

**Reframing History: *New Historicism* in
Cinematic Critique of World War II Perspectives in
'The Fighter Pilot' (2013) and 'Saving Private Ryan' (1998)**

Andreas Tano¹, Immanuel Sheva Simanjuntak²

English Literary Criticism: A Cross Cultural Study,

Boanerges: Makarios Education Journal

Email: andreas.tano@yahoo.com, immanuel.sheva.simanjuntak@gmail.com

*"Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit,
who is in you, whom you have received from God?
You are not your own; you were bought at a price.
Therefore honor God with your bodies."*

- 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (NIV)

ABSTRACT

This study aims at showing the biases of two contrast movies, *'The Fighter Pilot'* on the Japanese side and *'Saving Private Ryan'* on the American side in the context of *New Historicism*. Having the two movies analyzed, the *New Historicism* theory by Stephen Greenblatt (2011) was used to reveal the motives of both works. Two contextual aspects of the narratives were contrasted, *'Idealized Image'* vs. *'Realism'*. Hence, the cinematography aspects of both movies were also analyzed to reveal the emotional impacts and the motives of the characters. As a result: **1)** Emphasizing the themes of sacrifice, friendship, and loyalty, *"The Fighter Pilot"* presents an idealized image of Japanese fighter pilots during WWII, romanticizing their heroism, sacrifices, and positive qualities. **2)** The portrayal of the American soldiers in the *'Saving Private Ryan'* shows an idealized image of virtuous, patriotic, and brave individuals dedicated to duty, peacekeeping, and sacrifice for the greater good, using cinematic techniques to enhance heroism, while depicting the chaos and horrors of war, including the emotional toll on soldiers and moral dilemmas in the same era. **3)** Both movies avoid depicting unpleasant scenes of WWII, contributing to a one-sided perspective that compromises the historical accuracy by selectively portraying narratives to fit a particular motive. Thus, historical movies can be a tool for shaping one's perspective on historical events either to remember or to forget certain occurrences.

Keyword: *new historicism, the fighter pilot, kamikaze, saving private ryan, WWII*

INTRODUCTION

Movies have existed for a long time, not only it entertains audiences but also it mirrors the life of humans where people share experiences, feelings, thoughts and perspectives. It is also a medium where people learn from their mistakes and flaws, increasing awareness of the sense of humanity. Movies have different genres such as fiction and non-fiction; however, in a lot of historical or nonfiction, some of its aspects have been tweaked to satisfy the people's expectation in the country where it is produced. The different perspectives have been criticized by many people, some of which: *"Saving Private Ryan"*

(American production movie) and *"The Fighter Pilot"* (Japanese Production Movie). The two movies show contrast of their point of view about World War II, making it a subject to debate of what truly happened during that war. *"Saving Private Ryan"* shows a debatable perspective that is the ethical dilemma surrounding the mission to find Private James Francis Ryan and the sacrifices made during World War II.

The narrative presents a moral question about whether it is justifiable to risk the lives of a group of soldiers to save one individual, especially when so many lives have already been lost in the war. Some characters, like Reiben, question the mission's worthiness in comparison to other battles to liberate France and Europe. This perspective prompts discussion about the value of an individual's life versus the greater good and the ethical considerations of wartime decisions. On the other hand, *"The Fighter Pilot"* has faced criticism for its portrayal of Kamikaze pilots as nationalistic and sympathetic, with accusations of perpetuating a false myth. Director Hayao Miyazaki and others criticized the movie for its fictional war account. However, the director and the book's author defended the movie, emphasizing that it depicted war as a tragedy and aimed to preserve war memories. Despite controversy, the movie found success in Japan, becoming one of the highest-grossing movies. Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Yoko Ono expressed support for the movie's message.

