

# In the lake of the woods by tim o'brien: theme analysis

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Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* is centered around the mysterious disappearance of Kathy Wade. Mysterious is the key word, as throughout the novel O'Brien plays with the fine line between ambiguity and reality. Kathy's husband John Wade, the main character, is a Vietnam veteran and former politician whose participation in the infamous Mai Lai Massacre caused his fall from grace. Following a landslide defeat in the congressional elections, Kathy and John retreat to solitude in an isolated cabin in the Minnesota woods. Here, O'Brien highlights the stress that secrecy has had on their relationship.

During their retreat, Kathy disappears in the middle of the night. Their boat is missing, but there are no other clues. O'Brien does not reveal the truth behind Kathy's disappearance; instead, throughout the novel, in several chapters entitled "Hypothesis," he proposes potential solutions. O'Brien suggests that Kathy drowned in the lake, or John murdered her, or that she got lost on a deserted island. In the final hypothesis, which is both the most unsuspected and the most supported by the end of the novel, Kathy plans her disappearance.

Weeks later, John too goes missing, and he and Kathy are together once again in an isolated world. While he leaves does not offer a conclusive verdict, O'Brien does support each theory with both evidence from John's past and police evidence from Kathy's disappearance. The basis of *In the Lake of the Woods* is the burden of secrecy and the effects of truth.

Mysteries are plentiful, including John's obsession with magic as a young boy, the hiding of the Mai Lai massacre, the deceit of politics, and the central mystery of Kathy's disappearance.

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The connecting theme between all of these mysteries is that secrecy was a convenient way for John and Kathy to avoid facing the facts, but the burden of hiding the truth eventually proved to be too much. In the end, while the truth is ugly, it does manage to liberate John and Kathy. To highlight this theme, O'Brien constantly uses light imagery, namely the presence or absence of sunlight to differentiate between truth and mystery. O'Brien highlights several aspects of John Wade's childhood to trace the mysteries that surround John back to his roots.

As a child, John took an obsessive interest in magic, making frequent trips to "Karra's Studio of Magic" to buy tricks, or illusions, as he called them. John used magic to escape from the verbal abuse of his drunken father, Paul, who frequently teased John for his weight. "After school, and on most weekends, he spent his free time down in the basement, all alone, no teasing or distractions, just perfecting his magic.

There was something peaceful about it, something firm and orderly. (208) For John, magic was a way to avoid facing his problems with his father. To further avoid dealing with the alcoholism, John even tried to get rid of the liquor by replacing it with water. "Another little trick," he said. (209) Both this trick and his magic tricks did nothing but increase the secrecy surrounding John's turbulent childhood. When he was sober, Paul was a loving father, which is what John feverishly tried to imagine him as. O'Brien highlighted the difference between the sober Paul and the drunk Paul through the use of light imagery.

John's mother, Eleanor, said, " He'd just point those incredible blue eyes at you and you'd feel like you were under a big hot sun or something...Except then he'd go back to the booze and it was like the sun burned itself out. "

(195) The presence of sunlight when Paul was sober and a loving father proves that that was the image that John chose to believe. On the other hand, Eleanor said the sun burned out when Paul drank. This was because John ignored this side of his father, instead opting to cover it up with magic and secrecy.

In fact, John kept pictures of his father, his father's empty vodka bottles and his father's neckties alongside his magic equipment in his " box of tricks," demonstrating that he had conceived an completely unrealistic relationship with his father in which magic and trickery acted as a facade to hide the drinking and verbal abuse. John was terrified of discovering the truth about his father. O'Brien explained that for John, "[Knowing] is to be disappointed. To understand is to be betrayed. " (242) While hiding the truth was convenient for John, the secrets piled up and ultimately proved to be too much of a burden.

