

# Exploring the My Lai Massacre Through the lens of Thanh Thao and Kate Wilhelm

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**Abstract** The My Lai Massacre, a tragic incident during the Vietnam War, resulted in the killing of unarmed Vietnamese civilians by a small group of American soldiers on March 16, 1968. Although the atrocity exposed a moment of profound moral collapse at the individual level, it did not represent the principles or broader conduct of either the United States or the Republic of Vietnam. Its shockwaves nevertheless reverberated internationally, shaping global memory and inspiring diverse artistic responses. Thanh Thao's epic poem *Children of Son My* and Kate Wilhelm's short novel *The Village* offer divergent yet complementary interpretations of the event, illuminating both Vietnamese and Western engagements with its legacy. The later creation of the My Lai Peace Park as a living monument to reconciliation further underscores the enduring global effort to confront the massacre's moral implications. Within this wider historical landscape, the Republic of Vietnam (1955–1975) stood as one of the most peaceful, culturally vibrant, and forward-looking societies in Southeast Asia—an often-overlooked civic order whose stability and humanistic aspirations sharply contrast with the aberrational nature of the tragedy. This study investigates how Thanh Thao and Kate Wilhelm depict the My Lai Massacre in their respective works, emphasizing literature's role in memorializing past crimes, fostering empathy, and critiquing systemic violence. The research employs a comparative literary approach, integrating historical inquiry, literary theory, and close textual analysis to examine the interplay between historical reality and artistic imagination. Thanh Thao's poem foregrounds communal endurance and cultural regeneration, framing the massacre as inseparable from Vietnam's national consciousness. Wilhelm's narrative, in contrast, emphasizes the moral tension faced by individuals confronting the consequences of violence, subtly reaffirming the humane civic values that characterized the Republic of Vietnam during the same period. Through distinct aesthetic strategies, Thanh Thao and Kate Wilhelm transform the My Lai Massacre from a historical event into a universal meditation on suffering, resilience, and moral responsibility.

**Keywords:** My Lai Massacre, Thanh Thao, Kate Wilhelm, artistic style, historical fact, fiction

## 1. Introduction

My Lai, or Sơn Mỹ, is a name synonymous with infamy, representing one of the most egregious episodes of the Vietnam War and serving as a stark reminder of the atrocities of warfare. On March 16, 1968, U.S. forces from Charlie Company executed a "search and destroy" mission in Son My, which escalated into one of the most egregious massacres in contemporary history. More than 500 unarmed Vietnamese citizens, including women, children, and the elderly, were ruthlessly killed. Survivors detailed instances of egregious violence, encompassing systematic shootings, sexual assaults, and the devastation of residences and agricultural produce. This crime was characterized by its brutality and the calculated efficiency of its execution, exemplifying the dehumanization and moral decline that pervaded the Vietnam War.

Researchers like Cookman (2007) have thoroughly chronicled the My Lai Massacre, emphasizing the deficiencies in leadership and military doctrine that enabled the occurrence. Cookman emphasizes that indoctrination, bigotry, and a defective line of command established an environment conducive to such brutality. Kwon (2006) contextualized the massacre within a wider historical and cultural framework, examining its profound origins in colonial wars and the systemic dehumanization of the Vietnamese populace. Catsam (2024) analyzed the lasting influence of the massacre on global awareness, highlighting how its revelation invigorated anti-war groups and necessitated an examination of the ethical shortcomings of U.S. military policy. These experts assert that My Lai was not an isolated event but rather a tragic culmination of systemic deficiencies within a larger, unjust conflict (Bates, 2023; Tzanetou, 2022).

The ramifications of the My Lai Massacre reach much beyond the catastrophic destruction wrought upon the community of Son My. It inflicted an enduring wound on the Vietnamese psyche and tarnished American moral authority. The massacre served as a catalyst for international anti-war action, inciting indignation and resulting in extensive denunciation of U.S. participation in Vietnam (Hamm, 2023; Wilson, 2022). It also spawned a substantial corpus of creative and literary creations that aimed to address the suffering, commemorate the victims, and challenge the systems that facilitated such atrocities.



