

## **Lower-Division 2010 Writing Contest Winner: Literary Research**

### A Soldier's War

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(Written for Dr. Kimberly Vanderlaan's English 102 Course)

Up until World War I “descriptions of war in America are confined primarily to generals’ account . . . leaving much of the war’s confusion and chaos to the imagination” (Smith 11). American writers rarely considered war as a viable literary subject, until Stephen Crane’s civil war novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*. Despite Crane having never been in a war zone his publication is considered among the first to capture the potential of the battlefield as a literary backdrop. Further developing the war novel genre, Ernest Hemingway adds what Smith describes as a “journalistic style” to a more modern skeptical outlook on war. Just as Hemingway’s work provides graphic detail of World War I, Tim O’Brien’s novels “[have] become the Vietnam literature of record . . . [in] contemporary war fiction” (Smith 12). Like Hemingway,<sup>1</sup> O’Brien takes on a journalistic approach to his novels. Narrating with his typical method of fragmented stream-of-consciousness, Tim O’Brien recalls his past experiences as a soldier and creates a meta-fiction that illustrates the Vietnam War as a senseless paradox.

Fusing physical incident and creative writing, O’Brien establishes his novel in the form of a meta-fiction. The disparity is O’Brien’s first tool in developing his conclusions about the immense contradictions of the Vietnam War.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this literary analysis the term meta-fiction indicates the blending of factual occurrence and fictitious detail. As defined by Patricia Waugh, meta-fiction is “a fictional writing which self-consciously . . . draws attention to its status as [fiction] in order to [examine] the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh 2). In this manner, meta-fiction allows an author to explore a particular event from multiple perspectives and incorporate details that expand upon or even contrast against said event. O’Brien utilizes this technique extensively, creating a fantastically realistic reading experience. In perhaps his most notable example, the story-chapter “Good Form,” O’Brien establishes that actuality is not restricted to fact. He explains how “truth [can] transcend fact” (Moore, par. 3) in the form of his terms “Happening-truth” (O’Brien 179), something that actually occurred and “Story-truth” (O’Brien 179), the surreal what seemed to occur, a confounding concept to say the least. It is best to think of O’Brien’s meta-fiction as a cake with layers of historical fact and literary fiction baked together and topped with a creamy frosting of personal experience. Then take said cake and throw it out of the window of a speeding vehicle. The result is similar to the effect of meta-fiction in *The Things They Carried*--the layers of fact, fiction, and personal experience become indistinguishable from one another.

Beginning with “Happening-truth” the narrator explains how he coped with death, “I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I’m left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief” (O’Brien 180). The narrator admits that in reality he could not bring himself to look upon the dead. However, the “story-truth” offered later on in the novel describes the same incident quite differently. Instead, the aforementioned faceless grief is attributed to a certain individual, “a slim dainty man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a clay trail near the village of My

Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut and the other was a star-shaped hole. I killed him” (O’Brien 180). Using this particular description as an example, O’Brien reasons that meta-fiction allows him to “make things present” that essentially had not occurred, he asserts “I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and god. I can make myself feel again” (O’Brien 180). Since war is something far displaced from the average existence, O’Brien utilizes story and happening-truth to communicate the surreal nature of Vietnam War, ultimately highlighting the psychological tension soldiers and perhaps even he himself experienced.

O’Brien also employs the same technique in respect to stories that he considered would be otherwise too uneventful in their original forms. One example of this is in the chapter “On the Rainy River,” when the narrator, also named Tim O’Brien,<sup>3</sup> attempts to dodge the draft by heading to Canada. The novelist sates “. . . if I were to tell you the literal truth about that summer [it] would be that I played a lot of golf and worried a lot about the draft. But that’s a crummy story. It doesn’t make you feel anything” (qtd. in Moore). Though “On the Rainy River,” is not “real,” the effect of the raw emotion in the chapter is certainly authentic.

Relying on the principle of eliciting emotion, O’Brien simplifies the foreign concept of war in the fabricated details of his narrative. In this way, O’Brien finds fiction is sometimes paradoxically more real than actuality. The Vietnam War, O’Brien proclaims, consists of contradictory truths: “it can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque . . . war is also [beautiful]” (O’Brien 81). He further summarizes this paradox, asserting, “war is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War is what makes you a man; war makes you dead” (O’Brien 81). The contradictory relationship between fiction and actuality explored throughout the text both reflects and expresses the reoccurring inconsistencies of the Vietnam War.