For as hard as John tried to cover up the truth, he always knew about his father's drinking. " That was the worst part. The secret drinking that wasn't secret," O'Brien explained. (66) When Paul hanged himself, however, John was finally able to face the truth. He was still a child, and at the funeral he continually screamed in front of the entire procession, finally relieving himself of the burden of years of secrecy. While the truth of Paul's

alcoholism was not pretty, and was certainly less convenient to face than simply ignoring it, it was a significant relief for John.

His mother explained: " I hate to say it, but it was a relief to have him out of the house. John and I, we both adored the man, but suddenly all the tension was gone and we could have supper without sitting there on the edge of our seats. " (97) Throughout the rest of John's life, a similar process of hiding the truth and ultimately accepting it would repeat. As he progressed to the next stage of his life, as a young adult serving in the Vietnam War, John would bear a secret much heavier than his father's alcoholism. While serving in the U. S. army, John's battalion partook in the gruesome Mai Lai Massacre.

An entire village, including hundreds of women and children, was wiped out with its inhabitants all murdered and buried in mass graves. Many victims were raped or tortured. In every reference to the massacre in *In the Lake of the Woods*, O'Brien purposefully describes the bright sunlight that shone over Mai Lai on that day. " In the sunlight, which shifted from pink to purple, people were shot dead and carved up with knives and raped and sodomized and bayoneted and blown into scraps. " (200) Here, O'Brien reveals the brutal truth, which is fittingly accompanied with sunlight.

John, however, being quite the Houdini, would of course try to avoid the truth. John's interest in magic continued into his adulthood. At night, obviously when the sun was down, he would perform magic tricks for his fellow soldiers, who called him " Sorcerer. " In fact, very few of them actually knew his real name. Even though John was more of a bystander than a participant in the massacre, he still refused to face the truth, even when one

of his friends in the war tries to convince him that they can tell their story without repercussions.

John was horrified by the massacre, and once again the terror of discovery caused him to turn to secrecy even though he obviously knew the truth. " Pure wrongness, [John] knew. He could taste the sunlight. It had a rusty, metallic flavor, like nails on his tongue. " By describing the unfavorable taste of the sunlight, O'Brien demonstrates John's negative view of the ugly truth. Thus, similar to his use of magic to avoid facing his father's alcoholism, John kept the massacre a secret. He was able to keep it a mystery to everyone around him until he became a politician, which fit in perfectly with the theme of In the Lake of the

Woods. Like many politicians, John was an expert at manipulation, especially manipulation of the truth. He explained that, " Politics was manipulation. Like a magic show: invisible wires and secret trapdoors. " (35) But as he rose in status and ran for a seat in the Senate, it became harder to keep the secret. Much to the dismay of his campaign manager, Tony Carbo, John never even told him about the massacre.

" Doesn't say anything about the Vietnam shit—not to his wife or me or anybody...The guy was a magic man, keeping that stuff locked up inside, it must've driven him crazy sometimes. (196) Carbo was certainly correct, as the burden of keeping the massacre a secret became even worse than the truth. It affected his relationship with Kathy, who described a new darkness in his eye. When John ran for a Senate seat, the press discovered the truth about the Mai Lai Massacre. While it was horribly embarrassing for John and

Kathy, they actually achieved peace with themselves. Patricia Hood, Kathy's sister, explained Kathy's cheerfulness during their last conversation before she disappeared.

" She seemed so happy. Like she could finally relax and get on with her life. (182) John's mood also lightened after news of the massacre broke, and he and Kathy took a vacation to the lake house where Kathy would soon disappear from. In the six days they had there before she vanished, John and Kathy were relieved and isolated from the rest of society. Throughout the novel, John and Kathy's relationship is plagued by John's tendency to hide the truth. Kathy is truly in love with him, but she struggles to deal with the constant lying. Early on in their relationship, in fact, John constantly spied on Kathy.

He was completely obsessed with manipulating their relationship. As he rationalized it, " He was Sorcerer, after all, and what was love without a little mystery? " (45) This mystery took a toll on his relationship with Kathy, however. Kathy felt urges to leave John, as she grew tired of the constant secrecy and spying. She had a loveless affair with her dentist, Harmon, and in a typical nature, John chose to pretend like he was not aware that she was cheating on him. Kathy was both desperate for the truth and apprehensive about receiving the truth.