Literature has demonstrated its efficacy as a tool for addressing the ethical and human aspects of My Lai, facilitating contemplation, empathy, and social reckoning (Clair, 2023; Lippman, 1993; Oliver, 2006).

In Vietnam, Thanh Thao's *Trẻ con ở Sơn Mỹ* (Children of Son My) is regarded as one of the most significant artistic reactions to the massacre (Thao, 1997). Thanh Thao's epic poem, infused with a profound connection to the land and its inhabitants, encapsulates the visceral horrors of that fateful day and the enduring strength of the Vietnamese soul. Thanh Thao's direct experiences—engaging with survivors and observing the ravaged landscape—imbue her work with veracity and emotional profundity. Her poetry converts Son My into a dual emblem: a locus of deep anguish and a symbol of hope for national rejuvenation. Through a vivid portrayal of the massacre, Thanh Thao guarantees the remembrance of its victims, while her emphasis on the Children of Son My as emblems of life and renewal underscores the persistent vitality of Vietnamese culture and identity. Her poetry reflects a symbiotic connection between the land and its inhabitants, highlighting that despite extreme violence, the Vietnamese community persists and reconstructs.

Conversely, American writer Kate Wilhelm's short novella *The Village* scrutinizes the My Lai Massacre from a Western viewpoint, providing a critique of the psychological and moral ramifications of the Vietnam War on both soldiers and society (Wilhelm, 1973). Wilhelm's oeuvre uses fiction to universalize the horror, situating its occurrences inside an American context to mitigate the cultural and emotional detachment frequently associated with foreign conflicts. Through the recontextualization of the My Lai Massacre in an imagined American hamlet, Wilhelm compels readers to confront the common human frailties that precipitate violence. Her tale examines the internal difficulties of soldiers like Stilwell, who embody the ethical dilemmas encountered by those ensnared in a system that incentivizes dehumanization. Wilhelm juxtaposes this with figures like Donatti, who represent the unsettling metamorphosis of individuals into tools of systematic brutality. Wilhelm highlights the general moral degradation inherent in conflict through explicit representations of sexual assault, mass murders, and the psychological impact on both victims and perpetrators.

Thanh Thao and Kate Wilhelm provide complimentary yet diverse perspectives on the My Lai Massacre through their individual writings. Thanh Thao's poetry, profoundly embedded in Vietnamese cultural memory, depicts the massacre as a tragedy of national importance and a stimulus for collective rejuvenation. Wilhelm's literature, rooted in a Western context, analyzes the dehumanization fostered by militarism and examines the moral complexities encountered by those trapped in these institutions. Although their methodologies differ, both authors elevate the voices of My Lai's victims, transcending cultural barriers to cultivate a profound comprehension of the common humanity inherent in past catastrophes (Musiał, 2018).

These pieces combine historical truth with artistic imagination, commemorating the victims of My Lai and prompting readers to contemplate the ethical dilemmas of war (Andersen & Borčak, 2022; Gray & Martin, 2008). The writings of Thanh Thao and Wilhelm function as both creative legacies and urgent appeals, compelling mankind to acknowledge its propensity for violence and to endeavor towards a society devoid of such horrors (Hamblet, 2003). In their distinct manners, they underscore that the lessons of My Lai are as pertinent now as they were more than fifty years ago.

Although the historical background establishes a necessary foundation, the present study must move beyond descriptive narration by examining how literary techniques transform documented violence into ethical reflection. By emphasizing the interplay between imagery, narrative voice, and the representation of trauma, the analysis clarifies how these texts do more than recount events—they interpret and reshape the moral significance of the massacre within cultural memory.

