Telling a True War Story: Tim O'Brien's Vietnam War Novels

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Studij: sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i povijesti

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Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

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Znanstveno polje: filologija

Znanstvena grana: Studij engleskog

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Osijek, 2018.

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Study Programme: Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and History

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Bachelor`s Thesis

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Abstract

This paper will deal with the ambiguity between the factual, and emotional truth in the works of the American postmodern writer Tim O`Brien. O`Brien, who is a veteran of Vietnam War, is most known for his trilogy, the memoir *If I Die in Combat Zone,* fictional novel *Going After Cacciato,* and for his metafiction novel *The Things They Carried.* In all of his works, including an essay O`Brien wrote in 1994 titled "The Vietnam in Me", the writer tries to convey an emotional truth that would seem more profound, hurtful, and real in the eyes of the reader than an actual occurrence, a fact for that matter, ever could. He, therefore, alternates between telling outright lies about his own experience, intertwined with what actually happened, in order to make us "feel". The first part of this paper will present an overview of the US in Vietnam, from the history to psychological repercussions and influence in popular culture. The next part will deal with critical thought on O`Brien`s works, and finally, the third part will analyze three of O`Brien`s works in an attempt to explain and exemplify O`Brien`s writing style and the message he tried to put forth in his works.

Keywords: Tim O`Brien, metafiction, memoir, Vietnam War, truth, emotion

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Introduction

Tim O`Brien is considered as one of the most prolific, gifted, inspiring, and finest American modern writers today, whose works have managed to capture the imagination of people all around the globe. O`Brien`s specialty is war fiction in its broader sense, especially Vietnam War fiction, since he himself was a part of that bloody conflict which took place from 1955 to 1975 (with only the second half of the sixties up to its end being definitely marked by the American presence). His experience of the war is depicted in his trilogy, and it consists of the following works, listed chronologically by date of publication: *If I Die in Combat Zone (1973), Going After Cacciato (1978), The Things They Carried (1990).* As mentioned before, the works are considered to be a trilogy depicting the writer`s time and experiences in Vietnam, even though they are not connected in time, place, or genre. *If I Die in Combat Zone* is a work of non-fiction, a memoir which delivers the true feeling of war as experienced by the writer himself, *Going After Cacciato* is a profound anti-war novel and a work of fiction, as it follows an imaginary storyline set in the real world, and also transcribes the true feelings O`Brien felt while away in the distant southeast Asia. *The Things They Carried* is a metafictional novel, even if rebutted remotely in the book itself, and consists of mutually permeating war stories that depict both psychological and physical horror the war is. Finally, O` Brien`s essay published in 1994 puts forth O`Brien`s most personal thoughts about the war and his own mental state during and after the war itself, bringing about his story to a logical end. This paper consists of three parts. The first part brings about a brief, detailed overview of the American involvement in the Vietnam War, its repercussions, and the wave of social unrest it brought with itself. The second part focuses on differentiating O`Brien`s thoughts and ideas about the sheer nature of his works, determining and explaining the boundaries between the memoir, the fiction, and the autofiction in its critical terms, and the third part delves deeper into O`Brien`s memoir, metafictional novel, and his essay, explaining and exemplifying what makes the three works irrefutably connected and one of the most important parts of American Literature and collective memory. Finally, the paper sheds light on how to falsely, but at the same time truthfully and emotionally tell a “true war story”.

1. The US in Vietnam

1.1 American Involvement in the Vietnam War

Technically speaking, the war in Vietnam raged on from the end of World War II and the first Indochina War fought by the indigenous people of Vietnam against the French colonial forces. Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia have been under French rule from the late19th century, and have been collectively known as French Indochina, and were one of the most important agricultural regions noted for its production of exotic fruit, sugar, and rice, and have greatly helped in boosting the battered French economy after the First World War and in subsequent years. However, with the end of the global conflict, communist ideas turned up in the war-torn country, and Vietnam in particular got its first true freedom fighter in the person of Ho Chi Minh and his party Viet Minh, who desperately craved independence during the second half of the 1950s, when the seeds of the tragic conflict were placed. In addition to fighting the French colonial forces, Vietnam has been burdened by Chinese administration since the Middle Ages, not by the Chinese, but by their own people who have taken Chinese customs and administrative ways in order to create the so-called Mandarin elite. So, Ho Chi Minh, the Communist leader of North Vietnam and a national hero who fought the colonial influences, was fighting two wars; one against the European aggressor and one against his own people. This dual conflict was never understood by the US, and in it lies one of the key reasons to the American failure in Vietnam.

With the Geneva accords and the split between North Vietnam and South Vietnam (led by another charismatic, but pro-Western leader, Ngo Dinh Diem) across the seventeenth parallel, Vietnam got its independence, but the country was divided, and faced enormous challenges. Even though Ho Chi Minh was adamant in the unification of the two Vietnams, the actual process would never come to be during his lifetime.

By the end of the fifties, the political situation was highly unstable, as there was a large quantity of assassinations and guerilla strikes placed upon the South Vietnam in a desperate attempt to forcefully unite the two opposing sides, which differed vastly in ideology, even though they were ethnically the same. With the aforementioned guerilla attacks from the Northern Vietnamese begun the American interest in the local conflict that could bring massive shifts in the global theatre of power. The US were extremely worried about the possibility of Vietnam becoming a fully communist country under the patronage of the USSR, believing that

if Vietnam fell, the rest of the Southeast Asia would fall as well, becoming communist in the process and basically take half of the world population with it, massively upsetting American cultural, economic, and military domination of the time.

By the start of the sixties, the Americans have already set out to deliver the world from the communist evil, and in that mindset lies the first problem with the American involvement in the Vietnam War. The US more often than not have a very narrow-minded outlook on world crises and wars that they are more than willing to partake in. The same was with Vietnam: According to Olsen & Roberts, the American policy was to invade, deal with the threat quickly, and pull back with little effort, ignoring the cultural, geographical and ideological aspects of the country they are getting ready to invade, not giving any thought about the true nature of their so-called enemies (75). This policy is in strict opposition towards the communist party they were up against in the jungles of Asia. The communist rule did their best to approach the politically illiterate peasants, and also did their best in order to learn the weaknesses of their potential enemy. The true call to arms came with the inauguration of J.F. Kennedy, in which he delivered the inspiring speech that vaguely concerned Vietnamese matters: “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty” (Olson&Roberts 76). Kennedy assured that his administration would not adhere to any form of neocolonialism, whether the regime is asserted by the people of that particular country or not.

In the beginning, the US military administration opted for no direct involvement in the ongoing conflict between North and South Vietnam, but instead put forth military advisors whose number grew in the coming years. Also, Kennedy induced a novelty specially prepared for jungle warfare, it being a select division of military experts called Green Berets, whose role in Vietnam was to educate and to prepare ARVN forces for conventional warfare against the guerilla tactics employed by North Vietnam, or more commonly known as Vietcong. All that would change on August 4, 1964, when an alleged attack on American vessels *Maddox* and *C. Turner Joy* occurred in the Gulf of Tonkin. To this day this event is shrouded in mystery and unconfirmed factography regarding what happened, but it was enough for the US to effectively declare war on Ho Chi Minh.

