

Literary techniques in the things they carried

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A literary technique is a device employed in literature to add depth to a writer's work. These techniques can be obvious, such as the technique of rhyme in a poem, or subtle, such as juxtaposition, which can go unnoticed by the reader. In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien uses many such techniques to provide more depth to his book. Four literary techniques used by Tim O'Brien are symbolism, pathetic fallacy, irony, and juxtaposition. One literary technique prominent in *The Things They Carried*, particularly in the story by the same name, is symbolism.

Throughout this story, O'Brien mentions all the things that the soldiers carry with them, both physical and emotional. However, the physical items that the men carried is more than just equipment- they are symbols that represent various facets of each soldier's personality. For example, "Rat Kiley carried... morphine and plasma and malaria tablets and surgical tape... and all the things a medic must carry, including M&M's for especially bad wounds" (O'Brien 5).

The fact that Kiley carried medical necessities shows that he is a good paramedic devoted to doing his job well, but the M&M's represent something different- Kiley's optimistic and kind outlook on the war and life in general. Conversely, the tranquilizers carried by Ted Lavender represent his terror of the fighting in the war and his inability to face reality, rather choosing to escape from it by taking drugs. This is an effective technique because, by using these symbols, O'Brien can let the reader figure out for him/herself deeper aspects of certain characters' personalities without actually stating them outright.

Another literary device Tim O'Brien employs is pathetic fallacy, or nature mirroring humans' emotions. In the story *Speaking of Courage*, Norman Bowker attempts to save Kiowa's life but fails. He becomes depressed and remorseful about what he should have been able to accomplish. For a long time afterward, Bowker struggles with the fact that he was "braver than he ever thought possible, but... not so brave as he wanted to be" (153); he is overcome with sadness and guilt. This is reflected in the weather at the time of Kiowa's death.

The soldiers were camping out in a field along the Song Tra Bong, and "the rain kept getting worse. And by midnight the field turned into soup" (145). The rain emulates the emotions of the weary and despondent soldiers. Pathetic fallacy is a very useful technique because it helps to provide the tone for the story. If the story was a sad one but the weather was bright and sunny, the tone of the story would be wrong, and vice versa. In *Speaking of Courage*, the fact that it was raining during the main event of the story helps the reader gain an understanding of just how bleak and dismal the events that occurred were.

Irony, or a discrepancy between expectation and reality, is another literary technique used by Tim O'Brien in *The Things They Carried*. Many of the titles of the stories contain irony themselves. For example, *Speaking of Courage* is more centred on the themes of failure and the inability to be courageous than it is about courage. The story *Love* is not, as it would seem, about mutual love, but rather unrequited love. *Field Trip*, an expression with a usually very

positive connotation, is a story about a visit to a battleground where many lives had been lost.

The Story How to Tell a True War Story also contains much irony within it. The main point of this story is that a true war story cannot be told because the simple act of telling it makes it untrue. The title of this story is ironic- O'Brien makes the reader think that he wants to instruct them how to tell a true war story, but the reader soon finds out O'Brien's real intention- that telling a true war story is impossible. Another ironic idea within this story is the idea that war can be beautiful. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not. Like a forest fire, like cancer under a microscope, any battle... has... a powerful, implacable beauty" (81). This catches the reader off-guard because of how greatly it contrasts with the view of war we have been previously given. He continues to say that, " a true war story will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly" (81). This is very ironic because although the actual event may be beautiful, if a true story is told about it, the story is ugly.

This adds to O'Brien's point that telling a story, even a true one, can only take away from the truth of the event. Using irony, O'Brien can present his message in a creative and interesting way, and this helps the readers understand his point better. Another technique used by Tim O'Brien is juxtaposition. The story The Lives of the Dead seems to be a bit of a non-sequitur to the rest of the book, however, O'Brien has put it where it is for a reason. The point of The Things They Carried is not simply to tell stories about the Vietnam War- the lesson goes deeper than that.

It comes to teach that war is about more than just fighting- it is about the connection between life and death. It is about learning to detach oneself from death. It is about the sacredness and fragility of life. It is about so many things that many people never have to experience. But the Vietnam War is not O'Brien's first time coming into contact with these kinds of issues. As a child, he had a beloved friend named Linda who died of cancer. Linda's death was a major part of his growing up process.

As a child, he already had to learn to distance himself from her death, saying, " It didn't seem real... the girl lying in the white casket wasn't Linda" (241). And although he did not realize it at the time, her death helped him to deal with all the deaths he encountered in the war. For example, when Curt Lemon dies, O'Brien refuses to see his body as a friend who died. Instead he says, " his body was not really a body, but rather one small bit of waste in the midst of a much wider wastage" (238).

The lessons that O'Brien learned as a child are very relevant and linked to his experiences in the Vietnam War, which is why he chooses to include *The Lives of the Dead*. But this is not the only message that O'Brien wants us to take out of the inclusion *The Lives of the Dead* in *The Things They Carried*- he wants to convey that even though something that happens in one's life may seem horrible and meaningless, it may become of use to him or her later in life, and it may help him or her to get through an otherwise unmanageable time.

O'Brien wants his reader to know that everything in life comes for a purpose. Throughout *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien makes use of many

different literary techniques. In the story *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien uses symbolism. In *Speaking of Courage*, the literary technique is pathetic fallacy. Irony is used in *How to Tell a True War Story*, among others, and juxtaposition is used in the story *The Lives of the Dead*. It can be seen that literary techniques have a simple but powerful effect in *The Things They Carried*.