

# Individualism vs. Conformism in the American Myth of War

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Mentor: doc.dr.sc. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

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## Abstract

Individualism appears to be one of the most prominent values of the American society and it affects almost all fields of the American lifestyle and culture. Still, in extreme situations, such as wartime, the famous American individualism appears to fail and is replaced with conformism, therefore presenting the real face of the American nation. This thesis examines the mechanism of conformism and its influence on the individual in the American society. The overall goal is to debunk the myth of American individualism and present the real extent of the conformism in the American society. This will be done by exploring the tools of conformism and their effect on the individual; the pressure of social expectations, different roles asserted on the individual, and fear of isolation and shame. Further on, the subconscious effect of conformism is also examined by questioning ideas such as the American Dream - one of the most significant concepts in the American society and the social mechanisms which encourage conformism. Finally, the thesis will deal with the dangers of conformism and warn about its damaging effect on the individual and the society as a whole. The importance of this subject hides in the fact that conformism was oftentimes during history, and still is to this day, used as a means of pushing individuals into blind compliance or fearful obedience and has been an accomplice in many evils committed by the human race. The data supporting this thesis is collected by analyzing works of American war literature which feature examples of conformism and its conscious and subconscious effects on the individual; William March's *Company K* (1933), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Tim O'Brien's *The Things We Carried* (1990) and Kyla Williams' *Love My Rifle More than You* (2005). The theoretical background for the thesis was derived from Patric Colm Hogan's *The Culture of Conformism* (2001) and Natalija Princi Duhović's *The Eight Sin-Obedience* (2010).

Keywords: individualism, conformism, war, American dream, American society

## Introduction

This paper presents the conflict between individualism and conformism and ultimately debunks the myth of individualism in the American society in war literature. The subject of the paper is explored through four American war literature novels: William March's *Company K* (1933), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Tim O'Brien's *The Things We Carried* (1990) and Kyla Williams' *Love My Rifle More than You* (2005). Each paragraph of the paper analyzes another aspect of the conflict between individualism and conformism in the American society during wartime. Therefore, the chapters are not ordered by the chronology of the literary works used, but rather by the logical order suitable for describing this phenomenon on different levels. At the beginning, the reader is introduced with the meaning of individualism in the American society. The importance of individualism is shown by presenting its influence on almost all fields of human life; the business world, politics, show business, moral stands. The historical events which shaped the modern idea of individualism for the American nation are also described and analyzed. Further on, the phenomenon of conformism is defined and explained, especially in the context of wartime. The next paragraph revolves around O'Brien's novel *The Things We Carried* and the way in which it presents the effects of conformism on the individual during wartime, but also explores the way in which extreme situations, such as war, can free the individual from the shackles of roles and expectations asserted upon him by the society. The subconscious effect of conformism is also analyzed and exemplified. Another paragraph depicts the well-developed mechanism of conformism and the way conformism benefits the government and the "chosen few" and is therefore encouraged in the society. This is presented in the Heller's *Catch-22* and supported by Princi-Duhović's *The Eight Sin-Obedience* and Colm Hogan's *Understanding Social Consent*. Those studies deal with the phenomenon of conformism by providing numerous examples of blind obedience to the authority from the history, but also everyday life. The authors warn about the way in which education systems, religious organizations, the media and even the traditional family promote conformist behavior, and about the dangers that lurk when individuality and critical thinking are restrained. The last paragraph deals with the, often devastating, consequences of conformism on individuals and the society and serves as a warning by providing examples from March's *Company K* and Williams' *Love My Rifle More Than You*.



- Individualism in the American society

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” stands in the Declaration of Independence (US 1776); one of the core documents that represent the American nation. Those also happen to be one of the most quoted and well known lines amongst the American people. This is not surprising regarding the fact that these lines focus on equality of all men, their freedom, and the right to be independent, or shortly, individualism, which appears to be one of the most appreciated values in the American society.

