

# Common and different in "the things they carried" and "the woman warrior" novels

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The compelling, yet haunting novel by Tim O'Brien "The Things They Carried" has many parallels and contrasts to multiple elements of the culture filled text by Maxine Hong Kingston "The Woman Warrior" including writing style, targeted audience, and perspective. Both novels, "The Things They Carried" and "The Woman Warrior", tell the journey of self discovery, but the perspective depends on storytelling, setting, and their use of character analysis to develop the plot.

Storytelling ties into the development of a theme in which both authors included. The illustrated theme portrays a blur between reality and fantasy. For O'Brien, if it feels true he will tell it rather than if it occurred. He writes to the characters, "This book is lovingly dedicated to the men of Alpha Company, and in particular to Jimmy Cross...and Kiowa. (O'Brien, 1990, p.)" He dedicates the book to the nonexistent characters: Rat, Kiowa, and Sanders. This deceives the readers into thinking each character is real. Possibly, he intended to reach out to all the similar people of the world that relate to Cross and Rat to add influence and truth. The most ideal path for him is to convey his Vietnam involvement through "true stories" not through what truthfully happened. He developed this theme because truthful stories makes it harder to connect with the readers regarding the war. For Kingston, the more she reflects on memory the more the readers understand that the truth depends on who is recounting the story.

Kingston (1976) states the following: Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who

marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies? (p.) She is filled with questions regarding Chinese character in America. She demonstrates through her fable stories that fantasy plays a major role in the real world.

Storytelling in "The Things They Carried" consists of many linking stories. O'Brien reveals his childhood, war experiences, and memories. His distinct storytelling is found throughout the text but is epitomized in two different manners when he is seen as the author and as the protagonist characterizing himself. Not only did he present himself twice with the same name, but he exhibits fiction and actuality by composing stories about the past to help the readers comprehend it better.

Storytelling in "The Woman Warrior" consists of stories about her life, family, and cultural myths. Her style of writing brings questions to the table because she tells multiple versions of the same story without revealing a clear truth. Both novels assemble stories on one another that reflect on themselves, community, and memories. O'Brien incorporates his unique tone leaving the readers on edge as he faces obstacles that bring out internal reflection.

Similarly, Kingston connects stories based on personal life experiences, community, and cultural myths. O'Brien displays pieces of his life starting from meeting his childhood lover to war experiences to reviewing his past with his daughter. Just as Kingston tells many stories starting from lessons learned as a child to relative discoveries to unbelievable Chinese anecdotes.

Her nontraditional storytelling creates an itching desire for answers while smoothly incorporating new storyline outlets as it goes along. The two novels challenge the readers to believe in who they are and to serve a purpose by strengthening community, overcoming weakness, and finding your identity. This is strikingly displayed when Kingston (1976) says: Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?(p.) This quote gives a vivid picture of Kingston struggling with the idea of Chinese culture in America. In addition, O'Brien (1990) says, " They carry the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all." (p.) This conveys that everyone experiences weakness whether you're a soldier or a normal citizen. Both authors included language devices such as allegory, symbolism, and tone. They share the common device of symbolism. His use of symbolism is clear in the chapter " Speaking of Courage" when Bowker is unable to express his true emotions about Kiowa.

O'Brien (1990) says in the following: [Bowker] could not talk about it and never would. The evening was smooth and warm. If it had been possible, which it wasn't, he would have explained how his friend Kiowa slipped away that night beneath the dark swampy field. He was folded in with the war; he was part of the waste.(p.) Bowker cannot recall any experiences or memories from war symbolizing symptoms of PTSD. Just as Kingston includes

symbolism by referencing the foreigners to ghost. Kingston (1976) explains "The Japanese, though " little," were not ghosts, the only foreigners considered not ghosts by the Chinese" (p.). Her use of ghosts can teach the readers to overcome fear and whatever it is that is haunting. Each book has their own way of telling a story based on tone, familial experiences, and audience. O'Brien's tone tends to jump around from serious to nostalgic. He describes each subject with complete knowledge and confidence. Not only does O'Brien use symbolism, but he includes allegories within his stories to catch the reader's attention.

O'Brien (1990) states " The truth," Norman Bowker would've said, " is I let the guy go"(p.). This represents how all the soldiers felt responsible for Kiowa's death but in reality it was just universal. O'Briens writing style challenges the readers because it is unpredictable, thought-provoking, and filled with heartfelt memories. As Kingston's technique grabs the reader's attention because it is contradicting, complex, and abounding with family myths. She is more intimate in the text rather than knowledgeable. Kingston (1976) utilizes similes throughout the novel in ways such as " I...walked about like a guest"(p.). She chose this language because she wanted to provide a vivid illustration for the readers.

According to Kingston (1976): To make my walking life American-normal, I turn on the lights before anything untoward makes appearance. I push the deformed into my dreams, which are in Chinese, the language of impossible stories.(p.) This quote emphasizes the culture of America and China and how

nervous she was to begin her new life compared to what she was accustomed to.

"The Things They Carried" takes place in two areas: the homeland of the soldiers and the Vietnam jungle. It is a group of many stories about the lives of soldiers during 1990. The readers can experience the malicious Vietnam jungle filled with booby traps, gun fire shots, and the roaring sounds of explosions. "The Woman Warrior" alternates settings between a small village in China and America. This time is around 1924-1975 to the moment Kingston's dad departs.