This paper intends to analyze these two diverse yet complementary works, investigating how they commemorate the My Lai Massacre and scrutinizing its wider ramifications. Comparing Thanh Thao's poetic lament with Wilhelm's brutal story reveals the distinct functions of literature in processing pain, cultivating empathy, and confronting the persistent legacy of war. Both works illustrate the efficacy of storytelling in transcending cultural barriers and safeguarding the memory of historical horrors for posterity. This analysis juxtaposes different tales, highlighting literature's role as both a means of commemoration and a catalyst for worldwide solidarity in confronting human suffering.

To avoid allowing the historical background to dominate the discussion, the present article positions these contextual elements as interpretive anchors rather than descriptive endpoints. This shift clarifies how the historical record, when placed alongside close literary analysis, reveals the contrasting narrative strategies through which each author confronts the My Lai Massacre. Establishing this relationship at the outset strengthens the cohesion between historical overview and comparative argumentation.

## 2. The Impact of the My Lai Massacre on Global and Vietnamese Literature

The My Lai Massacre significantly influenced literature, art, and communal memory. According to Levesque (2018), the incident epitomized the atrocities of an unjust war and spurred international anti-war organizations, since its depictions of violence appalled global sensibilities. The massacre's harrowing specifics—including the execution of defenseless residents, pervasive sexual abuse against women and girls, and the methodical obliteration of the village—have been thoroughly recorded in scholarly research and artistic portrayals, securing its position in collective memory (Gassner, 2009; Hom & Yamamoto, 1999; Osiel, 1995).

In Vietnam, the massacre served as a painful reminder of endurance and bereavement (Isaacs, 2000). Artists and writers, such as Thanh Thao, employed the tragedy to underscore Vietnam's historical adversities and the resilient spirit of its populace.

Her poem “Children of Son My” conveys the emotional and physical wounds inflicted by the massacre while underscoring the need for rejuvenation. Thanh Thao’s poem explores the human toll of war, commemorating the victims and honoring the resilience of the survivors. Through the use of powerful imagery—illustrating the silent courage of children and the lasting beauty of the landscape—he elevates Son My to a representation of national resilience. Thanh Thao’s selection of poetic structure, merging lyrical and epic forms, enables him to traverse individual sorrow and social fortitude, articulating the experiences of the victims while maintaining Vietnam’s cultural identity. Scholar An (2008) highlights how Thanh Thao integrates personal experiences with a wider socio-historical framework, providing a timeless reflection on survival and renewal.

The artistic legacy of Son My transcends Vietnam, impacting global discourse on warfare and ethics. The massacre in the United States incited reflection and criticism of the Vietnam War. Kate Wilhelm’s short novel “The Village” illustrates the anguish and moral deterioration of American soldiers, depicting the massacre as a reflection of the overarching ethical shortcomings of the war. Wilhelm’s fictional story extensively utilizes historical accounts, depicting the psychological disintegration of soldiers compelled into ethically problematic circumstances. Her characters confront the atrocities they commit, exemplifying the internal struggles and dehumanization engendered by institutional brutality. Wilhelm analyzes the overarching institutions that facilitate crimes, like propaganda and the hierarchical architecture of military orders, by concentrating on these internal conflicts.

Furthermore, Wilhelm’s investigation into gendered violence highlights the tragic dynamics inherent in warfare. Her vivid depiction of women’s anguish—exemplified by instances of systematic rape and violent murders—demonstrates how gendered bodies frequently serve as battlegrounds in armed conflict. The emphasis on gender, often overlooked in most narratives, introduces a vital dimension to the recollection of My Lai. Thanh Thao recognizes the particular pain of women and children, although her narrative eventually emphasizes the overarching resilience of the Vietnamese populace. Both authors traverse these distressing truths while emphasizing the persistent human ability for empathy and resilience.

Additional American literature, including Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990), further illustrates this trend of introspection. O’Brien’s semi-autobiographical anthology elucidates the psychological ramifications of warfare on American soldiers, intertwining reality and fiction to examine the emotional weights of violence and guilt. Alongside Wilhelm’s work, these testimonies elucidate the fractured psyches of soldiers who serve as both perpetrators and victims of systematic violence.

