The Use of Sensory Language in War Literature

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Introduction
For centuries, authors have struggled to portray the shocking violence of war. The unique experience of warfare makes its depiction in literature particularly challenging; authors must describe unthinkable brutality between rational human beings. Explaining such tragic scenes of death and the complex emotions associated with them can be daunting and some might say impossible. But through numerous wars, authors have found a way to represent the tragedy of war and the experiences of the fighting soldiers. In order to convey the appalling bloodshed of battle, some authors choose to focus on the five senses to describe the horrible scenes. The senses are universal to all people and are the most basic tools with which humans understand their environment. Therefore using sensory language is a logical technique by which authors can describe war in a way that all audiences can readily understand.

This paper focuses on the works De Bello Civili by Lucan, Im Westen nichts Neues by Erich Maria Remarque and Generation Kill by Evan Wright, because these three authors utilize the senses—especially the sense of sight—as a way to depict the gore and horror of war. In De Bello Civili, an epic poem from the 1st century AD about the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, Lucan uses the senses to create vivid scenes of the bloodshed of war for his audience. Lucan focuses on the sense of sight, while also giving special attention to eyes and eye injuries in battle, emphasizing their importance as the tool for seeing. Similarly, sight is used to describe gore in the World War I novel Im Westen nichts Neues and in the Iraq war book Generation Kill. Though the dates of composition of these works span many centuries, their use of the senses to describe the violence and bloodshed is remarkably similar. Though sight is the main sense used by all three authors, the other four senses also play crucial roles in the depiction of the wartime atmosphere. However, because of the differences in the time periods and the nature of the wars themselves, different senses are emphasized in each work. In the following sections I shall outline the ways in which each author employs sensory language. I will also attempt to explain the reasons for the similarities and differences among the three works. Lucan relies heavily on the sense of touch or feel to describe gore to his audience, while Remarque uses sound to recreate the experience of battle during World War I, and Wright emphasizes the odors present in Iraq during wartime. Taste is the sense least utilized by the three authors. In general, sensory language gives depth to each work and helps to convey the horrors of war.

Sight
The sense most utilized by all three authors to describe scenes of bloodshed is the sense of sight. The types of language used to describe sight can be broken down into three categories: seeing words, colors and eye descriptions, each of which will be discussed separately below.

The sensory language associated with sight is used to create a visual image for the reader and is a very effective descriptive tool. “Seeing words” are often used to highlight the other visual descriptions of a scene as they emphasize the events that the characters
are witnessing. Lucan’s epic will serve as my first example. In Book 4, lines 568-570, referring to a fighting soldier, Lucan writes *despectam cernere lucem / victoresque suos vultu spectare superbo / et mortem sentire iuvat* (“He delights to watch the despicable light and to watch his conquerors with an arrogant face and to feel death”). In these lines Lucan uses two different verbs to describe the act of seeing or watching: *cernere* and *spectare*. Lucan may want to emphasize the difference between watching the *despectam . . . lucem* (“despicable light”) and the *victoresque* (“conquerors”) or he may simply want to highlight the act of seeing by using two different words to describe it.

Employing a different method to emphasize the act of seeing, Lucan uses the same seeing verb twice in one line in book 7. He writes *Caesareas spectate cruces, spectate catenas* (line 304, “see the crosses of Caesar, see the chains of Caesar”). This anaphora stresses the importance of seeing the brutality for which Caesar is responsible. In this line, Lucan also uses repeated “c” sounds, giving the line a harsh sound, in accordance with the harsh acts of Caesar.¹ Again in book 7, Lucan uses two seeing words in the same line, this time choosing one active and one passive verb. He states *videor fluvios spectare cruoris* (line 292, “I seem to watch rivers of blood”). Using the passive *videor* (“I seem”) calls into question whether or not he is actually watching the hyperbolic *fluvios . . . cruoris* (“rivers of blood”). Yet while the passive *videor* casts doubt on the reality of the situation, the presence of two seeing words in interlocking word order with the *fluvios . . . cruoris* makes them an integral part of the line. Lucan utilizes a passive seeing word again in book 3, lines 652-653, in saying *tunc unica diri / conspecta est leti facies* (“then a unique shape of awful death is seen”). *Unica diri . . . leti facies* (“a unique shape of awful death”) forms a chiasmus, which itself is surrounding the verb *conspecta est* (“is seen”). The chiasmus serves to highlight the seeing word in the middle of the phrase. Indeed the word order may mimic the experience of the person witnessing the scene, as the watcher is literally surrounded by images of death. Lucan’s choice of literary devices with seeing words stresses the importance of the act of seeing, and thus also the events being watched.

Next, in *Im Westen nichts Neues*, Remarque also uses seeing words in combination with literary devices to accentuate his description of war. In describing the face of a dying soldier he writes, *im Gesicht sind schon die fremden Linien, die wir so genau kennen, weil wir schon hundertmal gesehen haben* (p 50, “In his face are already the strange lines, which we know so closely, because we have already seen them one hundred times”), using anaphora of the word *schon* (“already”). Repeating this word emphasizes that the process of death being witnessed is expected by the narrator because there have been so many other deaths on the front lines. The phrase *wir schon hundertmal gesehen haben* (“we have already seen them one hundred times”) may be a hyperbole, but again emphasizes the massive death toll among the German soldiers. Because he has seen so much death, it appears that the narrator has almost grown accustomed to seeing his comrades dying.

