

A monster or a man?
the true case of in the
lake of the woods



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

He has dark secrets and regrets. The mystery to solve is not only that of John Wade, but that of the narrator of the story himself. Throughout the novel *In the Lake of the Woods* by Tim O'Brien, the narrator uses the case of John and Kathy as way to justify his own past. The narrator depicts the situation of John Wade and Kathy from a unique point of view, disregarding the truth of what happened to Kathy. Nonetheless, the footnotes reveal that there is so much more to the story than what happened to Kathy. The narrator has his own mystery he is trying to solve; the inner complexities of John as a person. It appears that the narrator is an unreliable narrator, as he, "distorts the tale [he's] telling" (Kelly xiii). Kelly's introduction explains, "When reading a story by such a narrator, part of the reader's pleasure comes from piecing together a more reliable account of the events" (xiii). The footnote at the end of chapter 30 reveals a deeper truth about the narrator and about the novel itself.

In attempt to assemble the pieces of the mystery, the narrator is attempting to assemble the pieces of himself. The narrator says, "Maybe that's what this book is for. To remind me. To give me back my vanished life" (298n10).

When the narrator says "remind me" he is referring to being reminded that deep down he is not a bad person. In this footnote the narrator reveals that, he too, has had a similar experience in Thuan Yen. He admits, "I have my own PFC Wetherby, my own old man with a hoe" (298n10). These atrocities that the narrator relates to are John's most tormenting and painful memories. The murder of Wetherby and the old man make John seem like a monster. The narrator reveals he carries the same weight of regret. It is because of this predisposition that the narrator proves un-reliable. If the

narrator can persuade readers to understand John as a complex individual, who deep down is a good person, then the narrator can convince himself that he too is the same. The novel boils down to these final questions, “ Can we believe that he was not a monster but a man? That he was innocent of everything except his life” (303)? Contrary to the plot of the story, the novel does not end with resolution to the mystery, but rather reveals the narrators final plea to understand John as a good soul underneath all the monstrosity of his life. As the footnotes reveal the relation between the narrator and John, it becomes clear that the verdict of John’s character is parallel to determining the narrators character as well.

As it becomes clear that the story is not about finding out what happened to Kathy, it also becomes clear that it is rather a collection of “ evidence” that defends the narrators own past. He admits, “ I find myself wondering if these old tattered memories weren’t lifted from someone else’s life, or from a pice of fiction I once read or heard about.” (298n10) Upon learning this relationship between the narrator and the main character it becomes evident that the narrator has taken the mystery of John and Kathy and used it as a template to place his own tattered memories. This reflects the evidence that the narrator has collected. Since the story is told by an unreliable narrator, the evidence collected is not actually conducive to the mystery of Kathy, but rather to the mystery of the narrators self. The narrator even declares in the first footnote, “ I have tried of course, to be faithful to the evidence. Yet evidence is not truth” (30n10). Later, the narrator ironically uses evidence to dismiss the possibility that John killed Kathy and argues, “ Besides, there’s the weight of evidence. He was crazy about her” (300n4). Both of these

statements have a defensive connotation. It appears the narrator uses “evidence” not in a truthful way, but a way that serves the narrator himself. The narrator endlessly searches for a solution to the nature of himself. He says, “ God knows I’ve tried. Reams of data, miles of magnetic tape, but none of it satisfies even my own primitive appetite for answers” (266n29). Data and magnetic tape cannot satisfy the narrator as he is not really looking for answers to the murder case; he is looking for answers to his own affliction.

In relation to the story as a whole, the aspects which the footnotes reveal, can indeed shed light on the story at hand. Understanding the narrator as an unreliable narrator with ulterior motives can shed light on the mystery of Kathy’s disappearance. Perhaps it was obvious that John murdered Kathy and the Biographer and Historian saw the case as an opportunity to defend his own merit. The way the narrator weighted importance on persuading John as anything but a monster, and the way the narrator twisted the use of evidence show that he was trying hard to convince readers out of what might have otherwise been obvious. The narrator is sympathetic towards John and does not care to prove what happened to Kathy because he knows what happened to her. Instead he stresses the importance of actually understanding John Wade. Like Wade, the narrator has committed despicable acts and wants to be seen for who he is underneath such acts. Realizing the resemblance between himself and John, he found a journey into the human motive and human desire in attempt to at last discover himself. After all, it is only through the otherness of another that one has a mirror to see the self.

Works Cited

Kelly, Joseph. Introduction. *The Seagull Reader Stories*. 2nd Ed. New York: Norton & Company, Inc, 2008, 2001. xxv. Print.

O'Brien, Tim. *In the Lake of the Woods*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence, 1994. Print.