

Norman bowker essay

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



Norman Bowker symbolizes the alienation that veterans of the Vietnam War felt within their community, consequently, this alienation illustrates the struggle they faced to be integrated back into the society.

Norman Bowker, a veteran who returns home, feels alienated from the other men in his hometown. “Speaking of Courage” chronicles the alienation and remoteness he feels in his hometown; though a deep desire to tell his story, he refuses to talk to Sally “... there is really nothing he could say to her” (O’Brien 133) as they both come from different worlds, one of war and the other of tranquility. He also keeps the story to himself; firstly when he meets the men working, then with the boys he passes, and lastly with the order taker. As a result of having no one to talk to, “He drove slowly. No hurry, nowhere to go. Inside the Chevy the air was cool...” (O’Brien 137) he transforms into quite a reserved person. Similarly, he is unable to connect to his past memories; this sense of disconnectedness overwhelms him.

Norman’s repetitive drive in circles around the lake reflects a metaphor for this cycle of trying to express his story. Additionally, the thought of his father’s disinterest in him coupled with the sense that “he felt invisible” contributes to the extreme alienation he feels. Summarily, Norman employs both imagery and symbolism to reflect the paradox between the need for emotional truth and the pain many feel in expressing it.

Norman has a weird interaction with his community and somewhat doesn’t know how to react to his community. He cannot find any meaning in employment, school, or relationships. This is evident when he admits “None of these jobs... had lasted more than ten weeks” (O’Brien 149). Furthermore he enrolls with a junior college in his hometown only to drop out after eight

months. Additionally, he fails to relate even with his past time girl friend and his father; " If Sally had not been married, or if his father were not such a baseball fan, it would have been a good time to talk" (O'Brien 160). He had much to say, but lacked somebody to tell and comfort him in moments of self-blame. His inability to communicate with other people and cope with the present time, to some extent is symbolic of the remoteness and inability to come to terms with everyone, veterans feel once they go back home.

Norman continued interaction with the community makes it hard for him to make the transition from soldier to civilian. He lacks a meaning in life.

Sending O'Brien a long, disjointed letter, "...Bowker described the problem of finding a meaningful use for his life after the war."(O'Brien 149) and the thought of the dancing girl that the troop encounters in " Style"; both act as a search for meaning. The letter metaphorically illustrates his inability to express what has happened to him, and come to terms with his new reality. Norman through his actions explicitly symbolizes how veterans feel after they live with the community. Moreover, Norman also experiences nostalgic and sentimental memories both of his girlfriend and his long gone best friend Max Arnold. However the past for Norman seems an idea, " possible... idea, even necessary as an idea" (O'Brien 158), consequently it also seems as a flickering thought in a big jumbled chaos in his head. This continually alienates him from the society and the people he loved most. This is demonstrated when he imagines talking to Sally;

‘ How’s it being married?’ he might ask, and

“ He’d nod at whatever she answered with, and he would not say a word about how he’d almost won the Star for Valor...” (O’Brien 160). In the end this isolation, depression and disappointment overwhelms Norman and he commits suicide.

Already physically and emotionally defeated, Norman finds bigger disappointments and sadness instead of recuperating trust when he returns to his hometown. Emotionally stricken he grieves to find someone to share his experiences with. Consequently, accumulation of these experiences in his mind come with multitude of disorders, predominantly with a post traumatic stress disorder occasioned by symptoms of intrusive thoughts relating to the death of Kiowa, feelings and memories inclined during the war time and the past. His failure to rescue Kiowa, placing his blame on the stench of the shit field, obsessively haunts him. Using a strong analytical structure of characterization, the author in regard to Norman’s dilemma asserts “...that night when Kiowa got wasted, I sort of sank down into the sewage with him” (O’Brien 156). Apparently this shows the motif as well as the image that both Norman had passion for Kiowa. To justify this profound aspect, the author employs the use of figurative approach when he states, “ He’d lost Kiowa and his weapon and his flashlight and his girlfriend’s picture. He remembered this. He remembered wondering if he could lose himself...” (O’Brien 171).

On the other hand, the effect of the post traumatic stress disorder Norman experiences is illustrated by his inhibited social skills when placing a fast-

food order. He honks at the waitress instead of placing an order through the drive-through intercom. Alternatively he does not move away until after he eats his hamburger and then presses the intercom again to inform the waitress that he has finished.

Norman finally admits that war conquered his courage. He wants to confess his cowardice and complicity to anyone but no one wants to hear the reality of war. On his eleventh repetitive round around the lake, the thought of not winning the Silver Star hurts him but what hurts him most is what it symbolized. He should have saved Kiowa then he would have had the Silver Star. Like his medals everything else in his life is inconsequential, he remains unable to move beyond that decision he made that contributed to his friend's death. Similar to Norman, the author tries to address the impact of war on soldiers when trying to understand reality. Unlike O'Brien using the immense power of storytelling to get over the wartime experiences, Norman lacks someone to share his experiences with demonstrating that loneliness and isolation are forces as destructive as any piece of ammunition.

War will always remain a powerful experience passing through the soldiers mind, Vietnam been quiet horrifying in the history of all wars. Norman a powerful character uses a number of elements of language to address the effect of trauma and the struggle for redemption and recovery coupled with the sense of being alienated that veterans go through. Alternatively, it seems that Norman was not emotionally equipped to deal with the viciousness and cruelty of war. This is illustrated prominently as Norman feels displaced from his old life and haunted by wartime experiences. In

addition, through the use of stylistic devices the author tries to imply that the soldiers including Norman did not bear any fruits in their operations. They were just wasting their time and energy. It is true to say that post traumatic stress disorder remains a scientific certainty and the results of the trauma suffered in the war together with the emotional weight had a negative impact on the lives of the veterans. Consequently he experiences a time of loneliness and transformation that leads to his self-discovery. Arguably, Norman lacks meaning for life.