Later, the soldiers are disturbed by the painful cries of horses that have been injured and are slowly dying. The narrator states *wenn man die Tiere erblickt, wird es besser*

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¹ In January of 49 BCE, Caesar crossed the Rubicon and entered Italy with his soldiers, thus instigating a civil war between himself and the respected Roman general Pompey. Caesar went on to win commanding victories against Pompey’s forces in Rome, Massilia, Spain and Dyrrachium. Pompey was eventually killed after he fled to Egypt (Braund, xviii).
auszuhalten sein (p 84, “If one sees the animals, it will be better to endure”), indicating that seeing the animals will put them better at ease, while just hearing them is hard to stand. This sentence suggests the power of sight as a sense crucial to understanding the environment. While the sounds of the horses revealed their pain, the soldiers wanted to see them to fully understand the situation and relieve some of the unrest caused by the noises. In addition, Remarque uses a seeing word to emphasize the particularly gruesome wounds of patients in the military hospital. He says ich sehe Darmwunden, die ständig voll Kot sind (p 221, “I see gut wounds, which are always full of excrement”). Remarque chooses to have the narrator say ich sehe (“I see”) instead of describing the wounds in a more impersonal way, such as using the phrase es gibt (“there are”). The seeing word makes the wounds and their proximity to the narrator more of a reality, thus underscoring their vile nature. Remarque’s use of seeing words truly emphasizes the events being watched and makes the experience of war more immediate for the reader.

Wright also uses sight words to put emphasis on the important parts of his description of the Iraq war in his work Generation Kill. But because of the nature of the Iraq war, his use of seeing words also stresses different psychological aspects of warfare. Guerilla warfare and the long-range capabilities of modern weapons often prevent soldiers from seeing the people they have killed, creating amongst the soldiers a complex attitude toward killing. Wright depicts one of the marines shooting an enemy fighter by saying, “Sutherby opens his eyes and kills the man. It’s a perfect head shot. In fact, Sutherby has the rare satisfaction of seeing the kill. The man’s hands jerk up to his face while he tumbles forward” (p 104). Wright says that seeing the man’s death is a “rare satisfaction,” and then goes on to describe the image of the victim’s flailing body. Though this horrible scene would under normal circumstances be abhorred by those watching, somehow it is satisfying for the marines to see the deaths that they have caused. Without seeing the deaths, the marines really do not know the number of deaths that they have caused, though often the main objective of their profession is to kill enemy soldiers. Being able to see a concrete image of death is perhaps not comforting, but satisfying because the soldiers are able to see tangible results of their wartime efforts in a time when victory and even progress in the war is often difficult to gauge. Wright uses seeing words to point out this aspect of warfare which is in such stark contrast to civilian life.

Wright also uses sight to show how soldiers become desensitized to death during warfare. He writes, “We pass dead bodies in the road again, men with RPG tubes by their sides, then more than a dozen trucks and cars burned and smoking. You find most torched vehicles have charred corpses nearby . . . Seeing this is almost no longer a big deal. Since the shooting started in Nasiriyah forty-eight hours ago, firing weapons and seeing dead people has become almost routine” (p 149). These scenes of horror are witnessed daily by fighting soldiers, and have to Wright become “routine,” despite their gruesome and shocking nature. While in most cases seeing corpses or dying people would be appalling, the constant inundation of many modern soldiers with the scenes of death described by Wright make death a terrible but also habitual part of their lives.

Wright also uses seeing words in a similar fashion as Remarque, using the first person to create immediacy to a situation and to add to the shocking nature of a scene. Wright uses this technique in describing Sergeant Charles Graves’s encounter with a small girl he was trying to rescue from the backseat of a car. Wright explains, “There’s a
small amount of blood on the upholstery, but the girl’s eyes are open. She seems to be cowering. Graves reaches in to pick her up—thinking about what medical supplies he might need to treat her, he later says—when the top of her head slides off and her brains fall out . . . ‘I could see her throat from the top of her skull,’ he says” (p 218). In this passage, Wright uses a quote from Sergeant Graves with a seeing word to depict the gruesome image of the little girl, making the situation at once more personal and more powerful for the audience. Wright uses seeing words in ways that are both similar to and different from Remarque and Lucan, reflecting the changing nature of warfare and what the sense of sight means to modern soldiers.  

**Color**

In their depictions of war, all three authors also use color words for various purposes. Lucan skillfully uses color words to describe the scenes of the epic civil war. In book 9, line 772, Lucan says, *Nigra destillant inguina tabe* (“the groins drip with black decay”), utilizing a word picture in which the *nigra . . . tabe* (“black decay”) is surrounding the *destillant inguina* (“the groins drip”). The word order emphasizes the amount of decay, which is engulfing the groins, and the word *nigra* (“black”) adds an extra detail about the decay, which enables the audience to picture the scene more fully. The color word *nigra* (“black”) and the word picture in which it appears, add another layer of description which fully realizes the horrific scene Lucan is describing. In Book 9, line 791, Lucan writes *rubor igneus* (“a fiery redness”), using redundant language to describe an exact color. To a reader, *rubor* (“redness”) and *igneus* (“fiery”) bring to mind very similar colors. Thus, Lucan’s use of both words suggests that he is trying to emphasize the color as an element important to his description.

