The Sorrow of War

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BAO NINH

Bảo Ninh was born in the Vietnamese city of Hanoi in 1952. He experienced the early effects of the Vietnam War, since American air raids started to disrupt everyday life in Hanoi in the mid-1960s. Ninh was directly impacted these air raids, since his school had to be relocated for safety reasons. This experience encouraged him to join the North Vietnamese Army against his parents' wishes, since they wanted him to go to college instead of putting his life at risk as a soldier. Still, Ninh was set on joining the army, wanting to be admirable and honorable by defending his country. He ended up joining the Glorious 27th Youth Brigade in 1969 and was one of only 10 soldiers from the brigade to survive the war—out of 500. He turned to writing in the aftermath of the war, penning *The Sorrow of War* as part of his studies at the Nguyen Du Writing School. The book circulated throughout Vietnam as a limited-run, underground publication before it was translated into English. It was eventually published abroad, but the novel was banned in Vietnam by the Communist Party of Vietnam until 2006.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Sorrow of War examines what life was like in Vietnam before, during, and after the Vietnam War. The war began in 1955, but Kien's life in the novel isn't intensely impacted by the conflict until the mid-1960s, when the United States became more involved. In 1965, the President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, launched Operation Rolling Thunder—a three-year bombing campaign targeting North Vietnam. The U.S. was allied with South Vietnam because of its anti-communist agenda, whereas pro-communist North Vietnam was allied with the Soviet Union. This meant that North and South Vietnamese people were fighting against each other, and though it's certainly the case that many American soldiers died (more than 58,000, to be precise), the toll the war took on Vietnam was considerably larger: more than one million soldiers died, and the civilian death count was north of two million. Despite this massive loss of life, North Vietnam emerged victorious, at least insofar as it succeeded in reunifying the country and ensuring that Communist forces could take control of not just Vietnam, but also Laos and Cambodia.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

There are many famous books about the Vietnam War, but most Western readers are relatively unfamiliar with works that approach the conflict from the Vietnamese perspective (like *The Sorrow of War* does). To that end, it's worth considering *The Sorrow of War* alongside books like *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace: The Diary of Dang Thuy Tram*, Andrew X. Pham's *Catfish and Mandala*, and Truong Nhu Tang's *A Viet Cong Memoir*—all of which give insight into real-life accounts of the Vietnam War from a Vietnamese point of view. In terms of more contemporary literature, Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer* also features a North Vietnamese protagonist during the Vietnam War. And, of course, it's worth mentioning the most famous American novel about the Vietnam War: Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, which explores a similar kind of wartime horror as *The Sorrow of War* even though it's told from an American perspective.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Sorrow of War
- **When Published:** 1990
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction, War Novel
- **Setting:** Vietnam during the Vietnam War
- **Climax:** Having been separated from his unit, Kien tries to catch up with his fellow soldiers by hopping on a freight train with Phuong during an intense air raid carried out by American bombers.
- **Antagonist:** The violence and trauma of war
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Triumph. Even though *The Sorrow of War* was banned in Vietnam at the time, Bao Ninh won the *Independent* Foreign Fiction Prize for the novel in 1994.

Translations. The version of *The Sorrow of War* that is most widely known throughout the world is not a direct translation of Ninh's work—rather, it's a newer version based on an earlier, rougher translation.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *The Sorrow of War*, a writer named Kien struggles to process his traumatic experience in the Vietnam War. A former soldier for the North Vietnamese Army, he has trouble finding happiness in postwar Vietnam, even though he fought for the winning side. Kien's life has been completely turned upside down by the war, and he finds himself unable to stop thinking

about the horrible things he witnessed. Tormented by the violence of his past, he starts writing about his experiences, creating a nonlinear, fragmented narrative that begins right after the war ended in 1975.

In the months after the North's victory, Kien was part of a Remains-Gathering Team searching for the many people who had gone missing in action. This required him to return to a place known as the **Jungle of Screaming Souls**, where he personally witnessed many horrific things over the 10 years he served as a soldier. While working with the Remains-Gathering Team, Kien often heard howls in the jungle at night. The noises caused him to remember an experience he had years before, when he and his men were stationed in the Jungle of Screaming Souls and he began to sense ghostly figures in their camp. As time went on, he slowly realized that the specters that came in and out of the camp weren't ghosts, but three young women living on a farm nearby. Three of his soldiers had developed romantic relationships with these women, and though Kien knew he should put an end to their nightly meetings, he couldn't bring himself to do it—he could never get in the way of love.

One day, the three soldiers were distraught because they couldn't find the women from the farm. When Kien helped them look, they discovered that the three women had been taken by South Vietnamese soldiers. Kien and the others tracked these soldiers down, but they had already killed the women. Even though Kien didn't know the women himself, he flew into a rage and ordered the soldiers to dig their own graves, preparing to shoot them when they finished. At the last minute, one of his own men suggested that he put off executing the enemy soldiers, at which point Kien turned on him and threatened to shoot him, too. In the end, though, he spared the South Vietnamese soldiers.

As part of the Remains-Gathering Team, Kien thought a lot about his time with the 27th Battalion. He was one of only 10 people in the battalion to survive a gruesome battle in 1969, and he's haunted by the memory of his many friends and fellow soldiers who lost their lives. He himself almost died in that battle, but he managed to drag himself to a shoddy field hospital, where he spent the next several months on the verge of death. He thought the nurse tending to him was Phuong, the love of his life. He didn't know it at the time, but he narrowly escaped death at this field hospital—a soldier who was with him told him years later that he and Kien were transferred to a bigger hospital just a few hours before the tents were bombed. The nurse who treated Kien had surely died.

Kien's thoughts often drift back to Phuong, as he recalls their time together before and after the war. They were in love as teenagers, and Phuong even had a close relationship with Kien's father—arguably closer than the bond Kien himself shared with his father. Both Phuong and Kien's father saw themselves as free spirits who didn't fit into the culture of wartime patriotism that defined North Vietnam in the 1960s. Kien's father was a painter, but his artwork was somewhat highbrow, so most people shunned it at the time, since communist art was supposed to be accessible to everyone. Kien didn't understand his father, even though he lived with him alone, since his mother had left years before (and died not long thereafter). His father spent hours painting in the attic of their apartment building. One day, though, he decided to kill himself, and he chose to burn all of his **paintings** beforehand. Phuong was there when he burned them, but she didn't tell Kien about this until years later.

It was the night before Kien left for military training that Phuong told him about watching his father burn the paintings. She and Kien were lying on the banks of a lake in Hanoi after having skipped school, where they were supposed to be digging trenches with the rest of the students in preparation for the inevitable attacks on the city. Phuong wore a bathing suit underneath her clothes that day and convinced Kien to sneak away. They swam and then lay together on the banks late into the night. Phuong wanted to have sex, but Kien couldn't bring himself to do it. Slightly frustrated, she criticized his devotion to his upcoming life as a soldier, trying to help him see that he might be gone for a very long time—if, that is, he came back at all. Still, though, he couldn't bring himself to have sex with her, though they came close. He often thought about that night later in the war.

After leaving for training, Kien passed through Hanoi one last time on his way to the frontlines. His superior told him and the other soldiers they could visit their families before getting back on the train and going to the frontlines. If they were late to come back, though, the train would leave and they would be considered deserters, which was punishable by execution. Kien rushed back to his building but then learned from a neighbor that Phuong's university was evacuating, so he rushed back to the train station, where he found her with another man. When Phuong saw Kien, she let the other man ride away on the train without her. She was overjoyed to see Kien; they rented a bicycle taxi and returned to their building. Just as they arrived, though, an air-raid siren started blaring, so their cab driver ran to the nearest shelter. Not wanting to waste their time together, they decided to commandeer the bicycle taxi, which they rode back to the station, laughing the whole way. They knew Kien was already in danger of missing his train, but they still had a good time.

Upon reaching the station, they saw that the train had already left, so Phuong convinced Kien that they should hitchhike to the next station, where he could reboard the train. But when they finally reached that station, there was only a cargo train travelling behind the train Kien actually needed. It was nighttime by then, so they snuck onto the cargo train in the dark, settling down in a pitch-black car full of other stowaways. They lay close to each other, feeling the thrill of being together

in such extraordinary circumstances, though Kien still couldn't bring himself to have sex with Phuong, which disappointed her. During the trip, however, more serious matters arose, as American bomber planes flew overhead and started targeting the railroads. The train Kien was supposed to be on was decimated by bombs, and even the cargo train sustain severe damage. In the chaos, Kien was separated from Phuong, at which point a group of men surrounded her and took turns raping her. It wasn't until much later that Kien was able to find her again. She was battered and bloody, but he was able to get her to stand up.

However, there was a large man in the cargo car who didn't want Phuong to go anywhere. He had apparently stopped the other men from continuing to rape her, and now he wanted to sleep with her as his reward. As bombs fell all around them, Kien had to fight this huge man, eventually knocking him to the floor by bashing him on the head with a pipe. While doing so, Kien called Phuong a "whore" in a state of frenzied anger. When they finally made it away from the cargo train, she had little desire to go on, but Kien picked her up and found a bicycle, which he used to transport them to a safe place nearby.

After resting for a bit, Kien and Phuong went to a small hamlet where there was an abandoned school. Phuong spoke unflinchingly about how doomed their relationship clearly was, acknowledging that they had a very dim future ahead of them and suggesting that they should probably accept that they would be going their separate ways. Kien was deeply troubled by what she said, but she fell asleep before the conversation ended. When Kien himself fell asleep, he didn't wake up until much later—only to find that Phuong was no longer by his side. He anxiously searched the premises, discovering groups of North Vietnamese soldiers camped out in other parts of the abandoned school. He approached one group and asked if they'd seen Phuong, and they teased him by claiming that she was having sex with several other soldiers on the outskirts of the grounds at that very moment—a joke Kien didn't take well, pulling out his gun and pointing it at the man who said it. He then ran to the edge of the property and peered inside some armored trucks, but Phuong wasn't there.

Kien dropped to the ground and put his gun to his head, ready to end his life. Just then, more American planes appeared on the horizon, and the sounds of gunfire broke out everywhere. Kien's gaze happened to fall on Phuong, who was naked and bathing in a nearby stream. Watching Phuong, Kien put down his gun. She seemed unbothered by the commotion, slowly drying off and then running right by him without seeing him. He heard her calling his name as she went back to the school. Instead of going to her, though, he walked in the other direction, making his way toward the highway so that he could continue on toward the frontlines.

Years later, Kien received a letter from a soldier named Ky, who explained that they had fought alongside each other several years ago and that he had recognized Kien at the time. He didn't say anything then, though, because he didn't want to shake Kien's concentration. But now he had something to tell him: he was with the soldiers who had mocked Kien on that day at the school. Shortly after Kien left, Phuong came back and was frantically looking for him. She looked for so long and then, the next day, refused to leave the school. Ky wanted Kien to know it was clear she loved him. This letter buoyed Kien's spirits and gave him hope, which sustained him through the rest of the war.

These days, Kien and Phuong are no longer together. They rekindled their relationship in the years immediately after the war, but it didn't work out. Phuong had supported herself throughout the war by earning money as a sex worker, which added a complicated layer to their relationship. And Kien, for his part, had come back from war a much different person. Eventually, Phuong decided to leave Hanoi once and for all. Kien was distraught, but he let her go and then focused on writing his novel, drinking heavily and working on the book late into the night. When he finally finished, he left Hanoi, too, leaving the manuscript with a "mute girl" who lived in his building. She kept the pages for a long time and then gave them to a former soldier (the second narrator), who arranged them and compiled them for publication.

CHARACTERS

Kien (The Writer) – The protagonist of *The Sorrow of War*, Kien is a former soldier for the North Vietnamese Army. He spent 10 years fighting in the Vietnam War, and though he was on the victorious side, he feels at a loose end in postwar Vietnam. As such, he decides to write about his experiences, creating a disjointed and fragmentary **novel** that winds through some of his most traumatic memories—memories of seeing friends die, of getting injured, and of succumbing to the violent urges of wartime. But the stories he writes aren't *all* sad—he also writes about Phuong, the love of his life. He and Phuong were romantically involved in high school, before Kien joined the army. His memories of her from this period are powerful, as he thinks back to their last night together before the war, when she tried to convince him to have sex—but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Later, Phuong ended up traveling with him toward the frontlines in a dramatic and terrifying entrance to the war that left their relationship dangling without any sort of emotional closure, as Kien set off to battle without knowing where, exactly, he and Phuong stood with each other. For the next 10 years, Kien often thought about Phuong in moments of hardship, and this helped him make it through some of the worst and most painful times of his life. Upon returning to Hanoi, he and Phuong resumed their relationship, but so much had changed that they were unable to make things work. After Phuong left him once and for all, Kien turned his attention to

writing, drinking heavily and staying up late to pen his novel. When he finally finished, he left his apartment and never came back. A "mute girl" living in his building ended up giving the chapters to a former soldier, who compiled them into a wide-ranging, nonlinear novel.

Phuong – Phuong is the love of Kien's life. A young woman living in Hanoi during the Vietnam War, she and Kien dated as teenagers. While everyone around her was very patriotic in the lead up to the war, Phuong remained skeptical of the violence and calamity to come. She saw herself as a free spirit who didn't fit into the gung-ho, patriotic attitude of wartime. Because of this outlook, she connected with Kien's father, a painter who bemoaned how everyone in Hanoi had gotten swept up in the war. Phuong understood Kien's father and even watched him burn his **paintings** shortly before he took his own life—an experience she didn't talk about until the last night before Kien left for training, when they were lying on the banks of a lake. She wanted to have sex on this night, but Kien was too nervous. Still, Phuong tried to point out that they might not have another chance, revealing her early grasp of just how much the Vietnam War would divert their paths in life. Later, Phuong ended up riding with Kien on a freight train toward the frontlines during an air raid. In the chaos of the bombs, she and Kien got separated, at which point a group of men surrounded Phuong and took turns raping her. By the time Kien found her, she was with a large man who wanted her to stay with him, forcing Kien to beat him with a pipe. The entire ordeal put a strain on Phuong and Kien's relationship, though they still thought of each other quite often in the ensuing 10 years of the war. To support herself, Phuong made money as a sex worker while Kien was gone—something Kien had a hard time accepting upon his return. In the end, Phuong left Kien after trying to rekindle their relationship in the postwar years. In her absence, Kien tried to find happiness in the happy memories they shared before the war.

Kien's Father – Kien's father was a painter who refused to conform to the artistic style prevalent in North Vietnam in the 1960s. At that time, Communist ideals upheld that **paintings** should be accessible to everyone, including people with working-class backgrounds. But Kien's father was interested in more abstract, highbrow artwork, and he refused to change his aesthetic style. The art community therefore shunned him, though this didn't stop him from painting. He considered himself a free spirit who didn't belong in the patriotic wartime climate of Hanoi in the 1960s. Phuong felt the same way, so they developed a close relationship—closer, even, that Kien's own relationship with his father. Eventually, though, Kien's father grew tired of life and decided to kill himself, though not before burning all of his paintings. Phuong watched him burn them, but she didn't tell Kien about the experience until years later. When Kien returned from Vietnam, he started working on his novel in the very same attic where his father used to paint, suggesting that he felt a connection to the old man while in the throes of agonized artistic creation.

Hoa – Hoa was a young Vietnamese woman who helped guide Kien and his men toward the Cambodian border in 1968. Most of the soldiers traveling with Kien were injured, making their group vulnerable to attack. Kien didn't know Hoa well, but he had to trust her because he didn't know the area very well. However, Hoa mistakenly brought the group to the edge of Crocodile Lake, putting them in a very dangerous situation with no escape route. Kien was so incensed that he almost killed Hoa, but he gave her a second chance. While the group stayed by Crocodile Lake, he and Hoa went back through the woods. They found the landmark Hoa had been looking for, at which point they took a break and got to know each other. Hoa was only 19, and Kien quickly came to like her. But their friendship was cut short when they spotted a group of American soldiers. Hoa sacrificed herself by shooting their hunting dog and running in the other direction, drawing the soldiers away from Kien and the wounded group at Crocodile Lake. Kien could hear the Americans raping Hoa, and though he wanted to come to her aid, he realized it would be futile.

Hien – Kien met Hien on the train back to Hanoi after the North Vietnamese Army won the war. Like Kien, Hien was a soldier for the North—unlike Kien, though, she didn't escape the war without lasting physical injuries. For the several days it took the train to make its way through Vietnam, Kien and Hien got to know each other. Every night, Kien would pick Hien up and place her in his hammock. They would then spend the night kissing and whispering to each other, enjoying some fleeting happiness after years of violence and turmoil. When the train reached Hien's village outside Hanoi, Kien wanted to get off with her, but she told him not to, saying that it was time for them to go their separate ways—the war was over, she told him, so now they had to return to their civilian lives on their own.

Can – In the last year of the war, Can was one of the soldiers in Kien's platoon. A sensitive person, Can was terribly impacted by all the horror he'd seen throughout his years of combat—so impacted, in fact, that he decided to leave the army and become a deserter, which was punishable by execution. He told his plans to Kien right before leaving, trusting that Kien wouldn't stop him or tell the higher-ups when he left. Kien tried to dissuade him, but it was no use. Army officials found Can several days later; he hadn't gotten very far, but he was already dead. Nobody knows how, exactly, he died, and though everyone quickly forgot about him, Kien still sometimes thinks about him and how profoundly the war troubled him.

The Mute Girl –The "mute girl" is how the novel refers to a woman who lives in Kien's apartment building in Hanoi and who doesn't speak. (It's worth noting that "mute" is no longer an accepted term for nonspeaking people.) As Kien writes his **novel** in the years after the Vietnam War, he often seeks out the company of the "mute girl." When he finishes writing late

into the night, for instance, he will drunkenly find her so that he can speak aloud whatever story he has just written, apparently feeling some kind of cathartic release simply by confiding in someone else. The novel implies that the "mute girl" is deaf but that she can read lips, so she seems to understand the vast majority of Kien's stories. When Kien finishes his novel, he decides to burn it (just like his father burned his paintings), but the "mute girl" stops him. Later, she and Kien finally have sex, but Kien leaves before dawn and never returns to the apartment. The "mute girl" understands that he has left his apartment for her, and she keeps his stack of pages safe until eventually giving them to a former soldier who compiles them into a book.

Hanh –Hanh was a young woman who lived in Kien's building when he was growing up. She was very pretty and eventually took an interest in Kien. One day, she asked him to help her dig a small bomb shelter beneath her bed. As he helped her, they stood close to each other in the ditch they'd dug, and though Kien was nervous, he found himself kissing her neck and pushing against her. Hanh hesitated, and then Kien felt out of control and tore himself away, running from the room. Hanh told him to return after he collected himself, saying that she wanted to tell him something—but he couldn't bring himself to open her door when he came back. He pressed himself against her door and sensed she was doing the same on the other side, but he couldn't bring himself to open it. They never spoke of the incident again, nor did they spend time together anymore, and by the time Kien joined the army, Hanh had already joined the Youth Brigade. Throughout the war, Kien often wondered what Hanh had wanted to tell him, feeling a sense of remorse for what he lost by not opening up to her.

