

Conscientious decay
of private paul berlin
in going after cacciato
by tim o'brien...



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The Conscientious Decay of Private Paul Berlin

One of the most life-changing experiences a man can endure is war. Since 1776, America and its patriotic citizens rallied behind the cry for democracy. These ideas, however, would change when the Vietnam War devastated the hearts and minds of the nation. The Conflict was the first war to bring awareness to the stress these warriors felt before, after, and during the war. Vietnam War veteran and author of *Going After Cacciato*, Tim O'Brien explained that his only knowledge of the conflict prior to the draft was from the news and protests (Herzog 13). The Character Paul Berlin, who is akin to O'Brien has suffered moral dilemmas caused by the unknown nature and the trauma of war.

From the very beginning, every soldier was unsure of what was going on in the foreign land that they couldn't even pin on a map. The Vietnam Conflict stuck out as such a great burden on the basic principles of freedom that young men valiantly fought for, in honor of their fathers before them. These men would only return home quietly, box up their emotions, never to speak of the terror they inevitably sustained. Author Tim O'Brien would be a victim of this unfortunate situation, experiencing the rotting corpses in the villages of Vietnam or recognizing his role in the My Lai Massacre. Due to the ghastly crisis that O'Brien went through, he was changed forever. *Going After Cacciato* by Tim O'Brien, showcases O'Brien's personal struggles with The Vietnam War, mainly to illustrate moral guilt that the war has embedded on soldiers, especially Private Berlin.

During The Conflict, every male had the general question poised in the back of their head: "What will I do if I get drafted?". This was a major internal conflict that O'Brien struggled with before going to Vietnam and even during his tour. When O'Brien initially received his draft notice he pursued a way out. The only option in his mind was to cross The Rainy River into Canada, where he could then fly away to Europe (Herzog 13). It was moments like these that O'Brien had struggled with, the thought of running away, for a long time before finally realizing that there was no escaping the war. His decision to go to war was the choice that would map out the rest of his life.

Along with the obligation to fight a war he didn't understand, the choice left O'Brien with a byproduct that could never be forgotten. The cumbersome guilt that would follow down every road he went and shape every decision he would make since that point in his life. The reason O'Brien was ashamed was due to the war being "ill-conceived" and "... (he) did the wrong thing in not following his conscience." O'Brien had the gut feeling that he should not have gone off to fight; however, he chose to report "active duty" in Vietnam. The then young O'Brien's poor choice of neglecting his instincts haunted him for the rest of his life. These events are displayed through Paul Berlin in *Going After Cacciato* during the first few scenes when Berlin weighs the morals of running away from war or staying and fighting for a cause that did more damage than any possible benefit (Herzog 14). "In my case, I committed an act of unpardonable cowardice and evil. I went to a war that I believed was wrong and participated actively. I pulled the trigger. I was there. And by being there I am guilty" (Herzog Interview, Herzog 14). O'Brien was clearly in a confused state both before and after the war. The decision of

whether or not to go to war can decalibrate a man's moral compass, and O'Brien clearly expresses his confusion through Berlin's personal struggles with his family and his choice to fight.

One of Paul Berlin's greatest struggles, which reflects Tim O'Brien's own experience, is his disconnect from his family symbolized by the Military Auxiliary Radio System. One of the most prominent times when the reader gets to interact with Berlin's family is when the squad gets to use the Radio Telephone Hookup to communicate with the mainland. The machine, called MARS, baffled soldiers and gave them the opportunity to communicate with their family back home and hear their voices for the first time in months, rather than just communicating via letter. MARS offers Berlin an opportunity to speak to his family. He quickly became overrun by a rush of nostalgia, leading a page full of describing minor details about his childhood home.

