

How to choose a path: on the rainy river novel

Literature



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An Application of the Archetype of the Hero's Journey to Tim O'Brien's "On the Rainy River"

Tim O'Brien is known for his realistic fiction, often involving a character similar to himself. One such character is the narrator in "On the Rainy River". This narrator, who is also known as Tim O'Brien, encounters a moral dilemma and has to engage in a process of making a decision that could affect him for the rest of his life. Although this is not a typical story that details the birth of a hero, elements of the hero's journey do apply. As this is highly realistic fiction, not all elements of the archetype are present within the story. "On the Rainy River" presents a modified, out of order version of the first half of hero's journey with a fork in the road leading to two different journeys, forcing him to choose one.

The first stage of the hero's journey is not represented in "On the Rainy River". Divergent to a traditionally chaotic or otherwise unfavorable situation, O'Brien's story begins with a protagonist who is fairly content with his life. He has a less-than-stellar job but it pays the bills. He is enjoying last summer before heading to college with a scholarship from Harvard for graduate studies (O'Brien 41). He has nothing to dread and nothing is threatening his future.

Suddenly, O'Brien receives a draft notice. This is in line with the stage of a call to adventure. Young men were being drafted to fight in the war. Some accepted the notice and were willing to travel abroad to fight for their country, or at least what they were told their country wanted them to fight for. Others rejected their drafting and went as far as burning their draft cards

to symbolize their disdain for the war and the administration that supported it. O'Brien takes neither of these extremes. However, in unison with most heroes who are called to action, initially rejects the call. O'Brien wants no part in the Vietnam War. He considers himself to be a pacifist and would only support a war in the case of an extreme evil (O'Brien 44). As for the War, there is no extreme evil. There is barely a cohesive enemy, with the goal of the war not only to eliminate the Viet Cong but also inhibit the spread of an idea - Communism. O'Brien summarizes his thoughts by writing, "The American war in Vietnam seemed to me wrong. Certain blood was being shed for uncertain reasons. I saw no unity of purpose, no consensus on matters of philosophy or history or law" (O'Brien 40).

Lacking the ability to gather his thoughts and form a plan, he does as many other heroes do and simply decides to wait (O'Brien 42). He continues his previously pleasant summer life, made unpleasant by the sheer weight of the impending doom. He does not believe that he will fare well in the war, and argues that he is uneasy even at the sight of blood (O'Brien 41). This is clearly not the case due to his employment at the meat packing plant, but it shows his mental suffering in the face of the draft. He is so consumed with fear and worry that he is fabricating new facts about himself.

After ruminating on the concept of being drafted for somewhere between weeks and months, O'Brien snaps. He walks out of work, gathers some of his things, and drives towards the border for Canada (O'Brien 46). This represents an even stronger rejection to the call than before. He intends to flee the country to escape the draft, and in his mind, escape death. He will also be escaping a nation whose leadership supported an immoral war.

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However, even while motoring towards a sense of freedom, he is unable to be free and escape from his own thoughts.

Archetypical heroes often face negative forces, represented by enemies or monsters. While O'Brien processes his decision to either stay stateside and face the war or desert to Canada, he also faces enemies in his own head. He did not live somewhere that it was acceptable to object from the war. In a Southern town where people supported a war against Communism, young men drafted into the war were expected to serve their country unconditionally, in actions as well as spirit. In the mind of the conflicted young man, their expectations battled his fear of the war. He describes how the opinions of the community drag on his mind:

A moral split. I couldn't make up my mind. I feared the war, yes, but I also feared exile. I was afraid of walking away from my own life, my friends and my family, my whole history, everything that mattered to me. I feared losing the respect of my parents. I feared the law. I feared ridicule and censure. My hometown was a conservative little spot on the prairie, a place where tradition counted, and it was easy to imagine people sitting around a table down at the old Gobbler Cafe on Main Street, coffee cups poised, the conversation slowly zeroing in on the young O'Brien kid, how the damned sissy had taken off for Canada. (O'Brien 44-45)

O'Brien's enemies are not entities that he encounters and must physically fight. His enemies are his own thoughts. Trapped between the mental monster of being conscripted to fight in an unjust war and the thoughts of being ridiculed by the community for fleeing, he is forced to choose a single

option. While he must contend with both of these evils, the enemy of his enemy is still not his friend. Both evils he faces are on the same side - the side that wants him to fight.