Steven Spielberg's *"Saving Private Ryan"* won five Oscars, including Best Director, and secured two Golden Globes. It also earned two BAFTAs, the Screen Actors Guild Award for Best Ensemble, and recognition from the Directors Guild of America and Producers Guild of America. It remains a highly acclaimed war movie. Meanwhile, the Japanese movie *"The Fighter Pilot"* received awards primarily in Japan, including the Kinema Junpo, Mainichi movie, and Hochi movie Awards. While well-received domestically, it did not achieve the same international recognition as *"Saving Private Ryan."*

Upon analyzing the movies, the theory of *New Historicism* is used to reveal the hidden motives in the lens of literary criticism. Based on the above issue, it is expected that the study will reveal how movies can be a media of propaganda that disseminate information, ideas, or messages with a biased or manipulative intent. How it often influences or persuades the audience in a particular direction, also implies that the information may not be entirely accurate or objective. *"New Historicism, as a method of literary analysis, is concerned with the ways in which literary texts participate in the culture and society from which they emerge. It seeks to understand the literary work not as a self-contained object, but as a series of social transactions"* (Greenblatt, S., 1988). This method focuses on the interconnectedness of literary texts with the historical and cultural context in which they were produced. Instead of viewing a literary work as an isolated creation, New Historicism considers it as a product of its time, reflecting and contributing to the social and cultural dynamics of the period.

Table 1

Binary Opposition	"Idealized Image" vs. "Realism"
Context	Examining how wartime narratives are portrayed in movies.
In " <i>The Fighter Pilot</i> "	Contrasting the idealized image of Japanese fighter pilots presented through their ideal point of view with the harsh realities they faced during WWII.
In " <i>Saving Private Ryan</i> "	Contrasting the influence of American perspective during WWII on perceptions of heroism and patriotism with the gritty realism depicted in the movie.

METHOD

This analysis discussed the two different perspectives of the historical movies: ‘*The Fighter Pilot*’ from the Japanese point of view and ‘*Saving Private Ryan*’ from the American point of view. Their bias about the World War II events becomes controversial. Therefore, in the analysis, *New Historicism* theory by Greenblatt, S (1988) was used; a literary theory that examines how literary works are influenced by the historical and cultural context in which they are produced. This theory was particularly used for evaluating how the movies interpret and portray World War II, as it allows researchers to analyze how historical events, ideologies, and cultural influences shape the narratives and perspectives presented in the movies. By applying *New Historicism*, how each movie aligns with or deviates from the historical record, and how it reflects the values and beliefs of its time of production were criticized. Besides, the significant scenes were analyzed using a cinematography approach as the story was presented in moving pictures, such as the camerawork, music, background, lighting, colors, and many more. Having the movies analyzed, Qualitative method was used to explain, describe, and criticize the aspects of the stories.

Historian David Culbert, in "*movie and Propaganda in America: A Documentary History*," discusses the influential role of movie in propagating wartime narratives and shaping public perception of war and national identity: "*movie was a powerful tool for propaganda, shaping public perception of war and national identity.*" (Culbert, 1990, p. 72). This aligns with the two movies presented by the respective nations, giving a new perspective in the portrayal of World War II events. On the contrary, Yoshimoto, M. (2000) argued, "*The Japanese movies were designed to create a sense of national unity, to justify the war aims, and to glorify the sacrifices of the soldiers and civilians.*" It creates a sense of heroism but at the same time, a portrayal of a victim due to WWII.

DISCUSSION

1. Characters' portrayal in the Japanese Movie, *'The Fighter Pilot'*



The movie begins with a ceremony to commemorate heroes' sacrifices during WWII in a Japanese state office. The camera takes a bird's eye view to show the entire hall, full of people showing respect and solemnity; while the music plays a calm melodic violin, giving the nuance more patriotic. Then, it highlights a

young man who is the grandchild of Miyabe (Fighter Pilot) in a close-up shot, revealing his blank expression; this is due to his absence of memory of his grandfather. This opening scene serves the purpose of introducing the characters one by one, specifically the main character: Kentarô Saeki. At the same time, this scene also introduces the theme of the movie, starting by showing the audience the dignity of Japanese WWII soldiers' descendants who are the victims of the U.S air force's attacks in Hawaii. In this part, the impact of how the audience views Japanese soldiers' past events can shift from tragedy to patriotic spirit. Greenblatt, S (1988) in his new historicism perspective argued, "*Literature can serve as a vehicle for the subversion or reinforcement of prevailing ideologies.*" The power of narrative and storytelling may blur the audience's perspective about the historical facts that picture the Japanese soldiers' actions during the invasion in Hawaii; rather, it visualizes the patriotic scene. The movie then tells the flashback story from the perspective of Miyabe in the past when his grandfather joined the military to occupy Hawaii. Greenblatt, S (2011) also added, "*History is not only what happened in the past but also what later generations choose to remember, and choose to forget.*" (p.7) It means that history gives choices to those who retell the story from time to time and how people interpret it. The shaping of historical narratives is significantly influenced by the decisions of individuals or societies to highlight, commemorate, or recall certain events while diminishing the importance or overlooking others. A purposely repetitive history manipulation can be used to propagate and switch people's perspective about the past. The movie romanticized the struggle of the Japanese heroes during WWII; however, it is shown in a one-sided perspective that drives out major events of the pacific war.