In the emotional sequence of storytelling, Berlin gives the reader a visual insight into his youth. Berlin goes deep into detail looking at how his father rigged up an extension of the telephone from the kitchen in order to hear the ringer in the basement. The emotional sequence is followed by a moment of thought from Berlin about what he could possibly say. Berlin thinks about all the things he could converse about, such as how the neighbors are or if his mother ever quit smoking. Berlin displays a damaged mind in this instance because he focuses so much on what not to say. Berlin can think of more things bad than good, for example, Berlin says, " Tell them things weren't really so bad. Then ask how his father's business was. Don't let on about being afraid. Don't make them worry..." (158). Berlin shows a malfunction in his frame of mind because the experiences he witnessed are ones he is

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unwilling to talk about. Berlin is a man who has seen his friends die in combat. MARS symbolizes his connection to the real world because his family never answers the phone. The emotions are heightened when Oscar says, " Maybe they was out takin' a drive or something. Buying Groceries. The world don' stop" (159). O'Brien puts these type of quotes in the book to show the disconnect of a soldier from the civilian lifestyle that he leaves behind when he ships off to combat. Author Vera P. Froelich agrees with the idea that war is bad for a soldier of in that type of mental state. "...in this novel O'Brien seems much preoccupied with memory and especially with imagination, probing its power and scope as well as its limitations, it is nevertheless the horror of the wartime situation that gives imagination its urgency, its desperate importance" (Froelich 1). In accordance with Tim O'Brien interviews, it is shown that *Going After Cacciato* is an anti-war novel for the reasons of the mental toll it had on all who participated.

Lt. Sydney Martin's massacre played a major role in Berlin's sudden shift from a small town boy, to shell shocked man. Although he didn't experience the fragging of his superior, the same can be said about O'Brien when the idea of witnessing a tragic death is questioned.

Literary critics point out, " The summary of O'Brien's novel on the litcharts.com website also mentions that Lt Sidney Martin was "' presumably murdered by Johnson'" but the means of the homicide in question, or " fragging", was not mentioned. O'Brien has said in author interviews that any soldier in their platoon, except Cacciato, could frag their commander"

(Morrow). Conceding to the concept of Lt. Martin's fragging, both the author and the critics are showing the horrors of war. Most innocent, patriotic young
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men wouldn't consider treason to such a degree, yet it happened because of the war. O'Brien indicates that Cacciato is the only soldier that wouldn't kill his leader, the killing is important for a couple of reasons.

The main point comes into fruition when the reader identifies Cacciato as a figment of Berlin's reality. Cacciato is a man who can filter through the trash and pull out treasure, a person that Berlin yearned to become. When at the water-filled crater, on the heavily bombed hill, Cacciato sees a fishing hole. Cacciato defines himself during Berlin's flashback because he manages to neglect the fact that his fellow squad-mates are about to kill his officer. Berlin desires the capacity to simply neglect the apprehension and destruction brought to the feet of Cacciato.

O'Brien establishes Berlin's flashback to develop Berlin's character, to show that it was impossible to overlook the dismay that battle puts on a soldier's mind, painting a distasteful picture. The idea that *Going After Cacciato* is an antiwar novel proven by the ideas of Fera P. Froelich, who shows that a "very American Novel" can make a patriotic soldier appear as only a pawn in a game (1). Even the most honest men who volunteered to serve didn't understand the type of psychological horrors that they would be subjecting themselves too. The same can be said for Lt. Sydney Martin who chooses to be an officer yet had no idea that he would have to send his men in enemy tunnels, a certain death sentence. His actions lead to all sorts of moral dilemmas. Martin knows he has a mission that has to be done but on the flipside, he doesn't want to lose his men. For this purpose, O'Brien writes about running from the war. Froelich shows her point again by hammering through the point of "social pressures" and how the only way to achieve a <https://assignbuster.com/conscientious-decay-of-private-paul-berlin-in-going-after-cacciato-by-tim-obrien/>

happy ending is to create it in your mind (2). Her ideas are translated into the novel through the idea of "The Observation Post".

