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“Words Make a Difference”: Memory and Storytelling in *The Things They Carried*

Tim O’Brien’s novel, *The Things They Carried*, is ostensibly about a group of soldiers fighting the Vietnam War. The novel’s structure is a series of interconnected stories about a rotating cast of young men. In these stories, we learn about the experiences of Alpha Company, both during the war and after. However, this is far from a straight-forward novel about the Vietnam War. It is also a reflection on the power of memory and of storytelling. Facts themselves are not able to truly reflect or convey the true essence of experience. O’Brien employs elements of metafiction and postmodernism to express that by shaping stories through emotion and subjectivity, telling and retelling, the truth is revealed. The act of storytelling preserves and saves lives.

The novel’s narrator is a character named Tim O’Brien, a forty-three year old writer. Tim reflects back on his time in Vietnam almost obsessively. He writes stories about it over and over, because for him, “the remembering is turned into a kind of rehappening” (36). In the stories, Tim is able to enter the situations again, to relive these crucial moments. This is a motif that recurs throughout the novel. Not all of the “rehappening” is traumatic. O’Brien uses these memories to work through some of the anger and grief.

One example of this “rehashing” occurs in the stories “The Man I Killed” and “Ambush.” While both of these stories tell essentially the same experience, that Tim O’Brien threw a grenade that killed a Vietcong soldier, each story comes from a different point of view. “The Man I Killed” is told in third-person omniscient point of view, while “Ambush” is told from a retrospective first-person viewpoint. The choice of these viewpoints is essential to understanding the impact of this event in Tim O’Brien’s life. “The Man I Killed” is told from a detached perspective. The omniscient narrator is able to invent the young Vietnamese man’s life. We learn of the man’s love of learning, of his delicate features, of the woman he loved. The narrator also presents the reactions of the men of Alpha Company, particularly Kiowa. In the aftermath of this incident, he talks to Tim, trying to draw him out. “‘Listen to me,’ Kiowa said. ‘You feel terrible, I know that.’ Then he said, ‘Okay, maybe I *don’t* know’ ” (142). From Kiowa’s dialogue, Tim appears traumatized. He does not respond to Kiowa at all. The narrator also repeats certain facts about the corpse of the young man. He states, “his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole” (139). The detail of the star-shaped hole recurs three times in the story. This reflects a kind of obsessive thinking, a particular focus on something horrific. It becomes clear that the third-person narrator reflects the depth of Tim’s shock. He cannot process everything he is feeling, so he detaches from the moment.

The story that immediately follows, “Ambush,” brings back Tim O’Brien as retrospective first-person narrator. In this version, the events leading up to the young man’s death are presented. Tim reacts automatically after sighting the soldier and throws the grenade. Again, we receive the description of the corpse that had “one eye shut, his other eye a huge star-shaped hole” (149). The description has a kind of strange beauty to it. Seeing someone’s face blown off

is certainly horrific, but the hole is star-shaped, something that represents light. This seems to reflect the contradictions of war, its terror and its odd wonder.

The title of the story, “Ambush,” is also significant. While this word refers to the way the young Vietcong soldier is attacked, it also resonates with the idea of a memory that springs forth suddenly from the unconscious. O’Brien cannot free himself from the memories of this life-changing incident. They ambush him when he least expects it. This fits O’Brien’s idea that a “true war story... never seems to end” (83).

In these war stories, there is much discussion about the mechanics of writing, of the elements of a good narrative. “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” is an account of the arrival of Mary Ann, a soldier’s girlfriend who comes to Vietnam. Rat Kiley tells the tale, and it is stated that for him, “facts were formed by sensation” (101). The sensations bring immediacy to the story that helps convey the truth, even if the emotions might inflate the facts. The idea of the “truth” of a story is brought up over and over again. Rat calls his story “a fact” (102). He insists that what he’s telling is “no lie” (102). Michael Kaufmann, in his article “The Solace of Bad Form: Tim O’Brien’s Postmodernist Revisions of Vietnam in ‘Speaking of Courage,’” argues that for O’Brien, “the only truth is the act of telling and retelling itself...the experience cannot be reduced to a truth – it only is what it is” (338). This idea is reflected in “Sweetheart.” Rat’s listeners may be aggravated by his story, but Rat makes it true for himself in the telling. That it can or cannot be proven is of no matter.

