



國立臺灣大學文學院外國語文學系

碩士論文

Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures

College of Liberal Arts

National Taiwan University

Master's Thesis

阮越清《同情者》中加害者形象的再現

The Representations of Perpetrators in Viet Thanh

Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*

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中華民國 113 年 1 月

January 2024

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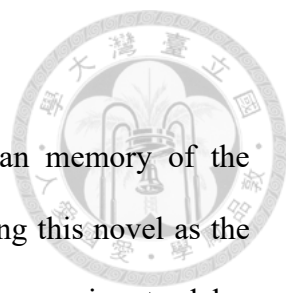
Acknowledgement

First, I am deeply indebted to my advisor, Professor Sophia Ya-Shih Liu, for her guidance and detailed revisions of this work. Her expertise, patience, and support have carried me through my writing process. Also, I would like to thank my committee members, Professor Chi-She Li, who has inspired me to start this study, and Professor Pin-Chia Feng, who has offered insightful suggestions that helped me think deeper about my research.

Additionally, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to my friends and classmates who have surrounded me with warmth and encouragement. Their fellowship has motivated me to continue my academic journey.

Lastly, I am extremely grateful to my family for their unwavering love. The accomplishment of this project would not be possible without them.

Abstract



The Sympathizer is Viet Thanh Nguyen's intervention in American memory of the Vietnam War and his call for ethical memory. This thesis, scrutinizing this novel as the protagonist's confession and echoing Nguyen's concept of just memory, aims to delve into how *The Sympathizer* challenges its readers to reimagine and sympathize with perpetrators as human beings with complex subjectivity. This thesis consists of four parts: Chapter One: Introduction, Chapter Two: A Systemic Perpetrator—Claude, Chapter Three: A Traumatized Perpetrator—The Protagonist, and Conclusion. Chapter One introduces Nguyen's idea of just memory, a model of ethical memory that recognizes humans' shared inhumanity, and reviews the development of Perpetrator Studies, a field that investigates why people become perpetrators. Chapter Two, by analyzing a character, Claude, as a systemic perpetrator, focuses on how humans' inhumanity can be provoked by a toxic interrogation system and how people can be transformed into perpetrators regardless of their ethnicity. By inspecting the complex subjectivity of the protagonist as a traumatized perpetrator, Chapter Three foregrounds the humanity of perpetrators, addressing the issue of perpetrator trauma. This thesis concludes by emphasizing that the recognition of humans' shared humanity and inhumanity promoted by Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* is crucial to violence prevention and reconciliation.

Keywords: *The Sympathizer*, Viet Thanh Nguyen, just memory, systemic perpetrators, perpetrator trauma

中文摘要

本論文以越南裔美國作家阮越清 (Viet Thanh Nguyen) 的小說《同情者》為研究文本，藉由將此作品視為主角的自白並呼應阮越清所提出之公正記憶 (just memory) 的概念，來探索這本小說中加害者形象的再現如何挑戰讀者對於加害者的既定印象，使讀者能將其視之為帶有複雜主體性的人。本文分為四個部分：第一章介紹阮越清的公正記憶概念，並回顧加害者研究 (Perpetrator Studies) 的發展。第二章藉由將書中角色克勞德 (Claude) 視為一位系統性加害者來研究人類的非人性如何被有害的審訊系統所激發，並探討人如何轉變成加害者。第三章藉由將主角視為一位受創的加害者，來聚焦於加害者的人性並探究加害者創傷之議題。最後，結論章強調《同情者》中對於人類共有人性與非人性的承認是達成暴力防治與和解的基石。

關鍵字：《同情者》、阮越清、公正記憶、系統性加害者、加害者創傷

Chapter One: Introduction

“They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.”

—*The Sympathizer* 189



I. Introduction

The Sympathizer is Viet Thanh Nguyen’s intervention in American memory of the Vietnam War. As a Vietnamese-American writer, he observes two problems in the dominant narratives about the Vietnam War: the lack of Vietnamese voices and the unequal distribution of memory about the war. As Nguyen argues that “[a]ll wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory” (“Remembering War” 149), the popular narratives about the Vietnam War, produced mainly by Hollywood, are dramatic representations of white men’s trauma (“Remembering War” 152). These Hollywood movies, such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Rambo: First Blood*, are prone to portray American soldiers as heroes who endure traumatic experiences to save the world. It is noteworthy that these mainstream representations of the Vietnam War fall short of Vietnamese perspectives. In “Just Memory,” Nguyen highlights the unequal distribution of memory: “American memories globally circulate via the most expensive circuits, whereas Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian memories are local or at most diasporic, invisible, inaudible, and illegible to the majorities in any given country” (161). When Americans sell their perspective to the whole world, people outside of Vietnam may think from an American perspective rather than from a Vietnamese one. In an interview with Sabine Kieselbach, Nguyen contends:

What Americans get wrong about [the Vietnam War] is that they think of it as purely an American war in which the Vietnamese are the bystanders of the drama—even though around 58,000 or so Americans died in the war, which is a

tragedy. But we have to remember, about 3 million Vietnamese people died during this war.

By predominantly presenting the Vietnam War from the American viewpoint, Hollywood's representations become unethical. These one-sided representations inevitably marginalize Vietnamese experiences in a war that has wreaked havoc on so many Vietnamese lives.

The Sympathizer is Nguyen's call for ethical memory. He states that this novel aims to "force readers to think anew about the Vietnam War and ponder questions of memory, representation, and reconciliation" ("A Novel Intervention" 65). In his keynote address, "War, Fiction and the Ethics of Memory," at the Third Annual Conference of the Memory Studies Association in Madrid in 2019, Nguyen draws on *The Sympathizer* and his nonfiction work *Nothing Ever Dies* to discuss the ethics of memory. He makes a contrast between ethical memory and disremembering. For him, Hollywood's representations of the Vietnam War are a form of disremembering. He explains:

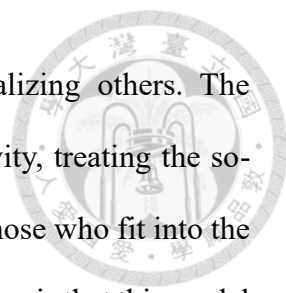
[In] these American movies about the Vietnam War, Vietnamese people were not forgotten. We were actually visible all over the place. But just because we were not forgotten, it doesn't mean that we were remembered. We were rendered visible onscreen only in order to serve as the background for this American drama, and only to serve a one-moment in the spotlight in every movie where we were raped, or killed, or made to say thank you. ("War, Fiction and the Ethics of Memory" 1:09:26)

In Hollywood's representations of the Vietnam War, Vietnamese people are seen and unseen at the same time. They are seen as props to fulfill the American fantasy of the white savior narrative. They are not seen as human beings who possess full and complex subjectivity. The disremembering done to the Vietnamese people is unethical for denying

their subjectivity.

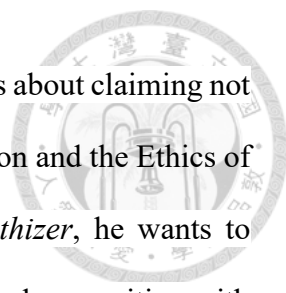
When it comes to the problematics of ethical memory, Nguyen lays out three models of ethical memory: the ethics of remembering our own, the ethics of remembering others, and the ethics of recognition. I interpret these models as three stages of ethical memory. *The Sympathizer* stands out from other representations of the Vietnam War because it does not stop at the first or second stage of ethical memory. This novel dares to engage in the third stage, which is the most challenging way of remembering wars. The first stage of ethical memory is the most common way of remembering wars. The ethics of remembering our own is remembering our own humanity and others' inhumanity. This form of ethical memory prompts people to fixate on a sense of victimization and glorification of heroism. The danger of this model of ethical memory is that it "is premised upon seeing the world in one way and one way only" ("War, Fiction and the Ethics of Memory" 0:16:54). *The Sympathizer* obviously refuses to stay in this stage of ethical memory since the novel attempts to narrate the story from more than one side, and the protagonist refuses to see the world from only one perspective. The protagonist is "a man of two faces" and "a man of two minds," who is "able to see any issue from both sides" (*Sympathizer* 1). With the ability to see any issue from others' perspectives, the protagonist thus engages in the next stage of ethical memory—the ethics of remembering others.

The ethics of remembering others is remembering others' humanity. It is the foundation of liberal democracy, promoting diversity and inclusion, which allows groups of minorities to be seen. However, this second stage's insistence on our common humanity is important yet insufficient. Nguyen points out that this model poses three problems. The first problem is that this model may encourage humanitarian warfare. In this model, people may conduct atrocious deeds in the name of saving others. The second



problem is that this model can potentially trap people into idealizing others. The idealization of others may oversimplify and reduce others' subjectivity, treating the so-called others as a homogenous group. This model implies that only those who fit into the ideal images imposed on them can be seen as humans. The third problem is that this model, even when it is criticizing our side, keeps on centering our own subjectivity. Nguyen uses the movie *Apocalypse Now* as an example. This American movie, though it condemns the inhumanity done by the American military during the Vietnam War, does not engage in showing the Vietnamese perspectives. Even as an anti-war movie, *Apocalypse Now* reinforces the centrality of American subjectivity.

The final stage of Nguyen's ethical memory is the ethics of recognition. This stage recognizes that both we and others are human and inhuman. Nguyen names this model of ethical memory "just memory," a memory that "recall[s] the past in a way that does justice to the forgotten" ("Just Memory" 150). Nguyen insists that the first and second models of ethical memory are not enough to achieve justice. Nguyen calls the ethics of recognition "just memory" because he believes that only if we recognize our and others' shared inhumanity can we march on the road to justice. *The Sympathizer* advocates this third model of ethical memory. The protagonist is often in situations where he has to be a complicit witness or even an active conductor of horrible perpetration. He has to recognize not only his humanity but also his own inhumanity. This novel asks readers to recognize that others and we are all human beings, who are capable of doing both human and inhuman behaviors. This ethics of recognition "illuminates how war neither emerges from alien territory nor is fought by monsters" (*Nothing Ever Dies* 24). This final model of ethical memory urges people to recognize and remember "how the inhuman inhabits the human" (*Nothing Ever Dies* 25). The first and the second models of ethical memory may thrust people into the category of demonization or idealization, denying human



beings' full and complex subjectivity. For Nguyen, “full subjectivity is about claiming not just our humanity, or our inhumanity, but claiming both” (“War, Fiction and the Ethics of Memory” 0:39:55). Nguyen elucidates that by writing *The Sympathizer*, he wants to “create a character who would be able to compete at the level of ethical recognition with the subjectivity that Americans and Westerners have always reserved for themselves” (“War, Fiction and the Ethics of Memory” 0:40:01). In other words, by writing this novel, Nguyen intends to engage in the ethics of recognition and grants the Vietnamese protagonist full and complex subjectivity.

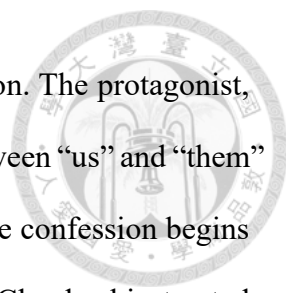
How to come to terms with human beings' shared inhumanity is thus a crucial issue of *The Sympathizer*. This novel not only poignantly criticizes American inhumanity but also confronts its readers with full Vietnamese subjectivity that consists of both humanity and inhumanity. Nguyen notes, “Some people see this book as an anti-American novel, because there is so much critique of what Americans have done and how they see the world. But the novel is also very pointed in what Vietnamese of all sides have done” (“A Novel Intervention” 66). In this novel, the Vietnamese are presented as a heterogeneous group that comprises poor citizens, flirty prostitutes, South Vietnamese soldiers, fervent communist agents, and so on. Some of them are victims, some are perpetrators, and some are both. Many scholars have dealt with the representations of Vietnamese victimhood in this novel. Yet, critical discussions of Vietnamese as perpetrators of atrocity are relatively scarce. This study aims to fill in this gap and engages in this issue with the concept of “just memory,” which recognizes the common inhumanity of human beings and represents the experiences of the victims as well as the perpetrators in order to gain a more truthful and comprehensive understanding of the past. Raul Hilberg contends that “without an insight into the actions of the perpetrators, one could not grasp history in its full dimensions” (*The Politics of Memory* 61). Seeing the

past only from the victims' perspective is seeing half of the past.

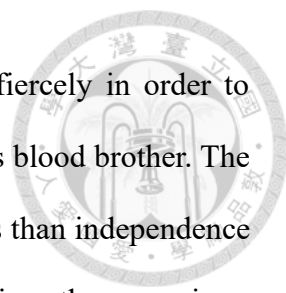
The American-centered narratives of the Vietnam War are prone to reserving compassion for the traumatized American heroes while limiting compassion for the non-Americans, not to mention the non-American perpetrators. To achieve just memory, expanding the realm of compassion is necessary. Expanding compassion toward perpetrators does not mean that *The Sympathizer* condones the atrocious deeds done by the perpetrators. *The Sympathizer* elicits readers' compassion in order to help them resist the impulse of demonizing and alienating perpetrators. Compassion may enable readers to recognize that the perpetrators are human beings as well. This recognition may induce readers' desire to understand the factors that provoke inhumanity in humans. The goal of this thesis is to investigate how *The Sympathizer* represents the perpetrators in ways that facilitate compassion.

As the winner of the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, *The Sympathizer* is a fascinating spy novel. The author, Viet Thanh Nguyen, is a Vietnamese-American novelist and professor who identifies himself as a refugee. Nguyen's family moved from North Vietnam to the South and eventually fled to the United States after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Due to his experience as a refugee of the Vietnam War, Nguyen's own memory of the war and how the war is remembered in various countries have been something that he has struggled with. Thus, how to remember the Vietnam War and wars in general is one of the central issues of his works.

