

Stylistic devices in the things they carried novel

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Devices in literature can be very powerful, especially devices like irony, suggestive language, humanisation, and dehumanisation of characters. In his novel “The Things They Carried,” Tim O’Brien uses these devices to put the reader into the world he creates and give them insight into the tragedy, hypocrisy, and dissociation of war. In the novel O’Brien exemplifies these devices within a passage about a military dentist. In that passage O’Brien gives insight on what it’s like to be a soldier during war using, irony, clever language, and dehumanisation.

The passage of “The Things They Carried” with the dentist shows some of O’Brien’s best use of irony. One of the clearest uses of irony is the dentist himself who is described as a “skinny young captain with bad breath.” (In 27) The fact that the dentist himself has bad breath shows the ineffectiveness of many war efforts such as trying to stay clean in a dirty war. O’Brien uses this irony to demonstrate futility in that type of effort and how blatantly aware the soldiers are of its uselessness, as obvious to them as the dentist’s bad breath. Another use of irony that stands out within the passage and spans the entire passage is Curt Lemon. At the beginning of the passage Lemon is described as almost a brave man, but one who cares a lot about his self-image, O’Brien says “He couldn’t stop bragging.” (In 9) The irony occurs when the dentist arrives and it is revealed that Lemon is terrified of the dentist and faints instantly after going into the dentist’s tent. This irony almost mirrors that of a lot of the other soldiers within the novel and war, they act brave and brag of their heroics, but when it comes down to the war they’re all afraid inside. It is continued further when Lemon returns to the dentist in the middle of the night claiming a fake tooth ache resulting

in the dentist removing the tooth, and Lemon pleased. This seems to be the way the soldiers are drawn into the war and how it changes them, forces them to get rid of their fears. The pain in Lemon's tooth represents the removal of the fear, the overcoming of the pain of war even when imaginary. This use of irony can also serve to show how the battle drives people crazy, forcing them to do things they never would have done on their own almost driving them to madness. The passage is very similar to one later in the book in which a soldier goes crazy scratching bug bites and eventually shoots himself in the foot.

The language O'Brien uses in his novel is always important to the passages he writes. Frequently he uses language relating to themes of the passage even when not directly referring to the theme. In the beginning of the passage O'Brien recalls a story of Curt Lemon putting on a ghost mask for Halloween. He also writes how Lemon painted his body, the story and language of Lemon disguising himself represents the way Lemon and most soldiers disguise their fear and who they really are. The story shows how Lemon wears masks literally and figuratively. Though the passage is supposed to be within a time of peace even almost "vacation" like, O'Brien includes a lot of language that evokes images of combat. He talks a lot about death in the first part of the passage and uses words like blood, pain, and torture frequently. Finally at the end of the passage he uses words like monster, killer, and shot. All this language is indicative of war and shows how within a soldier's mind, even in a time of peace, is war. The language lets us see how combat has been imprinted on the minds of those involved so deeply that when they try to relax, thoughts of combat still arise.

In war it seems the people in charge try to dehumanise the soldiers on both sides and the soldiers can see that. In this passage O'Brien shows the dehumanisation of the soldiers on his own side through diction and choice of story. O'Brien states "As usual, though, the higher-ups couldn't leave well enough alone." showing the constant pressure from those leading the war. To dehumanise the soldiers the "higher-ups" seem to look upon them as machines. This is shown through O'Brien's use of language, like saying the dentist was choppered in to "check our teeth and do minor repair work." (26) Very rarely do people use "minor repair work" in the context of humans, but more often in context of machines. It's also said that the dentistry was "Assembly-line dentistry, quick and impersonal." again invoking the idea that the soldiers are machines to be worked on on and "assembly-line." When Lemon returns to the dentist it's said he does so because "the embarrassment must have turned a screw in his head." (59) Lemon also describes the pain "like a nail in his jaw" (63) in a very mechanical sounding way. Using that language O'Brien demonstrates the dehumanisation and mechanization of the soldiers and the way that gets into their heads until even they begin thinking of themselves as machines.

Tim O'Brien effectively uses these techniques to display the mind of a soldier and give a perspective that could be understandable to people who've never been to war while keeping it real enough to connect with people who have. This passage with the dentist displays some of O'Brien's best insights into the mind of a soldier during war time.