In order to wholly understand the reasons behind this, one has to be familiar with the history of the United States and the process of the formation of the American nation. In *The American Way* E. N. Kearny, M. A. Kearny and Crandall explain how: “The earliest settlers came to the North American continent to establish colonies which were free from the controls that existed in European societies” (20). Some of them were exiled from the society and they were ready to risk their lives on a dangerous voyage because of their refusal to give up on their ideas and beliefs. Once the American nation was formed, they made sure that titles of nobility were forbidden and that government and church were clearly separated in order to assure equality and freedom for everyone (E. N. Kearny, M. A. Kearny, Crandall 20). Another element which increased the influence of individualism throughout the American history was the ideal of the “rugged individual.” It developed during the frontier experience – the settling of American people in the unpopulated areas of the west and it represented the model of a free and brave individual who did not subject to many social or political controls (E. N. Kearny, M. A. Kearny, Crandall 61). Later on, the “frontier individualism” was replaced, due to changes in the society, by a more appropriate form; the “business individualism.” The idea of a „self-made man,“ an individual who used his wit and hard work and therefore managed to succeed against all odds and despite his origin or social background, became the ideal in the business world. Private business institutions gained popularity over government – operated ones and it created an arena for competition; a term they closely related to freedom (E. N. Kearny, M. A. Kearny, Crandall 102). This also affected politics, since Americans wanted to make sure that a strong government will not affect their personal freedom and individualism. Today, the idea of individualism lives on in the American politics through interest groups that serve as “A tool to achieve the goals of the individual by influencing the government” (E. N. Kearny, M. A. Kearny, Crandall 120).

All of this created a climate of freedom and placed emphasis on the individual and his rights. Over the years, the “American individualism” became a common term and began to denote the very essence of the American culture and spirit. It spread like a wildfire and affected American politics, economy, business, but also art, especially literature and the film industry.

Many famous works of American literature glorify self-reliance and encourage the reader to place his inner beliefs and morals before any human law. In one of the, amongst Americans, most popular and appreciated essays, “Self Reliance”, dedicated to the subject of individualism, Ralph Waldo Emerson states: “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist”. Another author, Henry David Thoreau, goes even further and declares that the personal moral code of the individual should have priority before any laws asserted by the government or other authority. Thoreau expressed his ideas in an essay called “Civil Disobedience” and received much praise for it amongst the Americans. Also, there is a plethora of texts concerning the American Dream and telling a story of a strong individual who went from rags to riches. The typical literature, but also cinematography heroes were also individuals who lived on the line and opposed the corruption of the society, starting with the frontier cowboys all the way until modern-day American heroes.

But has the idea of individualism remained sustainable in the American society throughout the decades? The 20<sup>th</sup> century proved to be ground-breaking in so many ways, but what marked it the most were – wars. They re-shaped the world and affected almost every man’s life during the period. They brought around a change of paradigms, values, and ideals all across the globe. The question of war in regard to American individualism becomes even more significant when another American myth is explored – the myth of war. The American myth of War is as old as the American individualism – its roots can be found as early as 1630 in Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity”. In it, he describes the American society as “a city upon a hill” – a nation that should serve as a role model, the chosen ones. Over the years, the myth of war was used in order to justify the wars Americans fought all over the world. It presented them as their higher purpose and destiny – to “help” others by encouraging them to conform to the American values and lifestyle.

In addition, such an extreme and tragic situation such as war often offers a better insight into the nature of human beings – their true, basic instincts and shows them for who they really are. This is why war literature often proves to be the best source for exploring human behaviors and tendencies. After analyzing works of American war literature, it becomes obvious that there

is a significant discrepancy between the American ideal of individuality and the conformity which is often described in the texts.

- The Influence of Conformism on the Individual

*The Things We Carried* is a novel written by an American war veteran Tim O'Brien and published in 1990. The novel consists of short stories and the events are set in the time before, during and after the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War, which was presented to the American nation as the war on communism, lasted for twenty years and, by its end in 1975, became highly unpopular in the United States. In this novel Tim O'Brien deals with the problem of conformism in the American society and depicts its influence on the individual. The novel revolves around a young college student who gets drafted for the Vietnam War. He opposes the idea of war and contemplates running away to Canada in order to avoid the draft. He struggles with this idea but in the end falls down under the pressure of shame and other's expectations and goes to war. The war experience affects him and other soldiers he meets and profoundly changes their lives and outlooks. The novel offers a variety of stories, ideas, and thoughts and this makes it suitable for the exploration of individualism.