As Rat tells the story, he is interrupted by his listeners. Readers get to analyze the story’s structure through their comments. Mitchell Sanders states, “That stuff about the Special Forces ...all that had to be there for a *reason*. That’s how stories work, man” (112). This seems to be a

moment for the reader to recognize the familiar format and rhythm of stories; every word must count. Later on, Sanders offers more story-telling advice. Frustrated with Rat's asides and commentary, he tells him, "What you have to do ...is trust your own story. Get the hell out of the way and let it tell itself" (116). Yet again, this supports the idea that story-telling must be focused, and in the end, trusted. To over-think the story blunts its impact, but to under-think shortchanges it. Near the end of the tale, Sanders once more admonishes Rat: "The story...the whole tone, man, you're wrecking it" (117). It seems like this is an argument for clear, effective language. The word "tone" also reflects the thought process of the storyteller. There should be an overarching theme to a story, a unifying idea.

Structuring "Sweetheart" this way invites the reader to participate in the storytelling process. This seems to be a metafictional move on (the author) O'Brien's part. Catherine Calloway reflects on this idea in her article, "'How to Tell a True War Story': Metafiction in *The Things They Carried*." She states that "shifts in character and events tempt the reader into textual participation" (251). This fits in with Patricia Waugh's definition of metafiction, that this kind of writing "pose[s] questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). Because Rat Kiley's telling of the story is not the most objective, the reader must try to discern what "really" happened. Examining the storytelling process itself, as Mitchell Sanders does, gives the reader clues about how the story is shaped. Each part of the story builds on the next step, and allows the reader to meditate on how fiction reflects, distorts, or enhances reality. This brings the whole storytelling process into a new light.

Tim O'Brien, the character, reflects on the process and meaning of storytelling. In "Notes" he tells us that, "telling stories seemed a natural, inevitable process, like clearing the

throat. Partly catharsis, partly communication...” (179). The word “inevitable” is particularly significant. His stories would have come to the surface one way or another. It reflects the storytelling of all of the men, from Rat to Norman Bowker. There is a real *need* to tell these stories. The “catharsis” allows them to expel the ghosts of the past that have haunted them for so long. However, this catharsis proves elusive. The men do not get a chance to express these thoughts, not in the way O’Brien does. Steffen Hantke explores this idea in “The Uses of the Fantastic and the Deferment of Closure in American Literature on the Vietnam War.” He looks to other Vietnam War texts to see how each handles the idea of closure in war experiences. He concludes that “admitting to the historical guilt...repeating the often obsessive urge to break the silence, and approaching the painful subject...are ways of breaking out of the cycle of repression and denial” (70).

O’Brien tries to approach this kind of expressive writing in “Notes.” He goes on to state: “By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself” (179). To make something an object is to make it concrete, palpable. This process allows a storyteller to make something real out of very mixed, very changeable emotions. To separate the story from oneself allows one to have a new perspective on the remembered events. The act of telling, of shaping memories, gives the teller back the power.

Even after O’Brien writes the original version of “Speaking of Courage,” he realizes that he has missed the point. “[He] was afraid to speak directly, afraid to remember – and in the end the piece had been ruined by a failure to tell the full and exact truth” (181). “Notes” is an intimate look at the revision process. By not telling “the full and exact truth,” O’Brien not only lets down Norman Bowker, he lets down the reader. A writer has to be willing to leave

everything behind, even the previous good writing of an earlier draft, to get to the heart of a story, to tell it as it truly deserves. This is the difference between a fully realized story and one that is not. Only in the version of “Speaking of Courage” in *The Things They Carried* does the narrator character Tim O’Brien approach the truth.