Critic Jack Slay Jr. writes about how the book is staged in three parts; battle stories, the mission to find Cacciato, and the Observation Post. Slay Jr. realizes that all these intense battle experiences lead Paul Berlin to create a fantasy mission to Paris and he argues that the Observation Post is another image of Berlin. In fact, one of the key storylines is the observation post. The alleged flashbacks include scenarios where Berlin fearlessly creates a perfect scenario by taking multiple night watches where he allows his fellow soldiers to rest. The reason why this is unrealistic is that the men are so sleep deprived that they would most likely sleep at any given opportunity. Slay Jr. has a similar hypothesis saying that the Post is the only time when Berlin has complete "control" and it can lead to a desired happy ending (2). Even though Berlin achieves his happiness he still, much like O'Brien, has guilt.

Guilt is another reason for the creation of the Observation Post in order to cope with the guilt that Berlin experiences. The young Private chooses to get Cacciato to agree with the squads' decision to murder the Lt. because he needs to "share the guilt"(3). Everything adds up in Berlin's conscience, making him feel like a coward (4). Through all of these points, Slay Jr. wraps around into the idea that the Observation Post was another way to escape (5). Slay Jr. begins to end the essay by going back very start of the book. He says that this is the only part that is authentic (6). Slay Jr. says that it's only time that Berlin faces reality, he goes in order of who dies and exposes the ugly truth of war.

A famous quote from O'Brien is, "A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth" (The Things They Carried). The previous quote is perfect for the theme of *Going After Cacciato* because it captures the true mindset of a soldier experiencing war. His statement can be interpreted as O'Brien arguing the point that even if a soldier volunteers to serve his country and becomes a decorated war hero, he still could be a coward for going to war. In the events of the book, Berlin is the true hero for running away from the battles. Even though Berlin has fought in combat, O'Brien wants the reader to believe that the most courageous thing a soldier can do is put down his weapons. O'Brien is making a statement about war, he is saying war never changes and guilt is no exception.

Much like O'Brien, Private Paul Berlin blames himself for a war that is out of his control. O'Brien details these moral events with colors. General historical knowledge could assist the reader in identifying the meaning of the red smoke in the first booby trap that Cacciato leaves behind. The smoke scene could expose a couple of messages that the author was trying to leave behind. When the men first set off the trap, Berlin immediately knew what was going to happen, "Count, he thought. But the numbers came in a tangle without sequence" (19). As the reader will find at the end of the book, none of the things Berlin experienced were actually real. O'Brien reveals the shocking truth at the end of the novel, which means the aforementioned scene was played out and created in Berlin's mind. O'Brien is making a statement about the psychological impact that battle has on a soldier's mind because it is unlikely that most people would imagine their own death, said

person especially wouldn't imagine themselves wetting their trousers (20).

When the squad realizes that there was no threat, in fact, the trap was only a red smoke grenade, it's a clear sign from the author.

During battle, American ground forces would use smoke to identify either their position or "provide a target for an airstrike" (Keen 1). O'Brien specifically mentions that the troops were out of the "fly zone" for the US Air Force, creating a scenario where the only people who saw the smoke were the soldiers themselves. Berlin imagined this color because it was used to mark targets for the USAF, therefore Berlin believes he is the enemy. O'Brien wants to illustrate the mental toll that battle has on a man, showing how it can distort reality, make them picture their own death, and turn them into the thing they fear the most, the enemy.

Philosophers have questioned what is moral and what is not, Private Paul Berlin cannot debate this inquiry due to the mental state of decay he experiences throughout Tim O'Brien's novel, *Going After Cacciato*. Despite the fact that some of Berlin's maturity from his war experiences are not real, he is still a very much damaged soldier from spectating fellow soldier's deaths. O'Brien uses Berlin's character to state that war damages the mind beyond repair. The multitude of evidence cannot be denied that O'Brien intended to create a sense of moral challenge throughout the award-winning novel, *Going After Cacciato*.

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