

# **The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam Study Guide**

**The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam by Bao Ninh**

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# Plot Summary

This novel is the story of a North Vietnamese soldier, Kien, and his experiences before, during, and after the Vietnam War of the 1960's and 70's. Unstructured but never rambling, the book is an intense, vivid, and empathetic portrayal of an emotionally traumatized mind that experiences survivor guilt. The book is written in the style of a stream of consciousness with shifts of narrative tense juxtaposed with descriptions of both recent events and the distant past. The primary theme of the book involves an exploration of the suffering caused by war and the brief experiences of human contact that give hope for transcending that suffering.

The first part of the novel takes place in the past and chronicles Kien's experiences on a body collection team in the months following the end of the war. Atmospheric descriptions of the jungle are interspersed with his recollections of the more distant past, specifically his experiences of bloodshed and sacrifice in combat. These experiences are also juxtaposed with his idealized memories of his childhood friend and sweetheart, Phuong.

Eventually, though, the narrative shifts its emphasis to the post-war present, when Kien has been fully demobilized from military duty and is struggling to rebuild both his life and personal identity in Hanoi, the city where he grew up. Narration shifts back and forth between distant past, near-past and present as Kien experiences surges of memory and feeling associated with combat experiences, his relationship with Phuong, and his efforts to put his past behind him and get on with his life.

In Kien's efforts to deal with the trauma of both the war and the end of his relationship with Phuong, he becomes addicted to alcohol and to cigarettes, simultaneously finding himself intensely engaged in writing a kind of memoir. Kien becomes obsessed with recording his experiences in combat, at times staying up all night so that he can vent all his memories and feelings into a manuscript. Kien reads pages of that manuscript to an upstairs neighbor, a Mute Girl who has moved into the attic apartment once inhabited by Kien's painter father. For her part, the Mute Girl becomes obsessed with Kien, collecting the often forgotten pages of the manuscript, putting them in some sort of order, and allowing herself to be used sexually by Kien in his usually drunken moments of emotional vulnerability and sexual need. Kien eventually breaks up with Phuong, triggered by his inability to accept her prostitution-defined past and her inability to live up to his ideals and his expectations of her.

Meanwhile, as the traumas and sufferings of the present intertwine with the past, the narrative details Kien's combat experiences. These include the frequent sacrifices made by others so that he and other comrades can live, encounters with other women, including his fellow soldier Hien and the courageous guide Hoa, and the ill-fated determination of one fellow soldier Can to abandon the army and return to his quiet life on the farm with his mother. There are also glimmers of transcendent hope and humanity, specifically in an encounter between Kien and some North Vietnamese

comrades and a South Vietnamese family that should have been enemies but instead proved to be generous and compassionate hosts.

As the book reaches its climax, its parallel past and present narrative lines converge. In the past, Kien witnesses Phuong being raped who then transforms, literally before his eyes, into a woman whose sexuality is her means of survival. At the same time, he makes his first personal kill of the war. In the present, Kien's memories and remorse exceed even the healing process of writing his manuscript and he disappears. In the book's final pages, the reader becomes aware of the narrator. The point of view of the story is that of Kien's neighbor who, has attempted to put the manuscript that he receives from the Mute Girl into some kind of coherent order to make it accessible and available to others.



## Part 1, p. 1 - 39

### Part 1, p. 1 - 39 Summary

This novel is the story of a North Vietnamese soldier, Kien, and his experiences before, during, and after the Vietnam War of the 1960's and 70's. Unstructured but never rambling, the book is an intense, vivid, and empathetic portrayal of an emotionally traumatized mind that experiences survivor guilt. The book is written in the style of a stream of consciousness with shifts of narrative tense juxtaposed with descriptions of both recent events and the distant past. The primary theme of the book involves an exploration of the suffering caused by war and the brief experiences of human contact that give hope for transcending that suffering.

The story begins with Kien, a former platoon commander who is now on body-collecting duty, settles in for a night of attempted rest in a hammock hung in the back of a transport truck. The truck is parked on the fringes of a once-forested area called The Jungle of Screaming Souls. Kien is familiar with the Jungle after his participation and survival of a number of battles there. The narration shifts into past tense as Kien recalls the horror of those battles and his platoon's desperate attempts to dull the awful inhumanity of their experiences with hallucinogens. He also recalls his last playful card game with several of his comrades that all died shortly after. He shares an encounter with a homesick, shell-shocked, and profoundly guilty fellow soldier, Can, who makes a desperate attempt to desert. Instead, his body is found in a swamp, picked free of flesh by animals. The narration then shifts into the first person to describe a howl heard in the Jungle echoing from the other side of the mountain. "Some said it was mountain ghosts," the narrator comments, "but Kien knew it was Love's lament."

Again the narration shifts back to the third person and in the past tense. Returning to a time period when Kien's platoon was still alive, Kien discovered that his soldiers were making secret and nightly visits to the farm home of three beautiful young girls. Kien decides, in spite of his orders to keep discipline, to allow his soldiers the fleeting pleasures of love as they faced death every day. One morning, however, the platoon is uneasy and Kien leads an expedition to the farmhouse, where they discover that it has been recently abandoned. There are several brief narrative interjections including one in which Kien recalls his experience of love with the young and beautiful Phuong and another that recalls the beauty of the three girls. Kien and the platoon then discover the North Vietnamese commandos who killed the girls. After a short battle in which three commandos and one of Kien's men are killed, Kien orders the remaining commandos to dig their own grave and, in spite of their desperate pleas, prepares to execute them all.

Returning to the present day, the narrative follows Kien in the present time. He is being shaken awake in his hammock by the driver of the truck, who asks Kien why he was crying so loudly, but then comments that it makes sense Kien was having nightmares. The driver comments that he often talks with the dead souls he encounters and argues with Kien about the value of the war that they are fighting. He says that the so-called



"peace" that the soldiers win actually leads to worse living conditions for civilians and soldiers alike. He goes on to comment that "after this hard-won victory," those who fought will never be normal again, and that the war and each soldier's experience of it will never be forgotten.

## Part 1, p. 1 - 39 Analysis

This section introduces many of the narrative's key elements, including stylistic, narrative and thematic. All three work together to define a sense of immediacy, raw intensity, and uncomfortable truth throughout both the book and the reader's experience of it.

Stylistically, the elements to note here are the switching back and forth between tenses, and the lack of formal structure such as chapters. Both aspects, as discussed in detail in "Style-Point of View" and "Structure," give the narrative the feeling of a stream of consciousness and an experience of how random memories can trigger both other such memories and feelings. In this case, these stylistic choices communicate to the reader a real sense of how Kien's mind and spirit interrelate, both during and after the war.