The story of *The Sympathizer* is framed as a confession written by the protagonist when he was held captive by the communist Commandant. The protagonist, who is unnamed in the novel, refuses to obey the Commandant's demand to praise the communist ideology and present a bifurcated world that separates "us" and "them" clearly. Instead, the unnamed protagonist writes his reflection on war, brotherhood, sex, religion,

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homophobia, American colonialism, cultural representation, and so on. The protagonist, who is a communist mole spying on South Vietnam, blurs the line between “us” and “them” and sympathizes with people whom he should regard as enemies. The confession begins with the recall of the fall of Saigon when the protagonist asks Claude, his trusted American agent, for a plane for evacuation. The protagonist draws a list of evacuees that includes the General he works for, his blood brother Bon, himself, and others. During the escape, the airfield is attacked, and Bon’s wife and son are killed. Then, they settle in Los Angeles, where the protagonist works at a local university and encounters American racism and Orientalism. He and his Japanese-American colleague, Ms. Mori, become lovers. When living in the US, the protagonist continues to send intelligence to Man, his other blood brother, who is also a North Vietnamese revolutionary. Staying in America, the General still plans to fight back and regain control of Vietnam. He orders the protagonist and Bon to find and kill the spy. The protagonist kills the crapulent major in order to protect his own cover. After killing the major, the protagonist goes to the Philippines to work as a film consultant. In this job, the protagonist endeavors to make sure that the Vietnamese characters are represented fairly. Nevertheless, the film’s director, the Auteur, refuses to accept the protagonist’s suggestion. After being injured by an explosion on set, the protagonist returns to Los Angeles, where he finds out that Sonny, the newspaper editor, is in a relationship with Ms. Mori. When Bon joins the General’s troop to fight back, the protagonist insists on accompanying Bon. The General says that the protagonist cannot go unless he kills Sonny to prove his ability. The protagonist kills Sonny by shooting him five times. The troops are attacked during their crossing of the border into Vietnam. The protagonist barely saves Bon. They are captured and imprisoned by the communists. The protagonist is forced to write this confession. When his confession drafts are rejected multiple times, he is brought to the Commissar, the leader

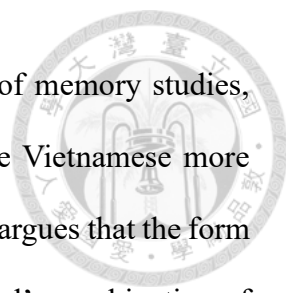


of the communist camp. The Commissar tortures the protagonist fiercely in order to reeducate him. The Commissar turns out to be Man, the protagonist's blood brother. The protagonist struggles to answer the question, "What is more precious than independence and freedom?" (467). When he finally realizes the answer is nothing, the commissar agrees to release him and Bon from the camp. The severe torture splits the protagonist's self in two: "me and myself" (487). The pronoun of his writing changes from "I" to "we." Bon and the protagonist get on a vessel that sends them out of Vietnam. The protagonist knows that he may not survive the trip. Nonetheless, he swears to keep the promise that "we will live!" (495).

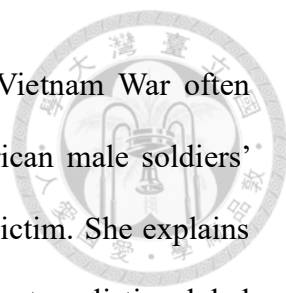
This thesis, scrutinizing this novel as the protagonist's confession and echoing Nguyen's concept of just memory, aims to delve into how *The Sympathizer* challenges its readers to reimagine and sympathize with perpetrators as human beings with complex subjectivity. This thesis consists of four parts: Chapter One: Introduction, Chapter Two: A Systemic Perpetrator—Claude, Chapter Three: A Traumatized Perpetrator—The Protagonist, and Conclusion. In the next chapter, this thesis, by analyzing Claude as a systemic perpetrator, focuses on how humans' inhumanity can be provoked by a toxic interrogation system and how people can be transformed into perpetrators regardless of their ethnicity. In chapter three, by inspecting the complex subjectivity of the protagonist as a traumatized perpetrator, this thesis foregrounds the humanity of perpetrators, addressing the issue of perpetrator trauma. I conclude this thesis by emphasizing that the recognition of humans' shared humanity and inhumanity promoted by Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* is essential to violence prevention and reconciliation.

II. Literature Review

The Sympathizer has been praised for bringing perspectives different from the American

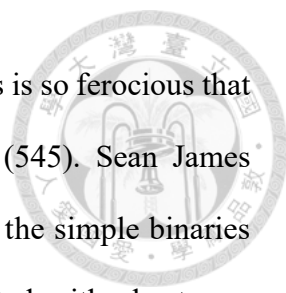


representations of the Vietnam War. Placing this novel in the field of memory studies, some scholars attend to how this novel makes the memories of the Vietnamese more visible, showing multi-perspective modes of memory. Sarah Chihaya argues that the form of this novel opens space for different voices. She analyzes this novel's combination of various genres, its intertextuality with African-American literature, the protagonist's multifarious identity, and the shift in pronouns. Some scholars contend that the shift from the singular to the plural pronoun allows this novel to incorporate refugee memories in the representations of the Vietnam War. Caroline Rody asserts that the change between "I" and "we" shows that the protagonist moves from the position of an ironic observer to a collectivity of numerous stateless refugees (402). Sandra Stanley argues that the transformation from "I" to "we" is Nguyen's attempt to pave a way out that is different from the ending of *The Invisible Man*, which appeals to individualism and self-reliance. The protagonist's refugee memory crosses the border between "I" as the individual self and "we" as a collective other, allowing the protagonist to sympathize with the undesirable others, including people like Man, who enacts inhumanity (297). Scholars also notice how this novel, as a representation of refugee memory, reveals the destructive power of Western imperialism. Dai-Jung Wu, by analyzing this novel with the help of Critical Refugee studies, contends that Nguyen "disrupts both the spatial and temporal boundaries of the Vietnam War," revealing the aftermath of colonization and how the violence of war is remembered or forgotten (5). Eryn Lê Espiritu Gandhi notes that this novel highlights the entanglement between Asian American subjectivity and the condition of American transpacific colonization (67). Mahdi Teimouri also posits that this novel provides critical insights into imperialism's modus operandi of sustaining dominion and justifying brutality (62). He regards the protagonist as a victim of imperialism. The protagonist's experience of consulting Auteur's film shows America's imperial power to



reduce the Vietnamese when Hollywood's representations of the Vietnam War often marginalize the Vietnamese characters as the background of American male soldiers' heroic stories (69). Debra Shostak also views the protagonist as a victim. She explains that this novel criticizes Western imperialism, which supports a paternalistic global politics, by "placing the narrator in relation to a range of surrogate father figures who at once dominate and fail him" (176). Besides these, some scholars direct their attention to the gender issue in this novel. Amanda Gradisek argues that in comparison with the prevalent American narratives which often focus on American manhood, this novel presents a more comprehensive story of the Vietnam War, which encompasses the voices of women (6). While female bodies have been used as sites to assert men's dominance, this novel confronts its readers with the obscene reality of sexual violence (25). The protagonist, guilty of doing nothing to save the communist female spy, is a powerless witness to the horrifying rape.

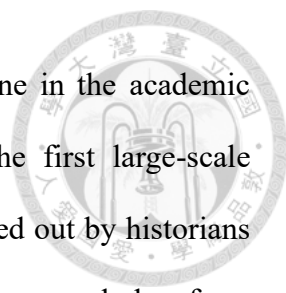
While these scholars primarily focus on Vietnamese victimhood, others draw their attention to the issue of perpetrators. Hayley C. Stefan, instead of simply treating the protagonist as a victim or witness, acknowledges the protagonist's role as a torturer (209). She inspects how the imperialism of America turns the Military Police of South Vietnamese into a system that produces torturers that inflict pain on brown bodies (209-10). Since the American interrogation trainers observe rather than directly perform torture, they blame the atrocity on South Vietnamese operatives (214). The protagonist's confession reveals how the use of torture is embedded in the imperial practices of America (227). Yu-yen Liu explicates that the protagonist's dual identity as a victim and perpetrator questions the typical frames of war that often support the use of violence (544). In order to get revenge for being insulted and to prove himself a capable torturer, the protagonist uses CIA torture techniques against a communist agent, the Watchman. These CIA torture



techniques are used on the protagonist himself in the end. The process is so ferocious that it causes the protagonist to break down physically and mentally (545). Sean James Bosman contends that Nguyen’s representations of ghosts challenge the simple binaries between perpetrators and victims (4). The indeterminacies associated with ghosts are utilized to accentuate the liminality of the protagonist and explore the possibilities of just memory (4). The ghosts force the protagonist to acknowledge his own ability to inflict harm, asking him to remember what he wants to forget— “*the suffering of the other and the transgressions of the self*” (10, original emphasis).

The Sympathizer’s multi-perspective modes of memory create space for the voices of the marginalized, ranging from the voices of the refugees, the women, and the perpetrators. When dealing with inhumanity, the aforementioned studies focus heavily on the inhumanity of the Western world and only briefly touch upon the inhumanity of the Vietnamese. Based on their studies, I want to examine inhumanity as a quality shared by disparate ethnic groups. I further explore not only the protagonist as a perpetrator, but also other types of perpetrators, including both American and Vietnamese perpetrators. The studies mentioned above attribute atrocity mostly to Western imperialism. However, Western imperialism cannot be the only factor that causes the mass atrocity during the Vietnam War. Aside from imperialism, I will investigate other factors that lead to atrocity, such as moral habits formed by training, obedience to authority, conformity to groups, diffusion of personal responsibility, loyalty, and personal interests.

In order to examine the heterogeneity and the complex subjectivity of perpetrators, I draw on Perpetrator Studies. Perpetrator Studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field of research on perpetrators of mass atrocities. Perpetrator Studies as an academic field started after the Holocaust. At first, the topics were chiefly about the Nazi perpetrators. Though it is obvious that violence has been part of human history long before the



Holocaust, the research on the Holocaust perpetrators is a milestone in the academic understanding of perpetrators. The Nuremberg trials generated the first large-scale investigation of perpetrators' psyche. Initially, the studies were carried out by historians and psychologists. As newer conflicts appear, this field has attracted more scholars from various disciplines, including anthropology, law, politics, and social science. Nanking Massacre in China, the Apartheid regime in South Africa, the genocides in Rwanda, the torture in Abu Ghraib, and the atrocities during the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan are just a few of the events that continue to mold this field.


A fundamental question asked by Perpetrator Studies is, "Who are perpetrators?" Alette Smeulers and other scholars define perpetrators broadly as "all individuals who are in one way or another involved in the perpetration and commission of mass atrocities" (*Perpetrators of International Crimes* 2). Aside from those who directly and physically commit violent crimes, this definition also includes those who instigate violence, organize violence, obey violent orders, and become complicit reluctantly. According to *Perpetrators of International Crimes*, the label of perpetrator is sometimes problematic for three reasons. Firstly, since mass atrocities are often generated by politics and ideologies, those who are considered perpetrators by one group of people may be the heroes of another group (3). They may be celebrated as protectors and patriots (3). In addition, some people are labeled as perpetrators simply due to their ethnicity or religion (3). The constant representation of certain groups of people as violent and dangerous may create an impression that makes people link them to perpetrations falsely, and the best example is the distorted statement that "Middle Easterners are terrorists." Furthermore, individuals' roles during mass atrocities can be fluid (3). As mass atrocities often take place during political turmoil, a context in which the situations are complex, ambiguous, and dynamic, "some people can at one point be a perpetrator and at another, a helper, or

a victim” (*Perpetrators* 25). The protagonist of *The Sympathizer* is once a perpetrator of torture and then a victim of torture.

Scholarly understanding of what perpetrators look like has evolved from the oversimplified understanding of perpetrators as evil monsters into a more nuanced and sophisticated typology of perpetrators. The Holocaust proves that atrocity is not a peculiarity that only belongs to barbaric societies. Because this crime was committed in a civilized modern country, it cannot be explained by the deficiency of civilization of the perpetrators (*Perpetrators* 11). Yet, in the primary phase of Perpetrator Studies, it was widely believed that the Holocaust was caused by mentally disturbed individuals. Thus, at the time of the Nuremberg trials, psychologists were interested in the mental health and personality of perpetrators. Psychologists Douglas Kelley, Gustave Gilbert, and Leon Goldensohn respectively conducted their research on Nuremberg prisoners. They have very different conclusions about the mental health of these perpetrators. Kelley concluded that

[the perpetrators] were essentially sane and although in some instances somewhat deviated from normal, they nevertheless knew precisely what they were doing during their years of ruthless domination. From our findings, we must conclude not only that such personalities are not unique or insane but also that they could be duplicated in any country of the world today. (47)

Kelley’s study showed that the Nazi perpetrators were ordinary people. Their personalities were not specific to Germany. This American psychologist argued that if Americans were in the similar socio-economic circumstances of Nazi Germany, it was likely for a number of individuals to act like these perpetrators (47). Gilbert and Goldensohn disagreed with Kelley. They did not regard these perpetrators as mentally healthy persons. Gilbert labeled Hermann Goering, one of the perpetrators, as a

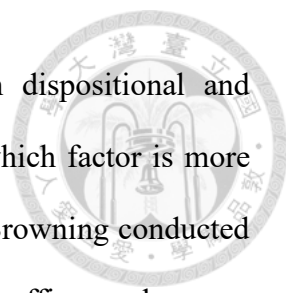


psychopath (211). Henry Dicks, a British psychiatrist, carried out research on German prisoners of war and attributed the Holocaust mainly to the personalities of these prisoners (152). However, Dicks later revised his conclusion and noted that personalities alone could not explain the Holocaust (qtd. in *Perpetrators* 14).

In 1963, Hannah Arendt proposed the concept of the banality of evil, indicating that perpetrators might just be ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances (*Eichmann* 349). In an interview, Arendt explained, “Eichmann was perfectly intelligent, but in this respect he was stupid. It was this stupidity that was so outrageous. And that was what I actually meant by banality. There’s nothing deep about it—nothing demonic! There’s simply the reluctance ever to imagine what the other person is experiencing” (“Eichmann” 44). The banality of evil does not mean that Eichmann’s actions were ordinary. It highlights that evil crimes may be conducted by an average person driven by banal motivations, such as “going along with the rest” and “functioning” (40-41). This type of perpetrator does not look like a monster. They appear to be terribly ordinary. Primo Levi, a Jewish Holocaust survivor and the author of *If This Is a Man*, once said, “Monsters exist, but they are too few in number to be truly dangerous; more dangerous are the common men, the functionaries ready to believe and to act without asking questions” (219). Levi notices that there are different types of perpetrators. Some of them, indeed, are monstrous, but they are few in number. Without the participation of numerous ordinary functionaries, the Holocaust could not be an atrocity of such a large scale. In 1985, Raul Hilberg published his monumental work *The Destruction of the European Jews*, drawing attention to bureaucratic perpetrators. This type of perpetrator might not commit violent deeds directly. Most of them “composed memoranda, drew up blueprints, signed correspondence, talked on the telephone, and participated in conferences. They could destroy a whole people by sitting at their desks” (*The Destruction* 327). They participated

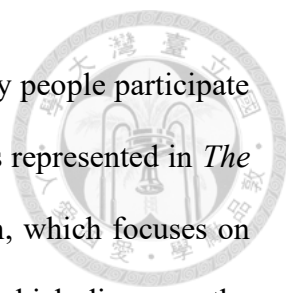
in killing people by fulfilling mundane work. They were ordinary people, playing their small roles within a toxic society.

