

Research paper on metafiction, language, symbols in tim o'brien's the things they...

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Tim O'Brien's Vietnam war anthology *The Things They Carried* follows a platoon of American soldiers both in and out of the field, showing the toll that the war itself took on these men and women. The nature of humanity, the senselessness of war, and the importance of relationships to human beings are highlighted in the metatextual and historical makeup of this short story collection. O'Brien makes heavy use of symbolism and metafiction to create a highly stylized world of the Vietnam experience, each of the stories providing their own perspectives and symbols to show the effect of Vietnam and war in general on the human psyche.

In the first short story, "The Things They Carried," an American platoon experiences horror, death and loss in the jungles of Vietnam, all while carrying various objects of both practical and personal significance to them. O'Brien's language in this story, as he delineates and describes in great detail the appearance and source of all of these objects and what they mean to the soldiers, is scattered and stream-of-consciousness at times. This is meant to convey the abstract importance of these things in the soldiers' lives; some of them, like the M-16, are supposed to protect them, while others, like Lt. Cross' letters from his romantic interest Martha, carry emotional and spiritual significance.

The use of the objects to show character and humanity to this group of men is one of O'Brien's strengths in the short story. When one of their company, Tim Lavender, dies, the rest of the men appropriate his things, in many ways appropriating parts of him as well - by smoking his marijuana and noting his abuse of tranquilizers, they get to know him through his objects. They wonder what it is like to suddenly be alive one moment, then dead the next,

like Lavender was; O'Brien notes the importance these objects hold in bringing structure, hope and sense to the men's lives. In this short story, Vietnam is shown to be a horrific and chaotic place, where your life can be taken from you at a moment's notice; it is only through the things they carry that they are able to maintain their humanity.

So much of the book is couched in symbols and figurative language; both O'Brien as a narrator and the characters in his stories use these techniques to distance themselves from the real horrors of war. "They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness" writes O'Brien of his soldiers, indicating the need to hide their vulnerability through incredible bluster (20). When death occurs in these stories, language was used to trivialize the bonds that they made in order to more smoothly deal with the loss of what had been, previously, a trusted friend. They hardly ever use direct language to describe their status, opting instead for coded language like greased, lit up, zapped and more, talking about how their friends died with very distracting, misleading language. To that end, the characters in question are extremely preoccupied with ignoring the realities of the horrors of Vietnam. These actions, like the trivializing of death or the obsession with objects that are being carried, show the psyche of the soldiers dealing with these events. O'Brien often makes these symbols more overt; like the soldiers assigning different levels of importance to people and events through language, O'Brien as a writer uses symbolism to provide his own coded representations of major ideas of his work. For example, in the story 'Speaking of Courage,' Norman circles a lake in his hometown, becoming reminded of the 'shit field' he encountered in Vietnam, the lake itself becoming a symbol for the ability

to take someone else's life. Remembering all he has lost, he recognizes that so much of him is now gone – his connections to his hometown, his family, his friends, his own ambition, his friend Max, etc. Norman is haunted by the lake, as he cannot seem to tear himself away from it – it becomes a symbol of how the events of Vietnam constantly follow him, as he is completely unable to escape them.

Calloway examines O'Brien's work as a piece of metafiction; the style and structure of the work frames the stories into epistemological tools with which to view the Vietnam war, life in America, gender issues and more through the lens of different viewpoints. The amount of autobiography found in many of the stories creates a metafictional link between O'Brien's experiences and the contents of these stories. O'Brien also notes unique ways to involve the reader in creating their own interpretations of the text - Calloway examines several places in the book where the author is asked to test or evaluate the veracity of these stories, in order to discern a greater truth. This literature is extremely helpful in elucidating O'Brien's biographical link to the stories of *The Things They Carried*, as well as defining the style and literary techniques used in the work.

The book's sense of reality is also well incorporated into the narrative, with just enough stylistic flourishes to hammer home the thematic significance of these real events. Goluboff (2004) examines the fictional stories of O'Brien's work against the real texts regarding what actually occurred in Quant Ngai province, the active area of Vietnam the US armed forces engaged in from 1968 to 1969, the time of the novel. Geographical and historical information about the province is provided, as well as facts about O'Brien's tenure there

during his military service. Comparing *The Things They Carried* with Jonathan Schell's "The Military Half", Goluboff (2004) finds several comparison points where events intersect, including "The Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong." Using these points of comparison, the author seeks to further the metafictional links between O'Brien's fictional accounts of his time in the Vietnam War and what really happened. This provides further evidence of O'Brien's metafictional techniques in the book, and their eventual significance in telling the real story of Vietnam.

With the kind of ambiguity and metafiction on display in *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien makes it clear that the people who experienced Vietnam had to change their own perspectives to deal with these events. Kaplan (1993) examines *The Things They Carried* as a series of stories with an unreliable narrator; his thesis is that it is impossible to completely trust the accounts of the narrators within the book. Framing this uncertainty along with the general ambiguity of the moral codes and sense of reality American soldiers experienced in Vietnam, the author likens this uncertainty to O'Brien's uncertainty in his work. O'Brien is stated to have been honest about this lack of reliability, his characters openly stating their lack of understanding about what they are doing and why they are in Vietnam. In *The Things They Carried*, the nature of reality is often called into question, and the line between ally and enemy is often blurred depending on the situation. Kaplan (1993) dissects O'Brien's use of imagination as a means to understand the complexities and uncertainties about the Vietnam war. This includes the subtextual meaning of the "things they carried" as a psychological barometer for each soldier's fears, anxieties and hopes, Lt.

Cross' relationship with the girl in his letters, and more - O'Brien constantly provides the reader with multiple likely interpretations of an event. The use of this ambiguity is celebrated by Kaplan as an accurate and fascinating indicator of the Vietnam war experience.

This kind of ambiguity between “ story truth” and “ happening truth” occurs most acutely in the short story “ Good Form” (O'Brien 171). O'Brien constantly makes reference to stories becoming made up, as if he cannot help but lie to himself and to his readers – this is another overt reference to the kinds of self-deception that these Vietnam vets go through in needing to try to move on with their lives and survive their war experiences. In “ How to Tell a True War Story,” Truth is made problematic by people embellishing awful truths by making them into stories. For example, Curt Lemon's death is first told as a love story, than a war story; with this, O'Brien says that real war stories cannot be believed as they are too obscene. By the end of the story, however, the line between authorship and truth is blurred with the addition of context and reader response; with the woman who comes to Tim's reading; she puts the fake 'true' war stories in perspective by finding the true emotions behind some of the stories.

In “ Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” women are shown to be just as affected by the horrors of war as men, but in different ways. When Mary Ann first gets to Vietnam, she is young and beautiful and friendly. She eventually changes into an adulterer, with a necklace of tongues to signify the moment when Mary Ann fully adapts to the horrific life of Vietnam. It is through these examples and more that O'Brien shows how war changes us, either through behavior, language, or perception of our environment.

In conclusion, the use of metafictional and symbolic elements in *The Things They Carried* allows O'Brien to tell the story of how the truth can be slippery, and is often changed to suit the psyches and needs of those who go through traumatic experiences, such as the Vietnam War. To O'Brien, war is just that horrific and unexplainable that those who experience it cannot deal with those feelings well. As a result, they resort to obfuscation, storytelling, metaphor and deflection to try and avoid those feelings. While this work is based on the realities of war in Vietnam, O'Brien takes a decidedly authorial approach, allowing the tales of horror found in that conflict to be told through a frail, human voice.

Works Cited

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