Meanwhile, narrative elements to note include the emphasis on the violence of the war, and the poetic descriptions of both that violence and of the fleeting and desperate interludes of love that alleviate the suffering triggered by war. Perhaps the most important narrative element introduced here, however, is the character of Phuong, Kien's idealized beloved. Her beauty and innocence in this section are both well defined, as is her role in Kien's determination to survive. As portrayed in this section, however, both these aspects of her character ironically foreshadow the ways in which Kien's image of her, not to mention his hope for the redemption she represents, eventually become corrupted by the war and its effects, ultimately leaving Kien alone and isolated in his suffering. In other words, Phuong can be seen as embodying the book's thematic perspective that suffering resulting from war can and ultimately will overwhelm more positive human experiences.

Two important themes in the novel are the intertwined perspectives on the suffering caused by war of those who fight it and those who are affected by it and the hope for humanity that gives Kien hope that that suffering can be transcended. Phuong, as suggested above, is the embodiment of hope for Kien, although later in the narrative Kien has other experiences that reawaken his hope even as he becomes increasingly disillusioned about Phuong. Meanwhile, the cynical commentary of the truck driver offers ironic foreshadowing of the narrative's ultimate contention that for survivors of war and for Kien in particular, any kind of hope is misguided and pointless. This becomes the foundation for the novel's central anti-war perspective.

Finally, it is important to note that the narrative never clearly explains what Kien does with the commandos. See "Topics for Discussion-Given what you know and can intuit about Kien's character" for further discussion of this question.



## Part 2, pp. 39 - 72

### Part 2, pp. 39 - 72 Summary

Through the first-person narration offered in the present time, which is eventually revealed to be Kien's journal or diary, the reader learns how Kien is still profoundly traumatized fourteen years after the war. The narrator describes the horrors of Kien's dreams, his experiences on the street when sudden smells remind him of the slaughters he witnessed, and how all the efforts of the past have been useless. The narration then shifts into the third person perspective and the present tense as it describes Kien's painstaking writing process, his obsession with detail, and his belief that his writing is a manifestation of his ultimate divine purpose. He believes that this purpose is ultimately connected to his survival of the war. Finally, the narrator describes how Kien first felt this sense of purpose during his post-war missions gathering dead bodies.

Kien recalls a visit that he made five years before to the home of the Lanh family where he had stayed during an early phase of his training. He discovers that the thirteen year old daughter of the family, Lan, is still living in the house, and is mourning the deaths of her mother, two brothers, husband, and infant son. Kien spends the night there and the following morning, Lan tells him that she wishes they could have been together as a couple, and that if he ever wishes a place to return to where he can rest, he will be welcome. Kien passes by the house several years later, describing the encounter as a "sad, doomed meeting," and also describes Kien's questioning of his purpose and his reasons in writing constantly about the war. This, in turn, leads to Kien contemplating his past, starting with his close relationship with his mother's second husband, who warns Kien to protect his soul from the dangers of too much patriotism and who urges him to "try everything ... don't turn your back on life."

Next, the narrative describes the troubled postwar lives of the other people who live in Kien's apartment building and Kien's thoughts that he should be writing about them rather than of his war experiences. A description of a youthful, prewar, and almost sexual encounter with the beautiful and vulnerable Hanh ensues. At the end of their encounter, Hanh tells Kien that there was something she wanted to tell him but then disappears, leaving Kien to wonder what it was she had had to say. Next, the postwar departure of Kien's beloved and embittered Phuong follows as well as his meeting with a vulnerable prostitute who turns out to be the bereaved younger sister of his fellow platoon member Vinh.

Finally, narration describes how Kien felt lost and unfocused, without a real sense of goal or purpose in his life. At this time, Vietnam was about to go to war with China, and many young people were excited about going into combat. Kien's reaction, however, is less excited, with narration describing his realization that people other than the young wanted to fight. It was at that point, however, that Kien feels something inside him change, something "powerful and urgent, [that] pumped life back into his collapsed spirit ... it felt like love." It was then that Kien started his first novel. Soon after Kien has the



spiritual renewal described at the end of the last chapter, he visits a dying friend. The once vital and poetic Trinh, on his deathbed, is described as wasted and sad. Kien is unable to remain with him for long, and runs out of Trinh's "half-bedroom, half-mortuary."

## Part 2, pp. 39 - 72 Analysis

This section introduces the novel's primary thematic consideration, which is an exploration of the experience of survivor guilt. Several of Kien's experiences, as portrayed in this section, are common to individuals who have survived under similar circumstances such as continuing to live when many around them have died. Flashbacks of memory, feelings of shame, lack of purpose and emptiness, and efforts to relieve oneself of those feelings are all common manifestations of survivor guilt. The way that they are portrayed in "The Sorrows of War," speak of a clear, detailed, and intimate awareness of the experience. In other words, the author create a clear route for the reader to find her way into the suffering of the traumatized central character. Meanwhile, development of the book's secondary themes continues with the stories of Lan and Hanh. These stories illustrate the idea of the hope for freedom from suffering surviving in the experience of human contact. The stories of Phuong and Tran illustrating the thematic point about the suffering triggered and experienced as the result of war.

The introduction of Kien's writing, his transcendent experience of writing's power, and his hope for the healing that it may bring, is a second important element in this section. As the writing communicates a clear sense of a drowning man clutching at straws, the reader can clearly see Kien's desperate hope for healing and that his emotional and mental suffering ends. Kien's hope however is similar in quality to his feelings for Phuong. It seems that both are reckless and urgent to the point of being delusional. There is also the sense that the narrative of Trinh's physical death foreshadows Kien's apparent and eventual spiritual death.





## Part 3, p. 72 - 106

### Part 3, p. 72 - 106 Summary

This section begins with Kien's return to Hanoi after the war and his encounter with fellow soldier Hien, whom he sleeps with on the train ride home and who tells him to not hope to see her again. When he finally reunites with Phuong, he finds out that she has been with another man. However, she breaks up with him in order to be with Kien. Their once idealized love, however, is soon poisoned by their mutual recollection of Phuong's lover and by their unspoken awareness of their history. They soon break up. After some months of misery, Kien stares into the rain when he has flashbacks to his time as a soldier and then experiences a surge of creative energy. He spends an entire night writing down his memories of combat.

Later that day, Kien walks through a park, feeling a new sense of release and freedom as he looks into the sky. During the time that it takes for Kien to write his novel, his memories of both combat and post-combat life as a body collector return in vivid detail, triggered by encounters with other soldiers with horrifying and traumatizing memories of their own. Some of these memories include listening to his severely wounded commander beg to be shot and released from his suffering and investigations of a man who appears to have returned to the wild after losing his mind in combat. He also recalls how he found himself at the airport in Saigon shortly after victory. In Saigon, he witnesses a North Vietnamese soldier's uncouth treatment of the body of a beautiful young South Vietnamese woman. This event makes him remember the violent death of a regimental comrade who was ambushed by a similarly beautiful South Vietnamese woman. Kien's memories and dreams of the young woman at the airport "left a tragic and indelible imprint on his mind. She became the last of his enduring obsessions."