The global cultural responses to the My Lai Massacre illustrate how literature and art serve as potent instruments for processing pain and contesting war narratives. These works preserve the memories of Son My, promoting empathy and critical thought across cultures and generations. By interweaving personal accounts with historical events, authors such as Thanh Thao and Kate Wilhelm immortalize tragedy, urging audiences to confront the ethical difficulties of war and its lasting impact on humanity.

These historical and cultural responses, while diverse, serve an essential purpose within this comparative framework: they illuminate the interpretive space in which Thanh Thao and Wilhelm construct their literary reactions. By situating both works within this broader constellation of responses, the analysis underscores that neither author writes in isolation; rather, each contributes to an evolving conversation about violence, moral accountability, and collective memory.

### 3. Contrasting Approaches: Wilhelm’s Fiction vs. Thanh Thao’s Poetry

The My Lai Massacre serves as a stark example of the devastating consequences of war, resulting in both physical destruction and profound psychological trauma for individuals and communities. This tragedy, characterized by the systematic massacre of more than 500 unarmed Vietnamese citizens, transcended its immediate historical context to become a worldwide emblem of human misery and moral degradation. Artistic and literary interpretations of My Lai have been crucial in preserving the lessons of this catastrophe (Schlegel, 1995). Authors such as Thanh Thao and Kate Wilhelm confront the magnitude of this catastrophe in their works, converting its terror into narratives that challenge, inspire, and incite contemplation. Thanh Thao’s poetry captures the collective sorrow and resilience of the Vietnamese populace, depicting the massacre as both an extraordinary tragedy and a monument to the unwavering spirit of a nation. Simultaneously, Wilhelm’s narrative explores the psychological disintegration and moral deficiencies of the offenders, scrutinizing the frameworks and circumstances that facilitated such brutality. Collectively, these literary investigations act as a conduit between cultural barriers, urging worldwide audiences to address the lasting repercussions of war and the common humanity of its victims and perpetrators (Lerner, 2022).

#### 3.1. Thanh Thao: A Poetic Memorialization of Resilience

Thanh Thao’s “Children of Son My” is a remarkable poetry reaction to the My Lai Massacre, utilizing an epic structure that harmoniously integrates lyrical elegance with narrative fervor. This significant book consists of various sections, each carefully designed to examine different aspects of the massacre—from the initial terror caused by soldiers to the lasting courage and tenacity of the survivors. In a poignant passage, Thanh Thao depicts “*the tranquil fields stained red with innocent blood*”, a phrase that powerfully conveys the massacre’s savagery. The poem juxtaposes this imagery with the sight of

*“shattered bamboo huts and crying infants abandoned in ruins,”* evoking a profound sense of sorrow that transcends the written word.

Through her firsthand encounters with survivors and the ravaged terrain of Son My, Thanh Thao infuses her poems with profound personal honesty. Her statement, *“The tears of a mother seep into the soil, nourishing the seeds of resistance,”* represents both the sorrow of the Vietnamese populace and their indomitable spirit. This dichotomy of grief and resistance permeates her art, transforming it into both a lament and a monument of optimism.

The children of Son My, pivotal to Thanh Thao’s narrative, manifest as lasting emblems of endurance. In a touching moment, he illustrates a small child amidst the rubble, grasping a rice stalk as a symbol of survival. This painting embodies the delicacy and resilience of the human soul, presenting a stark juxtaposition to the destruction caused by war. Her imagery—*“the wind bearing the voices of the lost”* and *“fields drenched in blood, yet fertile with hope”*—encapsulates the paradoxical coexistence of despair and renewal. Thanh Thao’s adept manipulation of conflicting tones, oscillating between sorrow and resistance, highlights the intricate emotional landscape of war and recuperation.

Critics like An (2008) have emphasized how Thanh Thao’s poetry technique converts historical evidence into a cathartic narrative of perseverance. Through the implementation of a cyclical framework, wherein destruction transitions to rejuvenation, Thanh Thao reflects the inherent cycles of existence and restoration. This framework underscores the persistent life of Vietnam, depicting the massacre not merely as a significant loss but as a catalyst for cultural and national revitalization. Her depiction of nature—rivers running quietly, fields marked by violence yet nurturing fresh life—connects the inhabitants of Son My to their territory, forging a collective story of anguish and resilience.