In 1963 John Fitzgerald Kennedy was murdered in Dallas and a new president was elected: Lyndon B. Johnson. Described as “Lon Chaney of American politics, a man with a thousand faces who could play any political role” (Olson&Roberts 105) and as a man without scrupule who effectively lied in order to better his chances to excel at his goals. By the time of

his inauguration, the American effort in Vietnam was slowly, but surely getting out of hand and more and more American troops were getting engaged by the enemy, despite assurances from the government that "all Vietnam is not worth the life of a single American boy" (Olson&Roberts 118). What started out as help, escalated into a profoundly American war, a war for the perceived freedom of the world, because the American point of view was that if Vietnam fell, nothing would stop the rest of the world from engaging in a similar revolt that would have its basis in communism.

The policy of the government led by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, General Westmoreland, Lyndon B. Johnson, and his administration (known as the Wise Men) is best described as a policy of denial. Even though they were deeply aware that the war is in fact escalating, they failed to acknowledge that at home among the American public, and were absolutely sure that the only way to deal with this escalation was to escalate it even more by sending more and more troops and expanding the draft. By 1968 the number of American foot soldiers who now actively engaged enemy troops was estimated to be around 65 000, and more and more of them were getting killed without affecting the morale of the opposite side. The public outlook on the war at home was getting more negative by the day, and soon the US had to deal with civil unrest jumpstarted by angry students and African-Americans alike, who desperately tried to ensure a real ending to the segregation and fulfillment of the promised civil rights they were denied, all the while being used as soldiers in the war itself.

According to Olson & Roberts, the beginning of the end in the American war effort in the distant South Asian land is rooted in three catastrophic events that had deep repercussions on the American myth of invincibility and general credibility in the world. The first of those is a colossal mistake committed by the American leadership stationed in Vietnam regarding the tactical analysis of their enemy. In mid-1967 Americans believed that North Vietnam was somehow ready to strike a menacing blow to the US, despite the constant bombing that led the American leadership to believe they were winning the war, while in truth they further fueled the already angry Vietnamese to be even more determined to secure their independence of all foreign influence. The Americans believed that the Vietcong would strike Khe Sanh military base, close to the border with Laos in an all-out effort to spread the war to South Vietnam, but they were terribly wrong. Instead, North Vietnamese conducted the Tet offensive which would span the entire area of South Vietnam, entering Saigon and bombing the US Embassy (Olson&Roberts 184). Even though their assault would end there, it finally showed the Vietnamese, the UN, and most importantly, the US that their war of liberation might just be

getting out of hand and beginning to be entirely futile. The third incident that basically nailed the coffin in the American war effort and the government was the horror committed by American soldiers in the village of My Lai, more commonly known as “Pinkville”. The incident occurred on March 16, 1968, and has since been dubbed as “the most shocking episode of the Vietnam War”. Around 500 innocent men, women and children were killed in massive arsons, bombings, and executions of two village hamlets under suspicion for being a Vietcong hotspot. The government chose to disregard the accusations made by Pfc. Ridenhour, which only further disillusioned the general public and created an even bigger aura of distrust towards the American cause in Vietnam. Finally, a couple of years after the incident itself, Lt. William Caffey was found guilty as the instigator of the massacre, but the damage to the American image of liberators and “the good guys” was irreparably tarnished throughout the world.

The cost was great; Lyndon B. Johnson, McNamara, and other American political figures of the war either stepped down or were beaten in the election, and the war was finally starting to come to an end. Also, Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese national hero, passed away in 1969. Even though the battles continued for five more years, the new President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State, renowned diplomat Henry Kissinger worked towards a resolution in the conflict and a way to stop the bloodshed and deaths of both Vietnamese and Americans. A cease of fire was signed in Paris in 1973 and marked the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam, but the bloody conflict continued for two more years, when in 1975 it was finally over with the unification of the two Vietnams under one central communist and nationalist rule, which in the end proved to be unfit for exercising power of its people. As far as the US is concerned, as said by Olson & Roberts, the lasting symbol of the Vietnam War is an entirely black wall depicting 58175 names of men and women who participated in a war they should not have participated in, and a black spot in American history that has left them crippled ever since (286).

1.2 Psychological Repercussions

The Vietnam War memorial differed vastly from the WWII memorial depicting the battle of Iwo Jima. While one was an embodiment of the great American spirit and determination, the other was a black wall which depicted names of the fallen, with little pompousness and somehow dispirited and hollow. It raised a great deal of controversy upon its inception, from the choice of architect, who was a Yale student of Asian origin Maya Ying Lin (Olson&Roberts 263), to the fact that some perceived it as not heroic enough or even insulting to the veterans

which participated in the war. The truth is, the memorial was just like the war and its participants: misunderstood, controversial, and shunned by the public.

Upon the end of the war, a new, internal struggle emerged in the US, and that was the general mistrust most Americans felt towards their government and military. The next step in coming to terms with Vietnam was what to do with its depiction, whom to trust, who could explain why did America fail so miserably against a nation of peasants and mountain savages? This answer was left to the filmmakers, artists, and historians who all tried to develop their own vision of Vietnam and their own general truth they could offer the confused American public desperate for answers (Olson&Roberts 264).

A more pressing matter, however, was dealing with the psychological and physical trauma soldiers and those who took care of them experienced in the war. The questions posed by the American public were how did Vietnam exactly change these people, how were they scarred, and could they ever live among the common American again? (Olson&Roberts 264). Long gone were the days of the heroic WWII veteran who was welcomed with highest honors from a war that was steeped in honor and heroism. Instead, the Vietnam veterans were perceived as baby killers, unstable maniacs who were symbolized a war the nation was far too eager to forget. Instead of being a hero, the Vietnam veteran became a villain, an inadvertent victim of a morbid war. They were looked upon without pity or admiration, but with sheer fear, as a maladjusted product of war, a timed bomb likely to kill again and transform into the killing machine he once was. This perception was backed up by the many immoral acts American soldiers did commit in the Vietnam, such as engaging with Vietnamese prostitutes, killing their own superiors (also known as fragging), or being addicted to various drugs.

All in all, it can be said that the Vietnam experience left a deep wound inside the American consciousness, a wound known as the Vietnam syndrome, which would not be sewn shut until the US got its next chance to assert dominance: the Gulf War. Known as the “war in which America got its mojo back”, the Gulf War, which started in August 1990 and was over by February 1991.

1.3 Depiction of Vietnam War in Mass Media and Culture

The Vietnam War was the first war in modern history which was almost completely televised, evident from the vast number of news correspondents and cameramen who roamed the jungles of Vietnam looking for spectacular war stories of the country (Olson&Roberts 205). Despite gaining massive popularity at the beginning of the war, war-themed and pro-military programs were rapidly losing viewership and interest by 1967, even though the war was being shown as part of the evening news. Moreover, TV shows depicting the war were losing viewership as well in the midst of the general revolt by the public in relation to the Vietnam War. Overt antiwar themes found their way onto mainstream television, even in shows that seemingly had nothing to do with the war itself. *Star Trek*, for example, kept airing episodes that condemned war with insistence that Starfleet captains not interfere with internal affairs of newly discovered civilizations. This was a subtle jab at the American government, but others were not so subtle. *The Smother Brothers* were a comedy team who deliberately brought American folk singers, voices of a generation onto live TV in order to propagate anti-war themes and stances, and more often than not publicly criticized the then president Lyndon B. Johnson (Olson&Roberts 204).