The narrative continues with the description of another obsession. This one involves the Mute Girl who moved into the attic apartment once occupied by Kien's father. She sees him only occasionally at first, feeling pity and worry for him that gradually turns into love. He comes to visit her when he is drunk, bringing with him the pages he has written and telling her the stories from those pages. She eventually becomes obsessed with both him and his writing. She watches and waits for him, gathering the pages together into a manuscript. On a couple of occasions, they make love but after she discovers him burning some of his written pages, she comes to understand that their relationship is over. The day after her discovery, he leaves. A year passes, while the manuscript collects dust in the attic apartment.

### Part 3, p. 72 - 106 Analysis

There are several important elements in this section. First is the increasing unpredictability of the book's structure, with its narrative shifting back and forth from distant past to recent past to present, and from the narrative point of view to a first-



person point of view. As previously discussed, this shifting and unpredictability gives a clear sense of Kien's state of mind, effectively drawing the reader into that experience. The description of the sun coming through Kien's windows the morning after his all-night writing binge metaphorically suggests the "dawn" of a new state of being or at least the hope of a new dawn.

The reader however faces the challenge of putting together the actual chain of events and situations encountered by Kien. In some ways, this challenge is similar to that of putting together a jigsaw puzzle, with the reader's awareness of pre-war, postwar, and combat forming the borders of the puzzle and piecing together the events, encounters, and incidents that make up the body of the picture. It is also interesting to consider the role of The Mute Girl in all this. This character is never given a name, apparently serving only as an object for Kien's attempts to heal himself.

Another noteworthy point is the ironic juxtaposition of Kien's relationships with Hien and Phuong, and the double standard that this juxtaposition implies. While the novel makes it clear that in her own way and for her own reasons, Phuong has been as wounded as Kien, it is for some reason considered all right for Kien to find comfort in another woman. However, the narrator is not sympathetic to Phuong finding comfort in another man. The novel seems to communicate a greater sense of transgression on Phuong's part, where there always seems to be a connection between her relationship and her history of prostitution. However, she has an experience that, in many ways, traumatizes her as much as Kien is traumatized, it does seem unfair in some ways that the narrative perspectives on the two sexual experiences are so different.

Finally in this section, the narrative adds another layer of meaning to Kien's experience. This lies in the exploration of Kien's writing, which is clearly a form of self-therapy and of acting out from the additional perspective of an artist. The comments are not made frequently. Consider this quote, "Kien...was just the writer; the novel seemed to be in charge and he meekly accepted that, mixing his own fate with that of his heroes, passively letting the stream of his novel flow as it would, following the course of some mystical logic set by his memory or imagination" (p. 81.) Similar experiences of artists such as writers, visual artists, dancers, composers, and musicians being "taken over" by their work, and by the creative impulse triggering their work, are essentially numberless. In other words, Kien is portrayed as an artist and not just a sufferer, which leads to an interesting link between suffering and art.



## Part 4, p. 106 - 135

### Part 4, p. 106 - 135 Summary

The first part of this section is written in the third-person perspective and present tense as it narrates Kien's intense writing experience. It describes his working during the night, his sleeping during the day, the ridicule he faces from his neighbors, and his dreams of death. The next part of this section is written in the third-person perspective and past tense as he remembers an escape from political indoctrination at school with Phuong as well as more details of death and violence during the war. He has a sense of his impending death, but also a sense that this is not his time.

Kien's details his minimal recollections of his devotedly Communist mother and his expansive recollections of his troubled artist father. His father, Kien remembers, became despondent and self-isolated after Kien's mother left, drunkenly painting increasingly bizarre works of art using only shades of yellow. The day that Kien's father died was also the day air raids started on Hanoi, and how Kien went to rescue his father's paintings, only to discover that his father had burned them all. Phuong is friendly with Kien's father and witnesses him burn the paintings. Many years later, she comes to believe that this moment was a prophetic foreshadowing of the destruction of her relationship with Kien. The narrative then continues into a deeper exploration of that relationship from Phuong and Kien's childhood affection, their burgeoning sexual desire for each other, and their refusal to obey the rules of indoctrination laid down for them by the government and the school. The pair go swimming and come close to making love but stop because Kien suffers from an intense pang of guilt. This leads Phuong to confront him about his lack of connection to his father, his passionate determination to go to war, and her determination to go to war with him so they could be together until they are forced to separate. She draws him to her and they almost make love but again Kien finds himself unable. The next day, they return to class for their last day and then Phuong goes to university while Kien is called into combat.

Kien's memories of Phuong sustain him through the early days of the war. These memories eventually retreat into dreams, and how on only three waking occasions in his ten years of combat do those memories return. One of those occasions involved the investigation of the three missing farm girls mentioned in Part 1. The reason Kien does not execute them is his memory of Phuong taunting him about becoming a killer. After Kien has been wounded, he hallucinates that his nurse is Phuong. After they initially break up, Kien plans to mark Phuong's birthday but she has become a prostitute during the war. Phuong tells him that she feels dirty and soiled because of what she has had to do to survive. She tells him that she never loved anyone else and that she is leaving forever. A note she leaves for him as she goes begs him to both forgive and forget her.



## Part 4, p. 106 - 135 Analysis

The primary narrative focus of this section is to reveal further truths about the relationship between Kien and Phuong. These include his idealism and her pragmatism, her emotional sensitivity to Kien's father and his emotional distance from his father. It also discusses her sexual openness and his sexual prudery. Perhaps most importantly, this section reveals the profound differences in the way they experience and respond to the suffering in their lives, with Phuong acknowledging how much her life has changed and making efforts to move on while Kien struggles to hold on to his past idealism as long as possible. After completing his manuscript, Kien comes to realize that there is no possibility that his life will be what he has dreamed it could be and eventually leaves.

The relationship between Kien's parents and the relationship between Kien and Phuong have interesting similarities. On one hand, these similarities are based upon the similarities of the two men. Both Kien and his father are profoundly troubled and artistic, leaving the two independently minded women, Kien's mother and Phuong, unable to cope with what their men need them to be. On the other hand, there are parallels between Kien and his mother where they are both unable to enter fully into their relationships partly due to their indoctrination into the communist system. There is also a similarity between Phuong and Kien's father where they are kindred spirits and also in their wounds. Their ways of compensating for those wounds such as Phuong's prostitution and the father's painting make them inaccessible to their partners. There is the sense here that in developing all these parallels, the author is on some level suggesting that there are more kinds of war than military combat and that all those forms of war can be equally traumatizing.



## Part 5, p. 135 - 180

### Part 5, p. 135 - 180 Summary

At the beginning of the chapter, Kien urges himself to keep writing, discovering a difference between the artificial and contrived ideas he has during daylight and the painfully surging memories of war that fuel his writing at night, both of which are occasionally interrupted by recollections of happier times. He also begins to visit a bar called The Balcony Café with increasing frequency where he encounters other drunken ex-soldiers and a maltreated young prostitute. Her determination to get drunk reminds him of the two occasions in his life that he has gotten drunk. The first occasion was at the Saigon Airport on the day that he had the experience with the dead girl mentioned in Part 4. The second time that he got drunk followed his encounter with a soldier who taunted him about being involved with a prostitute, which turned out to be Phuong.

