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The Sorrow of the War: Prompt 4

The development of different feelings and reactions among the readers is mainly due to the complexity in Bao Ninh's novel, *The Sorrow of the War*. The events and time periods in the book are molded into a complicated structure, one that does not flow in chronological order. His intention, however, is not to leave the readers in confusion, but instead, to trigger different emotional responses throughout the book. He successfully builds this fractured narrative by briefly introducing parts of a dramatic scene and transitioning abruptly when it reaches the climax. Ninh then revisits these scenes later in the novel, and slowly reveals parts of the falling action and eventually presents the readers with the resolution. He continuously repeats this process throughout the book for several scenes. These distorted images affect the emotions of the readers, constantly shifting and reshaping their feelings about a situation or a character.

The character that receives the most attention and affects our thoughts and feelings the most throughout the book is Phuong. The readers catch a quick glimpse of the "youthful and innocently beautiful" Phuong at the beginning of the book, leaving them with the impression of Phuong as a pure and beautiful woman. However, Phuong's actions and the portrayal of her character in several scenes, constantly leaves the readers feeling either irritated, guilty, or sympathetic. For example, after Phuong is violently raped in the train by the men, the readers

develop a sense of sympathy and pity for her. Kien's cluelessness and helplessness during this tragic scene creates feelings of irritation and annoyance among the readers. These emotions change suddenly in the following scene, when Kien, while trying to find Phuong near Thanh Hoa, hears from a group of men that she was last seen "screwing the driver at Company 8..."(220). The unbelievable and shocking news of Phuong last seen engaging in sexual acts with a truck driver affects Kien negatively. The unexpected turn shifts our feelings about Phuong from sympathetic to angry. However, after Ninh revisits this scene towards the end of the novel, a letter from one of the men reveals that what they said was a lie. After this truth is discovered, the readers develop a sense of guilt and embarrassment at their assumptions and shift their emotions back to sympathetic. This example shows how the audience's feelings and emotions towards a character can be greatly affected by the rearrangement of the events.

One major scene in the novel that also deals with the novel's structure and helps shape our emotions is the incident of the three, murdered farm girls. Enraged at the discovery of the death of the farm girls, Kien tries to violently punish the four commandoes. He furiously "shoves the barrel hard on his (commando's) head..." and even threatens one of his comrades, "If you want to show your love for them go stand in the line with them. I'll kill you too!"(40). Tension and nervousness is developed among the readers as they anticipate what is going to happen next. This scene reaches the peak of the climax, and there are no hints or text to foreshadow what is going to happen next. However, before this scene is resolved and reaches the stage of the falling action, Ninh brings this scene to a sudden and unexpected end. These sudden endings with no resolution add suspense and dramatic tension, leaving the readers feeling unsatisfied and curious. It leaves the readers feeling anxious and impatient as they read through the book. Towards the end of novel, Ninh returns to that scene, and reveals the results of the situation. Kien, affected by

Phuong's words, caused him "at the last moment, as he was about to press the trigger with the gun aimed directly at them" to give them a reprieve (139). Given the results, the readers' feelings are now reshaped from anxious to feeling a sense of relief.

"As for me, I thought that her silent waiting for our neighborhood writer to reappear was something akin to the loyalty of a reader towards a beloved masterpiece" (228), "I" said. Throughout the entire novel, the perspective and the point of view seems to have been written from Kien. However, the last few pages of the novel reveal a different narrator: Bao Ninh. This unexpected discovery reshapes the reader's entire view of the book. This pulls Ninh into the book as a character and enables the readers to fully grasp onto idea of Kien's fractured memories and the reason for the complexity of the novel's structure. This final falling action puts the readers in shock and amazement. In a sense, the readers have been reading Kien's papers that the 'character' Ninh, arranged to produce this book, *The Sorrow of the War*. This sudden realization helps the readers understand Ninh's choices and why he did it. He provides a brief description, stating that "At first I tried to rearrange the manuscript pages into chronological order, to make the manuscript read like the sort of book I was familiar with. But it was useless. There was no chronological order at all"(229). His explanation describes the structure of the book and why it is organized like how it is. Ninh's choice to reveal his role in the book during this last scene slightly changes the structure of the novel. The surprising metafictional novel becomes more complicated. Before Ninh was introduced, Kien was the author, writing stories that had stories within them. However, Ninh's role at the end takes the readers into a deeper and more complicated version of metafiction. Ninh is now the author of the stories who writes about Kien's metafictional novel. Because of this, it creates a sense of a deeper understanding but yet also a sense of confusion at this frame narrative.

In *The Sorrow of the War*, Bao Ninh constructs this piece of work into a complicated structure. The novel is structured in such a way, where the setting is constantly shifting between the past, present, and future. This structure allows the progression of different ideas and helps shape our thoughts, feelings, and ideas. While the readers read, they discover parts of the remaining pieces to a previous story. These scattered fragments of stories are important because while the readers bind these fragments together, they experience different emotional responses and reactions to a character or scene. A character's actions during a specific scene may convince the readers that they are unlikable yet another scene may describe their reasoning for their actions. This results in the changing of the reader's feelings towards both the scene and the character as they discover and are exposed more to these characters.

Word Count: 1,201