DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 098 CS 505 540

AUTHOR Carlson, A. Cheree; Hocking, John E.
TITLE "A Message for My Brother": The Vietnam Veterans' Memorial as Rhetorical Situation.
PUB DATE 10 Apr 87
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Joint Meeting of the Central States Speech Association and the Southern Speech Communication Association (St. Louis, MO, April 9-12, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Catharsis; Content Analysis; Death; Discourse Analysis; *Grief; *Interpersonal Communication; Letters (Correspondence); *Rhetoric; *Rhetorical Criticism; *Symbolism; Veterans
IDENTIFIERS *Rhetorical Situation; *Vietnam Veterans; Vietnam War; War Memorials

ABSTRACT

An examination of letters left at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, D.C. between November, 1984 and April, 1986 revealed that the memorial serves as a rhetorical situation that urges its visitors to eloquence. The memorial is an excellent proving ground for situational theory because the interaction of site and perception is vital to the communication created by the rhetor/audience. The memorial consists of two walls of granite in a v-shape, inscribed with the names of those who died in the Vietnam War. Those who leave messages at the memorial treat it as a commemoration, a gravesite, a spiritual medium, and an apology to the dead. The motivation behind visitors' responses seems to be a search for healing; each rhetor is searching for some form of peace. Visitors are moved to eulogize the dead in ways that personalize the memorial. The messages left behind suggest that for many, visiting the memorial is cathartic. And for some, the messages and the memorial serve as a medium for speaking to the dead. Finally, visitors use their messages to apologize for being alive when a friend is dead. The responses arise from each visitor's subjective needs, but the memorial serves as a rhetorical situation transforming these internal responses into rhetoric. (SRT)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED289098

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

"A MESSAGE FOR MY BROTHER": THE VIETNAM VETERANS' MEMORIAL AS RHETORICAL SITUATION

A. Cheree Carlson and John E. Hocking

Presented at the
"Top Four" Papers in Rhetorical Theory and Criticism Panel
of the joint meeting of the
Southern Speech Communication Association and the
Central States Speech Communication Association

Friday, April 10, 1987

Cheree Carlson is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Arts and Theatre at the University of Maryland, College Park. John Hocking is an Associate Professor in the Speech Communication Department, University of Georgia, Athens.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

A. Cheree Carlson

John E. Hocking

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CS 505540

ERIC

"A Message For My Brother":
The Vietnam Veterans' Memorial as Rhetorical Situation*

Abstract

The Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, D.C. creates a unique opportunity to examine the interaction of objective situation and subjective interpretation in the creation of rhetorical discourse. The Memorial serves as a call for eloquence, but the form of the message is determined by the individual visitors' perception of the situation. An analysis of messages left at the Memorial reveals the forms of response considered "fitting" by visitors.

ERIC

"A MESSAGE FOR MY BROTHER":

THE VIETNAM VETERANS' MEMORIAL AS RHETORICAL SITUATION

> I came down today to pay respects to [two] good friends of mine. Go down and visit them sometime, they are on Panel 42E, lines 22 and 26. I think you will like them.
> -- anonymous note found at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial

There are now 58,132 names of American men and women who died in Vietnam carved into the black granite surface of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, D.C. During its first two years of existence, the Memorial brought five million visitors to see these names.[1] Currently, it has become the most visited memorial in the United States. The National Park Service estimates that nearly twenty million people, almost ten percent of the American population, have visited the Memorial in the four and one half years since it opened.[2] A scale model of the memorial is now on national tour, so that those who cannot visit Washington may view the granite wall. The Memorial has become a mecca for those who have memories of the war, for the veterans who fought it and for the relatives of the names on the stone. This special gathering place has prompted a number of unusual reactions. Some people come, weeping, to collect pencil rubbings of meaningful names; other leave tributes as though at a gravesite: flags, photographs, medals, discharge papers, even teddy bears. Others write letters. Many of these letters are aimed at those who visit the Memorial, but the majority are addressed to the dead, to a specific name or two found on the black wall. Whether written carefully in a birthday card or jotted on the back of a map on the spur of the moment, these letters reflect the thoughts and feelings of those who visit the Memorial. In these missives lie a vital clue to how the Memorial is affecting those who remember