Music was probably one of the most enduring symbols of the Vietnam War and one of the more permeating influences on the general American public during times of civil unrest. It is no wonder that the music was bleak in tone, fueled with anti-war messages and outright controversial in some aspects. The war coincided with one of the most important periods in the evolution of popular music, during the hippie movement and the rise of rock and roll, which culminated with Woodstock in 1969. Pretty much all of the artists who we now associate with Vietnam War music were politically active and tried to convey a certain message to the government or the soldiers itself, most prominent of them being Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, *The Rolling Stones*, *The Doors* and *Creedence Clearwater Revival*. It should be noted that music was an important part of a soldier`s day in Vietnam, as it was purposefully played by military officials in order to boost morale or to relax, but it more or less achieved the opposite effect, even more creating a sense of disillusionment and despair by being thrown into such a war.

Movies, alongside music, probably depict the Vietnam War better than any other medium in relation to the public, since they are the most accessible medium all over the world. Over the years, films about Vietnam have passed through a plethora of stages, from outright rejection in the aftermath of the war, to the period of conveying the true nature of the conflict, to tales of

lost heroism of the individuals. There are a couple of films that are today considered to be masterpieces of cinematography that deal exclusively with Vietnam War and have at least partially managed to grasp what the conflict was all about. Those films are Michael Cimino`s *The Deer Hunter*, F. F. Coppola`s *Apocalypse Now,* Oliver Stone`s *Born on the Fourth of July* and Brian de Palma`s *Casualties of War.* According to Hellman, each of these films deal with a underlying sensation that permeated the moist jungles of Vietnam, and try to pry into the collective mindset of not just soldiers, but the general myth that surrounded the US up to that point. *The Deer Hunter* overtly deals with what it means to be a Vietnam veteran after returning home from immense physical and mental trauma, losing two best friends and all the while discovering your long-lost sense of humanity amidst conflict. *Apocalypse Now,* on the other hand, probably demonstrates the futility and madness of the war better than any other war film, because of its chaotic filming and a seemingly absent message that delves deep into the "heart of darkness", into the rotten minds of military officials who had lost all sense of what the war was about (Hellmann 173-188). *Born on the Fourth of July,* an adaptation of Ron Kovic`s memoirs, deals with the disillusionment the war brought upon the soldiers who participated and the physical toll one man gave for ideals his country presented to him, after being enthusiastically called upon to serve in the war and subsequently losing his faith in those ideals. Finally, *Casualties of War* deals simply with the atrocities American soldiers did out of sheer boredom to the locals, such as cold-blooded murder and rape, while being torn between loyalty to the US and individual sense of what is right (Canby)

2. Critical Differentiation of O`Brien`s Works of Fiction, Non-fiction, and Metafiction

Three years after Tim O`Brien returned from duty he published his first work, a work of pure non-fiction in the form of a memoir, titled *If I Die in Combat Zone,* which was the first in a line of critically-acclaimed works written by the author. Even though the work was by default non-fiction, an account of his personal experiences during his time in Vietnam, O`Brien has stated that "it might have been the most factually accurate book, but that did not make it the most true" (Bahr, "Loops and Spins" 48). This statement might seem contradictory at first, but upon closer observation of his works, especially the memoir, it can be said that the work is more of a creative non-fiction work than pure non-fiction. Evident from the way O`Brien writes, it is difficult to pull apart the strands which are fictional, and which are not. According to David Bahr, the limits of factual truth particularly stand out in an attempt to write one`s own biography, where the factual truths are constantly being intertwined with memories and emotions, blurring the distinction between what is real, and what is perceived ("Loops and Spins" 49). Most people understand that writing memoirs should be like putting down hard facts in a history book, while in reality it is putting down your deepest emotions and hazy memories created in an actual context. Perhaps the best explanation on the borders between the real and the fictional was given by Micaela Maftei, who argues that "an honest version of events without understanding this honesty to imply a belief in a single true version, either the author`s or anyone else`s" ("Loops and Spins" 48).

O`Brien`s last book about the experience of Vietnam, *The Things They Carried,* further complicates the notion of fiction and non-fiction. Today, the work is considered to be as one of the most important works in American postmodernism, and as one of the premier examples of metafiction. However, according to some scholars, the work should be observed not only from the standpoint of metafiction, but from the standpoint of autobiographical fiction, or autofiction. Therefore, it is necessary to understand what these terms mean on their own. Metafiction, as defined by Patricia Waugh, is "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" ("Loops and Spins" 49). *The Things They Carried* most definitely asks the reader those questions concerning the division between the real and the fictionalized, and can therefore be put into the category of metafiction. Autofiction, on the other hand, destabilizes the preconceived notions of fiction and nonfiction. Karen Ferreira-Meyers

associates the origin of autofiction to a French author Serge Dubrovsky and the year 1977. The aforementioned author defined autofiction as fiction in which "events and facts of an author`s life are accurately reported, but the author assembles them in a radically altered presentation, disorderly or in an order, which deconstructs and reconstructs the narrative according to its own logic with a novelistic design of its own" ("Loops and Spins" 56). To put it in a simpler way, autofiction is a postmodern way of writing one`s own memoirs. *The Things They Carried,* even though stated to be a work of fiction, most definitely holds a significant portion of truth as experienced by the author, which was stated by O`Brien himself, therefore presupposing that even his fiction can be true in terms of emotional and historic weight ("Loops and Spins" 56). Therefore, with *The Things They Carried,* O`Brien tried to cope with the reality of his time in Vietnam by fictionalizing his own accounts, blending the imaginary with the real, in the process creating a higher truth than his own memoirs could have. This could potentially explain why O`Brien used dialogue in his memoir. Dialogues, which are by default a device that induce fiction, are used in the memoir to further distinguish the truth of his real experience in the war.

The third work examined in this paper is O`Brien`s essay "The Vietnam in Me", published in 1994. The essay itself deals with O`Brien`s return to Vietnam along with his girlfriend Kate, and skillfully alternates between his visit to the country he called home for a year, and between how O`Brien spends his days in the US while being burdened by depression, suicidal thoughts, and guilt from taking part in a war he detested. The essay could be viewed as a definitive conclusion on O`Brien`s experience in the war, as well as a true conclusion to his memoir.

To sum up the chapter, all of O`Brien`s works hold a certain degree of truth, and a certain degree of fiction. As stated in the passages above, even his memoirs, which should by default be the most truthful representation of his time in Vietnam, do not assure the reader that what he is reading is in fact, true in its entirety. Somehow, O`Brien has managed to paint a fuller picture about the truth of Vietnam with his two fictional books, by putting in details which can only be described as a man`s deepest thoughts, emotions and internal struggles. It can almost be said that his works hold a reconciliatory function, helping an entire nation heal and deal with the fictional and actual loss of the war in Vietnam.

3. Analytical Overview of O`Brien`s Vietnam War Works

3.1 *"If I Die in Combat Zone (Box Me Up and Ship Me Home)*

Five years before publishing *Going After Cacciato* and seventeen years before releasing *The Things They Carried,* Tim O`Brien wrote a nonfictional account of his time in Vietnam titled *If I Die in Combat Zone.* It was an intensely personal account of an intelligent young man conflicted between serving his country as a part of a larger cause that reached back to the Second World War and resisting an affair he deemed unworthy of his persona and deeply unjustified. However, despite his conflicts, he was drafted after completing his BA in political science from Macalester College. He spent his time in Vietnam as a member of Company A, which itself was a part of the 23rd Infantry Division (also known as the Americal Division, which was also responsible for the already mentioned My Lai Massacre). He served from 1969 to 1970, and after returning home he went to graduate school at Harvard University. For a year instead of home, Vietnam became his place of contemplation about the lost morality, ambiguity of the war and the concepts of manhood, all of which were vividly described in the book itself, which is today considered to be one of the masterworks of the genre.