Both novels have more than one location as the setting and refer to the past and present as the story progresses. O'Brien portrays a balance between the soldier's homeland and the Vietnam jungle. This balance is to enhance the crawling fear upon the soldiers as they attempt to carry things through war. Just as Kingston travels back and forth in space and time between China and America. Both share personal stories that alternate character usage, setting, and time. For example, in the beginning of the book he shares old memories of the love of his life, Martha. He gives a glimpse of his past, while he was young and living in his hometown by sharing his thoughts and memories of Martha. O'Brien also digs deep into other characters such as Mark Fossie and his girlfriend, Mary Anne. During the war, Fossie invites his girlfriend to explore with him, but they come across relationship challenges. While Kingston transitions her stories between five different women known as her aunt, dead aunt, mom, Fa Mu Lan, and herself. The setting that is created from both is a nostalgic recollection of memories, myths, and events. The

differences in setting consist of society, culture, and values. O'Brien focuses on the obligations of the soldiers because at this time, expectations were set high due to the tough circumstances within society. Circumstances such as men being sent to war, low employment, small range of opportunities. Also, reputation plays a major role in the lives of men because they are to be viewed as strong, brave, and unemotional. For example, O'Brien becomes overwhelmed when he receives a draft letter.

Although society pressures men to participate in war, he has no interest in going. O'Brien (1990) says " I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war" (p.). He chose to go to war rather than fleeing because he didn't want to face cowardice and humiliation. Meanwhile, Kingston focuses on raising the role of women in society and representing the difficulties emigrants from China dealt with. This novel has an overflowing amount of Chinese culture involved. During this time, discrimination, low income, and limited privileges were common. Kingston (1976) yells " I'm not a bad girl," I would scream. " I'm not a bad girl. I'm not a bad girl." I might as well have said, " I'm not a girl" (p.). This quote represents how women felt unwanted, unappreciated, and invisible.

Character analysis helps develop the plot because it gives an outline of the character's traits and their role. This challenges the readers to analyze more about the character. The involvement of conflict brings characterization because it affects the protagonist by developing internal and external qualities. Both authors incorporate character analysis to create an interaction between the characters and audience. They reveal the

character's motivation, behavior, and personality through characterization. For example, Tim as a kid is motivated to gain an education before he drafts to war. From this, the audience can infer that he is observant as he settles into his new life. Just as Kingston describes Moon Orchid to be timid as she is put to the task to find her lost husband. The reader can contrast between Moon and her confident sister, Brave Orchid. Two traits that describe O'Brien is sentimental and excessively dramatic. This is exemplified through the pictures of Martha he carries to remember innocence before war. He explains " Whenever he looked at the photographs , he thought of new things he should have done." (O'Brien, 1990, p.). Not only does the quote represent his sentimental personality but reveals how he dramatically overthinks what he could've done to prevent a situation. His dramatic point of view adds intensity to the story but also becomes bothersome when it turns out to not be true. Traits that describe Kingston is bold and ambitious. The following quote " I refused to cook. When I had to wash dishes, I would crack one or two." (Kingston, 1976, p.). This represents her boldness to others that she had strength in what she believed whether it was the small things like refusing to cook or, the big things. Kingston (1976) explains " Night after night, my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep," Kingston writes. " I couldn't tell where the stories left and the dreams began, her voice the voice of heroines in my sleep" (p.). The stories that her mom told her encourages Kingston to break from tradition. During her childhood, she was always told she would grow to be a slave due to culture, but her ambitious drive encouraged her to be a warrior like Fu Mulan. Differences in character analysis is shown through external and internal conflict. O'Brien involves



more internal and external situations while Kingston doesn't have a central problem. He displays conflict between himself and the new medic, Jorgenson, who was incapable of fixing his shock. O'Brien (1990) aggressively says "Jorgenson was no Rat Kiley. He was green and incompetent and scared" (p.). From the text, the readers can infer that O'Brien is quick to judge and holds grudges. Even though Jorgenson apologized, O'Brien refused to accept the apology because they didn't reach his standards.

The theme of guilt and blame is applied through this quote because O'Brien automatically puts all the pressure on Jorgenson rather than thinking about other possibilities. Unlike Kingston emphasizes how the American lifestyle differs from the Chinese. The clashing of cultures and gender roles influence Kingston's choices and thoughts.

Kingston (1976) says in the following: The immigrants I know have loud voices, unmodulated to American tones even after years away from the village where they called their friendships out across the fields. I have not been able to stop my mother's screams in public libraries or over telephones. (p.) The theme of using your voice as you grow up in the Chinese society was applied. This passage illustrates how the immigrants used their voices without a worry of what the Americans thought.

The two authors share a common purpose in the way that they use similar storytelling, use of language, characters, and setting to convey a similar message. They both are making the distinction between truth and reality as they examine and reflect on experiences. O'Brien believes that revealing

Vietnam stories within a fiction book will make it more credible. He writes, "The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you" (O'Brien, 1990. p.). O'Brien puts this near the end of the book to get his point of keeping others alive and to manage his misfortunes across. Kingston's relationship with her family members is to empower and unite the feminine society. She questions "Why not? Because I'm a girl? Is that why won't?" "Why didn't you teach me English?" "You like having me beaten up at school, don't you?" (Kingston, 1976, p.) This quote gives a glimpse of the struggles women faced during this time, but also shows how she wasn't afraid to speak up for herself. In conclusion these two authors utilize several types of literary strategies throughout their works. While the specific way in which they demonstrated setting, storytelling, and character analysis may have been different; both authors chose similar techniques. While on the surface the novels appear to be different, once one can analyze the true meaning the similarities become apparent. As said by Iris Murdoch "We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality." Iris Murdoch perfectly captures the idea of truth versus reality seen between these two novels.