ERIC

the Vietnam War, especially those who served in it.[3] We have examined all of the letters left there between November, 1984 and April, 1986, and have discovered that the Memorial serves as a unique rhetorical situation that urges its visitors to eloquence.[4]

Lloyd Bitzer's initial exploration of the "rhetorical situation" has become a landmark in rhetorical theory.[5] The concept that discourse is rhetorical only if it responds to a specific exigence in the objective world was an important step in attempting to define the difference between rhetoric and other forms of communication. From this beginning an extensive debate has arisen, with scholars on all sides rejecting, defending, and modifying Bitzer's concepts.[6]

One of the chief opponents of Bitzer's theory of situation is Richard E. Vatz. Vatz stands opposed to every one of Bitzer's statements concerning the importance of objective events. He believes that "meaning is not discovered in situations, but created by rhetors."[7] Situations are in the eye of the beholder. The external world must be interpreted through the images rhetoric creates or else it might as well not exist. Rhetoric, for Vatz, becomes the study of symbolic manipulation, the process of creating the world. Thus, preoccupation with "situation" becomes a useless distraction.

Between the two extremes that ground rhetoric in either objectivity or subjective perception stands John H. Patton. Patton interprets Bitzer's theory as a duality. All rhetorical situations consist of two elements: the external, objective events and the internal, subjective interpretations of rhetor and audience. Patton admits that in most cases "the 'subjective' elements will be the chief constraining influences," but these influences do not exist apart from an objective reality.[8] The link between the two realms is perception. Humans may perceive the same situation differently; the rhetor's

goal is to move an audience to perceive it in a particular way. The critic must recognize the "degrees of accuracy or inaccuracy and clarity or unclarity in perceiving. Such distinctions can be made only by examining the relationship between perceptions and the objects or sets of conditions on which they are based."[9] Patton would have the critic examine both the objective and the subjective when seeking the complex of exigencies and constraints that control rhetorical discourse.

Patton provides a thoughtful defense of the "rhetorical situation" and it is surprising that more critics have not attempted to test the utility of his views by applying that perspective to an instance of discourse. We intend to take up that challenge through an examination of a unique rhetorical phenomenon -- the complex of messages composed by visitors to the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial.

The Memorial is an excellent proving ground for situational theory because the interaction of site and perception is vital to the communication created by the rhetor/audience. The Memorial itself serves as a call for discourse. Its abstract design demands a variety of "fitting responses" to the exigencies that veterans' and civilians bring to the site. It invites response, but it is the audience's perception of that invitation that determines which response is fitting. An exigence is "an imperfection marked by urgency, it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be."[10] At the Memorial, each visitor carries his or her own imperfection: guilt, anger, an unfinished deed or an unkept promise. These exigencies call for a response, and these responses are brought to light at the Memorial. The interaction of internal and external forces determine the final form of the message and to whom it is addressed.

Two communication articles have speculated on the meaning of the Memorial

ERIC

and its effect upon the nation's perception of the war. Sonja Foss analyzed the design of the Memorial itself and concluded that the rhetorical power it seems to hold for its audience derived from the design's ambiguity. This ambiguity allows each visitor to invest the Memorial with his or her own personal meanings.[11] But the question remains: what are those meanings? Harry W. Haines suggests that the current administration is using mass media to mold that ambiguity into a message redefining the war as noble and patriotic. He fears that the Memorial is being used to prepare the United States for similar wars in the future.[12] His view defines the Memorial as a tool to force veterans to "forget" the war and reintegrate peacefully with society. Haines confines his study to the Memorial as described by the media. He does not investigate the behavior of Memorial visitors, other than those activities described by the press.

The evidence provided by these writers indicates the Memorial has a profound effect upon visitors, but there is, to date, no investigation into what the audierce perception of those effects might actually be. Viewing the Memorial as a rhetorical situation allows for such an investigation.

This study will proceed by first describing the Memorial and its visitors. These are the external elements of the situation. Then, an analysis of the messages will be presented, revealing four types of "fitting responses" perceived by the letter-writers. Finally, conclusions concerning the rhetorical function of the Memorial as defined by its "pilgrims" will be presented as evidence of the unique interplay of situation and perception.