Besides understanding what perpetrators look like, many scholars also devote their lives to dissecting the factors that lead to mass atrocities. Inspired by the trial of Eichmann, psychologist Stanley Milgram began his experiments on obedience to authority. The participants were told that the experiment was testing the effect of pain on learning. They were instructed by a scientific authority to give electric shocks to a learner. The level of electric shocks gradually increased. The participants did not know that the shocks were fake and the learner was an actor. The results showed that 65% of the participants went up to the full shock level of 450 volts (43). Milgram found that people tend to follow the order of authorities, even when the orders are immoral. The participants were not psychopaths and did not enjoy hurting others. This experiment shows that evil acts might not necessarily be the results of individuals' dispositional deviance, but the results of social forces. In order to understand the influence of situational factors, psychologists Craig Haney, Curtis Banks, and Philip Zimbardo conducted the Stanford prison experiment. The participants, after being assessed as psychologically stable, were randomly assigned to prisoners or guards. Within six days, the structure of prison life had induced escalating brutality and humiliation. Zimbardo concluded, "The inherently pathological characteristics of the prison situation itself ... were a *sufficient* condition to produce aberrant, anti-social behavior" ("Interpersonal Dynamics" 90, original emphasis). The prison situation gave the participants unequal statuses of guard and prisoner. Within a short period of time, participants adapted to their new social roles in the prison. The mentally healthy participants transformed into cruel guards who seemed to enjoy dehumanizing their peers—the participants who were randomly assigned to the prisoner role (Zimbardo, "Interpersonal Dynamics" 89).



In the 1990s, although there was a consensus that both dispositional and situational factors contribute to atrocities, scholars debated about which factor is more influential. To understand what caused the Holocaust, Christopher Browning conducted a study on Reserve Police Battalion 101, a unit of German police officers who were ordered to execute Jews. In his book *Ordinary Men*, Browning observed, “The battalion had orders to kill Jews but each individual did not. Yet 80 to 90 percent of the men proceeded to kill, though almost all of them—at least initially—were horrified and disgusted by what they were doing” (184). By analyzing the recruitment of this battalion, Browning argued that these police officers were ordinary men. He then attributed the perpetration mainly to “conformity to the group” (184). He explained that disobeying the order to kill might be seen as leaving the dirty work to the comrades and morally rebuking the comrades who obeyed the order (184-85). He concluded that in almost every society, the pressure of conformity could pose a huge influence on individuals and could transform ordinary humans into perpetrators (189). Daniel Goldhagen disagreed and thought that the Holocaust was chiefly caused by anti-Semitism, a factor that Goldhagen regarded as dispositional and unique to Germany. He claimed that these perpetrators were Hitler’s willing executioners who were given a chance to carry out their racism. His book, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, though scathingly criticized by lots of historians, gained more popularity among the public than Browning’s book. Remarking on this phenomenon, Smeulers commented, “Instinctively, even after so many years of perpetrator research, it seems like most people still like to believe that it takes a special breed of people, a special type of person, to become a perpetrator” (*Perpetrators* 21).

The Sympathizer contests this instinct of imagining perpetrators as a special group of people who incarnate evil. Following the scholarly works that investigate the

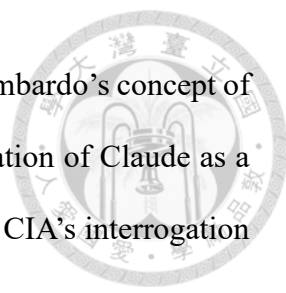


situational factors of perpetration, this thesis seeks to understand why people participate in mass atrocity and analyze the complex subjectivity of perpetrators represented in *The Sympathizer* with the help of psychological research on perpetration, which focuses on figuring out why people commit violence, and research on trauma, which discovers the existence of perpetrator trauma. Studies of perpetration unveil how inhumanity dwells in humans, resonating with Nguyen’s contention of just memory, a memory that recognizes humans’ shared inhumanity. Studies of perpetrator trauma dig into how perpetrators may be traumatized by their own acts of violence, assigning humanity back to perpetrators, who are often misrepresented as utter evil.

III. Chapter Design

In the following chapters, I will explore perpetrators’ complex subjectivity, which is an amalgam of humanity and inhumanity, by focusing mainly on two characters: Claude as a systemic perpetrator and the protagonist as a traumatized perpetrator. Claude, though an affectionate and trustworthy American to the protagonist, is cold-blooded and indifferent to the detainees in the CIA’s interrogation system. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the protagonist, an intelligent and non-violent person who has the ability to sympathize with his enemies, still participates in the murders of two men and suffers from the traumatizing effect of killing.

In “Chapter Two: A Systemic Perpetrator—Claude,” this thesis centers on investigating how humans’ inhumanity can be instigated by a toxic interrogation system. This chapter first traces the history of the CIA’s interrogation system, revealing how torture during interrogation is actually systemic perpetration supported by this toxic system. Then, I examine how torture during interrogation, in political discourse, is often interpreted through the lens of the bad apple theory, a rhetoric which frames systemic



violence as individual deviance. Finally, by applying psychologist Zimbardo's concept of "the bad barrel-makers," I inspect how *The Sympathizer*'s representation of Claude as a systemic perpetrator debunks the bad apple theory, revealing that the CIA's interrogation system is indeed a bad barrel-maker that generates systemic perpetrators.

The next chapter, "Chapter Three: A Traumatized Perpetrator—The Protagonist" probes into the humanity of perpetrators, exploring the issue of perpetrator trauma. Based on Rachel M. MacNair and other scholars' studies on this issue, this chapter begins by introducing what perpetrator trauma is and the controversies provoked by this concept, which discloses that perpetrators are also human beings capable of suffering. Next, delving into the question of "how people become perpetrators," I use situational action theory, a criminological theory that construes violence as the interplay of individual propensity and situational factors, to understand the protagonist's decision-making process of his perpetration. Lastly, I analyze how *The Sympathizer*'s representation of the protagonist as a traumatized perpetrator underscores the humanity of perpetrators and exposes the traumatizing effect of perpetration.

This thesis concludes by reemphasizing the importance of integrating honest and compassionate representations of perpetrators in memories of the Vietnam War. These representations may help people understand how easily humans can become perpetrators. The acknowledgment of our shared inhumanity may enable us, as a society, to be more aware of the factors that contribute to perpetration and endeavor to reduce these factors.

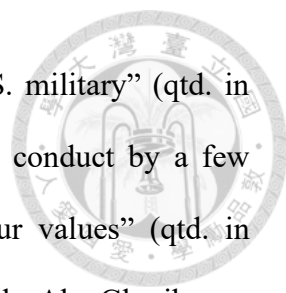
Chapter Two: A Systemic Perpetrator—Claude

Interrogation is not punishment. Interrogation is a science. Disorientation. Sensory deprivation. Self-punishment. These principles have been scientifically demonstrated by the best scientists in the world, American scientists.

—*The Sympathizer* 221-22

This chapter's epigraph is stated in the novel *The Sympathizer* by a character named Claude, a CIA advisor who trains Vietnamese secret policemen to become interrogators. Claude is not presented as a direct executioner of torture, yet he disseminates the CIA's ideology of torture and justifies the use of violence during interrogation as he actively trains people to become interrogators who implement torture. Nguyen, through his depiction of interrogation training and violence in the novel, poignantly criticizes the American ideology of torture as a military necessity and its role in building an interrogation system that propagates violence. This chapter argues that, by representing Claude as a systemic perpetrator in the novel, *The Sympathizer* explores the problematic nature of torturers as regular products of the CIA interrogation system.

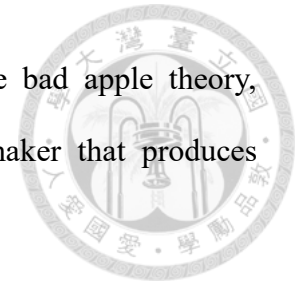
The Sympathizer's representation of torture not only corresponds with the CIA's interrogation practice during the Vietnam War but also resonates with the contemporary War on Terror during the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack H. Obama (Stefan 209-10). In 2004, the American public was appalled by the Abu Ghraib scandal, a series of human rights violations committed by the American military and the CIA against detainees held in the Abu Ghraib prison during the Iraq War, including physical abuse, psychological torture, sexual violence, and other forms of inhuman treatments (Smeulers and Niekerk 328). In response to this scandal, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld



claimed that the abuse was “perpetrated by a small number of U.S. military” (qtd. in McCoy 14). President Bush condemned the abuse as “disgraceful conduct by a few American troops who dishonored our country and disregarded our values” (qtd. in Smeulers and Niekerk 328). However, many reports have shown that the Abu Ghraib case is not an isolated incident caused by a few deviant soldiers but the result of a toxic interrogation system developed by the CIA that perpetuates violence (Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect* x). The Abu Ghraib case is just the tip of the iceberg of the CIA’s long practice of torture. Historian Alfred McCoy observes that “the pervasive influence of the agency’s torture paradigm can be seen in the recurrence of the same techniques used by American and allied security agencies in Vietnam during the 1960s, Central America in the 1980s, and Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001” (20-21). Interrogators who torture prisoners are not rare exceptions but typical products in the CIA interrogation system. Having a long history of authorizing violence in conflict-stricken areas, the American government has built an interrogation system that turns their people and their allies’ officials into perpetrators.

To understand the torture scenes in *The Sympathizer*, I first provide the historical background of the CIA’s interrogation system in the Vietnam War, showing how torture during interrogation is indeed systemic perpetration supported by the American government. I then examine how torture during interrogation is represented in political discourse. One common discourse is the bad apple theory, a rhetoric often used to frame systemic violence as individual misconduct. This rhetoric construes violence as a problem caused by a few bad apples in a fine system. The Bush administration’s response to the Abu Ghraib scandal is an example of this rhetoric. Finally, by using the concept of “the bad apples, the bad barrels, and the bad barrel-makers,” developed by the social psychologist Philip Zimbardo, I investigate how *The Sympathizer*’s representation of

Claude as an interrogation advisor challenges the rhetoric of the bad apple theory, disclosing that the CIA's interrogation system is a bad barrel-maker that produces systemic perpetrators.

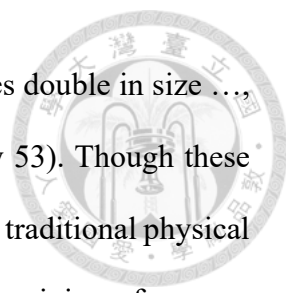


I. The Historical Background of the CIA's Interrogation System

According to McCoy's book, *A Question of Torture*, the interrogation system seen in the Vietnam War can be traced back to the start of the Cold War, when the CIA began research on mind control (16). Threatened by the Soviet's ability to decipher human minds, the CIA was determined to develop mind control methods that surpassed the Soviet ones. Ex-president Herbert Hoover proclaimed in 1954:

It is now clear that we are facing an implacable enemy whose avowed objective is world domination by whatever means. We must ... learn to subvert, sabotage, and destroy our enemies by more clear, more sophisticated, and more effective methods than those used against us. (qtd. in McCoy 33)

The CIA spent millions of dollars yearly on developing a new interrogation method—psychological torture, also known as “no-touch torture” (McCoy 16). They found that physical pain might induce more resistance, while psychological torture that combines sensory deprivation and self-inflicted pain was far more effective in breaking the prisoners' sense of self (McCoy 17). McCoy explains that the combination of these two methods “causes victims to feel responsible for their suffering and thus capitulate more readily to their torturers” (17). Among these psychological torture, sensory deprivation is “the deliberate reduction or removal of stimuli from one or more of the senses” (Bhaze). The techniques include “isolation, standing, heat and cold, light and dark, noise and silence” (McCoy 17). Long-term sensory deprivation may cause anxiety and hallucinations (Sahoo 436). Self-inflicted pain refers to the technique of forcing prisoners

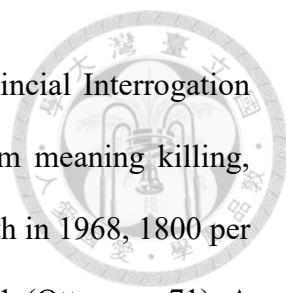


to stay in stressful positions which may cause extreme pain as “ankles double in size ..., heart rates soar, kidneys shut down, and delusions deepen” (McCoy 53). Though these interrogation techniques seem to be less brutal and more efficient than traditional physical torture, “[v]ictims often need extensive treatment to recover from injury far more crippling than mere physical pain” (McCoy 18). These torture techniques severely damage victims psychologically.

According to William L. d’Ambruoso, the CIA interrogation system is supported by two mentalities: patriotism and the belief in the science of torture. U.S. foreign policy elites, believing that America is threatened by their enemies’ crookedness, “shared a sense of urgency about geopolitical developments and the need for rule-bending and sometimes rule-breaking measures in order to keep up with the Soviets” (90). In the name of protecting America and democratic values, these political elites condoned or approved the CIA’s psychological torture programs. To preserve the democratic world, the CIA interrogators were willing to eliminate threats at all costs. The belief in the science of torture allowed the interrogators to assure themselves that the methods they used were “tough but not egregious” and hence were “more morally sound and more effective than a more physically brutal, scarring approach” (d’Ambruoso 90). With patriotism and the belief in the science of torture, the CIA interrogators convinced themselves that they had the moral high ground to carry out these techniques of psychological torture that induced severe trauma. In 1963, the CIA extracted the results of mind control research and codified the practices of psychological torture into the infamous manual named *KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation*. The term “KUBARK” in the title was “a CIA codename for itself,” and this manual was used as “a comprehensive guide for training interrogators” (Blanton and Kornbluh 2), which served as the base for the CIA to

disseminate these torture techniques to its allies worldwide in the name of stopping communism (McCoy 19).

