

Tim o'brien's the things they carried essay



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In his collection of short stories, 'The things they carried' Tim O'Brien attempts to explore the 'bloody eccentricity^[ii]' of Vietnam- a war dominated by uncertainties and unlike any war which had gone before. The stories connect a group of fictional soldiers called the alpha company in their journey through the war. The Vietnam War divided America for ten years and led to a confusing political and social split within the country. A generation was shaped in a country where business men 'could not agree on even the most fundamental matters of public policy^[iii]'.

When America lost the war in 1975 the blow was immense to the nation and caused an intense backlash against the patriotism and ideological complacency which had characterised their national 'superpower' identity. Vietnam became the forgotten war as 'Evil has no place... in our (American) national mythology. ^[iv]' In the other text, Pat Barker's 'Regeneration' the backdrop is another iconic war, the First World War. The First World War also had a remarkable effect on society and how war was viewed for a long time after its aftermath.

The total destruction caused by the technological advances in warfare had never before been seen and their effects were devastating to a society who still thought of war as 'one big glorious cavalry charge^[v]'. 'Regeneration' highlights these effects as its plot centres upon Wilfred Rivers, a psychologist at Craiglockhart war hospital for the shell shocked. Through his character Barker explores the feelings those who couldn't cope with the intense pressures of the war, or like Siegfried Sassoon believed it morally questionable.

In Craiglockhart, Barker creates a setting which fully underlines the futility of war. Characters who are 'shell shocked' dominated the novel and the act of setting 'Regeneration' amid the confusion of those who have 'given up' on the war emphasises the terrible effect the apparent aimlessness of the war had on those who suffered 'without purpose or dignity. [vi]' The fact that Craiglockhart is not a fictional construct; it was a real intuition further serves to make the reader consider 'the sheer extremity... of suffering[vii]' depicted within the novel.

Like Vietnam, WW1 was a war fought for uncertain reasons but with certain casualties which were well-documented for the first time as a result of the evolution of mass media. Barker has taken historical figures, conditions and places and has woven them into her novel seamlessly allowing her to explore the transition of Sassoon and Rivers perspectives on the war. 'Its (Regeneration's) research and speculation combine to produce a kind of educated imagination that is persuasive and illuminating about this particular place and time[viii].

I completely agree with Sheppard as Barker's use of pre-existing characters and her powerful narrative skills convince the reader of verisimilitude of the moral crisis which faced both the soldiers and those who had to 'treat' them. Craiglockhart is described as both 'gloomy[ix]' 'massive[x]' and 'cavernous[xi]'. 'The author uses these terms to highlight the despair felt by those who have been sent there to recover. The negative connotations of the words make the reader see Craiglockhart as more of a prison than a retreat from the carnage of the war.

Often Barker uses the weather to enforce their isolation and confinement. She writes of a storm saying ' they seemed to be trapped, fixed in some element thicker than air[xii]' and the wind ' snapped branches off trees with a crack like rifle fire. [xiii]' The author's deliberate choice of ' rifle fire' gives the reader an insight into the mental state of some of the characters. Although they are no longer in the trenches, their fear has not left them as they are in an aggressive, harsh environment which emulates the very place they fear.

Also, by setting the novel away from the action in the front Barker reinforces the long term effects of the war which are often forgotten by other historical novelists. In parts, ' Regeneration' often seems like a ' behind in scenes' view into a long overlooked piece of British history with Barker emphasizing the ironies which juxtaposed society at that time. In ' The Eye In The Door', the sequel to ' Regeneration' a young woman is condemned for trying to abort her baby by the very same people who are throwing young men under the German guns for very unclear reasons.

Similarly in ' Speaking of courage' O'Brien highlights the contradictions in the American society about the war. Norman Bowker, the protagonist of this story is a Vietnam veteran who drives around a small town lake while dreaming that he had somebody to talk to about the war. By setting this story in a small town on Independence Day, O'Brien reinforces the loneliness and isolation of Bowker who cannot seem to connect to anything. Bower is ' in orbit[xiv]' of the town which seems ' remote[xv]', ' brisk[xvi]' and ' polite[xvii]'.

Through language like ' polite', ' sanitary[xviii]' and ' quaint[xix]' O'Brien makes the town sound clean, clinical to enforce the disgusting reality of the ' shit field' which Bowker faced. This helps the reader connect further with Bowker's plight and feel the distance between him and the town. By saying Bowker is ' in orbit' O'Brien emphasises the peripheral role that people play in Bowker's life and to the reader his loneliness seems even more apparent. Bowker's character watches the life around him as he drives around the lake.