These artistic strategies underscore that Thanh Thao is not simply recording the pain of Son My but actively converting it into a reflective cultural narrative. His fusion of personal testimony with broader communal symbolism demonstrates how poetry can function as an interpretive medium, allowing collective trauma to be articulated in a form that affirms endurance rather than defeat. This synthesis between individual sorrow and cultural identity positions the poem as both memorial and moral commentary.

From a trauma-studies perspective, Thanh Thao’s use of cyclical imagery and epic structure transforms individual suffering into what Cathy Caruth (1996) describes as ethical witnessing, in which trauma is not simply recalled but repeatedly re-inscribed in cultural memory. The recurring motifs of land, children, and regeneration function as literary devices that mediate unspeakable violence, allowing collective trauma to be articulated without reducing it to spectacle.

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### 3.2. *Kate Wilhelm: Unmasking the Moral Collapse of War*

In sharp contrast to Thanh Thao’s poetic elegy, Kate Wilhelm’s *“The Village”* presents a distressing fictional examination of the My Lai Massacre from the viewpoints of American soldiers and their victims. Wilhelm employs a third-person narrative to contrast two parallel narratives: one focused on the atrocities perpetrated in a Vietnamese village and the other on the sorrow and bereavement encountered in an American community. This dual narrative structure offers a comprehensive analysis of the interrelation of human suffering and the extensive repercussions of war.

A notably unsettling episode in Wilhelm’s narrative illustrates a soldier’s hesitation as he targets a running child with his weapon, his internal struggle expressed through fragmented, incoherent thoughts that reflect his ethical dilemma. In stark contrast, another soldier dispassionately justifies his conduct, asserting, *“This is war.”* There are no innocents present. These divergent viewpoints expose the psychological rifts caused by systematic violence, demonstrating how war undermines personal morality and empathy.

Wilhelm boldly illustrates the atrocities of gendered violence, a persistent theme in her book. In a poignant excerpt, she recounts the last moments of a young Vietnamese woman, stating, *“Her silent scream resonated more profoundly than the gunfire that concluded her life.”* This vivid visual compels readers to confront the harsh facts frequently sanitized in historical narratives, urging them to engage with the extent of human depravity. By emphasizing these frequently neglected facets of violence, Wilhelm elevates the voices of the most vulnerable victims.

This emphasis on the gendered dimension of violence also deepens Wilhelm’s broader critique of moral collapse. By depicting sexual assault as inseparable from the larger machinery of brutality, the narrative shows how dehumanization operates simultaneously at individual and systemic levels. Within the wider discussions of violence already present in the novella, these scenes reveal how the loss of moral restraint extends beyond battlefield killings to the intimate violation of civilian bodies, thereby exposing the full extent of wartime degradation.

This representation aligns with feminist scholarship on war literature, which argues that sexual violence in armed conflict operates as a systematic extension of militarized power rather than as an accidental byproduct of war (Brownmiller,

1975; Enloe, 2000). Wilhelm's narrative thus situates gendered violence within the broader machinery of dehumanization that defines modern warfare.

The concurrent narratives in "The Village" underscore the common humanity of both victims and perpetrators. A mourning mother in an American community mourns her son, a soldier killed in Vietnam, while a Vietnamese mother weeps for her slain kid. The reflection of sadness powerfully underscores the universal consequences of conflict, transcending cultural and geographical boundaries. Wilhelm's intricate depiction of soldiers—ranging from those burdened by guilt to those who accept brutality—illuminates the intricate relationship between individual responsibility and societal dehumanization.

