Helmand - a poem by John Hawkhead

Author's introduction
This poem concerns the current operations in Helmand province, Afghanistan. My intention was to draw parallels between military operations using the poppy which is grown extensively for opium and ironically is also the symbol we use for Remembrance Day

Helmand

Night on the cold plain,
invisible sands lift,
peripheral shadows stir,

space between light and dark
shrouding secrets;
old trades draped grey.

Here too poppies fall,
petals blown on broken ground,
seeds scattered on stone

and this bright bloom,
newly cropped,
leaves pale remains,

fresh lines cut;
the old sickle wind
sharp as yesterday.

John Hawkhead
2009

Comparison

In attempting to observe similarities between modern war poetry and our assigned readings for this week I found my attention to be focused more on the differences. In the 1910s, the first World War and war poetry were both new and unfamiliar ideas to England. The scale of conflict around this time was beyond anything that had been seen before, but the way of sharing personal sentiments about unfolding events through the established (by that time) art of poetry was also emerging. The amount of change that was occurring could not possibly be measured, at the world level or at the cultural.

Fast forward 100 years and things are very different today than they were then. The issues of the modern day soldier are similar in ways to those of the past, but at the same time different. The role of poetry in war has long since been replaced by other things, such as the Internet and numerous 24 hour news channels. The world has changed from a small handful of people trying to tell their stories in unfamiliar ways to too many people trying to tell too many stories in well established ways.

I am not suggesting that current war poetry is less authentic, it's just different in every way except perhaps impetus. Soldiers in 1915 were worrying about many kinds of things, but they definitely did not have to concern themselves with things like the repeal of "Don't ask, don't tell" as a political strategy to energize a base, or an active general being removed of his duty by a conveniently timed article published in magazine that showcases pop culture icons like Justin Bieber and Lady Gaga, or troops being withdrawn prematurely from an established and in some ways improving operation in an election year to give a needed boost to a certain party come November....

Re: Mortal Combat

This generation of soldiers grew up playing video games. They were shooting at people long before they ever went to boot camp. I think the connection between video games and combat is a strong one.

Check this website out: www.americasarmy.com

Here's the Wikipedia article for a summary*:* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/America's_Army

Re: Mortal Combat

By the way, it's spelled "Kombat". I will remind you that you are in a higher level English class and that you should know these kinds of things.

Re: Reality in Aghanistan

I think that one thing that many of these poems from the Afghanistan and Iraq wars have in common with some of the poems from this week's assigned readings is the need of the writer to communicate what is really happening to people who otherwise would not know. Our book mentions that the daily average number of English soldiers killed was fifteen hundred (2112), which pretty much ensures that somebody that you knew that used to be around either wasn't anymore and/or would never be around again. War poetry publications would only have reinforced this particular idea for the average person.

Re: Comparison

"prematurely"... what would be a defensible definition of a mature withdrawal?

Well, I probably should have gone into more detail on some of these points, but with this I was commenting on the strong likelihood of leaving the war effort in an incomplete state and effecting greater instability in the area over the long term. A lot of things are going to change the moment we start withdrawing troops, but at the same time everybody wants our them home sooner than later, so what is the correct decision? Can there be one? The heated public discourse surrounding these conflicts and the destructive political climate that created and feeds them has produced a tremendous amount of confusion. Most people don't really know what's going on (I include myself in this group), but still they demand action (but not in this one). It would be horrible if our troops and the people of Afghanistan and Iraq, those who have suffered in this the most, don't have what they need at the end of it all to ensure that future conflicts of this kind will not again occur. This might be impossible,

however, due to the nature of the war and the many unstated reasons for why we are there.

I guess what I was attempting to say is that, in certain ways, the worst thing that is happening to our troops is that they are frequently used for political maneuvers—which in my opinion is something that both parties are equally guilty of doing. In the process of all of this they oftentimes don't have what they need to do their jobs and are put in even greater harm.

Only in the talk-radio world is reality so simplistic (actually specious pablum) as to think one could end a war to win an election.

Well, Republicans and Democrats are always looking for ways to make the other look bad. When it comes to these wars the Democratic Party has plenty to work with. I hear what you're saying though: it's not going to do much for the economy if we suspend our war operations. Whoever is president at that time (which will probably be Obama since granting second terms to incumbents is something that is apparently quite popular with voters) will have to deal with the backlash of a downturn in the economy. I dunno… it's an involved subject and I wish I had more time to get into this. I believe what's going on right now is that our government is more and more like a pendulum that swings back and forth, each time a little more severely. Each party knows this and banks for when it swings back to their side: a number of people get elected and then for a little while it's a grab bag; then the pendulum starts going back in the other direction. Maybe the democrats know they can't do anything about this and so making a decision that hurts the economy at a particular time doesn't really matter or won't hurt them so much? Or maybe not. These are just some of the thoughts that I have when these kinds of topics come up.

Re: Comparison

A very interesting article, but there are many details in it than I am unable to place.

Here is the best reply I can give you about these troubles in Iraq: