

"the things they carried" by tim o'brien

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Rationale

The intention of the following text is to elaborate the use of meta-fiction and narrative layering in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* through writing a narrated interview with Tim O'Brien regarding Part Four's study: Literature and Critical Study. Using quotations/transcriptions of Tim O'Brien's statements within the fictional interview will support the structure of the text accordingly as a narration of an interview. First, I will address Tim O'Brien's brief biography regarding his career, education and works.

The narration will continue with an introduction from the interviewer, briefly regarding his works and the incorporation of observed application of meta-fiction and narrative layering. Then, a personal acknowledgement of the use of meta-fiction and narrative layering in his work, *The Things They Carried*, will be mentioned discreetly and indirectly.

Several techniques used to break down Tim O'Brien's work in aims to identify the usage of these literary devices will be addressed - then the narration will be preceded by several questions and answers addressing the application, role, and purpose of the usage of meta-fiction and narrative layering; this will be supported by direct contextual examples from the text studied.

A brief re-cap on the definitions of both literary devices will be addressed.

The closing of the interview aims to emphasize the coherent application and purpose of these techniques in the interviewee's work.

Narrated Fictional Interview

Tim O'Brien, an American citizen, is acknowledged as a novelist and/or a short story writer. He is highly recognized for his work, *The Things They Carried*. His works are under the genre of memoirs and war stories, more specifically those correlated with the Vietnam War, or as he would refer to it as the Vietnam Conflict. Neal Conan and Michiko Kakutani defines his work, *The Things They Carried*, as " a critically acclaimed collection of semiautobiographical, inter-related short-stories inspired by O'Brien's experiences in the Vietnam War." A stellar student, he was the president of the student body and earned his degree in Political Science in 1968 - after he graduated, instead of paving his own career path, he was drafted to join the United States Army. Sent to Vietnam, he was on duty until the 1970s. After his duty, he continued his studies in Harvard University, which lead him to his career as a writer. After being drafted and earning his graduate school degree, Tim O'Brien wrote in his memoir, " Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories." And so he did just that, he told war stories.

Having the privilege of interviewing him personally, I addressed and accredited him for his excellent works - both for serving in Vietnam and his works as a writer. I planned to ask him regarding his work, *The Things They Carried*, to ask him regarding the observations of the usage of meta-fiction and narrative layering. I thought to myself in the beginning of the interview, how ironic it was to ask him about his experiences in the Vietnam War (or Vietnam Conflict) while I already read an entire book based upon his personal war stories. I decided to address my ironic thoughts and he

responded, " Didn't you realize? The 'Tim' I mentioned repeatedly in the book, is not based on me, Tim O'Brien, it's a fictional character I embedded within the book! I honestly, did not refer to the real experience I encountered, instead I referred to my own fictional narratives." Before I asked him my scripted questions, he led the interview towards the two topics I was to talk about, narrative layering and meta-fiction.

Based on everything2. com, the characteristics of works that use both these literary devices include the reference to itself as well as the creation and/or discussion of fictional works by fictitious characters. Tim O'Brien's works can be broken down when aiming to identify the application of meta-fiction and narrative layering.

Within *Speaking of Courage*, a character 'Tim' is present. Written in third person narrative, and having the same name as the author, I personally thought that Tim, the character, was Tim, the writer. Though the literal Tim O'Brien addressed that " I am Tim, Tim O'Brien, but Tim is not me." I gave him a blank stare, attempting to understand his point then I realized that he used narrative layering within his work. The first layer can be considered as when Tim, the character, heard about Bowker's story, then the story lead to the second layer at which Tim, the writer, made it seem like Bowker is retelling the story. In fact, the whole story itself, is narrated by a fictional narrator, this discovery is and can be seen as the third and final layer.

This discovery proves both the application of meta-fiction and narrative layering as it writes fiction based on fiction and is narrated by layers of fiction characters. Even within the beginning pages of the novel, though <https://assignbuster.com/the-things-they-carried-by-tim-obrien-2/>

insignificantly mentioned, it is stated that it is a "work of fiction" and "lovingly dedicated to the men of Alpha Company, ... Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, ... and Kiowa". "Did you realize? I schemed the writing of that page to enhance the fact that this entire novel is a fictional piece. Tim, the character - the fictional character, wrote this page, not Tim as in myself," he smirked while explaining.

"Within Notes, I began writing by referring to *Speaking of Courage*, that in itself can show that I referred to my own fictional work - that is meta-fiction," he clarified. Whilst in *On A Rainy River*, a statement brings upon the reference of itself - as stated above, this technique can be used to identify the usage of meta-fiction. The narrator of the story explains, "Now, perhaps, you can understand why I've never told this story before." (Pg. 54) - the narrator addresses the story within the story.

The story *How to Tell A True War Story* is the epitome of a meta-fiction-filled work. It starts off stating, "This is true," (Pg. 64), then leads to the confusion of readers that if a war story "seems moral, do not believe it," as it is a "very old and terrible lie." (Pg. 65) Every definition of a 'true' war story within is alternately opposed through the differing versions of the fictional character's narratives. Patricia Waugh declares that meta-fiction-filled work "selfconsciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality," at which is all present within this story.

Evidently visible within his work, Tim O'Brien demonstrates the usage of both literary devices. Acknowledging the help of these literary devices, he states

that narrative layering makes “ the source material stronger and the core story

more engaging.”¹ While the other literary device, meta-fiction is defined as the act of writing about writing, acts as a tool to remind readers that even though the narratives he writes are fiction, “ sometimes stories can be more real than reality itself.” Using it to the extent of “ foregrounding the fiction of fiction and reality,”² - he applies meta-fiction as how John Barth defines it. He writes based on the imitation of novels/narrative fictions rather than writing fictions based on reality, undeniably present, his works show self-conscious examinations of fiction by referring to itself. Written with excellence, Tim O'Brien's works uses both literary devices - he explores thoroughly, the purpose of writing.

1

Goldhammer, G. (2013). Layered Narrative Storytelling: A Journalistic Standard for Creating

Content. . Last accessed 23rd May 2014.

2

Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. NY: Routledge, 1984.