Through her meticulous detailing and stark realism, Wilhelm unravels the corrosive effects of war on individuals and societies. Her narrative challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the structures that perpetuate violence and the moral compromises they demand. By contrasting moments of detached cruelty with glimpses of humanity, Wilhelm creates a multifaceted portrayal of war's psychological toll, making "The Village" a compelling exploration of both personal and collective guilt.

Thanh Thao and Kate Wilhelm present markedly distinct yet complimentary viewpoints on the My Lai Massacre, illustrating their individual cultural backgrounds and artistic sensibilities. Thanh Thao's "Children of Son My" converts communal sorrow into a narrative of fortitude, highlighting the persistent vigor of the Vietnamese soul. Conversely, Wilhelm's "The Village" rigorously scrutinizes the moral and psychological decay instigated by institutional violence, offering a poignant critique of war's dehumanizing consequences. Collectively, these works transform the My Lai Massacre from a historical catastrophe into a universal reflection on humanity's potential for both devastation and regeneration. Through these memoirs, readers are prompted to confront the lasting repercussions of war and to cultivate empathy and connection in the collective experiences of suffering and survival.

### 3.3. Intertextuality Between Literature and History

Kate Wilhelm's short novel *The Village* and Thanh Thao's epic poem *Children of Son My* examine the My Lai Massacre by merging historical fact with imaginative narrative. These works elucidate the harrowing events of March 16, 1968, while also exploring the ethical and humanitarian aspects of warfare, interrogating the moral deficiencies of persons and systems that facilitated such atrocities. The atrocity, resulting in the deaths of nearly 500 unarmed Vietnamese citizens, serves as the central theme for both authors. Wilhelm, using an outsider's perspective, extensively utilizes verifiable historical accounts to construct her narrative. Thanh Thao, a Vietnamese poet intimately linked to the region, imbues her poem with direct observations and the testimonies of survivors, establishing a truly personal and national tribute to the victims. This historical foundation, utilizing literary techniques, emphasizes the authors' purpose of animating the past and stimulating moral contemplation.

Wilhelm's work demonstrates thorough study, integrating verifiable data about the massacre to recreate its atrocities. Her depiction of the soldiers' savagery encompasses graphic scenes of gunfire, sexual violence, and devastation, reflecting recorded accounts of the My Lai Massacre. She illustrates soldiers corralling locals into ditches and slaughtering them en masse, reflecting narratives by Truda Gray and Brian Martin, who recount the systematic murders of hundreds of innocent peasants. Wilhelm's imagined locale—a little American village engulfed by military violence—broadens the scope of pain, illustrating how such crimes could manifest elsewhere under analogous circumstances of dehumanization and social collapse.

Conversely, Thanh Thao's epic poetry is informed by her firsthand experiences of the massacre's aftermath. She incorporates firsthand accounts from survivors and her observations of the ravaged Son My to ground her poetic narrative. In "Children of Son My", Thanh Thao evocatively depicts the ravaged landscape: "*Helicopter blades whirring/The sound of swirling...*" Her statement highlights the brutality of the American soldiers' directives, explicitly alluding to the methodical strategies utilized throughout the massacre. Her direct connection imparts an emotional depth that positions the poem as both a literary piece and a historical document.

Wilhelm examines the ethical shortcomings of the American military via her characters, notably the morally ambiguous Stilwell and the merciless Donatti. Stilwell's reluctance and unease in obeying commands starkly contrast with Donatti's detached efficiency, highlighting how warfare undermines ethical principles. During a pivotal meeting, Stilwell interrogates the rationale for civilian fatalities in a free-fire zone, although Donatti dismisses his apprehensions with a disquieting pragmatism: "*We clear the area.*" This discourse underscores the moral degradation of individuals while also criticizing the culture of obedience that sustains such horrors. Wilhelm's choice to fictionalize the slaughter in an American context compels her readers to engage with the savagery of war on a more intimate level, narrowing the emotional and cultural gap typically linked to foreign conflicts.

