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Reader Response and Questions *The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen

The Eurasian narrator of Viet Thanh Nguyen's debut novel *The Sympathizer* wholeheartedly believes in the power of his duality. While there is an attraction to the victimhood that is commonly expressed by mixed race characters in American literature, the nameless narrator learns to use it as his super strength and talent. He believes himself to be the epitome of a Hegelian synthesis. Not half of anything, instead he is something new and twice as much as those around him. He introduces himself as "a man of two minds" (1). He can see things two ways and catches a perspective that eludes those of "pure" Vietnamese or European blood. Thus, he is "The Sympathizer" a man whose superpower derives from the fact that he does not belong to one group or another.

The unnamed narrator and double agent who simultaneously works as a South Vietnamese military advisor and North Vietnamese spy can sympathize with both sides of Vietnamese conflict that explodes around him. His father was French and his mother Vietnamese. While those around him consider him a deficient due to his status as a "bastard," he considers his ability to see both sides of the war as both a talent and weakness; it is his weapon for survival. Nonetheless, the trait which he describes with pride ends up being his most dangerous flaw. While he can "sympathize" with opposing ideologies, there is a carelessness about the detachment that comes as baggage to such a trait. He lacks the commitment and connection that "empathy" entails and it becomes inevitable that the narrator learns that true

change and survival requires intimate human connections that cannot be held neatly together by ideological schools of thought or political theories.

I first became interested in *The Sympathizer* after hearing an interview during which the author, Viet Thanh Nguyen, confessed that he wrote this as an act of revenge on the usual narrative of the Vietnam war. He wanted to confront and challenge stories that have left Vietnamese people most affected by the conflict as voiceless and marginal to the story. He believed films such as *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deerhunter* and *Full Metal Jacket* sacrifice the humanity of those most affected and turned them into caricatures. Nguyen's debut asserts that his characters are more than bodies to be dismantled for the sake of film glory. Viet Thanh Nguyen's first fictional work delivers on its promise on shattering the mainstream narrative of the Vietnam war and challenges the one-sidedness through which war is usually narrated. He challenges the reader to find a true war a story where any kind of heroism or understanding is accomplished. Nguyen leaves audiences with "nothing" and he seems to think that is more than enough.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

How did the narrator's biracial identity influence or motivate his actions?

How are the narrator and his antagonists alike? Different?

What are some reasons that the narrator decides to serve as a double agent?

What is the author's purpose for including the narrator's participation in a film about the Vietnam War?

Based on the information in the story, what assumption can I make about the author's views on the Vietnam war?