Ky –Ky was a soldier for the North Vietnamese Army who crossed paths with Kien at the very beginning of the war. At the time, Kien was frantically looking for Phuong. The other men in Ky's unit teased him by claiming that she was off having sex with other soldiers. Kien was so enraged that he pulled a gun on the man who made this joke and then ran off in search of Phuong. Ky and Kien encountered each other later in the war, but Kien didn't recognize Ky, and Ky didn't want to shake his focus by mentioning anything about their last meeting. Later, though, Ky wrote to him and informed him that Phuong had come looking for him shortly after Kien ran off. His letter brought Kien great hope for reuniting with Phuong after the war.

The Second Narrator –A second narrative voice enters the novel in the final pages of the book. This secondary voice belongs to a former soldier whose path briefly intersected with Kien's at the very beginning of the war. After the war, he often saw Kien walking around Hanoi and knew that he was a reclusive writer. When Kien finished his **novel** and left his apartment once and for all, the second narrator eventually came into possession of the unfinished manuscript and was drawn in by Kien's writing. He ultimately decided to compile the many stories and try to organize them in a way that made sense, presenting the book as a jumbled and fragmentary collection of tales about war, loss, and love.

Lan – Kien first met Lan when he was in training as a soldier. He and his battalion were stationed in the small hamlet where Lan's family lived, and the men got to know their hosts fairly well. Lan was just a young girl at the time, but she remembers Kien when he returns for a visit after the war—he's the only soldier to ever come back. Before he leaves again, she tells him that he's welcome to come back whenever he wants: if he doesn't find another way to live, they could be together and lead a peaceful existence on her family's tranquil land.

The Green Coffee Girl –"Green Coffee Girl" is a term used in postwar Vietnam to refer to sex workers who often frequented coffeeshops. While on a walk one day after the war, Kien sees a man abusing a "Green Coffee Girl," so he goes to her aid and fights off her aggressor. Later, he realizes that he knew her brother from the war—in fact, Kien was the one to deliver the news of her brother's death. The "Green Coffee Girl" offers to have sex with Kien as a way of thanking him for his protection, but he simply gives her a place to rest and some money before seeing her out.

Oanh – Oanh was one of Kien's fellow soldiers in the Vietnam War. Kien watched him get shot to death by a Southern Vietnamese female soldier. Oanh had spared the woman by deciding not to shoot her, but she shot him as soon as he turned his back. The incident suggested to Kien that it can be very dangerous to show mercy and kindness in war.

"Lofty" Thinh – "Lofty" Thinh was one of Kien's fellow soldiers in the Vietnam War. "Lofty" once shot and killed an orangutan in an abandoned village. When he and the other men skinned the animal, though, it looked like the corpse of a human woman, so they didn't eat it. Still, "Lofty" and the others felt like the corpse haunted them for the rest of the war—sure enough, "Lofty" died a violent death not long after the incident.

Tu – Tu was a soldier who fought alongside Kien in the Vietnam War. He died on the very last day of the war. That very morning, he sensed that he wouldn't survive, so he gave Kien a deck of cards that they often used to use with their other friends, all of whom had also died in battle in the previous few days. Just as he predicted, Tu died that day while attacking the Saigon airport. The war ended mere hours after his death.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MEMORY, TRAUMA, AND MOVING ON

The Sorrow of War explores how trauma can impact memory, suggesting that disturbing recollections of violence and destruction can reorder how a person thinks. For Kien, a former soldier for North Vietnam, traumatic memories of the Vietnam War cause him to constantly relive the worst days of his life, as he frequently loses himself in vivid scenes from his past—scenes that make it impossible for him to find peace and contentment in his postwar life. Instead of trying to run from these memories, though, Kien ends up embracing them by writing a **novel** about his wartime experiences. The novel itself (which is, for all intents and purposes, *The Sorrow of War*) is extremely fragmented, as Kien's memories blend together and present themselves without a clear timeline. This lack of order or chronology, it seems, is a byproduct of Kien's trauma: his memories are so overwhelming that they surge up in the most unlikely moments, drowning out the present with their intensity. For instance, Kien will describe the experience of looking for dead bodies as part of a Remains-Gathering Team at the end of the war, but then a ghostly sound in the jungle will suddenly send him reeling back to a troubling memory from the early years of the war, making it clear that he's powerless in the face of such visceral recollections.

And yet, reliving these harrowing experiences also offers Kien a certain kind of comfort. Of course, it's torturous to revisit these emotional wounds, but looking back also means thinking about the happiness, hope, and optimism he used to have as a young soldier. In particular, memories of his prewar romance with Phuong—his high school sweetheart—bring him a genuine sense of happiness. In fact, these memories are so rewarding that Kien comes to take comfort in his ability to revisit them. The future, he feels, has been ruined by the horrors of war, but he can still revel in the memory of his own prewar happiness. In turn, the novel presents a bittersweet portrait of what it means to move on from intense trauma, ultimately suggesting that happy memories can sometimes be as powerful as traumatic ones.

LOVE IN TIMES OF HARDSHIP

Although *The Sorrow of War* focuses on the horrors of violent conflict, the novel is also a love story—though not necessarily a happy one. The first half of the novel mainly spotlights Kien's terrifying and traumatic time in the Vietnam War, but the narrative also gradually reveals that his entire wartime experience is wrapped up in matters of the heart. In fact, he even faces his first taste of true violence and destruction with Phuong (his girlfriend) at his side, since she travels toward the frontlines with him at the very beginning of the war. Even though the subsequent years of bloodshed seemingly have nothing to do with romance, Kien's life as a soldier is nevertheless intertwined with his relationship with Phuong. To that end, it doesn't matter that they eventually part ways so he can continue to the front: the mere thought of her sustains him through many terrible moments, especially when he's injured and imagines her caring for him. The novel closely examines Kien's capacity to feel such romantic feelings in the midst of war, exploring both the cognitive dissonance and the emotional reward of clinging to "delirious romantic joy in extraordinary circumstances." However, Kien and Phuong find themselves unable to have a successful relationship in the aftermath of the war, which means that the very thing that helped them through the war is ultimately incapable of flourishing in the *absence* of such hardship. In turn, the novel underscores the idea that although love is powerful and can help people through the worst moments of their lives, it can also be very delicate and fickle, blossoming in unlikely circumstances but then wilting in the reality of everyday life.

COPING THROUGH WRITING

As a novel about a former soldier who deals with his postwar trauma by writing a **novel** of his own, *The Sorrow of War* explores the act of writing and its potential to be cathartic or therapeutic. Returning to Hanoi after fighting for the winning side of the Vietnam War, Kien has trouble putting the violence and horror of combat behind him, so he turns to writing. Of course, composing a novel about war isn't necessarily the best way to forget about the experience, but that's not why Kien writes the book—after all, it's clearly *impossible* for him to forget the disturbing things he witnessed in his 10 years of combat. Rather than putting these memories out of his mind, though, he completely surrenders himself to them, intentionally reliving some of the most trying times of his life and writing them down in a frenzied state, as if the emerging novel has "its own logic" and "flow." In doing so, he effectively refuses to hide from his own emotions. And though the process of writing about such difficult experiences is undoubtedly painful, it actually allows him to take a certain amount of ownership over his trauma. Instead of passively letting it eat away at him, he manages to assert a form of control over his sorrow by actively participating in it, even if doing so counterintuitively requires him to completely give himself over to it. In the end, he feels as if writing is a way to purge himself, thinking, "I must write! To rid myself of these devils, to put my tormented soul finally to rest [...]." In the world of *The Sorrow of War*, then, writing has therapeutic effects not because it helps writers forget their troubles, but precisely because it forces them to face those troubles head-on.

PATRIOTISM, SACRIFICE, AND SKEPTICISM

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE JUNGLE OF SCREAMING SOULS

The Jungle of Screaming Souls—where Kien is sent at the end of the Vietnam War to retrieve the corpses of missing soldiers—symbolizes the ways in which trauma and grief often lurk beneath the surface of life. The corpses themselves have sunk into the mud of the jungle, making them very difficult to find. In a way, then, it almost seems as if nothing tragic took place in the area. And yet, it's Kien's job to excavate the many bodies so that they aren't forgotten, a task he comes to see as his "heavenly duty." This "heavenly duty" isn't just to drag bodies out of the mud: it's to ensure that history bears witness to the atrocities that happened during the war. In the same way that the Jungle of Screaming Souls is full of ghosts and bodies despite looking completely unassuming, everyday life in Vietnam eventually resumes as if nothing happened. This discrepancy between the horror of what happened during the war and society's odd sense of normalcy rankles Kien, ultimately driving him to write about his experiences in the war. In doing so, he essentially excavates the bitter reality of the war from society's forgetful collective consciousness, dragging it out of obscurity in the same way that he once dragged corpses from the mud. In turn, the Jungle of Screaming Souls comes to represent how quickly and easily even the most monumental tragedies can fade away—unless, that is, people make the effort to keep the memory of such events alive.

THE PAINTINGS AND THE NOVEL

The paintings Kien's father creates and then destroys at the end of his life symbolize a fierce devotion to art for art's own sake. Kien's father doesn't paint for any other reason than to express himself through art, which is why he refuses to conform to the Communist Party's demand that all art should be a certain way—namely, accessible to the working class. Because he continues to paint the way he wants, he is cast out of the art community. And yet, this doesn't stop him from painting, indicating that he doesn't use art as a way of attracting attention and praise. Similarly, his decision to burn his work before killing himself solidifies the idea that the point of the paintings was to help him express himself through art, suggesting that artistic creation in and of itself is an inherently worthwhile endeavor, regardless of whether or not the work reaches other people. This idea eventually resonates with Kien, who turns to writing as a way of processing his war-related trauma. Instead of writing his novel in the hopes of getting it published, he writes it for the sake of *writing* it, since doing so helps him work through everything that happened to him. At the same time, though, Kien does have another purpose for composing his novel about the Vietnam War: to make sure the stories of what happened don't fade away in the aftermath of the war. Although *The Sorrow of War* celebrates the mere act of creation, then, it also suggests that art can communicate important messages.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Riverhead Books edition of *The Sorrow of War* published in 1996.

Pages 3-8 Quotes

❝ Even into early December, weeks after the end of the normal rainy season, the jungles this year are still as muddy as all hell. They are forgotten by peace, damaged or impassable, all the tracks disappearing bit by bit, day by day, into the embrace of the coarse undergrowth and wild grasses.

Related Characters: Kien (The Writer)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3-4

Explanation and Analysis

The first scene of *The Sorrow of War* is set in the Jungle of Screaming Souls immediately after the Vietnam War, when Kien works with a Remains-Gathering Team searching for the corpses of soldiers who have gone missing in action. Before Kien and the other people on the Remains-Gathering Team can venture into the jungle and start searching for bodies, they have to wait for the wet season to end, since it's virtually impossible to trek through the mud. This year, though, the wet season lasts far longer than normal, forcing Kien and the others to wait to carry out their dreadful task. With the search delayed, Kien has nothing to do but sit on the outskirts of the jungle and contemplate the fact that so many missing bodies are hiding somewhere beneath the mud. He thinks about the jungle itself, remarking that it has been "forgotten by peace," ultimately implying that, though the war is finally over, the violence and horror of war persist deep in the "undergrowth." Although the dead bodies have sunk into the mud and have been obscured by lush plant life, Kien knows they're still there, and the entire image of death lurking

beneath the surface of the jungle comes to symbolize the difficulty Kien later has returning to everyday life while so many traumatic memories fester inside of him.

❝ The humid atmosphere condenses, its long moist, chilly fingers sliding in and around the hammock where Kien lies shivering, half-awake, half-asleep, as though drifting along on a stream. He is floating, sadly, endlessly, sometimes as if on a truck driving silently, robotlike, somnambulantly through the lonely jungle tracks. The stream moans, a desperate complaint mixing with distant faint jungle sounds, like an echo from another world. The eerie sounds come from somewhere in a remote past, arriving softly like featherweight leaves falling on the grass of times long, long ago.

Related Characters: Kien (The Writer)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

When the Remains-Gathering Team isn't looking for missing bodies in the Jungle of Screaming Souls, Kien spends his nights sleeping in a hammock slung over a pile of corpses—corpses that the team has already dragged out of the mud and undergrowth of the jungle. Unsurprisingly, he has bad dreams as he sleeps over the dead bodies, feeling as if he can hear "moans" drifting through his head. The way he "float[s]" in a state of fear is a good representation of the way he will go on to live his life in postwar Vietnam; in the same way that he now drifts through a hellish landscape of frightening, deathly sounds that seem to "come from somewhere in a remote past," he later feels trapped in an echo chamber of memory while living a normal civilian life. He can't escape his own thoughts about the many horrific things he witnessed during the war, and this passage—in which he literally drifts through a deeply troubled mindset—is a perfect representation of how hard it is to extricate himself from the world of death, violence, and loss that defined the war.

Pages 8-26 Quotes

❝ The tasty *canina* had many wondrous attributes. They could decide what they'd like to dream about, or even blend the dreams, like preparing a wonderful cocktail. With *canina* one smoked to forget the daily hell of the soldier's life, smoked to forget hunger and suffering. Also, to forget death. And totally, but totally, to forget tomorrow.

Related Characters: Kien (The Writer)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

When Kien and his fellow soldiers are stationed outside the Jungle of Screaming Souls, they decide to dry and smoke the root of the *rosa canina* plant, which has a mildly hallucinogenic effect. They do this as a way of escaping the many stressors of their wartime reality, as they're constantly forced to face the threat of violence and death. Although it's not a permanent solution, smoking *rosa canina* allows them to momentarily forget about their "suffering." Of course, the effects of a hallucinogenic drug obviously wouldn't help them in actual combat, instead impairing them and making it that much likelier that they might die in battle. And yet, they smoke it anyway, since they're desperate to "forget the daily hell of the soldier's life." However, it soon becomes clear that there *is* no way to escape this "daily hell," as evidenced by the fact that Kien can't forget the horrors of war even years—decades—after his time as a soldier draws to a close.

❝ One southern soldier behind a tree fired hastily and the full magazine of thirty rounds from his AK exploded loudly around Kien, but he had walked on unharmed. Kien had not returned fire even when just a few steps from his prey, as though he wanted to give his enemy a chance to survive, to give him more time to change magazines, or time to take sure aim and kill him.

Related Characters: Kien (The Writer)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Kien remembers a time during the Vietnam

War when he reached his wits' end and walked straight into enemy fire. Not caring what happens to him, he steadily advances toward his enemies, not even flinching as he nears a Southern soldier who's actively firing at him. The fact that Kien is willing to take this risk suggests that he has no problem with the idea of dying—in fact, his foolhardy bravery might even suggest that he *wants* to die, especially considering that he stops to give the Southern soldier time to reload his gun, as if he wants the Southerner to have ample time to "take sure aim" and "kill him." That he even makes it to the Southerner in the first place is rather astounding, considering that he just slowly walked toward flying bullets. In fact, there's a certain irony at play in this scene, since Kien has seen so many fellow soldiers desperately try and fail to stay alive. Now that he tries to embrace death, though, he manages to survive.

❝ The name, age, and image of someone who'd been every bit as brave under fire as his comrades, who had set a fine example, suddenly disappeared without a trace.

Except within the mind of Kien. Can's image haunted him every night, returning during the night to whisper to him by his hammock, repeating the final, gloomy lines he'd spoken by the stream. The whisper would turn into a suffocating gasp, like the sound of water blocking the throat of a drowning man.

Related Characters: Kien (The Writer), Can

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

When Kien works with the Remains-Gathering Team in the Jungle of Screaming Souls, he finds himself thinking about Can, one of his fellow soldiers who ended up running away from the army after years of service. Can confided in Kien before leaving, telling him that the war was simply too much for him—he had seen too much horrific violence and felt like it was destroying him from the inside out. Now, as he lies in his hammock while working for the Remains-Gathering Team, Kien feels as if he's the only person who still remembers Can, since pretty much everyone forgot about him after he was found dead in the jungle a few days after deserting his unit. The fact that everyone forgot about him is a good illustration of how wartime patriotism can overshadow the actual people who put themselves on the line for their country. Kien's fellow soldiers wrote Can off for being a deserter, but the fact that he ran away doesn't automatically undo all of the bravery he showed earlier in the war. According to Kien, Can was "every bit as brave under fire as his comrades," but his legacy has ultimately been lost to time simply because he couldn't take the war anymore.

Pages 26-44 Quotes

❝ He recalled the standing orders from the political commissar: "It is necessary to readjust, rectify, and re-establish the rules, the morals and behavior of your men, when there are breaches." Of course that would have meant pulling the soldiers out, snapping them out of their romantic spell. Kien's heart would never allow him to truly discipline those boys. It begged him to keep silent and sympathize with the young lovers. What else could they do? They were powerless against the frenzied forces of young love which now controlled their bodies.

Related Characters: Kien (The Writer)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29-30

Explanation and Analysis

While stationed in the Jungle of Screaming Souls during the war, Kien realizes that three of his men have been sneaking out of the camp each night to visit three local farm women. They have, it seems, struck up romantic relationships with these women, and Kien knows he should probably punish them for slipping out of camp and breaking orders by indulging in such relationships. He should, in other words, "snap[] them out of their romantic spell." The implication here is that Kien's superiors in the military think that romantic relationships have no place in war, since they're capable of casting a "spell" on people and thus distracting them from the matter at hand. And yet, Kien can't bring himself to punish his men, nor can he fathom the idea of stopping them from enjoying the small piece of joy they've somehow managed to find in the otherwise bleak and dismal environment of war. To the contrary, he "sympathize[s] with the young lovers," highlighting the fact that Kien himself understands that love is a powerful thing that can't simply be turned off. His feelings in this regard also suggest that he would jump at the opportunity to rekindle his own romantic feelings, since these feelings have sustained him through hardship in the past.

Pages 44-56 Quotes

❝ The future lied to us, there long ago in the past. There is no new life, no new era, nor is it hope for a beautiful future that now drives me on, but rather the opposite. The hope is contained in the beautiful prewar past.

Related Characters: Kien (The Writer)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Years after the Vietnam War, Kien thinks critically about the idea that the war had a good, productive outcome. Before the war, North Vietnam was awash with optimistic promises about what would happen if the North emerged victorious, ultimately creating the image of a "beautiful future." There was, in other words, a great sense of hope, which made the idea of putting oneself in danger seem reasonable and justifiable. Kien is one of the many people who sacrificed his youth to help bring about this "beautiful future," but now he no longer sees things the way he used to. The awful experiences he underwent in the war have made him give up on the idea of future happiness. Instead of looking to the future, then, he takes comfort in the past, knowing that "hope" and joy only exist in "the beautiful prewar past." The horrors of war thus ruined Kien's capacity to believe in a better future.