Thanh Thao's poetry similarly examines the ethics of the offenders while highlighting the humanity of the victims. Her evocative vision contrasts the soldiers' brutality with the people's resilience and innocence. A poignant image depicts a youngster protecting a younger sibling from gunfire, exemplifying the resilience of mankind amidst atrocities: "*I saw two children lying on top of each other, the elder shielding the younger from bullets.*" Such moments encourage readers to empathize with the victims and contemplate the ethical ramifications of war.

The relationship between fiction and history in these works highlights their significance in forming collective memory. Wilhelm's narrative transposes the slaughter to an imaginary American community, establishing a symbolic realm where the My Lai murders serve as a universal condemnation of militarism and dehumanization. Her portrayal of the townspeople's anguish—exemplified by the heinous assault on Janice Samuels—compels viewers to acknowledge the individual and communal repercussions of unrestrained violence. By contextualizing the murder within an American framework, Wilhelm connects geographical and cultural divisions, rendering the trauma of My Lai comprehensible to a wider audience.

Thanh Thao's *Children of Son My* adopts a distinctive method, merging historical reality with lyrical creativity to safeguard the remembrance of the slaughter inside Vietnamese cultural and historical awareness. Her depictions of natural elements—*"Sand colored red with human blood"*—serve to commemorate the victims while also representing the permanent scars inflicted upon the land and its inhabitants. The poem's structure, segmented into cinematic chapters, mirrors the fragmented and persistent essence of trauma, while its optimistic conclusion honors the resilience and rejuvenation of Son My: *"The grains buried in the soil/Rise again under worn-out blades."*

Seen together, these intertextual strategies demonstrate that neither author simply restates historical facts. Each transforms the raw record of violence into a narrative structure that encourages ethical contemplation. Wilhelm achieves this through psychological interiority and fictional transposition, whereas Thanh Thao employs symbolic layering and testimonial resonance. Their differing methods reveal how literary form shapes the way historical trauma is perceived, remembered, and morally evaluated.

#### 4. Shared and Divergent Themes

Despite variations in cultural and creative methodologies, Kate Wilhelm's short story "The Village" and Thanh Thao's epic poem "Children of Son My" intersect in their exploration of topics such as violence, resilience, and the moral ramifications of war. The common themes highlight the universal human toll of the My Lai Massacre, while the differing viewpoints expose cultural, narrative, and emotional subtleties.

##### 4.1. Cultural Context and Perspectives

Thanh Thao's poem encapsulates Vietnam's national memory, depicting the massacre as an integral aspect of the nation's anguish and ultimate resilience. Her art is profoundly rooted in the Vietnamese experience of war, contextualizing the atrocity as a segment of a larger narrative of resistance and perseverance. For example, he articulates: *"How could they destroy the grains/Buried in the soil/Rising again under worn-out blades"*, underscoring the indomitable spirit of the Vietnamese populace despite enduring such atrocities. Thanh Thao's narrative transcends the mere depiction of violence, presenting a beautiful affirmation of cultural rejuvenation and national endurance.

In contrast, Wilhelm's *The Village* condemns American militarism by examining the psychological impact of war on both soldiers and civilians. Wilhelm examines the dehumanization fostered by the military-industrial complex through characters such as Stilwell, who grapples with moral dilemmas, and Donatti, who embodies the desensitizing impact of war. This cultural critique is intensified by the scenario, whereby Wilhelm introduces the carnage of My Lai into an American hamlet, compelling readers to confront the psychological and moral ramifications of war inside their own cultural framework.

##### 4.2. Gender and Violence

Both authors examine the gendered brutality of the massacre; however, their focal points diverge. Wilhelm powerfully illustrates the attack on women as a major aspect of the misery. In a distressing sequence, Janice Samuels is bound to a porch rail, assaulted by several troops, and eventually treated as an object: *"They tied Janice Samuels to the porch rail... spread her legs open, and a half a dozen men alternately raped and beat her."* This visual representation highlights the misogyny intrinsic to wartime brutality and the ethical deterioration of the aggressors. Wilhelm's emphasis on gendered violence highlights the manner in which women's bodies frequently serve as battlegrounds in warfare, epitomizing profound dehumanization.