These musings on other people intersperse the narrative about the ' shit field' allowing the author to present the reader with the impression of time passing and the world carrying on with Bowker. O'Brien uses the repetition of the drive around the lake to give the reader an insight into the mental state of Bowker. The slow and steady repetition of the revolutions around the lake shows how Bowker is unable to move forwards in his life, he is so haunted by Vietnam and how he almost won the silver star.

The author calls them ' revolutions[xx]' which gives the reader connotations of a struggle against oppressors. In this case, I believe that O'Brien is referring to the oppressive weight of an American society which wants to forget all about a war which devastated a generation. This reluctance to remember is embodied in the ' polite' town which has ' no memory, therefore no guilt[xxi]. ' For Bowker it seems the futility had followed him home from Vietnam and he had ' no place in particular to go. ' In the next story, ' Notes' O'Brien reports that Bowker had committed suicide.

In this way, O'Brien ' adroitly resists finality[xxii]' as the non-chronological recursive and predictive structure of ' The Things They Carried' allows the

reader to meet the character of Bowker again, even after we have learnt of his end. Another way O'Brien ' adroitly resists (the) finality' of war is through his understanding of long term consequences. O'Brien explores what happens to his characters both during before and after the war, something many other war novelists fail to do.

Like Pat Barker, O'Brien shows through his portrayal of his characters that for some the war never seemed to end. The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over. [xxiii]' The ironic contradiction and change from the ' seven medals[xxiv]' to the town ' who wouldn't listen[xxv]' echoes the futility of a war which for some could never end. In ' The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong' Tim O'Brien makes Vietnam as much a character as a place. He personifies the land and the people and the war and mixes them together to create an intense mystery and odd character of a place so unknown to an average American conscript.

For Mary Anne Bell, a girl swept up into the war by her boyfriend Mark Fossie ' Vietnam had the effect of a powerful drug. [xxvi]' She became addicted to Vietnam until she became ' part of the land[xxvii]'. O'Brien gives Vietnam power through his choice of language. He says that Vietnam had the ' dense terrain of a nightmare[xxviii] which gives the reader the impression of fear and impenetrability. In the end, ' The Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong' seems to be the author warning the reader of the danger Vietnam and the uselessness of trying to resist. ' You come over clean and you get dirty and then afterwards it's never the same. xxix]'

In contrast in 'The Things They Carried' Vietnam is not viewed as a person, nor a threat but simply so different that it becomes a burden. 'They carried the land itself... a powdery orange-red dust that covered their boots and fatigues and faces. [xxx]' O'Brien's use of 'covered' implies that Vietnam was everywhere and they couldn't escape it. The futility of war comes through to the reader in O'Brien's sentence structure. He uses long liturgical sentences to show the relentless monotony of the march and of the war.

'It was automatic, it was anatomy, and the war was entirely a matter of posture and carriage. xxxi]' In 'Regeneration' Barker displays the futility of war through her character development and their past experiences the most of all. The character of Burns serves no logical plot purpose within 'Regeneration' other than as an emotional foil for River's conflicting moralities. Barker uses the plight of Burns to show the reader the intense pointlessness of his suffering and what Sassoon is protesting against. By using the third person narrative Barker can objectively and clinically describe the affliction which emphasises the sheer horror of the situation to the reader.

Medical language like 'radius[xxxii]' and 'ulna[xxxiii]' makes the experience seem more impersonal and creates a bigger emotive effect for the reader when Barker switches to the personal thoughts and feelings of the characters involved. One critic called 'regeneration' 'An eloquent statement against the madness of war[xxxiv]' I believe that 'capturing her characters' voices and moods[xxxv]' through emotive language is how Barker conveys of the madness of war. Barker also expresses the futility of the war by the emasculation of her characters.

Before World War One shell shock was known as ' hysteria' an ailment commonly associated with women from its Greek root ' hystera' which means ' womb'. Many of the shell shocked patients in ' Regeneration' find the idea of being cured by sharing their feelings emasculating and hopeless. They feel ' weak' some have inadvertently made themselves paralysed or mute, unable to cope with the uselessness and the horror. War was seen as an active, manly event. ' The big adventure. [xxxvi]' However, when World War One turned out to be a ' passive[xxxvii]' war it created the existence of shell shock symptoms such as mutism and paralysis.

I believe these symptoms show uselessness of the war and the reactions of the soldiers to the reality of it. Barker uses the irony of being stuck in ' no-mans land[xxxviii]' being bombed to ' buggery[xxxix]' to further highlight the futility of the war and how it was only done because it was standard procedure. In contrast in ' The Things They Carried' the characters deal with the stresses and futility of war in a completely different way. O'Brien presents the alpha company as much more masculine but child-like. O'Brien describes the atmosphere as ' curiously playful' and ' lethal'.