Kien leaves the Café and catches a tram home, realizing that the father of his school friend Toan is the driver. Toan was a competitor for Phuong's affections and a fellow soldier in the same platoon that was killed just before the capture of the Saigon Airport. After getting off the tram outside his apartment, Kien again gets lost in his feelings and memories of Phuong.

More recollections of his war experiences with Phuong fill Kien's mind. He remembers how he desperately pursued her to a packed train station and fortuitously stopping her from leaving Hanoi during an evacuation. As they go to Kien's apartment building for a romantic dinner, Phuong urges him to stay with her, but he tells her he has to be back at his unit shortly. An air raid delays them to the point that they have to turn around and go back to the station so Kien can catch his train back to training. When they get there however, they discover that the train has left. It turns out to be lucky that Kien missed that train, since it is bombed before reaching its destination. Kien learns the truth about the bombing on his train ride home to Hanoi at the end of the war. This is also the same ride during which he spent the night with the female soldier Hien.

Again, the narrative switches to the past with a description of how Phuong led Kien through a series of attempts to have him rejoin his unit such as failure to do so being a cause for a charge of desertion punishable by death. They first hitch a ride with a trucker who is sexually interested in Phuong and then in a goods transport train, populated by mysterious and grumpy fellow travelers. In the dark on this train, Phuong attempts to get the frightened Kien to make love with her, but he is too nervous about what might happen if he is believed to have deserted.

Kien is determined to maintain his connection with his memories and "his only hope of staying in rhythm with normal life" so that "his writing could take substance."

The narrative switches to the past again to a school trip that Kien and Phuong took to the beach where they received news during a storm that the war was beginning. The



final moments of Kien and Phuong's train journey are then described in detail and specifically, how their train was attacked from the air, how they attempted escape, and how Kien helplessly watched Phuong being raped by another soldier. He was then knocked unconscious and wakes up to find Phuong gone. That was the moment, "that 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."

Kien's experiences with some of these friends include Tu who draws machine gun fire so that Kien can complete a mission, Cu who held off a regiment of the enemy to allow Kien and his scouts to escape and Tam who attacked a paratrooper so that Kien and another scout could run free. Kien's "most memorable escape" involved a young female guide named Hoa. Initially she is lost, and therefore gets Kien and a ragged group of fellow soldiers lost as well, but after leaving the others behind in a concealed area, she and Kien find the correct path. After a few quiet minutes, during which they share a cigarette and Hoa confesses her fear, they make their way back to the others, only to find a squad of American soldiers also on the road. Hoa distracts them, and ends up being gang raped. In the years after the war, Kien goes to the scene of Hoa's sacrifice but is unable to release his feelings of guilt. Unfortunately, there are so many painful memories that continues even in peacetime.

## **Part 5, p. 135 - 180 Analysis**

This section marks the beginning of the book's lengthy climax, where the themes, narratives, and relationships all reach a high point of emotional intensity. Specifically, this chapter sets the tone and lays the groundwork for Kien's experiences of suffering, both in combat and in terms of his relationship with Phuong.

The closing moments of this section, in which Kien reflects on the nature of sacrifice and his experiences of it, are key components in the book's thematic consideration of survival guilt. Having survived as the result of a deliberate act of self-sacrifice on the part of another can be very difficult for the survivor. It can also be a traumatic component of guilt due to the inherent belief that such sacrifice implies that the person committing the sacrifice is a nobler and greater human being. In other words, a sufferer of survivor guilt feels bad that he lives while other people died. When those other deaths are the result of a choice made so that others might live, the sense of guilt becomes even more intense.

Meanwhile, an interesting question to consider is why Kien is so repeatedly and consistently reluctant to make love with Phuong. Even when his feelings are not handicapped by his war-related traumas, there is something about him that seems unable and unwilling to let himself be vulnerable to intimacy. This idea is reinforced by his postwar relationship with the Mute Girl, in which he is portrayed as being unable to be open with her, either sexually or emotionally without being drunk and his pre-war relationship with Hanh, in addition to his relationship with Phuong. While the narrative offers no explicit explanations of why, it does suggest through its portrayal of Kien's sensitivity to the intensity of all kinds of experiences, that he fears being overwhelmed



by feeling of any sort. This fear is justified when he is overwhelmed and ultimately damaged by the intensity of feelings resulting from his combat experiences. His apparent sexual encounter with Hien on the train however falls outside the parameters of these other experiences, because it is essentially a physical experience with an emotional side effect, as opposed to his experiences with Phuong and with Hanh, which seem to be grounded in emotional experiences with a sexual manifestation. There is the feeling about Kien throughout the book that he is afraid of feeling. This is a situation that is not all that surprising given his mother's denial of emotion and his father's simultaneous vulnerability to feelings and inability to handle them.





## Part 6, p. 180 - 211

### Part 6, p. 180 - 211 Summary

The narrative is written in the third person perspective and in the present tense. It describes how the process of writing the novel seems to be boring and unproductive to Kien. Kien encounters a soldier during the war who seems to think an attack of venereal disease is far worse than his other wounds. Kien then contemplates how many of his surviving comrades have settled into quiet lives on their farms and recalls a quiet and peaceful visit that his northern unit paid to a southern farm. That visit illustrated to many soldiers in Kien's unit that the way of life they were fighting for was not necessarily the best and that no matter what political system people lived under, they were still just people.

Kien recalls his youthful romance with Phuong, her skill at the piano, and his insight that her skill indicated that she was destined to be a troubled soul. His contemplation triggers memories of what happened after the initial raid at the train station. In the second air raid, which Kien survives, he discovers a traumatized Phuong who is trying to escape the clutches of a muscular sailor. Kien kills the sailor and it is his first kill of the war. Kien and Phuong attempt to flee the site of the second bombing but are forced by the arrival of a third wave of bombers to take cover. After the raid, they discover an abandoned bicycle and ride it to safety where shock settles into both of them, shock that narration describes as continuing down into the present.

Kien and Phuong spend an uncomfortable night in a bombed-out school, with Phuong's shock first transforming into anger followed by fatalistic depression and dismissiveness. They both fall asleep, with Kien discovering in the morning that Phuong has run away. His search for her leads to another part of the school, where he is taunted by a group of soldiers that she is a whore. He reacts violently and almost fires his gun but restrains himself, going instead on a further search. He discovers her bathing, which is the first time he sees her naked. He cannot help but notice that she seems to be carrying herself differently. He raises his gun to his own head but does not fire, remaining silent when Phuong cries out to him. She disappears into town, searching for him.