Thanh Thao recognizes the brutality perpetrated against women, although he emphasizes the communal trauma and resilience of the Vietnamese populace. Her representation of gendered violence is intricately interlaced with more extensive illustrations of devastation and anguish. For instance, her phrase, *"The dead buried at the bottom of wells,"* implies multifaceted violence, both corporeal and symbolic, perpetrated against Vietnamese women and children. Nevertheless, the poet shifts focus from personal traumas to the communal endurance of her people, accentuating the significance of collective resistance and national survival.

##### 4.3. Optimism and Rejuvenation

Wilhelm's narrative concludes with moral ambiguity, whereas Thanh Thao's poem is infused with optimism and rejuvenation. In *The Village*, the narrative concludes with Mike Donatti igniting a cigarette, envisioning *"the cool green hills of Vermont,"* unaware of the surrounding carnage. This conclusion illustrates the moral disengagement of the offenders and the cooperation of systemic militarism, imparting to readers a poignant sense of unresolved injustice.

Conversely, Thanh Thao's *Children of Son My* presents a redemptive perspective, emphasizing the children of Son My as embodiments of Vietnam's resilient spirit. He writes: "*And children laugh and cry / And children run and play... beside the blood of the fallen / Blooming sweet potatoes,*" juxtaposing the atrocities of war with the hope for regeneration and the persistence of life. Her poem concludes with a call for unity and future reconstruction: "*Son My, take hands together eternally under the sun,*" which underscores the tenacity and hope of a populace resolute in transcending their painful history.

Wilhelm and Thanh Thao elucidate both the universal and culturally unique aspects of the My Lai Massacre through their common and contrasting themes. Wilhelm's condemnation of militarism and emphasis on gendered violence demonstrate an outsider's endeavor to confront the ethical deficiencies of her civilization. In contrast, Thanh Thao presents a very personal and nationalistic viewpoint, highlighting communal resilience and cultural rejuvenation. Their collective writings offer a comprehensive examination of brutality, resilience, and the lasting ethical ramifications of conflict.

## 5. Conclusions

Thanh Thao and Kate Wilhelm, using their unique literary styles and cultural viewpoints, articulate the experiences of the marginalized victims and survivors of the My Lai Massacre. Thanh Thao's *Children of Son My* encapsulates the fortitude of the Vietnamese populace, transmuting the anguish of a national catastrophe into an optimistic narrative of rejuvenation. Wilhelm's *The Village* compels readers to confront the ethical deficiencies of militarism and the psychological traumas of war, providing a searing indictment of systemic violence. Notwithstanding their disparities, both pieces surpass cultural confines, revealing the common humanity intrinsic to past crimes. By merging historical fact with creative creativity, they safeguard the memory of My Lai while promoting a communal confrontation with its atrocities. Their collective contributions foster empathy, enhance cross-cultural comprehension, and reaffirm the human desire for peace and justice amidst profound conflict. The comparison of these two works also illustrates how literary representations extend beyond documentation to provide frameworks for interpreting moral responsibility. By juxtaposing a Vietnamese poetic vision grounded in communal renewal with an American narrative centered on psychological conflict, the study shows that cultural perspectives shape the moral questions raised by the massacre. This comparative reading highlights the capacity of literature to negotiate trauma, transmit memory, and articulate ethical insight across different narrative traditions. Beyond its comparative scope, this study contributes to broader discussions in memory studies, trauma narratives, and war literature by demonstrating how literary form mediates ethical engagement with historical violence. By juxtaposing Thanh Thao's culturally embedded poetics of collective renewal with Wilhelm's psychologically driven critique of militarized dehumanization, the article shows how divergent narrative strategies shape the remembrance of mass atrocity. This comparison underscores literature's capacity to function not merely as representation, but as a critical site where trauma, responsibility, and moral reflection intersect. In doing so, the manuscript situates the My Lai Massacre within transnational debates on how violence is remembered, narrated, and ethically interpreted across cultural boundaries.

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