Narrative Techniques in Tim O'Brien Novels

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Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki, Assistant Professor

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Abstract

Tim O' Brien is a Vietnam War veteran. He served as a professor of creative writing at Texas University from 2003 to 2012. His war experience is of great importance in terms of his literary narrative. In his novels, especially *The Things They Carried* and *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, O'Brien explores the moral and emotional complexities of the war he participated in. In his exploration of the previously mentioned issues, the author uses various narrative techniques. When these techniques are taken into consideration, and are appropriately listed and further elaborated, it will be shown that they were used not only to tackle certain subjects, but also to help the author to make sense of his experience.

Key words: Tim O' Brien, Vietnam War, war experience, narrative techniques

Contents

Introduction

In the exploration of soldiers' horrific experiences during the Vietnam War, Tim O' Brien lays out various narrative techniques. Not only do these techniques aim to challenge readers to delve into the emotional and moral complexities of war, but they also put the author's war experience into perspective. His war experience will be of great importance in his literary work, which is prevalent in two of his novels.

O' Brien's personal memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone* was published in 1973 and was his way of putting his legitimate experience directly onto paper. By capturing extremely overwhelming details of the war zone's incidents, this author's storytelling skills become known through his creation of a powerful war narrative. Besides graphic descriptions of what was happening on the battlefield, O' Brien raises significant moral and ethical questions that consume him throughout the book. His focus remains on pointing out differences between the patriotic ideal of war and the overwhelming reality of combat, alongside the questions of courage, cowardice, violence, and sacrifice. Through his criticism of political decisions, the author reflects on the true nature of the Vietnam War. That proved crucial for this conflict's further development, which only enabled him to put soldiers' experience at he center of this memoir.

The Things They Carried, O' Brien's metafictional work, which was published in 1990, includes a collection of short stories that depict the Vietnam War soldiers' experience. Even though every story can be individually interpreted, they add emotional depth to the narrative. As the novel's title anticipates, Tim O' Brien analyzes the intensity of soldiers' physical and emotional burdens and how they cope with what they experienced in Vietnam. By modifying events and characters to fit his narrative, this author encourages readers to question him as a narrator as well as the power of storytelling in terms of illuminating the truth about Vietnam.

The first section of the paper will explore the usage of first-person narration, which is split between the two perspectives: one from the perspective of Tim O' Brien as the author and the other one from the perspective of Tim O' Brien as the novels' character. Throughout the two novels, readers are invited to decipher whether to trust the narrator or not.

The next part will show how the author accomplished the use of non-linear narrative structure through a series of flashbacks and vignettes in the two novels. By using distorted and fragmented structure in his narrative, Tim O' Brien portrays the nature of one's memory in such

an overwhelming and traumatizing environment, ultimately showing how war experience influences one's life even after it is over.

The final part of the paper observes and analyzes metafiction as the crucial element in the two novels. The author undergoes an in-depth analysis and reflection on the act of storytelling and what it does in terms of unraveling the truth. This paper will suggest that not only does Tim O' Brien enlighten his readers with significant moral and emotional questions, as well as the representation of storytelling's power and impact, but he also provides a safe space for expressing his own struggles in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, supported by the usage of specific narrative techniques.

1. The Vietnam War

Vietnam, “a nation in Southeast Asia on the eastern edge of the Indochinese peninsula” (Onion et al.), has been a French colony since the nineteenth century. After World War II ended, they realized that they no longer wanted to be under French colonial ruling. However, “French-educated Emperor Bao Dai stayed” (Onion et al.). The main goal was to unify Vietnam, but there were some crucial problems to begin with: Ho Chi Minh wished for Vietnam to be shaped according to some other communist countries, but Bao Dai “wanted a Vietnam with close economic and cultural ties to the West” (Onion et al.). Sometime after this division, Viet Minh forces, or the League for the Independence of Vietnam, “took over city of Hanoi, and declared a Democratic Republic of Vietnam” (Onion et al.).