In the words of Phillip Beidler, it is "a work that quickly established itself among Vietnam narratives as the exemplar of the genre" (qtd. in *If I Die in Combat Zone* I.), and further praise is given to O`Brien by comparing him to such American greats like Melville, Hemingway, and Thoreau. Furthermore, the acclaimed newspaper *Washington Star* considers the work to be the defining work about Vietnam, on par with WWII masterworks such as *The Naked and the Dead* (qtd. in *If I Die in Combat Zone* I.).

On a more personal note, O`Brien testifies how his memoir helped him to cope with his situation in Vietnam, since he started writing the memoir in form of notes while stationed in South Asia. Also, he states that after writing the memoir, he had been fully "healed", so to speak, that he had "fully come to terms with it" by the year of publication. ("Book of Illusions" 1). His subsequent works dealt more with storytelling and conveying the notion of factuality and falsehood, or telling "true" war stories. His most powerful quote about the nature of storytelling, and in a broader sense, about the nature of the human mind, deals with that truth: "Do stories, even from our own life, have to be literally true to be emotionally true?" ("Loops and Spins" 48). With that in mind, *If I Die in Combat Zone* is O` Brien`s most factual work, even though he himself does not consider it to be the most emotionally truthful account of his

time in Vietnam. The work itself feels as a chronological, logically, and stereotypically ordered work, containing a logical beginning, following with the time spent in Vietnam, and finishing with an emotionally satisfying conclusion that carries a hopeful message.

As previously stated, O`Brien started writing *If I Die in Combat Zone* in the form of note-taking since, as he himself explains, "did not know what was literature back then" (*If I Die* 148), while he was stationed in Vietnam. He started writing anecdotes which he did not think of as a book, but as an uncertain way of coping with the hardships of being in a foreign land in a foreign war (*If I Die* 148). Three years after returning from the war, he published his now arranged notes in the form of a memoir consisting of twenty-three chapters which closely describe his time in Vietnam. Some of the chapters however, carry more emotional weight than others, and are the subject of a more serious scholarly interpretation and analysis.

The first chapter, *"*Days", starts off the narrative *in medias res,* meaning that O`Brien has been in Vietnam for some time now. The reader encounters O`Brien in combat and in the midst of a conversation with a fellow soldier. This conversation in particular can be observed as something odd, since the work is written in the form of a memoir. With that in mind, O`Brien probably included these fictional dialogues that appear throughout the novel as a way of further developing his point and his thoughts, which are sometimes better conveyed through sharing words with another actor within a narrative. Even though he included something that is most probably purely fictional (even if the conversation did occur), O`Brien explains that all of his stories in the memoir are straightforward retelling in the manner of "here`s what happened to me". ("Loops and Spins" 50) This is corroborated even more in the following chapters, which imply a linearity after an immediate establishment of the character of O`Brien in Vietnam.

The following chapter, "Pro Patria", deals with the explicit theme of shattered patriotism of the Vietnam generation, and the inspired love for one`s nation of their predecessors who fought in an "honorable" war, that being WWII. In the chapter O`Brien say that "he grew out of one war and into another" (*If I Die in Combat Zone* 11), thus connecting his father`s generation and his own. On a deeper level, O`Brien connects the notion of patriotism that infused the US after the incident at Pearl Harbor, when a large number of young men opted to join the army in the war against Japan and Germany. Their service was deemed as honorable and something to be proud of. Almost twenty-five years after that notion was completely shattered, and even O`Brien himself backs this up by being utterly disappointed by the cause of the war and the concept itself.

This disappointment, disillusionment, and fear is further explored in the chapter "Beginning", which is probably the pivotal chapter of the work. A description of O`Brien`s struggles after being drafted and his subsequent fear and loathing of the war he did not choose to be a part of, it delves into the collective feeling young Americans, among them O`Brien, had about Vietnam. At the time of being drafted, the US had become almost completely against the war and massive demonstrations occurred all over the country, led by educated young students, a class O`Brien himself belonged to. The chapter deals with his frustration with being drafted, as O`Brien believes that he was simply too good for the war, too morally correct and too intelligent to take part in such a barbaric affair. He believes it to be a lost cause, as many students did at the time. He even contemplates desertion, which would be more closely, if untruthfully, dealt with in his metafiction work *The Things They Carried.* At the end of the chapter, he connects the chapter at hand with the previous one; the consensus being that a man simply cannot escape "the old lie", and is bound by the American way of life and by some old truth established hundreds of years ago, to go and fulfill his duty to the country and the world. However, O`Brien puts it selfishly; he simply could not disappoint his family and his place of birth, because he would be ashamed of doing the right thing his all life by people who simply do not understand.

Also, at the end of the chapter, O`Brien leaves hints of his future genius writing, saying "Can the foot soldier teach anything important about the war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories" (21). This further explains his statement that the memoir is perhaps his most factual work up to date, but not his most true one. In context, he who was a foot soldier in Vietnam, saw all kinds of atrocities and wonders alike, but he can only put them in context of the factual truth he was part of, from the day he was drafted up to the day he came back. Only in his fictional works could he interpret his memories and emotions to their truest sense, further cementing that the imagined is sometimes more true than the real.

In the next twenty-one chapters, O`Brien chronologically tells "simple" war stories about what happened to him in the war, not really delving into his emotions and philosophical context of the situations. He breaks off this brief tradition in the last chapter, "Don't I Know You", which describes his way home. This chapter is specific because it offers some kind of palpable and true conclusion in the form of a lesson ("Loops and Spins" 50). The lesson itself is not so much philosophical, as it is practical, and deals more with the coping with your time in Vietnam and the expectations placed upon those who took part in it, on a moral note and the note of manhood. O`Brien states the following:

> You add things up. You lost a friend to the war, and you gained a friend. You compromised one principle and fulfilled another. You learned, as old men tell it in front of the courthouse, that war is not all bad; it may not make a man out of you, but it teaches you that manhood is not something to scoff; some stories of valor are true; dead bodies are heavy, and it`s better not to touch them; fear is paralysis, but it is better to be afraid than move out to die, all limbs functioning and heart thumping and charging and having your chest torn open for all the work; you have to pick the times not to be afraid, but when you are afraid you must hide it to save respect and reputation. You learned that the old men had lives of their own, and that they valued them enough to try not to lose them; anyone can die in a war if he tries. (*If I Die* 207-208)

Also, O`Brien utters a couple of sentences directly dealing with him coping with his time in Vietnam and with the land he was forced to call home for a year, thus offering a logical and emotionally satisfying conclusion to the memoir. First of all, in a way he emotionally says goodbye to Vietnam:

> It`s the earth you want to say goodbye to. The soldiers never knew you. You never knew the Vietnamese people. But the earth, you could turn a spadeful of it, see its dryness and the tint of red, and dig out enough of it so as to lie in the hole at night, and that much of Vietnam you would know. Certain whole pieces of the land you would know, something like a farmer knows his own earth and his neighbor`s. You know where the bad, dangerous parts are, and the sandy and safe places by the sea. You know where the mines are and will be for a century, until the earth swallows and disarms them. Whole patches of land. Around My Khe and My Lai. Like a friend`s face. (207)

Secondly, O`Brien shows signs of successful coping with his time in Vietnam and with the fact he was part of an insane war, as he contemplates while changing his clothes at the back of the plane going home: “You take of your uniform. You roll it into a ball and stuff it into your suitcase and put on a sweater and blue jeans. You smile at yourself in the mirror. You grin, beginning to know you`re happy. Much as you hate it, you don`t have civilian shoes, but no one will notice. It`s impossible to go home barefoot” (209). The conclusion itself portrays a man who is comfortable with the established fact that he was and always will be a soldier, and is now ready to move on and deal with his demons in a way he deems appropriate for his character.

