

The Oppression of Love and War in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and *The Man I Killed*: A Study in Technique

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This research paper tackles the two short stories *The Things They Carried* and *The Man I Killed* from Tim O'Brien's short story collection *The Things They Carried*. O'Brien wrote about his difficult experiences as a soldier in a way where he went against the grain. He never considered himself a hero for participating in killing innocent people while serving in Vietnam. He spoke about a new type of reality which many soldiers shielded from the public, one which many soldiers would not usually confess to; the guilt of serving in wars and how to deal with it. The current paper discusses how love and war could be oppressive factors to soldiers who are serving far away from their countries—they could drive a soldier to act in opposition to his/her belief system, too. On the other hand, the research discusses how O'Brien uses storytelling as a method of resistance focusing on the theme of love, repeating particularly certain parts of a story, and creating whole scenarios to stories that have a real beginning but an unknown rising action or ending; in other words his aim is to feel at peace with himself, and battle feelings of guilt due to his participation in ending the lives of innocent civilians.

Keywords: war, storytelling, resistance, remembrance, daydreaming

Introduction

The theme of war has dominated the works of many writers since it was first registered on paper, and the first writers were referred to as anonymous. Those such as “Bewolf”, once called warriors, now called soldiers are referred to as patriots. It was the dream of every so-called brave man to participate in war and be dubbed a hero. It was a sign of bravery and masculinity. These men decided not to focus on the atrocities of war, because doing so would be a sign of weakness and would cause them to be disregarded.

The contemporary writer Tim O'Brien refers to what the majority of soldiers do at war as “erasing”; a means of unburdening oneself in front of the world; however, he is very clever not to do the same because we come to know that he is a vibrant humanist who cannot live with the psychological burdens of doing so. He could fool people, but he could never fool himself, and for that reason he is not one who would resort to such not-so-brave actions (Wolff, 2011). O'Brien however, decided to go against this stream and expose what he thought of war—that it is a true demon. He studied politics at university and was one of those soldiers who really fought in the Vietnam War, however, against his convictions. It is important to reveal that O'Brien was constantly torn between participating in the war, which was against his beliefs, and crossing the border to Canada and escaping it (Wolff, 2011).

After coming back from Vietnam, O'Brien dedicated much of his time to writing about his experiences there. Although fiction, his books were very strong and convincing. This goes hand-in-hand with what Aristotle said about literature: "Poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history, for poetry deals with things in a universal way" (Aristotle, 1902, p. 81). As a result, O'Brien won many book awards and decided to abandon his graduate studies to get his beliefs about the war across and lay the truth bare to "the people". His audience was mainly people of the younger generation (The PBS NewsHour, n.d.).

The Purpose of the Study

In the short stories, he has written, O'Brien has proven himself a masterful writer who is concerned with the ambiguities of love and war. This research explores how love and war oppress a human being and would drive him to oppose both his intuition and his true beliefs. The research paper uses two of O'Brien's short stories, *The Things They Carried* and *The Man I Killed*, for this purpose. Through his unique technique, he portrays his protagonists as normal human beings who need some kind of "story" to help them break from the cycle of repression and resist the imposing factors of war. Chen (1998) stated that O'Brien's "book [is about] the need to tell stories, the way to tell stories, and the reasons for telling stories" (p. 94).

O'Brien (1990) described his fellow soldiers who carried the burden of war:

For most part they carried themselves with poise, a kind of dignity. Now and then, however, there were times of panic, when they squealed or wanted to squeal but couldn't, when they twitched and made moaning Sounds and covered their heads and said Dear Jesus and flopped around On the earth and fired their weapons blindly and cringed and sobbed and begged for the noise to stop and went wild and made stupid promises to themselves and to God and to their mothers and fathers, hoping not to die. (p. 22)

Love: An Oppressor and a Method of Resistance

In *The Things They Carried*, both the title of the collection and the title of one of the short stories in the collection, the protagonist, Lieutenant Henry Cross, is a pathetic man. The previous quote describes him and his fellow soldiers. He is repressed, carrying a heavy load physically and a heavier one psychologically. He carries such loads for the sake of his convenience—he, of course, loves himself like any human being. He also loves his men. The physical bundle he is carrying around is necessary for the survival of him and his men in the exotic Vietnamese environment. The Vietnamese environment is not home. It is like an enemy to them; dictating their feelings of security. It was a dictator because these men are obliged to cope with the repressive environment by carrying a physical bundle, such as maps, compasses, and cigarettes.