THE MEMORIAL AS SITUATION

The Vietnam Veterans' Memorial is not a "traditional" war memorial. No shining flags fly, no bronze statue of brave heroes stands tall beside it, no

ERIC

heroism is lauded.[13] In fact, it is not a memorial to the war, at all, but rather a memorial to the 2.7 million Americans who served in Vietnam, and especially to those who were killed. As Foss notes, it focuses our attention on those who did not survive the war.[14] The Vietnam war is reduced to its inevitable result. The Memorial suggests the message, "In war, young men die; here are their names."[15]

The memorial itself is deceptively simple. It consists of two walls of highly polished black granite arranged in a V-shape. The west wall points exactly at the northeast corner of the Lincoln Memorial and the east wall points exactly at the northeast corner of the Washington Monument. Each wall is 247 feet long and contains seventy panels of names. The walls rise from ground level at each entrance to a height of ten feet at the vert The names are inscribed in chronological order, by the date of casualty. The list begins at the vertex, at the top of the eastern panel, and proceeds to the tip of the east wall. It resumes at the tip of the west wall, ending where it began, at the vertex. Thus the names of those killed at the beginning and at the end of the war come together. They are one. The effect is a sense of symmetry, wholeness, and closure.

Visitation at the Memorial has increased each year, possibly stimulated by intense media coverage. Twice as many people visited the Memorial in 1985 as did in 1983.[16] The unusual behavior of these visitors has earned the site the title "the most emotional ground in the Nation's Capital."[17] Some visitors walk through quickly, in a hurry to catch a tour bus. But others move slowly, back and forth, again and again, stopping, staring, sometimes touching a name, sometimes making a pencil rubbing, and usually shedding a tear. For a number of these latter visitors, a trip to the Memorial is nearly a sacred pilgrimage. For example, one visitor was a veteran in search of his best friend's name.

When the name was shown to him, he suddenly became excited, and cried out, "There he is, there he is!" as though he was seeing his friend, and not a name carved in granite. The name was out of reach, so a volunteer brought a ladder to the spot. The veteran climbed up and slowly rubbed his fingers back and forth across the letters, as though touching his friend. He stayed for an hour, talking about his friend with a mixture of laughter and tears, venting his rage and sorrow. The friend had died seventeen years before, in 1968. On another occasion, a lone man in a wheel chair slowly descended the walkway to a panel near the vertex. He stared at a single name for a half hour or more. Finally, he turned, and with some difficulty, wheeled himself back to the entrance. This visitor returns periodically to the memorial to stare at the same name.

The thoughts of such quiet, intense visitors to the Memorial cannot be ascertained. However, there are a large number of visitors who attest to their feelings by leaving letters and other objects. These letters serve as responses to the exigencies carried within visitors turned rhetor by the power of the rhetorical situation.

FUNCTIONS SERVED BY THE MEMORIAL

Visitors who leave messages at the Memorial appear to perceive four main exigencies that must be dealt with before each can depart with his or her own form of "peace." The Memorial is experienced at once as a commemoration, a gravesite, a spiritual medium, and an apology to the dead. These responses are not always mutually exclusive. In fact, some texts fit into several categories at once, but differences in emphasis or purpose were used to delineate the boundaries of each response.

ERIC

The Commemorative Response

It is obvious that the Memorial serves as a memorial, but the nature of this particular site is unusual enough to warrant attention. The Memorial violates traditional commemorative form in that it does not deal specifically with any event. It makes no direct statement about the war other than "here are the names of those who died." It does not ask the visitor to remember Vietnam in any specific context, nor does it require that honor be attributed to any specific act of heroism or sacrifice. The thousands of names are overwhelming, and no name receives any emphasis. In essence, the Memorial fails to fulfill its ostensible function. Thus, the imperfection felt by the audience exists in their perception of the Memorial itself. The fitting response of these audience members is to make it clear that abstract remembrance is not enough. This audience literally compensates for the Memorial's failings by attempting to modify its message to serve traditional commemorative purposes. This is done by leaving artifacts that address visitors in an attempt to create concrete memories about the war and its victims.

In most cases, these artifacts take the form of photographs of specific soldiers taped to or placed as near to their names on the memorial as possible, or old newspaper obituaries wrapped carefully in plastic and displayed in prominent places. But some visitors prepare more elaborate messages. Large framed items describing the heroic deaths of individuals have been left, such as a plaque left by an Eagle Scout troop, stating that the purpose of their visit was to give meaning to a single death:

> To those Scouts who are here this morning, it is hoped that you and your name will from this day forth, mean far more to us than those simple, terrible words, "Killed in Vietnam, 1965."[18]

ERIC

These messages are aimed at transforming names into personalities, at revealing the courage behind the marble words:

> You saved a fellow soldier's life after your patrol was hit in an ambush. As you pulled him to safety you were struck with a number of rounds from automatic weapons. You crazy fool.