The flashback begins with the training of the fighter pilots among whom



Miyabe has the greatest potential and abilities in operating his jet skillfully. Instead of being respected, he is instead discriminated against by jealous fellow soldiers. Then, the real war happens when all the pilots fly to attack the U.S air force. The camera shoots in a worm's-eye view to create a dramatic scene of free falling fighter planes from both sides: Japanese and The U.S. However, the Japanese pilots retreated due to the weakening forces. This part lets the audience see that they are on the losing side, struggling to defend themselves from enemy forces. Greenblatt, S (1988:4) said that the object of literature is a product of its time and that it reflects the values, beliefs, and power structures of that period. It means that historical events can be reshaped according to the time, social politics, power and the country where the movie is made. The movie pays respect to the Japanese heroes who are skillful and brave, but it shows the brutality of the war on the Japanese side. Nevertheless, it puts aside the highlights of the casualties and the death of the civilians due to the atrocities of the aerial combat. Afterwards, one of the pilots runs out of fuel, he signals to Miyabe that he intends to do a suicide bomb into the enemy forces. Miyabe declines his decision and tells him to retreat to his homeland but in the middle of his journey, he has to land on water and wait for the rescue team. However, Miyabe receives news that the soldier who lands on water cannot survive due to shark infested waters. Upon hearing this, another soldier confronts him and says why he does not let the pilot sacrifice himself for his country when it will have made him not die in vain. He says, *"Don't you have people who will feel sad for you if you die?"* Besides, the statement draws the audience's sympathy to show that the soldiers have someone to protect and portrays them as the victims of the impacted war. This movie depicts the soldier as a hero by showing his suicide death as something patriotic by the people's perspective in his country because he is able to destroy the enemy's fleet.

This scene shows the two characters' interaction in a wide shot when his friend is willing to be a Kamikaze pilot, making an honorable sacrifice for his country. He says, *"Please let me make an honorable sacrifice."* From his statement, the movie tries to show the glorification of the high spirited



Japanese fighter pilots, devoting themselves to their country. In the narrative context of movies, some historical events in a plot potentially can be modified to a particular purpose or agenda. *"Literature is merely a tool for political indoctrination"* (Greenblatt, 2003). Movies are media that have roles in shaping public perspective, specifically about the war; the portrayal of the Kamikaze pilot creates an image of a hero, yet he is a symbol of Japanese resistance. In this part of the scene, it tries to divert people's attention about the historical event but more into a strong relationship between characters. It also drags the audience into having emotional connection and portraying a good image of the characters: brotherhood, loyalty, bravery, patriotism, and victimization. A few hours after,

prior to the mission, Miyabe realizes that his plane has fuel malfunction, then he switches his plane to his friend's by requesting it and he agrees. In this part of the scene, the movie directs the audience to the dramatic event to gain more sympathy to the victimized characters. A few minutes after taking off, Miyabe's friend realizes that his plane which is originally Miyabe's has a fuel malfunction. As he looks through the cockpit's window ahead, fuel splashes over his view and he is running out of fuel to finish his mission to the enemy base. Again, this part creates a more touching moment to the audience as Miyabe who always values his life over his country. *"The ultimate act of self-sacrifice is to die for others, and the ultimate act of heroism is to die for one's country"* (Hirohito, E.,1997). The statement reflects a perspective that was present in certain historical contexts and cultural frameworks, particularly during times when notions of sacrifice and duty were emphasized.



In this last moment, the movie shows Miyabe in a medium shot to focus on the Miyabe's gestures or facial movements and dutiful expression in the plane as the plane goes off into the horizon. Flying side by side with his friend, Miyabe signals him to retreat as he does not have enough fuel to carry out the mission. Touched and angry, his friend sadly accepts his order, realizing that Miyabe values his life as a faithful friend who is willing to die for him and his country. *"The emotional impact of literature is not only more memorable but also more significant than the historical accuracy of events. By prioritizing emotional resonance, authors can create works that transcend time and place, speaking to universal human experiences."* (Kirsch, 2019, p. 155) The movie takes the theme of friendship to show the Japanese soldiers' strong emotional relationship, conveying the idea that they are interconnected or share a common destiny. This significantly buries the story into the audience's mind, leaving a powerful emotional impact that may overshadow the historical events.