In May 1954, Viet Minh forces won the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. That victory meant that Indochina was no longer under French colonial rule. At a Geneva conference, that occurred in July 1954, a treaty was signed, and, as a result, “Vietnam is split along the latitude known as the 17th Parallel” (Onion et al.). That meant that Ho Chi Minh had control over North Vietnam, while Bao Dai controlled South Vietnam. Although Bao held power in South Vietnam, that did not last long because “the strongly anti-communist politician Ngo Dinh Diem pushed Emperor Bao aside to become president of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (GVN), often referred to during that era as South Vietnam” (Onion et al.). At that time, the US established more strict policies against any allies of the Soviet Union, and “by 1955 President Dwight D. Eisenhower had pledged his firm support to Diem and South Vietnam” (Onion et al.).

With the US siding with South Vietnam, in 1961 John F. Kennedy sent special forces because a build-up was demanded to help Diem to confront the threat of the Viet Cong. Namely, the “domino theory” suggested that “if one Southeast Asian country fell to communism, many other countries would follow” (Onion et al.). It was because of this theory that John F. Kennedy decided to send more troops to Vietnam, which President de Gaulle of France highly disapproved of. He warned Kennedy to evade any increasing involvement in Vietnam because “De Gaulle had been responsible for the French effort to hold onto Indochina, and thus spoke from bitter experience” (Hellman 38). The troops that Kennedy sent were the Green Berets, who “symbolized the rededication to the American errand, the reassertion of the virtues and imperatives of America’s frontier mythos” (Hellman 37). Throughout the Vietnam War, Americans presented themselves in terms of having “an absolute faith in American righteousness and mission” (Hellman 14). For them, this war was a test of their character. Nevertheless, what they did not expect was the fact

that “during that war, the question of American identity and purpose would provoke an internal struggle without precedent in the one hundred years since the Civil War; and by its end, defeat and disillusion would for the first time be a significant part of the national experience” (Hellman 4).

Kennedy’s successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, was not different from his predecessor in terms of the US involvement in the Vietnam War, which is demonstrated through the fact that “[i]n August of 1964, after DRV torpedo boats attacked two U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, Johnson ordered the retaliatory bombing of military targets in North Vietnam” (Onion et al.). Likewise, he systematically sent more troops whenever it was needed, not considering that what he was doing might be ineffective and counterproductive. In the meantime, numerous protests against the war arose in the US, arguing that “civilians, not enemy combatants, were the primary victims and that the United States was supporting a corrupt dictatorship in Saigon” (Onion et al.). One of the examples would be the protest held outside the Pentagon in October 1967, during a period when “the number of American troops in Vietnam was approaching 500,000, and U.S. casualties had reached 15,058 killed and 109,527 wounded” (Onion et al.). What induced other upcoming protests was the My Lai Massacre, when “U.S. soldiers had mercilessly slaughtered more than 400 unarmed civilians” (Onion et al.) in March 1968. This anti-war movement was pervasive on college campuses, which caused a great division among Americans: “For some young people, the war symbolized a form of unchecked authority they had come to resent. For other Americans, opposing the government was considered unpatriotic and treasonous” (Onion et al.). Being exposed to a constant stream of bad news, discouraging numbers, and terrible graphic images in the media, Americans felt the need to show resistance to have their voices heard.

Vietnam’s wish to obtain independence from French colonial rule clashed with the Americans’ tendency to stop communism from spreading around, which resulted in a brutal conflict known as the Vietnam War. In America, while the army saw this conflict as a noble mission one was obligated to fulfill, civilians were organizing protests to stop the army from further violence in Vietnam. However, their efforts had no results. In the aftermath of this conflict, military power proved to be of limited nature, due to the many casualties, while those who participated in it experienced its physical and emotional consequences. The Vietnam War is now considered one of the most crucial events of American recent history and it became the first war Americans lost.