At the beginning of the story, the young man is scared senselessly of the possibility of giving up his life for a pointless war that he does not support. His mind and body are screaming at him to run and never look back. Still, he stays right where he is, paralyzed by a fear even greater than the one of bullets, bombs and death – the fear of judgment from society. “I feared losing the respect of my parents. I feared the law. I feared ridicule and censure” (38), he states. He was painfully aware of the ignorance and blindness of those who would judge him for escaping the war and he “. . . detested their blind, thoughtless, automatic acquiescence to it all, their simple-minded patriotism, their prideful ignorance, their love-it-or-leave-it platitudes, how they were sending me off to fight a war they didn't understand and didn't want to understand” (38). He was not deceived; he had not bought the old lie about the greatness of war and he wanted nothing less than to die for his country. But instead, upon looking the whole American society in the eye, he admitted defeat: “I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to” (38). This powerful and sad confession, that is repeated more than once throughout the novel, shows just how overwhelming and destructive the influence of conformism on the individual can be; the need to fit in and be accepted can at times precede basic human instincts for survival and safety. Colm Hogan explains this phenomenon in his book *The Culture of Conformism*, which focuses on understanding social consent, and claims: “. . . Social opinion has the same sort of consensual force as law. Although less intense, it is almost certainly more constant. As Mill put it . . . in society at large *peculiarity of taste, eccentricity of conduct, are shunned equally with crimes*” (qtd. in Colm Hogan 29).

Further on, O'Brian introduces the reader with another form of conformism by telling the story of a young girl who experiences a transformation of character once she is freed from the constraints of the gender roles that the society asserted upon her. The story "The Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong" features a character of Mary Ann, who is a girlfriend that one of the soldiers managed to smuggle into Vietnam. In just a couple of weeks' time she experiences a drastic transformation from a "seventeen-year-old doll in her goddamn culottes, perky and freshfaced, like a cheerleader" (71) to a brave warrior who is one with the nature. At the beginning she is presented as a typical American girl living the dream; she was dating her high school sweetheart, she looked attractive, had a bubbly personality, and was soon supposed to get married, own a house and become a mother. But upon her arrival to the beautiful chaos of Vietnam, where most social norms meant nothing, her newfound freedom makes her question her life choices: "Not necessarily three kids, she'd say. Not necessarily a house on Lake Erie. Naturally we'll still get married, she'd tell him, but it doesn't have to be right away. Maybe travel first. Maybe live together. Just test it out, you know?" (72). She is no longer bound with the expectations that the society holds for her as a woman and finds that most of her wishes and dreams have been instilled into her by that same society. The exotic nature and closeness to so much misery and beauty at the same time allow her to find her true self without feeling the need to conform and soon all differences between her and the other men are erased. The beautiful yet dangerous nature of Vietnam represents her own nature which came forth after the social constructs which shaped her life were broken. This revelation frees her and she states: "To tell the truth, I've never been happier in my whole life. Never" (72). At the same time, her boyfriend's reaction serves as the prototype of the way society sees women who are strong nonconformists. At the end of the story, when her transformation is complete, he describes her as a sort of a monster: "In part it was her eyes: utterly flat and indifferent. There was no emotion in her stare, no sense of the person behind it. But the grotesque part, he said, was her jewelry. At the girl's throat was a necklace of human tongues" (81). His description shows that he would rather perceive her as non-human, a grotesque who lost its mind, than a woman who proved to be stronger and braver than him. This shows how the mechanism of conformism, especially concerning gender roles and expectations related to them, functions even without the individual being fully aware of its influence.

Lastly, except of these, more obvious, examples of conformism, the whole novel is subtly knitted with yet another phenomenon that the American nation conforms to – the American Dream. The author is critical towards it and depicts it tragically through the

narrator's hallucination of the American nation: "Hotdogs and popcorn—stadium smells, stadium heat. A squad of cheerleaders" (47). He debunks the myth of equality by implying that he was not supposed to fight this war since he was a white, college-educated kid and also the one of individuality, which was drowned in the noise of the society and its demands. Also, he marks consumerism as one of the essential elements of the American Dream: ". . . sailing that big silver freedom bird over the mountains and oceans, over America, over the farms and great sleeping cities and cemeteries and highways and *the golden arches of McDonald's*" (italics mine 25). Still, perhaps the author himself also was a victim of the merciless mechanism of conformism and has succumbed to the American Dream. In the background of all the stories, even the one where the narrator contemplates leaving the American society behind, the reader can recognize a wish to live, a cry for freedom, and a yearning for happiness – the three basic values of the American society that every individual is allegedly granted to and which represent the American individuality. The author comprises these values in "the freedom bird" – a one way ticket out of Vietnam and out of war, and states: ". . . —but it was more than a plane, it was a real bird, a big sleek silver bird with feathers and talons and high screeching. They were flying. The weights fell off; there was nothing to bear. They laughed and held on tight, feeling the cold slap of wind and altitude, soaring, thinking *It's over, I'm gone!*" (25).