Others reveal only the tragedy of war, such as this chronicle of the events of a single battle:

> On June 26, 1967, on a small hill near Camp Evans, along Hwy 1, north of Hue, RVN. [Jim] never saw the mine he stepped on that morning. Nor did he live long enough to feel the wounds he would soon die from. The concussion of the mine's explosion detonated a 60mm mortar round carried on the back of [Angel]. Angel never heard it. A piece of schrapnel caught [Doc] in the chest. Doc was gone before his knees buckled. An instant in time for some, an eternity for others.

Not all of the messages are memorials for specific names on the wall. One item was not even a tribute to a human being. It was an eight by ten framed color photograph of a German Shepherd bearing the caption:

> In memory of my close friend, King. He saved my life and the lives of many others.
>
> This is a tribute to the many sentry, scout and tracker dogs and their handlers who gave their all.

What these messages have in common is a concreteness at odds with the abstract design of the memorial. Visitors who leave these messages are attempting to make the memorial serve as a specific reminder of the individual sacrifices made during the war. Scribbled notes demand that we "do not forget." In some cases, visitors are commanded directly to recall what a memorial is for:

> Whenever you start loosing a grip
> Remember them guys
> Remember those promises
> Even if that's the only thing
> You stay alive for. . .
> You promised. . .
> You might be the only thing
> They died for.

These visitors will make certain that the memorial reminds us of the promises that lie behind the names.

At the Memorial, audience expectations of a "good" commemorative monument cause it to create rhetoric that "corrects" the message. The audience literally adds material to the message that already exists, thus reforming it to fit a particular need.

The Eulogistic Response

The Memorial, with its list of names, emphasizes those who did not survive the Vietnam War. It serves as the single location where all the dead and missing are recognized. Thus, it is not surprising that one response is funerary -- to "bury" and mourn the dead. Those who have lost loved ones come to the Memorial to express their grief, seeking an eventual catharsis of their pain. For thousands of relatives, this is the only gravesite, for the remains of many soldiers never came home. For Vietnam Veterans, it is the one place where reminders of all their "brothers" stand together. One poem left at the site remarks upon its funerary appearance:

> For finally, there has been,
> both burial,
> and reminder.
> A great sunken headstone
> at which to lay
> Flowers, Flags, newspaper clippings
> Hats, Sea Rations and memories.

The eulogistic function of the Memorial is vitally important in healing the wounds left by Vietnam. Kathleen Jamieson notes that "facing the reality of death is a critical factor in the grief process. By publically confirming death, the eulogy makes denial difficult."[19] The concrete reality of the memorial, the names that can be read and touched, confirms the death of an

individual in a way not usually provided to mourners who have never seen the bodies of their loved ones. Those who accept these deaths are now free to mourn, and the Memorial is ready to serve as an outlet for that grief. According to Jamieson, "the human needs created by the death of a loved one are so great that eulogistic rhetoric persists, although in untraditional forms."[20] The Memorial has become one such untraditional eulogy.

The messages left by these mourners are rarely directed at other visitors. Often, they are scrawled on notebook paper or the back of a map in the heat of the instant, then dropped to the ground. They are introspective, sometimes written as though to a departed friend. Sometimes they are addressed to no one at all. What they all have in common is grief, and the need to visit the Memorial to ease that pain. As one writer states, "Each one of us has a different way of coping with the death of a loved one, and writing these letters. . . is a way of easing my grief." Sometimes the Memorial works, and these visitors write of accepting their losses and returning to the living. It is the hope of such a cure that leads a Pennsylvania psychiatric hospital to bring disturbed veterans to the Memorial for therapy sessions.[21] Other veterans have found a measure of release on their own. One learns acceptance:

> I've looked for you for so long. . . . How angry I was to find you here -- though I knew you would be. . . . It is only now on my second trip to this monument that I can admit that you, my friends, are gone forever -- that I can say your names, call you my friends and speak of your deaths.