2. First-Person Narration

Since Tim O' Brien is a Vietnam War veteran, one could expect that his literary work bears many autobiographical accounts of the war. When it is taken into consideration that autobiography is "a text wherein a contract, or pact, is established between the author and the reader whereby the author identifies him- or herself as the narrator-character" (Spear 89), this hypothesis seems true. However, at the very beginning of O' Brien's *The Things They Carried*, it is stated that all the incidents, characters, and names are imaginary, besides a few details about the author's life, which certainly challenges this autobiographical account. In 1977, Serge Doubrovsky managed to reconciliate autobiography and fiction by coining and defining autofiction. Autofiction is established as a relatively rare form because "authors generally establish a clear pact of either autobiography or fiction as they take a personal stand in the public sphere" (Spear 90). What characterizes any text as an autofictional one would be "a literary style, a perfect onomastic correspondence between author, narrator and main character, and finally a strong psychoanalytic angle" (Schmitt 126). Even though Tim O' Brien's novel exhibits some of the given features of autofiction, in one of his interviews he admitted that "[n]inety percent or more of the material in the book is invented, and I invented 90 percent of a new Tim O'Brien, maybe even more than that" (Kaplan 95). The question of credibility inevitably emerges because readers would like to know with certainty whether events, names, and characters in the books correspond with the author's real-life experience or not. At some point, it becomes evident that "[r]eaders can only decide on their own about what is going on in the story and they have their own choice to make, no matter what the narrative said about" (Lei 27).

At the same time, while the readers make their decision on whether to trust the narrative or not, O' Brien's use of first-person narration in his memoir aims to show the moral conflicts and psychological burdens both Tim-the-author and Tim-the-character exhibit. To begin with, it is said that the "first-person commentary vocalizes the uncertainty and guilt he associates with the Vietnam War while the 'war stories' he tells illuminate the emotions he attributes to the conflict" (Solomon 4). It all started with him being drafted in 1968. At the time, Tim explicitly stated that the Vietnam War was a wrong war to participate in and how he did not see himself in the battlefield at all. However, what bothered him was that he felt unable to force himself out of the situation: "I did not want to be a soldier, not even an observer to war. But neither did I want to upset a peculiar balance between the order I knew, the people I knew, and my own private world" (O' Brien, *If I*

Die 22). His fear of being mocked was greater than his sense of what was right, which is what prevented him from listening to his own instincts. Throughout this memoir, "O' Brien intertwines personal commentary and specific recollections to accentuate his intellectual and emotional standoff with the Vietnam War" (Solomon 6).

During his first weeks in Vietnam, Tim struggled with his sense of morale, especially in terms of what is good, bad, right, or wrong in these circumstances. He had heard of chaplain Edwards many of his comrades talked to and decided to talk to him as well. For Tim, "a man is most a man when he tries to recognize and understand what is good" (O' Brien, *If I Die* 56). Unfortunately, he did not get the answer he was hoping for since the chaplain completely dismissed his concerns because of his belief that the Vietnam War was a fine moment for American forces, which left Tim feeling even more lost and confused.

Besides his intellectual and moral conflicts regarding this war, he added another aspect to his first-person narrative. In his descriptions of particularly traumatic events, either in the form of a flashback or in the form of a reflection about something that had happened in the past, he was completely detached from them. For example, when a young Vietnamese woman was shot, he said that "Her hair was lustrous black. The man who shot her stroked her hair. Two other soldiers and a medic stood beside her, fanning her and waving at the flies. Her uniform was crusted an almost black color from her blood, and the wound hadn't clotted much" (O' Brien, *If I Die* 114). By appearing to be detached from a particular experience he writes about, O'Brien creates a safe space for himself while processing what happened and what he was feeling at that moment.

In the context of *The Things They Carried*, "O'Brien works hard to create a believable persona in his narrator-protagonist, Tim O' Brien, to allow his narrative to function as history, to be taken, as the epigraph reminds us, as a 'statement of actual things'" (Silbergleid 139). After the war, he did not wish to talk about what he had been through. Instead, he turned to writing because telling stories in that way meant "grabbing people by the shirt and explaining exactly what had happened to me, how I'd allowed myself to get dragged into a wrong war, all the mistakes I'd made, all the terrible things I had seen and done" (O' Brien, *The Things* 110). By writing down his experience, he relives it and faces it. When he was asked to elaborate on the role of Tim-the-character in this novel, O'Brien said that Tim-the-character is not "a judging figure, but a consciousness, both telling the story and vaguely participating in it" (Kaplan 97). That statement properly sums up a true nature of Tim O' Brien as a character and as a narrator: while Tim-the-character serves as an insight into what it was like for the author to be a part of numerous horrible

incidents, Tim-the-narrator's role consists of presenting his experience through his literary narrative as truthfully as it is possible.