Therefore, even though it might appear that the American society values individualism, Tim O'Brien offered a different perspective on that idea. He pointed out the damaging effect of the burden of society's expectations on the individual and lively depicted the inner conflicts which sprout when whatever is within a man collides with the external world. The basic principles of conformism were described through questions of courage, gender identity, and ideals asserted on the individual by the society. It appears that not much from the idea of individualism has survived in the American society and that most fields of human existence are subjected to conformity. The tragic and extreme context of the novel – the Vietnam War, seen through the eyes of a war veteran, allowed the reader to get through to the character's raw thoughts, emotions, and instincts. What was revealed was a nation full of conformists; people living someone else's dreams and often in complete dissonance with their own ideas. The American individualism turned out to be a myth about something long lost.

- The Mechanism of Conformism in the American Society

Conformism may appear as an innate reaction all human beings are prone to. It can be spotted in the behavior of all age groups, even small children. At times, it can even appear to serve as a defense system built into people in order to avoid shame, rejection, or isolation. Still, perhaps human readiness to conform is not simply a character trait, but something encouraged and taught from an early age. *Catch-22*, a novel written by Joseph Heller, offers plenty of examples of conformism being encouraged by the American society and its institutions, predominantly the army. The novel is set in Italy during the Second World War and the main character is a young American pilot called Yossarian. Through his story, the author introduces the reader with a number of paradoxes or catches, as he calls them, and other elements which are used by various institutions of the society in order to keep the characters obedient and servile. Ideas and examples from the novel can be transferred to different areas of human life and social institutions; the army, the education system, legal system and media, and Heller included all of the above in one quote: “. . . and because Orr, unlike Yossarian’s mother, father, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, in-law, teacher, spiritual leader, legislator, neighbor and newspaper, had never lied to him about anything crucial before” (39).

First of all, Heller uses *catch-22* to criticize the levels of conformism in the American society. Every catch is presented as another regulation which benefits the institution, in most cases the American army, and takes away individual freedoms. Still, most characters blindly accept the catches and obey the authority which invents them. This is, not only in the novel, but in the real world, one of the main features of conformism. In her book *Eight Sin Obedience*, Princi-Duhović explains this phenomenon and states that whenever humans function as a part of a larger group or a hierarchy they are likely to see themselves as an instrument in someone else’s hands and therefore, go through with an order or respect a certain rule without the feeling of responsibility or guilt (72). As presented in the novel, army is a perfectly suitable institution for the development of conformism; each member is a part of a group and there is a strict hierarchy, allowing the feeling of responsibility and critical thinking to almost disappear. Heller portrayed this in the description of one of the characters: “Appleby was a fair-haired boy from Iowa who believed in God, Motherhood and the American Way of Life, without ever thinking about any of them, and everybody who knew him liked him” (19).

Furthermore, the author’s examples can be removed from the war and army context and seen as a criticism of the whole American society. One of the catches mentioned in the novel

is: “Group Headquarters was alarmed, for there was no telling what people might find out once they felt free to ask whatever questions they wanted to . . . Under Colonel Korn’s rule, the only people permitted to ask questions were those who never did” (36). This example can be related to the way in which human society often operates; ordinary people are exposed only to select information that suit the institutions and the government and, using a technique similar to the one above, schoolchildren are taught to conform from an early age (Princi – Duhović 47). The education system uses such techniques since it is aware of the power of the individual and the danger it represents. Conformism in the education system is necessary because it creates blind masses of obedient people who will finance the ones on the top and fight their wars without ever raising their voices (Princi – Duhović 49). The absurdity, but also the efficiency of such an approach is presented in an example of a person born, raised and educated in a society which promotes conformism and obedience to institutions – Doc Daneeka’s wife, who chooses to believe that Doc Daneeka is dead, as it was said by the army, while she is reading a letter from her very much alive husband (275).