Shortly after, Kien reports for duty, and several years later, he receives a letter from one of the taunting soldiers, saying that he did not truly mean the things that he had said about Phuong. "When the war is over," the letter concludes, "and hopes of meeting former friends are realized, find her, Kien, if you are still alive."

### Part 6, p. 180 - 211 Analysis

This section contains one of the most vivid and powerfully narrated manifestation of one of the book's secondary themes, which is the transcendent value of human contact. This is the description of the visit of Kien and his platoon to the farm, in which he and his





fellow soldiers are treated not as political, military, or spiritual enemies but simply as fellow human beings. This is a manifestation of what the author seems to intend as a thematic glimmer of hope in the narrative's overall despairing and cynical perspective on the inescapable and soul-destroying horrors of war. Even in the darkest of times, there is hope for transcendence. This is more poignant because Kien and almost all the other characters seem unable to transcend their situation. This seems to imply that hope for such transcendence is futile in the face of such pervasive physical and spiritual destruction.

A second manifestation of this theme can be recognized in the letter of the soldier, in which the writer seems intent upon other forms of transcendence. These include his own repentance and the forgiveness of the wronged Kien, towards both the soldier writing the letter and Phuong. However, Kien has been unable to fully forgive anyone for what the war made them do, particularly Phuong and himself. This, in turn, is another manifestation of survival guilt or an inability to forgive and particularly, to forgive oneself.

Finally, it is important to note Kien's near suicide, and his inability to follow through on what seems like an impulsive act. The moment is particularly noteworthy because of its circumstances where he does not threaten himself with death because of anything related to combat. Instead, it is disappointment that Phuong has become something other than what he believed, wanted, and needed her to be. In other words, he has lost all hope, but instead of acting to end the suffering caused by hopelessness, he chooses to live in denial. He spends most of his combat and postwar experiences desperately attempting to hold on to his dreams of Phuong's innocence. These dreams could be dreams of his own innocence. The narrative does not make that clear, but it is certainly a possibility.



## Part 7, p. 211-217

### Part 7, p. 211-217 Summary

In this final section, Kien hopes that he will find Phuong and be able to recover from his traumas. This hope is echoed in dreams of her again calling for him from across a river, as "the light of love shining from deep in his childhood."

The point of view then shifts written in the first-person perspective and past tense by a neighbor. The neighbor does not notice Kien leave but does notice the mute girl clean up the apartment and put the manuscript together, later giving it to the narrator. The narrator describes his experience of reading the manuscript and trying to put it together, commenting on its lack of flow and structure, inconsistency of detail, and the fact that "the author had written because he had to write, not because he had to publish." The narrator then describes reading through the manuscript again, uncovering confirmations of the author's identity, and coming to the realization that they had known each other during the war, both literally and metaphorically. The narrator writes of their common sorrow which enables them both to move on to a new life of peace. This aspect of the author's life is evident, according to the narrator, in the author's repeated references to the positive aspects of his experience.

### Part 7, p. 211-217 Analysis

The narrative takes an intriguing twist in this section with its shift in narrative perspective. There is the sense here that what the reader has read to this point is in fact an interpretation of an interpretation. It is the result of the narrator's intent to make second-hand sense of the war and its effect on both those who fought in it such as Kien and those whose suffering was considered collateral damage such as Phuong. While it is interesting to note that there is little or no sense of character or identity about the narrator, there is the sense here that on some level, the narrator is a stand-in for the reader. Both are presented with facts and recollections and are put in a position of responsibility for interpreting and having empathy for those who had the actual experiences. By implication, both are put in a position of responsibility for working towards a world in which such suffering is lessened and if not eliminated altogether.



# Characters

## Kien

Kien is the novel's central character. He is a North Vietnamese soldier fighting in the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s. The narrative chronicles his experiences before, during, and after the war, repeatedly moving back and forth between his youth, young adulthood as a soldier, and postwar maturity.

Kien's youth is troubled due to the lack of connection between his artist father and Communism-indoctrinated mother and romantic due to his idealization of his childhood sweetheart Phuong. His young adulthood is marked by increasingly desperate struggles, both physical and moral, to survive as a soldier and his human being. His adult life is marked by similar struggles, with his traumatized efforts to integrate both youth and young adulthood into some kind of livable postwar existence. These efforts manifest primarily in his attempts to write a book about his experiences, which have proven to be unsuccessful. Kien ultimately disappears, leaving his life and his manuscript behind.

Other noteworthy aspects of Kien's character and experience include his being nicknamed "Sorrowful Spirit" by his companions, his terrified ruthlessness in combat, his ambivalence about sexuality, and his capacity to survive when many people around him are being killed. This last ability is particularly important because his survival results in powerful guilt. This survivor guilt is a powerful theme throughout the book. Other aspects of Kien's experience such as his experience of killing form the basis of the book's secondary thematic focus on the horrors of war.

## Phuong

Phuong is the woman with whom Kien has a relationship both before and after the war. Childhood friends and teenage sweethearts, they enjoyed an ideal and romanticized love. Kien's recollections of her during war are of an idealized and intimate love, tinged with hope that when he returns, she will help him redeem the horrors he has both seen and been a part of. There is the sense later in the novel, as the truth of what happened to Phuong is revealed, that Kien's hope is at least unrealistic and possibly delusional. He responds to his beliefs about her rather than to who she truly is. His relationship with her after his return from the war is difficult and troubled, partly because of his own situation but mainly because he seems determined to avoid any awareness of the facts of her experiences.

## Cu, Thanh, Van, Vinh, Toan, Tam

These characters are Kien's comrades during the war that are all killed. Among these soldiers, Tam is particularly noteworthy for having sacrificed his life so that other



soldiers could escape. Cu is the last to die, fighting with Kien at the Saigon Airport "with just three hours to go before the eleven-year war ended."

## Can

Can is a comrade of Kien who is different from the others because of his early attempt to desert the army and escape to the quiet and safe life back home on a farm with his mother. Can's efforts, however, end in failure. This can be seen as a metaphoric foreshadowing of how Kien's efforts to emotionally and spiritually leave behind the horrors of war also end in failure.

## Sinh, Hien, Phan

These characters are Kien's fellow soldiers. Sinh is a comrade whom Kien visits shortly after his return to Hanoi after the war who was once vibrant, lively, and poetic, but is now wasted, dying, and sad. Hien is a female soldier who travels with Kien on the train back to Hanoi. They spend the night together and they depart from each other at the train station with Hien urging Kien to not put too much faith in seeing each other again. The traumatized Phan tells Kien a story of how his attempts to aid a severely wounded soldier are hampered by confusion and rain, leaving him with a vividly imagined and lifelong sense of guilt. All three metaphorically represent and foreshadow aspects of Kien's own postwar suffering.

## Lan

Lan is the daughter of a woman who had opened her home to Kien and two other young soldiers during their training. Kien's postwar visit to Lan's home suggests that there is potential for a romantic and intimate relationship between them, but at the same time suggests that they are both too emotionally scarred by the war for a relationship to happen.

