civil War veterans has generally adopted two major paradigms to examine this group and its place and influence in postwar American society. The first paradigm derives from the views of the American poet Walt Whitman, who maintained that the true experience of war could never be fully conveyed through words. Whitman expressed the belief that the reality of war transcended the limits of written language. This view has been widely invoked to explain why the period failed to produce literary masterpieces commensurate with the magnitude of the war, suggesting that this absence resulted not merely from the difficulty of artistic creation but from the inability of conventional literary forms to capture the essential reality of warfare.

The second paradigm is known as the Reunion Road. Its central argument is that discussions of and attention to the legacy of the Civil War during the 1890s were primarily centered on the reunions and commemorative activities of white veterans. This paradigm emphasizes that, in the decades following the war, the reunions of white veterans became not only a dominant mode of narrative but also an important means by which American society shaped the memory of the war. These reunions were typically organized by veterans' associations from both the North and the South. Through jointly participating in commemorative ceremonies, reenacting battles, delivering speeches, and honoring fallen comrades, they sought to bridge former hostilities and reconstruct a narrative of fraternal reconciliation. In this process, the trauma of war was reinterpreted, and attention shifted from the political and moral significance of the conflict itself to the valor, sacrifice, and honor displayed on the battlefield.

Veteran writing, including memoirs, autobiographies, and literary works published by soldiers and officers, provides an important window into the difficult process by which veterans returned to civilian life in the early postwar years. By tracing the evolution of Civil War writing, it is possible to examine how white veterans employed the image of the masculine citizen-soldier to construct an emotional space for the veteran community, one that was neither defined by pity nor constrained by a socially imposed sense of obligation.

III. THE CHANGE OF VETERAN IMAGES AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

In 1848, the Mexican-American War broke out. More than a geopolitical conflict, it attracted large numbers of young men and adventurers eager to take part. Young soldiers and fearless explorers devoted their enthusiasm and energy to the war, and many enlisted in pursuit of honor, adventure, or personal gain. After the war ended, these veterans often turned to writing about their wartime experiences as a means of emotional release or simply to pass the time. Their memoirs and literary works were therefore frequently infused with personal feelings and subjective experience.

Against this background, the novelist Herman Melville criticized the literature produced by veterans of the Mexican-American War. He argued that such writing was often marked by highly emotional descriptions and failed to maintain an objective and impartial perspective. Melville contended that these texts were frequently characterized by inflated, affected prose and displayed a clear tendency toward opportunism. In his view, they were more concerned with celebrating individual heroism and expressing personal emotions than with providing a truthful and comprehensive account of the war.

Melville further observed that the style of these veteran writings was often so exaggerated that it undermined their authority as representations of war. In shaping the experience of conflict, they tended to overlook the complexity of history. Instead, they relied on dramatic effects to attract readers, rather than presenting the realities of war with historical rigor. As a result, veterans' recollections came to resemble personal emotional catharsis more than reliable historical records.

Melville's criticism reflects his concern with the authenticity and authority of war literature. He believed that genuine accounts of war should move beyond the expression of individual emotion and strive to present the complexity and depth of warfare objectively and accurately. His critique also reveals the challenges inherent in

literary representations of war, particularly the difficulty of balancing personal experience with historical fact. (Melville 41)

At the same time, the dominance of Romanticism also suppressed the expression of veterans' genuine emotions. Romantic literature tended to idealize war and heroism, and this tendency simplified and obscured the realities of veterans' experiences. Their suffering, struggles, and inner conflicts were often concealed beneath romanticized narratives, preventing their true feelings from being fully expressed or understood.

The end of the four-year Civil War brought a series of new challenges to American society, including the demobilization of the armies and the question of whether soldiers from both the North and the South could successfully reintegrate into civilian life. Civilians feared that, after experiencing the violence of combat and the disruptive influence of military camp life, soldiers might be unable to readjust to peacetime society. There was even concern that returning veterans would dominate the postwar political landscape and threaten social stability. It was not until the appearance of fictional works written by veterans from both sides that these stereotypical public perceptions began to be challenged.