Moreover, one of the examples of social mechanisms being used to encourage conformism is the media and propaganda usage. Princi-Duhović reminds the reader of a saying by Samuel Butler and states: “Each person that neglects to use their own brain in order to form opinions, and rather decides to buy them from the television, newspapers, seminars, political rallies and other *specialized idea markets* is exposing themselves to the danger of having the truth watered down” (italics mine 92). Heller also knew this and therefore, through his ironic, even humorous style, presented the way in which the army uses media to incite the masses and keep them under control: “And make sure they understand the importance of a tight bomb pattern . . . Colonel Cathcart wants to come out of this mission with a good clean aerial photograph he won’t be ashamed to send through channels” (263). Obviously, the representation of events broadcasted by the media is much more important than the reality, and ultimately, the false representation becomes the truth that the people accept.

Further on, Heller offers another instance of media manipulation, but this time fused with another powerful element which can be used to induce conformism - religion. It is when Colonel Cathcart proposes prayer before each mission. His goal is not to encourage his soldiers and it has little to do with faith, rather, his plan is to gain publicity and reputation; “Maybe if we say prayers, they’ll put my picture in The Saturday Evening Post” (154). Heller furthers his point by Colonel Cathcart’s proposition to choose a prayer which avoids the subject of religion all together. This presents the distortion of religion, often used throughout history with the



purpose of justifying violence, selling it under false pretence of a higher purpose and God's will. It becomes obvious, from this ironic dialogue, that those in power are well aware of religion's influence on people and the possibilities of using it in their own favor. According to Colm Hogan in *The Culture of Conformism*, religion, especially Christianity, is often consent-inducing since it propagates humility, docility, acceptance and turning the other cheek, therefore supporting the status quo – “the religious views that receive the support of the powerful in a society—and thus, typically become the dominant ones—will invariably be views that support the position of the powerful” (64).

In *The Culture of Conformism*, Colm Hogan also warns about another factor which encourages conformism in the American society and claims: “Any legal system—with its police enforcement as well as penal codes and practices—functions in large part to preserve the social relations that define the society in which they operate” (13). Catch 22 proves this through an episode about court-martial trials of young soldiers being accused of absurd crimes and facing a number of illogical questions. One of them is the court notary Popinjay – “*Popinjay, is your father a millionaire, or a member of the Senate? -No, sir. -Then you're up shit creek, Popinjay, without a paddle. He's not a general or a highranking member of the Administration, is he? -No, sir. -That's good*” (65). This short but meaningful dialogue also concurs with Colm Hogan's theory; “The entire structure of legal proceedings is organized in such a way as to maximize the advantages of the opulent minority” (19). In other words, the legal system is advantageous for the wealthy and the powerful and therefore preserves the social stratification and prevents changes from happening. This is even strongly accentuated in some of Yossarian's thoughts, such as: “Strangers he didn't know shot at him with cannons every time he flew up into the air to drop bombs on them, and it wasn't funny at all” (15). According to Colm Hogan, state holds the monopoly over murder and its definition; large-scale elite homicide, such as killing other soldiers or even civilians, is considered legal and socially acceptable, while small-scale crimes, committed by the unprivileged, is severely punished (16). This kind of bias in the legal system prevents a person from fully exercising its individual rights and freedoms and keeps the underprivileged majority fearful and obedient.

Finally, Yossarian appears to be one of few characters who kept their belief in individualism and are still trying to hold on to their independence and freedom in a world that appears to do everything possible to push each individual into conformism. He is trying to reason with the laws and rules which constraint him and his fellow soldiers but at certain situation it becomes obvious that perhaps he is also a conformist. This can be spotted in the

episode of bombing the Italian village full of civilians (262). Yossarian was aware that such thing is unnecessary and considered it morally wrong. He even tried to reason with his colonel for a while, but very soon decided to keep quiet and follow the orders. By the time of the bombing, his conscience was almost completely anesthetized: “Yossarian no longer gave a damn where his bombs fell, although he did not go as far as Dunbar, who dropped his bombs hundreds of yards past the village and would face a court-martial” (265).

Another instance of Yossarian conforming is the very end of the novel, when he decides to desert the army. At first, this might appear as a bold act individualism, but, if analyzed a bit deeper, it becomes obvious that he too conformed to the American dream; he chose life, freedom, and happiness. While those three concepts represent the essence of American individualism, a question arises: can something prescribed by the society and asserted onto the individual from an early age be called individualism? And this is perhaps the final catch-22 of the novel; the one that even the author could not escape. Yossarian might have rejected the absurd laws and regulations of the army and the government when he deserted, but only to fall into another trap – to conform to some other American values. Individuality may be an American value only in theory, as the examples from the novel prove, but it still is an American value. Trying to escape the society he criticized, Yossarian and his creator ran right back into it. “-*You’ll have to jump. -I’ll jump. -Jump!* Major Danby cried. Yossarian jumped” (364), but not very far.