❝ At the bottom of his heart he believes he exists on this earth to perform some unnamed heavenly duty. A task that is sacred and noble, but secret. He begins to believe that it is because of this heavenly duty that he had such a brief childhood and adolescence, then matured in time of war. The duty imposed on him in his first forty years a succession of suffering with very few joys. [...]

The first time he had felt this secret force was not on the battlefield but in peacetime, on his postwar MIA missions gathering the remains of the dead. [...]

From the time of that realization he felt that day by day his soul was gradually maturing, preparing for its task of fulfilling the sacred, heavenly duty of which the novel would become the earthly manifestation.

Related Characters: Kien (The Writer)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 50-1

Explanation and Analysis

When Kien starts writing his novel as a way of processing his trauma and grief, he feels urged on by a certain "heavenly duty." It's never explicitly stated what, exactly, this "heavenly duty" actually *is*—in fact, the narrative even calls it an "unnamed heavenly duty," suggesting that the duty itself is somewhat vague or ambiguous to Kien himself. However, the fact that Kien first felt "this secret force" while searching for bodies as part of the Remains-Gathering Team suggests that the "duty" has something to do with the act of historical preservation—that is, making sure that the many people who lost their lives in the Vietnam War aren't forgotten. This, after all, is what he did by combing through the Jungle of Screaming Souls for the corpses of soldiers who went missing in action, effectively ensuring that there would be some sense of closure about what happened to them. Similarly, writing this novel is a way of telling war stories that might otherwise go unheard. The implication, then, is that Kien feels an obligation to educate people about what it was truly like to fight in the Vietnam War.

Pages 56-79 Quotes

❝ When starting this novel, the first in his life, he planned a postwar plot. He started by writing about the MIA Remains-Gathering Team, those about-to-be-demobilized soldiers on the verge of returning to ordinary civilian life.

But relentlessly, his pen disobeyed him. Each page revived one story of death after another and gradually the stories swirled back deep into the primitive jungles of war, quietly restoking his horrible furnace of war memories.

Related Characters: Kien (The Writer)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

As he tries to write his novel, Kien finds it difficult to stop himself from writing about the war. His original intention was to set the entire story in the direct aftermath of the Vietnam War, wanting to focus on his experience working on the Remains-Gathering Team—which, of course, really *is* how *The Sorrow of War* begins. However, the novel quickly changes course, as Kien finds it nearly impossible to keep himself from jumping from one story to the next. There's a

jumbled, fragmentary nature to his writing process, but everything he writes is, in fact, connected, even if the stories don't follow a linear timeline. Indeed, the stories are all about war or love (or both), so they're all united by the same thematic scope. This, however, means that Kien finds himself "restoking his horrible furnace of war memories"—a phrase that frames his writing process as deeply painful. Even if writing about the war is cathartic, then, it's clear that this catharsis comes at a certain price, as Kien essentially has to relive his trauma in order to finally process it.

❝ When later he recalled his actions, her words, his timidity, he would grieve and regret his loss.

The passing of beautiful youth had been so rapid that even its normal periods of anxiety and torment, of deep intense blind love, had been taken from him as the war clouds loomed. A moment so close, yet so far, then totally lost to him, to remain only as a memory forever.

Related Characters: Kien (The Writer), Hanh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

When he's still a young teenager, Kien nearly becomes romantically entwined with Hanh, a pretty young woman who lives in the same building. She asks him to help her dig a small hole that she can use as a bomb shelter beneath her bed, and as they dig, they find themselves pressed close to each other—at which point Kien loses control of himself and starts kissing Hanh's neck. It doesn't go well. Hanh tries to pull away, and then Kien comes to his senses and—mortified—runs out of the room. On his way, though, she tells him to come back once he has collected himself, saying that she has something to tell him. But he never works up the courage to actually reenter her apartment. As a result, he spends years wondering what would have happened if he went back to her. He feels as if his "beautiful youth" disappeared too soon, since the war made it impossible for him to fully experience the joys and complexities of young love (or, perhaps more accurately, young *lust*). If he hadn't gone to war just a little while after this incident with Hanh, it's quite possible that he would have finally reconnected with her and found out what she wanted to tell him. As it stands, though, the war robbed him of this experience, leaving him to wonder about what could have been for the rest of his life.

Pages 100-108 Quotes

❝ "No. I mean it. That slob gave us a sort of warning: Don't criticize others. Be sure of yourself first."

Kien frowned, then walked away. "Be sure of yourself first, what a joke!" Kien said to himself. He recalled Oanh's death a month earlier, the morning his regiment attacked the police headquarters at Buon Me Thuot.

Related Characters: Kien (The Writer) (speaker), Oanh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of the war, Kien finds himself in Saigon Airport, which was where North Vietnam scored its deciding victory. Exhausted by days of fighting, he goes to sleep in the airport. After he wakes up, another North Vietnamese soldier points out that he has been sleeping right next to the nude corpse of a female South Vietnamese soldier. Shortly after this conversation, a huge Northerner bursts into the airport carrying a crate of beer, but he trips over the corpse, which infuriates him so much that he grabs her, drags her down the stairs, and throws her onto some concrete below. The first soldier—who pointed out the presence of the corpse to Kien—is so appalled that he tries to shoot the bigger man, but Kien hits his gun right as he pulls the trigger, sending the bullets flying into the air.

The man later thanks Kien for stopping him, realizing that his life would have been ruined if he murdered a fellow soldier. He suggests that there's a lesson to be learned from this entire episode: namely, that people should be "sure" of themselves before criticizing others. The general idea behind this sentiment is that it's best for people to stop and think about their behavior before lashing out at others. But Kien isn't so sure; the war has taught him the exact opposite lesson, since one of his good friends was shot to death by someone to whom he tried to show mercy. For Kien, then, a more accurate lesson is to always heed one's own violent impulses—an outlook that will ultimately make it difficult for him to reenter everyday life, where wartime impulses are out of place.

Pages 116-146 Quotes

"There's no other night like this. You're offering your life for a cause so I've decided to waste mine too. This year we're both seventeen. Let's plan to meet each other again somewhere at some future point. See if we still love each other as much as we do now."

Related Characters: Phuong (speaker), Kien (The Writer)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

Phuong speaks these words to Kien on the last night they spend together before he leaves to become a soldier. They're lying close to each other on the banks of a lake, but Kien doesn't feel ready to have sex with Phuong. She, on the other hand, wants to have sex because it's their last night together before he leaves. When she says, "There's no other night like this," she urges him to live in the moment, since there's no telling what the war has in store for them. It's quite possible that Kien will never come back from the war, so Phuong wants him to take advantage of the time he has left of his prewar life. To that end, she criticizes the idea that going to war is inherently honorable, subtly suggesting that he is ultimately "wast[ing]" his life by "offering" it to the Communist Party and the North Vietnamese military—a viewpoint that wasn't very popular at that time in North Vietnam, where the act of joining the military was largely seen as an admirably patriotic thing to do. Phuong, however, recognizes that such an act of patriotism may well have grave consequences.

But at the last moment, as he was about to press the trigger with the gun aimed directly at them, he gave them a reprieve.

It was not because of their pleading, nor because of prompting from his colleagues. No, it was because Phuong's words had come to him like an inner voice: "So, you'll kill lots of men? That'll make you a hero, I suppose?"

Related Characters: Phuong (speaker), Kien (The Writer)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

After Kien and his fellow soldiers find a group of Southern commandos who raped and killed the three farm women (with whom three of Kien's men had developed romantic relationships), Kien prepares to kill them. He tells them to dig their own grave, and he flies into a rage when one of his own men suggests that maybe they should spare the commandos for the time being, at least until their superiors decide what to do with them. However, right before pulling the trigger, Kien decides not to kill the Southerners. The reason for his sudden and unexpected mercy is that he recalls something Phuong told him on the night they lay together by the lake: "So, you'll kill lots of men? That'll make you a hero, I suppose?" Phuong tried throughout that conversation to get Kien to see that there's nothing inherently honorable about killing people, despite what the patriotic messages circulating throughout Hanoi said. At the time, Kien didn't listen.

Now that he's faced with the decision to murder four men or show them mercy, though, he realizes that Phuong is right. Killing the commandos won't bring back the three farm women they killed, nor will it do anything to make Kien feel better about his horrifying daily existence in the war. The fact that Phuong's sentiment is what dissuades him from killing the commandos is yet another illustration of how their relationship continues to impact the way he moves through the world, even in situations that feel far removed from the romantic bliss of their prewar days together.

"[…] It's over. We deserved to have had a happy life together, but events conspired against us. You know that. You know the circumstances as well as I do. Let's go our own separate ways from now on. Forever. It's the only way."

Related Characters: Phuong (speaker), Kien (The Writer)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Phuong tells Kien that she's leaving their shared apartment building for good. She says this after the war, when they've tried and failed to rekindle their romantic relationship. Even after bringing their partnership to an end, Phuong has been living in the same building as Kien, but now she recognizes that she needs to leave. Her words suggest that she thinks they both need to make a clean break in order to finally move on with their lives. Part of what has been keeping them together, it seems, is the

feeling that they "deserved to have had a happy life together." The word "deserved" suggests that Phuong recognizes just how pure and strong their love for each other really is—in any other situation, she implies, a love like theirs would undoubtedly lead to a long and happy relationship. But that's not what has happened for Phuong and Kien, since the war has made it essentially impossible for them to be together like they should have been. Instead of dwelling on this injustice, though, Phuong has decided that they need to go their "own separate ways."

Pages 146-200 Quotes

And so their intimate nonsense had continued for the next hour, a period of delirious romantic joy in extraordinary circumstances.

Related Characters: Kien (The Writer), Phuong

Related Themes:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

When Kien misses the train that's supposed to take him to the frontlines, he and Phuong board a cargo train in an effort to catch up with the rest of his unit. As they hurtle toward the violent chaos, they find themselves lying next to each other in the darkness of the train car, whispering back and forth to each other. The entire experience is a strange combination of fear and excitement, as they somehow manage to savor what they think will be their last few hours together before parting. In turn, they revel in a feeling of intimacy and "delirious romantic joy" despite the fact that their surroundings are frightening and harsh—a fact that once more underscores the idea that love can prosper in the most "extraordinary circumstances." Of course, their love *is* hindered by the war that has started to rage all around them, at least insofar as they don't have much time left to be with one another. And yet, these wartime limitations arguably intensify their emotional bond, ultimately heightening their feelings for each other by forcing them to fully enjoy what little time they have left together.

He suddenly remembered what he thought he had seen in the freight car and what could still be happening there. He was to remember that as his first war wound, [...].

It was from that moment, when Phuong was violently taken from him, that the bloodshed truly began and his life entered into bloody suffering and failure. And he would understand true sacrifice: friends who would die to save others.

Related Characters: Kien (The Writer), Phuong

Related Themes:

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

After Kien accidentally misses his train to the frontlines, Phuong travels with him on a mad dash to catch up with the rest of his unit. Riding in the dark hold of a cargo train, they're suddenly bombarded by American planes. Bombs shake the train and throw everything around them into chaos, at which point Kien and Phuong get separated. As Kien desperately tries to find her again, he remembers that he saw—in a flash of light—Phuong lying somewhere in the train while a muscular man pinned her down. He saw, in other words, Phuong getting raped by a fellow North Vietnamese man who was riding in the cargo train.

The image of Phuong's rape has remained in Kien's mind to this day, decades after it happened. It has obviously stayed with him because of his love for Phuong, but it also remains because he sees it as the first time he truly grasped the horrific gravity of the war. Until that point, the war had been little more than a patriotic abstraction for Kien. He had clearly been taught that going to war would be an honorable thing to do, but there was no way for him to know just how viscerally violent conflict would impact him and his loved ones. Upon seeing Phuong get raped, he suddenly realizes the true meaning of "bloody suffering" and—moreover—comes to understand that this kind of suffering will not be ambiguous or abstract: it will be personal and excruciatingly real.

Not one of them asked about Hoa. At first he found it disagreeably strange. Then, with its acceptance, he too began to forget about her. Was it that such sacrifices were now an everyday occurrence? Or that they were expected, even of such young people? Or worse, that they were too concerned worrying about their own safety to bother with others?

Related Characters: Kien (The Writer), Hoa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

At one point during the war, Kien and his men are in the difficult position of having to retreat through the jungle in an area swarming with American soldiers. Their guide is a young woman named Hoa, who accidentally leads them to a lake, where they're especially vulnerable to an attack. At first, Kien is furious with Hoa and considers shooting her, but he gives her a chance to redeem herself, and she ends up not only showing Kien the correct way but also sacrificing herself by drawing the attention of a group of American soldiers, ultimately leading them away from the lake. The Americans rape and kill her while Kien watches, powerless as he hides in the jungle. Later, he returns to his men and shows them the way through the jungle that Hoa found, and none of them even ask where she went.

Kien is troubled by the fact that nobody seems to care enough about Hoa to ask what happened to her. And yet, he also finds himself slowly forgetting about her. This is part of what's so difficult about surviving a war: either Kien stops thinking about Hoa and moves on with his life, or he fixates on what happened and spends the rest of his life in a state of constant grief. This, it seems, is the great dilemma that comes with survival, forcing people like Kien to either live in guilt or perpetual sorrow (or, more likely, *both*).

❝ It all seemed so long ago, and because he couldn't even find the head-shaped rock—it had been blown apart or washed away—it seemed a touch unlikely that it had ever happened. Of course it had, but not even finding the clearing where he had last seen her allowed him that escape into such possibilities.

What remained was sorrow, the immense sorrow, the sorrow of having survived. The sorrow of war.

Related Characters: Kien (The Writer), Hoa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

When Kien works with the Remains-Gathering Team in the immediate aftermath of the war, he returns to the area where Hoa sacrificed herself in order to save Kien and his men. The memory of watching her get raped and killed by American soldiers obviously still lurks in his mind, but it's so intense that it almost feels unreal. To add to this feeling, he's unable to find a "head-shaped rock" that Hoa identified as a landmark signifying the way Kien's unit should go, so the entire memory feels even further removed, as if it never even happened.

And though Kien knows that it *did* happen, he almost doesn't mind experiencing a little bit of doubt in this regard, since this doubt gives him an "escape into" the "possibilit[y]" that perhaps what happened to Hoa was just a bad dream. At the same time, though, the novel suggests that concrete memories are somewhat irrelevant—Kien doesn't *need* to perfectly remember what happened in order to experience the terrible aftereffects. After all, the trauma of what happened to Hoa lingers no matter what, hovering over Kien like an "immense sorrow," which is the "sorrow of having survived," since Kien wouldn't be saddled with this grief if he, too, had died that day.

Pages 200-224 Quotes

❝ "Why didn't you tell me you were injured? Sit down, sit down. We'll bandage it. Does it hurt?"

Phuong shook her head, No.

"Sit down. I'll make some bandages from my shirt."

"No!" she cried, pushing him away. "Can't you see? It's not a wound! It can't be bandaged!"

What was going on? He knew so little!

Related Characters: Kien (The Writer), Phuong (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

When Kien finally locates Phuong in the cargo train after having been separated from her, he slowly realizes that something is wrong. But he doesn't immediately grasp that she has been raped. Amidst the commotion, he briefly saw a man pinning Phuong down, but he hasn't yet pieced together that the man was raping her. When he tries to get her to stand, though, he realizes that there's blood running down her legs. He immediately assumes that she has some kind of wound and that it needs to be bandaged, but she tries to explain that he's wrong: she's not bleeding from a wound, at least not in the way Kien thinks—she's bleeding from her vagina. Even when she explains this, though, Kien is still confused. The narrative notes that he "knew so little,"

which is a good reminder that he's still extremely young and naïve. Despite the fact that he's hurtling toward the frontlines of a gruesome war, where he'll be expected to kill people, he's still quite childish and unprepared to confront harsh realities. The novel thus highlights the extent to which the Vietnam War robbed people like Kien and Phuong of their youth, plunging them into horrific circumstances and forcing them to deal with matters far beyond their years.

Pages 224-228 Quotes

❝ Several years later, on a night when he was deep in desperation, Kien dreamed that his life had been transformed into a river stretching before him. He saw himself floating towards his death. Then at the very last moment, when he was about to go over the edge, he heard Phuong's call echoing from that bitter dusk of the marsh near the school. It was the final call of his first love. Though they hadn't had a happy life together or moved towards a glowing future, their first love had not been in vain. They were back there in the past together, and nothing could change or rob them of that.

Related Characters: Kien (The Writer), Phuong

Related Themes:

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

Even decades after the Vietnam War, Kien still feels a sense of "desperation" and sorrow. In fact, he's so troubled by the horrible things he saw and did in the war that he eventually considers taking his own life—something he also considered at the very beginning of the war, when he and Phuong had just spent their final and fateful night together as teenagers. On that day, Kien dropped to his knees and was about to shoot himself in the head when he suddenly heard Phuong's voice: she was searching the abandoned school for him, desperately calling out his name. Her voice snapped him to his senses and kept him from taking his own life.

Now, in adulthood, her voice apparently still "echo[es]" in Kien's head. When he considers killing himself, he remembers the sound of her voice calling out for him, and he's able to recapture the feeling of being with her as a young man. In keeping with his belief in the power of the past to sustain people, he manages to immerse himself in the happy memories of their prewar lives together. And though their relationship exists only in the past, this is enough to keep him going. The future for Kien thus becomes not a new landscape but a perpetual opportunity to dwell in his fond memories of his youth—memories that seem to give him a sense of purpose in life by showing him that his and Phuong's love "had not been in vain."

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PAGES 3-8

It's the wet season of 1975 in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Kien is part of a military team tasked with finding the remains of soldiers who have gone missing in action. But the Remains-Gathering Team is unable to do much during the wet season, since the jungles are too muddy to trek through. It isn't until December that Kien and the other soldiers can finally make their way toward the **Jungle of Screaming Souls**, where many unfortunate fighters died gruesomely in violent combat. Until now, their bodies have been encased in mud and hidden by the eerie, overgrown jungle.

The Vietnam War ended on April 30, 1975. What's more, the wet season in Vietnam generally runs from June to November. It's evident, then, that The Sorrow of War *begins in the direct aftermath of the Vietnam War, as Kien is tasked with returning to the area where horrific battles took place just months before. And yet, although the memory of the war is still fresh, the actual physical evidence of such horror is buried deep in the mud—a reality that symbolically aligns with the human and societal tendency to bury traumatic memories.*

Kien is all too familiar with the **Jungle of Screaming Souls**. He was part of the 27th Battalion, which in the dry season of 1969 found itself surrounded by enemy forces in this very jungle. Napalm coursed through the area and lit everything in a horrible blaze, trapping the members of the 27th Battalion in a hellish landscape. Only 10 soldiers survived, the others either burning to death or desperately running into waves of enemy bullets. Kien now recognizes the clearing where this horror took place: no vegetation has managed to grow back.

It's clear early in the novel that Kien has witnessed some truly terrifying things. Although he managed to escape the Vietnam War with his life intact, this ultimately means he has a whole new challenge ahead of him—that is, learning to live with such traumatic memories, which the novel suggests is an unfortunate cost of survival. On another note, Kien's observation that the vegetation hasn't grown back builds on the symbolic function that nature plays in the novel, as the failure of the plant life to regrow comes to represent just how hard it is to return to normalcy after violence and destruction.