Since the publication of *Miss Ravenel's Conversion: From Secession to Loyalty* in 1867 by the Union veteran John William De Forest, many literary critics have argued that its conventional romantic plot weakens De Forest's realistic depiction of the Civil War. What these scholars have failed to recognize, however, is that the military experience of the novel's protagonist, the Union veteran Edward Colburne, goes beyond what David Blight has described as a romantic reunion.

More importantly, the novel's plot, characterization, and narrative style inaugurated the tradition of American literary realism. De Forest's rejection of Romanticism was closely related to his personal experience. Typhoid fever had left him physically frail during childhood. During the Civil War, in his letters to his wife, De Forest repeatedly emphasized the ordinariness of military life, complaining that people showed little concern for the future of soldiers and that few genuinely cared about the fate of veterans.

Writing in *The Nation* in June 1867, Henry James praised the novel, remarking: "The emotions of the characters may not be subtle, but they present genuine personal experience. It is a novel with many merits" (James 52). In July of the same year, William Dean Howells similarly observed: "De Forest treats the soldier as a new literary subject. He is the first man to deal with war in a truly artistic manner. His soldiers are social organisms tempered by battle, the kind of men we actually know" (James 52).

Throughout his career, De Forest sought to demonstrate that only veterans could write their own wars, and that only a soldier's experience could be transformed into reliable personal knowledge for readers. In the editorial column of *Harper's Magazine* in February 1887, Howells wrote: "Before realism had acquired its name, De Forest was already America's first realist" (Howells 196).

Both in fiction and in reality, Southern civilians were generally more capable of establishing emotional connections with Confederate soldiers. Even so, a psychological divide continued to separate Southern veterans from the civilian population. In *Tiger-Lilies*, the Southern veteran Sidney Lanier argues that action inflicts greater suffering than observation, because action creates an illusion of power that is ultimately shattered by the reality of military defeat.

IV. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF VETERAN IDENTITY

After the Civil War, Southern veterans confronted profound psychological dilemmas and intense social pressure. They were compelled to construct new personal narratives through which they could explain and justify actions committed during the war that violated ordinary moral standards. Acts such as destroying property and taking human life appeared particularly difficult to reconcile with the moral values of postwar society. For these veterans, the brutality of war and the extreme circumstances in which they found themselves rendered their actions morally complex and deeply controversial.

To gain social understanding and tolerance, Southern veterans attempted to mitigate the negative

consequences of their wartime conduct by reshaping their public image. In recounting their wartime experiences, they emphasized the difficult choices they had faced while portraying themselves as heroes loyal to their country and committed to honor. Within these narratives, the war was presented as an unavoidable catastrophe, and their actions were explained as inevitable decisions made amid the conflict between national duty and personal responsibility. By emphasizing the cruelty of war and recounting their own suffering, they sought to demonstrate that their conduct resulted not from personal malice or moral corruption but from the extraordinary circumstances in which they had been forced to act.

This narrative strategy functioned not only as a form of self-defense but also as an effort to reshape historical memory to secure social recognition. By stressing both the complexity of war and the immense psychological and physical burdens they had endured, veterans hoped that society would judge their actions more sympathetically and reduce the moral condemnation and social exclusion they faced after the war. In this process, they sought not only public sympathy but also reconciliation with their own inner conflicts and feelings of guilt. Their efforts reflected both an urgent desire for acceptance in postwar society and a profound reflection on their own historical role.

Through this process, Southern veterans attempted to reestablish their identity and dignity in postwar America. They hoped that society would acknowledge the moral dilemmas created by war, recognize their sacrifices and struggles, and grant them the respect and acceptance they believed they deserved. This process of discursive construction not only shaped contemporary perceptions of Southern veterans but also exerted a lasting influence on broader historical narratives.

Literary critics have found it difficult to classify *Tiger-Lilies* as a Civil War novel, although the work explicitly identifies itself as *Tiger-Lilies: A Novel*. The first volume is generally interpreted as an expression of early nineteenth-century German Romanticism, while the remote village of "Tallborg" is celebrated as an Eden untouched by war. After the end of Reconstruction, however, Civil War veterans could not recover a sense of inner peace or nostalgically recall the pastoral world before the war unless they first confronted and organized their traumatic memories of battlefield killing. These traumatic memories erected a barrier between prewar and postwar life. Beginning in the late 1870s, ordinary veterans and retired generals increasingly restored the agency of veteran authors through the writing of Civil War documentary literature, thereby giving fuller meaning to the identity of the Civil War veteran.