Another learns to mourn:

> I never cried -- my chest becomes unbearably painful and my throat tightens so I can't even croak, but I haven't cried. I wanted to, just couldn't.
> I think I can, today. Dam, I'm crying now. Bye Smitty. Get some rest.

Sometimes the Memorial cannot work a cure, as evinced by the Veteran who could only write "Damn, it still hurts."

For other visitors, the funerary function of the Memorial appears less traumatic. At its base they leave flowers and crosses, medals and flags, a vast array of cemetery decorations. Thus does the Memorial allow them to honor the dead in the traditional manner, even the dead who never came home.

The Mediumistic Response

Some who come to the Memorial seek to bury their dead and continue with their own lives. There are others, however, who view the Memorial as a site from which to communicate with their dead as though they still lived, or at least live in an afterlife. These visitors are responding to a completely internal exigence. There is a need for contact with a loved one, and a conversation at the Memorial seems to fulfill that need. The address is rhetorical in that no one really expects a "ghost" to respond. But there is a touching element in many of these letters -- a tacit expectation that a message sent to the wall will "get through", at least metaphorically, better than elsewhere. The most blatant example of this is a card addressed to a deceased naval officer "c/o Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, Constitution Gardens, Washington, D.C." The Memorial is regularly decorated with birthday cards, birth announcements, family photographs and other memorabilia as offerings for the dead. The greatest number of these items are simple notes tendering love and friendship. One indicated a continuing conversation:

> It is that time of year again for me to get to say my special hello to you. I feel so close to you when I am here at the "Wall."

Another was a "love note":

> I just wanted to come here today to tell you I love you.

A third was from a daughter to her father:

> I knew that you were Santa Clause but I didn't want to spoil it <u>for you</u>.

ERIC

A final example was written with gratitude to a nurse:

> God Bless You Sharon for holding the hands of the Dying for a war there was no need to fight.

Other messages are more complex letters and poems expressing faith in the after life and a hope that the separation will not be too long. For example, a mother brought a small stuffed bear and a photograph with this note:

> I'm bringing 'Teddy Bear' and a picture of your loved race car. I realize they can't stay there long but they are yours and I want them to be with you. In time I hope we can all be together.

Not all the notes are simple expressions of emotion. Some "newsy" letters seem intended to bring the deceased up-to-date on recent events. The occasional note to an MIA serves as "moral support": "Somehow I know that you are still alive in the jungles of Vietnam. . . . I still look forward to seeing you someday." In another instance, a wedding photograph was found near a name. On the back was written, "Sir, although you don't know me, I know you. I love your daughter and will do everything to protect her."

Veterans write special letters to their "brothers" in arms. One mentioned recent events:

> Movies are being made about Nam and we could really laugh at them -- some guy called "Rambo" goes back to Nam to free POW's and MIA's -- We could have won the war with this guy Rambo -- but so much for fiction.

Another described the dedication of a Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in New York, then discharged a final duty:

> Finally, America has awakened and taken home those of us who live and remember you and all the others. . . . I kept your spirit alive till America woke up, sir. I'm done. Rest well my friend, my Lieutenant.

Thus are messages sent across the void to a loved one. Everything from the "chewing out" that was never delivered: "You never would listen to anyone and you finally screwed up," to a poem from a daughter who never had a chance

to communicate before her father's death:

Now I'm grown
And I look a lot like you,
Who would have
known I would
grow up to look
like someone I
never even knew.

The Apologetic Response

This final category is similar to the mediumistic function in that it consists of messages directed to the names on the Memorial. However, these messages address a different exigence, perhaps that "something waiting to be done" described by Bitzer. These messages are apologies, sometimes desperate attempts to make amends for past mistakes. The audience perceives that the imperfections lie within themselves, for things they did, or failed to do, during the war. Civilians apologize for letting the war begin, or for not volunteering. Veterans apologize for practical jokes, old debts or, most touchingly, for still being alive after their "brothers" fell. Somehow, for these people, the Memorial serves as a place of restitution.

Letters left by civilians tend to emphasize their regret that the Vietnam War occurred at all. They range from the simple "We should have done more so that this didn't happen," to eloquent bursts of poetry handwritten on notebook paper:

We are sorry,
But who could tell
That such awful Pride
Would give us those who died
And those who cried
And got all ripped up inside.
For such an ignoble gesture
Nobly done.