## Hanh

Hanh lives in Kien's apartment building and knows him from childhood but becomes attracted to him as a mature and handsome adolescent. An almost sexual encounter between the two of them leads to discomfort and separation. There is vivid contrast in this relationship compared to that of Kien's with Phuong. With Phuong, Kien experiences an emotional ideal whereas Hanh is more of a sexual and physical ideal.

## The Mute Girl

In Kien's post-war life, the unnamed Mute Girl moves into the apartment vacated by Kien's father when he dies. She becomes devoted to Kien, who in turn uses her as the



first reader for his manuscript. She takes care of both the manuscript and his apartment after he disappears. She is essentially the guardian of his identity and memory.

## **Kien's Father and Mother**

Kien's father is an artist with a tendency to sleepwalk. Kien's mother is impatient with the sleepwalking because she believes that it lowers the family's social status. She leaves the family when Kien is very young. Kien's only memories of her are her pride in her status as a New Intellectual and member of the Communist Party, which are both sources of conflict with Kien's father.

## **Hoa**

Hoa is a female North Vietnamese guide who gets Kien and several other soldiers lost as they're trying to make their way back to the North Vietnamese battle lines. In what appears to be an effort to redeem herself, she distracts a troop of American soldiers from the wounded North Koreans, and is raped for her efforts.

## **The Sailor on the Train**

This unnamed character rides with Kien and Phuong on the train as Kien attempts to catch up with his unit in Parts 5 and 6. When he tries to keep Phuong from running away with Kien, Kien kills this character. This is Kien's first killing during the war.

## **The Narrator**

The book's final pages reveal that Kien's story has been told by a neighbor who was aware of his existence and his work. This individual has taken on the task of putting Kien's writings into some kind of narrative shape. The narrator reveals that he is a fellow soldier and has much in common with Kien, giving the sense that making sense of Kien's life is an attempt to make sense of his own life on some level.



# Objects/Places

## Vietnam

This country in South East Asia has for centuries been the focus of conflict between other powers in the region such as China, Japan, and Cambodia. In the 1960s and 1970s, a war between the Communist North and the South that was supported by the United States resulted in millions of lives being lost and the establishment of a Communist government over the entire country.

## Hanoi

This is the North Vietnamese capital city. Kien grew up here and returns to it in adulthood to try to rebuild his life and establish his career as a writer.

## Saigon

The capital of South Vietnam, Saigon was the last part of the country to fall to the Communist North Vietnamese in the war, its capture signaling the ultimate triumph of the North. Some of the most vivid and defining incidents in Kien's military career take place in Saigon during its capture.

## Vinh

Vinh is the setting for a key series of incidents and encounters, all of which are essentially Kien's first encounters with the horrors and sorrows of war, incidents described throughout the book.

## The Jungle of Screaming Souls

This is the name eventually given to the site of the first battle described in the book, in which an area of forest, its wildlife, and most of Battalion 27 was incinerated by napalm and flamethrowers. Only ten soldiers including Kien survived.

## Rosa Canina

Rosa Canina is the name of a flower that blooms along the fringes of the Jungle of Screaming Souls. Kien and his platoon dry the flowers and roots, mix them with tobacco, and smoke them for an intoxicating and mellowing effect similar to that of marijuana.



## **Kien's Apartment, Phuong's Apartment**

Kien and Phuong live in the same apartment building in Hanoi with almost identical apartments. Their parallel physical environments clearly echo their parallel emotional traumas. They both are compelled to leave their former lives and selves due to the effects of the war.

## **The Attic Apartment**

In the same apartment building, an apartment in the attic becomes the home of Kien's father. He essentially hides himself away from the world, painting, smoking, and eventually dying. The apartment eventually becomes the home of the Mute Girl, who can be seen as providing the sort of emotional support and engagement that Kien's absent but well-meaning father never could.

## **Kien's Manuscript**

Throughout the book, Kien obsessively writes about his experiences in the war, writing without shape or structure or flow but nevertheless powerfully communicating experience. Kien has "written because he had to write, not because he had to publish." In other words, the manuscript is an exercise in catharsis of releasing of emotion in order to speed up the healing process.

## **The Balcony Café**

The café, nicknamed "The Veteran's Club," is a post-war Hanoi club where former soldiers gathered to tell "each other stories of their attempts to adapt to civilian life," or stories that in some cases are starkly vivid and full of the horrors of death and war. The café is the setting for Kien's encounter with the thuggish ex-soldier who taunts him about Phuong being a prostitute.



# Themes

## Survivor Guilt

"Survivor guilt" is the term for an experience common to those who have endured a traumatic event in which large numbers of other people died. Such deaths can occur either accidentally such as a natural disaster like an earthquake or tsunami or in an "industrial" disaster like a plane crash or by design such as the Nazi Holocaust or a school massacre like Columbine in the United States. In many cases, those who remained alive are often haunted and troubled by the fact that they did so while so many others did not. Such people often feel guilty and unworthy, with their feelings often leading to depression, addiction, suicidal tendencies and other forms of "acting out." All of these activities release a buildup of emotional energy and tension. There is the strong sense throughout the novel that Kien experiences a form of such guilt with feelings that seem to have begun at the beginning of the war when he survived the attack on the train transporting him to his first posting. In its early stages, while he is still fighting in the war, his guilt manifests as self-doubt and feelings of unworthiness, particularly when he considers his own state of being alive in relation to the sacrifices made by so many of his comrade so that he can continue living. Later on, after the war ends, his guilt manifests in alcoholism, depression, anti-social behavior, and in his obsession with writing. It is important to note that the novel never explicitly refers to survivor guilt but instead portrays it through the narrative of the character's actions.

One of the more influential factors in triggering an experience of survivor guilt is the paradoxical and irreconcilable tension between relief and pleasure at being alive and the knowledge not only that so many had died, but had suffered beforehand. Explorations of both these aspects of war and associated tension form the narrative's secondary themes.

## The Transcendent Power of Human Contact

Several times throughout the novel, Kien both longs for and experiences contact with other people that makes him glad to have survived and to be a human being. The prime example of the longing he feels is the way that he remembers and desires Phuong in a childhood experience of simple pleasure and fun that he idealizes as the only source of both hope and redemption. He believes that as long as he has Phuong, he will be able to survive and his guilt will ease. He holds onto that belief in spite of repeated indications that she is not the ideal that he needs her to be. When he finally does realize that she has left him, both physically and emotionally, he tailspins onto what seems to be self-destruction.

Meanwhile, examples of genuine human contact experienced by Kien include his experiences with supportive, trusting, and self-sacrificing comrades, his day with the welcoming farm family, and with the Mute Girl who has moved into the apartment





vacated by his father. In all these cases however, the pleasure and joy he feels at making the connection are tempered by survivor guilt. His experience is always tainted with the belief that he is unworthy not only of survival in general but also of the supportive, open, and compassionate humanity that he glimpses in these encounters. In other words, human contact is a double-edged sword. It gives him hope but it also profoundly triggers his guilt.