In book 9, lines 809-810, Lucan utilizes color language for a different purpose. He states *sic omnia membra / emisere simul retilum pro sanguine virus* (“thus all the limbs at the same time discharged red poison instead of blood”). In this line, Lucan is using a transferred epithet, describing the *virus* (“poison”) as *retilum* (“red”), when the reader would more likely expect the *sanguine* (“blood”) to be described as red. Attributing the adjective *retilum* (“red”) to poison instead of blood creates a connection between the poison and the blood. This connection could refer to the fact that the poison has basically replaced the blood in this person, and is now being discharged from the body just as blood normally would from a wound. Lucan’s use of color language is not limited to merely describing the colors of objects or people, but is intertwined with literary devices to create different emphases in his work.

Similar to Lucan, in *Im Westen nichts Neues* Remarque does not use color language only to describe the literal colors in a scene, but uses it to describe metaphorical colors as well. When Remarque says *er sieht sich schrecklich aus, gelb und fahl* (p 50, “he appears

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2 Additional examples in Wright: Page 100, “I stand up and see one injured Marine staggering in circles.” Page 109, “I see a man curled over in the backseat in a fetal position. He’s covered in blood-soaked rags.” Page 302, “We drive into a bank of smoke, glimpsing a succession of small horrors.” Page 359, “The main problem was his severed femoral artery. Every time his heart beat it looked like, as he later told me, ‘about half a glass of Coca Cola was pouring out’ from the hole in his leg. With no hands, all he could do was look on helplessly as his life drained out.”

3 Further examples in Lucan: Book 1, line 618 *Terruit ipse color vatem* (“the color itself terrified the prophetess”), Book 1, lines 618-619 *Pallid taetris / viscera titcta notis* (“The pale entrails having been colored with foul spots”).
awful, yellow and sick”), he is literally describing the yellow tinge of the dying man’s skin. But later on page 232, Remarque states man sollte den Leuten zu Hause diese grauen, elenden, ergebenen Gesichter hier zeigen, diese verkrümmten Gestalten (“One should show the people at home these grey, miserable, obedient faces here, these twisted figures”). In this sentence, grauen (“grey”) is most likely not literally describing the color of the men, but instead indicating their sullen mood and low morale. The color grey is often associated with negative emotions, making Remarque able to use a visual descriptive word in a metaphoric sense.

Remarque uses the color grey again for a similar purpose again in saying einige Regenwochen liegen hinter uns – grauer Himmel, graue, zerfließende Erde, graues Sterben (p 236, “A few rainy weeks lie behind us—grey sky, grey, deliquescent earth, grey death”). Remarque uses the color grey in the literal sense when describing the grauer Himmel (“grey sky”), indicating a cloudy or rainy day. But he uses anaphora and goes on to also describe Sterben (“death”) as grey as well, although death is an abstract concept and does not have a color. Remarque could be referring to the actual color of the corpses once men have died, or to the hopeless emotion associated with the countless deaths in war. Remarque uses grey again when describing the blood of the decaying corpses of soldiers on the battlefield. He says, morgen werden sie bleich und grün und ihr Blut gestockt und schwarz (p 126, “tomorrow they will be pale and green and their blood thickened and grey.”) Interestingly, Remarque chooses to describe the decaying bodies using mostly color words, instead of emphasizing other elements of the decay, such as odor. Remarque’s use of color words extends beyond the literal, giving added depth to his description of World War I. Remarque is also deliberate in what colors he chooses to describe. He frequently uses the colors green and grey, perhaps to reflect the dreary mood of the soldiers or the utter hopelessness of war, both common themes in the book.4

Of the three authors, Wright uses color language the least, choosing other sensory and descriptive language to describe the battles in the Iraq war. He does not use colors in a metaphoric sense, as Remarque does, or within literary devices, like Lucan. But the colors that he does point out in his writing create important visual images for the reader. On page 89, he writes “We pass a few meters from the Humvee, close enough to see pools of brown fluid—probably blood—spilled on the ground by the doors.” Describing the color of the mystery fluid enables the reader to better visualize the scene. Just like Wright, the reader realizes that the brown color described is most likely the result of blood mixed with Iraqi sand. On page 115, Wright uses color language again in saying “On the other side we pass several blown-up Amtracs. Marine rucksacks are scattered on the road, with clothes, bedrolls, and bloody scraps of battle dressing. Nearby are puddles of fluorescent pink engine coolant from destroyed vehicles.” The description of the “fluorescent pink engine coolant” contrasts with the bloody debris surrounding it, creating an unsettling scene with great color disparity and probably surprising the reader. Though more simple, Wright’s use of color language is effective for the purposes of his work.

4 Further examples in Remarque: Page 84, Feuer und schwarze, größere Klumpen (“fire and grey, large clumps”), page 184, da, wo die Armwunden sind, ist die Erde Schwarz von Blut (“there, where the arm wounds are, the earth is grey from blood”).