To show this, O'Brien used light and dark imagery. In the middle of the night, Kathy had a " huge and desperate wanting in her heart. " (253) This desire is to end the lies that her relationship is based on, such as the spying, and the desire to stop John's constant manipulation in politics. She frequently wakes

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up in the middle of the night because of the burden placed upon her by John's lies, but she always feels more relaxed during the day. " It was just after six o'clock [in the morning].

Flakes of speckled light filled the kitchen. ' Well, that's better,' she said. (14) At the same time, however, Kathy was still hesitant to leave the convenience of secrecy. While she was desperate to put an end to the lying, she worried that doing so would put an end to their relationship. John, however, was comfortable living in secrecy, or in the dark. " Wade lay back in the shade... Pleasant memories came to mind. Kathy's laughter. The way she slept on her side, thumb up against her sleeve. He remembered the times back in college when they'd gone dancing, how she'd look at him in a way that made him queasy with joy. (183)

Ultimately, John's secrecy affected him, as it caused Kathy's affair with Harmon. The lies finally came to fruition when the Mai Lai Massacre was unveiled and John's career unraveled. John was able to accept Kathy's unfaithfulness and he stopped spying on her. With the truth finally out, John and Kathy were relieved of the pressures on their relationship and they moved on. By going to the lake house in the woods, they were able to start anew with a relationship free from secrecy and manipulation. Soon after, however, they would be separated again.

The central mystery of *In the Lake of the Woods* is Kathy's disappearance. She left her bed in the middle of the night and took their boat out onto the lake. Fittingly, it is completely dark when she disappears, as once again the truth is unknown without sunlight. After weeks of searching, no one found

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her. Throughout the novel, O'Brien proposes four solutions to the mystery, all in chapters entitled, "Hypothesis." The first three are the most plausible. Perhaps Kathy drowned in the lake, or was stranded on a small island, or perhaps she was even murdered by John.

The police suspect the latter, since John is seemingly unaffected by Kathy's disappearance. But in the final chapter, O'Brien proposes the idea that in one last magic trick, John and Kathy planned her disappearance, with John joining her later on. Bethany Kee, Kathy's coworker, supported this theory. "Maybe they decided...Hard to say. But I know this much. She had the guts. And she wanted changes." (297) Ironically, this "magic trick" would be the only secret that resulted positively. Having disappeared together, Kathy and John have faced the truth and are now at peace, even when the sun is down.

And so one chilly evening he might have joined her on the shore of Oak Island, or Massacre Island, or Bucket Island. Maybe she scolded him for being late. All around them there was only wilderness, dark and silent, which was what they had come for. They needed the solitude...Maybe they spent the night huddled at a small fire, celebrating, thinking up names for the children they wanted—funny names, sometimes, so they could laugh—and then later they would've planned the furnishings for their new house. (300)

Even though O'Brien never reveals what actually happened, this hypothesis is supported by the fact that John, who was madly in love with Kathy, was not fazed by disappearance. Out of all the hypotheses, it serves the central theme the best, as John and Kathy have been liberated by truth. In the Lake of the Woods is an excellently written book. O'Brien is ingenious, and he is

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always one step ahead of the reader. By leaving the ending inconclusive, O'Brien adds to the mystery of the book. While this could leave readers unsatisfied, it was the only way O'Brien could feasibly end the story.

John Wade is an incredibly intriguing and dynamic character whose different sides show throughout various parts of the novel. O'Brien brilliantly intertwines elements of John's childhood, time in Vietnam, time as a politician, and the present day. Every piece is connected, molding together into one, profound message. Sunlight imagery perfectly serves this message, and its subtle inclusion is well-used. In the Lake of the Woods is not the most satisfying book to read, but it is certainly a thrilling and thought-provoking work of high literary quality.