

Feminist and new historical approach to the things they carried

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



By applying the Feminist and New Historical criticisms to a work, the reader is presented with a deeper understanding of a story and a clearer analysis of the text than other traditional approaches. Unlike other literary theories, the feminist literary criticism argues the importance of female authors and characters throughout a work. The feminist critic claims that women are not accurately depicted by male writers and that their experiences can be better defined by female authors. In contrast, New Historical criticism focuses on the historical context of a story, rather than specific characters in the work. New Historical critics argue the importance of not only the historical background but the biography of the author as well. When applying these theories to “The Things They Carried” by Tim O’Brien, the reader gets a well rounded interpretation of this short story. Centered around the male-dominated setting of the Vietnam War, O’Brien’s story presents many issues that both criticisms seek to analyze. While the feminist critic focuses primarily on O’Brien’s lack of female representation throughout the story, the New Historical critic would seek to interpret the motives behind the writing of the story and the setting in which it is placed. Both criticisms take a different approach to analyzing literature that creates an in-depth understanding of the author’s portrayal of the characters and the setting. As applied to “The Things They Carried,” these two approaches present a better understanding of Tim O’Brien’s purpose behind writing the story, as well as his portrayal of female characters referenced throughout the work. Building upon the ideals of feminism, beginning with the suffrage movement in the early nineteenth century, the feminist literary criticism attempts to uncover the ways in which literature contributes to or opposes the

oppression of women. Applied to society, the feminist critic seeks to unravel and expose the patriarchal traditions that influence decisions of the household and of the state (Brizee). Initially, this idea centered around the exclusion of female authors from the male-dominated profession of writing. In recent years, however, it has evolved into a concept that encompasses far greater issues, not only dealing with the struggles of discrimination against women but also towards other minority groups as well. The emergence of feminism can be viewed in three waves, each more influential than the last, especially in regards to the importance placed on female literature (Goel). The first wave occurred in the years preceding the Civil War, in which women fought for abolition as well as the right to vote. The Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, led by such leaders as Susan B. Anthony and Victoria Woodhull, greatly contributed to the suffrage movement. In 1920, this movement culminated in the Nineteenth Amendment, which guaranteed women the right to vote (Goel). Expanding on the growing equality granted to women in the work force after World War II, the second wave of feminism sought to grant women more rights apart from political freedoms. Finally, the third wave emphasized equality for all groups, not only those involved with the feminist movement (Goel). With each wave of feminism, women's rights expanded in society as well as in literary circles, which became more open to the emergence of works written by female authors.

The feminist literary critic argues the significance of female literature in the context of historical, philosophical, and biographical importance. The traditionally male-dominated practice of writing, excluded many talented

female authors from prominent literary standing in past centuries. Because of this overwhelming dominance of male literary works in society, many feminists argue that their ideas and experiences are not adequately represented. In writing about the exploits of female protagonists, male authors fall short of fully encompassing the feminine identity. Shilpi Goel describes the feminist literary criticism as “ the rebellion of the female consciousness against the male images of female identity and experience.” The preconceived ideas surrounding women in society proved inadequate in defining the female condition.

Authors like Virginia Woolf, a prominent proponent of feminism, resented the lack of importance placed on female literature (Kowaleski-Wallace 431). Woolf thought the differences in societal interests were not fairly represented, as the male bias dominated all forms of literature. She believed that women’s literature lost credibility with male readers because it was not focuses around the specific things they wanted to read. For instance, Woolf acknowledged the fact that men were primarily concerned with literature about the war and had little desire to read anything else. In ridiculing these differences in twentieth century literature, Woolf said, “ This is an important book...because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room (Donovan 10).” With the rise of female literature, came the push for more representation of women in literary circles. It was believed that women, more so than men, were capable of studying and interpreting female literature. Therefore, with the increase in the importance of female literature, the movement started by feminist

literary critics introduced more women into the predominately male society of literature.

In regards to other theories, feminist literary criticism takes a closer look into the experiences of female authors and the representation of female characters in literature. While women are able to study and apply these other theories, it is a predominately male practice, like the art of writing itself (Eagleton 5). Because of these inherently patriarchal traditions, feminist literary critics question the practices of other theories. However, some argue that theory is too disinterested and distant for feminist thinkers altogether. Mary Eagleton expands on this by saying, " theory is impersonal, public, objective, male; experience is personal, private, subjective, female" (6). " Gynocriticism", or the study of female writers in the past, explores the historical challenges confronted by female authors (Kowaleski-Wallace 287). This approach gives the reader a clearer representation of the feminist criticism, as well as the ideals of feminism introduced in the past century.