This idea is explored again in “Good Form.” O’Brien writes, “I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (203). Here, O’Brien is not advocating for literal truth, but emotional truth. This emotional truth can be brutal and upsetting, but in the end, it is all that is real. In Kaufmann’s article, he compares this emotional truth with postmodernism. Kaufmann argues that O’Brien’s modernist predecessors, like Ernest Hemingway, strove to find a “good form” to “clearly convey the truths beneath the surface of...fiction” (333). However, O’Brien’s “Good Form” clearly advocates something much messier, more subjective. He states that through “story-truth...I can make myself feel again” (204). The question of what constitutes the truth is not definitively answered. This fits in with a postmodern perspective, according to Kaufmann, where truth has not one definition, but many (333). A devotion to “good form” cost the original “Speaking of Courage” its emotional center (339), but this new approach restores its impact.

Storytelling is an act of faith. In the final portion of the novel, “The Lives of the Dead,” O’Brien claims, “stories can save us” (255). O’Brien illustrates that stories preserve people, their lives. “In this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head” (260). O’Brien reveals that he writes to keep these people that he knew alive, to not lose them. He writes of his childhood sweetheart, Linda, who dies of a brain tumor at age nine. This loss clearly devastates young Tim. He imagines conversations with her after her death. Linda

compares death to “being inside a book that nobody’s reading” (273). By writing her story, Tim makes sure that Linda is not forgotten on some shelf, but is forever alive in his heart. In the end, this storytelling reaches out to rescue even him. In the novel’s breathtaking final line, O’Brien reflects on his own life, his own account: “Tim trying to save Timmy’s life with a story” (273). The writing, the storytelling, saves his youth, his innocence, his pain and his memories forever.

Alex Vernon offers a differing opinion in his article, “Salvation, Storytelling, and Pilgrimage in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*.” He writes: “The prospect of saving Timmy’s life with a story, the possibility of Tim’s complete moral cleansing and his return to innocence of his youthful pre-war self, strikes me as bleak” (181). He concludes that O’Brien the author makes a case for this bleakness through his other work, such as the novel *Going after Cacciato*, and his personal essay from 1994, “The Vietnam in Me.” Vernon states that in “The Vietnam in Me”, “words fail [O’Brien]. Words can’t express the misery, words can’t make a difference” (182).

I feel that Vernon is missing the point of *The Things They Carried* by comparing it first with an earlier work of O’Brien’s, and then with a non-fiction essay. First, the reference to *Going after Cacciato* does not take into account O’Brien’s growth as a novelist. The two books were written at very different times in his life, and by the time *The Things They Carried* was published, he had more time to reflect on his Vietnam experience. He also had the opportunity to explore storytelling and emotion in a more complete way, as reflected in the earlier paragraph about “Good Form.” To compare *The Things They Carried* with “The Vietnam in Me” is unfair. They are two entirely different forms of storytelling. By its very nature, “The Vietnam in Me” is one person’s story, Tim O’Brien’s. Maybe words do fail O’Brien in this instance, but that does

not necessarily apply to *The Things They Carried*. I think Vernon tries too hard to connect the narrator Tim O'Brien with the author Tim O'Brien. It is clear from the book that *The Things They Carried* is much more than just one person's story. It is everyone's story, because everyone reads it in their own way. The participatory nature of the text, the elusive nature of "truth", and the themes of "writing, memory, reality" (Birnbaum 3) transcend all boundaries of traditional narrative.

The Things They Carried is more than a novel, more than a Vietnam War story. It is an opportunity to create history from memory, memory from history. O'Brien himself says that "in fiction we not only transform reality, we sort of invent our own lives" (Naparsteck 8). Fiction has the power to overcome everything, even death, to form a new kind of life, one that is our own creation. In our own individual stories, we preserve those we love, atone for those we have wronged, and leave behind a legacy of emotional honesty and ever-elusive truth.

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