The story then goes back to the present day, the movie screen fades into black and then fades out to show Miyabe's friend 'Oishi' and his daughter 'Kiyoko'. At this time, the camera takes a wide angle shot focusing on the two characters as he retells it to the next generation all of these horrifying events and how this remains in the mind of the veteran soldiers at the time of WWII. *"History is not a fixed and objective record of the past, but rather a construct of power and manipulation. It is shaped by the*

perspectives and agendas of those who write it, and can be used to legitimize or challenge existing power structures." (Greenblatt, 1991, p. 12) In his view, history becomes nothing more than a tool in the hands of the powerful, used to divert and manage the order of the public opinion. He asserts that those in control fashion historical stories to align with their own interests. This standpoint implies that history is not a neutral retelling of past events; instead, it is a subjective historical interpretation crafted and molded by those wielding influence. On another occasion, Oishi tells, "Miyabe san did not return." In Japanese culture, San is a call for a respected person or an elderly or someone who has a higher position. His sentence shows the deep loss of his dear friend and captain as well as a hero in his country. Meanwhile, Oishi himself is portrayed as a normal veteran who gets a chance to have a family due to Miyabe's sacrifice. In this very last scene, the camera shows the expression of the daughter's face looking deeply sad, following her father's perspective of the war.



2. Characters' portrayal in the American Movie, 'Saving Private Ryan'

The movie is set in France during World War II in 1944 and follows a group of soldiers led by



Captain John Miller, who are on a mission to find Private James Francis Ryan and bring him home safely after his three brothers are killed in action. The movie depicts the soldiers' journey through dangerous territory, facing bloody skirmishes, mutinous infighting, and the

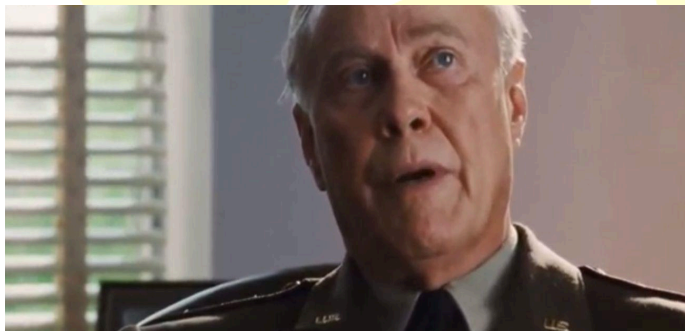
wrong Pvt. Ryan, to find the right one. In the beginning of the scene, the movie shows barriers on the shallow beach of Omaha near one of the German headquarters. The camera shoots slowly from the top of the barrier to the horizontal view, showing all of the barriers signifying something critical is going to happen. Then, it abruptly shifts to the scene where the tension of the U.S navy sailing in the sea towards the headquarters can be felt through the shaky camera pointing at one of the war ships while showing the date of the battle, June 6, 1944. At this very moment, the portrayal of the characters is full of dignity, bravery, patriotism and integrity. New historicism views "*Literary objects are not simply the products of individual authors or literary traditions but are actively engaged in shaping historical and cultural contexts.*" (Greenblatt, 2004, p. 3) Movies can go beyond the historical context, bringing about the intricate hidden motive and play a significant role in shaping or influencing people's opinion about the

image of war that can be patriotic, yet biased. The movie tries to engage the audience by showing the dramatic battle of the American soldiers partaking in the brave solidarity action to fight the Germans in France.

Following the first scene, all the soldiers finally arrive at a nearby beach by slowly walking towards the shore due to the risky situation facing the enemy. The shooting of the camera follows the army in a wide shot to show the chaos and hectic condition where the shooting of weapons and



bombing can be seen throughout the scene; at the same time, it shows the struggle of the U.S army as they are losing numbers being shot down. Horrible scenes of the piles of the dead bodies of the U.S side can be seen. At one moment, the camera focuses on one of the soldiers who is praying in the middle of the tragic battle in low position. At this time, the movie tries to draw the audience's sympathy when he is reciting the Lord's prayer. The depiction of this war shows how the U.S army become the victim of this war at this moment. It highlights the positive image imposed on the audience. Greenblatt in Womersley (2007:325-340) argued, "By examining the ways in which authors represent war in their works, we can gain insight into the cultural and political values of their societies." It means that literature can be a source of history as it reflects beliefs, attitudes, and anxieties of its time when it is made. Hence, it can be seen from the perspective of the movie that they are portrayed on the right side. He also believed that literary works are not only a piece of art but also past records in which a particular event of history can be learned to dig deeper into the past based on people's point of view at the time.