Kien remembers the terrible slaughter of the 27th Battalion. He himself was shot in the side and fell into a shallow creek, where he then lay for several days. When the American troops left the area, massive rains came. Kien managed to haul himself along the banks of the river, finding countless water-logged corpses as he went. He was sure he would die, as snakes and centipedes crawled through his wounds. And though nobody talks about the "Lost Battalion" anymore, Kien knows that the gruesome bloodshed that took place in this area gave rise to many lost souls, which now flit through the **jungle** and moan, letting their cries carry on the wind. Their howls are the reason the area is called the Jungle of Screaming Souls.

The Sorrow of War *is full of stories about ghosts and wandering souls. The soldiers looking for corpses in the Jungle of Screaming Souls feel haunted by the memory of the many fighters who went missing in action, and though the novel takes these stories about ghosts at face value, it also uses the stories to speak metaphorically about the ways in which traumatic memories linger. The soldiers really seem to believe that the jungle is full of wandering souls, and the novel doesn't challenge this belief—it simply uses it to underscore how hard it is to move on from the horrors of war.*

There are also civilian spirits in the **Jungle of Screaming Souls**. Long ago, there was a small village in the area, but it was consumed by disease. By the time soldiers reached the vicinity, they found the village completely abandoned. Unsettled by the empty homes and the specter of illness and death, they burned the village. Still, they avoided the charred remains—until, that is, "Lofty" Thinh from one of the squads went into the village and shot an orangutan. He summoned other soldiers to help him drag the kill back to camp, but when they skinned the animal, it looked exactly like the corpse of a sickly woman. Kien helped "Lofty" and the others bury it, but it didn't do any good: the corpse's soul still haunted everyone, and they all died in battle—except Kien.

The story about "Lofty" shooting an orangutan highlights the ways in which the constant violence and terror of war can lead to superstition. The novel doesn't suggest that the men are wrong *to fear the corpse, but the entire episode does suggest that the soldiers are particularly on guard when it comes to protecting themselves. Because of the perpetual state of fear they live in, they want to insulate themselves from danger in any way possible, which ultimately means respecting superstition. In turn, superstition itself becomes a defense mechanism of sorts, though not one that actually works—an illustration of just how difficult it was to survive in the Vietnam War.*

PAGES 8-26

Not all of Kien's memories of the Vietnam War are harrowing. He remembers, for instance, the period in which he and his fellow soldiers posted up near the **Jungle of Screaming Souls** for "political indoctrination." They spent their days hearing about politics as their superiors spoke rapturously about the Northern forces, insisting that they would triumph. But there was still quite a bit of time to take it easy, so Kien and his friends would play cards and smoke *rosa canina* roots. It was the rainy season, and there wasn't much fighting going on. Kien had plenty of friends to play cards with—but soon enough, the war took them all.

Something that makes moving on from difficult experiences particularly hard is that those experiences can still be associated with positive memories. Even the worst period of a person's life can still have some good moments. For instance, Kien fondly remembers playing cards with his friends when they weren't in combat. If it were even possible to completely forget about the war, then, he might not actually want to, because that would mean letting go of his fond *memories of the time, too.*

Eventually, Kien's entire platoon was down to just four soldiers: Tu, Thanh, Van, and Kien himself. They were playing cards the morning of the North's first true attack on the city of Saigon. Knowing he and his friends would soon be in combat, he told the others to play cards slowly. If they left the game unfinished, he said, perhaps heaven would keep them alive to let them finish. But Thanh mocked this idea, saying that it didn't work that way: if they didn't finish, God would simply take them *all* from the world—that way, they'd be able to finish the game in heaven.

Again, the novel suggests that superstition is a way of coping with fear and trauma. In this case, Kien tries to manufacture a sense of hope before going into battle, insisting that they should save the game for later so that they have a reason to survive—or, more accurately, a reason to be spared by God. In the face of the terrifying reality of war, then, Kien grasps for any means of feeling in control of his own destiny.

Kien's last card game with his fellow soldiers took place on April 29. Early the next morning, only Kien and Tu were left. They had reached the airport in Saigon and were about to overtake it. Sensing that he would surely die in this battle, Tu gave Kien the deck of cards and told him that many of the cards themselves carried "the sacred spirit" of their entire platoon. And just as he predicted, Tu died fighting in the airport that morning, a mere three hours before the end of the war.

For Kien, one of the many challenges of surviving the Vietnam War is the fact that he had to watch so many of his friends die. Right up until the very end of the war, everyone was in danger of losing their lives—including Kien. He, however, managed to make it through the war's final fight, which took place at the airport in Saigon on April 30, 1975. But just because he survived doesn't mean he can simply return to a normal life, since he has now experienced so much loss.

Swinging in a hammock after having finally reached the **Jungle of Screaming Souls** with the Remains-Gathering Team, Kien falls through memory after memory of the war. The hammock has been hung over a pile of corpses they've already found, and Kien wonders if they're the ones he hears calling out in the night. He feels mystified by how different everything feels in this jungle, even though he was here just one year ago. He realizes that the difference doesn't have to do with the landscape or anything specific about the area. Rather, the difference is that the last time he was here there was a war raging on, and now there's peace.

As a member of the Remains-Gathering Team, Kien has basically no chance of forgetting about his harrowing experiences in the war—after all, his job is literally to dig up soldiers who have gone missing in action, which is like excavating the horrors of his own wartime past. Instead of moving on in the aftermath of the war, then, he finds himself doing the opposite, effectively revisiting the traumatic experience as soon as it's over.

Remembering the first time he and his fellow soldiers came to the **Jungle of Screaming Souls**, Kien thinks about what it was like to smoke *rosa canina*. The locals have always said that the flower grows in graveyards and other places where there's the "scent of death." But Kien's platoon decided to dry the roots and mix them in with tobacco. It had a sedating, slightly hallucinogenic effect that helped the soldiers relax. When they were smoking *rosa canina*, it was as if they could escape the turmoil of war and the constant threat of death. Kien always had vivid dreams when he smoked the flower's root, once seeing Phuong—the love of his life—standing in a light Hanoi wind.

Kien's memories about the war are wrapped up in not just the horrific things he saw, but also the moments of relative calm—moments that were clearly hard to come by, since Kien and his men had to smoke a hallucinogenic root in order to relax. Still, in these moments of peace, Kien's mind drifted to Phuong, the woman he loved, ultimately hinting at the novel's later suggestion that it's possible for the mere idea of romance to emotionally sustain people in trying circumstances.

Soon, though, the higher-ups banned the smoking of *rosa canina*, ordering the soldiers to go through the **jungle** and rip up the plants so that they wouldn't grow ever again. Still, the flower had already impacted the platoon, giving the men vivid hallucinations of headless American soldiers walking through the jungle and other frightening images. The soldiers put up small alters in their tents, honoring the soldiers who had died in the jungle.

Smoking the hallucinogenic rosa canina *root seems to have added to the ominous, ghostly feelings that Kien and the other soldiers experienced while stationed in the Jungle of Screaming Souls. Although the root helped them relax, it also exacerbated their fears about American soldiers. And yet, while it might be the case that the root's hallucinogenic properties worked against the soldiers by giving them vivid visions, it's worth noting that it was completely rational for them to fear not just the American soldiers lurking in the jungle, but also the threat of violence and bodily harm that these soldiers represented. In a way, then,* rosa canina *wasn't responsible for the soldiers' terrifying thoughts: the war itself was.*

Thinking back, Kien remembers his friend Can, whom he spoke with by a river one day in 1974. Kien was fishing and thinking about a battle that took place the previous week against Saigon commandos. In that fight, Kien had practically laughed in the face of death: as soldiers on both sides ran for cover, he brazenly walked out in the open and made his way slowly toward the enemy. Bullets fell around him, but he was never hit. When he reached one of the shooters, he gave the man a chance to collect himself, as if wanting to let him calmly reload his gun and kill him. But the Southern soldier lost his calm and fumbled, so Kien begrudgingly shot him dead. When he moved on, the other Southern soldiers fled.

There's a sad kind of irony at play here. Kien and his fellow soldiers have spent the entire war trying not *to get killed, and yet Kien has seen so many of his friends die in battle. Now, though, Kien seems to actively invite death by behaving so fearlessly and foolishly, but instead of dying, he ends up succeeding in battle. It's as if things always transpire against him in the war, no matter what he wants. The entire episode is also a good illustration of the extent to which wartime trauma can drive people to stop caring about their own lives.*

Kien saw his behavior as foolish, but the higher-ups honored him by inviting him to a "long-term training course" near Hanoi. The idea, his superiors told him, was to preserve the best soldiers for future fights. By the time Kien finished the training, his superior said, everyone in his platoon would surely be dead.

Kien's skepticism about military life begins to creep into the novel, as he recognizes that his superiors praise him for behavior he considers foolish. He doesn't see his decision to walk straight into enemy fire as a sign of patriotic bravery—he sees it as an indication that he has very little regard for his own life. Plus, the idea of training for future fights is surely unappealing to Kien, who is eager to finish his time in the Vietnam War and return to civilian life.

There was a time when Kien would have felt honored by the opportunity to attend the training and avoid the frontlines. But as he fished in the river on that day in 1974, he felt nothing like pride. When Can approached him, though, he congratulated Kien on the honor. As they talked, Kien realized that Can was unraveling—he couldn't go on with this war, he said. The constant killing was simply too much. He used to desperately try to avoid bayoneting fallen enemies or bashing in their heads, but now he didn't even think twice about it. The entire experience of war was eating away at him.

The fact that Kien would have been proud of himself at the beginning of the war for earning praise from his superiors ultimately highlights just how much war can change a person's outlook. As a young soldier, Kien would have been honored to receive special training. By the end of the war, though, he's highly skeptical of such things, perhaps because he feels that it's impossible to be truly honorable in the twisted and bloody context of war—a feeling that Can seems to experience on an even greater level, as he feels fundamentally corrupted by the things he has seen and done.

Kien told Can not to complain so much. He had no choice, after all, but to go on fighting. Still, Can talked about how his mother was sick and alone at home. He wished he never even agreed to go to war in the first place—he technically could have avoided it with the excuse of needing to care for his mother, but he didn't end up pressing the matter. Now, though, he wondered what it was all for. He admitted to Kien that he was going to desert the army, and though Kien tried to dissuade him by pointing out that he'd surely die on his own or be dragged back only to be executed, nothing he said could dissuade the young man.

Can's desire to run away underscores just how miserable he is as a soldier in the North Vietnamese Army. To desert the army was a very serious thing to do and was punishable by death, so it's clear that Can is desperate to escape the life of a soldier. Kien most likely understands this sense of desperation, but he doesn't see the point of deserting the army, since doing so would be futile and end in death—either way, then, these soldiers face the constant threat of death.

Can pointed out that he wouldn't get caught if Kien didn't order the soldiers to go looking for him. After asking Kien to come visit him after the war, he slipped into the woods. Kien didn't report the conversation, but his superiors soon found out about Can's disappearance and ordered everyone to look for him. They eventually found him only a few hours away—nowhere near home. But they didn't bring him back to fight, since he was already dead. Nobody knew how he died, but they didn't dwell on the matter. Everyone forgot about him—everyone, that is, except Kien, who was haunted by Can's image every night. Long after Can's death, Kien thought about how he died disgraced and misunderstood by everyone around him, including by Kien himself.

Kien's response to Can's death is directly tied to the fact that Can confided in him before deserting the army. This suggests that Can saw him as a kindred soul, or someone who would understand his desperation to get away from the horrors of war. Can wasn't necessarily wrong to think Kien might feel the same way as him, considering Kien's skepticism about the war after having witnessed so much terrible violence. However, Kien didn't offer Can any sort of emotional support, which is why he now looks back with a sense of regret when he thinks of Can, realizing that he stubbornly refused to relate to Can's feelings about the war—perhaps because doing so would have made it impossible for Kien himself to continue as a soldier.

As Kien lies in his hammock and listens to the ghostly sounds coming from the **Jungle of Screaming Souls**, he's certain Can is yelling out to him. The memories of his own fighting days flash before his eyes even as he drifts to sleep, but then he wakes with a start in the hours just before dawn. He has just heard a chilling cry coming from the jungle—a cry he has heard before. He heard it for the first time in this exact spot one year earlier, in the last year of the war. Although the cry sounds ghostly, he knows from his experience last year that it is actually the sound of "love's lament."

When Kien tries to sleep in the Jungle of Screaming Souls while working with the Remains-Gathering Team, the sounds of the jungle bring back more than one memory. He thinks he hears Can crying out to him, but he also hears a sound that reminds him of something else—of "love's lament." It's not yet clear what, exactly, this means, but it's evident that this area brings back many different kinds of memories for Kien and that not all of them are directly related to battle or the army.

PAGES 26-44

One year ago, Kien's unit came to this very place in the **Jungle of Screaming Souls**. They built small huts at the foot of the mountain that now towers over him, and though it was a good place to set up camp, the environment felt somehow mysterious. Two nights passed, and Kien sensed that something strange was happening to his platoon. He himself had developed a fever, but he had also seen ghostly shapes whisking by in the night. On the third night, he was restless and rose from his bed before dawn. Walking through the rainy dark with a machine gun slung from his shoulder, he heard laughter and what sounded like a young woman's voice.

The narrative has already suggested that the sound Kien hears while working with the Remains-Gathering Team is the sound of "love's lament." This section elaborates on that idea, and though it's still not clear what it would mean to hear "love's lament" deep in an eerie jungle, it now seems that Kien once heard the sound of a young woman in the Jungle of Screaming Souls, ultimately suggesting that he didn't just experience violence in the jungle—he also seems to have encountered love in the most unlikely circumstances.

Kien burst into his soldiers' hut and demanded to know who had laughed. They seemed confused and assured him nothing had happened—nobody, they told him, was in the hut with them. Leaving the hut, Kien was sure he'd heard a young woman, not a ghost. As he walked through the dark, he heard movement and halted. In the reflection of a nearby stream, he saw the image of a young woman with long hair and a bare stomach. He shouted at her to halt, but she left. As he threatened to shoot, "Lofty" stepped out and told him to calm down, assuring him that nobody was there.

Kien's experience in this scene highlights the wartime paranoia and confusion that is common in such settings. Under the constant threat of violence, even the smallest sound in the middle of the night is capable of putting Kien on high alert. And yet, what he sees is a mysterious woman, not an enemy soldier—a confounding sight that taps into the somewhat mystical, superstitious mindset that often emerges in stressful situations in which people fear for their lives and are surrounded by death.

The next morning, nobody talked about what Kien had heard, but he still felt like the other soldiers were hiding something from him. In the coming nights, he became increasingly confident that something strange was afoot, though there were no more ghostly women slipping into the camp. Instead, three figures seemed to quietly escape the camp each night and then return just before dawn. Kien became accustomed to the nightly commotion and started caring for the strange shadows, finding himself unable to sleep each night until they had all returned to the camp. He then remembered that there was a farmhouse nearby and that three young girls had lived there before the war. He realized that the girls were now teenagers and that they had returned to their home even though it was unsafe.

Although Kien originally thought ghostly figures were flitting into the camp each night, he comes to realize that there's a much simpler explanation: his men have developed romantic relationships with three local women. What's surprising about this is the fact that his men manage to find love in the cruel, dangerous environment of war, ultimately suggesting that love can prosper in even the most devastatingly unromantic environments.

As commander of the platoon, Kien knew he should stop his men from sneaking out each night to visit the young women at the farmhouse. But he couldn't bring himself to do it—he felt for these enraptured lovers and would never deprive them of this brief period of romance. So he let it go on, all the while falling into dreams of Phuong, fantasizing about the love they shared as 17-year-olds. But that was a long time ago—now he was in his mid-20s, and the romance that once existed in him had been broken by war. Unfortunately, he now thinks as he lies in the hammock a year later, the love his soldiers felt for the young farm women only led to sorrow and pain.

Although romance can blossom in unlikely circumstances, the novel suggests that this doesn't always lead to happiness. To the contrary, the novel implies that love can actually make things quite difficult—after all, people have much more to lose when they tie themselves emotionally to another person. Kien knows this firsthand, and though it's not yet clear what happened between him and Phuong, it's evident that the love he felt as a young man for Phuong—before the war—has only led to heartbreak.

Kien remembers the tragedy of the young farm women. The three soldiers who had fallen in love with them went racing to the farm one day, desperate to find the young women. Kien followed them and stood in the rain—a machine gun hanging at his side—as they called out for the women. But they were nowhere to be found. Then, however, Kien found a bra lying on the rocks near the farm's bathhouse. It was white and torn, and there was blood on it. It immediately became clear to him and the others that enemy soldiers had come through the farm and taken the women.

It now becomes clear why the novel suggests that love in times of war can lead to terrible heartbreak. Although Kien's men experienced happiness in unlikely circumstances, they are now forced to face the harsh cruelty of war, which is ultimately defined by loss and sorrow.

That evening, Kien and the others finally caught up with the commandos who had taken the young farm women. Three of the commandos died right away in the fighting that ensued when Kien and the others ambushed them, but four survived. "Lofty"—who was one of the lovers—died in the fighting, too. After rounding up the four remaining commandos, Kien demanded to know what they'd done with the women. He learned that the commandos had already killed them. They taunted Kien and the others by talking about how long the women had cried as they died. These comments infuriated Kien's men, but he stopped them from killing the commandos right away, suggesting that perhaps the commandos should be made to suffer before dying.

Kien's dark side comes out in this section, as he treats the commandos with a ruthless sense of cruelty. Of course, he only wants to take revenge on them for what they did to the three farm women, but his merciless rage is still rather surprising, especially because until this point in the novel he has seemed quite sensitive to the harsh realities of war. Now, though, he shows the same kind of cutthroat mentality as the commandos themselves.

Kien wanted to know why the commandos had bothered to kill the three women. They'd come to the **jungle** for Kien's platoon, so why spend time brutally murdering innocent women? But the commandos didn't answer, simply telling Kien to hurry up and kill them if that's what he planned to do. He then ordered them to dig their own graves. When they finished, they asked if they could smoke before dying, and he granted them this wish. As they smoked, one of them approached Kien and offered him a cigarette. He was young and claimed to not have participated in the rape and murder of the three farm women. He pleaded for his life, even showing Kien a picture of a woman waiting back at home for him. But Kien just told him to get back into the grave and prepare for death.

Kien allows the commandos to have a final smoke before they die, but he doesn't actually show them compassion. Even the young man's comment about a young woman waiting at home for him doesn't seem to impact Kien, despite the fact that he's sympathetic when it comes to love. In turn, it seems likely that he has gotten wrapped up in the harsh violence of war, making it difficult for him to show his enemies mercy. Cruelty, then, emerges in the novel as an all-consuming force capable of refiguring the way a person views the world.