The men enjoy such tasks as trick or treating on Halloween, doing rain dances and playing catch with hand grenades. When Azar blows up Ted Lavender's puppy he shrugs it off saying ' Christ, I'm just a boy. [xli]' However, O'Brien also states that Perhaps this is down to experience for the authors. Unlike ' Regeneration', one critic believes that in ' The Thing They Carried' ' there is no intense exploration of the test of courage we must all face[xlii]'. I complete disagree. Tim O'Brien highlights the ironies within

society's perception of courage and in ' On the Rainy River'; he shows the futility in resisting them.

For O'Brien, the irony is that by acting courageous as defined by society, the soldiers secretly learn that they are cowards. They fight in the war ' to avoid the blush of dishonor,' and they are even willing to die ' so as not to die of embarrassment'. The point is that the soldiers are too frightened of the consequences of not being brave to be brave enough to confess to their cowardice. This experience of the soldiers—the battle between what society considers courage on the outside and what the soldier feels to be cowardice inside, is I believe O'Brien's biggest accomplishment in changing our normal ideas of the nature of courage.

O'Brien makes issues of bravery and cowardice more than minor themes in ' The Thing They Carried'. Indeed, being a brave person, or trying to live up to his own expectations of courage, is a very important problem for our narrator. We are first made aware of O'Brien's personal battle with courage in ' On the Rainy River' when he struggles to decide whether to run from the draft and desert or give way to it and go to war.

The public perception of what denotes courage is so dominating that the narrator's decision to go to Vietnam is based entirely on cowardice and worry about other people's opinions, rather than courage ' Both my conscience and my instincts were telling me to make a break for it,[xlii]' says Tim, ' just take off and run like hell and never stop[xliii]' but he stops himself because he is too afraid to go. ' I feared the war,' he says, ' but I also feared exile... (and) losing the respect of my parents. [xliv]'

Just like Sassoon in 'Regeneration', Tim ' would risk conscience and rectitude before risking the loss of love[xlv]. Both writers express the futility in challenging the preset values of courage through their characters.

Sassoon, although he still believes in the pointlessness of the war returns to service in order to protect his men. Barker allows the reader to know that Sassoon though his protest was futile even before it was done. ' You can't just acquiesce[xlvi]' he says to Rivers. This allows the reader to gain an insight into the stubborn nature of Sassoon's character. In ' On the Rainy River' O'Brien uses the setting as a metaphor which foreshadows the war.

The character ' Tim' is working in a slaughterhouse declothing pig carcasses before in gets his draft notice. Many critics have called ' The Things They Carried' a work of metafiction. Metafiction is defined as ' fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. [xlvii]' I believe ' The Things They Carried' is a very good example of metafiction and that it highlights the futility of war within the piece.

Tim O'Brien refers to character and narrator clearly named after him and very similar to himself. ' I'm 43 years old, and a writer now. [xlviii]' The difference between the narrator and the author, it seems is that the narrator ' Tim' O'Brien has a daughter called Kathleen who is a metaphor for that impossible gap in communication between a writer and a reader. Kathleen asks the questions that the reader is asking themselves. For example in ' Good Form' Kathleen asks ' Tim' whether he has ever killed somebody and ' Tim' says both yes and no.

This contradictory answer reinforces the futility of war to the reader because it doesn't matter whether he has or not, only that somebody somewhere has and that according to O'Brien makes it true. He wanted to tap into the 'emotional truth, which is what fiction is all about. [xliv]' In conclusion, both Barker and O'Brien heavily use setting to express the futility of war; Barker through the oppressive Craiglockhart which is described as ' a trench with the sky' and O'Brien through the personification of a land into an ideal, a threatening mystery that is inescapable- ' You don't have to be in ' nam to be in ' nam. [lv]' he writes.

Contrarily, Barker uses the moral dilemmas of her character to express the pointlessness and opinions on war, dealing with cowardice and courage so that ' Regeneration' becomes a ' mutli-layered exploration of all wars[lvi]', not only the First World War. By using emotive language and Rivers status as a psychologist Barker manages to get ' under the skin of both real and imaginary characters[lvii]' to create an accurate picture of the despair facing those suffering from shell shock. In contrast O'Brien uses ambiguity and pseudo-' authorial' insights to create what he calls the ' story-truth' which is more real than what actually happened.

Through the structure of ' The Things They Carried', O'Brien explored the pasts, futures and war lives of his protagonists and highlighted the dominating pointlessness of their deaths and criticized American society who forgot all about their useless war. ' In a war without aim' writes Tim O'Brien, ' you tend not to aim. You close your eyes, close your heart. The consequences become hit or miss in the most literal sense. [lviii]' This, I

believe superbly echoes the hopelessness of both wars highlighting the ' ambiguities[liv]' and moral ' schizophrenia[lv]' of an ' aimless' war.

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