The other bundle, which is much heavier than the physical one, is a figurative or spiritual one. The figurative ones concern O'Brien more, because they are really tough to deal with. The figurative loads are emotional loads, such as grief, terror, and longing. Lieutenant Henry Cross went to war not out of belief in patriotism, but he, like O'Brien and other fellow soldiers, went for the sake of love—maybe it was because his friends went to war. It is clear that he was an escapist because of what he often did. "He had difficulty paying attention to the war" (O'Brien, 1990, p. 15). Every once in a while Lieutenant Cross would resort to his thoughts of "Martha". This technique of mixing remembrance with daydreaming is used by O'Brien to describe his protagonists. It seems that Cross means to lessen the strain—war had over him. "Martha" is only his friend, not a girlfriend. However, Cross would enforce in his mind the idea that "Martha" was his girlfriend. Every time his psyche needed to loosen up from the oppressive state the war was enforcing on him, he would go back

to the past and remember the night he took her out to the movies. He would wish his relationship with her was more than just friends. He would look at her pictures for a long time and would imagine that “Love, Martha” at the end of her letters to him was not the customary closing, but an ending that meant they were in love. Through Lieutenant Cross, O’Brien makes remembrance in this creative way, a means of resistance against the war he is participating in.

Lieutenant Cross really loves and cares about his men. As evidence of this, when one of his men—“Ted Lavender was shot in the head [and...] his teeth were broken” (O’Brien, 1990, p. 18)—Cross blames himself for it. It seems that Cross is unable to think right and blame his real oppressor—He blames Martha as well, because he has been constantly preoccupied with her instead of watching his men. As a result, he chooses to burn his oppressors. He burns Martha’s pictures and letters, no longer carries the pebble she sent him as a gift, and tries not to think of her at all. He also deals with the repression that incident caused him to experience by digging a hole aimlessly and then weeping hard over Ted Lavender’s death.

The real oppressor, on the other hand, is war, and not Martha or the letters or the pictures or anything having to do with Martha. The reality is that war is oppressing him, and since he is a part of it, he is unable to blame what he is a part of. He would rather die than to speak up and admit that war is his oppressor, he puts it all on Martha. Not only does he symbolically burn Martha, but he also literally burns a whole Vietnamese village thinking he is beating the oppressor.

To summarize and to add as well, an oppressed person cannot clearly think or make feasible decisions, and that is exactly what Lieutenant Cross is. As a result of his actions, he is burdened even more than before—he carries the guilt for the death of one of his men, and he deals with this burden by trying to feign courage to his men. O’Brien clearly states this fact about the soldiers: “It was not courage exactly; the object was not valor. Rather, they were too frightened to be cowards” (O’Brien, 1990, p. 24). This method of resistance while at war is a strategy of survival for both him and his men.

Remembering, Repeating, and Inventing Parts of a Story as a Method of Resistance

In his intention to resist the oppression of war on soldiers, O’Brien shows “how memories keep coming back” (Wolff, 2011) and to show how the mind really works when a human being is concerned about a particular thing, he gives his characters the freedom to rewind the mind’s tape—in other words, their memories. In this process, remembering and repeating becomes a sort of emphasizing. In the short story, *The Man I Killed*, the protagonist Tim remembers and repeats certain parts of the story that he made up for the Vietnamese man twice and in *The Things they Carried*, Lieutenant Henry Cross remembers and repeats his thoughts on the day he and Martha were out together. What O’Brien saw in the war is something he will always remember. According to John Ransom’s *Andersonville Diary*, “[t]hose who have had any such experience as the author will see its truthfulness at once, and to all other readers it is commended as a statement of actual things by one who experienced them to the fullest” (as cited in Silbergeld, 2009, p. 30). Henry Cross’s mind also keeps going back to the loss of the soldier Ted Lavender. This technique used by O’Brien is to show that his characters are a bundle of thoughts and that they do feel guilty for their service and that they try to find ways to resist such guilt.

In *The Man I Killed*, Tim, the protagonist, finds himself totally burdened because of “love” on the one hand. He has killed a man! Tim is an example of a soldier who was forced to go to Vietnam because he loves his family and relatives, and does not want to defeat their expectations. O’Brien (1990) said,

More than we realize, our behaviors come out of a desire to be loved. To go into a war is a pretty good example of my country to love me, as well as my mom and dad and hometown, even though I thought it was a bad thing to do. I wanted that love more than I wanted to love myself in doing the right thing. (Wolff, 2011)

On the other hand, O'Brien unburdens his protagonist Tim by using the technique of remembering, repeating and storytelling. Tim who has killed a young Vietnamese man in the woods silently stares at the Vietnamese man's body, and the whole story is revealed through a video strip in Tim's mind. This video strip reveals several important things about Tim. He is not happy about killing the so-called enemy. He does not find what he has done a sign of bravery, as does Azar, who says, "Oh man, you fucken trashed the fucker You scrambled his sorry self, look at that, you did, you laid him out like shredded fucken Wheat" (O'Brien, 1990, p. 87). But has not Azar also come because he loves his country? Tim is dismayed to the extent where he needs to be consoled. This is when his friend Kiowa comes to the rescue: "No sweat man. What else could you do? Come on stop staring" (O'Brien, 1990, p. 87).