South Vietnam, a crucial stronghold fighting against communism in Southeast Asia, received considerable financial and military support from the U.S.A in the 1960s, including building interrogation centers and training interrogators (Otterman 59, 62). The CIA launched the Phoenix Program, an American initiative that “aimed at eliminating the Vietcong civilian infrastructure (VCI)” (Otterman 61). VCI were civilians who were viewed as “clandestine operatives living within South Vietnamese society that supported the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units in the field ... [who] performed recruiting, financing, political indoctrination, intelligence collection, and logistical support tasks” (Tovo iii). The Phoenix Program, or Chiến dịch Phụng Hoàng in Vietnamese, was a counterinsurgency targeted not at soldiers but civilians (Valentine 13). This program consisted of two main components: Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs) and interrogation centers (Otterman 62). The PRUs were responsible for killing VCI and capturing civilians who were thought to be VCI sympathizers or informants. Many of these captured civilians at the interrogation centers experienced further interrogation conducted by the CIA and the Vietnamese Special Branch Police. American advisors trained the Vietnamese Special Branch interrogators at the National Interrogation Center (NIC) in Saigon. They used both the techniques in the 1963 KUBARK manual and the old French methods of interrogation, such as water torture and electricity (Otterman 64). From 1964, Provincial Interrogation Centers (PICs) were built under the direction of the CIA and then operated under the control of the Vietnamese Special Branch. By 1966, every South Vietnamese province had its own interrogation center—forty-four centers in total. The interrogations were supervised by American advisors and executed by interrogators of the Vietnamese Special Branch Police (Otterman 66).



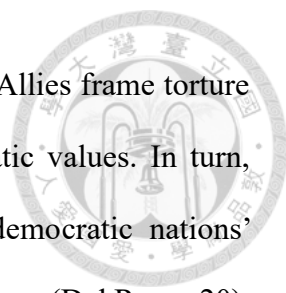
Besides, Phoenix officials demanded the agents in the Provincial Interrogation Centers to meet the monthly quotas of neutralization, a euphemism meaning killing, capturing, or making VCI defect (Valentine 13): 1200 VCIs per month in 1968, 1800 per month in 1970, 1800 in 1971, and back to 1200 per month in 1971 (Otterman 71). A catchphrase of these CIA-trained interrogators, “If they are innocent, beat them until they become guilty,” confirmed that there was no due legal process for the prisoners who were detained and interrogated without any charge (Otterman 67). In 1973, Amnesty International reported that in South Vietnam:

It is clear ... that the brutalizing effects of the Vietnam War have become so entrenched that some of the time the use of torture during interrogation is no longer even motivated by a desire to gather intelligence. ... [There] can be no doubt that torture is now widely used in the areas controlled by the Saigon government not only as an instrument of intimidation but as an end in itself. (*Report on Torture* 168)

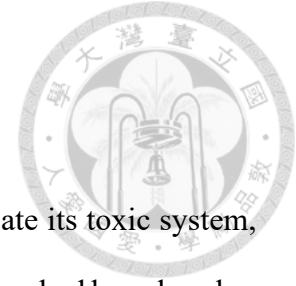
It was evident that agents in the interrogation centers of South Vietnam sometimes performed torture not as an approach to extract information but as a chance to unleash demonic desire and inflict horrendous pain on the detainees. This situation is reflected in Nguyen’s novel, *The Sympathizer*, which provides a vivid and horrifying reification of what it means when torture is used as an end in itself with the gang rape scene of the female communist spy.

II. The Political Discourse of Torture: The Bad Apple Theory

How are the memories of torture represented in political discourses? The political scientist Darius Rejali observes that “World War II constitutes a great rift in modern memories of torture” (538). As a poster created by Ben Shahn for the Allies shows, torture

The logo of National Taiwan University (NTU) is located in the upper right quadrant of the page. It is a circular emblem with the university's name in Chinese characters around the perimeter and a central design featuring a scale of justice and a book.

is construed as “the method of the enemy” (qtd. in Decker 85). The Allies frame torture as an evil act belonging to the enemy and antithetical to democratic values. In turn, modern memories of torture engaged in collective amnesia of democratic nations’ atrocities and an obsession with the Nazi and Soviet practices of violence (Del Rosso 20). As torture becomes morally reproachable and legally prohibited by international laws (e.g., Geneva Conventions), the nations that implement torture, when facing charges of human rights violation, may turn to what Stanley Cohen calls the rhetoric of denial to reframe the political discourse (Del Rosso 22). The bad apple theory is one common rhetoric of denial used to reallocate the accountability of torture (Del Rosso 23). This theory blames the atrocities on a few individuals who are framed as a few bad apples in a good barrel. Deviant people who enjoy violence indeed exist. They may be diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder (ASPD), a mental health condition characterized by aggressive behaviors and a lack of empathy (“Antisocial Personality Disorder”). Yet, they only comprise 1% to 4% of the general population (Werner et al. 195), a number that can hardly explain the large scale and long history of American torture. The alleged governments may exonerate the toxic systems that generate atrocities by resorting to the bad apple theory. Hayley C. Stefan points out that “projecting institutionalized violence onto the actions of so-called aberrant groups of deviant agents” has been a method used by the US officials to “[defend] their actions in Vietnam, and later in Iraq and at Guantánamo Bay” (214). The bad apple theory enables the American government to minimize the problems, forming an illusion that the issue of torture is solved once and for all as long as the few deviant agents have been removed from the interrogation system. By severing the officials who commit torture from the system, the American government can maintain its reputation as a human rights protector even though its interrogation system continues to perpetuate systemic violence.



III. Claude as a Systemic Perpetrator

As the American government applies the bad apple theory to exculpate its toxic system, the novel *The Sympathizer* reveals that the CIA interrogation system is a bad barrel-maker that produces torturers by depicting one of its characters, Claude, as a systemic perpetrator. Nguyen's portrayal of the interrogation system refutes the rhetoric of the bad apple theory, which insists on blaming a few bad apples in order to exonerate the system. The bad apple theory attributes wrongdoings to personal deviance and takes no account of situational factors of a system. Psychologist Philip Zimbardo, after years of reflection on the Stanford Prison Experiment conducted in 1971 and his experience as an expert witness of the Abu Ghraib torture in 2004, published the book *The Lucifer Effect* in 2008 to share his insights into the psychology of evil, explaining that the human transformation from good to evil is a dynamic interplay of personal, situational, and systemic factors. Analogizing that the individuals are apples, the situations the barrels, and the systems the barrel-makers, he argues that recognizing the power of the bad barrel-makers is crucial to understanding how good people turn evil. In a TED talk, Zimbardo summarizes his studies, listing "the seven social processes that grease the slippery slope of evil": "Mindlessly taking the first small step. Dehumanization of others. De-individuation of self. Diffusion of personal responsibility. Blind obedience to authority. Uncritical conformity to group norms. Passive tolerance of evil through inaction or indifference" ("The Psychology of Evil" 16:24). I apply this list to inspect how *The Sympathizer's* representation of Claude as an interrogation advisor reveals that the interrogation system in Vietnam, nourished by the American plan of propagating torture clandestinely and globally, is indeed a toxic system that provokes inhumanity. I analyze Claude as a systemic perpetrator from two aspects:

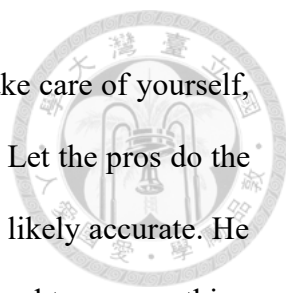
Claude as a human being influenced by the CIA's interrogation system, and Claude as a situational factor in this system that facilitates others to commit violence.

Nguyen demonstrates that Claude is a human being with complex subjectivity who possesses both humanity and inhumanity. Claude is not depicted as a one-dimensional, ruthless, evil monster but as a human being who not only embodies racism and the CIA's ideology of justifying violence but also shows his concern and affection for the protagonist. The protagonist introduces Claude as "our most trusted American friend" (*Sympathizer* 5). He is an intellectual who reads and speaks excellent English, and yet he is also a self-disciplined macho man who works out daily (*Sympathizer* 6-7). Claude is a caring man who consistently expresses his affection towards the protagonist by giving him gifts (*Sympathizer* 7, 17), clapping or squeezing his shoulder (*Sympathizer* 43, 367, 387), embracing him (*Sympathizer* 106), saying words of encouragement, and expressing concern (*Sympathizer* 43, 367). When Saigon is about to fall, Claude arranges a plane for evacuation and reassures the protagonist:

See you in the States? He clapped me on the shoulder with affection. Just like when the communists took over in '54, he said. Who would have thought we'd be here again? But I got you out of the north then, and I'm getting you out of the south now. You'll be all right. (*Sympathizer* 43)

Claude is like an older brother who makes arrangements and cares for the protagonist. When sensing the protagonist's anxiety about the chaotic situation of Saigon and the uncertainty of the escape, Claude shows affection towards the protagonist. He comforts him by promising that he will be all right.

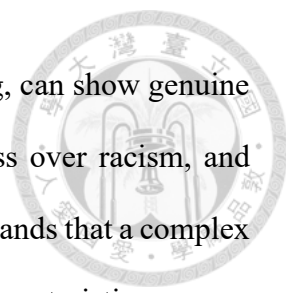
Claude's affection and concern for the protagonist are sincere. When the protagonist is about to depart from America to join the General's mission of fighting back, Claude blesses him with high fives and gives him words of concern and encouragement:



Claude intuited my worry when he squeezed my shoulder. Take care of yourself, buddy. If anybody starts shooting, just keep your head down. Let the pros do the fighting. His estimation of my abilities was moving and most likely accurate. He wanted to keep me safe, this man who, along with Man, had taught me everything I knew about the practices of intelligence, of secrecy as a way of life. We'll be waiting for you guys to come back, said Claude. (*Sympathizer* 387)

Claude loves the protagonist fraternally, treating him like a younger brother who needs instruction and protection. Claude respects the protagonist's will to join the General's mission, but also knows that the protagonist is not a combatant. Thus, instead of asking the protagonist to fight fearlessly at all costs, Claude cautions him against getting involved in battles. He cherishes the protagonist's life and does not urge the protagonist to be a hero who sacrifices honorably. He treats the protagonist with warmth and humanity. In the protagonist's eyes, Claude is a trustworthy, self-disciplined, caring, and affectionate big brother.

The protagonist, though genuinely touched by Claude's affection and concern, is well aware of his inhumanity, which is presented in multi-layered ways: Claude as a racist, a perpetrator influenced by the CIA's interrogation system, and a systemic factor that provokes inhumanity. Claude's racism is shown in the gift that he gives to the protagonist, Richard Hedd's *Asian Communism and the Oriental Mode of Destruction*, which the protagonist describes as a book "crowded with blurbs so breathless they might have been lifted from the transcript of a teenage girls' fan club, except that the excited giggling came from a pair of secretaries of defense, a senator who had visited our country for two weeks to find facts" (*Sympathizer* 7-8). The book stinks of orientalism, a form of racism that thrusts the Western imagination on "the Oriental," showing the arrogant belief that the Western scholars have the superior power to understand and represent "the Oriental." The

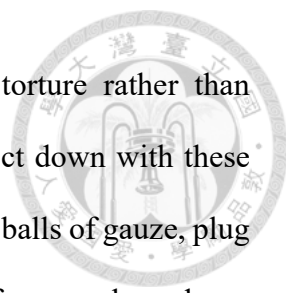


protagonist embraces the fact that Claude, as a complex human being, can show genuine affection and racism. For the protagonist, affection should not gloss over racism, and racism does not invalidate Claude's affection. The protagonist understands that a complex human being like Claude may embody both positive and negative characteristics.

Secondly, Claude is also described as a perpetrator influenced by the CIA's interrogation system. Claude is a human being affected by the CIA, a state institution that propagates "America vs. the communists" ideology, frames torture as science, and justifies violence. When discussing *The Quiet American*, a novel written by Graham Greene that implicitly questions the legitimacy of American intervention in the Vietnam War and criticizes American exceptionalism, Claude snorts and says, "I didn't care too much for that book. It's also a pro-communist book. Or at least anti-American. Same thing, anyway" (*Sympathizer* 132). Claude believes in the dichotomy of "America vs. the communists," assuming that the act of criticizing America is supporting the communists and, in turn, anti-American. With this dichotomy, Claude can shrug off critiques that point out American problems, regarding these critiques as unwarranted attacks from the enemy rather than opportunities to reflect.

Claude, as a product of the CIA, buys into the ideology of the CIA's American exceptionalism and the rhetoric of torture as science. When teaching the Vietnamese Special Branch Police at the National Interrogation Center, Claude criticizes the Special Branch's traditional way of interrogation as brute force and the French tools for interrogation as outdated and useless (*Sympathizer* 221). He praises the American way of psychological interrogation techniques as new world science:

We have shown that the human mind, subject to the right conditions, will break down faster than the human body. All this stuff—again he [Claude] waved his hand in contempt at what we now saw as Gallic junk, the tools of old world



barbarians rather than new world scientists, of medieval torture rather than modern interrogation—it will take months to wear the subject down with these things. But put a sack on the subject’s head, wrap his hands in balls of gauze, plug his ears, and drop him in a completely dark cell by himself for a week, and you no longer have a human being capable of resistance. You have a puddle of water.

(Sympathizer 222)

This lecture on interrogation exudes American exceptionalism, rationalizes torture as science, and disregards the subject’s human rights. Claude believes that America has the best interrogation techniques, which are based on new-world science. Americans are not barbarians but civilized and efficient scientists. Stefan points out that Claude’s statement about interrogation techniques as science recalls President Bush’s response to Abu Ghraib situation, which denies any allegation of America’s association with torture (223). By framing torture as science, Claude rationalizes the use of violence. Psychologist Zimbardo points out that how the violence was framed may affect how people perceived it: “Framing the genocide of the Jews as the ‘Final Solution’ ... transformed the whole matter into a difficult problem that had to be solved by whatever means were necessary to achieve a pragmatic goal. The intellectual exercise deleted emotions and compassion” (*The Lucifer Effect* 215). Similarly, the rhetoric of torture as science removes the moral aspect of implementing torture, pretending that these interrogation techniques are only about scientific efficiency and precision. This rhetoric allows the conductors of torture to be emotionally detached from their subjects. They may convince themselves that they are not tormenting another fellow human being, but carrying out scientific procedures. In Claude’s lecture, the subjects’ human rights never come to mind. Even though America claims to be the protector of human rights, it seems that it never occurs to Claude that

torturing suspected Viet Cong violates human rights. To Claude, the subject is not perceived as an equal human being who deserves respect and compassion.

This inhuman attitude toward the subject is not peculiar to Claude. Nguyen's representation of Claude as an interrogation trainer in the Phoenix Program shows that Claude is just a tiny piece in an extensive interrogation system, refracting the fact that this disregard for prisoners' human rights is pervasive. Stefan argues that Claude is "the novel's most overt critique of US military practice of torture centers" (222). Michael Otterman notes that the CIA's Phoenix Program practically assumes every suspect is guilty despite the lack of due legal process (67). In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler argues, "Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear. Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters" (37). Under the condition of interrogation, the subject's loss of human rights does not matter to the interrogator. It is clear that, for Claude, the subject's suffering is not worthy of grieving. In *Precarious Life*, Butler observes:

Lives are supported and maintained differently, and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as 'grievable.' (32)

People may feel compassionate toward certain people and grieve over their suffering, but may not grant the same amount of grievability to others who do not fit in the realm of compassion. For Claude, the subject of interrogation is definitely outside his realm of compassion. Nguyen's critique of this unequal distribution of grievability resonates with the present world, where this disregard for certain people's human rights does not stop at

the end of the Vietnam War, but continues to appear in Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay, and the Afghanistan War.