One person who received a college deferment felt moved to link his present life

ERIC

with his earlier "failure:"

> I don't feel guilty because you died and I live. I feel guilty because I have failed you. You died to provide me an opportunity to accomplish something. Not only have I not done anything with my life, my lack of accomplishment is the result of the worst of all sins, lack of discipline, irresponsibility, lack of courage to try.

Some of the most moving apologies, by far, are tendered by Veterans. All of the following messages were handwritten, scrawled on whatever material was at hand. The greatest number relate to the deaths of soldiers. Veterans apologize for letting friends down, and often offer their own lives in exchange:

> Here is your buck -- sorry I couldn't save more of you -- but they shot me too. Sorry for the waste -- fuck I'm just sorry.

> I'm so sorry Frankie -- I know we left you -- I hope you didn't suffer too much.

> Sorry I couldn't keep it down longer so I could get you, Brother. I wish it was me instead of you.

> I would give my life if some how it would bring you all back.

Not all the apologies rise from guilt for abandoning comrades. One message, written on the back of a photograph of a surgery unit, mourns that even doing all one could was often not enough:

> We did what we could but it was not enough because I found you here all if you are not just names on this wall you are alive. You're bloods on my hands, your screams in my ears, your eyes in my soul. I told you you'd be alright but I lied, please forgive me. I see your face in my son, I can't beat the thought. You told me about your wife, your kids, your girl, your mother. Then you died. I should have done more. Your pain is ours. Please go. I'll never forget your faces. I can't. You're still alive.

These messages reveal the pain and anguish of individuals who share in the guilt created by the Vietnam War. All they can do to alleviate their pain is to apologize. To what extent the action of writing the messages is truly cathartic can only be guessed. Perhaps it does ease the pain, but as one missive at the Memorial notes, "Forgive thyself is the only cure."

ERIC

CONCLUSIONS

The Vietnam Veterans' Memorial evokes intense responses from both veterans and non-veterans. These responses are unique in that the external setting created by the Memorial prompts the audience to create rhetoric arising from the deepest part of their souls.[22] These messages are constrained by the audience, for each sees a different exigence, and a different "fitting response." Our analysis reveals four major forms of responses, but these responses appear to have a single motivating force: the search for healing. Each rhetor who creates a message is searching for some form of peace.

That so many visitors would come in search of healing is not unusual considering the nature and recency of the Vietnam War. The war was arguably the most significant event in United States history in the last forty years. Prior to Vietnam, the United States had never been defeated in war. American soldiers were seen as heroes who fought for noble causes. Americans were proud of their country, proud of the victorious soldiers who fought to keep it free.

Vietnam was different. The intensity of pain about American involvement, the disastrous outcome and the lives lost in vain will take generations to heal. The healing has begun with the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. Thousands of people make a pilgrimage to seek healing in one form or another. Many leave records of their journey and its success or failure. These records indicate four different kinds of searches.

People come to remember. Prior to the Vietnam war, the anger and sorrow of those who lost soldiers in battle could be tempered by memories of victory. There was no victory for Vietnam; the pain of loss is only worsened by the memory of the uselessness of the sacrifice. Perhaps, instead, the pain can be tempered through the knowledge that others remember, too. Thus visitors are moved to eulogize the dead in ways that personalize the memorial. The messages

left behind allow visitors to realize that there was once a real person behind every name; someone's friend, spouse, son, or brother. Each name represents an individual whose life was shattered by war. If visitors carry the memory of an individual away with them, the dead did not die in vain, after all.

People come to mourn. To lose a loved one is surely one of the most difficult things a human being can bear. Many visitors come to the Memorial to mourn this tragedy. The messages they leave behind suggest that for many, a visit to the memorial serves a cathartic function. Although it is a very public place, the Memorial has become an environment that accepts tears and other open expressions of grief. Thus, the Memorial serves as an acceptable outlet for venting intense emotions that might otherwise remain internalized for a lifetime.

People come to speak to the dead. It is painful to lose someone forever. Surely it would ease the pain if there were only some medium through which to send messages that would "reach" the dead. Our analysis suggests that for some people the Memorial serves as this medium. Visitors come to tell their lost loved ones that they are remembered and loved. Visitors relay messages, thank the dead, scold them, and wish them well. The veteran who left the piece selected for the introduction spent a day introducing mutual acquaintances that he found on the wall to each other, so that the dead would have someone to talk to when he was not around. The Memorial allows visitors to create a sense of closeness with the dead. Clearly, that feeling would diminish the pain of the survivors.

