

# [History and memory](https://assignbuster.com/history-and-memory/)

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History and memory both provide adequate insights into the past, but it is through the consideration and combination of the two that compelling and unexpected insights are generated. After having analysed and studied a selection of poems from Denise Levertov’s anthology ‘ Freeing of the Dust’ and ‘ Millicent’s Story’, which is an extract from the ‘ Report of the National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal children from their families’ it has become apparent to me that this viewpoint is demonstrated vividly through a variety of textual forms and a plethora of elements and techniques.

History claims to record the truth of past events. At its best it is aware of its limitations to be entirely truthful because of its partial and highly biased nature. Traditionally history was more respected than memory as a representation of the past because it was viewed as an empirical study and thus was more reliable. During the post-modernist era, however, a new view arrived, which placed higher value on memories for their ability to disrupt and dispute the meta-narrative provided by history.

This disruption of history generates compelling and unexpected insights into the past when both history and memory are considered. In Levertov’s poem ‘ In Thai (Peace) Province’ she recreates her time spent in Vietnam during the Vietnam War working as an official reporter recording history and memories. The opening line expressed in first person ‘ I’ve used up all my film on bombed hospitals’ makes it seem as if Levertov is dispassionate and neutral towards the war. This is further reinforced through the repetition of ‘ bombed’, which conveys the factual and partial nature of history.

It cannot create an intimate and detailed picture of this event, merely black and white facts and evidence. This is later contrasted by the peaceful imagery of her memory, ‘ warm slant of afternoon light ‘, which provides the reader with completely new insights into the war. Levertov creates an unexpected insight into the Vietnam War through the juxtaposition and comparison of both history and memory, something history or memory could not achieve alone. ‘ Millicent’s Story’ is an oral transcript of her experience in the Stolen Generation.

She recounts the horrific details of her memory, which have been all but neglected until recently, that completely contradict the history that was recorded and proclaimed about the care and welfare of Aboriginal children which is now known as the ‘ Stolen Generation’. The colloquial Aboriginal dialect, ‘…whitefellas away…’ apparent throughout the transcript shows how Millicent is now expressing her own personal memories, which completely conflict with what was once recorded history. This demonstrates how memory has recently become highly valued.

The manner in which she was treated is so appalling that it makes the listener wonder how this type of treatment was ever ignored. This is expressed poignantly in the imagery and alliteration of ‘ whipped with a wet ironing cord’. This makes it apparent that history may give a completely biased and untruthful version of the past, although this version had once been considered the truth. The recent consideration of memories into this historic event has generated an unexpected and compelling insight.

Throughout Levertov’s poetry she continues to compare and contrast history and memory to demonstrate to the viewer just how much they can contradict each other, therefore making it vital that the two are considered when trying to recreate the past in a reliable fashion. This viewpoint is portrayed with extreme effectiveness in her poem ‘ The Pilots’. The anaphora of the opening lines, ‘ Because they were... ’, demonstrates what has been considered as the truth in regards to the Vietnam War.

This is that the pilots merely did what they were told without real knowledge of ‘ what these bombs are designed to do to human flesh’. Levertov begins to wonder how ignorant they truly were, her memories of meeting with the prisoners of war, ‘ drinking tea with the POW’s’, make her believe that the history she has been told is a facade covering up the truth. Her unexpected insight into this historic event compels her to the point where she can no longer feel proud to be an American, which is shown strikingly in the rhetoric question, ‘ how shall I ever be able to meet the eyes of Mrs.

Brown? ’. The manner in which the interplay of history and memory generate unexpected and compelling insights has been so powerfully expressed to me through these texts that I now have a much better understanding of this symbiotic relationship. Predominantly that it is only through the consideration and combination of both history and memory that enthralling insights are generated. Hopefully the amalgamation of history and memory can be continued to provide future generations with truthful and bias-free recreations of their past, our present.