By presenting Claude as a complex human being influenced by the CIA's interrogation system, *The Sympathizer* urges its readers to acknowledge the coexistence of humanity and inhumanity and the power of a system on an individual. The protagonist can sense genuine affection as well as racism from Claude. The CIA interrogation system reinforces Claude's racism and convinces him to believe the rhetoric of torture as science, turning a caring person into a cold-blooded interrogation trainer who is indifferent to the suffering of the prisoners. Though humanity and inhumanity already inhabit Claude, the power of the CIA interrogation system fuels the inhumanity by providing the ideologies and the environment that justify and promote the perpetration of violence.

Finally, Claude is also depicted in the novel as a systemic factor that provokes inhumanity. Claude, as the American trainer and advisor in the Vietnamese interrogation system, serves as a situational factor that facilitates violence from Vietnamese interrogators. As an interrogation trainer, Claude sets up the room for interrogating the Watchman and expects the protagonist to devise multiple ways to torture him. The protagonist, to earn good grades from Claude, carries out this assignment effectively:

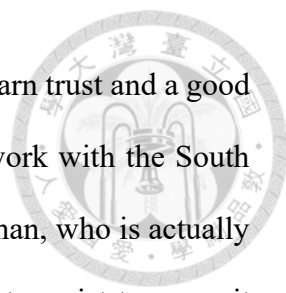
What should we play? Claude asked. It has to be something he can't stand.

He looked at me expectantly, ready to grade me. The prisoner's only real hope of escaping from his situation lay not with me, but with the liberation of the entire south. So I said, Country music. The average Vietnamese cannot bear it.

Perfect, Claude said.

....

.... Claude had assigned me to be the chief interrogator, the task of breaking the prisoner my graduation exam from his interrogation course. (*Sympathizer* 244-45)



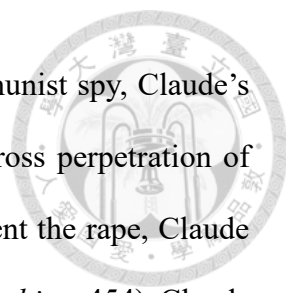
The protagonist is stuck in the position of being a spy who needs to earn trust and a good reputation in order to secure his cover and future opportunities to work with the South Vietnamese government. He has to cooperate in torturing the Watchman, who is actually his communist comrade. Even though Claude does not force the protagonist to commit violence, Claude's position as an interrogation trainer who expects his students to perform torture pushes the protagonist into the position of torturer. Hence, Claude's positive reaction may be authoritative encouragement of torture.

Claude sets up an environment where the exploitation of power is very likely to happen. The protagonist, driven by the need to earn a good reputation and the desire to avenge the Watchman for calling him a bastard, breaks the Watchman with various techniques. The most devastating technique is to represent the Watchman as a homosexual:

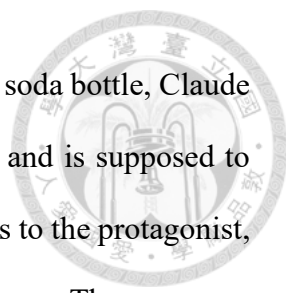
[Claude] replayed the scene for me later in the surveillance room, where I watched myself watching the Watchman as he stared at his confession, knowing he was out of time, a character in a movie, as it were, that Claude had produced and I had directed. The Watchman could not represent himself; I had represented him.

Brilliant work, Claude said. You really fucked this guy. (*Sympathizer* 250-51)

In the interrogation system, Claude is the figure of authority who can request the interrogator to break the prisoner. The interrogation environment creates an asymmetry of power where the interrogators can easily exploit their power, an action that is not frowned upon but encouraged by Claude. For the protagonist, the torture scene is like a movie in which Claude is the producer, and he is the director. Though Claude is not the person who directly tortures the Watchman, Claude has provided the environment, passed down interrogation techniques, delegated his authority to the protagonist, and praised him for breaking the Watchman. Claude is a situational factor in the interrogation system that enables torture to happen.



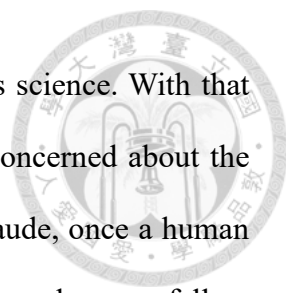
In another interrogation scene that features the female communist spy, Claude's dereliction of his duty to supervise the interrogators leads to the gross perpetration of gang rape. When the protagonist asks Claude to intervene and prevent the rape, Claude replies, "Talk to the major. He's in charge. I'm just the adviser" (*Sympathizer* 454). Claude diffuses his personal responsibility. Even as an American advisor of interrogation with the authority and duty to supervise, Claude does not take on the responsibility to restrain the policemen from excessive violence. Instead, he acts as if he has no power to influence the policemen's behaviors. When the protagonist pleads with the crapulent major to stop the impending gang rape, the major responds, "There's nothing I can do about it. Nothing! The General wants to know how she got the names, and he wants to know now" (*Sympathizer* 454). The major also quickly shifts the responsibility, acting as if raping the communist spy is the inevitable interrogation process. When the protagonist protests again, "[the crapulent] major sat there and said nothing, and Claude, standing by the movie projector, was also silent" (*Sympathizer* 454). Claude and the crapulent major know the three interrogators are going to rape the communist spy, but they keep silent and let it happen. They pretend they can do nothing about it. However, the line "The American's not worrying about this. Neither should you" (*Sympathizer* 454) said by the oldest policeman shows that these policemen dare to commit gang rape because they perceive that those in charge are not bothered by their behaviors. They even justify their behaviors by saying, "Somebody else would do it. So why not us" and euphemize gang rape as "treatment" (*Sympathizer* 457). Claude's silence is indeed the implicit endorsement of gang rape. The three policemen exploit the opportunity of interrogation to satisfy their demonic sexual desire in a situation where they know the authority is indifferent or at least passively tolerates violence. Claude's inaction is a situational factor that allows these policemen to perpetrate evil.



When the policemen violate the communist spy's body with a soda bottle, Claude quickly disassociates himself from these policemen whom he trains and is supposed to supervise, avoiding accountability for this heinous action. He explains to the protagonist, "Just so you know? I didn't teach them how to do that. The bottle, I mean. They came up with it all on their own" (*Sympathizer* 458). This explanation echoes the logic of the bad apple theory, which frames violence as the result of a few deviant individuals in a fine system. Claude blames the gang rape wholly on the three perverse policemen and exonerates himself from the crime. The three policemen definitely should bear accountability for the rape, yet this does not mean that the interrogation system is innocent of this crime. The protagonist does not buy into Claude's explanation. He sees the link between this toxic interrogation system and this gang rape, commenting: "They were good students, just like me. They learned their lesson well, and so have I" (*Sympathizer* 458). The protagonist notes that this interrogation system expects the interrogators to torture the prisoners and assign authority to the interrogators so that they have the opportunities to do what they are supposed to do and not supposed to do. Whether it is having pleasure in breaking the prisoner for personal revenge or unleashing obscene sexual desire by gang raping the prisoner, this system tolerates these evil actions through inaction or indifference.

IV. Conclusion

The representation of Claude in *The Sympathizer* reveals the connection between the CIA and the torture in the Vietnamese interrogation centers. Under the influence of the CIA, both American and Vietnamese officers can become perpetrators. On the one hand, Claude, as the American officer who trains and advises Vietnamese officers, believes in the CIA's propaganda of mind control, perceiving the world through the dichotomy of



“America vs. the communists” and framing psychological torture as science. With that mindset, Claude, a person who can be genuinely affectionate and concerned about the protagonist, becomes indifferent to the pain of his prisoners. For Claude, once a human being is regarded as the enemy and becomes a prisoner, this person is no longer a fellow human who deserves human rights but a subject to be tackled. On the other hand, Claude, as a member of the interrogation system, is a situational factor facilitating violence from Vietnamese officers. As the interrogation trainer, Claude encourages Vietnamese officers to break the prisoners with psychological torture. When the three Vietnamese officers are going to commit gang rape during the interrogation, Claude, as the American advisor, does not intervene. His silence to the three Vietnamese officers is a passive approval of their behavior. Claude uses the logic of “they came up with it all on their own” to dodge accountability, just like how the American government in real life uses the bad apple theory to frame its torture scandals in political discourses. The interrogation system transforms Claude into a pitiless interrogation trainer, and Claude, as the authority figure in this system, provides an environment that provokes inhumanity from the interrogators. *The Sympathizer’s* representation of Claude unveils that the interrogation system in Vietnam built up with the help of the CIA is, in fact, a bad barrel-maker that produces systemic perpetrators.

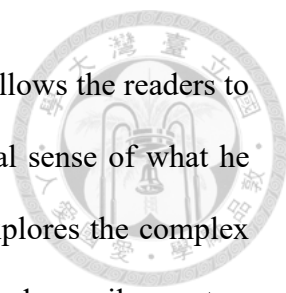
Chapter Three: A Traumatized Perpetrator—the Protagonist

These are the wars for which we have paid, from which we have benefitted, by which we are traumatized. Whatever may be noble and heroic in war is found in us, and whatever is evil and horrific in war is also found in us.

—Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* 24

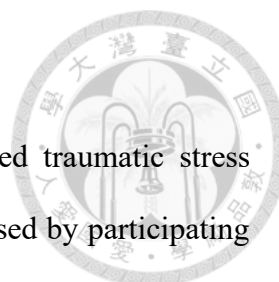
This chapter argues that *The Sympathizer*, by depicting its protagonist as a traumatized perpetrator, challenges the “all-too-common perception of perpetrators as cartoonish monsters” (Mohamed, “Of Monsters” 1157) and shows that the very person who commits violence may be traumatized by his own act of perpetration. Nguyen has created a fascinating protagonist who is notable for his contradiction and duality: he is an illegitimate child of his Vietnamese mother and a French priest, a North Vietnamese spy working in South Vietnam and America, and both a victim and perpetrator of violence. As mentioned in the introduction, many scholars have already tended to the protagonist’s victimhood, treating him as a victim of Western imperialism. Some scholars have discussed the protagonist’s inhumanity by highlighting his dual identity as a perpetrator and a victim of violence (Stefan 209; Liu 544; Bosman 10). Thus, this chapter turns to focus mainly on the protagonist’s role as a perpetrator, particularly as a man who is plagued by perpetrator trauma, a special form of trauma caused not by experiencing violence but by the exact act of perpetrating it.

The Sympathizer brings forth a perspective that is relatively rare in the representation of the Vietnam War—a perspective of a traumatized Vietnamese perpetrator. This novel, framed as the protagonist’s confession, is written in first-person narrative, which invites its readers to experience the tumultuous era of the Vietnam War



through the protagonist's subjective lens. This mode of storytelling allows the readers to peer into the protagonist's psychological activities and get a visceral sense of what he experiences before, during, and after the perpetration. This novel explores the complex subjectivity of perpetrators, a group of people who are often portrayed as evil monsters or enigmatic entities beyond comprehension in popular representations. Refusing to give the protagonist a clear-cut label, this novel presents him neither as a willing executioner who has full control over his life nor as a powerless young man whose crimes can be totally ascribed to external forces. Breaking the dichotomy of with-agency vs. without-agency, this novel illustrates the protagonist as an unfortunate young man who struggles among multiple forces and makes difficult decisions in his war-torn world. The protagonist's actions are the outcome of the interplay between his inner will and the outer world. Given the complex subjectivity of human beings, the protagonist's whole identity cannot be defined as merely a perpetrator. Therefore, when using the term "a perpetrator" to describe the protagonist of this novel, this thesis does not indicate that he is a bad person. I simply mean that he is someone who has contributed to a violent act.

To understand the nature of perpetrator trauma and how a person decides to commit perpetration that induces his own trauma, this chapter begins with an investigation of what perpetrator trauma is and the controversies this concept has stirred up. Next, to dissect the decision-making process that leads to perpetration, I draw on situational action theory, a criminological theory that conceptualizes crimes as an interaction between individual propensity and contextual exposure (Anderson 129). Lastly, I analyze how *The Sympathizer's* representation of the protagonist as a traumatized perpetrator raises awareness of perpetrator trauma and highlights the coexistence of humanity and inhumanity in humans.

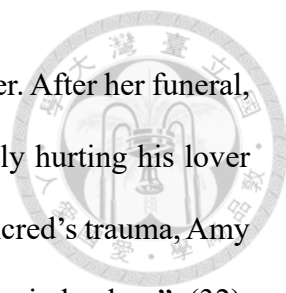


I. Perpetrator Trauma

Perpetrator trauma, also called perpetration or participation-induced traumatic stress (PITS), refers to a form of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) caused by participating in violence (MacNair 313). Not everyone who commits violence goes on to develop this form of trauma. Still, those who perceive their participation in violence as morally problematic may have “moral injury,” a potential cause of perpetrator trauma that is defined as the impact of “perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations” (Litz et al. 697). These people may show signs of guilt, shame, and intrusive symptoms (Litz et al. 697; MacNair 316).

Raising awareness of perpetrator trauma is crucial to forming just memory, Nguyen’s final model of ethical memory, which recognizes human beings’ shared humanity and inhumanity. The idea of perpetrator trauma assigns humanity back to perpetrators, who are often construed as the embodiment of inhumanity, indicating that perpetrators are also human beings capable of suffering. Since the recognition of perpetrator trauma blurs the border between humanity and inhumanity, it has stirred up discomfort and backlashes.