In viewing Tim O'Brien's " The Things They Carried" through the lens of a feminist literary critic, it is obvious that the story presents a bias toward the male protagonists in the work. Women are not represented in the story, except in the memories of the soldiers, who primarily view them for their physical attributes and sexuality. Historically, women played little part in the conflict of the war, though the feminist literary critic would argue against O'Brien's objectification of women in the story.

The devastation of the Vietnam War takes a secondary role in the story, as the account centers around Lieutenant Jimmy Cross' inner conflict. Cross struggles to focus on the war as his thoughts continually wander to the woman he loves back home. Although women are not directly represented in Tim O'Brien's "How To Tell a War Story", Lieutenant Jimmy Cross' adoration of Martha constitutes a majority of the story and plays a pivotal role in the soldiers' experiences in the war. Martha, an English student at Mount Sebastian, constantly sends letters to Lieutenant Cross, and he longs for her affection. He spends hours at a time looking at her pictures and reading her letters, fantasizing about the life that they could have together. However, most of these fantasies center around her sexuality, especially in questioning her virginity. In one instance, Cross remembers touching her knee during a movie and later kissing her goodnight. In recalling this event O'Brien writes, "he should've carried her up the stairs to her room and tied her to the bed and touched that left knee all night long" (369). These and other thoughts throughout the work, distract the protagonist and objectify the women in the story by merely focusing on their physical attractiveness.

In analyzing this work, the feminist literary critic would argue against O'Brien's central presentation of this historical event, which gives a one-sided account of the Vietnam War. Women in the story are given no physical manifestation and are represented merely by their tokens of affection: a picture, a letter, some pantyhose. Despite this lack of representation, Cross attempts to blame Martha's distraction as the cause of Lavender's death. In the end of the story he burns her pictures and letters, resenting her memory

for bringing emotional affliction on himself and physical harm to his men. O'Brien summarizes this drastic change in emotion by saying, " He hated her. Love, too, but it was a hard, hating kind of love" (383). The feminist would argue against this conclusion, as the woman is blamed for the hardship faced by the protagonist, even though she plays no part in the story itself.

In the beginning of O'Brien's story, Martha is introduced as an English student who loved the works of Virginia Woolf. By referencing this prominent feminist writer, the gender differences presented by O'Brien throughout the rest of the story are even more obvious, as male characters predominately overshadow the females. Woolf argued against the patriarchal stories of past generations, claiming literature written by men did not adequately portray the experiences of women. This short story, centering around the male-dominated war effort, leaves little room for female protagonists or the input of female characters. In the end, Martha is viewed as an unnecessary burden that must be left behind, similar to the other supplies carried by the soldiers.

Unlike traditional theories of the past century, New Historical criticism puts great emphasis on the background of a work, focusing on the social, political, and economic features of the time in which a story was written, rather than the specific information in the text. According to the New Historicist, the ideological and cultural motivations that affected the author's writing must be taken into account when analyzing a particular work of literature (Delahoyde). New Historical criticism primarily relies on the cultural response to the reading, as well as the writing of a story. Much of its focus is on

disenfranchised, isolated groups, as well as groups that practice unusual traditions and behaviors (Brewton). New Historicism presents a unique interpretation of a work of literature by not only emphasizing the author's written words but also a culture's response to the particular work, both in the time it was written and in the present era.

New Historicism began in the late twentieth century with the work of Stephen Greenblatt, a Shakespearean critic who wanted to delve into the social and political aspects of the stories he read. Greenblatt began by studying the works of Shakespeare in relation to Renaissance theatre and the performances of the plays he wrote during this period ("New Historicism"). He later coined the term "New Historicism" for this particular school of criticism. Building off of Greenblatt's work, Michel Foucault furthered the study of New Historicism by collecting several works of literature and applying his analysis of these works to the particular time period. By interpreting a literary text through the lens of society, Foucault set the precedent for further work in this field of thought.

The past few decades have seen an increase in the importance of Historical Criticism as it applies to literature. New Criticism, the idea that the author should not be considered when reading a work, primarily dominated the literary circles of past centuries (Brewton). However, more critics are beginning to realize the importance of historical context in the analysis of a story. New Criticism, or Formalism, gives a singular interpretation of a story that does not extend beyond the written page, while Historical criticism gives the reader a clear representation of the background of the text. "The Things