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Eyes

The depiction of eyes is the last category of language for the sense of sight. Because eyes are the sole tools for the sense of sight in the body, their loss through injury is particularly cruel. In De Bello Civili, Lucan often emphasizes eye injuries as especially gruesome and uses literary devices and word placement to draw attention to the eyes. In book 6, lines 178-9, Lucan writes alterius flamma crinesque genasque / succendit, strident oculis ardentibus ignes (“he inflames with fire the hair and cheeks of another man, the fires hiss as the eyes are burning”). The literary devices in line 179 highlight the eyes as the focus of the sentence. Oculis (“eyes”) is the middle word of the five words in the line, and is surrounded on each side by two “fire words:” succendit (“set on fire”), strident (“hisses”), ardentibus (“burning”), and ignes (“fires”). While strident (“hisses”) is a direct onomatopoeia, the repeated “s” sounds make the entire line mimic the sound of a hissing fire. Oculis, as the only non-fire word, is given added importance in a line devoted to the full description of the eyes burning. Oculis appears as the middle word of a line again in line 541, book 6; inmergitque manus oculis gaudetque gelatos / effodisse orbes (book 6, lines 541-2, “and the hand digs the eyes and delights to dig out the circles having been frozen”). The placement of oculis (“eyes”) again gives prominence to the word, and the following phrase gaudetque gelatos / effodisse orbes (book 6, lines 541-542, “and delights to dig out the circles having been frozen”) is redundant, emphasizing the violent action of the eyes being dug out with interlocking word order.

Using repetitive language is another common way to stress the importance of a particular word or action. Lucan utilizes repetitive language in book 6 in saying in caput atque oculi laevom descendit in orbem (line 216, “it goes into the head and into the left circle of his eye”). Lucan uses both the word oculi (“of his eye”) and orbem (“circle”) to refer to the same eye being pierced through by a weapon. The repetition directs the reader’s attention to the eye as the focal point of the action. In line 218, Lucan describes the aftermath of the same injury in gruesome detail. He states, adfixam vellens oculo pendente sagittam (book 6, “pulling out the fastened arrow with the eye hanging”). Again, oculo (“eye”) is the middle word in the line, which stresses its significance. In book 6, line 757-758, the eyes are placed in between a noun and participle pair. Lucan writes, distento lumina rictu / nudantur (“the eyes are laid bare with the jaws having been spread out”), with the placement of lumina (“eyes”) creating a word picture of the jaws being spread out around the eyes. Though this action is not physically possible, the picture implies the great width that the jaws are spread out, while still highlighting the word lumina.

However, Lucan’s skillful placement of eye words is not limited to placing them in the middle of phrases or lines. In book 2, line 185, Lucan describes the final injury to a man who has already had his hands, tongue, ears and nose cut off. He says ultimaque effodit spectatis lumina membris (“and last gouged out the eyes with the limbs having been watched”). In this line Lucan juxtaposes the participle spectatis (“having been watched”) and the noun lumina (“eyes”). Placing a word for the act of seeing and a word for the tool used for sight next to each other stresses the importance of sight as a crucial element of this torturous death, -and the significance of the eyes as the last body part to be mutilated. Fantham notes that “ultima, ‘lastly,’ is predicative. All sources emphasize
the gouging out of Gratidianus’ eyes, but only L. has the perverse motivation of saving them to witness his own mutilation. Physical cruelty is compounded by mental sadism” (p 113-114). Through literary devices and word placement, Lucan calls attention to eyes and eye injuries while highlighting the importance of the sense of sight in *De Bello Civili*.

Interestingly, Remarque also pays special attention to eyes in *Im Westen nichts Neues*. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator describes how, Josef Behm, one of the first boys from his class to be killed, dies. He says, *er erhielt bei einem Sturm einen Schuß in die Augen, und wir ließen ihn für tot liegen* (p 48-49, “During a storm he received a shot in the eyes, and we left him to lie for dead”). Remarque chooses to use an eye injury as the cause for one of the first deaths in the novel, giving the fatal injury prominence. In contrast to Lucan, who uses eyes mainly in the context of eye injuries, Remarque also uses eyes as a focus in the process of death. When describing one of the narrator’s dying comrades, Remarque says *die Haut wird fahl, die Glieder erstarren, zuletzt leben- lange- nur noch die Augen* (p 220, “The skin becomes sallow, the limbs grow stiff, finally life- for a long time- is only in the eyes”). He depicts the eyes as the last part of the body to be overtaken by death. This passage emphasizes the symbolic meaning of eyes beyond that of just the physical tools for seeing.

Using the same idea that the eyes are the last body part to succumb to death, Remarque again describes the hopelessly advanced stage of death of one of the soldiers. He explains, *es ist bereits herausgedrängt bis an den Rand des Körpers, von innen arbeitet sich der Tod durch, die Augen beherrscht er schon* (p 50, “it was already out to the border of the body, from the inside death works itself through, it rules the eyes already”). Remarque specifically points out that death *die Augen beherrscht er schon* (“rules the eyes already”), because that is a definite sign that the soldier does not have long to live. The eyes are similarly described in the process of death on page 61, when Remarque states *die Augen versinken schon. In ein paar Stunden wird es vorbei sein* (“the eyes sink already. In a couple of hours it will be over”). Again, the eyes are the most important indicator of death in a soldier, giving them significance not only as a tool for seeing but as a symbol for life.

While Remarque used eyes as a symbolic indicator of death in soldiers, Wright is more similar to Lucan in his focus on eye injuries. He writes about how the Iraqi desert creates “runny noses and weeping, swollen eyes caused by the dust storms” (p 182), and thus hinders the soldiers by impairing one of their most crucial senses, sight. Later he describes seeing an Iraqi man after he has been shot in the eye by an American soldier. He explains, “We drive toward the blue car. The shot man behind the wheel appears to be in his forties . . . His right eye stares ahead; his left eye is covered in blood dripping down from the crown of his head” (p 261). The image of the man’s two eyes, one healthy, one destroyed, is disturbing because of the stark contrast. The wound is potentially fatal, but even if the man survives, his American marine attacker has forever disabled sight in his left eye. This injury seems particularly cruel because of the loss of an eye, such an important body part.