As another means to demonstrate the war’s inherent insignificance, O’Brien recalls his daily patrols with alpha company. The reader receives a hint of the ambivalent atmosphere of the Vietnam War in O’Brien’s description of the typical field operations alpha company performed. For alpha company, the war consisted of a vicious never-ending cycle of marching, fighting, and in some cases, dying: “they had no sense of strategy or mission. They searched villages without knowing what to look for, not caring, kicking over jars of rice, frisking children and old men, blowing tunnels, and sometimes setting fires and sometimes not, then forming up and moving on to the next village . . . it would always be the same” (O’Brien 15). O’Brien’s illustration captures what many historians note as flawed logistics of the Vietnam War: fighting an unseen enemy, in an unknown land, for an unknown cause. Historian, Robert Aspery, summarizes the majority consensus: “American officers in Indochina [with some splendid but unheralded exceptions, did not understand] the nature of the war [and] failed . . . to make a more realistic strategic appraisal” (Aspery 799). While one can possibly assume that military and political administrators had a legitimate reason to enter the conflict, as far as the soldiers were concerned; there was no concrete evidence of any purpose for the war. This conclusion compounded the already overwhelmingly incorporeal justification for American involvement and further weakened the soldier’s diminished morale.

O’Brien extends the intangibility of the war with the theme of culpability. The lack of the ability to identify a cause for their plight left the soldiers as bewildered as their inane missions, effectively increasing the absurdity of the war. The young soldiers were driven mad, losing companion after companion for no apparent

reason. Vietnam was pointless and the story “In the Field,” serves as a primary example, describing the impact of losing brother in arms, Kiowa, to a swampy grave. During an enemy light artillery bombardment Kiowa is sucked down into the field of excrement in which they were unfortunately ordered to camp. Norman Bowker attempts to save his comrade, but sadly he cannot and is forced to watch helplessly as Kiowa vanishes under the muck. Azar, another alpha, later makes insensitive jokes about Kiowa’s death. Moments later, feeling guilty for his heartless comments, Azar apologizes to Bowker. The joker explains he feels somehow responsible for Kiowa’s death, to which Bowker responds “[it’s] nobody’s fault” (O’Brien 176), yet at the same time, “everybody’s” (O’Brien 176). In this simple exchange O’Brien expands upon the senselessness of the war posing the implicit question; whose fault is it really for these tragedies? Shortly after Bowker’s rationalization O’Brien follows up with Lieutenant Cross’s thoughts to consolidate his point. Lieutenant Cross understood “when a man, died there had to be blame” (O’Brien 177), however, there are so many elements that come into play one can never really be sure what to blame. A death could be attributed to a bullet or carelessness, the enemy or disease. This concept of culpability echoes through the war the cry of the twenty-one gun salute and for alpha company is a mirror to the obscure objective of the conflict. The Vietnam War shattered the link between cause and effect like a brick through a window and brought the futility of existence in war into the limelight.

Like the elusive concept of blame, the deceptive Vietnamese environment serves to reinforce the uncertain reason for the war. Soldier Mitchell Sanders explains the illusory attributes of the country in his story about the six man listening post, “there’s always this fog-like rain, except it’s not raining-everything’s all wet and swirly and tangled up” (O’Brien 72). O’Brien animates the war in the form of the murky jungle. In essence, Vietnam distorted reality, and absorbed purpose. O’Brien captures Vietnam the country and the war, as an inescapable unknown. The physical murkiness parallels the psychological and emotional incoherence the soldiers experienced during the war.

In addition to the illusory element of Vietnam, O’Brien further exemplifies the ambiguous aim of the war by deconstructing the typical literary process. Using a technique of fragmented stream of consciousness, O’Brien’s story-telling process works very much like the human memory in that it is more or less a re-happening of an event. In this manner O’Brien reconstructs his experiences and sets the foundation for his “Story-truth.” Rather than having an account of precise occurrences, O’Brien develops a hybrid of events and literary spice that are delivered through the filter of his individual perception. Catherine Calloway correspondingly remarks, “O’Brien presents events that take place in a fragmented form rather than in a straightforward, linear fashion. The reader has to piece together information, such as the circumstances surrounding the characters’ deaths, in the same manner that the characters must assemble the reality of war” (O’Brien 253). The best model for this is the story of the unnamed North Vietnamese soldier. The Vietnamese combatant first appears in the chapter “Spin” as “A slim dainty young man of about twenty” (O’Brien 37). O’Brien revisits the Vietnamese soldier nine chapters later, elaborating in “The man I killed” with a vivid description of the young man’s ragged corpse. Noticing the soldier’s “dainty young” figure, the narrator speculates how the recruit’s life may have been; “he was not a communist [but] a citizen and a soldier” who “wanted someday to be a teacher of mathematics” (O’Brien 125).