"They Carried", a short story set in the conflict of the Vietnam War, gives a glimpse into the lives of several young soldiers who struggle with both physical and emotional baggage they are forced to carry. Through the lens of Historical Criticism, the war itself would be studied, as well as the response of the American culture to the conflict overseas. The New Historical critic would go so far as to analyze the objects carried by the men, referenced throughout the story. For example, in one scene of the story, O'Brien writes, "They all carried ghosts" (372). This statement shows that despite the physical burden of the objects they carried, they also suffered under the weight of emotional and mental strains. Through this analysis and research into the background of the Vietnam War, the reader would be able to fully comprehend the implications of the work and the time period. The Vietnam War presents a deeply traumatic and tragic conflict not only in the history of America but throughout the world. In the wake of North Vietnamese aggression toward South Vietnam, President Lyndon B. Johnson and the American people pledged to step in to prevent the spread of communist hostility ("The Big Read"). The average age of American soldiers in Vietnam was nineteen, making the young men who fought, dangerously susceptible to physical and emotional trauma. Most of these young men were also extremely unexperienced when it came to combat and the senseless killing that accompanies a life of war. O'Brien greatly emphasizes this aspect of the war in his story, by writing about the emotional strains on the men and the onset of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that followed their time in Vietnam (Fowler). When compared to the war itself, O'Brien's story gives a glimpse into the lives of young men trying to rationalize the chaos unfolding around

them, especially in regards to the death of their friends. O'Brien describes this by saying, " They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing — these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight" (381). Each of the men attempted to find a means of escape from the war, which generally centered around senseless fantasies. In describing Lieutenant Cross's distraction with Martha's memory, O'Brien writes, " He had loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence Lavender was now dead, and this was something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war" (377). Each scene in O'Brien's story describes the chaos and emotional strain placed on the young men in the war. Jimmy Cross and his men were forced to push ahead, even after losing men like Ted Lavender. In describing the war, O'Brien writes, " They shared the weight of memory. They took what others could no longer bear. Often, they carried each other, the wounded or weak" (376). This and other images described by O'Brien create a setting of death and despair for the characters in his story.

Also important to the story, is the author's personal background and his motivations for writing the work. Historical Criticism argues that the author's writing must have been influenced in some way by the cultural or political ideologies of the time in which it was written. Tim O'Brien, the author of " The Things They Carried", fought in the Vietnam War himself, giving the story an underlying autobiographical tone, especially since O'Brien uses his own name for the protagonist in some of his literature. He even dedicated the story to the characters, giving the reader the impression that they were

based off of real people. In an interview about the book, O'Brien later stated, "The stories in the book are for the most part invented but they are launched out of a world I once knew" (O'Brien). By writing about an event that he experienced, the literary critic would argue that O'Brien had a better understanding and deeper motive for putting his thoughts on paper.

Both Feminist and New Historical criticism give a broader understanding of a particular work of fiction, by creating a clear interpretation of an author's voluntary and involuntary motives behind writing a story. In analyzing O'Brien's "The Things They Carried", both approaches work together to create a meaning beyond the reader's initial interpretation. The Feminist literary criticism goes beyond the explicit writing of the text, seeking to identify a bias in the author's presentation of the characters. In "The Things They Carried", this bias can be seen in O'Brien's one-sided approach to the war effort and the lack of representation given to women in the story. The feminist critic would view O'Brien's depiction of Martha as demeaning, especially since Lieutenant Cross's fantasies focus solely on her sexuality and the question of her virginity. However, of the things that Jimmy Cross carries throughout the war, his memory of Martha is by far the most important and influential. The Historical Criticism put a greater emphasis on the history of the time period and the author's personal association with the Vietnam War. By understanding this connection between O'Brien and the war effort, the story is given more credibility, as an autobiographical tone is seen in this work of fiction. The setting, characters, and objects described in

the story are also enhanced by an understanding of the story's historical background.

The Feminist and Historical criticisms do not only create meaning separately but also present a profound meaning when viewed together. Because the feminist goals and ideals changed over time, literature interpreted in the later twentieth century would be viewed differently than literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The historical context of O'Brien's story, when viewed through the lens of a Feminist critic, shows the bias of the Vietnam War that generally focused on the roles of men in combat, and gave little credibility to the women back home. The Feminist literary critic would argue that "The Things They Carried" presents a great representation of this historical bias, whether the author's intent was voluntary or involuntary.

As I read and interpreted the story through the lens of Historical and Feminist literary criticisms, I gained a deeper understanding of the work as a whole, as well as the author and his characters. My research enhanced my understanding of the story by presenting me with a different interpretation of a work that I initially only viewed as a simple story about the Vietnam War. The feminist approach gave me a better understanding of the roles that male and female characters play throughout a work of fiction, depending on the time in which it is set. I now know the importance of the background of a literary work, including the author's motives and the underlying implications of his writing. My understanding of these criticisms allowed me to not only view the characters and setting of O'Brien's work but also the implications of

his underlying ideas concerning women of the time and the historical context.

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