Suddenly, Kien shouted at the commandos, telling them that their time had come. They hadn't even finished their cigarettes, but he didn't care. One of his fellow soldiers whispered to let them finish, but he ignored him and instead fired his gun—but he aimed the shots over the commandos' heads. The young commando dropped to his knees and pleaded with Kien for his life, but Kien simply asked if the young boy had volunteered to go first. He pushed the end of his gun hard against the boy's forehead, sending him falling backwards. Still, the boy kept begging.

Again, it's quite clear that Kien has gotten swept up in the terror and violence of war. He normally seems like a rather sensitive, kind person, but in this moment, he loses his sense of compassion and takes out his anger and grief on the commandos, indicating that it's easy to reach a breaking point after years of enduring harrowing violence.

Just then, one of Kien's men came up and suggested that Kien should spare the commandos for now, saying that they could let their superiors decide what to do. But Kien turned his rage on his fellow soldier, yelling that he was welcome to go stand in the grave and wait to be shot along with the commandos, if he cared about them so much. "I'll kill you too!" he screamed.

Kien is in such a rage that he finds himself threatening his own comrades—a good sign that years of war have brought him to an emotional breaking point, where it's difficult for him to not only show compassion to enemy soldiers but also to treat his fellow soldiers well.

Kien wakes up in the present. The Remains-Gathering Team's driver is asking him why he's crying so loudly in his sleep. But he already knows why: it's because Kien slept near so many dead bodies. The driver himself knows what it's like to dream of the many people who died here in the **Jungle of Screaming Souls**. The bodies they collect seem to come alive at night and tell their stories. The driver has encountered many people from his old unit, but it's not like conversing with normal people. Kien knows what he means. Talking to these listless souls at night is troubling because it's impossible to do anything to help them.

One problem with returning to old, disturbing memories is that there's nothing that can be done to change the outcome *of those memories. Kien and the truck driver are thus forced to relive past traumas as they return to the Jungle of Screaming Souls, finding themselves unable to do anything but rehash the terrible things that happened in the area. This approach to memory is worth noting, as the novel later suggests that it's possible to return to* happy *memories as a way of recapturing joy.*

Kien wonders if it would soothe the ghosts of fallen soldiers to know that the North won the war, but the driver doesn't think so. War doesn't matter to the dead. Plus, the driver is skeptical of the peace that the North has achieved. Everyone has been trying to make something of their lives in the aftermath of the war, but hardly anyone has had any success. And the current economic and political system isn't all that great, leading the driver to wonder what, exactly, all of the dead soldiers gave their lives for.

The driver is deeply skeptical of whether or not the Northerners who died in the Vietnam War ended up sacrificing their lives for a worthy cause. Of course, it was considered very honorable to devote one's life to North Vietnam in the lead-up to the war, but now it's not so clear that the North's victory actually improved society all that much. In turn, the entire idea of dying for one's country comes to seem a lot less worthwhile.

When Kien asks the driver what he's getting at with this pessimistic outlook, the driver says he's not necessarily getting at *anything*. He's just pointing out that life is hard these days, despite the North's victory. Soldiers like Kien will now have to figure out a way to live as civilians, but they'll never again lead a "normal" life. Still, Kien plans to go back to school when he's finished working for the Remains-Gathering Team. He wants to get a university degree so that he can learn to do something other than fire machine guns. As for the driver, he plans to travel around with a guitar and sing songs about the war. Kien laughs and says that what he should *really* do is tell people to forget the war, but the driver points out that it's impossible to forget it.

One of the driver's most important points is that the soldiers who fought in the war will find it incredibly hard to lead a so-called "normal" life. Even though the North Vietnamese soldiers who survived the war were ultimately on the winning side, learning how to live after seeing so much violence and death is an undoubtedly difficult thing to do. What's more, it's not entirely clear that the war was worth fighting, since society hasn't necessarily improved all that much as a result. Kien, however, appears somewhat optimistic, as he plans to earn a college degree and make something of his life—plans that will be harder to execute than he thinks.

PAGES 44-56

Kien is back in Hanoi now. It has been years since the war, but each day brings more memories of the horrific events Kien witnessed as a soldier. In a nightmare, for instance, he sees a pretty young woman he once knew named Hoa. He and Hoa knew each other in the **Jungle of Screaming Souls** in 1968. They only worked together for a short time, but he often has vivid nightmares in which he sees her lying helpless at the mercy of American soldiers. The soldiers rape her while Kien watches, but he's powerless in the dream—he can't even yell to her.

The novel hasn't yet revealed the specific circumstances of Kien's acquaintance with Hoa, but it's clear that her ultimate demise at the hands of ruthless American soldiers still haunts Kien. Once again, he finds himself in a completely helpless position as he remembers the horrific things he has witnessed, knowing all the while that he can do nothing to change what happened.

Sometimes, when Kien walks down the streets in Hanoi, he will pass some rotting meat and suddenly find himself transported back to a battle site from 1972, when he was forced to walk over countless corpses and smell the "stench of death." The memories are always right there, ready to spring up at him at a moment's notice, like when he watches an American war movie and finds himself raring to jump into battle, feeling overcome by a horrific and murderous excitement. This, it seems, is all the war has left him with—it didn't give him a beautiful, hopeful future, as he once thought it would. Instead, the promise of a gleaming new future was nothing but a lie. The truth is, the only beauty and hope in his life exist in "the beautiful prewar past."

Now that he's back from the war, Kien is seemingly just as skeptical as the truck driver was during their conversation in the Jungle of Screaming Souls—he doesn't think there's any promise of a glorious, wonderful future, despite the fact that the North won the Vietnam War. Rather, he tries to take comfort in his memories of prewar life in Vietnam, underscoring just how thoroughly the war upended his life.

Kien is almost 40 now, but he was only 17 when the fighting began in 1965. That means he was 27 when Saigon fell to the North. And then he spent time working with the Remains-Gathering Team, meaning that he lost nearly 14 years of his life to the war. He has little to show for all of his efforts. Still, he has been trying to write about it. He sits down each evening and tries to find the right headspace to write about his experiences, planning out how the plot should go and how his many stories should intersect. Once he starts writing, though, his plans fall apart. Immersing himself in his memories makes it impossible to write with the kind of coherency he originally had in mind.

Weighed down by traumatic memories, Kien starts writing as a way of coping with the horror he has witnessed. This is a productive way of channeling his trauma, but it also forces him to revisit some of the worst moments of his life. It's no wonder, then, that the writing itself comes out jumbled and nonlinear, as he appears to let his emotions and memories guide the process instead of following a chronological timeline—a good illustration of how grief and trauma have their own internal logic, which doesn't always make much sense from the outside.

It seems to Kien that he writes simply to "rid himself of his devils." The process plunges him back into some of his worst memories, and he relives them in order to commit them to the page, creating an account of the war that feels oddly personal to him, as if the war itself was his own private experience. As the **novel** emerges, he realizes that it will be his final act as a soldier—it's something he needs to do, feeling almost as if it's his duty even though it pushes him to the brink of insanity. In fact, he has a secret suspicion that he's been put on Earth to fulfill a "heavenly duty," which is why he survived the war. And the novel, he thinks, will be the "earthly manifestation" of that "heavenly duty."

The novel has already shown Kien's pessimistic view of the present and the future, as well as his skepticism of the war. He no longer believes that the Vietnam War achieved what it was supposed to, and he has no hope that the future will bring the many things the war promised it would. He is, however, invested in the present in one very specific way: he cares about writing this novel about the Vietnam War, seeing it as an important thing to do. In fact, he believes it is his "duty" to write this book, indicating that he thinks society needs to know what the war was like from a soldier's perspective. By investing himself in this belief, Kien ultimately invests himself in the present and the future, even if he otherwise feels jaded.

Five years ago, Kien decided to revisit a small hamlet where his battalion had been based for training 20 years earlier. The place looked almost exactly the same, as if it had been perfectly preserved in time. But when he went to visit the older woman who had cared for the troops, he discovered that she had died. The old woman's daughter, Lan, answered the door when Kien arrived and instantly remembered him, even recalling his nickname in the platoon: "Sorrowful Spirit." She was only 13 back then, but she remembered the period very well. She took Kien to pray for her mother, who died after receiving the news that both her sons had been killed in the war.

There's something inherently unsettling about returning to a place that looks familiar but has undergone so much change. The hamlet that Kien revisits doesn't look like it has been ravaged by war and time, but almost everyone he knew who lived there has died. What's more, Lan's mother seemingly died as a direct result of the Vietnam War, since the news of her sons' deaths ultimately killed her. And yet, the hamlet looks the same to Kien, easily transporting him back to the days he spent there—yet another illustration of how hard it is to move on in the aftermath of the war.

Kien looked down at a small grave, and Lan explained that it belonged to her infant son. Her husband was a soldier who also trained in the small hamlet. He was only there for a month, so they had to rush the wedding ceremony. He died in combat six months later, and Lan thought his death was the reason their baby didn't survive, either. Her husband was part of the last group of soldiers to ever come through the hamlet. Of all the men that stayed there, though, Kien was the only one to ever have returned. Lan wanted to leave the hamlet, but she felt that she couldn't leave behind her mother and son's graves. Also, she felt like she was waiting for someone—perhaps, she said, she was waiting for Kien.

Lan lost a lot to the Vietnam War. Everyone she loved, in fact, ended up dying because of the war. Like Kien, then, she has trouble simply moving on in these postwar years, finding it difficult to start a new life instead of dwelling on the past, which is ultimately what she does by continuing to live in the hamlet.

Lan ran her hand over Kien's shoulder and told him to forget about her and to live a good life. However, she also said that if he ever stopped wandering and had nowhere to go, he should return to her in the small hamlet. She would always be there for him, should he ever want to be with her. Years later, Kien happened to drive near the hamlet while on assignment with some fellow journalists. Looking up at the hills, he remembered Lan's words and thought fondly of her kind offer as the car kept driving.

Lan's offer suggests that she sees Kien as a kindred soul—after all, both of their lives have been ravaged by the war, and both of them find it difficult to move on. And yet, returning to the hamlet and living with Lan would, in some ways, force Kien to dwell in the past to an even greater extent, since he originally met Lan when he was staying on her property with the rest of his unit at the beginning of the war. To return, then, would be to return to a place laden with memories.

PAGES 56-79

Kien originally intended to write a **novel** set after the war, starting out with a story about the Remains-Gathering Team. But his writing has veered off-course, as his memories of the actual war flood in. It's strange, though: he himself avoids reading books about the war. And yet, he can't help but write one himself. He wishes he could write about other things, like about his upbringing and his parents. But even the subject of his father makes him sad, since he regrets how he treated his father while he was still alive, and he doesn't remember much about his family. He does, however, vividly remember his mother's second husband, a poet who told him before he left for war that people are put on Earth "to live, not to kill."

The first scenes of The Sorrow of War *focus on Kien's time with the Remains-Gathering Team. Given that Kien wants to write a novel that begins with a story about the Remains-Gathering Team, it's reasonable to conclude that* The Sorrow of War *is that very novel. The book itself, then, is the book Kien is trying to write, which makes sense, considering that the novel is so nonlinear—just like the book Kien works on now. Instead of focusing on postwar stories, Kien can't help but rehash his experiences in the war. And because these experiences were so intense, they make it hard for him to tell a straightforward story, thus suggesting that trauma often comes with a certain sense of incoherence, as if nothing could possibly ever make sense of such horrific experiences.*

As Kien remembers his stepfather (who died before Kien returned from the war), he thinks about the many people from his past. In particular, he remembers Hanh, a young woman who lived in the same apartment building as him when he was growing up. As a boy, Kien noticed how men stared at Hanh, who was incredibly beautiful. As the years went on, Kien himself was deeply engaged in his relationship with his girlfriend, Phuong, but Hanh slowly started to take notice of how handsome he had become.

The Sorrow of War *is predominantly about the Vietnam War, but it's also about Kien's life in general and his process of coming of age. Interspersed with his traumatic memories of the war, there are lighter, happier memories—like this one, in which Kien remembers a period in his prewar days when the most pressing matters had to do with his blossoming love life.*

When Kien was 17, Hanh asked him to help her dig a small shelter beneath her bed—war was on the horizon, and the city was constantly running air-raid drills, so Hanh wanted a way to avoid running to the nearest shelter. Kien agreed to help her, and they worked through the evening, breaking through the floor tiles and digging a chest-deep hole. During a break, Hanh gave Kien dinner and some beer. When they resumed working, Kien was a little tipsy and felt uncomfortable, but he didn't say anything—nor did he say anything when the power went out. In the darkness, Hanh lowered herself into the hole to see if it was deep enough. Their bodies pressed against each other, and though at first Kien resisted temptation, he soon feverishly clutched her.

Although Kien's life before the war was happy and full of hope, it's not the case that he lived in a completely carefree environment. By the time he was 17, it was clear that the war was on the horizon. In fact, daily life in Hanoi was impacted by the imminent threat of violence, as made evident by the fact that Hanh wanted to build a small bomb shelter beneath her own bed. The novel thus sets Kien's love life against the backdrop of war, though this doesn't deplete his romantic feelings.

Kien kissed Hanh's neck and shoulders, but she tried to struggle away from him. When one of his shirt buttons popped off, he realized what he was doing and rushed out of the hole. Hanh asked him to stay, since she couldn't see anything, so he hesitantly lifted her out of the hole. But then he left and went back to his room, with Hanh telling him to come back in a moment because she wanted to tell him something. He couldn't bring himself to do that, though. He stayed in his room until late that night, at which point he crept downstairs and put his ear to Hanh's door. Somehow, he could tell that Hanh was also pressing herself to the other side of the door, but he couldn't bring himself to open it.

There's a certain innocence to Kien's behavior in this scene. First, he lets his passion get the better of him, leading him to come on a bit too strong as he and Hanh stand pressed together in the ditch. When he gets ahold of himself again, though, he reacts by running away from the entire situation, ultimately revealing a sense of immaturity—in other words, he behaves like a child overwhelmed by the prospect of romantic desire. This entire episode highlights the fact that Kien is still quite young and inexperienced, even though he will soon go to war.

Kien ran back upstairs. He never spoke to Hanh again. Whenever their paths crossed, he avoided her as best he could, though she always seemed eager to talk. By the time he went to war, Hanh herself had already volunteered with the Youth Brigade. He stopped by her room on his way through Hanoi when he was headed toward the frontlines, but somebody new was living there, and the hole they'd dug had been filled in and tiled over again. For years and years afterward, Kien still pondered what Hanh had wanted to tell him—he felt as if he'd lost something by running away from her that night.

Kien's memory of what happened with Hanh is a good example of how the war disrupted his life. It's quite likely that he would have eventually made amends with Hanh if they had both continued to live in the same apartment building in Hanoi. Instead, though, they went their separate ways as a result of the war, leaving Kien to wonder for the rest of his life what, exactly, Hanh had wanted to tell him. In turn, it becomes clear that one of the kinds of loss associated with war is the loss of everything that could *have happened if not for the disruption of violent conflict.*

These days, Kien looks out over Hanoi and feels alone with his memories. He remembers a time after the war when spring came early, the sun shining brightly at the end of winter. As soon as winter returned, though, Phuong left him. He had loved her since childhood, and it was her memory that had sustained him through some of the worst nights of the war. For her to leave him was unbearably painful, forcing him to examine himself and realize that he had come back to her a completely different person. He was now enrolled in classes at the university, but he stopped going and started drinking heavily.

Although Kien and Phuong managed to reunite after the war, things apparently didn't go well because so much had changed. After all, Kien spent many years away, all the while witnessing and even personally carrying out terrible things, so it's no wonder that he would feel like a different person after the war. And though he loved Phuong, figuring out how to make their relationship work surely meant figuring out who he had become and how that person related to the person he was when he and Phuong first began their relationship—an undoubtedly difficult thing to do.

During that false spring, Kien was walking by the lake one night when he saw a man assaulting a woman. He ran over and defended the woman, chasing off her attacker. He then realized that the woman was a "Green Coffee Girl," the popular name for sex workers who frequented coffeehouses to meet up with clients. She was still very young—just 19—and wore somewhat dirty clothes, but she was deeply grateful to Kien, who took her back to his apartment. She wanted to repay his kindness by having sex with him, but he refused.

Throughout The Sorrow of War, *Kien has a number of interactions with women, many of whom he is romantically interested in. In this moment, though, he doesn't want to have sex with the sex worker, perhaps because he senses that she just wants to thank him for helping her fend off a vicious abuser. But Kien has seemingly no interest in meaningless sex, even if he's lonely in his postwar life. Rather, he helped her simply because she needed help, thus illustrating his willingness to put himself in danger for others—a willingness he perhaps cultivated in the war, when he became accustomed to the idea of sacrificing himself for North Vietnam.*

When the "Green Coffee Girl" got into Kien's bed, she fell asleep almost instantly, and it was only upon waking up hours later that she realized she knew Kien, who had been in the same platoon as her older brother. Kien was the one who had delivered the news of her brother's death. Sitting in his bedroom, his former compatriot's sister told him about how she came to be a sex worker in Hanoi, explaining that her mother died shortly after the news of her brother's death. Kien went around his room looking for money and anything of value, scooping up the bills and giving them to the young woman, who thanked him and said she'd never forget his kindness.

It's a strange coincidence that Kien knew this sex worker's brother from the war. It's even more *coincidental that he's the one who delivered the news of her brother's death. And yet, this coincidence underscores just how many people were deeply impacted by the Vietnam War—everyone, it seems, has a story to tell about how the war changed their lives. In that way, the people living in Hanoi are connected by a shared sense of grief, just as Kien and the sex worker are connected in this moment by what happened to the sex worker's brother.*

That spring, rumors of a new war began circulating. The Vietnamese had overtaken Cambodia, and now Cambodia's Chinese allies were threatening to invade Vietnam's northern border. Everyone around Kien was very patriotic, boasting that Vietnam was stronger than ever and that it would fare well in another war. And though Kien didn't necessarily disagree, he knew he'd have no part in the fighting. As the country got swept up in gung-ho ideas about war once more, something started to shift inside Kien—it was a *good* shift, as if he had begun to find peace for the first time since the war. That same spring, he began to write his **novel**.

Writing the novel coincides with an important emotional transformation in Kien. Even though the country is hurdling toward war once again, he begins to make a certain kind of progress, at least insofar as he actually starts to process the many difficult feelings and memories he has from the war. And the way he processes these memories, of course, is through writing, which allows him to work through his trauma.

PAGES 79-100

Kien recalls the train he took back to Hanoi after the North won the war. The train took three days and was full of soldiers, but there wasn't much fanfare. Kien and the others expected there to be big celebrations as the train passed, but that wasn't the case—the civilians and authorities didn't seem to care much about the passing veterans. Plus, so many of the soldiers were wounded and in rough shape. When they passed through train stations, loudspeakers blared messages warning the soldiers about getting too comfortable with southerners, urging them to be wary of the "spirit of reconciliation."