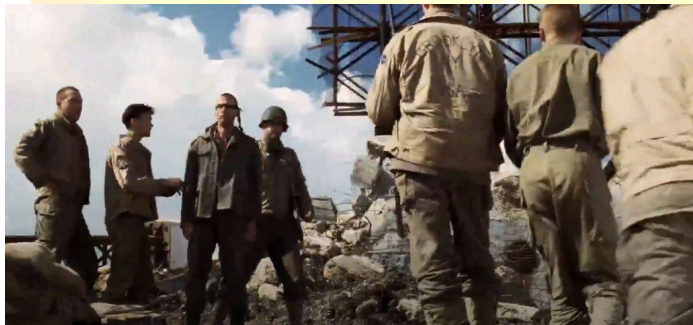
In this beginning scene of the war, it portrays them as the winner and the dominant power over the opponents. Winning the battle for the German headquarters in Omaha, France, the high chief of the U.S army commands a group of soldiers to rescue the only remaining son of a single mother or widow. Although his underlings disagree and

question him, he insists on his ideals, saying "That boy's alive. We are going to send someone to find him. And we are getting him the hell out of there." It shows his firm commitment and sympathy for a poor citizen, protecting and not letting any American citizen die in the war. The depiction of the characters in the movie emphasizes the portrayal of America as the peacemaker, protector, and justice enforcer. Even

though this historical event is based on what happened; however, the character Private Ryan and the mission to save him is fiction. *“Diversion in literature reveals that it is often used to mask political and social issues (Greenblatt, 1991, p. 13).”* This technique is a common strategy to drag the audience’s attention about the brutality of war and its impact on civilians.



Upon receiving the news about his troop mission, many of Captain Miller’s soldiers complain about the unrealistic nature of the saving of one random troop. In this part of the scene, the camera takes an extreme close-up, revealing the character’s mood and expression of despair after his first soldier dies during the mission. The background looks dark with the soft lighting from the fire, reflecting on the character’s face creates the tone of sorrow when talking to his troop. *“When you end up killin’ one of your men, you tell yourself: it happened, so you could save the lives of 2 or 3 or 10 others you know. Maybe a 100 others. you know how many men I’ve lost under my command? 94. But that means I’ve saved the lives of ten times as many, doesn't it? maybe twenty? And that's how simple it is. That's how ya rationalize making the choice between the nation and the men.”* says Captain Miller to Mike, one of his soldiers. From his statement, it can be seen that he values the lives of his men for the better good of his nation, rather than saving one life at the cost of many.



During a fight for a German camp, another one of Captain Miller’s soldiers dies. Winning the fight, the last standing German soldier surrenders himself but due to the soldier’s death, the American soldiers want to take revenge. In this part, the movie shows all the characters in one shot, shooting it from below to enhance the dramatic event of the

capture. All of a sudden, one of Captain Miller’s soldiers goes against the idea because he has surrendered but Miller replies, *“Tell him to march a hundred paces forwards and take off his blindfold. He'll turn himself in to our next camp.”* Instead of killing him, the captain shows mercy by letting him march and leaves his fate up to chance. The portrayal of the American soldiers shows their soft action towards the enemy; even though they lose respect to him.

By the end of the movie, the American soldiers eventually manage to find James Francis Ryan. At this time, the camera starts to shoot him first in close-up mode to gain sympathy from the audience of

what has happened. Then it shifts to the two characters, Ryan and Miller, to show their interaction, sharing emotions while having a conversation about the death of Ryan's brother. Upon hearing this information, Ryan is taken aback and visibly sad and shocked. However, when Miller tells him that he can go home, he chooses to stay to protect the camp, saying *"I have my orders too Sir, they don't include me abandoning my post. Sir I can't leave until at least reinforcements come."* This movie shows Ryan's integrity and loyalty to his nation, even though he is the target of the rescue mission. Furthermore, it shows the dutifulness of the American soldiers. Hearing this, Captain Miller makes a decision to stay until the reinforcement comes. However, before they come, the Germans out of nowhere try to take over the post.