## The Horrors of War

Kien's positive encounters with humanity are contrasted throughout the novel by his traumatizing encounters with how horrible humanity can be. Physical examples of this include bombing raids, rapes, violent confrontations with opposing soldiers, and his discovery of his own capacity for killing. The book also portrays war's capacity to trigger psychological and emotional horrors such as nightmares, depression, and surges of rage and grief in both soldiers and civilians. These horrors are destructive to both individual and collective humanity.

It is interesting to note that throughout the book, descriptions of those horrors are portrayed greater detail than the experiences of pleasure or positive human interaction. From the book's narrative and thematic perspectives, the impact of these horrors far outweighs and therefore overwhelms, corrupts, and ultimately destroys any of the positive experiences Kien and other soldiers might have. For soldiers like Kien and for anyone who fights in any war, survivor guilt worsens and is made more complicated by the fact that they may have committed the same sorts of atrocities that they feel glad to have survived. Ultimately however, the book's emphasis on war and its horrors has even broader implications. The book is defined by the ultimate perspective that the genocide aspects of war corrupt anything it touches, whether it is soldiers, civilians, or survivors.

# Style

## Point of View

One of the most interesting aspects of the novel is the way it shifts between different points of view from between first and third-person perspective and between omniscience and subjectivity. Tense also changes frequently from past tense to present tense and vice-versa in addition to switching back and forth between memory and current circumstances. This shifting has a couple of effects. It creates a clear sense for the reader of just how fragmented Kien's experiences have left his psyche. This also implies that the experiences of his fellow soldiers in this particular war and any war can become just as fragmented. In many ways, this narrative is in the style of a stream of consciousness where the reader is taken into Kien's thoughts, feelings, and memories. There also the clear sense that it is the author's intent to bring the experience of war vividly into the reader's consciousness.

The second effect of this narrative shifting does not become apparent until very late in the novel in Part 7, when the nature of what has gone before is revealed. Specifically, this is the idea that the shifts have not only been reflective of Kien's experience but of the narrator's experience of attempting to organize and comprehend Kien's thoughts, writings, process, and personal history. It almost seems that the author pleads for a compassionate reading of the book to allow those who had a traumatic postwar experience to express and move through it in any way that he or she needs.

## Setting

In general terms, the time, place, and circumstances in which the action unfolds is the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 1970s. A complete and thorough examination of the causes, experiences, and outcomes of the War is the subject for another examination. Suffice it to say that the Vietnam War, like any other war, creates and defines an experience of physical, emotional, and spiritual violence that, as the novel thematically contends, is horrific.

Within the general setting, several important encounters are set in Hanoi, which is Kien's home and the capital city of North Vietnam. Other important settings include Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam and the site of the war's final battle and of some of Kien's most traumatic wartime experiences and the countryside. In the countryside, Kien experiences extremes of both horror such as rape and murder as well as grace in his encounter with the farmers in Part 6. There is a metaphoric suggestion that the natural human condition, as represented by the countryside, is a manifestation of both.

By far the most important place in the book is the town of Vinh where Kien's horrific experiences begin. These include bombing raids in which hundreds are killed and mutilated, the rape of Phuong, and Kien's first killing of a drunken sailor who wants to



take control of Phuong. Finally, there is his encounter with a raucous group of soldiers who ridicule Phuong for being a whore. This is his first encounter with the desperate and callous nature of other soldiers. Finally, Vinh is the setting for both Phuong's transformation into a hardened prostitute and the beginning of Kien's transformation into an emotionally wounded soldier. However, he simultaneously wants to be as hardened as Phuong to war while he wants her to be as tender to him as she once was.

## Language and Meaning

The first point to note in terms of the book's use of language is that this version is a translation. In this context, it is also important to note that the effort made to communicate the original's sense of detail and immediacy seems, for the most part, to have succeeded. At the same time, however, it must also be noted that at times there is a certain sense of formality and politeness to the language, particularly in terms of the dialogue that tends to undercut the immediacy of the rest of the writing.

A third noteworthy point about language and meaning relates to "Point of View," mentioned above. This is the idea that on some level, the author intends to bring the visceral nature of an experience of war into the awareness of the reader. This is done through language as well as through the point of view, with the language of violent encounter such as person-to-person, battalion-to-battalion, and country-to-country taken from a violent and vivid vocabulary. In other words, the words the author and translator choose to use effectively bring the reader right into Kien's experience. The sensations are immediate and the impact of what Kien writes about is intense, creating palpable shocks.

Finally, and perhaps surprisingly, the language even tends towards the poetic in places, particularly when the author explores and documents the few positive experiences relating to Kien's participation in combat. Interestingly, there is also an occasional sense of poetry in the combat descriptions, manifest in simultaneous intensity and economy of image and in emotional and visceral impact.

## Structure

The book's structure is, in many ways, complimentary to its point of view and its language. The book's fluid and undivided structure where there are no formalized chapters or section breakdowns gives a very strong sense of the ebb and flow of memory, feeling, and the experience of time. In other words, where a more formal and traditional structure tends to give a sense of objectivity and some element of authorial control over how the story unfolds, the lack of such structure in "The Sorrow of War" makes the book subjective. Structure in this book, like language and point of view, conveys a strong sense of intimacy, and of the very personal nature of the experiences its narrative includes. This, in turn, draws the reader even further into the experience of the central character, who is emblematic of all those who are traumatized by their experiences of being in a war.



Another interesting point about the book's structure is that on one level, it is written backwards since Kien's first experiences of the war such as his delayed joining of his battalion and his first killing are recounted at the end of the book. This structural choice functions on two levels. First, it suggests that the event recounted last is the most important. In this case, the structural choice suggests that for Kien, his loss of innocence about the war through killing and of what happens to Phuong remains the most traumatic part of the war for him. Second, it gives the rest of the novel a strong sense of layering where the narrative thread is similar to the peeling of an onion. As layers after layers of experience, feeling, and reaction are being peeled away, one event after another is stripped away to reveal the core truth of a person's individual experience.



## Quotes

"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." (pg. 2.)

"...numerous souls of ghosts and devils were born in that deadly defeat. They were still loose, wandering in every corner and bush in the jungle, drifting along the stream, refusing to depart for the Other World." (pg. 3.)

"I'll go in this fight. You keep [the cards]. If you live on, gamble with life. Deuces, treys and fours all carry the sacred spirit of our whole platoon. We'll bring you permanent luck." (pg. 8.)

"We have so many of those damned idiots up there in the north enjoying the profits of war, but it's the sons of peasants who have to leave home, leaving a helpless old mother, exposed to hardships." (pg. 18.)