In the lead-up to the war, Kien was inundated with patriotic messages about how glorious victory would be and how much the country would change if the North took control. And yet, returning from winning the war isn't what he imagined: there's no grand celebration or prevailing sense of change. In fact, Northern authorities even warn the soldiers about embracing the "spirit of reconciliation," thus implying that there's still quite a bit of animosity at play in Vietnam. Winning the war, then, clearly hasn't instantly changed the country, leading Kien to question what it was all for.

Still, Kien found some solace while riding the train back to Hanoi. He grew close with a young woman named Hien, who had fought on battlefields in South Vietnam. She'd been wounded in battle, so each night on the train Kien would carry her to his hammock so she could sleep soundly. They would lie next to each other and sway all night in the hammock, occasionally kissing and hugging. When they reached Hien's stop, Kien wanted to get off the train with her and see her home, but she told him to stay, saying that he needed to go home and see if there was anyone waiting for him. With regret, he watched her walk slowly down the road on her crutches.

The novel has already emphasized the fact that love and romance can blossom in even the most unlikely circumstances, like when Kien's fellow soldiers fell in love with the three farm women in the Jungle of Screaming Souls. It's quite fitting, then, that Kien spends his last few days as a soldier in a state of romantic passion with Hien. And yet, their relationship is fleeting, as Hien insists that they must return to their separate lives, making it clear that moments of romantic bliss should never be taken for granted, since they're liable to come to a quick end.

When Kien finally reached Hanoi and went to his old building, it looked as if nobody lived there. And yet, there was a light shining on the third floor. He went up to his old apartment and saw that his father's name was still on the door. Just as he was about to open it, he heard a door open down the hall and heard his name—it was Phuong. He couldn't believe his ears. He turned around and went to her, kissing her and hugging her for the first time in 10 years. It was a moment he would never forget.

Kien's memories of his prewar relationship with Phuong helped him through some of the worst moments of the war. Now, he has the pleasure of finally reuniting with her—something he might not have even known would be possible, since so many years have passed since he last saw her. Therefore, this reunification most likely feels like an unexpectedly happy ending to the war, even if he and Phuong will later face challenges in their efforts to rekindle what they once had.

Kien mumbled about how Phuong's memory had stayed with him throughout the years, and Phuong herself assured him that now they'd be together forever. But then something intruded on their intimacy—Kien had a creeping sense of unease, and though he wasn't sure at first what it was, he soon realized he was unsettled because there was a third person in the hall. It was a man, and he was standing behind Phuong. However, Phuong was undeterred, unbuttoning her shirt to reveal a key to Kien's apartment hanging around her neck. They moved to go inside, but just as they were about to embrace once more, Kien realized Phuong had been with another man before he arrived. Furious, he pulled his bag into the apartment and firmly shut the door on Phuong.

It's not necessarily surprising that Kien is upset to learn that Phuong was with another man when he returned, but it's also *not very surprising that Phuong would seek out other lovers in Kien's absence. After all, it has been more than a decade since Kien last left; it's not even clear whether or not Phuong knew he was still alive. And though she has clearly allowed herself to strike up new relationships, she also wears the key to Kien's apartment around her neck, which is a pretty good indication that she still feels very strongly for him.*

Pacing in his room, Kien thought angrily about how his suffering in the war had been repaid by still more suffering at home. The only way he'd gotten through some of the worst moments of the war was by fantasizing about his reunion with Phuong, and now that had been ruined by the fact that she was with another man when he returned. Later that night, Phuong came to his apartment and told him that the man she'd been living with had left. The man had asked her to marry him, but now that Kien was back, he had decided to leave.

It's evident that Phuong still loves Kien. Although the man she was just with seems to have cared deeply for her (considering that he asked her to marry him), Phuong apparently has no problem brushing him aside now that Kien has returned. But she and Kien have gotten off to a rocky start in this new chapter of their relationship, ultimately underscoring just how difficult it is for people to pick up where they left off after having gone through so much individually.

Phuong and Kien resumed their romantic relationship. In retrospect, though, Kien now knows it was destined to fail. The relationship lasted for a while but ultimately ended after Kien beat up Phuong's ex-lover at a bar. The police who arrested him described him as a "madman," and when he returned home, Phuong told him that they had clearly made a mistake by getting back together. She said they were each "prisoners" to their memories of their prewar life together. She also referenced a time when they were on a train that was attacked, saying that she should have died then—that way, at least, Kien would have remembered her with happiness.

The description of Kien as a violent "madman" implies that the war has fundamentally changed him. After years of fighting, he has trouble dealing with intense emotions in everyday life, ultimately flying off the handle and becoming violent in inappropriate contexts. When Phuong says that they've become "prisoners" to their memories, she suggests that they've become overly devoted to the happiness they once had. It's clear that they no longer have this happiness, but they have tried desperately to recapture it—an endeavor Phuong now sees as futile.

One night shortly after Phuong left, Kien stood in his apartment looking out the window and reliving a number of scenes from the war. The memories tormented him, sending him pacing around the room until he finally picked up a pen and started writing them down. And then everything changed. He threw himself into the writing, and then he spent the next day wandering the city with an odd feeling of contentment, as if he had managed to regain a sense of his prewar happiness. From then on, he decided, he would plunge into the past through his writing. This would be the "new life" that the war had promised: not a new future, but a return to the past.

One of the central ideas at play in The Sorrow of War *is that the past can be a refuge of sorts. Even though Kien no longer believes in the bright future that the war was supposed to bring to Vietnam, he is able to find some sense of hope by returning to his old memories—memories, that is, of his prewar life. In doing so, he is better able to process everything that happened to him during the Vietnam War, as if the mere fact that he was once happy is enough to give him strength in the present.*

While working on the **novel**, Kien tried to recapture the many stories he'd heard throughout the years. For each soldier missing in action, he thought, there was a unique tale. For instance, many of the people working for the Remains-Gathering Team heard a ghostly song playing through the **Jungle of Screaming Souls**, and when they followed it, they finally found the dead soldier whose soul had been singing the tune. The man's skeleton was lying in a shallow grave and holding a shoddy guitar. When they gave the skeleton a real burial, the song burst forth and played loudly through the jungle one last time and then was never heard again. Whether or not this is true was never clear to Kien, but the Remains-Gathering Team passed on the story until it became a legend.

There's an emphasis on storytelling in the novel, as Kien recalls the supernatural tales many of his fellow soldiers told during and after the war. By telling such vivid ghost stories, the soldiers effectively try to make sense of their experiences, which are otherwise very overwhelming and traumatizing—so traumatizing, in fact, that it's arguably impossible to make sense of them without *turning to mysterious, supernatural interpretations.*

Kien remembers a story one of his fellow soldiers told him. This soldier was involved in an intense fight with Southern commandos when suddenly American forces started firing on them and dropping bombs. The northern soldier jumped into a bomb crater and took cover, and then a Southern commando jumped into the hole for protection. The commando landed right on top of the Northern soldier, who instinctively stabbed him multiple times. He didn't even mean to do it—it was just his impulse.

The Northern soldier in this story didn't actively want to stab the Southerner who jumped into the same crater as him—he did it without thinking. This, the novel suggests, is what war does to people: it puts them in such frightening situations that they don't have time to truly think about what they're doing, instead acting on a desperate impulse to survive.

The commando had already been injured, and though the Northerner had stabbed him, he started trying to help him. As soon as the bombing stopped, the Northerner told the commando to stay in the crater, promising to go get bandages. But it started raining heavily once he left the crater, and then he couldn't find his way back. He spent hours trying to find the commando. As he looked, though, water quickly built up in the craters. Eventually, the Northerner knew it was too late: the commando had surely already drowned. This thought haunted him for years and years to come.

Although the Northerner's first impulse was to stab the Southern commando, he quickly comes to the Southerner's aid, despite the fact that they're supposed to be enemies. The entire story suggests that there can still be quite a bit of humanity on the battlefield, despite the horrific violence. And yet, it's also very rare for soldiers to find a sense of closure after a battle, as illustrated by the Northerner's inability to help the commando, as well as his subsequent dismay, which follows him around for the rest of his life.

Kien now knows it's imperative not to dwell too much on thoughts about dead soldiers. And yet, he still vividly recalls the death of his first commander. It was 1966, and a nearby explosion of a bombshell struck the commander down. His intestines were spilling out of his stomach, but he was somehow still alive. Kien stayed with him, trying to bandage his legs to stop the terrible bleeding coming from wounds in his thighs. But the commander told him to stop—in fact, he *pleaded* with Kien to shoot him. Kien refused. Before long, another shell landed nearby and separated Kien from the commander. Before Kien could start bandaging him again, the commander grabbed a grenade and told him to run away for his own sake.

Kien's memory of his commander's death highlights the uncomfortable fact that sometimes showing mercy on the battlefield means putting people out of their misery. Such an action could be seen as a form of kindness, since it stops the wounded from suffering. The problem, though, is that this form of kindness still involves killing and thus it threatens to haunt the other person for the rest of their days. In that light, Kien still vividly remembers his commander begging him to kill him, and though he didn't ultimately oblige, it's likely that he would still be deeply scarred if he had.

To this day, Kien can still hear his commander's crazy laughter just before detonating the grenade. Nine years later, members of the Remains-Gathering Team swore they kept hearing crazed laughter in the same vicinity of the **Jungle of Screaming Souls** where Kien's commander died. Kien didn't mention the incident at first, but other members of the team offered up similar stories that might explain the ghostly laughter. They also claimed to have seen various figures in the woods and even went to find them. But there was no way to know for sure what or who these things were, so the men formulated a story about how one of these figures was pregnant, saying that the baby would most likely live a good life—a small form of optimism that Kien saw as necessary to the soldiers' general post-war outlook.

Again, storytelling becomes a way of making sense of otherwise frightening wartime experiences. In this case, Kien's fellow soldiers insist on infusing their lives with a small dose of optimism by suggesting that one of the ghostly figures they've seen in the woods is pregnant. In this way, they use storytelling and supernatural beliefs to project their hopes for a brighter future, clinging to the idea that even good things can emerge from ugly circumstances.

PAGES 100-108

Kien thinks back to April 30, 1975—otherwise known as Victory Day. That was the day Northern forces captured the airport in Saigon. He remembers being inside the airport after the fighting finished and seeing the many soldiers strewn about. The enemy soldiers were dead, but his fellow Northern fighters were exhausted and sleeping. He himself lay down and drifted into a heavy slumber. When he woke up, he smelled the delicious smell of noodles, which some of his compatriots were cooking in a large pot over a big fire they'd lit using things like mattresses and parts of a bar. They offered him some, but then one of the soldiers chastised Kien for sleeping right next to the nude corpse of a South Vietnamese woman. He hadn't even noticed until the other soldier pointed it out.

That Kien doesn't even notice the corpse at first highlights two things: first, that the final days of the war have utterly depleted his energy, and second, that he has become somewhat accustomed to being around death. For the past decade, he has been surrounded by violence and death, so sleeping right next to a dead body perhaps isn't as alarming as it would be for most people. He has, in other words, become somewhat desensitized to the horrors of war.

Just then, a large soldier carrying a huge crate of beer burst in. He was clearly ready to celebrate, but he tripped over the naked corpse and dropped the beer. Infuriated, he screamed at her and grabbed her leg, dragging her to the stairs. Kien could hear the sound of her head banging against each step as the big soldier pulled her down. Once outside, the soldier picked up the woman and threw her off the stairs onto the concrete. The soldier who first pointed out the corpse was enraged by the big man's behavior, so he rushed forward with his gun out, but Kien knocked it toward the sky as the bullets rushed from the barrel.

Although the corpse was a South Vietnamese soldier and thus an enemy, the soldier who initially pointed her out to Kien still recognizes her humanity—she is (or was) more than just a soldier for South Vietnam. She was a human being. Therefore, the soldier doesn't want his comrades to disrespect her, perhaps because he realizes that the war could so easily have gone differently, putting him and his fellow Northerners in the same position as the helpless corpse.

The soldier who fired the shots thanked Kien for stopping him from doing something stupid. He had been deeply infuriated by the big soldier's behavior, but it would have been senseless for him to kill the man. He then suggests that the entire ordeal taught them a good lesson: "Don't criticize others. Be sure of yourself first."

Having calmed down after almost killing a fellow soldier, the man who defended the corpse's honor sets his sights on how, exactly, he should behave in the postwar years to come. He wants this scene to be a lesson, realizing that his anger almost got the best of him, which would have ruined his life. Instead of acting like he's still at war, then, he decides to mind his own business and not resort to violence so quickly. In other words, he realizes that he has to reexamine his violent impulses—impulses that the war certainly encouraged him to cultivate.

Kien didn't agree with his compatriot's point about being "sure of yourself." The comment made him think about his friend Oanh, who died a few months before Victory Day while his and Kien's regiment attacked a big police headquarters. Once they got inside, they made their way down the halls and found three people. Kien immediately fired his machine gun, right as Oanh yelled at him to hold his fire, saying that the people were women. It was too late: two of them had already fallen. The third one crumpled at the base of some stairs. She was alive, so Oanh rushed to her. He made sure she was all right and then told her to go outside with her hands up, assuring her that nobody would shoot her. As soon as Oanh turned away, though, the young woman shot him.

The story of Oanh's death illustrates one of the cruel realities of war, which is that compassion and mercy can be quite dangerous. If Oanh had unhesitatingly killed the woman at the base of the stairs, he wouldn't have died in this moment. Instead, though, he stopped to show her kindness, and it ended up costing him his life.

The young woman would have shot Kien, too, if her gun hadn't run out of bullets. She pointed the gun at him and pulled the trigger, but nothing happened. Enraged that she had killed his friend, he shot her repeatedly with all the bullets in his gun.

Oanh's death explains Kien's hesitancy to embrace the idea that the soldier at Saigon airport set forth: namely, that it's important to show restraint instead of letting violent impulses take over. If Oanh had heeded his own wartime impulses by instantly killing the woman at the base of the stairs, he might still be alive.

To this day, Kien still remembers the woman's naked corpse from the Saigon airport on Victory Day. He sees her in his nightmares, and he doesn't think back to Victory Day with the kind of fondness that most people expect. When he sees depictions of the joyous atmosphere in movies or on TV, he feels at odds with history. In his experience, Victory Day was full of tired, drunk soldiers looting whatever they could—not parades and elation.

Winning the war isn't what Kien thought it would be. For him, the most important thing about winning is simply that it means the war is over—not necessarily that the North was victorious. After all, the victory doesn't seem to have led to anything all that admirable, as most of the people around Kien celebrate by devolving into utter chaos, which only increases Kien's sense of skepticism about whether the war was worth spilling so much blood over.

PAGES 108-116

The only person who has read Kien's **novel** manuscript is a woman referred to only as "the mute girl." She doesn't speak, and she moved into Kien's building a few years before the war ended, living in the attic where his father used to paint. Kien has written about her, explaining that she slowly began to realize that he and Phuong used to be in love but that their relationship ended. One night, Kien drunkenly knocked on "the mute girl's" door. She had been expecting him to come around at some point, since it was obvious he was interested in her, though not necessarily in a sexual way. He began pacing the room and talking to her, saying that he put her in his novel because for some reason her presence helped him remember things.

Kien's interest in "the mute girl" seems to stem from the fact that he's desperate for some kind of outlet, or somebody he can talk to without fearing judgment (it's implied in the novel that this woman is deaf). Liberated by the idea that he can say whatever he needs to say, Kien approaches his developing friendship with "the mute girl" as a somewhat therapeutic bond that ultimately helps him cope with everything he has been through.

Kien developed a habit of visiting "the mute girl" in the attic on a regular basis. He would write as much as he could—drinking all the while—and then head upstairs to speak the story aloud to her. She couldn't hear him, but she read his lips and knew the stories he was repeating were terrifying and brutal. But she wanted to be there for him in this way, and he seemed to cling to her presence. She even fell in love with Kien, though he was always at an emotional remove—he mistook her for Phuong, for Hien, for Hoa (a woman he knew in the **Jungle of Screaming Souls**), and even for the corpse from the Saigon airport.

It's quite clear that Kien is in a troubled state of mind, given that he mistakes "the mute girl" for women from his own past, including the corpse of a South Vietnamese soldier he didn't actually even know. All the same, though, he finds "the mute girl's" presence soothing, as if her inability to verbally respond to his stories gives him space to finally process them. In a way, then, talking to her becomes part of his writing process—which, in turn, is his way of dealing with the terrible things he has seen and done.

As Kien approached the end of his **novel**, he spoke to "the mute girl" about how he didn't know what to do with it. He hadn't written it to be published; he had composed it simply for the process of writing it. One night, she went to his room during a city-wide power outage and found him putting the pages of his manuscript into the stove and trying to light a fire. She knew that his father had apparently burned all of his **paintings** before his death, but she didn't want Kien to follow in his footsteps, so she stopped him. He was startled at first, but then he embraced her, and they held each other for a long time.

That Kien didn't write his novel for publication underlines the fact that the novel is his way of processing his war-related trauma. He wrote the book, it seems, simply to give voice to both the terrible and happy memories swirling inside him. The act of writing, then, is more important to him than the end result, which is perhaps why he tries to burn the pages, maybe hoping that doing so will bring him a sense of emotional closure.

"The mute girl" fell asleep at some point, and Kien snuck out of the building. He never came back. It was clear to the woman that he had left his apartment for her. Alone, she gathered the pages of his **novel** and stacked them on the desk, where they remained for years.

Having finished his novel, Kien is apparently capable of finally moving on, at least in a literal sense. Instead of staying in Hanoi and continuing to live in the same building he occupied as a child, he sets out in search of a new life—or, at least, this is what readers are left to think. Regardless of where he goes, the fact remains that he has finally moved on from his old life in Hanoi, suggesting that writing the novel was a necessary step he had to take in order to process his trauma and leave behind his past.

PAGES 116-146

Kien thinks back to 1965. He was still in school, and he would soon head to war. One day, the headmaster commanded all of the students to start digging trenches, but Phuong and Kien didn't listen. Phuong had worn an attractive bathing suit beneath her clothes, so she and Kien snuck away to go swimming in the lake. As they swam together, they heard a choir singing in the schoolyard, and Kien was enthralled by Phuong's beauty. This memory remains his last happy, peaceful memory. The rest of his memories are full of violence and horror. Now, as he writes, he feels fatigued by his own life, wishing he could just slip away into a state of eternal peace. But he can't, he knows, until he finishes writing, as he feels like he carries the "burden of his generation" to finish this book.

Although the novel has already given readers a glimpse of Kien's life as he finishes the novel, the narrative circles back in this section to a time when he's still working on the book. And as he writes, he thinks back to what he regards as his last happy memory. The novel thus continues to spiral into the past, creating a nonlinear timeline that, though somewhat difficult to piece together, resembles the reeling, listless feeling of looking back on past moments of joy after a lifetime of grief—an undoubtedly discombobulating feeling.

