**Thematic Connection – Loss of Innocence Child Soldiers**

Over 250,000 children under 18 are fighting in both government armies and armed opposition groups. Some children are kidnapped or forced to serve; others join up hoping to find food and shelter, help their families, or improve their lives.

Because of their emotional and physical immaturity, children are easy to manipulate and can be drawn into violence that they are too young to resist or understand. Both boys and girls may be sent to the front line of combat or into minefields ahead of older troops. Some have been used for suicide missions or forced to commit atrocities against their own families and neighbors. Others serve as porters, cooks, guards, servants, messengers, or spies. Many child soldiers, mostly girls, are also sexually abused.

Children are killed and wounded at far higher rates than their adult comrades. Those who survive often suffer trauma, injury, abuse, and psychological scarring from the violence and brutality they experience. Some are rejected by their families and communities. Most lose the opportunity to acquire an education, job skills, or any hope for the future. -*From the United Nations*

**Voices of Child Soldiers** – *from the United Nations*

*Visna is registered in the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces as an adult soldier. He is 16 when interviewed in a remote area west of Battambang City. Being the youngest of three children, Visna’s parents couldn’t afford to send him to school. Instead, he helped his father fish. When Visna was 12 his father died. He was too small to fish as competently as his father had. It wasn’t long before Visna saw himself a burden to his mother.*

Through village gossip, my mother learned an army officer was looking for an aide. When my mother suggested that I apply, I wasn’t interested. But after a quarrel with her, I sought out the officer. I was recruited to be the man’s bodyguard. I had no idea what the job would require. When my commander went to the front, I went too. I was so frightened even though there were many soldiers near. I was given an AK47 to carry. Sometimes I was told to fire it, but I don’t know if I ever shot anyone. My duties included cleaning guns, patrolling and cooking rice for my unit. I sent my salary to my mother through my brother.

I have seen several people killed in battles with Khmer Rouge soldiers. I remember the terror that grabbed me from out of the jungle where I could not see the enemy but could hear their voices. That fear sometimes visits me when I sleep at night. I also remember the weight of exhaustion from carrying weapons and equipment up and down the forested mountains where my unit was posted.

I had malaria several times and often have headaches and dizziness. My commander treats me well. He even gives me extra money each payday and I buy cakes for myself. Other soldiers aren’t as kind. One man has beaten me several times, and I don’t know why. Another man, no longer a soldier but who lives near the military camp, has threatened to kill me.

The nights are the worst. Sometimes I am too afraid to sleep. For when I sleep, I dream I am dead. In my dream, a soldier in uniform comes to find me. He is angry with me. I am arrested and taken away. The soldier questions me for a long time. I say I don’t know what I have done. No one listens to me. I see someone take a gun, and then they shoot me – not just once but three times…

Is that called a dream or a nightmare?

*Vasco is wiry and tall. He has black eyes, a long face and short straight black hair. He begins talking of his experiences in the pro-autonomy militia in a whisper, constantly looking for approval from the village headman. When answering difficult questions, he looks at the ground and puts his head to the wall with a pained expression creasing his face. Vasco, who was 16 when interviewed, was forced to join a militia for eight months when he was 14, prior to the referendum in 1999. He comes from a village where 144 families lived during the Indonesian occupation. Only 90 families live there now.*

The militia first came to my village in early January. ...they beat many people and killed some. They told us that if we did not join them we would die. When the militia came, my parents were very afraid and said to me, "If the militia ask you to do anything, just do it or they will kill us."

The first time they took me from my house, we had to rape a woman and then kill anything we could find, like animals and people. They ordered us to rape. We did this together. Every day we were taken with them by car to burn houses, kill animals and harass people. Sometimes we were happy to burn the houses because the people in our group were enjoying themselves. But other times I felt that it was not good to burn the house and to hurt these people. If we didn’t do this, we would die. Every day they came to get us and if we didn’t want to go, they would threaten us with machetes. They beat me with a piece of wood every day. The first time they beat me was the most difficult.

They killed many people but I don’t know where they put the bodies. They screamed and shouted when they had killed people and showed off their machetes covered with blood and said, "Eat the people." There was so much blood. They drank alcohol made from palm like tuak and tuasabo and they ate angin gila [amphetamines]. I did not drink or take any tablets.

They gave us training in how to use guns and knives and how to attack and how to kill. An East Timorese militiaman was our teacher. We were also trained by the Indonesian military. Every week we were trained twice for two hours. They never talked about human rights – they only told us how to rape, steal and kill. They didn’t teach me anything good.

I was very sad and I cried when they killed people and raped people. If I cried in front of them I would die. I would only cry in my home.

I had bad dreams and I woke up thinking that somebody wanted to kill me. Now I wake up still from bad dreams. I don’t remember my dreams, but I feel afraid when I wake up. I am still constantly afraid.

**Loss of Innocence Assignment**

Choose to do ONE of the following written assignments (3/4 -1 page):

1. Write a journal entry from the point of view of a child soldier. Choose to write it **during** the time of soldiery or **after** the time (looking back). Be sure to incorporate the idea of loss of innocence in your piece.
2. Write an expository piece that details how child soldiery exemplifies the loss of innocence theme. First, you must describe what the theme means and then continue with an analysis of how this topic is an example of the theme.