The concept of trauma has long been regarded as the experiences of victims. Trauma studies started as a field predominantly focusing on the victims of the Holocaust (Mohamed, “The Contours” 268). In the popular imagination, the traumatized are people who are wronged and need justice. They should be a group of people whose suffering deserves recognition and compassion. However, in reality, not all traumatized people fall into this category. The existence of perpetrator trauma clearly manifests that not all traumatized are victims. Some people may think that the concept of perpetrator trauma is abhorrent because this concept seems to mix up the victims and the perpetrators. Cathy Caruth once discusses the story of Tancred and Clorinda in Torquato Tasso’s *Jerusalem*



Delivered, in which Tancred, who loves Clorinda, accidentally kills her. After her funeral, he cuts the tree in which Clorinda's soul inhabits, hence inadvertently hurting his lover again (2). In response to Caruth's analysis, which reads this tale as Tancred's trauma, Amy Novak argues that "Tancred does not experience the trauma; Clorinda does" (32), accusing Caruth of reinterpreting "one woman's bodily experience of trauma as the trauma of the male consciousness" (32). Challenging Caruth's reading of this tale, Ruth Leys further argues:

[I]f, according to [Caruth's] analysis, the murderer Tancred can become the victim of the trauma ..., then Caruth's logic would turn other perpetrators into victims too—for example, it would turn the executioners of the Jews into victims On Caruth's interpretation, ... not only can Tancred be considered the victim of a trauma but that even the Nazis are not exempt from the same dispensation. (297)

To Leys, the concept of perpetrator trauma is unfathomable and morally appalling. For Novak and Leys, only the victims of violence are qualified to have ownership of trauma. The tale should only be regarded as Clorinda's trauma.

I disagree with Novak and Leys, believing that Tasso's tale of Clorinda and Tancred can be interpreted in two ways: Clorinda's trauma of being killed and Tancred's trauma of killing Clorinda inadvertently. These two interpretations should not negate each other. Attending to a perpetrator's trauma is not necessarily turning him into a victim. Both victims and perpetrators are capable of experiencing trauma. According to the *APA Handbook of Trauma Psychology*, trauma is the "stimulation that exceeds the individual's ability to cope" (15). Following this line, Erin McGlothlin explains:

[For] perpetrators of mass atrocities such as the Holocaust, the unprocessable and thus unintegrable experience ... is the act of actively terminating another person's

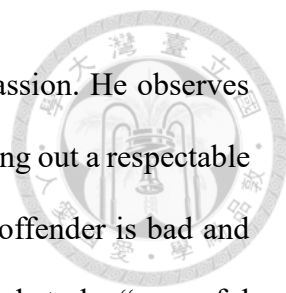
life. (In this, they differ radically from victims of violence, whose trauma derives from their experience of mortal danger.) (105)

Killing can be a traumatic experience that exceeds one's ability to cope. There are at least two kinds of trauma: victim trauma, which is caused by experiencing violence, and perpetrator trauma, which stems from committing violence. In the case of Clorinda's death, Tancred is a traumatized perpetrator. His psychological wound should not be interpreted as a sign of victimhood but as a testimony of his act of violence. The discussion of perpetrator trauma should not be used to minimize victims' experiences, nor should it be used to bestow undue victimhood to perpetrators in an attempt to exonerate them.

Echoing Nguyen's concept of just memory, which recognizes "how the inhuman inhabits the human" (*Nothing Ever Dies* 25), this chapter's purpose is to dissect how *The Sympathizer's* representation of the protagonist as a traumatized perpetrator illustrates that human beings are amalgams of inhumanity and humanity. This understanding of human beings' complex subjectivity may facilitate compassion for the traumatized perpetrators, even when they are non-Americans. Compassion for perpetrators should not be manipulated as a tool for justifying or downplaying atrocities committed by them. It should be a reminder of human beings' common inhumanity that encourages people to understand why and how perpetration occurs.

II. Who Deserves Compassion

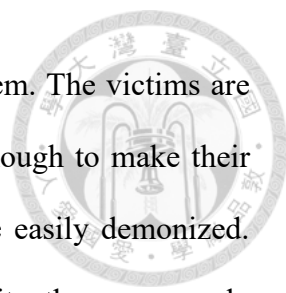
To understand how representations may facilitate compassion, I first inspect what factors affect people's perception of who deserves compassion. Compassion is "the feeling that arises in witnessing another's suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help" (Goetz et al. 351). Nils Christie, a criminologist, introduces the term "the ideal victim" to



refer to the person whose suffering is perceived as worthy of compassion. He observes the condition of being an ideal victim: The victim is vulnerable, carrying out a respectable project, and at a place where s/he cannot be blamed for being. The offender is bad and has no personal relationship with the victim, and the victim also needs to be “powerful enough to make [his or her] case known” (Christie 19, 21). Christie then underscores that “[i]deal victims need—and create—ideal offenders. ... The more ideal the offender, the more ideal is the victim. ... The ideal offender is a distant being. The more foreign, the better. The less humane, also the better.” (25, 28). Unfortunately, not all real victims are ideal. The rape of a sex worker may get less attention than the rape of a young virgin (Christie 19). In *Precarious Life*, Butler points out another factor contributing to the unequal distribution of compassion, and that is: familiarity:

Daniel Pearl [the American journalist who was killed by terrorists in Pakistan] ... is so familiar to me: he could be my brother or my cousin; he is so easily humanized; he fits the frame, his name has my father’s name in it. ... But those lives in Afghanistan, or other United States targets, who were also snuffed out brutally and without recourse to any protection, will they ever be as human as Daniel Pearl? Will the names of the Palestinians stated in that memorial submitted to the *San Francisco Chronicle* ever be brought into public view? (37)

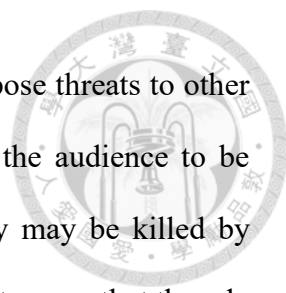
She notes that Daniel Pearl, who appears to be familiar to the American public, is treated as worthy of grieving, while the deaths of Afghans and Palestinians are not. The American public is familiar with Daniel Pearl and is willing to grant compassion to his suffering, whereas the deaths and suffering of Afghans and Palestinians are disproportionately underrepresented in the American media. In essence, to be a person whose suffering is regarded as deserving compassion, one needs to meet the following conditions: The suffering victims are familiar enough to be easily humanized. The victims carry out



respectful projects and are not responsible for what has befallen them. The victims are vulnerable enough to be seen as needing help but also powerful enough to make their cases heard. The offenders are bad outgroup members who can be easily demonized. Those who fit the description are in the realm of compassion. In reality, there are people in need of compassion but are not regarded as worthy of it since they are not represented as people who fit the criteria. Those outside the realm of compassion may struggle to make the public acknowledge and attend to their suffering.

In Hollywood films of the Vietnam War, American soldiers may be represented as people who deserve compassion. For example, *The Deer Hunter* does not show the atrocities that the American soldiers have instigated during the Vietnam War but highlights the cruelty of the Viet Cong and the victimhood of three white American soldiers. These three American soldiers, Mike, Nick, and Steven, are first presented as ordinary young American men who drink beers, sing songs, and go hunting together. Then they are captured by the savage Viet Cong, who force them to participate in games of Russian roulette. This experience forever changes them. Nick suffers from PTSD and becomes addicted to the Russian roulette game. He eventually kills himself despite Mike's effort of trying to bring him back to his senses. The movie presents the suffering of these three young men as worthy of grieving. They are familiar enough to be humanized. They are carrying out respectable projects, namely, serving their country. Their offenders are the barbarous Viet Cong soldiers who show nothing but cruelty. These three American soldiers are presented as unfortunate American young men who are traumatized by the demonic Viet Cong.

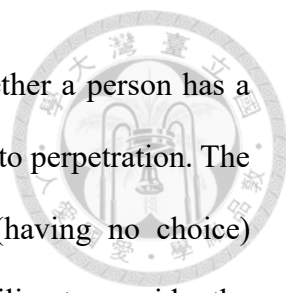
In the popular representations of the Vietnam War, which feature the centrality of American subjectivity, Vietnamese soldiers who commit violent acts do not fit the criteria I mentioned above. They may be presented as props in American soldiers' white savior



narratives. They may be killers who carry out indecent actions that pose threats to other innocent and weak Vietnamese. They are not familiar enough for the audience to be humanized or vulnerable enough to be seen as needing help. They may be killed by American soldiers who are probably framed as heroes of the stories. It seems that they do not carry out morally respectable projects and are responsible for what happened to them. The dominant representations of the Vietnam War do not bring the Vietnamese soldiers who commit violence into the realm of compassion. *The Sympathizer* endeavors to change this discourse with its diverse and complex representations of Vietnamese perpetrators.

How a traumatized perpetrator is represented may influence people's judgment on whether this person deserves compassion. When making that judgment, people are eager to know if the perpetrator chose to commit violence or was forced to comply. If committing violence is the perpetrator's choice, people may think that he or she should be blamed for the trauma and is not worthy of compassion as a result. Thanks to Hollywood's representations of traumatized American soldiers, the American public may perceive the traumatized veterans as victims of state violence, which forces young men to participate in wars. Derek Summerfield notices that through the diagnosis of PTSD, American veterans are no longer seen as offenders but "as people traumatized by roles thrust on them by the US military" (95). It seems that these soldiers have no choice but to comply. They are forced by external factors that they cannot control. They are not responsible for the pain they endure. Yet, if perpetrators are represented as unfamiliar and enigmatic outgroup members, people tend to think of them as monsters who choose to commit violence due to their internal personality traits.

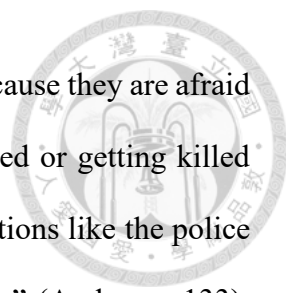
III. Why People Become Perpetrators: Situational Action Theory



The Sympathizer's representation of the protagonist shows that whether a person has a choice is a tricky question that may oversimplify the process leading to perpetration. The dichotomy of with-agency (having choices) vs. without-agency (having no choice) arbitrarily attributes violence to personal or environmental factors, failing to consider the interaction between them. To further consider the interaction of these two aspects when inspecting the process leading to the protagonist's perpetration, I apply situational action theory.

Situational action theory is a criminological theory that tends to the decision-making process of perpetrators. This theory helps me deal with the following question concerning perpetrator trauma: If perpetrators do have humanity within them and participating in atrocity may violate their deeply held moral beliefs, why do they commit the violent acts that may potentially traumatize themselves in the first place? This theory construes perpetration as an outcome of a perception-choice process guided by the person-environment interaction (Wikström 264). According to Kjell Anderson, people's perception of the options they have are influenced by personal propensity (e.g., individuals' personalities, moral rules, moral habits, and self-control) and situational factors ranging from the macro to the micro: the moral context of the society they live in, the culture of the social group they belong, and the factors in the immediate situation of perpetration, including authority figures, group dynamics, distance, perceived threat, emotion, and intoxication. People then weigh these perceived options based on the cost and benefits of perpetration and non-perpetration (Anderson 125-34).

Perpetration is sometimes commanded by authority figures. When the situation is ambiguous, people may prefer to comply with "'situational etiquette' (the action deemed appropriate in a particular situation)," which reduces the tension of social relations (Anderson 133). The appropriate action at the moment of perpetration may be to obey the



orders and conform to the group norms. People may follow orders because they are afraid of getting negative consequences, such as being socially marginalized or getting killed for being a disobedient individual. Another reason is that in organizations like the police or military, obedience may cultivate a sense of “subjective necessity” (Anderson 133), meaning that even when the orders contradict people’s moral values, they may perceive that they have no choice but to follow the authority’s orders, as a Rwandan perpetrator stated, “we thought at the time we were doing something wrong, but the authorities were ordering us to do it” (qtd. in Anderson 134). In a tumultuous circumstance, perpetration may become a likely choice when these factors are at play.

IV. The Protagonist as a Traumatized Perpetrator

A. Before the Perpetration: Personal Propensity

To analyze the protagonist of *The Sympathizer* as a traumatized perpetrator, I begin with the inspection of the protagonist’s personal propensity. The protagonist is an intelligent, kind-hearted, non-violent person who sympathizes with his enemies and is unlikely to be manipulated by ideologies. It may be hard to comprehend how “a good person,” like the protagonist, becomes a perpetrator. The protagonist is a spy, a “man of two faces” (*Sympathizer* 1). He is also “a man of two minds” who has the ability to “see any issue from both sides” (*Sympathizer* 1). As a spy who works for North Vietnam in South Vietnam and America, the protagonist needs to put on different faces according to his environment. He has to assimilate with his enemy, namely the South Vietnamese. If he is a simple-minded, stubborn fanatic of communism who draws a clear boundary between “us” and “them,” the protagonist may still be able to maintain an unwavering “true” identity when he has to be like a chameleon that takes on various identities. However, his ability to understand the other side makes it difficult for him to believe that his side is

right and the other is completely wrong. When contemplating the killing of the crapulent major, who is his colleague and a father of two young children, the protagonist struggles with his moral dilemma:

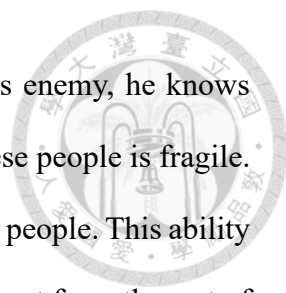
As Hegel said, tragedy was not the conflict between right and wrong but right and right, a dilemma none of us who wanted to participate in history could escape. The major had the right to live, but I was right to kill him. Wasn't I? I asked the question that I imagined my mother asking of me: What if he's innocent?
(*Sympathizer* 134)

The protagonist can hardly convince himself that the killing of the crapulent major is morally irreproachable. The protagonist can see from the major's side and acknowledge his right to live.

The protagonist cannot help but see his enemy as his fellow human beings, even when his superiors and peers all want him to believe otherwise. When he is reading reports about the collapse of the Northern Front, he reflects:

We could not believe that Da Nang and Nha Trang had fallen, or that our troops had shot civilians in the back as they all fought madly to escape on barges and boats, the death toll running to the thousands. I dutifully snapped pictures of these reports, which would please Man, my handler. Perhaps it was not correct, politically speaking, for me to feel sympathy for them, but my mother would have been one of them if she were alive. She was a poor person, I was her poor child, and no one asks poor people if they want war. (*Sympathizer* 4)

Man, the protagonist's blood brother and handler, would be pleased by the suffering of the South Vietnamese people because it implies the erosion of the South Vietnamese regime. Though the protagonist is also pleased by the erosion of the regime, he still sympathizes with the South Vietnamese. Even though the protagonist understands that



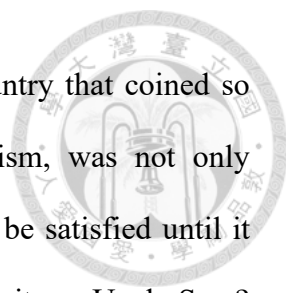
these South Vietnamese, politically speaking, are supposed to be his enemy, he knows that the boundary that separates him from these poor South Vietnamese people is fragile. The protagonist knows that he and his mother could be one of the poor people. This ability to sympathize with the people on the other side sets the protagonist apart from the rest of the characters in this novel. In a world where everyone has to choose a side, the ability to acknowledge the humanity of the other side is a distinctive characteristic of the protagonist. He is compassionate and sees humanity in people who are supposed to be his enemy.