- The Consequences of Conformism

At the time being, conformism might seem as the most convenient solution, but its effects on the individual and consequences it bears are much deeper. By choosing conformism, people deny their own character, value system, and moral code and therefore conformism proves to be destructive, not only for the victims, but also the conformists.

*Love My Rifle More Than You*, a novel by Kyla Williams offers an example of how dangerous consequences of conformism might be. The main character, Kyla, is a young American woman who joins the army as an interpreter and is deployed to Iraq. Kayla from the beginning of the novel appears to have zero predispositions for any type of bigotry; she is well educated, familiar with other languages and cultures, especially Muslim, and has a personal experience of a deep relationship with a man who belongs to that culture and religion. She is also not brainwashed and understands a thing or two about politics and the real reasons behind the war she is going to. She was aware of the lies “sold” to the American nation and the fact that “only the most messed-up-patriotic-head-up-his-ass-blind-faith-my-country-right-or-wrong soldier would believe them” (14). But, maybe most importantly, she knows what it is like to be “the other” - a member of a punk rock subculture and a woman in a man’s world. As a rebellious punk kid she knew what it was like not to fit in, to be an individual who opposes the majority, but what really affected her was being a woman in the army. With army being a predominantly male “territory” and often seen a man’s job, Kyla learned firsthand what it was like to be discriminated against, belittled, sexually harassed, and seen as a “commodity” (19).

Kayla’s main preoccupation during war is to help others and establish a trustworthy relationship with the locals. Still, over time her perspective slowly changes due to her environment and she starts slipping into conformism. This is exemplified by her participation in prisoner’s interrogation during which her job is to humiliate and embarrass naked prisoners. During this, she is experiencing an inner conflict and a sort of a cognitive dissonance. On one hand, she would like to stop the violence and does not feel comfortable with her task of shaming and humiliating others, but at the same time she does nothing to prevent it and decides to participate in it. As she states: “I’m very surprised by this, but I don’t turn around, either. I don’t get myself out of there” (247). Soon the verbal abuse turns into physical violence, making Kyla feel even more uncomfortable, but she uses a simple coping mechanism; she convinces herself that she does not have enough information and perhaps this violence is something normal and that what she is seeing is “supposed to happen” (248). She never files a complaint, contacts the

media, or does anything else to stop the abuse, even though she herself was a victim of sexual abuse and is aware that once again, the army did not see her as a valuable member, but simply a useful female prop used to intensify prisoner's shame during interrogations. Instead, she decides to avoid the prisoner's cages from that day on and justifies it with a very important sentence: "I don't want to see things that will disturb me" (250). And this is exactly what conformists do; look the other way and find an excuse for their behavior. Perhaps torturing another, probably innocent, human being is justified because this is the common practice, and if one feels it is wrong, they will keep it out of sight and out of mind. Kyla's silence and conformity, just as they do in real life, bore great consequences: "A prisoner died in custody there. Another prisoner had a broken jaw" (250), but what she forgot to list were dozens of others who were left with trauma, fear or fury. The kind of fury that calls for retribution. Violence breeds violence, but conformism also does. Kyla chose to conform and not to react, and this led to torture and death of perhaps completely innocent people. This exemplifies the true strength of conformism and provides a powerful warning for every reader.

On the other hand, William Marches' novel, *Company K* represents the consequences of conformism on the one who conforms. *Company K* is a whirl of stories told by World War I soldiers, most of them haunted by the war experience. One of the most striking stories is the one about a group of men forced to commit war crime – shoot German war prisoners. What they say to themselves in order to rationalize and excuse themselves is: "Soldiers are supposed to do what they are told, and leave thinking to their superior officers . . . I guess it's none of my business. I guess I'm here to carry out instructions" (125). They are also under the influence of the media and the propaganda whose ultimate goal is to dehumanize the enemy and justify the immense violence of the war. In the American media, and the urban legends which sprout from it, German soldiers are presented as pure evil; they kill their enemies, mutilate their bodies, kill babies, and burn churches (127). True or not, other soldiers accept this, because it is easier to live with the idea that you killed a monster, than with the idea of killing another human being. Still, one of the soldiers manages to break the magic circle and realizes: "why don't I refuse to do this? . . . Why don't all of us refuse? If enough of us refuse, what can they do about it?" (129). He becomes aware that, even though they are also prisoners of the system, they are prisoners because they chose so. They are prisoners of their fear, ignorance and weakness. He throws away his rifle, deciding to follow his own moral code, deciding not to conform, but he is aware that this means either death or decades in prison. Very symbolically, the only trace of sanity and individualism is going to be strictly punished.