Kien thinks about his parents. His mother was a devoted communist and urged Kien to look forward to when he'd be able to join the Youth Union. His father, on the other hand, was a somewhat reclusive painter whose art didn't conform to communist standards, since the Communist Party frowned upon what it saw as overly intellectual art. Since his father's **paintings** weren't easily understood by working-class people, he fell out of favor with the art community, at which point his health declined and he went—according to Kien—a little crazy. He ended up taking his own life, though he didn't die right away. He stayed alive long enough to say to Kien that times were changing, and that he would now face great hardship and sorrow.

Kien doesn't have a particularly happy family history, suggesting that the war isn't the only sad or troubling thing in his past. His father, though, seems to have predicted the outcome of the Vietnam War, recognizing that it would take a devastating toll on both Kien's life and Vietnamese society as a whole.

Kien's father burned all of his own **paintings** before his death. Kien resented him for a long time, not understanding why he would want to kill himself and destroy his own life's work. Now, though, Kien has a better understanding. On the day of his father's death, the air-raid sirens blared for the first time in Hanoi, and though it was only a drill, it still felt like the promise of the terrible hardship still to come.

To a certain extent, the death of Kien's father signaled the death of Kien's innocence, since Hanoi plunged into conflict on the very same day. There's a very stark dividing line, then, between Kien's prewar life—when he still had a father—and his wartime existence, when he found himself fatherless in a city speeding toward violent conflict.

Although Kien wasn't close with his father and didn't understand his eccentric ways, Phuong had a tight bond with him. She seemed to understand his artistic view of the world and would often come up to the attic to view his **paintings**. They often sat next to each other in complete silence as he worked. Once, Kien's father noted that Phuong was very beautiful and that she would surely experience great unhappiness—it was inevitable in a world like the one she was growing up in. When he finally burned his paintings, Phuong was by his side, helping him and acting as a witness to the act.

Both Phuong and Kien's father seem to share a certain cynicism or skepticism about the surrounding world. Kien's father, for example, thinks that Phuong will experience hardship simply because of the way she moves through the world, which he implies isn't able to accommodate people like her. Of course, it's not all that clear (at this point, at least) what, exactly, Kien's father means by this or why Phuong doesn't fit into the world around her. Regardless, though, what's important is that Phuong and Kien's father are closely connected, which strengthens her bond with Kien while also creating a small amount of tension, since he himself doesn't feel close to his father.

It wasn't until they skipped the trench-digging to go swimming that Phuong told Kien she had watched his father burn the **paintings**. Kien had already volunteered for the army and would soon be leaving the city, so this was the final period of their youthful romance. In fact, Kien would be leaving the very next day. After they swam out far from the shore, they returned and lay on the banks at dusk. Lying close to each other, they watched a reddish glare appear on the western horizon and wondered if it was a flare alerting the city to an attack, but there had been no siren.

The narrative returns once more to Kien's last truly happy memory, which takes place when he and Phuong lie next to each other by the lake shortly before he goes to war. This is most likely his final happy memory because it's the last time he and Phuong are able to be with each other without the trauma of war interfering in their relationship. Of course, the war is very much present in this moment, since everyone else is preparing for violence and there's an ominous glare in the sky, but these things haven't yet fundamentally altered Phuong and Kien's bond.

Even as it got cold that night, Phuong and Kien stayed on the banks of the lake. Phuong moved closer to Kien, pulling him toward her. He was nervous, but he gave in and kissed her passionately—until he was suddenly overcome by anxiety and guilt. He ripped himself from Phuong's embrace, causing her to ask him if he was afraid. She was afraid, too, she said, but admitting that actually made her want to embrace the feeling anymore. But Kien said he didn't think they should have sex, since he'd soon be leaving for war. Phuong was disappointed, saying that there would never be another moment like this, to which Kien simply insisted that he would come back some day.

Kien's previous experience with Hanh—in which he came on too strong and then felt too embarrassed to see her again—has likely impacted the way he behaves in this scene. Even though Phuong actively wants to become sexually intimate with him, he can't bring himself to let things progress too far, perhaps because he's still reeling from what happened with Hanh. The entire situation once again calls attention to his lack of experience, thus highlighting the fact that he's still quite young even though he'll soon be going off to war.

Phuong noted that it would likely be years before Kien would return. What's more, they had no idea what, exactly, he'd be coming home to. This conversation transitioned into a discussion of Kien's father. Phuong claimed that she glimpsed into the future when Kien's father burned the **paintings**. She then went on to lovingly criticize Kien's commitment to the army and to the war. Unlike him, she felt like a "free spirit" who didn't belong in this period of war—just like Kien's father.

The reason Phuong doesn't fit into the surrounding society becomes a bit clearer in this moment, as she explains that she's a "free spirit" who is out of place in a culture fired up by wartime patriotism. Unlike Kien, who is—at this point, at least—enthusiastic to join the war effort, she feels more like his father, who valued things like art and beauty more than war and patriotism.

Phuong kissed Kien and told him she had always loved him. From now on, she said, she would be his wife—wherever he went, he would know that she was his wife, and then perhaps they would reunite someday. For now, though, they should take advantage of their last private moments together. Saying this, she drew Kien toward her, and he finally gave in, eventually baring her chest and kissing her breasts. But still, he couldn't bring himself to have sex with her.

Phuong makes an emotional commitment to Kien in this moment, essentially assuring him that he will always have her heart. This, however, doesn't change the fact that Kien is still quite young and unready to have sex, once again spotlighting the disturbing fact that the country has called on people as young and inexperienced as Kien to go off and kill others on the battlefield.

During their conversation by the lake, Phuong had challenged Kien's ideas about the valor of war. She didn't think killing enemy soldiers was an inherently honorable thing to do, as many other people seemed to think at the time. Later, when Kien forced the four commandos to dig their own grave after they killed the three young farm women, he was about to shoot them but then recalled Phuong's words: "So, you'll kill lots of men? That'll make you a hero, I suppose?" He ended up sparing their lives.

In this moment, the novel circles back to a previous section—a section that actually took place many years after *this conversation between Phuong and Kien, when Kien found himself rounding up four Southern commandos after they killed and raped the three farm women. Again, the fragmentary nature of the narrative represents how such traumatic experiences impact the way people think about their pasts, jumbling the memories because almost nothing can actually make sense of the horrific events. Readers now learn that Kien ended up sparing the Southern commandos because of the conversation he had with Phuong by the lake, in which she criticized him for thinking that wartime violence would make him a hero. By saying this, she essentially helped him see that patriotism doesn't automatically justify violence and cruelty.*

In 1969, when Kien was one of the only people in Battalion 27 to survive a nasty fight in the **Jungle of Screaming Souls**, he managed to hobble through the landscape and meet up with some other soldiers, who took him to a small field hospital. The entire operation was hardly equipped to heal anyone, but Kien convalesced there for two months, all the while drifting in and out of consciousness and dreaming of Phuong. He even thought the nurse attending to him *was* Phuong.

When Kien mistakes the field nurse for Phuong, it becomes quite clear that his memories of Phuong are responsible for helping him through some of the most trying and painful times of the war. Of course, Phuong isn't actually there to care for him, but the mere thought of her seems to sustain him as he lies wounded in a shoddy, dangerous field hospital.

Later, Kien was transferred to a bigger hospital and wanted to know what had happened to Phuong, but another soldier—who had also been at the field hospital—explained that the nurse who helped him was someone else. She was almost certainly dead by now, the soldier said. The field hospital had been bombed just two hours after Kien was transferred.

A significant aspect of Kien's overall experience in the war is that he is quite lucky. All around him, people are dying terrible, gruesome deaths. And though he does sustain some serious injuries, he manages to escape the war with his life still intact. This episode at the field hospital is a good illustration of just how lucky he is, considering that the tents were bombed mere hours after he left. With such luck on his side, it's no wonder that he and the other surviving soldiers often invest themselves in supernatural explanations of what has happened to them, since these are perhaps the only ways of making sense of their otherwise unbelievable fortune (and, conversely, the misfortune *of their deceased compatriots).*

After Phuong and Kien ended their romantic relationship in the aftermath of the war, Phuong continued to live down the hall. Kien could hear the many men who came to visit her, but she eventually slowed down her practice of entertaining such guests. Still, when Kien realized it was her birthday and brought her flowers, he was surprised to see that she wasn't alone: there was an older man in the apartment, and though she claimed that he was simply an artist, it was evident to Kien that there was something else going on between them.

It's clear that Kien has trouble moving on from his relationship with Phuong. This isn't all that surprising, considering that they have such a long history together. Plus, the mere thought of returning to Phuong helped Kien through the worst moments of the war, so it's undoubtedly hard to simply forget about their relationship now that he's back. In turn, it's even more *difficult for him to ignore the idea that she might be seeing other people.*

Kien went back to his room and stared at his **novel** pages. After a moment, Phuong came in and said she wanted to tell him something. She explained that she had to do certain things to support herself during the war—things that sometimes made her feel "like an animal." She now felt "badly soiled," but she also couldn't simply stop living the lifestyle she had created for herself; this was how she would surely live out the rest of her life. Kien tried to convince her to come back to him, but she refused, saying that it wasn't worth thinking about. It seemed like they could have been happy together, but that's not how things went, and now they should finally part for good.

The implication here is that Phuong has been supporting herself as a sex worker for the past decade or so. The novel also suggests that Phuong feels guilty for earning her living this way but, at the same time, doesn't know how else to live, since this is what she has been doing for so long. In turn, the novel indicates that it can be quite difficult to move on from certain lifestyles, especially if those lifestyles were adopted as a means of survival. Similarly, it has already been made clear that Kien has found it hard to abandon his soldierly way of moving through the world, as he responds to everyday life with the violence and fear of wartime.

Phuong told Kien that she was finally leaving their apartment building for good. She would leave that very night, she said. He embraced her, and they kissed for a while, but she cut it off and said it was time for her to go. He asked her if she was in love with the older man he found in her room, but she said she had only ever loved Kien. Then she left forever, leaving Kien to consider the fact that he only ever had two true loves in his entire life: Phuong before he went to war, and Phuong after he came back.

Despite the challenges Kien and Phuong have faced in their postwar lives, they still seem to love each other. In fact, their feelings for each other are quite strong—so strong that Phuong finds it necessary to completely leave Kien behind in order to get on with her life. The idea here is that sometimes things simply don't work out, and though love is capable of enduring even the most trying circumstances, that doesn't always mean people should let their romantic feelings keep them from living fuller, more rewarding lives.

PAGES 146-200

When he's not writing, Kien wanders Hanoi, often visiting a coffeehouse in the evenings. One night while he was still with Phuong, he went to the coffeehouse and encountered several dangerous men. One of them insulted the owner of the coffeehouse, so Kien stood up for him, which led to a fight. The ruffian was a former soldier, too, and he challenged Kien to come back the next day for a fight. But Kien threw hot coffee in his face and told him he was willing to fight that instant. In response, the ruffian insulted Phuong—he mocked Kien for thinking Phuong was his girlfriend, telling him that she had sustained herself through sex work while he was at war. Nearly everyone had been with her, he claimed, including the ruffian himself. Kien flew into a rage and brutally beat the man until the police arrived.

The narrative now confirms that Phuong did indeed support herself as a sex worker while Kien was off at war. The way Kien responds to this information is in keeping with his inability to fully move on from the war, as he flies into a violent rage in the same way that he might become violent when provoked in battle. It's clear, then, that he has trouble moving on from his wartime impulses, even though beating up this man in the coffeehouse won't do anything to change the fact that other men have slept with the love of his life.

Kien thinks back to the very first days of his wartime experience. He joined the army in 1965 and underwent three months of training, after which his unit—the 36th Battalion—was called to the frontlines. On the way, their train passed through Hanoi. Since there were so many soldiers from Hanoi, the commander allowed them to take three hours to visit their loved ones before boarding the train again and making their way south for the frontlines. Anyone who was even just one minute late would be left behind and considered a deserter, which was punishable by death.

It's worth noting that the novel has already stated that Kien was part of the 27th Battalion. Now, however, it says that his first unit was the 36th Battalion, thus inviting readers to wonder what must have happened to his first unit—a question that highlights just how quickly things can change in wartime, when nothing is dependable or predictable.

Kien rushed away from the train station and returned to his apartment building, but he found it mostly empty, since people were evacuating the city and seeking shelter. However, there was still one resident there, and he told Kien that he'd seen Phuong headed to the train station, so Kien raced back to find her. He found her just about to board a moving train. A young man already on the train was yelling at her to hurry up, but she didn't move because she had seen Kien. The young man was incredulous, shouting at her to get onboard as the train pulled away, but she ignored him. Kien couldn't help but notice how much the young man seemed to care about Phuong, but he pushed the matter to the back of his mind when the train disappeared and Phuong embraced him with pure delight.

This happy reunion between Kien and Phuong is something of a precursor to their reunion after the war, when Kien is ecstatic to see Phuong but then realizes that she's with another man who seems to care deeply about her. In this moment, though, he's able to ignore the implication that Phuong has already developed a relationship with somebody else in his absence, but it is perhaps partially because of this first episode that he flies into such a rage years later when he realizes that she has been living with another man.

Overjoyed to see Kien, Phuong insisted that they should go back to their apartment building and have dinner together. When Kien told her that he was headed to the front, he felt the reality of that statement for the first time: he was truly leaving Phuong. But Phuong didn't want to dwell on the matter, convincing him to rush back to the apartment with her. They paid a bicycle taxi to take them there as fast as possible, but an air-raid siren went off as soon as they arrived. The taxi driver immediately ran off to seek shelter, but Phuong didn't want to spend her and Kien's last precious moments in a bomb shelter. She insisted to him that he should spend the night, since the train would surely be gone by the time the air-raid was over.

Phuong understands the fleeting and precious nature of her final hours with Kien. This understanding suggests that she's capable of recognizing just how long and terrible the war will be—she seems to know that there's a high likelihood that she'll never see Kien again or that, if she does, it could be a very, very long time. With this knowledge, she doesn't hesitate to make the most of the time they have left of their prewar relationship.

Kien was too afraid to stay the night with Phuong, terrified by the prospect of being labeled a deserter. Instead of staying at the old apartment building, then, he and Phuong commandeered the taxi driver's bicycle and rode back to the station, laughing and enjoying the thrill of careening through the empty streets during an air raid. But by the time they reached the station, Kien's train had already left, so Phuong insisted that they hitchhike to the next train station, where he could meet up once again with his unit.

Even though the surrounding circumstances are grim and even a bit terrifying, Kien and Phuong manage to have a good time together as they careen through the abandoned streets of Hanoi—during an air raid, no less. Their excitement and glee in this moment underlines the idea that romantic happiness can flourish even in the face of hardship and adversity.

What Kien didn't know at the time is that, while he and Phuong were trying to catch up with the train, American B-52 planes were targeting his Battalion. The war, in other words, had really begun, but he was still with Phuong. Hardly anyone in the 36th Battalion survived these opening attacks.

It now becomes clear why Kien ends up entering the war with the 27th Battalion instead of the 36th. Out of sheer luck, he avoids death by accidentally missing his train. And though this is simply coincidental, it's arguable that love is what saves him from dying on this first day of his life as a true soldier, since he wouldn't have missed the train if he hadn't sought out Phuong.

Phuong and Kien managed to hitch a ride from a brusque soldier who only stopped because Phuong stood on the side of the road while Kien stayed back. Enchanted by a beautiful woman in such an unlikely place, the soldier screeched to a halt and started flirting with her, and though he was clearly disappointed when he saw Kien, he didn't refuse them a ride—nor did he stop speaking suggestively to Phuong, who expertly indulged his attention. When they finally reached the next train station, the driver told Phuong to wait there; he would be circling back and returning to Hanoi, and he'd be glad to pick her up on the way back.

In this scene, Phuong demonstrates her ability to leverage her good looks in ways that make it possible for her (and, in this case, Kien) to survive otherwise dangerous circumstances. She's obviously not interested in the brusque soldier who gives her and Kien a ride, but she indulges him to ensure that he won't give her and Kien trouble as they try to make their way to the next station. It is this survival skill that later enables her to support herself as a sex worker in the difficult context of wartime Hanoi.

After leaving the driver, Phuong and Kien learned that the train they'd seen from the car (which they'd thought was Kien's train) was actually a cargo train. The one they wanted was still ahead, but the cargo train was following it, so they hopped onto one of the cars, stowing away in the darkness. As soon as they did so, they realized they were surrounded by other people lurking in the dark, most of them soldiers. Kien and Phuong found a place to lie down, but Kien insisted that Phuong should leave—it wasn't safe there, since the train was careening toward violence. Plus, there was the constant threat of American bomber planes, but Phuong refused to leave, having decided to accompany Kien as far as possible.

Phuong's devotion to Kien is on display in this scene, as she puts herself in harm's way simply to be with him for as long as possible. She wants to squeeze every last minute out of their youthful relationship, clearly understanding that things will never be the same once Kien enters the war.

As the train rolled south, Kien and Phuong lay next to each other. They were charged with the excitement of love, lust, and fear, but Kien still hesitated to have sex with Phuong. She tried once more to convince him, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Years later, Kien would think about these moments. After the war, he would stand in the hallway of the apartment building and look at the lamplight shining through Phuong's door. It shone even after she left the building for good, occasionally making him forget she was gone.

Once more, Kien can't bring himself to have sex with Phuong, feeling as if he's not ready to do so. In turn, it becomes clear once again that he's still quite inexperienced and young—and yet, he's also hurtling toward the violence and gore of war. The fact that he isn't ready to have sex but will soon be expected to kill people underscores the absurdity of sending such young people into battle.

Phuong tried again to convince Kien to have sex, asking if he was afraid. Before he could answer, though, somebody screamed, "Planes! Bombers!" Everyone in the cargo train started moving about the dark car as jets flew close overhead. The train started braking, and people started jumping out of the car before it had even stopped. The planes started firing rounds all over the place, and in the commotion, Kien lost track of Phuong. He heard her calling his name but couldn't locate her. Then, in a bright flare of light from a nearby blast, he saw her lying on the floor of the cargo car with a muscular man on top of her. She was trying to fight him off, but he was too strong. Another explosion hit, and the shock of it sent Kien flying across the car.

In the chaos and commotion of the bombing, Kien suddenly realizes that the Americans overhead aren't the only antagonistic forces he has to watch out for: there are also the other North Vietnamese men in the cargo train, some of whom are apparently eager to take advantage of the confusion and use it as an opportunity to attack and rape Phuong. Kien's first real experience in the war is thus quite complicated, as he's put in a position in which it's necessary to fight off his own compatriots.

After the blast, Kien didn't know where he was. Disoriented, he searched desperately for Phuong, but he couldn't find her. After some time passed, he remembered what he'd seen, the image of Phuong getting raped burning in his mind's eye. Later, he would look back on this moment as his first true taste of the brutal, horrific violence of war.

Kien's first brush with violence is much messier and more complicated than anything he ever could have prepared for. In the abstract, fighting in a war seems like a straightforward battle between two opposing sides. Now, though, Kien realizes that this isn't necessarily the case: war creates all sorts of tension, violence, and antagonism—all things that can play out between people who are ostensibly on the same side.