People come to apologize. They apologize for being alive when a friend is dead. They are sorry they did not do more, sorry they did not repay a debt, sorry they did not keep a promise. Guilt plays as strong a role as grief in bringing these people to the Memorial. Here is the opportunity to offer the

apology which was long ago neglected. And an apology can reduce or eliminate guilt. The pain of unkept promises subsides.

Each response arose from each visitor's subjective needs, and would perhaps have existed in the mind of each whether the Memorial was there or not. It was the Memorial, however, that transformed these internal responses to rhetoric. It was the concrete interacting with the subconscious that produced the messages. The Wall, unvisited, would merely be a piece of stone. The visitors, without the Wall, might have carried their exigencies within themselves for a lifetime, never giving voice to their feelings.

Thus, in this case, at least, the debate over which is the most powerful constraint upon discourse would appear to be resolved. At the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial only a critical approach <u>unifying</u> the two could produce useful results. Thus, Pattons' rapprochement of Bitzer and his opponents appears to be the ideal situational stance. Only this stance reveals the Memorial as a truly eloquent work, by discovering that it literally inspires eloquence in others.

The documents left at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial reveal the private pain felt by those who lost loved ones in Vietnam. They come in search of a healing force that has previously been denied them. Sometimes, the act of visitation does indeed heal all wounds, for the letters express new feelings of hope and peace. At other times, the Memorial works no miracle, and the letters reveal that sad truth, as well. For others who bring artifacts, we can only guess at whether the Memorial has brought peace or pain. One young girl wrote a poem about her brother soon after he died. Years later, she typed it, framed it, and brought it to the Memorial. We can only hope that this act brought her some surcease from the feelings she grappled with in the poem.

ERIC

PEACE

When I was little in my room
I wondered.
I wondered if I would ever
see my brother again?

I did not understand
why he had to leave me?
Mom said he had to leave
He had to go make PEACE.

My brother went to WAR!
He said he's doing it for me
He did it so I would be able to live in a
world of PEACE.

I would have loved to have gotten to
know him better.

The War had taken him from me.

My brother went to fight
a war
To give you and I a world of PEACE.

I'll never be at PEACE.
I have lost my brother.

I pray my brother
is at PEACE.

I'll always remember his last words to me
before he left,
"I love you my little pumpkin, God Bless."

God Bless you (Larry) and all men and
women
who went to Vietnam.

By: Debby
(Larry's little pumpkin)

ERIC

NOTES

*We would like to thank Ruth Anderson-Hocking, Kevin Dean, Edward L. Fink, Thurmon Garner, Cal Logue, Michael McGuire, Terry Doyle, and Len Shyles for comments and encouragement on this paper.

[1]Jan C. Scruggs and Joel L. Swerdlow, To Heal a Nation (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 159.

[2]National Park Service Estimate.

[3]The authors wish to express their appreciation to the Museum and Archeological Storage Facility of the National Park Service in Lanham, Maryland. Park service workers have been collecting the artifacts and letters left at the memorial since November, 1984 in the hope of eventually establishing a museum (See Duncan Spencer and Lloyd Wolf, Facing the Wall: Americans at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial [New York: Macmillan, 1986, p.11). Our special thank you is for David Guynes, curator of the facility, for allowing us access to the special collection and to Steve Alimar, lead Park Service Ranger at the Memorial.

[4]Although the authors examined over two thousand artifacts, including nearly 1,000 written texts, new materials arrive weekly at the storage facility. Unfortunately for future research, the Memorial collection has begun to receive a great deal of media coverage. An ABC television Nightline episode was broadcast May 26, 1986, and with this, a significant number of people will discover that artifacts left at the Memorial are being collected. This could have a two-fold effect: sincere mourners may become reluctant to commit their reactions to paper, and others may decide to use the Memorial as a political platform -- or as a vast granite bulletin board.

[5]Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric 1 (1968), 1-15.