Therefore, although having second thoughts, majority of them conforms in the end, and follows the orders, but the moment they pulled the trigger will stay with most of them forever. As the novel continues, the reader finds out that most of the men who were involved in this incident suffered serious consequences. They conformed and therefore managed to survive but they were dead emotionally and could no longer function as productive members of society. For some of them, pulling the trigger meant losing all hope and ideals and facing the ugly truth – everything they were ever told by their country was a lie. As one of the American soldiers puts it: “Everything I was ever taught to believe about mercy, justice and virtue is a lie” (132). They were not killed in the war, but could hardly be called alive. What was left of them were bland figures who perhaps even envied those who died or had the courage to take their own lives. One of those who opted for the latter was private Everet Qualls. He went through war and witnessed some of the most gruesome scenes human mind can imagine. His friends were killed and injured. He saw people kill and getting killed. He saw the dying, the injured, the suffering, the hopeless and yet, this is not what haunted him when he returned home. What truly traumatized him was the moment when he conformed, when he picked up the rifle and started shooting the prisoners. The only way for him to set the slate clean was to shoot once again – at himself (222). This example depicts the devastating effect that conformism has on the one who conforms. Conformity might seem convenient and simple for the time being, but it does not forgive. For it, the perpetrator and the victim are the same, and both will pay their due.

## Conclusion

Individualism might appear as one of the most significant values of the American society and, in a way, it defines and shapes the American culture. Still, upon analyzing works of American war literature, it becomes obvious that American inclination towards individualism functions and exists almost exclusively in theory. It is present on the declarative level, but in reality, Americans appear to be more prone to conformist behavior. Tim O'Brien recognized this and explored the influence of conformism on a person on the individual level in *The Things They Carried*. He proved that that the need to conform and therefore be accepted by the society sometimes precedes even the survival instinct of the human kind. Further on, he depicted the strength of social constructs and the way they bind every member of the society through a story about a liberation of a young American girl. Stepping out of her culture and society gave her an opportunity to get in touch with her real self and throw away the burden of social expectations. As it usually is, those who were too scared or too blind to do the same saw her as a grotesque. Finally the author of the novel, though trying to criticize the conformism which prevails in the society, fell into the same trap. He conformed with the American Dream by promoting the three basic American values – freedom, life and the pursuit of happiness.

On the other hand, analyzing Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* offers an answer to why, despite their insistence on individualism, conformism appears to be such a common trait in the American society. He offers a criticism of the American society and an insight in how do the central institutions of a country promote and instill conformity into its people. Examples from the novel criticize the education system which preaches silence and obedience from an early age, the media which uses propaganda in order to deceive and blind the nation, the religion as a status quo preservation tool, and the legal system, which functions in a biased way and therefore causes fearfulness of the majority that could rebel. But once again, the author is not immune to the influence of conformism. At the end of the novel, the main character, presented as a strong individual, decides to desert the army. The values he is led by are again freedom, life and happiness that, when comprised, form individualism. The very same individualism that is, though mostly on the declarative level, praised and glorified in the American society. The question that remains is can trading one set of beliefs for another really be called individualism.

In the end, all of the described conformist behaviors bear severe consequences. Some of them are visible in Kyla Williams' *Love My Rifle More Than You* in which Kyla's conformism leads to suffering and even death of other people. The way in which she reasons with herself

and decides to turn the blind eye to the injustice explains the typical mindset of a person who conforms and the results are obvious and frightening. On the other hand William March's *Company K* shows that conformism does not only affect the victims, but sometimes proves to be even more destructive for the one who conforms. Through various examples March shows how conformism disillusion, takes away self-respect and causes a crushing feeling of guilt. March's "heroes" who tried to wash their hands of all the responsibility could never forgive themselves for what they have done, and therefore suffered even more than their victims.

All of these examples prove that American war literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century does not present the United States of America as a country made by and for strong individuals. Rather, it depicts the effects of the American myth of war through various mechanisms which promote conformism. Theory and practice collide in extreme situations such as war, but also in everyday life and the myth of American individualism is debunked.

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