Throughout history, memoirs have served as a literary genre through which retired military leaders and other historical figures defended the strategic decisions they made during wartime. They provided an opportunity for individuals who had participated in major historical events to reconsider their decisions in later life and to justify their actions. By writing memoirs, these figures could not only summarize their military careers and decision-making processes but also reshape their public image in an effort to address earlier controversies or misunderstandings.

Because military and political elites generally wrote memoirs, the genre typically emphasized personal heroism and the legitimacy of the author's decisions. As principal participants in major historical events, these elites used memoirs to demonstrate their wisdom and strategic vision at decisive moments in history. One of the primary purposes of memoir writing was to establish, through detailed narrative, that their decisions and actions had been farsighted and carefully considered within the complex circumstances of their time. Such memoirs frequently contained elements of self-glorification. The authors selectively recalled events, highlighting their contributions to success while minimizing or omitting failures and controversies. This process not only protected their personal reputations but also reinforced their historical standing. Memoirs therefore functioned not merely as records of the past but also as important instruments of historical interpretation and self-fashioning, revealing both the author's subjective understanding of historical events and the intentions that shaped their historical narrative.

The first edition of *Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman* was written while Sherman was living in St. Louis during the 1870s. Like most military memoirs, Sherman's memoir, as the Commanding General of the Army, was

primarily concerned with enhancing his reputation within the United States military. Following its publication by Appleton in 1875, the book immediately became controversial. The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* observed that the memoir was "unjust to both the living and the dead; there are too many instances in which the general uses his role as an author to defame others while elevating himself. In the *Memoirs*, Sherman maintained that every military action he undertook was intended to hasten the end of the Civil War and restore national unity, while avoiding responsibility for controversial actions such as the notorious foraging parties during the March to the Sea. Sherman's biographer John F. Marszalek summarizes this rationale succinctly: "Destroying property was preferable to taking lives, especially when those lives belonged to friends" (Sherman 547).

V. CONCLUSION

Civil War writing not only provided Union and Confederate veterans with a new sense of collective identity but also elevated them to a position of exceptional social prestige. Between 1869 and 1901, the United States experienced what may be called the era of the "veteran presidents." During this period, every president except Grover Cleveland had served in the Union Army. Significantly, all of these veteran presidents came from the North. It was not until the election of Jimmy Carter in 1977 that a president from the former Confederacy assumed office in the post-Civil War era.

By the 1890s, aging Civil War veterans, through their distinctive literary representations of the war, had become a significant obstacle to the aspirations of younger white middle-class men. Raised on the literature produced by Civil War veterans, this younger generation had absorbed the belief that "war makes men." They longed to prove themselves on the battlefield and thereby demonstrate the masculinity of what they regarded as the postwar generation. Writers such as William Faulkner exemplified the enduring influence of this cultural ideal, as their works sought to articulate a distinctive vision of postwar manhood and heroism.

Yet these aspirations stood in sharp contrast to the central message of veterans' literature. Through realist accounts of warfare, Civil War veterans sought to establish that they had participated in the last authentic war in American history. Their narratives emphasized the singularity, magnitude, and unparalleled hardships of the Civil War, presenting it as an irreplaceable historical event whose experience could never be replicated. In doing so, they effectively denied younger men access to the battlefield as a legitimate means of achieving masculine identity. Veterans' writings frequently conveyed a profound understanding of the realities of combat while criticizing the modern generation for its lack of genuine military experience, thereby making it difficult for the postwar generation to attain public recognition of its claims to manhood.

This intergenerational conflict was not merely a literary debate but also a struggle for cultural authority. Civil War veterans asserted their privileged understanding of national history and heroic citizenship through their war narratives. In contrast, younger middle-class men sought to redefine their place in society through military service and martial achievement. As the twentieth century approached, this conflict intensified, exerting a lasting influence on American society, culture, and military policy. In particular, as the United States embarked on overseas expansion and eventually entered the First World War, these cultural tensions helped shape the nation's willingness to engage in war. Throughout this process, the meanings of war and masculinity were continually renegotiated, profoundly influencing American military culture and conceptions of martial citizenship.

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