In addition to this, Tim' s first-person narration in *The Things They Carried* "emphasizes the soldier as an individual with emotions, shattering the traditional representation of nationalized heroic soldiers who are rid of any cowardice or "nightmare of the past" (Li 749). In doing so, Tim O' Brien offers segments of himself and his war experience in a way that makes the reader aware of what and why he was thinking or feeling in each moment, and how that connected with what had happened on the battlefield. For instance, there was a point in the novel when he thought about running away to Canada to avoid participating in the war, which he found profoundly wrong on every level. When Elroy Berdhal drove him all the way to the Canadian border, Tim could not bring himself to carry out his plan. In an extremely confessional and intimate way, he describes what he felt back then: "I couldn't tolerate it. I couldn't endure the mockery, or the disgrace, or the patriotic ridicule. Even in my imagination, the shore just twenty yards away, I couldn't make myself be brave. It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that's all it was" (O' Brien, *The Things* 48).

Even though *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *The Things They Carried* differ in their narration, in the usage of first-person narration both works aim to provide Tim with enough space to convey his thoughts and feelings in a way that supports his traumatic experience.

3. Non-Linear Structure

For an average reader, who does not have war experience of any kind, Tim O' Brien's narrative might seem fragmented. However, one must keep in mind that no matter how hard it might be for a reader to understand why Tim O' Brien does certain things in his narrative, the author does not have an easy task ahead of him either: to describe such a horrific experience of the Vietnam War to someone who did not go through anything like that is extremely demanding. Tim O' Brien is aware of that overwhelming gap: "Even the declarations about war, such as war is hell, war is evil and so on, are bloodless and abstract because they're so broad. The only way that the horror of war can mean anything to us is through small, detailed vignettes or episodes of evil" (qtd. in Kaplan 102). For that reason, this author chooses certain narrative techniques to put his experience into perspective and to make readers capable of comprehending the intensity of what he went through.

The non-linear structure in O' Brien's memoir becomes evident via a specific coping mechanism some of the soldiers acquired, namely escapism. Since they were constantly exposed to high levels of stress, thoughts unrelated to the overwhelming environment they were part of pushed them not to give up: "O'Brien often mentions his characters moving between the everyday life of being a combat soldier and coping with imagination" (Fedewa 40). For instance, the author wondered what he would do after the war: "I spent some time thinking about the things I would do after Vietnam—after the first sergeants and rifles were out of my life. I made a long list. I would write about the army. Expose the brutality and injustice and stupidity and arrogance of wars and men who fight in them" (O' Brien, *If I Die* 93). For him, it is of great importance to expose everything he went through to prevent future generations from repeating his mistakes.

Besides escapism, the language that was used in Alpha Company played an important role in O' Brien's narrative, as well as in confronting some particularly painful moments during the Vietnam War. In a way, he wished "to conceal portions of experiences that veterans may deem too traumatic for civilians" (Fedewa 33). In his memoir, O' Brien illustrates what this usage of language looked like:

> I learned that REMF means 'rear echelon motherfucker'; that a man is getting 'Short' after his third or fourth month; that a hand grenade is really a 'frag'; that one bullet is all it takes and that 'you never hear the shot that gets you'; that no one in Alpha Company gave a damn about the causes or purposes of war; it is about

> 'dinks and slopes', and the idea is simply to kill them or avoid them. (O' Brien, *If I Die* 80)

Many civilians do not have any idea about what this means. Even when these types of phrases are seen through the lens of war literature, they still sound rigid. Whereas, for a Vietnam War veteran, these phrases have a profound meaning. They take him back there, and he feels as if all that happened a long time ago. Therefore, the role of language in shaping one's memory must be noted because it creates emotional distance: if one thinks about his opponent as a "dink," that will make him act merciless. However, after the war is over, veterans might seem fine because of the way they chose to interpret what they had done. Nevertheless, after some careful consideration of what really happened, they might realize that such a mindset is flawed when facing memory and trauma.