In that case, the logical conclusion to the narrative in form of this lesson is probably the most honest conclusion about his personal experience O`Brien could have given the readership.

With reference to the ambiguity of the truth of war O`Brien presented in his later works and with respect to the conclusion of *If I Die in Combat Zone* with a perceived, completely honest statement, we can try to understand critically the constraints of the mimetic memoir and just why is the conclusion the way it is. According to Marilyn Wesley, mimesis as a literary strategy provides structure and order in spite of a disruptive force, such as war (qtd. in "Loops and Spins" 51). It can be therefore said that if viewed this way, O`Brien`s memoir can be read more like traditional fiction than his other works, which disrupt the notion of mimesis with authorial and narrative instability, being unreliable, but the most truthful ("Loops and Spins" 51). Also, even though some memoirs avoid the linear chronology, O`Brien opted to use chronological ordering to convey sequential incidents that happened to him during his time in the war up until the exit, therefore it can be said that this form of writing represents the most accurate recreation of events as experienced by the author, since he does not deviate in chronology and "pointless" digressions that delve into philosophical aspects, but that is expected from a memoir. According to David Bahr, O`Brien himself realizes that mimesis has its limits, and has even said that while writing his memoir he learned to distrust the truth ("Loops and Spins 51). He further elaborates this by comparing his work to the work of journalists; they are considered to be the primary instigators of the truth, but that they also have to omit and choose what should be written, and what should not. Therefore, O`Brien could deliver only the factual truth of his experience in Vietnam, not the general truth felt by everyone involved, from soldiers to civilians alike. It is no surprise then that in his subsequent works he opted for writing fictionalized accounts which could more closely convey his true feelings about what he was involved in.

Closely associated with his memoir is his essay published in the *New York Times Magazine,* titled "The Vietnam in Me". With its publication it became clear that O`Brien`s emotionally satisfying conclusion to the memoir was, in fact, false and misleading. Despite what was stated in the analysis of that conclusion, the essay finally gave some justice to O`Brien`s internal struggles that would be more closely inspected in his following works. In it O`Brien admits to being depressed and having suicidal thoughts after his breakup with girlfriend Kate and because of vivid memories of the horrors of Vietnam. One particular sentence out of the essay harbors a harrowing message that deals not only with internal struggle, but with the struggle of a nation:"Evil has no place, it seems, in our national mythology. We erase it. We use ellipsis"

(qtd. in “Loops and Spins” 52). O`Brien basically admits that his nonfiction memoirs repressed the real truth that was supposed to be conveyed, and rather dealt with actual occasions that are meant to be accurate depictions without any real emotion and weight. In that case, the memoir`s conclusion falls flat, and creates even more struggle that goes on.

3.2 *The Things They Carried*

According to Steven Kaplan, who is credited with the first work on O`Brien`s writing, “The Undying Uncertainty of the Narrator in Tim O`Brien`s *The Things They Carried”,* literature is not an explanation of origins, but a staging of the constant deferment of explanation (qtd. in Bahr “The Things We Carry” 100). *The Things They Carried,* by all its elements can be considered a metafictive work about the Vietnam War, put in the broader aspect of American postmodernism, as a deeply conflicted and contradictory work that dwells on historical occurrences while being inescapably political, despite being intensely personal. Probably the most well-known theorist of metafiction, Patricia Waugh, defines it as writing that “self-consciously draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Bahr “The Things We Carry” 103). This is closely connected to ideas O`Brien put forth in his work, mainly manifested in the dilemma between historical, biographical, and phenomenological truth, which are put in context by an extremely painful personal emotional truth.

Tim O`Brien attempted to put his own take on it, on the ambiguity of the aforementioned “truth”. He states that he clearly dissociates the so-called “story-truth” from a “happening-truth”. The former can be emotionally correct, but not factually, while the latter is most definitely factually truthful, but does not have the same emotional power as a story which obviously exhibits and conveys some sort of an emotion that makes it feel more true. It can be said that these “story-truths”, in a way, feel more connected to the reader who either consciously or unconsciously responds to the story subjectively, creating a specific emotion that is, in fact, both objectively and metaphysically true. To simplify, the “happening truth” offers the facts a reader can infer without being moved or disturbed by them, while the “story truth” offers a deep emotional response no matter how the story is written or what actually happens in the story. For Tim O`Brien, therefore, his departure is a “happening truth”, but the range of emotions he felt while being in Vietnam are his “story truths”. Through his writing, he subjectively alters his

true war stories with imagination and specific memories that are then being put in the context of made-up stories that may or may not resemble actual situations (Bahr, “The Things We Carry” 103-104).

The work itself consists of twenty-two separately titled chapters, which are either longer, stand-alone stories, or short, comment-like interludes that piece together the lengthier texts. The larger pieces of text are not connected to each other in the usual way, but while being able to stand alone, when read together draw a bigger picture of Vietnam as seen through the eyes of the narrator, who by all means, is Tim O`Brien. As with his previous work concerning his time in Vietnam, *If I Die in Combat Zone,* several chapters stand out in the larger narrative and are therefore subject to scholarly interpretation as they deal with O`Brien`s writing style and what it means to write a true war story.

One of those chapters which, in this case, concern the overall style of O`Brien`s is aptly titled “Good Form”. Also, in this chapter O`Brien delivers on the aforementioned concepts of “story” and “happening-truths”. The chapter itself can be read as a piece of nonfiction, and it is mainly concerned with one of the work`s previous chapters, “The Man I Killed”, in which O`Brien details the appearance of a Vietnamese man whom he killed inadvertently, deliberately, or may not have killed at all. “Good Form” is also interesting because it gives the reader insight into the writer`s creative process and the way he intends to back up his story with emotional weight it is supposed to convey. The narrator, presumably O`Brien states that he is “forty-three years old, true, and I`m a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier. Almost everything else is invented” (*The Things They Carried* 171). Further through the chapter, he refers to the part of the work in which the narrator kills a Vietnamese soldier, and it is interesting how he also denies that part of his life occurring at all. That story was also made up as a way to further deliver the emotion he felt during the war, and also in a way to come to terms with his own involvement in the war, which was by all means evil in his eyes. O`Brien tells us that he wants us to feel what he felt, and wants us to know why story-truth is sometimes truer than happening-truth (*The Things They Carried* 171). He proceeds to explain the dichotomy between the two terms, which have been discussed previously: “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 afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I`m left with faceless responsibility and a faceless grief” (*The Things They Carried* 172). From this passage we can infer two types of information; first is obviously the factual part of the passage, which deals with the hard facts of his life, in this case the part of his life when he was