Kien pauses this recollection of his fateful first night of war to rehash an experience he had later on. He remembers the most grueling escape he made throughout the war. It was in 1968, when he and his fellow soldiers were trying desperately to make their way toward the Cambodian border, where they might find some safety. As they made their way through the **jungle**, they crossed paths with a group of wounded soldiers who were also trying to get to the Cambodian border, so they joined forces and started traveling together. Both groups followed a woman named Hoa who, although she was acting as a guide, didn't actually know the area very well. She promised to take them to the Sa Thay River, but she ended up leading them to Crocodile Lake—a potentially deadly mistake.

Hoa has already come up several times throughout the novel, so it's evident that she's someone who made a lasting impression on Kien. It's not clear, however, what happened to her. By suddenly shifting from the suspenseful train scene to this story about Hoa, the narrative once again mimics the fragmentary, discombobulated way that trauma impacts memory. Instead of telling the story linearly, Kien hops from one memory to the next, letting his lingering, traumatic recollections guide his storytelling. The novel thus has its own kind of internal logic—a logic that only makes sense through a lens of extreme grief.

Enemy troops were spread throughout the **jungle**, so it was incredibly unsafe for Kien and his men to find themselves locked in against Crocodile Lake. He almost shot Hoa for making this mistake, but he instead gave her one last chance to redeem herself by allowing her to retrace their footsteps in the hopes of finding the correct path toward the Sa Thay River and, eventually, the Cambodian border. But he didn't trust her to do it herself, so he accompanied her. Eventually, she found a rock shaped like a face, which was a marker she had overlooked before. She then found the river, at which point she and Kien took a small break.

The novel suggests in this scene that one of the difficult parts of war is having to rely on others. Kien doesn't trust Hoa after she leads him and his men to a location where they're vulnerable to enemy attacks, but he has no choice but to continue to depend on her knowledge of the area. With no alternatives, he gives Hoa another chance, essentially putting his unit's chance of survival in the hands of somebody he has no reason to trust.

Hoa shared cigarettes with Kien, who was no longer suspicious of her. As they smoked, he learned that she was only 19 and that she'd already been fighting for almost two years. She spoke frankly about her fear and, in doing so, endeared herself to Kien. As they smoked, though, they heard a helicopter overhead and then some gunfire, so they got up and started making their way back to the group by Crocodile Lake, who—because so many of them were wounded—were essentially sitting ducks. As they made their way back, Kien couldn't believe he had been so angry that he had considered murdering an innocent 19-year-old for making a mistake.

The fact that Kien was ready to kill Hoa simply because she made a mistake is a good illustration of just how intensely the war has refigured the way he moves through the world. His first impulse when things go wrong is now to lash out in a violent rage, and though this is clearly a problematic and unproductive way to live, the tricky thing about war is that it justifies this kind of behavior, as evidenced by the fact that Kien's friend Oanh later dies because he shows compassion instead of demonstrating a soldierly sense of ruthlessness.

Suddenly, Kien saw a large group of American soldiers walking through the **jungle**. He immediately ducked and pulled Hoa down behind him, hiding as the Americans progressed on the path with a large hunting dog. It was clear that the Americans were on their way toward the group stranded at Crocodile Lake. But then a gunshot rang out behind Kien, and all of the American soldiers ducked for cover. Another shot sounded, and it became clear to Kien that Hoa had stood up and fired shots at the hunting dog, killing it before sprinting in the other direction. The Americans sprinted after her, headed away from Crocodile Lake, and though Kien wanted to help her, all he had was a grenade.

Hoa ends up saving not just Kien's life, but the lives of everyone in his unit. She perhaps makes this sacrifice because she feels guilty for accidentally leading the unit into such a vulnerable position. It's also possible that she sacrifices herself simply because she realizes that if she doesn't, many people will die—that is, it's possible that she simply sees this sacrifice as part of her soldierly duty. Either way, the memory of this sacrifice will stay with Kien for the rest of his life.

The Americans eventually caught Hoa and started brutally raping her. Horrified, Kien realized that Hoa had sacrificed her own life to save the vulnerable soldiers stranded by Crocodile Lake. She had also sacrificed herself for Kien, so it would be senseless for him to rush toward the Americans with a single grenade. Realizing that Hoa would die in vain if he did anything else, he made his way back to Crocodile Lake and led the others to safety.

If Kien were to rush to Hoa's aid, he would essentially render her great act of bravery futile, since he would certainly fail to save both her and himself. He's thus faced with the difficult task of simply accepting her extreme kindness by turning his back on her—something that is very hard to do and will haunt him for years to come.

When Kien returned to Crocodile Lake with the Remains-Gathering Team years later, he couldn't find the area where Hoa had been raped and murdered. The entire memory had already seemed like a distant nightmare, and his inability to find the spot where she had died made it seem even more like it had never happened. In a way, then, not being able to find the area again allowed him a certain kind of "escape" from the memory itself. The only thing that remained of the experience, it seemed, was the "sorrow of having survived."

Kien's experience retracing his steps to find where Hoa died provides some valuable insight into his broader emotional struggles. Although he managed to live through the war, the fact of the matter is that surviving doesn't always feel like such a stroke of luck. In fact, there's a certain "sorrow" to "having survived," since staying alive after such a disaster means having to grapple with the horrific memories of the war—like, for instance, the memory of watching Hoa get raped and killed.

PAGES 200-224

Kien's thoughts return to the night he spent traveling south with Phuong. There was a period after a nearby explosion in which he had been knocked out. When he regained consciousness, he couldn't remember which car of the train he'd been in. As he tried to gather himself, several sinister men jumped out of a cargo car and went toward the demolished train station. Sensing that Phuong was in the car they had just left, Kien made his way into the dark train, where he found Phuong huddling in a corner. Her shirt was completely ripped, her hair was messy and hanging over her face, and she was terribly battered. When he tried to touch and speak to her, she didn't register his presence, instead staring forward with a vacant, haunted expression on her face.

Returning to the troubling story of Phuong's rape, the narrative highlights the sense of helplessness Kien feels—the same kind of helplessness, perhaps, that he will later feel when he's forced to silently watch American soldiers rape Hoa. Because the bomb blasts separated him from Phuong, he was unable to come to her aid during the chaos of the air raid. And now that he has found her, it's too late to do anything.

Phuong refused to answer Kien's questions about what happened to her. He could tell something horrific had taken place while he was unconscious, but she wouldn't speak about it, so he simply convinced her to stand and leave the train. As soon as she got up, though, he saw that her pants were torn and that there was blood trickling down her thighs. Kien instantly told her to sit back down so that he could bandage her wound, but Phuong refused, eventually yelling that it *couldn't* be bandaged.

Kien's overall innocence and naivety shines through when he suggests that Phuong should be bandaged. He doesn't seem to understand that the blood is coming from her vagina, instead thinking that she has an open wound somewhere on her body. In turn, it's clear that he hasn't fully realized that she has been raped, which is a good reminder of just how young he still is—young enough that he's not used to considering such horrific possibilities, though he'll soon have to learn to recognize evil in the world because of the war.

Just as Phuong and Kien were about to get off the train, a huge, muscular man blocked them and asked Phuong where she was going. He said he had some new pants for Phuong, as well as some water, though he didn't seem at all interested in Kien. As he spoke, he looked at her bare breasts and then told Kien he could leave. Meanwhile, Kien tried to speak to Phuong, insisting that they should go, but she didn't respond. The big man told Phuong that he wanted her to stay with him until the next train station—if she didn't, he said, he would be bored. Plus, he saved her from a group of men "lining up for [her] again," so he felt like he deserved to have his "turn" with her.

Phuong and Kien come to learn some of the horrors of war in this scene, as they realize that war brings out the worst in people (and in society at large). Using the chaos of American bomber planes as an excuse, Kien and Phuong's fellow Northerners don't hesitate to rape Phuong, ultimately demonstrating that war isn't just about fighting one enemy—it's about protecting oneself at all costs, even from people who should be on the same side.

As Kien tried to convince Phuong to leave and the large man tried to get her to stay, the entire train shuddered with the force of another attack. Suddenly, the entire environment erupted into chaos, with people running everywhere. In the confusion, Kien screamed at the large man to let him and Phuong leave. They started to fight, and the huge man threw Kien to the ground and started dragging Phuong away. But then Kien found an iron bar and started bludgeoning the man with it. At one point, Phuong grabbed Kien, yelling at him to stop, but he just whirled around and screamed, "Get away, you whore!" Then he went back to bashing the man with the iron bar, bringing it down over and over until the man stopped moving.

Kien turns his rage on Phuong in this moment, and though it's possible that this is just an instance of misplaced anger, the fact that he calls her a "whore" possibly suggests that he holds her own rape against her, as if it's her *fault that a group of men violently took advantage of her (which, needless to say, it's not). Given this tense interaction, it's unsurprising that they later find it difficult to move on from the horrors of war. On another note, it's significant that the first person Kien truly injures (and possibly kills) in the war is a fellow Northerner—a good indication that war isn't as straightforward and clear-cut as he has been trained to think.*

Phuong yelled at Kien, telling him not to touch her, but he ignored her and carried her off the train. Once they were on the ground, though, multiple explosions shook the earth and made it impossible for them to continue. Kien clung to Phuong as bombs fell all around, but still she struggled against him. He dug his fingers into her shoulders to get her to stop, and though he didn't think they'd make it out of the attack alive, the jets eventually flew away and left them in a destroyed landscape.

Despite the unjustified anger Kien showed Phuong as he fought off the large Northerner, he now does whatever he can to save her life. This means holding her against her will, which is a complicated thing, since she has just been raped. And yet, if Kien left her there, she would likely die in the air raid, so he's forced to make a difficult decision: respect her wishes and leave her in a state of extreme danger, or violate what she wants and drag her to safety.

Kien carried Phuong on his shoulders, walking over many dead bodies as he went. He was surprised by his ability to stay calm in this environment—a skill that would later become second nature. At one point, he found a bicycle lying amid the carnage and destruction. Somehow, it was in perfect condition, so he picked it up, put Phuong on the back, and rode to an air-raid shelter, where he put Phuong down. After some time passed, a man came by with his wife on his shoulders and asked if he could buy the bicycle. Kien didn't respond, so the man simply put some money down and rode away with the bike. There had been a small bag slung to the bicycle, so Kien opened it and found provisions, allowing him and Phuong to eat a little.

Kien has kicked into full-on survival mode, seemingly blocking everything out and simply moving forward. In turn, he's able to get Phuong and himself to a relatively safe place. Little does he know that this state of mind—in which he's essentially on autopilot—will become his primary mode of existence in the coming decade, as he's often forced to do unthinkable things. In fact, it's this ability to slog through impossible situations that is most likely responsible for his survival of the war.

Kien suggested that he and Phuong should go to a nearby hamlet, where they'd be able to lie down and rest for a while. He tried to give her his shirt, but she got angry at him, thinking he was ashamed to be with her in the condition she was in. Still, he convinced her to go to the hamlet, where they found an old school building that had only been partially destroyed in the air raid. Before lying down to get some sleep, Phuong said she wished there was a stream she could bathe in. But when Kien offered to find one, she told him to stay with her. All she wanted, she said, was to lie with him before they said farewell for the last time—a remark that unsettled Kien.

Kien doesn't like the idea that this is the last time he will see Phuong. But Phuong, on the other hand, once again seems to grasp that the Vietnam War will push them apart. And if the scene in the cargo train is any indication, she's right: even if they both survive the war, it's clear that it won't be easy to simply overlook the hardships they've been through and how those hardships will impact their relationship.

Phuong assured Kien that she didn't necessarily mean they'd never see each other again, but he still insisted it was bad luck to even acknowledge the possibility. In turn, Phuong said he shouldn't get hung up on what might happen in the future. Instead, he should focus on the past. There was a time when it seemed they would lead a happy life together, but now that was no longer the case. They didn't have any choice over what happened: things were different now, and each of them simply had to follow their own path.

Phuong's general outlook resembles the one Kien eventually embraces after the war—an outlook that frames the past not as something that should be mourned, but as something that ought to be celebrated. *Happiness is no less meaningful just because it belongs to the past, so Phuong urges Kien to take heart from the fact that they ever got to experience romantic bliss* at all.

Finally, Phuong fell asleep. Kien was alarmed by how much she seemed to have changed in such a short period of time, but then he, too, fell asleep. He didn't wake up until late in the afternoon, at which point he realized Phuong wasn't there anymore. He frantically searched the school, discovering that there were many other soldiers in the other rooms. When he asked a group if they'd seen Phuong, they teased him by saying that she was last seen having sex with multiple soldiers out on the edge of the hamlet. Infuriated, Kien punched the soldier who made this joke and pointed a pistol at him before running outside.

Kien is terrified of losing Phuong, both literally and romantically. As such, he's furious when the other soldiers joke that Phuong is busy having sex with other men—a joke that clearly taps into Kien's insecurity that Phuong will quickly move on to other men once he leaves.

When Kien reached the edge of the hamlet, he found two military trucks—but no Phuong. As he stood in confusion, more American jets flew overhead, and the sound of anti-aircraft fire broke out in the air. Just then, he looked to his left and saw Phuong. She was naked and bathing in a nearby stream. She heard the planes, gunfire, and bombs nearby, but all she did was casually look up and then continue bathing. Kien watched her slowly get dressed, thinking that she had quickly gone from "being a pure, sweet and simple girl" to a "hardened experienced woman." The war, he felt, had already fundamentally changed their relationship.

The Sorrow of War *is largely a story about the loss of innocence. Before going to war, Kien is an idealistic young man who believes in the value of making sacrifices for one's country. By the time he comes back, though, he has seen and done horrific things, and he no longer believes in the value of patriotic sacrifice. In this moment, he gets his first glimpse of how war is capable of changing people and stripping them of their innocence, as he reflects on the fact that Phuong has now been subjected to a terrible experience that will ultimately force her to "harden[]" herself to the world in an attempt to move on.*

Kien felt depressed by all that had already happened in the war. He wondered why people thought life was better than death, and as he thought this, he brought his pistol up to his own head. He paused, about to pull the trigger, but then he heard Phuong calling his name. She was looking for him. Slowly, he lowered the gun, but he didn't say anything, instead letting Phuong run by him without seeing him. Once she was gone, he set off in the other direction, making his way toward the highway. Even when he was very far away, he thought he could still hear her voice calling his name.

In this moment, Kien nearly takes his own life—but he doesn't end up doing it, since he's too moved by the sound of Phuong's voice. This emphasizes the power of love to sustain people through the worst moments of their lives. However, Kien also lets Phuong run right by him. He most likely lets her go because he knows that if she finds him, she will probably want to continue accompanying him to the frontlines, which would only put her in more danger. Kien thus begins the war by making a personal sacrifice instead of a patriotic one.

PAGES 224-228

The next time Kien received news of Phuong was in a letter from another soldier. It was 1973, and a soldier named Ky wrote to him. Ky and Kien had fought together, but he didn't tell him at the time that their paths had crossed before: Ky was one of the soldiers whom Kien had approached on that fateful day in the school while looking for Phuong. In his letter, Ky expressed regret that the other men teased Kien by making up a story about Phuong. The truth was, Phuong returned shortly after Kien stormed off, and she went around the entire compound asking where he had gone. She didn't give up looking for him for a long time—so long that Ky eventually had to persuade her to come back into the classroom. He had easily recognized how in love Phuong was with Kien.

Only two years before the end of the war, Kien finally finds out more about the last time he saw Phuong. What's remarkable isn't necessarily just that Phuong tried so hard to find him, but that Ky was so moved by the love she had for Kien that he has now gone out of his way to write this letter. This is yet another sign that love can have a profound impact on people in even the most unlikely circumstances.

The next day, Ky and his unit had to leave, but Phuong wouldn't go with them, saying instead that she might go south and join the Volunteer Youth Brigade. In his letter to Kien, Ky said he hoped Kien had already reunited with Phuong. If not, he wanted to pass along this information about her. Signing off, he told Kien to reunite with Phuong when the war was over.

Phuong's love for and devotion to Kien made a last impact on Ky, moving him to write to Kien many years later to make sure the two lovers had a good chance of finding each other in postwar Vietnam. Once again, then, the novel highlights the ways in which love is capable of flourishing in unlikely moments.

It has now been years since the war ended. Kien often finds himself in horrible fits of despair, but he's comforted by one thing: the past. Things might not have worked out with Phuong after the war, but he will always cling to the beauty of their youthful, prewar love. For him, any promise of happiness or love now lies in the past—that's how he will move through the future, always looking back to the precious days of his life before the war.

Again, the novel suggests that past periods of happiness aren't worth grieving over, since they still happened. *It's not the case that Kien managed to find happiness in postwar Vietnam, but it* is *the case that he experienced romantic bliss before becoming a soldier, meaning that he can always take comfort in his memories of this idyllic time.*

PAGES 228-233

A new narrative voice explains that the writer who penned the previous pages left his apartment without telling anyone. This new narrator is a man who lives in Hanoi and often used to see the writer walking on the streets. He explains that the writer finished writing his **novel** and left his apartment for good the very next day. "The mute girl" who lived in the same building had spent the night with him, but she woke to an empty bed. She didn't know what to do with the many pages he left behind, so she put them in a stack in the attic. Eventually, she gave the pages to the new narrator, who set to work organizing them into a coherent book, though this was a difficult task because the stories were so fragmented.

This final section of the novel shifts the perspective, suggesting that all of the pages that came before this part are supposed to be the pages that make up Kien's novel. Of course, it's not a traditional novel, since there's no clear chronology or even a central plot, other than Kien's experience surviving the Vietnam War. And yet, now that the novel has drawn to a close, it's easier to see that its central narrative revolves around Kien and Phuong's romantic relationship and the way it was able to sustain them both through hardship even though the relationship itself was ultimately unable to survive.

The new narrator became enthralled with what the writer had created. As he read the pages, he realized he had known the writer during the war—they had traveled together for a short while on their way to the battlefront. On an even broader level, though, the narrator recognized his own story in the **novel** simply because the pages outlined experiences that were relatable to a soldier who had faced similar horrors. That, after all, is what the war left the survivors with: a "common sorrow."

Although war is characterized by division and animosity, the new narrator points out that such hardship also binds people together. Although the new narrator only fleetingly knew Kien, he feels connected to him because they both underwent the horrors of war. In fact, according to the second narrator's logic, even South Vietnamese or American soldiers would potentially be able to relate to Kien's story, since they all faced the same terrifying experiences as soldiers—experiences that have ultimately created a "common sorrow" that transcends political allegiances and anything else that might divide people.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Lannamann, Taylor. "*The Sorrow of War.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 18 Apr 2022. Web. 18 Apr 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Lannamann, Taylor. "*The Sorrow of War.*" LitCharts LLC, April 18, 2022. Retrieved April 18, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-sorrow-of-war.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Sorrow of War* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Ninh, Bao. The Sorrow of War. Riverhead Books. 1996.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Ninh, Bao. The Sorrow of War. New York: Riverhead Books. 1996.