Not only did the use of language make a lasting impact on O' Brien's comrades, but it also became known in the way he writes about certain occurrences or memories from the war. For instance, in the chapter "Nights," he wrote about what he felt like during one of their night marches in an extremely scattered manner: "Don't walk there, too soft. Not there, dangerous, mines. Step there and there and there, not there, step there and there and there, careful, careful, watch. Green ahead. Green lights, go. Eyes roll in the sockets. Protect the legs, no chances, watch for the fuckin' snipers, watch for ambushes and punji pits" (O' Brien, *If I Die* 27). By aiming to write about such instances, O' Brien had to illustrate it in a way for his readers to comprehend what was happening inside his mind during such traumatizing experiences.

In *The Things They Carried*, by presenting a reader with "deep, descriptive, emotive imagery followed by imaginative hypotheticals, O'Brien illustrates the span of trauma, panic, and dissociation" (Fedewa 37). In the aftermath of the war, he feels the need to organize his experience. By attempting to do so, he is willing to take various approaches regarding his narrative. For example, in a chapter called "The Man I Killed," O'Brien repetitively uses certain phrases to convey the amount of shock he experienced when he saw the body of the man he killed: "He was 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 starshaped hole" (O' Brien, *The Things* 93). Even though this kind of description might seem cold or distant, O' Brien is distancing himself from his experience because of his inability to deal with the feelings this memory evoked.

By writing vignettes, flashbacks, and memories in this novel, O'Brien enhanced "the confusion and complexity of the Vietnam War experience through breaking traditional linear

storylines" (Fedewa 38). In the chapter called "The Things They Carried," a variety of questions came to his mind when they were searching the tunnels. Even when such a paragraph seems out of the ordinary, it still makes Tim's experience valid: "Will your flashlight go dead? Do rats carry rabies? If you screamed, how far would the sound carry? Would your buddies hear it? Would they have the courage to drag you out? In some respects, though not many, the waiting was worse than the tunnel itself. Imagination was a killer" (O' Brien, *The Things* 17). In the aftermath of the war, when he felt that he could put everything behind him before coming home, "O'Brien denotes the trauma of living with the Vietnam War, as a veteran and a writer" (Solomon 52). Two decades later, when the author takes his daughter to Vietnam, he can reflect on his war experience differently. As he was looking at the field that took everything from him, he said:

> After that long night in the rain, I'd seemed to grow cold inside, all the illusions gone, all the old ambitions and hopes for myself sucked away into the mud. Over the years, that coldness had never entirely disappeared. There were times in my life when I couldn't feel much, not sadness or pity or passion, and somehow I blamed this place for what I had become, and I blamed it for taking away the person I had once been. (O' Brien, *The Things* 127-128)

Even though these insertions of vignettes, flashbacks, or the author's memories seem unnecessary or confusing, they are certainly not. They demonstrate what he went through on a different level, where he managed to give himself justice of properly illustrating the true nature of what such an immense stress and trauma did to him.

4. Metafiction

Through the narrative technique called metafiction, Tim O' Brien examines the true nature of fiction and reality, as well as the role of storytelling and its impact on facing his war experience. The purpose behind tackling given issues is "to remind the reader that 'truth' and 'fiction' are two intertwined aspects of the same story, shaped by the author's narration and the reader's interpretation" (Lei 28). O' Brien develops this idea by establishing the so-called "story-truth" and "happening-truth," where he puts into perspective that "happening-truth provides the generalized statement of the fact—it 'tells' rather than 'shows'—and does little more than summarize events," while "story-truth is full of excruciating detail and specificity" (Silbergleid 133). Besides enabling the author to alter his stories in a way that readers can understand the depth of his traumatic experience, metafiction emphasized that "[t]he significance of a story depends on its capacity to replace fading memories and bring a justification for the enduring pain" (Mimaki 17).