in Vietnam and saw all the terrible things that most definitely left him scarred for life. The second part, the one in which he mentions the faceless responsibility and faceless grief, can mean that at that point, he did not yet come to terms with his own involvement in the bloodshed, and therefore was forced to come up with a story that would give shape to his own grief, and make him understand and be understood. He proceeds defining his story truth; "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" (*The Things They Carried* 172). First of all, O`Brien mentions in the passage before this one that he had seen many bodies, real bodies, which is by all means a horrific experience. However, the reader does not feel the horror of the faceless bodies and the nameless bodies, only when the writer, O`Brien made-up the man he killed and have him an appearance and the manner of his death, does the reader feel appalled at the horrors of war. Only then, when there is a palpable and emotionally difficult occurrence, nevermind it being made up, does the reader feel compelled to experience what the writer felt. Therefore, O`Brien`s made-up stories put in context with the real world horrors he experienced, can convey real feelings of dread, while the factual, cold passages of history books cannot.

One of the chapters that can be associated with his memoir better than any else is named "On the Rainy River". The chapter itself can be considered semi-autobiographical in a non-physical way. It can be connected with a chapter in his memoir, where O`Brien describes his thoughts and feelings about going to a war which he abhorred and felt he was not supposed to be a part of; that he was simply too good for the war. In that chapter he mentions that he had been contemplating about fleeing to Canada, then considered to be a haven for all draft-dodgers. In a way, "On the Rainy River" can be considered as a personification of O`Brien`s internal struggle about patriotism, loyalty, and what he considered to be the right thing to do. He tried to evade the war by going to Canada, but in the end the overwhelming sense of shame and duty to his family, and then his country compelled him to return and take part in the war he loathed. It should be said that this story, ironically, stirred quite a bit of controversy from the veteran community of the US, who felt betrayed by one of their comrades who suddenly could not be trusted due to his imaginative writing about the conflict they all took part in.

"How to Tell a True War Story", the seventh chapter in the work is considered to be the representative example of what was discussed in the passages above which dealt with how Tim O`Brien writes and tries to convey the feeling of truth. Throughout this chapter, O`Brien continually asserts that the story is true, but at the same time tries to dissolve that feeling of

truth and the truth of memory which is in a state of constant flux. As he puts it, stories are for "when you can`t remember how you got from where you were to where you are, and when there is nothing to remember except the story" (*The Things They Carried* 40). In his mind, the stories conveyed from memory in turn become the facts that shape the story of a particular person. Those stories, either orally transmitted or written about, become the medium by which any person can pass on either happy or painful memories that are in reality, the facts of one`s life, never mind them being chaotic or in a particular order. The story at hand inherently deals with someone else, who is not Tim O`Brien. A series of anecdotal fragments that describes the death of a fellow soldier, Curt Lemon, who accidentally stepped on a land mine in a period of relaxation. But his death is not the real event of the story; that belongs to a couple of passages in which O`Brien talks about what makes a true war story. He says:

> A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. 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. (*The Things They Carried* 65)

In this passage we can see that O`Brien talks about what in his opinion should be an absolutely true war story, yet even the fact that he tried to warn the readership that a war story is never moral, he offers a piece of moral advice about the stories itself. The chapter is filled with such digressions that deal with the nature of truth, intertwined with war stories told by his comrades in the book. Another interesting point O`Brien makes is concerned with generalization. He states that true war stories do not generalize, and not indulge in abstraction or analysis. As an example he sets the old statement "War is hell", and acknowledges its moral truth, but as someone who actually took part in the war cannot feel moved by it. After that part, the most brutal excerpt of the chapter occurs; the killing of the baby buffalo as retribution for death which came upon the men of Alpha Company:

> He stepped back and shot it through the right front knee. The animal did not make a sound. It went down hard, then got up again, and rat took careful aim and shot off an ear. He shot it in the hindquarters and in the little hump at its back. He shot it twice in the flanks. It wasn't to kill; it was to hurt. He put the rifle muzzle up against the mouth and shot the mouth away. Nobody said much. The

> whole platoon stood there watching, feeling all kinds of things, but there was not a great deal of pity for the baby water buffalo." (*The Things They Carried* 75)

This act can be seen as a rite of passage for the men, who finally get rid of their innocence by killing an innocent animal uninvolved in the war, apart from being there. Also the story furthers O`Brien`s point about "making the stomach believe" (The Things They Carried 74). The story is made up, but it is true because it conveys strong emotion felt by the characters, who in return pass it on to the reader.

The last story that will be analyzed in this part, "Speaking of Courage", deals with the themes of veteran alienation, the phenomenon called "orphan pain" and, of course, truth or fiction when connected with the subsequent chapter, "Notes". In the chapter, a former soldier by the name of Norman Bowker suffers from PTSD and drives around his hometown in search for meaning and return to his civilian life. He is broken because of an accident which occurred during the war, that being the drowning of his friend Kiowa in a shit-field. He backs this up with a nice reference to courage: that he almost had a Silver Star for courage, if only he was not so discouraged by the stench of the shit-field, Kiowa would be alive and he would be a hero. In his distant driving around he searches for meaning, talking with strangers and acquaintances alike, but simply cannot connect to the real world, which feels surreal after returning from the jungles of Vietnam. In the end, he gets in a lake, water being a symbol of purity and cleansing, and seems to come to terms with his own imbalance and struggles in life. This was one of O`Brien`s more controversial stories, since he stated that it was written at the behest of his former military buddy who hanged himself some time after the story was handed to O`Brien. Later, he confessed the story to be untrue, but nevertheless that was not the point. The point, of course, was to make the readership believe, and that it did not matter whether it could be backed up by facts or not, the readership felt connected to the character of Norman Bowker and his struggles, and the chapter is cited as a fine example of the phenomenon "orphan pain" (Bahr "The Things We Carry " 109). This can be further backed up with examining the "real" Bowker, who spent his post-war years working at dead-end jobs, playing basketball and driving around alone, struggling to fit in a society he felt he should be a part of. Why this connected deeply to the readership, is because Bowker`s struggles can be felt by anyone struggling with depression; they do not need to be strictly a result of taking part in a war, and not only traumatized soldiers can feel useless and meaningless. Therefore, the story resonated with the readership since it dealt with concealed emotions "ordinary people" can also feel (Bahr "The Things We Carry" 109).

If examined through the prism of the story “Notes”, which reads as a piece of nonfiction and an essay, then we can realize the point O`Brien was trying to make with his work; that fiction works, despite being unreal, surreal, or downright imagined, can deliver emotions, memories, collective pain felt by both characters and the readership in a larger capacity than previously believed. “Notes” rejects every “truth” delivered in the story of Norman Bowker, and despite being invented itself, manages to “feel” true and to feel heavy, important, and real. That which is also interesting is the sharp difference in tone and style of the two chapters. While “Speaking of Courage” is written almost poem-like, with distinct rhythm supposed to present the dissonance from the world felt by Bowker (bahr "The Things We Carry" 109), “Notes” is written in an almost journalistic style, implying its truth in spite of the story told by Bowker. Even though both stories are made up, both of them carry significant emotional weight, in turn felt by the readership, which makes them believable, and effectively, the truth.