Later, on page 341, Wright describes one of the most gruesome injuries of the book. After one of the marines steps on a landmine nearby, Staff Sergeant Ray Valdez is deprived of sight and must ask Redman, one of his comrades, about his injury. Wright writes, “Redman jumps onto the highway. He sees Valdez wandering beside the road, holding his hands over his eyes, moaning. . . ‘Are my eyes there?’ Valdez asks. ‘I can’t
see nothing.’ Redman suppresses the urge to vomit. Both of Valdez’s eyes are filled with pebbles and debris. His left eye is packed. Bloody tissue puffs out around it like a blossom” (p 341). Wright uses simple sentences to describe the horror of Valdez’s eye injury. The image created is grisly and shocking, in a way that surpasses injuries to other body parts depicted throughout the book. The eye injury is at once gory, causing a visceral reaction from the reader, and tragic, because the marine will never see out of his destroyed left eye again. Like Lucan, Wright uses gruesome imagery to stress the importance of eyes and the tragedy of their loss through injury.

**Smell**

Like sight, the sense of smell is also an important tool that humans use to understand their environment. However, both Lucan and Remarque chose not to use sensory language associated with odor to help depict war in their works. Wright alone fully utilizes the sense of smell as an added layer of description that expresses the sensory experience of the soldiers. After the marines notice a horrific smell outside of an Iraqi city, Wright comments “This morning, Patterson realizes the odor comes from the corpses of shot-up Iraqi fighters rotting in nearby ditches” (p 223). The thought of the scent of rotting corpses constantly looming in the air would repulse any reader. While the sight of the corpses can be temporarily blocked by looking away from the ditches, escaping the strong scent of decay is a much more difficult feat. The unwanted scent is an assault upon the soldiers’ senses and serves as a constant reminder of the dead bodies lying not far from them.

Later, Wright describes the strong odor of burning bodies in connection with areas of heavy fighting. On page 246, he says “Redman smells a powerful odor of burning flesh. They have arrived in Al Muwaffaqiyah.” By this point, the soldiers have come to associate the smell of burned bodies with areas such as Al Muwaffaqiyah, which have undergone heavy fire from American forces. Outside of Baghdad just before the city falls, Wright comments on the smell again: “The streets are filled with newly liberated Iraqis in the throes of celebration. Though the city center will not fall for another twenty-four hours, freedom fills the air, along with the stench of rotting corpses, uncollected garbage and overflowing sewers” (p 288). Wright contrasts the jubilation of the citizens at the end of a cruel dictatorship with the repugnant smell of bodies, a reminder of the cost of freedom. Trash and sewer waste also add to the awful smell, implying that the city is in disarray. On page 309, Wright again describes the scent of burning bodies, this time depicting those inside vehicles that have been attacked. He states “Some of the smoking wreckage emits the odor of barbecuing chicken—the smell of slow-roasting human corpses inside” (p 309). Wright’s use of sensory language in this sentence is particularly horrible because he compares the unthinkable scent of burning human flesh to the common and pleasant odor of barbeque chicken. Such a contrast is shocking to the reader, especially because most people know the scent of barbeque chicken and would

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5 Further examples in Wright: Page 262, “What Aubin finds is yet another testament to the skills of the Marine Corps rifleman. Of the three rounds Hasser fired, one hit an occupant in the shoulder (whom we saw jump out), one skimmed into the hood and the third entered the driver’s left eye.” Page 298, “He’s had a severe allergic reaction to Iraq. His eyes have swollen to red slits. They ooze tears constantly, which mix with the snot pouring from his nose.”
therefore be able to imagine themselves as a part of this scene of warfare, undergoing the same sensory experience as Wright and the American soldiers.

Modern weaponry such as bombs and grenades were not yet invented in the first century BCE, the time of the war depicted in De Bello Civili. At the time, soldiers relied mostly on hand-to-hand combat. Thus Roman soldiers most likely would not have experienced the intense burning smell in battle that resulted from such advanced weaponry. The differences in weapons may explain why Lucan chose not to focus on smell as a means of describing the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, but Wright thought it important to use smell language to portray the Iraq war. Interestingly, Remarque also does not comment extensively on odor in Im Westen nichts Neues, though by World War I, soldiers were using grenades and other weapons which would likely have caused burning flesh.

Hearing

While Wright utilizes the sense of smell more than the other two authors, Remarque chooses to use the sense of hearing as a descriptive tool in Im Westen nichts Neues. When describing a soldier dying in an army hospital, Remarque says selbst seine Stimme klingt wie Asche (p 50, “even his voice sounds like ashes). Remarque skillfully uses literary devices to accentuate the description of sound in this line. He uses a simile to compare the sound of the dying man’s voice to ashes, an object that makes no sound but has dry qualities that a reader could associate with a harsh or raspy voice. Ashes are also associating with cremation, reminding the reader that for this man, death is imminent. Selbst seine Stimme (“even his voice”) is an alliteration, which creates an interesting sound pattern for the person reading the line. The literary devices draw attention to the sound being described in the line.