Even though metafiction as a narrative technique is not as dominant in O' Brien's memoir as it is in *The Things They Carried*, what O' Brien does instead is that he uses "personal narrative and storytelling to relay how his convictions hindered his involvement in the war" (Solomon 4). In that way, this author sets the tone of his literary narrative for the rest of his works, where the nature of a true war story, alongside the impact of storytelling, will be analyzed more explicitly. The proof of this lies in a chapter called "Step Lightly," which resonates with O' Brien's thoughts on the Vietnam War:

> Those who point at and degrade his bitterness, those who declare that it's all part of war and that this is a job which must be done—to those patriots I will recommend a postwar vacation to this land, where they can swim in the sea, lounge after a fine sun, stroll in the quaint countryside, wife and son in hand. Certainly, there will be a mine or two still in the earth. Alpha Company did not detonate all of them. (O' Brien, *If I Die* 128)

His initial thoughts about the Vietnam War being a war without a purpose, accompanied by a lack of understanding either in terms of the army itself or in terms of people from his town, only grew and eventually turned into profound disappointment and anger at those who dared to conceal the truth about what was happening in Vietnam. In addition to this, "[t]he instances of wartime that O'Brien recollects and illustrates throughout his memoir concern matters of courage and exhibit how one's conscience factors into combat, ultimately conveying the guilt O'Brien harbors toward the war" (Solomon 4-5). From the start, O' Brien's values have been shattered. It all started when he gave up on his plan to desert, and it has progressively gotten worse the longer he was in

Vietnam. Even after some time had passed, he was still wondering whether he had done the right thing. When the letter from his father came, he inevitably started wondering: "And, if right, was my apparent courage in enduring merely a well-disguised cowardice? When my father wrote that at least his son was discovering how much he could take and still go on, was he ignoring his son's failure to utter a dramatic and certain and courageous no to the war?" (O' Brien, *If I Die* 138-139). Despite Tim's betrayal of his own convictions and the fact that he saw it as an act of cowardice, many would argue that his decision to go to war was courageous. However, once he arrived in Vietnam and spent some time there, even his own view on what it means to be brave drastically changed, as was probably the case with some of the fellow soldiers. This author no longer possesses black and white differentiating of cowardice and courage because the longer he spent his time in Vietnam, the more he was convinced that the relationship of cowardice and courage can be seen as a dynamic one: "[i]t is more likely that men act cowardly and, at other times, act with courage, each in different measure, each with varying consistency. The men who do well on the average, perhaps with one moment of glory, those men are brave" (O' Brien, *If I Die* 147). Even though he speaks of courage and lays out his personal convictions about the Vietnam War in his other works as well, this memoir represents the beginning of his war narrative.

In *The Things They Carried*, O' Brien introduces the term of a true war story and discusses everything one such story should contain. To begin with, it is important to acknowledge that "[t]rue war stories don't necessarily have to be about heroism or about pain, chaos, death, and destruction. O'Brien's emphasizes that war is also a mystery and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing for love" (Lei 30). War experience cannot be limited merely to what happened during combat because there are other equally important struggles soldiers endure. The author recognizes that and wants to reach out to any veteran to make sure they are seen and heard.

In the first chapter, O' Brien lists both tangible and intangible items that soldiers must carry. The list of tangible objects is quite long and calls for physical exhaustion that is a result of the horrible conditions soldiers were brought into, but he does not exclude other burdens soldiers have: "They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing—these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight" (O' Brien, *The Things* 24). If readers can completely understand the point behind O' Brien's stories and the nature of his storytelling he wants to achieve, his experience will have a long-lasting impact on them, and, once again, it will be properly validated.

Like his memoir, *The Things They Carried* analyzes some important issues that were of great importance for O' Brien's experience. However, what makes this work different from his memoir is the fact that O' Brien developed an idea of a true war story that was not presented in the memoir. Before any further elaboration, it must be noted that "[t]he significance of what he calls 'stories' lies in their ability to mirror the struggle or the spiritual feeling of a person who faces the cruelty of the real world" (Mimaki 17). This author writes his stories to make sense out of the chaotic memories that are now an integral part of his identity. The Vietnam War transformed him and destroyed what he once held to be true: "[s]tories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are" (O' Brien, *The Things* 24). For Tim O' Brien, a true war story bears an emotional value, which causes readers to feel every word. In fact, "[a] true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe" (O' Brien, *The Things* 59). Therefore, it could be argued that "a true war story is one that is based in emotional truth, getting the reader to 'feel' the right thing, to have the vicarious experience of presence" (Silbergleid 147). If readers can emotionally connect to the story, that increases the chances that they will believe it. However, O' Brien warns readers not to trust any war story that seems moral. The reasoning behind this would be the fact that the American military system puts forward the narrative about the Vietnam War as a noble mission and as a man's duty to serve for a country that provided him with everything he might need: "If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie" (O' Brien, *The Things* 52). Besides the examination of what a true war story should be like, in a chapter called "Good Form," O' Brien makes a distinction between so-called "story-truth" and "happening-truth:

> Here is the happening-truth. 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. Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him. (O' Brien, *The Things* 124)

By establishing such a distinction, this author wanted to point out that factual truth cannot capture the how and why beyond events or incidents of war: it can only provide specific and detailed information rather than an emotional account. Because he takes into consideration an emotional account of one's memory or event, O' Brien prefers "story-truth" over "happening-truth." That

ultimately implies that some of the events in this work were altered to convey the emotional aspects of a particular experience, which is why the factual truth was not as important. For example, even though O' Brien experienced doubts about whether to go to war or not, that part of the book was fabricated for the purposes of his writing.

Even though O' Brien's goal to put his war experience into perspective was achieved, he managed to do that via a variety of narrative techniques: metafiction being one of them. Without a doubt, "the ability to communicate has saved O' Brien, who compulsively writes about Vietnam, as his daughter Kathleen reminds both him and the reader" (Silbergleid 150-151). Unfortunately, Norman Bowker, his fellow soldier, was not of such luck. In "Notes," O' Brien explains that Bowker hanged himself in 1978 in the locker room of YMCA in Iowa. O' Brien even got a letter from him, in which Bowker wrote about how he was having a hard time finding purpose after the war had ended. Bowker suggested Tim write a story about "[a] guy who can't get his act together and just drives around town all day and can't think of any damn place to go and doesn't know how to get there anyway. This guy wants to talk about it, but he can't. . ." (O' Brien, *The Things* 110). Norman Bowker's story can be the story of any veteran because there are numerous reasons why this keeps happening to them. One of them could be the overwhelming feeling of inability to adapt to a calm environment because of exposure to a tremendously stressful environment. The other reason could be not knowing to voice their needs to someone who does not have the same experience, no matter how supportive they might be. Unlike Tim O' Brien, who chose to write about what he went through, many other veterans do not have such a tool.

Stories found in his memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, as well as in *The Things They Carried*, "can be considered O'Brien's relentless effort to sort through and organize the fragments of the Vietnam War, the nightmarish images and his stance against it, which has not faltered, with the assistance of various narrative techniques" (Solomon 55). In his persistence of using storytelling to cope with his own experience, O' Brien managed to create a safe space for anyone who could relate to what he was saying and to make his reader aware of what had really happened during the Vietnam War.

Conclusion

After the Vietnam War ended, Tim O' Brien realized he had made a big mistake by going to war. His regret was so profound that he started writing about the war to deter the next generation from believing the "old lie." In *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, the author graphically describes combat, tackles important moral and ethical questions, and discusses his struggles regarding the conflict by examining the patriotic ideal of war in contrast to the realities of combat. Later, his collection of short stories called *The Things They Carried* examines physical and emotional burdens and their impact on an average soldier, as well as the power of storytelling.

What connects the two works are the narrative techniques O' Brien uses in achieving his goals: first-person narration, non-linear structure, and metafiction. Through the usage of first-person narration, Tim O' Brien wanted to show the nature of moral conflicts and psychological burdens Tim-the-character and Tim-the-narrator exhibit in the two works. While Tim-the-character shows what Tim O' Brien went through as a soldier, Tim-the-narrator presents the character's past instances to fit in with O' Brien's narrative. Next is the non-linear structure, which is accomplished via a series of vignettes, flashbacks, and O' Brien's recollections of some past events. Here, language plays an important role because it changes the way one deals with past trauma. It becomes clear in two cases: first, the dehumanization of the enemy through language and black humor to ease particularly traumatic events, and second, the way O' Brien's writing reflects incidents of the Vietnam War. Finally, metafictional elements in the two works discuss the relationship between fiction and reality, as well as the power of storytelling. Elaboration on the narrative techniques discussed in this paper systematically suggests that they are presented in O' Brien's narrative as his unique way of portraying both personal and universal hardships of the Vietnam War experience.

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