During the war for that post, the very same captive Miller lets go, takes a chance to kill one of the American soldiers in Miller's office. The camera takes a low position to shoot the two men fighting. It creates the tension atmosphere when the German shows his fierce action to kill the American soldier. It implicitly conveys the bad image of the German soldier, betraying

the mercy of Captain Miller. In addition, this also tells that American soldiers are on the victim's side. Shortly after, Ryan finally makes it through the battle and arrives in his home country but has to live with the burden of four lives on his shoulders including Captain Miller.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the movie, *'The Fighter Pilot'* highlights the dynamic depiction of the characters, specifically the main character, Kentarô Saeki, and his grandfather Miyabe. The movie unfolds the historical events, focusing on the dignity and struggles of soldiers on the Japanese side of WWII. Nonetheless, it contains bias on the historical narratives as the movie tends to romanticize the heroism of Japanese fighter pilots, but avoids showing unpleasant scenes of the Pacific war that can ruin the image of the country. A powerful emotional impact on the audience is created on purpose through the narrative of

the movie through the themes of sacrifice, friendship and loyalty. However, it shows how the historical narratives are prone to subjectivity. The movie ultimately presents a nuanced perspective on the complexities of war and the lasting impact on individuals and their legacies, as seen through the lens of Miyabe's friend Oishi and his daughter Kiyoko in the present day.

On the other hand, 'Saving Private Ryan' shows the portrayal of the virtues of patriotism, bravery and integrity seen in the WWII characters, led by John Miller. A number of cinematic techniques in the scenes are employed to bring the positive image of the American soldiers, portraying them as the protectors and peacemakers, while showcasing the moral dilemma of war by sacrificing for the greater good. The narratives weave in fiction along with the historical events, using the plot technique to divert the audience's attention from the brutality of war and its impact on civilians to the emotional aspects among the characters. Conclusively, the movie leaves a lasting impression by depicting the soldiers' dedication to their nation, their moral dilemmas, and the emotional toll of war, shaping a narrative that goes beyond historical facts to reflect cultural and political interests.

All in all, while *'The Fighter Pilot'* digs into the dynamic portrayal of characters in Japanese WWII, emphasizing the biases in historical narratives and deliberately creating emotional impact through themes of sacrifice, friendship and loyalty, *'Saving Private Ryan'* highlights on American soldiers during the same era, highlighting virtues like patriotism and bravery, employing cinematic techniques for a positive image, and incorporating fiction to explore moral dilemmas and emotional aspects. Both movies showcase the subjectivity of historical narratives and offer nuanced perspectives on the complexities and lasting impacts of war on individuals and their legacies in the future ahead.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Culbert, D. (1990). *Movie and Propaganda in America: A Documentary History*. Greenwood Press.
- Greenblatt, S. (2003). *Literature and power*. London, UK: Methuen.
- Greenblatt, S. (1991). *Marvelous possessions: The wonder of the New World (New ed.)*. University of California Press.
- Greenblatt, S. (1992). *Power and ideology in Renaissance Europe*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Greenblatt, S. (1988). *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England (2nd ed.)*. University of California Press.
- Greenblatt, S. (2004). *The swerve: How the world became modern (New ed.)*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Greenblatt, S. (2011). *The swerve: How the world became modern*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Hirohito, E. (1997). *The Emperor in His Own Words: Hirohito's Radio Speeches to Japan, 1941-1945* (G. G. Sorenson, Trans.). New York: Random House.

Kirsch, A. (2019). The power of emotion in literature: A psychological perspective. *Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, 23(1), 147-162.

Rakuten TV. (n.d.). https://www.rakuten.tv/ie?content_type=movies&content_id=the-fighter-pilot

Saving Private Ryan (1998) ★ 8.6 | Drama, War. (1998, July 24). IMDb. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120815/>

Saving Private Ryan Movie Official website | Trailers and gallery | Paramount Pictures. (n.d.). Saving Private Ryan Movie Official Website | Trailers and Gallery | Paramount Pictures. <https://www.paramountpictures.com/movies/saving-private-ryan>

The Holy Bible, New International Version. (1984). International Bible Society.

Womersley, David. (2007). "New Historicism." *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 325-340.