Onomatopoeia is a common literary device associated with sound and hearing which Remarque uses to describe the noises heard during battle. On page 121 he writes ein Bajonett zischt ihm in den Rücken ("a bayonet hisses into his back"). The verb zischt ("hisses") both describes and sounds like a bayonet slicing through the air and striking the soldier in the back. Remarque uses the same verb (zischen) on page 122 to describe a hissing shot as well as on page 128 to describe the hissing noises coming from the stomachs of corpses. The last example is particularly horrifying because dead bodies are the entities making the noise. Remarque also utilizes onomatopoeia again later on the page to describe the injured man’s reaction to the blow. He says, er springt hoch, und die Arme ausgestreckt, den Mund schreiend weit offen (p 121, “he jumps high, and the arms are outstretched, the mouth screaming wide open”). The adjective schreiend (“screaming”) describes the man’s yelling, but the sound of the word itself also emphasizes the painful noise. Remarque describes more sounds on battle when he writes überall knacken Drahtzangen, poltern Bretter über die Verhaue (p 121-122, “everywhere the wirecutters click, planks rumble over the entanglement”). The verb knacken (“click”) mimics the sound of the wirecutters cutting the wires. Also, Remarque’s choice to use the verb poltern (“rumble”) to describe the movement of the planks is interesting because though he is describing their movement, the verb he uses is suggestive of sound.

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6 schräg über die Ecke zischt der nächste Wurf (p 122, “sloping over the corner fizzes the next shot”).
7 Manchen treiben die Bäuche auf wie Ballons. Sie zischen, rülpfen und bewegen sich (p 128, “Some bellies float as if they are balloons. They fizz, belch and move themselves”).
Later Remarque depicts how the narrator experiences the noises coming from the man he has just stabbed. Remarque writes *Der andere röchelt. Es scheint mir, als ob er brülle, jeder Atemzug ist wie ein Schrei, ein Donnern* (“The other groans. It seems to me, as if he roars, every breath is like a scream, a rumbling”). Remarque uses a simile to describe what the man’s breathing sounds like to the narrator; *jeder Atemzug ist wie ein Schrei, ein Donnern* (“every breath is like a scream, a rumbling”). The reader does not know for sure if the man’s breath is really as loud as is described, or if the narrator’s nerves and emotions in battle are heightening his sense of hearing and making him acutely aware of every noise the other man makes. Remarque highlights these noises and their effect on the narrator through the onomatopoeia in the line.

While Wright does not often utilize the sense of hearing for descriptive purposes in *Generation Kill*, he uses a similar description to Remarque to describe a dying Iraqi man who has been shot by American soldiers in his car. Wright says, “He’s alive. When we pass within about a meter of him, we hear his rapid breathing—a shushing sound. Due to a temporary rotation in the team, Trombley is on the Mark-19 and Hasser is in the seat to the left of me. He rides closest to the man he just shot, and stares ahead, refusing to look as we drive past, listening to his dying gasps: *Shhhh! Shhhh! Shhhhh!*” (p 261). Just as odor cannot be easily ignored, sounds such as those of the dying men in Remarque and Wright are not easily blocked out. Though Hasser “refused to look as we drive past,” blocking his sense of sight from experiencing the injury he has caused, he—like the German soldiers before him—cannot help but hear the sounds of the man’s suffering. Because of its importance in the experience of battle and its unavoidable qualities, Remarque chooses to emphasize hearing in *Im Westen nichts Neues*.

**Touch**

Though Lucan and Remarque both use touch as an important descriptive tool in their works, Lucan’s use of sensory language concerning sensation is the most extensive out of the three authors (Wright ignores it completely, choosing to use other senses rather than touch to describe his experiences in Iraq). One component of the sense of touch is temperature. Lucan uses temperature language to give added description to parts of a scene. In book 6, line 568, Lucan writes *gelidis infundit murmura labris* (“she pours out murmurs with icy lips”). In this line, the *gelidis . . . labris* (“icy lips”) are surrounding the murmurs being poured out. The line creates a nice word picture which mimics the appearance of actual lips surrounding the mouth from which the murmurs would be emitted. Lucan describes cold temperatures again in book 6, line 752, saying, *percussae gelido trepidant sub pectore fibrae* (“the fibers having been beaten tremble under the icy chest”). Lucan uses a chiasmus to surround the *gelido . . . pectore* (“icy chest”) with the *percussae . . . fibrae* (“fibers having been beaten”). If taken as a word picture, the chiasmus seems to be inverted, because the fibers are *sub* (“under”) the chest and would more logically be the noun surrounded by the icy chest. The word picture adds to the horror of the passage because it suggests that the normal order of the situation is somehow wrong or unnatural.

Lucan also often uses “burning” or fire words to describe hot temperatures. In book 6, line 667, he writes *pectora tunc primum ferventi sanguine supplet* (“then first she

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8 Additional example in Remarque: Page 122 *die Erde ruckt, es kracht, dampft und stöhnt* (“the earth jerks, it cracks, fumes and groans”).
supplies the chest with burning blood”). The blood is described as *ferventi* (“burning”) instead of merely “hot” or “warm” to give added emphasis to its high temperature. Because it is a liquid, the blood itself cannot be “burning” (although it can cause burns), but Lucan may have used this adjective because it implies that there is pain associated with the temperature of the high blood. Later, in book 9, Lucan writes *calidaque incidunt viscera tabe* (line 742, “and with hot decay it burns the entrails”), with the *calidaque . . . tabe* (“hot decay”) surrounding the burning entrails. The two temperature-related words *calidaque* (“hot”) and *incendit* (“burns”) are juxtaposed for added emphasis. The fire-related imagery makes the destruction of the entrails seem even more violent to the reader. Lucan uses temperature to provide more detail about the elements he is describing.