The protagonist is not a fervent, mindless follower of communism but an intellectual who is critical and well-literate in communism, western culture, and philosophies. It is the protagonist's job as the General's officer of intelligence that provides him with knowledge of communism, including Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto*, Mao Tse-Tung's *Little Red Book*, and Vladimir Lenin's *What Is to Be Done* (*Sympathizer* 3). Compared with his colleagues, the protagonist is very fluent in English and familiar with American culture. He remarks:

Some of my countrymen spoke English as well as I, although most had a tinge of an accent. But almost none could discuss, like I, baseball standings, the awfulness of Jane Fonda, or the merits of the Rolling Stones versus the Beatles. If an American closed his eyes to hear me speak, he would think I was one of his kind. (*Sympathizer* 8-9)

The protagonist understands the American way of living and thinking. He is not a bigoted communist who disdains everything associated with America. He can appreciate the beauty of the American culture, but also be critical of the negative elements of it:

American, land of supermarkets and superhighways, of supersonic jets and Superman, of supercarriers and the Super Bowl! Although every country



thought itself superior in its own way, was there ever a country that coined so many ‘super’ terms from the federal bank of its narcissism, was not only superconfident but also truly superpowerful, that would not be satisfied until it locked every nation of the world into a full nelson and made it cry Uncle Sam?

(Sympathizer 38)

The protagonist criticizes American exceptionalism and imperialism. He is not naïve to believe that the USA intervened in the Vietnam War solely because of humanitarian causes. He understands that the Vietnam War, which devastated so many Vietnamese people, may just be part of American foreign policies of maintaining world dominance. With his knowledge and sharp sense of critique, the protagonist is not likely to be blinded by any propaganda or ideologies that frame the world into an oversimplified dichotomy of good vs. evil. He is a knowledgeable and experienced intellectual who is improbable to be manipulated by political ideologies.

Based on the characteristics mentioned above, the protagonist seems to have a low probability of becoming a perpetrator. However, the protagonist is not just a critical, sympathetic intellectual; he is also a loyal and loving person who protects his blood brothers and his country at all costs. The protagonist’s loyalty, love, and need to protect himself, combined with the extraordinary circumstances of the Vietnam War, set the protagonist on the path toward perpetration.

B. Before the Perpetration: Personal Propensity and Situational Factors

The protagonist never wants to kill the crapulent major, yet his need to protect his secret identity as a communist spy pushes him to use the crapulent major as a fall guy. This action eventually leads to the killing of the crapulent major, a consequence that the protagonist does not envision when he uses the crapulent major’s name as a distraction

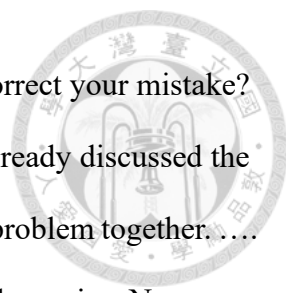
when the General asks him who is spying on them. The protagonist feels compelled to give a name in order to follow the situational etiquette, avoiding suspicion and protecting his secret identity:

If I said I did not suspect anyone, when he clearly did, it would look bad for me.

In a paranoid imagination, only spies denied the existence of spies. So I had to name a suspect, someone who would sidetrack him but who would not be an actual spy. The first person who came to mind was the crapulent major, whose name had the desired effect. (*Sympathizer* 76-77)

As an intelligence officer, the protagonist cannot act as if he has no idea how espionage operates. Denying the existence of spies is not an option for him. As the General's subordinate, the protagonist cannot refuse to answer the question in that situation. If he does not name any suspect, he will stir up suspicion and endanger his mission as a communist spy. He uses the crapulent major's name as a scapegoat, believing that the General will not fully buy in this unlikely answer. The protagonist complies with situational etiquette, answering his superior's questions and maintaining his identity as a loyal officer. At this point, the protagonist has no idea that his action has planted the seed of the crapulent major's death.

The protagonist's need to regain the General's trust and his concern for Bon's wellbeing, combined with the General's demand to get rid of the spy, traps the protagonist in a circumstance where the killing of the crapulent major seems inevitable. When inviting Claude and the protagonist to his liquor store, the General is excited that he finally has a chance to resume his mission of fighting for his country and regain his glory as a military leader, starting with eliminating the communist spy whom he believes to be the crapulent major. The General instructs the protagonist:



Because you picked the major. Do you agree that you must correct your mistake?
I thought you would. You do not have to do it alone. I have already discussed the
problem of the major with Bon. You two will take care of this problem together.
You have never disappointed me before, except in picking the major. Now you
can redeem yourself. (*Sympathizer* 115)

The protagonist's role as a member of the secret police makes him internalize the norm of obedience and his duty to his peers. The General does not force the protagonist to kill the crapulent major. Yet, the culture of obedience in the secret police creates a sense of subjective necessity that makes the protagonist feel that obeying orders is an obligation. Even though the protagonist privately questions the legitimacy of killing the crapulent major, he does not dare to openly object to the General's decision to kill the major when disobedience is absolutely a deviant action in his social group. Moreover, the General frames this killing mission as a chance for the protagonist to redeem his mistake. The cost of non-perpetration is losing the General's trust and failing to fulfill his duty to his group.

Aside from the authority figure of the General, group dynamics plays a role in the protagonist's decision-making process. Bon's participation in this killing mission makes it harder for the protagonist to act differently. The protagonist alone cannot call this mission off. Bon does not question the General's order and is eager to carry out this mission, which grants him a sense of purpose after they evacuate to the USA. Joohee Seo points out that the mundane life as a Vietnamese refugee in the USA has stripped Bon of his masculinity (720). Bon, who has failed to protect his country and his family, views the assassination of the crapulent major as an opportunity for him to reclaim his manhood. In response to the protagonist's doubt of the legitimacy of this mission, Bon rants:

[My] life once had meaning. It had a purpose. Now it has none. I was a son and a husband and a father and a soldier, and now I'm none of that. I'm not a man, and

when a man isn't a man, he's nobody. And the only way not to be nobody is to do something. So, I can either kill myself or kill someone else. Get it? (*Sympathizer*

98)

The cost of non-perpetration for the protagonist is risking his friendship with Bon and depriving him of his sense of purpose and happiness. Canceling this killing mission means that the protagonist has to go against his authority and his dear blood brother. Though the protagonist's cost of perpetration is the torture of his conscience, the price of non-perpetration is too high to pay.

Similarly, the protagonist does not want to kill Sonny, who is his college peer and a Vietnamese journalist. Yet, the circumstance in which the General perceives Sonny as a threat and the protagonist needs to prove his ability as a fighter pushes the protagonist to be a perpetrator. Upon reading Sonny's comment about the crapulent major's death, the General no longer sees Sonny as a friend who speaks for Vietnamese refugees but as a threat who implants ideas in people's heads and undermines the mission of fighting back to Vietnam:

[The General said,] [Sonny is] supposed to be a reporter. That means to report the facts, not to make things up or interpret them or put ideas in people's heads.

[The protagonist said,] He isn't wrong about the major, is he?

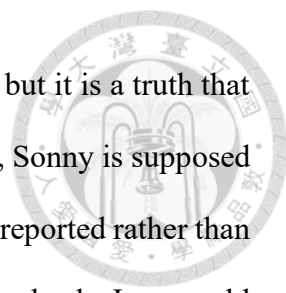
Whose side are you on? Madame said. The problem with Son is that he is his own editor and he goes unchecked.

[The protagonist said,] You're absolutely right, Madame.

[The General said,] Remind him of how we did things back home.

In the good old days, Sonny would already be sweating in a holding cell.

(*Sympathizer* 178-79)



Sonny's inference of the cause of the crapulent major's death is true, but it is a truth that the General does not want anyone to point out. In the General's mind, Sonny is supposed to be a reporter who is on his side and vocalizes what he prefers to be reported rather than expressing political opinions and doubting the legitimacy of fighting back. In a world where everyone seems divided by whose side they are on, truth and personal opinions are no longer important. Once the protagonist expresses his opinion that Sonny's assumption of the crapulent major's death is accurate, Madame quickly asks the protagonist to choose a side and show his loyalty. For the General and Madame, having opposite opinions may be a sign of disloyalty. In their worldview, a person can only be either one of us or them, the enemies. The General thinks that being a threat is enough for him to categorize Sonny as an enemy, condemning him to interrogation and eventually to death. The protagonist, as a subordinate of the General, cannot openly defy the General without endangering himself. When Madame asks the protagonist whose side he is on, the protagonist instantly hides his true opinion and acts as if he agrees with the General's judgment of Sonny. He did this in order to follow the situational etiquette of that circumstance. If the protagonist insists on expressing his opinion of the crapulent major's death, he may also be regarded as a potential threat by the General. This is a risk that the protagonist does not dare to take. To reduce the social tension and maintain his relationship with the General, the protagonist may feel that showing agreement and support to the General is the most appropriate action in that situation, even though this action definitely goes against his conscience.

The protagonist's situation is an example that illustrates how a person can become an unwilling perpetrator without being openly forced. The General does not directly order the protagonist to kill Sonny, but the protagonist certainly feels that this task is necessary.

The General does not force the protagonist to kill; he just hints that this killing task is the protagonist's chance to prove himself as a fighter:

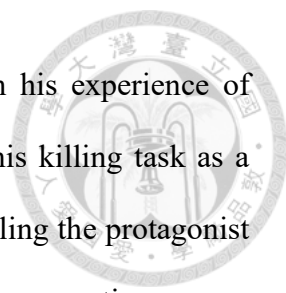
I've been thinking about your request to return to our homeland, Unlike Bon and the others, however, you've never been battlefield tested. But you'll need to prove you can do what they can. You'll need to do what must be done. Can you do that? Of course, sir. I hesitated, then asked the obvious question: But what is to be done? You know what needs to be done, said the General. I sat with my hands still on the steering wheel at ten o'clock and two o'clock, hoping I was wrong. I just want to make sure I do the right thing, sir, I said, looking at him in the rearview mirror. What exactly needs to be done?

[the General said,] I became the man I am today by jumping and by surviving that camp. But no one asked me to volunteer. No one told me what needed to be done. No one discussed the consequences. All these things were understood. Do you understand, Captain?

Yes, sir, I said.

Very good, then. If what needs to be done is done, then you can return to our homeland. (*Sympathizer* 344-45)

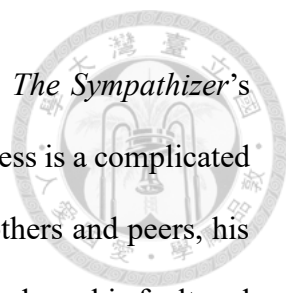
The protagonist knows the General well enough to understand exactly what the General wants him to do, but he still asks questions, hoping to divert Sonny's fate. The protagonist dislikes Sonny and understands why Sonny is perceived as a threat, but it is clear that his distaste for Sonny does not make him think the killing is justifiable. The task of killing Sonny never delights him. The protagonist is not a fighter, and he never wants to become one, either. He is more like a negotiator who prefers to get things done by using his words and bribes rather than violence. Nevertheless, in order to protect his blood brother Bon, who is eager to join the mission of fighting back, the protagonist has to prove that he can



be a killer. The General compares this task of killing Sonny with his experience of jumping into Dien Bien Phu to save his fellow soldiers, framing this killing task as a patriotic action. The General refuses to enunciate the killing task, telling the protagonist that this task should be understood tacitly. At that moment, asking more questions seems to be violating the situational etiquette. If the protagonist insists on negotiating for an alternative way of proving himself, his action may be interpreted as disobedient and cause unnecessary suspicion. In this way, the General thrusts the protagonist to “volunteer” for this killing task.

The cost of non-perpetration is defying his superior, inducing suspicion, and being unable to join the mission of fighting back and protecting his blood brother. As an undercover spy, the protagonist must stay low-profile and maintain his relationship with the General. Given the case of the crapulent major, the protagonist knows to what extent the General can go when he suspects someone of being a threat. He understands that if he loses the General’s trust, he may be the next target the General wants to eliminate. As Bon’s blood brother, the protagonist will not forgive himself if he fails to protect Bon. Their brotherhood is what the protagonist holds onto in this tumultuous world. As Man says at the night when they have to be parted, “We’re blood brothers, us three. We’ll be blood brothers even if we lose this war, even if we lose our country” (*Sympathizer* 19). Their brotherhood gives them a sense of stability and security in a world where everything seems to be fleeting and ambiguous. In times of crisis and despair, their brotherhood stays true and certain and gives the protagonist a sense of belonging in a world where he faces constant rejection due to his bastard origin. His love for his blood brother propels the protagonist to take on the task of killing Sonny.

In sum, the protagonist’s decision-making process is the interplay of his personal propensities and situational factors. Taken out of context, it may be hard to imagine how



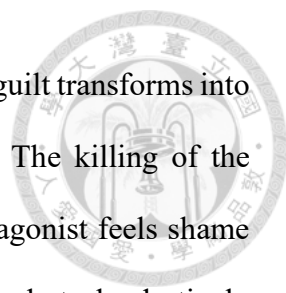
a sympathetic, intelligent, and loving person becomes a perpetrator. *The Sympathizer's* representation of the protagonist shows that his decision-making process is a complicated interaction of multiple factors, including his love and duty to his brothers and peers, his need for self-preservation, the pressure from the General for him to redeem his fault and prove himself, and the social tension that prevents him from questioning and defying the General. The protagonist clearly is not a person who is prone to use violence as a solution, and he is not forced to become a perpetrator. His own need to protect himself and his brothers, combined with a circumstance that impels him to kill people as a way to eliminate threats and prove himself as a loyal and competent fighter, leads the protagonist to walk on the path of perpetration.

