

# A theme of guilt in the man i killed by tim o'brien

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



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In Tim O'Brien's "The Man I Killed" guilt is a strong theme within the work. The narrator, Tim, is struggling with his whirlwind of emotions so much so that his own presence disappears within the story as he begins to focus more on the victim he killed. By giving the man a life, O'Brien is attempting to exonerate the guilt of taking the man's life. The list of physical attributes and characteristics of the man are strong forms of imagery. The theme of guilt reverberates in forms of repetition and imagery, creating a life for the fallen man, and the consolations of the fellow soldiers.

Repetition was the strongest form of guilt written within the work. By repeating the descriptions of the man, losing some imagery and adding some, O'Brien is torturing himself. The repetition of certain phrases such as the "his jaw was in his throat" and "his one eye was shut" and most importantly, the "star-shaped hole" shows that O'Brien is having trouble grappling with the idea of killing a man. The passage of time also signals to the readers how long O'Brien has been staring at the body, which indicates unbridled guilt. Kiowa references O'Brien's guilt as well when he says "You feel terrible, I know that." O'Brien has stared at the body so long that his fellow soldiers become unsettled. The repetition is both imprinted into O'Brien's mind as well as the readers. He's constantly describing the man as a "slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay with one leg bent beneath him, his jaw in his throat, his face neither expressive nor inexpressive. One eye was shut. The other was a star-shaped hole". The death is still haunting O'Brien, by using descriptive words such as "dainty" and "star-shaped hole," O'Brien is also trying to establish a feeling of gracefulness from the horrific death of the soldier.

The description of the butterfly and how it travels along the face of the man also tugs at the readers heartstrings because it adds an element of innocence into a devastating scene. By creating a life for the young man, O'Brien is grappling with the idea of his own mortality. He sees himself in the young man by drawing similarities between the two. The man is described to be a student who was drawn into patriotic duty. By imagining the man being in the prime of his life, O'Brien is feeding into his own guilt. Identifying with the victim is another way O'Brien tries to console himself. The life of the man becomes complex as O'Brien continues the repetition of the fallen soldier's dead features. When O'Brien points out that the man " had no stomach for violence", he's drawing a parallel to himself.

O'Brien, with how torn up he is about the death of his victim, also reveals that he also doesn't have a stomach for violence. By giving the man life, O'Brien is hoping he'll be able to exonerate his guilt. The man, as O'Brien describes, felt obligated to be courageous and fight, even if it goes against his scholarly nature. O'Brien, to his fellow soldiers, is humanizing a " weapon. " Looking into the similarities between O'Brien and the dead soldier, society plays a large role in the choices each man makes. The expectations of both societies, American and Vietnamese, shows that going into battle was the manly and courageous thing to do despite it going against the natures of both men. The characterization of the dead soldier also points out how weakness is associated with feminine qualities. The dead soldier was not meant to be a fighter, but felt that it was the manly thing to do to serve his country. O'Brien is noted to have felt the same way by use of repetition and how he reacts with such profound guilt to the death of the man.

Kiowa is referenced multiple times in the story and he serves as a persistent and understanding presence. He's a reminder to O'Brien that killing a man in war does not equate to murder. Each time Kiowa returns, he's showing how unsettled by the death he is as well, especially when he recognizes how long O'Brien stares at the body. "Tim, it's a war". By emphasizing how they're fighting in a war, Kiowa is trying to show that murder isn't as cold-blooded when you're fighting for your country. Kiowa is patient with O'Brien, but as time passes, his patience grows thin. By trying to persuade O'Brien to realize that killing in war isn't something to tear yourself up about, he's failing to help O'Brien sort out his emotions. The theme of guilt resonates in Kiowa's words each time he tries to talk to O'Brien. "I'm serious. Nothing anybody could do. Come on, stop staring" Kiowa doesn't appear guilty, but it's obvious that he recognizes how guilty O'Brien feels. Another member of O'Brien's company serves as a more cold, guiltless presence. "Oh, man, you fuckin' trashed the fucker" Azar is unaware to how guilty O'Brien feels. He makes another round of snide remarks before Kiowa tells him to leave. Azar serves as a contrast in character between O'Brien, the dead soldier, and Azar himself. Azar is more ready and willing to end a life because he views his victims as weapons rather than human beings. O'Brien and the dead soldier are opposites to Azar, which is proven when O'Brien creates an entire life surrounding his victim. By using strong forms of imagery and repetition, creating a life for the fallen soldier, and describing how O'Brien's company tries to console him, O'Brien establishes the theme of guilt and how he struggles with it throughout the story.

By pondering the complexity of the human life and the importance of taking one's own morality into consideration, O'Brien is working through his emotions by creating a life for his victim in relation to his own. Tim O'Brien balances the descriptions between the life of the victim and the aftermath of his death because it serves as a reminder that the beauty of human life should never be overshadowed by the gruesomeness of death.