Lucan also uses sensory language concerning dryness and wetness as a part of his touch descriptions. He often associates dryness with the mouth and throat area. In book 4, line 325 Lucan writes *oraque sicca regent squamosis aspera linguis* (“and the dry mouths stiffen, rough with scaly tongues”), using several sensory adjectives, *sicca* (“dry”), *aspera* (“rough”) and *squamosis* (“scaly”), to describe the feeling and texture of the mouth and tongues of Roman youth who have drunk water polluted with gore. In book 6 line 553, Lucan uses dryness to describe the throats of wolves in saying *siccis raptura e faucibus artus* (“about to snatch limbs from the dry throats”). Lucan again describes throats as being dry in book 6, line 567. He writes *siccoque haerentem gutture linguam* (“the tongue sticking to his dry throat”), using interlocking word order to show the tongue perhaps sticking so much that it is becoming a part of the throat. Similar to his descriptions of dry mouths and dry throats, in book 9, lines 744-745, Lucan uses the adjective *sicco* (“dry”) to describe a palate. He writes *in sicco linguam torrere palate / coepit* (“begins to parch the tongue in the dry palate”). Because *sicco* (“dry”) is juxtaposed next to *linguam* (“tongue”), the tongue, in addition to the palate, is implied as being dry. In this case, poison is causing the dryness in the mouth, as it seeps up all the moisture in the body of the victim. Lucan could choose to focus on describing the mouth area as dry to emphasize the contrast between his description and the moist or wet state of the mouth, tongue and palate under normal circumstances.

Lucan also uses wetness as a descriptive tool. In book 1, line 621, he writes *cernit tabe iecur madidum* (“he sees the liver wet with decay”) when he describes the liver of a sacrificial animal. Roche comments that the image of the wet liver is “an obviously bad omen . . . the adjective indicates a structural disintegration of the liver by being so steamed in the gore” (p 355). In book 2, line 125, Lucan uses a verb to depict the wetness caused by a slain man. He says *saeva tribunicio maduerunt robora tabo* (“the cruel oak becomes wet with the viscous fluid of the tribune”). The verb *maduerunt* (“becomes wet”) describes the feeling of the tree after the tribune’s death. Interestingly, *saeva* (“cruel”) and *tribunicio* (“tribune”) are juxtaposed, indicating that perhaps the tribune as well as the oak, was cruel. The fact that Lucan uses the verb *maduerunt* (“becomes wet”) suggests that a large amount of blood and gore from the tribune has landed on the tree. Lucan also employs synchysis in this line, perhaps indicating that the blood and gore of the tribune is covering, and becoming interlocked with the tree. Fantham notes that

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9 Further temperature examples in Lucan: Book 6, line 750 *Astrictus calcuit cruor* (“the blood having been frozen became hot”), book 3, line 644 *Qua viscera fervent* (“where the entrails are hot”).
“tribunicio . . . tabo has shock value (as well as assonance), since tribunes were sacrosanct and could not be touched without violating religion” (p 104).

Remarque also uses the language of tactile sensation in his descriptions. On page 189 he writes, about an incident when the narrator stabs an enemy soldier who has come into the place where he was hiding. He says Ich denke nichts, ich fasse keinen Entschluß - ich stoße resend zu und fühle nur, wie der Körper zuckt und dann weich wird und zusammensackt. Meine Hand ist klebrig und naß, als ich zu mir komme (“I think nothing, I do not come to a decision - I thrust, frenzied, and only feel how the body jerks and then is mellow and slumps down. My hand is clammy and wet, when I come to myself”). In this passage, the narrator, in an outburst of violence, seems to rely on only his sense of feeling when stabbing the enemy soldier. Remarque uses the adjectives klebrig (“clammy”) and naß (“wet”) to describe the feeling of the narrator’s hands when the act is done, indicating that they are covered by either sweat or blood.

Remarque uses wetness again to describe the earth after it has rained on the battlefield for a few weeks. He writes Die Gewehre verkrusten, die Uniformen verkrusten, alles ist fließend und aufgelöst, eine tiefende, feuchte, ölige Masse Erde (p 236, “The guns become cracked, the uniforms become cracked, all is flowing and dissolved, a dripping, moist, oily mass earth”). The description of earth is hyperbolic, but the many adjectives give a clear image of the conditions on the battlefield, and the feelings of the soldiers after dealing with so much rain. The multiple adjectives with similar meanings also mimic the many repeated weeks of rain that the soldiers experience.

Another component of feeling is firmness. Lucan and Remarque both use sensory language to describe if objects are hard or soft in order to create a more complete description of a scene. Lucan tends to describe objects as firm more often than he describes them as soft. In book 6, line 94, he says duravit visceras caeno (“hardened the entrails with slime”), creating a contrasting picture because caeno (“slime”) is usually thought of as a liquid, and yet it is hardening the visceras (“entrails”). Lucan uses the same verb again in lines 539-540 in book 6, writing tracta durescunt tabe medullae / corpora (“the bodies grow hard with the decay of the marrow having been drawn out”), this time describing the corpora (“bodies”) as becoming hard. Lucan portraying the bodies and entrails as hard is particularly effective because this description contrasts so completely with the soft feeling of healthy bodies and entails.