C. During and After the Perpetration: The Traumatic Effect of Killing

The Sympathizer's representation of the protagonist not only helps readers understand the complexity of the decision-making process of perpetration but also shows the excruciating effect of the participation of perpetration. The protagonist experiences numbness, intrusive imagery, shame, and guilt right after the killing of the crapulent major:

A numbness descended on me, beginning from my brain and my eyeballs and extending to my toes and fingers. I lay down on my bunk, closed my eyes ... and shuddered at what I saw. I opened my eyes but it made no difference. No matter whether my eyes were open or shut, I could still see it, the crapulent major's third eye, weeping because of what it could see about me. (*Sympathizer* 143-44)

Though the protagonist is not the one who pulls the trigger, he is the one who comes up with the plan. He feels guilty for infecting the General with the idea of the crapulent major being a spy and failing to dissuade the General. The numbness that the protagonist experiences may be a traumatic effect of terminating another person's life. The experience



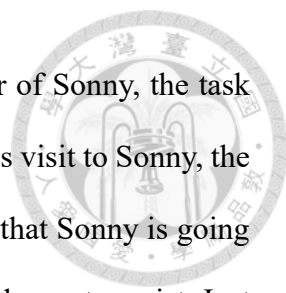
is too overwhelming for the protagonist to process. The protagonist's guilt transforms into this intrusive imagery of the dead crapulent major staring at him. The killing of the crapulent major changes how the protagonist sees himself. The protagonist feels shame for being a hypocrite who stays friendly with the major ostensibly but clandestinely hatches a deadly assassination scheme.

The traumatic symptoms do not cease as time passes. A conversation with a woman about the situation in Vietnam triggers the protagonist, prompting him to experience a typical traumatic symptom, that is, “[r]ecurrent, unwanted distressing memories of the traumatic event” (“Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder”). The memory of the major's death makes the protagonist doubt his behaviors and the meaning of his mission:

Let's put it this way, she said. Before the communists won, foreigners were victimizing and terrorizing and humiliating us. Now it's our own people victimizing and terrorizing and humiliating us. I suppose that's improvement.

I trembled at hearing her words. For a few days my conscience had been purring smoothly, the crapulent major's death seemingly behind me in the rear view of my memory, a smear on the blacktop of my past, but now it was hiccupping again. What was happening at home, and what was I doing here?
(*Sympathizer* 199)

The woman's words remind the protagonist that he has also become the perpetrator of his own countryman. What happens back home is happening in the USA. He has victimized the crapulent major for the sake of sustaining his relationship with the General. The death of the crapulent major is the cost of his mission as a mole spying on the General. His mission is supposed to make his home country a better world, yet the conversation with the woman indicates that his mission as a revolutionary spy may be pointless.

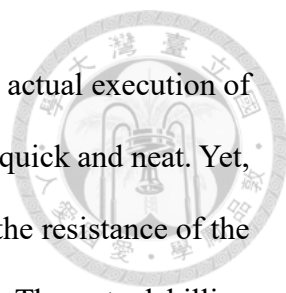


The protagonist's trauma is further aggravated by the murder of Sonny, the task that the protagonist plans and executes with his own hands. During his visit to Sonny, the protagonist's resolve to kill him fluctuates several times as he learns that Sonny is going to be a father and build a family with Ms. Mori, the ex-sex partner of the protagonist. Just like how the crapulent major's family is devastated by his death, the protagonist feels the weight of destroying another potential family. Desperate to avoid the killing, the protagonist even reveals his secret identity as a communist spy to Sonny. However, Sonny does not believe the protagonist and even wants to tell Ms. Mori that the protagonist is trying to trick him. If Sonny tells anyone about this visit, the protagonist's identity as a communist spy may be exposed. Threatened by this possibility, the protagonist feels that he has no choice but to murder Sonny. The protagonist fails to kill Sonny with one shot, and the killing then becomes messy and terrifying:

The third bullet struck between shoulder blade and spine, staggering but not stopping him as I jumped over the coffee table, catching up before he reached the door. *Click, clack* went the gun, one bullet behind the ear, another in the skull, and Sonny fell face-first with enough graceless weight to break his nose.

I stood over his prone body, cheek down on the carpet, copious amount of blood gushing from the holes drilled in his head. A wave of nausea and chills shook me, and my mother said, You'll be better than all of them, won't you, my son?

I inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, once, twice, and one more time, slowing my shaking to a trembling. Remember, Bon said inside my head, you're doing what has to be done. The list of other things in need of doing returned.
(*Sympathizer* 359-60)



This passage shows the difference between the idea of killing and the actual execution of killing. In the abstract, the protagonist may imagine this killing to be quick and neat. Yet, when it comes to the actual killing, the perpetrator may have to face the resistance of the victim and the visceral disgust induced by the act of perpetration. The actual killing involves physical exertion against the victim, blood gushing, nausea, and trembling. Even if the protagonist remembers wiping out the trace of his perpetration, this does not mean that he is a cold-blooded and willing executioner. Even when he manages to hold himself together and complete the task, the execution clearly is traumatizing to the protagonist.

The sign of the victim as a living being may be terrifying to the perpetrator. It consolidates the fact that the perpetrator has harmed a fellow human being:

Sonny's eye was lusterless and blank. He must surely be dead, but as Bon had told me, sometimes the dead did not know they were dead yet. So it was that I reached forth my index finger slowly, closer and closer to that eye, which moved not at all. My finger hovered an inch before the eye, then a few millimeters. No movement. Then my finger touched that soft, rubbery eye, the texture of a peeled quail egg, and he blinked. I jumped back as his body shuddered, just a little, and then I fired another bullet into his temple from a foot away. Now, Bon said, he's dead.

(*Sympathizer* 361)

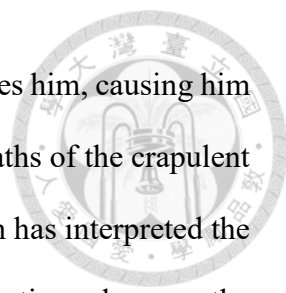
Killing means actively turning a living being into a motionless corpse. If the killing is neat, the turning process may be short. However, the protagonist's inexperience in killing prolongs the turning process. Hence, compared to the killing of the crapulent major, the killing of Sonny requires more physical effort from the protagonist, and he is closer to the victim. This perpetration is executed within a short distance. The protagonist experiences the extended process of actively and closely terminating another human being's life. The killing executed under this circumstance may morally traumatize the perpetrator deeply.

Sonny blinks his eyes when the protagonist touches his eyeball. This incident intensifies the trauma. The sign of life amplifies the realization that the protagonist is confronting a living being. The protagonist is startled and quickly turns Sonny back to the state of lifelessness.

When others apply justifications to relieve themselves from the guilt of murder, the protagonist's intelligence and ability to sympathize prevents him from doing that:

In our country, killing a man—or a woman, or a child—was as easy as turning a page of the morning paper. One only needed an excuse and an instrument, and too many on all sides possessed both. What I did not have was the desire or the various uniforms of justification a man dons as camouflage—need to defend God, country, honor, ideology, or comrades. These off-the-rack excuses fit some people well, but not me. (*Sympathizer* 129)

The protagonist can hardly accept any excuse to justify his crimes. Though protecting his blood brother is one of the reasons that leads to his perpetration, the protagonist does not allow himself to use this as justification. His comrades recommend him to drink up and commit himself to the next mission. The protagonist tries to indulge himself in an unforgettable time with Lana. Nonetheless, alcohol, jumping into the next mission, and women do not help the protagonist forget the crimes that he has committed. Even when his comrades try to convince him that his victims ask for their own deaths, the protagonist knows that is not true. The protagonist's ability to see things from both sides prevents him from demonizing or blaming his victims. He cannot blame anyone but himself. His good traits that lower his probability of becoming a perpetrator, unfortunately, turn out to be the factors that exacerbate his trauma. He has no way to quell his pain and his conscience's accusation.

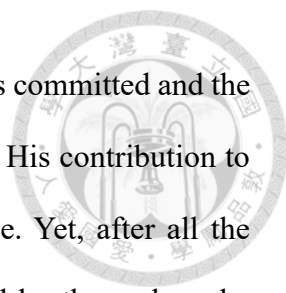


The violence that the protagonist has participated in traumatizes him, causing him to suffer from hallucinations, remorse, shame, and guilt. After the deaths of the crapulent major and Sonny, the protagonist sees and hears their ghosts. Bosman has interpreted the ghosts as “a demand for justice” (4). He contends that the haunting continues because the protagonist, who has perceived the ghosts as a form of punishment, fails to recognize the ghosts as “ethical injunctions” (8), which compel the protagonist to recognize his ability to inflict harm (10). Teimouri, following Bosman’s argument, also upholds that the ghosts “enlighten [the protagonist] about [his] inadequate moral responsibility” (74). These two scholars have viewed the ghosts as an outer force that demands the protagonist to acknowledge his inhumanity. Disagreeing with their arguments, I interpret the ghosts as the symptoms of the protagonist’s perpetrator trauma. The protagonist’s reading of the ghosts as punishment is not his denial of ethical injunctions but his sign of guilt and shame, which are typical symptoms of trauma. The protagonist sees the ghosts exactly because his act of perpetration has morally injured his conscience. These ghosts can be seen as the protagonist’s projection of his own thoughts. When the protagonist is imprisoned for reeducation, he hears the ghosts questioning and accusing him:

How did you end up here, with your best friend and blood brother overseeing your demise? said the crapulent major. Don’t you think your life would have taken a different course if you hadn’t killed me? Not to mention mine, said Sonny. Do you know Sofia still weeps for me? I’ve tried to visit her and put her at peace but she can’t see me. Whereas you, who I would rather not see at all, can see me all the time. But I have to say that seeing you like this does give me some pleasure.

Justice exists after all! (*Sympathizer* 424-25)

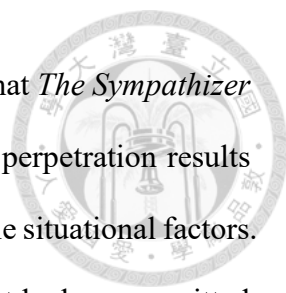
At that moment, the protagonist is in shock due to the knowledge that the commissar who subjects him to ferocious torture is actually his blood brother, Man. What the crapulent



major asks is what the protagonist wants to know. The violence he has committed and the pain he endures for the revolutionary cause seem to be meaningless. His contribution to the revolutionary cause is supposed to make Vietnam a better place. Yet, after all the struggles, he ends up in Vietnam, where he is tortured by his blood brother, whom he trusts. His brotherhood with Bon and Man is what the protagonist believes to stay true no matter how messed up the world becomes. However, feeling betrayed by his blood brother Man, the protagonist's belief system is shattered at this moment. The killing of the crapulent major and Sonny seems to achieve nothing but the pain he induced on others and himself. The shame and guilt of killing the crapulent major and Sonny resurface. The protagonist regrets the killings and the suffering he has caused Sofia. On the one hand, the protagonist wishes he could not have killed them and goes on a different path where he is not confined and tormented by his blood brother. On the other hand, the protagonist feels that the agony is a kind of karma or punishment for the perpetration he has committed. The protagonist somehow feels that he deserves to suffer.

V. Conclusion

The Sympathizer's representation of the protagonist bestows complex subjectivity on this Vietnamese perpetrator, drawing attention to the amalgam of humanity and inhumanity in humans. The concept of perpetrator trauma reveals that perpetration and suffering are not antithetical. The representation of the protagonist demonstrates how perpetration can be traumatizing. The representation in the novel recognizes his trauma, presenting it in ways that facilitate compassion. The readers may not be familiar with Vietnamese people, but the first-person narrative helps readers see from the protagonist's perspective and vicariously experience the protagonist's pain. The protagonist is not presented as a one-dimensional character but as a complicated human being. Examining the protagonist's

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experience with the help of the situational action theory, we can see that *The Sympathizer* reifies the circumstances in which a perpetrator can be trapped. The perpetration results from the interplay of the protagonist's personal propensity and multiple situational factors. The protagonist definitely should be accountable for the violence that he has committed and traumatizes himself, but he should not be solely responsible for it. Attributing the perpetration either to the protagonist or the environment is missing the whole picture of how perpetration occurs. The readers get to see the protagonist's vulnerability when he is struggling with his decision to kill and suffering from the psychological toll of killing. Just as American perpetrators get to be represented as human beings with full subjectivity, *The Sympathizer* represents Vietnamese perpetrators in light of the recognition of both their inhumanity and humanity. Representing the protagonist as a traumatized perpetrator defies the misrepresentation of perpetrators as utter evil, granting them the compassion that facilitates readers to acknowledge the suffering of perpetrators, who are totally human, just like you and me.

Conclusion

The Sympathizer, in response to the mainstream representations of the Vietnam War, which tend to reserve compassion and subjectivity to the traumatized Americans, represents perpetrators as a heterogeneous group consisting of Americans and non-Americans who are amalgams of humanity and inhumanity. These representations challenge the idea of perpetrators as the incarnation of evil or unfortunate people who are forced to participate in violence. In this novel, perpetrators are human beings with complex subjectivity who have a certain degree of agency in extraordinary circumstances. Their environments influence the options they perceive they have, and their decisions and actions contribute to the perpetration of their war-torn world. By analyzing Claude as the systemic perpetrator and the protagonist as the traumatized perpetrator, I contend that this novel explores how people's inhumanity can be provoked by the atrocity-producing system they are in and recognizes the humanity of perpetrators by addressing the traumatizing effect of killing. The term, sympathizer, can simply denote a person who expresses compassion for others' suffering, or it can be used in a derogatory way to describe a person who sympathizes with an immoral political cause. These two definitions can refer to the protagonist, who suffers from his ability to sympathize with his enemies in a highly divided world. The term can refer to readers as well. *The Sympathizer* invites its readers to expand their compassion to encompass not just the non-American victims but also the non-American perpetrators, letting the readers recognize that the non-American perpetrators are also human beings.

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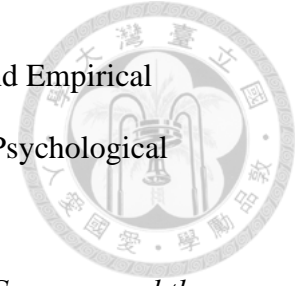
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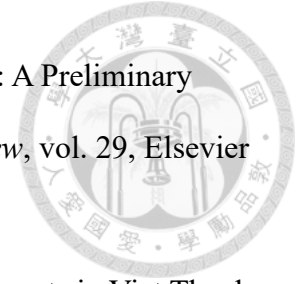
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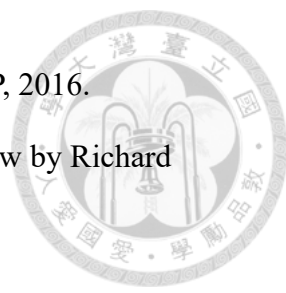
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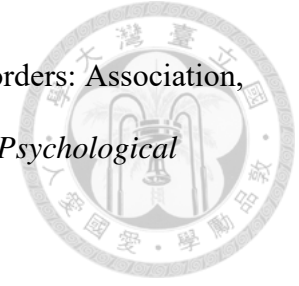
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