[6]Participants include Richard E. Vatz, "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric 6 (1973), 154-61; Scott Consigny, "Rhetoric and Its Situations," Philosophy and Rhetoric 7 (1974), 175-86; David M. Hunsaker and Craig R. Smith, "The Nature of Issue: A Constructive Approach to Situational Rhetoric," The Western Journal of Speech Communication 40 (1976), 144-56; and John H. Patton, "Causation and Creativity in Rhetorical Situations: Distinctions and Implications," The Quarterly Journal of Speech 65 (1979), 36-55.

[7]Vatz, p. 157.

[8]Patton, p. 45.

[9]Patton, p. 48.

[10]Bitzer, p. 6.

[11]Sonja Foss, "Ambiguity as Persuasion: The Vietnam Veterans' Memorial," Communication Quarterly, 34 (1986), 94-104.

[12]Harry W. Haines, "'What Kind of War?': An Analysis of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial," Critical Studies in Mass Communication 3 (1986), 1-20. Haines' argument that the Memorial is "especially susceptible to politics" and that it is being used as a tool by the current administration to justify American involvement in Central America and elsewhere is unconvincing (p. 17). The authors do not share his fears. After spending over 200 hours at the Memorial observing reactions and talking to thousands of visitors, veterans, war supporters, war protestors, and people too young and too old to remember the Vietnam War, we remain convinced that if there is an unambiguous message conveyed by this "ambiguous" Memorial, it is "when there is war, people die." The current administration, or "power" as Haines calls it, appears to want as little as possible to do with the Memorial. It may, in fact, be embarrassed by the elegant and fundamental truth the Memorial conveys to many people.

[13]A statue of three soldiers and an American flag were added to the site after the Memorial was completed. It was built in response to public concern about the Memorial's untraditional form. This statue, however, has been placed well away from the Wall itself.

[14]Foss, p. 18. The only similar American memorial is the Arizona in Hawaii. It, too, features the names of the dead, specifically those whose bodies still remain trapped within the ship's hull. The Arizona is literally a tombstone, whereas the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial merely suggests a gravesite.

[15]M. McGrory, "Names Are Memorial's Silent Legacy," Denver Post (17 November, 1982), sec. B, p. 2. Cited in Foss, p. 18. The Memorial was designed by Maya Ying Lin, who at that time was a 21 year old student at Yale University. Her design was selected from 1,421 entries in a competition open to any American citizen over eighteen years of age. The internationally respected judges included two landscape artists, two structural architectures three sculptors, and an expert on urban development and architecture. The judges were instructed to consider whether the entries: 1) were reflective and contemplative in nature; 2) were harmonious with the surroundings, especially the other national monuments on the mall; 3) contained the names of the over 58,000 Americans who died or were missing in the war; and 4) made no political statement about the war. Her design was the unanimous selection of the competition judges. Lin was a student in a funerary architecture class at the time of the competition. She also submitted her design as her final class project. She received a B in the class. See Scruggs and Swerdlow, p. 66. The memorial itself was the brain-child of Jan Scruggs, who was an infantryman in Vietnam. For a discussion of how the controversial Memorial was completed on the Mall by a concerned group of Vietnam veterans, see Scruggs and Swerdlow.

[16]Park Service Estimate.

[17]John S. Lang, "A Memorial Wall That Healed Our Wounds," U.S. World and News Report 21 Nov. 1983, p. 68.

[18]The authors intend to leave the identities of the writers anonymous. In addition, any spelling or grammatical errors are left "as is," without the intrusion of sic. To do otherwise would destroy the "spirit" of the messages.

ERIC

[19] Kathleen Jamieson, Critical Anthology of Public Speeches, MODCOM (Chicago, IL: Science Research Associates, 1978), p. 40.

[20] Jamieson, MODCOM, p. 41.

[21] Personal observation of the authors. Discussion of the therapeutic function of the Memorial may be found in Charles L. Griswold, "The Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thoughts on Political Iconography," Critical Inquiry 12 (1986), 688-719.

[22] Other American Memorials which potentially serve as rhetorical sites have not prompted spontaneous rhetoric. This may be because the external constraints are too great to allow visitors the freedom to respond. For example, at the Arizona visitors are ferried to the site and back in fifteen minute intervals. There is barely time to compose a response. In addition, there is no anonymity. A person leaving a note cannot escape into the crowd until the next boat arrives. At the Tomb of the Unknown Soldiers in Arlington National Cemetery there is a twenty-four hour military honor guard that may make potential rhetors too uncomfortable to leave a message.

ERIC