Backtracking slightly, O'Brien actually is facing a fork in the road between two different potential hero's journeys. The first of which is easily understood. O'Brien's call to action arrives in the form of a draft notice and his refusal of the call takes the form of his initial escape towards the border. From this point on, it will be known as the Path of War. The other, more obscure option for a journey is the path O'Brien has an inclination towards. For this journey, his call to action is the impulsive force leading him towards the border. This represents a separate journey because of the bipolar nature of the choices ahead. He either faces what he assumes will be death in the war, or a more positive life ahead of him in Canada. Regardless of which path he chooses, he will face a set of new challenges and experiences that will permanently change his outlook on life. This journey will be referred to as the Path of Freedom. He initially refuses this call, just as he did in the Path of War. Concerns of how the community will react to his perceived cowardice prevent him from fleeing earlier, but he inverts his refusal and drives away from home. Either of these paths will lead to a separate journey, and the main conflict in the story is the trials involved with making the decision.

O'Brien's decision is not made without help. While he his wishes are set against the wishes of his country and community, "On the Rainy River" also includes the stage of the hero's journey where the hero meets a mentor.

However, this mentor does not entirely fit the mold of someone who gives advice to guide the hero. O'Brien meets his mentor by the name of Elroy

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Berdahl when he stays at the Tip Top Lodge (O'Brien 48). He describes the role of Elroy by writing, "The man who opened the door that day is the hero of my life. How do I say this without sounding sappy? Blurt it out - the man saved me. He offered exactly what I needed, without questions, without any words at all. He took me in. He was there at the critical time - a silent, watchful presence" (O'Brien 48). Elroy represents a different kind of mentor. Rather than telling the hero what to do, he instead presents himself as an unbiased, understanding worldly man. He welcomes O'Brien with open arms and seems to have a complete understanding of the young man's internal conflict. Over a period of six days, Elroy never asks him a prying question, but is constantly thinking about his predicament. Rather than a mentor who provides knowledge, Elroy acts more like a mirror and reflects O'Brien's thoughts back towards him. Calm, meticulous, and experienced, Elroy reassures O'Brien without words. Elroy somehow knew what the young man's decision would be. He chose the Path of War. The mentor's understanding of this is clear when he insists the young man take money for his labor at the Lodge and says, "Pick it up. Get yourself a haircut" (O'Brien 54), showing his knowledge that O'Brien made the decision not to desert his country, and that his hair would need to be cut prior to war. Afterwards, he gave O'Brien the final test. If he was really going to flee to Canada and accept the Path to Freedom, he would have done so by the final day of his stay at the Tip Top Lodge, when Elroy brings him within swimming distance of the border. O'Brien puts it best as he says, "The man knew" (O'Brien 54).

The protagonist finally chose his journey. Rejecting the Path to Freedom, he takes the Path to War, also avoiding the ridicule from his community. He

speaks about his rejection of the Path to Freedom while he stared at the border when he writes, “ It was no longer a possibility. Right then, with the shore so close, I understood that I would not do what I should do. I would not swim away from my hometown and my country and my life. I would not be brave” (O’Brien 57).

O’Brien describes his struggle with the potential ridicule, “ All those eyes on me - the town, the whole universe - and I couldn’t risk the embarrassment. It was as if there were an audience to my life, that swirl of faces along the river, and in my head I could hear people screaming at me. Traitor! they yelled. Turncoat! Pussy! I felt myself blush. I couldn’t tolerate it” (O’Brien 59). Explaining his reasoning for his choice to the reader, he feels defeated. He gave up the journey he had begun less than a week earlier due to fear of judgement from others. In doing so, he finally overcomes the stage of refusal to the Path of War. O’Brien will go to Vietnam. He will submit to the wishes of his community and his country. He summarizes his dejected feelings about this choice by writing, “ I was a coward. I went to the war” (O’Brien 61). In doing so, he crosses the threshold to the Path of War and is able to turn back from that point.

“ On The Rainy River” presents a story with a realistic take on the hero’s journey. In life, few things are cut and dry. O’Brien’s decision between the Path of War and the Path of Freedom is a muddy decision that embodies the first half of the hero’s journey. As a preface to *The Things They Carried*, this is understandable. It explores the conflict of a young man expected by his country and community to agree to lay down his life in a military action against his will. Presented with two possible journeys, Tim O’Brien takes <https://assignbuster.com/how-to-choose-a-path-on-the-rainy-river-novel/>

what he considers to be the cowardly action because he sacrifices his own values to accept those of others. Especially applicable to young people seeking individuality, this story embodies the variability of human morals. Neither option is a clear right or wrong, but both lead to a different life for a young adult. Denied the obligation to choose one specific path, he only has the faintest idea of what to expect from either choice. O'Brien happened to choose the one with less cultural friction. Having struggled through the task of deciding his life's path, the young man was finally able to choose a path that sacrifices his own personal values to meet the wishes of his nation. He went to war.