All three authors describe entrails using language which implies their texture. Lucan gruesomely describes the slippery property of entrails in book 4, lines 556-567 in saying iam latis viscera lapsa / semianimes traxere foris multumque cruorem / infudere mari (“now half-alive they dragged their slipped-out entrails to the wide gangways and poured much gore into the sea”). Lucan uses a chiasmus with the words latis viscera lapsa / foris (“the slipped-out entrails to the wide gangway”) to show the entrails slipping down the gangway. Though Wright does not use the sense of touch to describe scenes often in Generation Kill, he uses similar language to Lucan when describing a soldier accidentally stepping on the brains of a young Iraqi girl who has been killed. Wright says “the top of

10 Further example in Remarque: Page 236, Wenn wir hinausfahren, dringt uns bereits die Nässe durch die Mäntel und Kleider – und so bleibt es die Zeit vorne auch. Wir werden nicht trocken (“When we travel out, already the wetness penetrates us through the jacket and clothing – and so also remains the time in front. We do not become dry”).

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her head slides off and he brains fall out. When Graves steps back, he nearly falls over when his boot slips in the girl’s brains” (p 218). The action of slipping usually suggests a slimy texture and is quite effective in suggesting the feeling of entrails or brains. Remarque utilizes this descriptive technique on page 121-122 also, when he writes wir stolpern über glitschige Fleischfetzen, über weiche Körper, ich falle in einen zerrissenen Bauch, auf dem ein neues, sauberes Offizierskäppi liegt (“we stumble over slippery flesh shreds, over soft bodies, I fall in a tattered belly, on top of which lies a new, clean officer’s cap”). The description of the texture of the bodies adds to the goriness of the passage by making the gruesome scene more realistic for the reader.

**Taste**

The sense least often used to describe scenes of warfare in De Bello Civili, Im Westen nichts Neues, and Generation Kill is taste. This finding is logical because taste is the sense least utilized by soldiers during battle. But there are grotesque passages in the works that describe the process of eating. In book 6, lines 542-543, Lucan writes siccae pallida rodit / excrementa manus (“pale, she gnaws on the excretion of the dry hand”) when describing a witch eating the hand of a corpse. Though Lucan describes the act of eating, he refrains from describing the taste of the corpse. In book 9, lines 802-803, Lucan depicts the body of a plague afflicted man about to be eaten by wild animals as epulasque daturum / haud inpune feris (“about to give feasts to wild beasts not without punishment”). Wright draws on a similar theme when describing wild dogs eating corpses in Iraq. He writes “Espera’s vehicle swerves to avoid running over a human head lying in the road. When the vehicle turns, he looks up to see a dog eating a human corpse. ‘Can it get any sicker than this?’ he asks” (p 276). Animals eating humans is so uncivilized and repulsive in itself that both Lucan and Wright do not need to describe of the taste of the bodies to shock and repulse the reader. The nature of taste, a sense used for the most part only when eating, makes it non-essential in describing the experience of war.

**Conclusion**

Sensory language is a writing technique that allows authors to more fully depict scenes in their work. Though readers may not have firsthand knowledge about the content of the narrative, through detailed descriptions utilizing the senses of sight, smell, hearing, touch and taste, they are able to imagine clearly what the experience would be like. In their works about warfare, Lucan, Remarque and Wright use sensory language to describe the bloodshed that is so intrinsic to battles. All three authors rely heavily on visual descriptions to depict scenes in their work, while none of the authors utilize taste as an important component of their descriptions. Beyond sight and taste, each author seems to emphasize one sense more than the others. Many factors influence the author’s choice of which sense to highlight. For example, Lucan writes about a civil war one hundred years after it has occurred. Therefore he does not have any direct experience with the war he is describing. Yet through his sensory language, which emphasizes the different components of the sense of touch, he is able to present a realistic depiction of the civil war. Though Lucan himself did not experience the war, he knows that touch is a sense fundamental to the experience of war, and that he could probably describe the sensations of feeling in war more accurately than other senses. Next, Remarque wrote Im
Westen nichts Neues shortly after World War I. Although the novel is fictional, Remarque did serve briefly in the army, so his descriptions of army life likely have a truthful basis. Thus the sounds he heard during his own war experience could have influenced his writing and caused him to emphasize hearing in his work. Finally, Wright is a journalist who travelled with the Marines during the start of the Iraq war, and his book is about his own experiences in the war. His emphasis on the sense of smell most likely comes from his own shock at the new and horrific smells of the Iraq war. The smells he describes are often surprising (even surprising in their similarity to ‘civilized’ smells), and would not be known to someone without direct experience in the war. Therefore his descriptions of smells create a very realistic picture of the war.

By focusing on one sense, each author creates a unique sensory experience for the war he is describing. The wars depicted in the works differ greatly in the time periods in which they take place and manner of warfare itself. By focusing on different senses, the authors can highlight the sensations that are important to one particular wartime experience. Sensory language allows each author to describe his narrative in vivid detail, making the experience of war more realistic for the reader.
Bibliography