

Introduction: Scholarship

Critical Questions, Creative Responses

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The Journal of Military Experience's first volume of creative art and literature showcased the experiences of a small group of talented veterans-turned-college students at Eastern Kentucky University. Since that time, it has expanded its focus to address the intersection and transition between soldier and civilian, soldier and veteran, soldier and student. Negotiating these overlapping and multiple perspectives is no small or simple task, and the essays chosen to represent this inaugural scholarly assemblage appreciate the gargantuan and complex qualities of the endeavor to speak to the reality of military experience; they intend to open up conversation at this intersection so that soldiers and veterans can contribute their voices to the discussion.

The writers in this collective position their personal narratives within the bigger picture of military experience with the unspoken intent of using critical analysis to think through what we might otherwise fight through. Maj. Dr. Andrew D. Belyea's captivating elucidation of his efforts as a military officer/English professor not only situates itself within one of *JME's* critical focuses but points to the usefulness of literary analysis in making critical thinking skills meaningful in the everyday lives of students, soldiers, and veterans. Belyea adeptly summarizes the cultural and philosophical conditions of the last thirty years before laying out what might be seen as a battle plan to issue literary and cultural analysis into the arsenal of soldiers before they deploy into a culture completely foreign to them. Whether critical analysis is or isn't a proper "weapon" to wield during war is one of a number of important and practical questions concerning how the Humanities classroom might assist to effectively

deploy critical thinking skills into the real-life missions soldiers and veterans encounter. Looking at art and reading texts solely for fun is a luxury of the past to many people who have experienced real life up close and personally; we read the world around us as it has been shaped by those experiences which often causes us to hypervigilantly read even the most peaceful situations. As Maj. Belyea's essay so perfectly illustrates, developing a knack for critical analysis combats the solipsism too often brought on by the individualized and narrow purviews of academia, of battle, and of our own life's circumstances.

The skills that these scholarly writers have embedded into their texts instruct us both explicitly and implicitly. English professor Irene Karpiak examines the patterns and possibilities of several of her own students' writings to underscore JME's potential for cathartic life writing, while Joshua A. Bernstein deftly weaves his own war narrative with a number of war novels to respond to an ongoing critical conversation about the value of realism in war stories. Sarah K. Traphagen models a more deliberate example of "close reading" war narrative when she playfully sutures the roles of medical professionals in combat scenarios to their capacity to relate those experiences afterward through written narrative; Frank Usbeck pairs this same critical skillset with his research into Native American tribal rituals to provide insight into the microcosm of military blogging, and Sarah M. Gann turns her critical attention back onto the "academic machine" to describe the unique circumstances surrounding the transition from military soldiers to university students and to suggest that changes in faculty training may be a necessary first step toward more deliberately setting up soldier-students for success in academia. Careful readers will discern a set of skills from the way these writers are reading literature and culture, a kind of methodology or "how to read"—one that, when practiced consistently and as these writers argue, has the potential to change the way we read the world around us.

These scholars, diverse in their experiences and interests, come together here in testimony to the work they do in the real world and to their commitment to

translating those realities into textual expression. Though they have never met and though their intentions were different at the outset, they share a tone of optimism about the future of the relationship between the Humanities and our armed forces.