3.3 “The Vietnam in Me”

“The Vietnam in Me” is an essay published by O`Brien in the *New York Times* on October 2, 1994, four years after finishing his metafictive work *The Things They Carried.* The essay can be considered as a definitive reminiscence on his time as a foot soldier in Vietnam, and should serve as the definitive truth of both his experiences (which are, curiously enough, not particularly described in the essay) and his mental state during and after the experience. Written by alternating between his visit to Vietnam with his then-girlfriend Kate and nightmarish, but real experiences of PTSD and depression while being home on his own, it serves as a harrowing example of both irreconcilable guilt and redemption as felt by a man who participated in the catastrophic event.

The essay starts off with a description of the place O`Brien was stationed at during his time in Vietnam, but from the perspective of how it looks in 1994, when there is nothing left of the fabled LZ Gator of the late sixties. He then proceeds to describe how the LZ looked like at the time of his arrival in February 1969:

> In February 1969, 25 years ago, I arrived as a young, terrified pfc. on this lonely little hill in Quang Ngai Province. Back then, the place seemed huge and imposing and permanent… I remember a tar helipad, a mess hall, a medical station, mortar and artillery emplacements, two volleyball courts, numerous

> barracks and offices and supply depots and machine shops and entertainment clubs. Gator was our castle. (“The Vietnam in Me”)

O`Brien then proceeds with the description of what was mainly his routine while stationed there, an interesting passage in which the reader can infer what was like to be in the army back then. He mentions how they spent their leisure time, listening to “We gotta get out of this place”, smoking marijuana and drinking beer. He reminisces about the times in a positive way, he compares it as “thirty or 40 acres of almost-America” (“The Vietnam in Me”). In the evenings they would watch movies or even live floor shows-the war, for him and his fellow soldiers, was a distant thing he hoped he would never experience to the fullest. Interestingly, O`Brien avoids talking explicitly about the war in his essay, a testament to the horrors he went through while being in Southeast Asia. He ends the passage with a harrowing sentence: “Nothing here but ghosts and the wind” (“The Vietnam in Me”), ghosts of his own past he tries to forget, but is forced to cope with through writing.

In the following passage, which takes place at the little hamlet of Nuoc Man, he describes waves of people coming to meet and touch himself and his girlfriend. He is the first American soldier to visit the place since 1970 and its evacuation. All of the Vietnamese farmers he meets are incredibly pleased to meet him, not paying any attention to his nationality and the fact his people bombed their people not thirty years ago. O`Brien concludes with a touching sentence of a man that feels irreparable guilt about his involvement in the affair at the hamlet: “Dear God. We should have bombed these people with love” (“The Vietnam in Me”). He understands now what he felt at the start of the war; that his participation was wrong, that the war was not even supposed to be fought, and in the end, was evil.

At this point, O`Brien changes the setting of his essay and shifts to Cambridge, Massachusets, three months later after his return from Vietnam. Even though he wrote about his mental state which can be inferred in his works, since his writing is so full of contradictions the reader never could have taken his word seriously. This is significantly changed in the essay, which finally gave his readership a glimpse into the mind of a Vietnam veteran. O`Brien admits of suffering from depression, insomnia and suicide contemplation. As he states later, it`s not the days that are troublesome; but the nights, when the memories return. Similarly to his invented character, Bowker, O`Brien says that he tries to spend his days like a model citizen, working out, taking hikes, and doing what every normal citizen of the US would do. However, he realizes that he is scarred for life and that is what inevitably will keep him awake to the end of his life. Also, he lost a significant part of his stability by losing Kate.

At the Song Tra Hotel, O`Brien explains that it was his then-girlfriend Kate who came up with the idea of coming to Vietnam in order to learn about her partner`s experiences, since she was only a child when he participated in the event. It is obvious that she is an integral part of his coping with Vietnam, allowing him to see Vietnam through different eyes; through the eyes of a human being, and not a veteran. Its interesting to read how O`Brien viewed Vietnam while being stationed there, as he opens up to Kate during their late-night conversations:

> …Vietnam was more than terror. For me, at least, Vietnam was partly love. With each step, each light-year of a second, a foot soldier is always almost dead, or so it feels, and in such circumstances you can`t help but love. You love your mom and dad, the Vikings, hamburgers on a grill, your pulse, your future – everything that might be lost or never come to be. Intimacy with death carries with it a corresponding new intimacy with life. ("The Vietnam in Me")

Obviously, for O`Brien, as for many veterans, Vietnam was a life-changing experience that definitely lead to a more pronounced lust for life, to an unprecedented appreciation of everything that surrounded them, and that through fear of losing your life could they only begin to value it. In addition, he admits the notions he talks of in his memoir, about how he felt about the nature of the war he was about to be a part of. Like stated previously in his works, he concludes with "I was a coward. I went to the war" (*The Things They Carried* 58).

Controversially, O`Brien decides to put forth his opinion about the horrific My Lai Massacre of 1968. The massacre was an example of the futility of the war for US forces and a testament to just how unprepared and unorganized, even puppet-like they were. To the US, everything uncharted village was a VC hotspot, and such was My Lai. O`Brien proceeds to scold the US principles, stating that "evil has no place, it seems, in our national mythology. We erase it. We use ellipsis. We salute ourselves and take pride in America the White Knight" ("The Vietnam in Me"). He feels disgust with American policy of the time which consciously chose to ignore the crime committed by their own soldiers, which led to nation-wide protests and distrust in not only the government, but the veterans who subsequently returned from the war; it did not matter if they were grunts who participated in the war unwillingly, they were all pronounced baby killers and other ghastly names. O`Brien, as a veteran, understands this better than most people and his comment on the incident is entirely justified.

He further proves his point about the massacre by actually talking to people that managed to survive it, and he cannot help himself but feel ashamed and horrified. The testimonies are truly disturbing, as one woman reminisces:

> The Americans took us to a ditch. I saw two soldiers with red faces – sunburned – and they pushed a lot of people into the ditch. I was in the ditch. I fell down and many fell down on top of me. Soldiers were shooting… I lay under the dead in the ditch… Brains, pieces of body… Three of my four children were killed. ("The Vietnam in Me")

O`Brien bravely included this testimony in his essay as an example of what could be called a "happening-truth", but one that with its facts manages to engage the reader and feel disgusted as he reads of a true occurrence in the war that the US government would like to forget. He concludes with a statement that he feels "betrayed by a nation that widely shrugs off barbarity, by a military judicial system that treats murderers and common soldiers as one and the same. ("The Vietnam in Me").

In the next passage that is set in Vietnam, O`Brien speaks of studying and trying to understand the country he was taught to hate while being in Vietnam. Unlike many people at the time, himself included, he knew next-to-nothing about Vietnam, about its culture or history. So this act could be interpreted as atonement for his own ignorance, and a chance to set things right in the future of his life. He meets with a Vietnamese journalist, who proceeds to tell him about how he lost his brother, and the uncertainty and the hardship of his mother who never found her son`s remains, as the US forbade her from doing so, while at the same time searching for their own MIA and KIA`s. At this prospect O`Brien again feels disgust at his country:

> A perverse and outrageous double standard. What if things were reversed? What if the Vietnamese were to ask us, or to require us, to locate and identify all of their own MIA`s? Numbers alone make it impossible: 100 000 is a conservative estimate… I watched napalm turned villages into ovens. I watched burials by bulldozer. I watched bodies being flung into trucks, dumped into wells, used for target practice, stacked up and burned like cordwood. Even in the abstract, I get angry at the stunning, almost cartoonish narcissism of American policy on this issue. I get angrier yet at the narcissism of the American public that embraces and breathes life into the policy – so arrogant, so ignorant, so self-righteous, so

> wanting in the most fundamental qualities of sympathy and fairness and mutuality. (“The Vietnam in Me”)

He feels further betrayed by stating this, as the beliefs the US held as their birthright and national symbols are being repressed, distorted, and down-right destroyed with reckless abandon. He believes that the US have always been, and always will be a nation of hypocrites.