"The uprush of so many souls penetrated Kien's mind, ate into his consciousness, becoming a dark shadow overhanging his own soul. Over a long period, over many, many graves, the souls of the beloved dead silently and gloomily dragged the sorrow of war into his life." (pg. 22.)

"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." (pg. 26.)

"Under the ground in the grave human beings aren't the same. You can look at each other, understand each other, but you can't do anything for each other.." (pg. 37.)

"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 pre-war past." (pg. 42.)

"From the horizon of the distant past an immense sad wind, like an endless sorrow, gusts and blows through the cities, through the villages, and through my life." (pg.43.)

"Stories, humorous, heart-rending, arose every day. Anywhere people were jammed up close together and forced to share their lives." (pg.. 55.)

"The dreams focused and refocused until past scenes and the present became a raging reality within him, images of the present and the past merging to double the impact and the smell and atmosphere of the jungle there in the room with him. Wave after wave of agonizing memories washed over his mental shores." (pg. 62.)



"Nothing lasted forever in this world, he knew that. Even love and sorrow inside an aging man would finally dissipate under the realization that his suffering, his tortured thoughts, were small and meaningless in the overall scheme of things. Like wispy smoke spiraling into the sky, glimpsed for a moment, then gone." (pg.64.)

"The ones who loved war were not the young men, but the others like the politicians, middle-aged men with fat bellies and short legs. Not the ordinary people. The recent years of war had brought enough suffering and pain to last them a thousand years." (pg.69.)

"The two childhood friends were now in completely different situations in post-war life. After so many years of fighting they were able to speak to each other wordlessly, using the language of their hearts." (pg. 71.)

"An unforgettable embrace for each of them, from one heart to the other, an embrace they would remember forever, for nothing so wondrous had touched their lives in those lost years apart." (pg. 75.)

"...he sat for hours just listening to the quiet wind blowing over the lake as he gazed into the distance, far beyond the horizons of thought to the harmonious fields of the dead and living, of unhappiness and unhappiness, of regret and hope." (pg. 80.)

"...Kien ... was just the writer; the novel seemed to be in charge and he meekly accepted that, mixing his own fate with that of his heroes, passively letting the stream of his novel flow as it would, following the course of some mystical logic set by his memory or imagination." (pg. 81.)

"The sorrow of war inside a soldier's heart was in a strange way similar to the sorrow of love. It was a kind of nostalgia, like the immense sadness of a world at dusk. It was a sadness, a missing, a pain which could send one soaring back into the past." (pg. 86.)

"There was still too much to do. He had the burden of his generation, a debt to repay before dying. It would be tragic and unjust in the extreme if he were to pass away, to be buried deep in the wet earth, carrying with him the history of his generation." (pg. 112.)

"...[Kien] automatically looked up to her window, hoping to see the teenage Phuong there, repeating those urgent little love cries she used to utter. But she was not there...she'd long gone, from that teenage world, and from the adult world. She had now departed from both of his worlds." (pg. 147.)

"That's how the war started, with a storm. For Kien the storm continued for nearly eleven years and even after the war his mental skies were clouded for another ten." (pg. 163.)

"As [Kien] crawled towards his lines his emotions were storming; excruciating pain at having left and lost his mates, ecstatic elation at having survived death once more." (pg. 170.)



"But for Hoa and countless other loved comrades, nameless ordinary soldiers, those who sacrificed for others...creating a spiritual beauty in the horrors of conflict, the war would have been another brutal, sadistic exercise." (pg. 179.)

"But for those still living to know that the kindest, most worthy people have all fallen away, or even been tortured, humiliated before being killed, or buried and wiped away by the machinery of war, then this beautiful landscape of calm and peace is an appalling paradox. Justice may have won, but cruelty, death, and inhuman violence had also won." (pg. 180.)

"Kien began stepping through the bodies as though it were an everyday event for him. This was his new-found strength, to stay cool under fire. No-one really knew: they could suspect, but would never really know until they faced the real test...to him, in his hardened state, it seemed perfectly normal." (pg. 196.)

"Like the dead, one felt no fear, no enthusiasm, no joy, no sadness, no feelings for anything. No concerns and no hopes. One was totally devoid of feeling, and had no regard for the clever or the stupid, the brave or the cowardly, commanders or privates, friend or foe, life or death, happiness or sadness. It was all the same; it amounted to nothing." (pg. 198-199.)

"If we don't care for each other who's going to care?" (pg. 201.)

"[Phuong] seemed to be welcoming her new lifestyle, embracing it with a calm, carefree approach. From being a pure, sweet and simple girl she was now a hardened experienced woman, indifferent to vulnerable emotions. To Kien she seemed to be walking away from his life, from herself, from her past and her country, without the slightest regret." (pg. 208.)

"It was a sublime sorrow, more sublime than happiness, and beyond suffering. It was thanks to our sorrow that we were able to escape the war, escape the continual killing and fighting, the terrible conditions of battle and the unhappiness of men in fierce and violent theatres of war." (pg. 217.)

"He could feel happy that his soul would find solace in the fountain of sentiments from his youth. He returned time and time again to his love, his friendship, his comradeship, those human bonds which had all helped us overcome the thousand sufferings of the war." (pg. 217.)



## Topics for Discussion

Consider the quote from page 2, and discuss ways in which the image communicated here is reflected throughout the rest of the narrative in terms of event, structure, and sensibility.

Given what you know and can intuit about Kien's character, what do you think he chose to do with the commandos who raped the farm girls in Part 3? Does he execute them or does he let them live? Explain your answer.

Consider the quote from page 69, and discuss this statement could be made of war in general, contemporary and/or historical.

Discuss the ways the various women in Kien's life are portrayed. What are the similarities, in terms of both individual character and relationship to Kien's experience, between Phuong, Lan, Huynh, Kien's mother, and the other women? What do you think is the author's intent in establishing these similarities?

Discuss your interpretation of the character of The Mute Girl. What is the metaphoric significance of her being unable to speak? How does this relate to her apparent function as the recipient of Kien's attempts to vent and release his suffering?

Construct a chronology of Kien's experiences using pre-war, postwar, and combat as boundaries and establishing which events took place in which order.

Discuss ways in which Kien's experiences before, during, and after the war affected each other. For example, in what way did his experiences with Phuong color and define his combat experiences? In what ways did his combat experiences color his experiences with Phuong and with other individuals? Consider the chronology you developed and examine what affects the quality and or intensity of Kien's experiences?

In portraying a link between suffering and art, is the narrative suggesting that true art emerges from suffering or simply from a powerful impulse to release energy and create?

Consider this quote from page 179, "But for Hoa and countless other loved comrades, nameless ordinary soldiers, those who sacrificed for others...creating a spiritual beauty in the horrors of conflict, the war would have been another brutal, sadistic exercise." Do you agree with the principle implied here that the sacrifice of a soldier or a group of soldiers makes the widespread destruction and death of war worthwhile? Why or why not?