The narrator concludes, “he had been a soldier for only a single day” (O’Brien 130). Next, O’Brien offers a recollection of events leading up to the narrator’s killing of the Vietnamese soldier in the following chapter “Ambush.” Narrator O’Brien recalls, “I had already thrown the grenade before telling myself to throw it” (O’Brien 133). As if that were not enough, O’Brien retells the death of the soldier a third time in the chapter “Good Form,” inverting the details of “The Man I Killed,” claiming that the narrator was not the thrower of the grenade. He narrates, “I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe” (O’Brien 179). “I did not kill him” he states, “but I was present you see and my presence was guilt enough” (O’Brien 179). After denying responsibility for the Vietnamese soldier’s death, O’Brien alters the details once again, then follows up on the next page, “he lay...near the village of My Khe . . . I killed him” (O’Brien 180). O’Brien prolongs the story of the dead Vietnamese soldier throughout the novel, offering a combination of different occurrences that leaves the reader wondering what really happened. O’Brien intends *The Things They Carried* to be replete with ambiguous details, interspersing story fragments, he provides the audience with varying degrees of ambivalence. O’Brien’s method “actively engages the audience in the process of textual creation” (Calloway 253) as much as it generates a foundation of perplexity equivalent to that which was experienced in the war.

In addition to interspersing the details of his stories, O’Brien develops of the Vietnam War by recounting stories. In the same way his fragmented accounts reflect the haziness of the war, O’Brien’s narrative recollection brings into question the thin line between invented detail and actual events. O’Brien’s “How to Tell a True War Story” illustrates this idea.

In a war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. When a booby trap explodes, you close your eyes and duck and float outside yourself. When a guy dies, like Curt Lemon, you look away again. These pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed. (O’Brien 71)

In the process of recounting past events, O’Brien adds and subtracts details in an effort to illustrate the most genuine Vietnam experience. He repeats this process in Kat Riley’s story “Sweetheart of the Son Tra Bong.” The narrator explains, “It wasn’t a question of deceit, just the opposite: he wanted to heat up the truth, to make it so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt” (O’Brien 89). The audience in turn is required to determine what is and is not true; in an interview O’Brien comments, “the element of perception has to do with uncertainty. The whole stew of variables determines what we perceive and what we call real” (qtd. In Herzog 107). O’Brien essentially states, for any story there are multiple interpretations through which the reader must navigate. Not every individual will gain the same understanding of the same story, because personal experience is a critical factor of comprehension. In the same fashion the reader is left to make inferences about the war stories; alpha company was left to ascertain their own conclusions about the fundamental justifications for the Vietnam War--an impossible feat to accomplish to say the least.

In retrospect, O'Brien establishes that the Vietnam War can only be defined in the form of a contradiction, a fantastic reality that forces one to "gape at the awful majesty of combat" (O'Brien 80). The Vietnam War, like any war, cannot be generalized because for everything it can be defined as, the opposite can also be argued. Consequently, the only true definition of war is that which an individual perceives through the collection of traumatic and intense experiences they carried. Because in the end "a true war story is never about war. It's about sunlight. It's about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you have to cross the river and march in the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen" (O'Brien 85).

#### Notes:

1. Levin remarks, Hemingway's Journalistic style very much relies on "the powers of connotation, the possibilities of oblique suggestion, and semantic association" (594). Hemingway, unlike "rhetoricians," used basic "American vernacular" and "short spontaneous vulgarisms" (593). Hemingway felt his approach was "more honest than all those grandiloquent slogans which rhetoricians dream up long after the battle" (593). Tim O'Brien writes in a similar fashion however, taking it one step further, he incorporates "real and metaphorical forms in his work; [the result of which typically leaves] the reader with more questions than answers" (Smith 12). Smith concludes, "the chaos in the words themselves is a linguistic metaphor for war" (13).

2. Calloway highlights this feature, observing that, "O'Brien draws the reader into the text, calling the reader's attention to the process of invention and challenging him to determine which, if any, of the stories are true" (250). O'Brien's style of meta-fiction combined with fragmentation transform his stories into "multidimensional windows through which the war and the ways of telling a war story can be viewed" (250).

3. Tim O'Brien and the narrator in *The Things They Carried* have the same name. "Author O'Brien however, notes that despite the same name and many of the same characteristics, [he is not the narrator]" (Herzog 114). Critics maintain, regardless of his intentions, the fact that the author and the narrator share the same name adds an undertone of confusion. For my purposes, this uncertainty serves as an additional medium through which O'Brien achieves his objective of expressing the paradoxical nature of the Vietnam War. The narrator and author being of two separate entities operate as multiple perspectives that may or may not interpret the same event the same way. This adds an additional dimension to analysis that the reader must attend to.

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