O`Brien proceeds with one of the more beautiful, yet terrifying passages which deal with his own emotional emptiness and search for lost meaning. While being lost in their tour of the country, revisiting old wounds and old landmarks, O`Brien sets out to finding a landmark of his own he desperately wants to revisit again. He finds it; a rice paddy where a battle occurred not thirty years ago, and he wishes to see it once again and to share it with Kate, to share his deepest feelings and memories of the rice paddy:

> Our fingers lock, which happens without volition, and we stand looking out on a wide and very lovely field of rice. The sunlight gives it some gold and yellow, there is no wind at all. Before us is how peace would be defined in a dictionary for the speechless. I don`t cry. I don`t know what to do. At one point I hear myself talking about what happened here so long ago, motioning out at the rice, describing chaos and horror beyond anything I would experience until a few months later. I tell her how Paige lost his lower leg, how we had to probe for McElhaney in the flooded paddy, how the gunfire went on and on, how in the course of two hell-on-earth hours we took 13 casualties. (“The Vietnam in Me”)

He tries too attain the peace he wished for after returning from his service, and finally he succeeds in this. Their observing of the lost rice paddy brings some sort of consolation to O`Brien, helping him cope with his involvement and his bad memories of the war. He arrived in Vietnam to seek closure and salvation from Vietnam. In the end, he emotionally states: “Vietnam took a little Vietnam out of me” (“The Vietnam in Me”), as he feels at peace with himself and his past.

This essay of O`Brien`s delivers on the factual and emotional truth he tried to tackle with both his memoir and the metafictive masterpiece that is *The Things They Carried.* In his search for a way to cope with his experiences in Vietnam, and in his search to educate, disturb, and touch all of those who would read his works, O`Brien delivers a notion of self-redemption and irrefutable truth about the nature of war and the nature of emotion and memories. All of his previous works dabbled in the imagined, yet real, while trying to explain personal struggles felt

by a Vietnam veteran who desperately tried to make us understand and make us feel what he felt. An incredibly angry and disappointed essay, it still offers a glimpse of hope O`Brien wants for his country, while bravely trying to tackle all the things his country would not want him to tackle. The essay he wrote in 1994 finally delivers on his promise of making the readership feel; it gives an unique insight in the mind of a man who lived with his demons for almost thirty years, trying to trap them on sheets of paper through his storytelling, and also gives the hard facts through testimonies and personal experience of O`Brien`s of which he is both ashamed and proud.

Conclusion

The Vietnam War presented an immense trauma for the US, both physical and psychological. From the onset of the war, which started 15 years before the US got involved, in 1945, it was clear that foreign forces especially that of the Western civilization, would not get their due in Southeast Asia. That region in particular for the US, was supposed to be the last "barrier" between the free capitalistic world and communists, where the West could spread their influence and have the upper hand against Russia and newly-found Communist China. What started as a combat training operation in the jungles of Vietnam in 1960, escalated into full blown, misguided war about domination and retaining influence, which lasted until 1973 when the Paris Accords were signed and the US were forced to retreat from Vietnam and let it fall into the hands of the Communists. However, the much-publicized domino theory the US government propagated did not come to be; Vietnam did fall, but only two more Asian countries, that being Cambodia and Laos, fell under the Communist regime. It was a first massive failure for the US, in a military aspect, as well in a political one. It can be said that the lasting legacy of Vietnam in case of the United States is that of a permanent failure and shame, since it took nearly 20 years for the country to rebound on the political and military scene, and to assert their dominance all over again, Also, the war has left thousands of people physically and psychologically scarred, as well as created a deep rift that was increased by the battle for civil rights and protests that took place all over the country. It was truly a turning point for a country that experienced a period of ultimate dominance during and after the Second World War, and was now defeated by an inferior opponent, who has managed to strike at the core of American beliefs, and has managed to tear the country apart, causing deep trauma on a personal, and on a collective level.

What the American public has been left with is remembrance; and that remembrance is validated through movies, novels, music, and memoirs that deal with the conflict. No other conflict in American history has created so much controversy, not just on a political level, but on an artistic one. It can be said that such artistic forms as named above are the only medium that could emotionally, not necessarily truthfully convey the story of Vietnam. It is no wonder that since it was such a deep scar on the American consciousness, immediately after the war no films were being made, and literary works were rare, but powerful. The war itself was a taboo theme that was not meddled with in the subsequent years, since the public image of the veterans was extremely negative and they were shunned by their compatriots, being called "baby-

killers", treated almost as savages, members of society that will never be able to fully adapt back to the daily routine shared by common people. An important role in this reconciliation of the Vietnam veteran with society, as well as the whole story of Vietnam was played by such artistic works that dared pry into the taboo and the atrocities that were committed by American soldiers, and the American government that ordered those same atrocities. The literary works, no matter if fictional or not, offered unique insight into the minds of American soldiers who experienced Vietnam first-hand, and many of them stand today as masterpieces of anti-war literature. The films on the other hand, helped visualize the conflict and the leisure time spent by the soldiers in the jungle better than literary works sometimes could, and also gave an unique twist on both the combat side of Vietnam, and the psychological, stressful situations some of the soldiers experienced when returning home. Music, one of the universal symbols of the time, to this day reminds the public of the drug-addled years of the 1960s and the collective madness felt not only in Vietnam, but in the rest of the world too.

O`Brien`s works fall into the prism of literary masterpieces of the genre that deal with that particular conflict. Tim O`Brien was a foot soldier in Vietnam, serving there from 1969 to 1970, and he has a first-hand experience of the aforementioned madness, horror, and the beauty of the land he fought in. O`Brien`s quest for the truth is, ironically, steeped in lies and made-up stories that deny that same truth he tries to convey. However, the factual truth, as we know, is not always "the truth". O`Brien`s method in madness is justified, as his "story-truths", never mind them being made up or not, carry significantly more meaning than the hard facts all of us, "normal people", can come across in some account of the Vietnam War. What he tried to make us do was to make us understand through his memories and his feelings of the war; what he went through, why went through it and why does he still goes through it. He opted for this approach in which he would deliberately tell us, the readership, one thing he vouches for to be true, only to shatter it and tell us that it was all made up – but nonetheless, even with that lie, he made us believe and for us, that lie was the truth. In one hand he tried to explain life, which is a series of strongly felt emotions, beautiful and terrible memories that shape people into what they are. So, to conclude, heartfelt emotions put down by O`Brien in his works *If I Die in Combat Zone, The Things They Carried,* and his essay "The Vietnam in Me" might not be in its entirety factual, hard truths that can be explained, but deep, emotional, memorable truths that he truly wanted us to feel.

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