Tim resorts to silence for two reasons. The first is his guilt over killing a man. Any kind of talk would fail him at such a moment. Instead he resorts to *meditation*; he describes the present state of the man: "His jaw was in his throat, his upper teeth and lip were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star shaped hole, his eyebrows were thin and arched like a woman's, his nose was undamaged" (O'Brien, 1990, p. 86). Then, he guesses who the man was: "He had been born maybe, in 1946, in the village of My Khe near the central coast line of Quang Ngai Province, where his parents farmed" (O'Brien, 1990, p. 86). What possible future he could have had, had the protagonist not killed him. He was like Tim, hated the war, and was embarrassed to show it.

In writing the story of the Vietnamese man, Tim O'Brien is unlike colonial writers, he does the exact opposite of what a colonial writer would do. He does not just write his side of the story and totally neglect "the other". Tim, the protagonist, thinks that the Vietnamese man is as human as he is, and as much as Tim hates the war, the Vietnamese man does too; for that purpose O'Brien decides to write a story of the Vietnamese man's life, revealing his humanity. In so doing, he is inventing his own way of dealing with his feelings of guilt for a crime; in his opinion, he has been forced to do so, because he too loves himself and does not want to die. It is not his fault; it is the fault of war. It dehumanizes human beings. It forces them into committing acts they are totally in denial of.

War as an Oppressor

The other issue is that soldiers, such as Tim or Cross, would generally find themselves reluctant to expose their true beliefs and feelings about war. It is most difficult to reveal your true feelings in front of people who are soldiers just like you but do not share the same convictions. For Azar, war is the place for power and patriotism. Azar is proud of Tim; he is even jealous of him. The fear of being shamed according to O'Brien is a powerful factor that makes one move both forward but backward at the same time. "Forward" here means going along, because according to Kiowa "it's a war" (O'Brien, 1990, p. 88): It is a place where principles do not apply. Why we do so is really due to fear of losing our own lives, out of love for those who are waiting for us to return. We simply do not want to appear like cowards in front of those people who really do not know the truth about the war. Tim O'Brien thinks they are "misguided" and they are the worst part of the conflict. Moreover, the fear of shame among fellow soldiers is a very powerful factor that war highly depends on. War forces both protagonists and antagonists into engaging in actions they know are wrong. War motivates the two reluctant men to go to Vietnam and become engaged in absurd actions that they would not do normally.

On the other hand, O'Brien argues that such soldiers are in search of truth: "There are different kinds of truth you're after, a feel, an emotional truth, a spiritual and psychological truth not tethered to the world we live in" (Wolff, 2011). His storytelling technique highly reveals the kind of truth he is interested in—the truth about life is mirrored in his short stories "by one who experienced [the events of Vietnam] to the fullest", and for that very purpose he uses his own name for both narrator and protagonist in some of his stories to achieve credibility and ethical appeal (Silbergleid, 2009, p. 30).

O'Brien does focus, however, on a bright side. The bright side also functions as a means of resistance to war because, after all, he has learned a lot from this experience. In *The Man I Killed*, some parts of the Vietnamese man are not damaged by the grenade. And then, a butterfly alights on the dead man's nose, and lilies are near. In *The Things They Carried*, Lieutenant Cross' mind was not ever at peace and his later crying functions as a story of cathartic relief and resistance to the war. Through his characters and through his stories, Tim O'Brien is not silent; he tells an objective story of the Vietnam War to the world in his own way.

In the two short stories, both protagonists try to put themselves in impossible situations, wishing they could go back to the past to make amends. Of course, this is not possible, because the Vietnamese soldier is dead, and Martha back home does not love Henry Cross, and Lavender is killed and can never come back to life. It is really funny how war is an oppressor. But were not these men oppressed by something larger that brought them to war? They were really craving love. They wanted their families, their popes, and their country to love them! According to O'Brien in the name of love, they acted against their beliefs. Both Tim and Lieutenant Cross are in Vietnam for the sake of love and so end up dealing with the consequences of such a chaotic situation. "We do evil things in the name of love" (Wolff, 2011).

Conclusion

In conclusion, writing chronicles of the Vietnam War through "story-telling", Tim O'Brien was able to express the truth about the way he felt. He was one of the soldiers whose mind, heart, and soul were injured by the hardships of war. In this, he was able to deal with his own life's difficulties and break from the cycle of repression. He could no longer prolong his silence. He spoke not only for himself, but for every person who suffered his fate and for those who lost their lives during the war. O'Brien was very clever not to use the traditional way of rendering a war story. According to Marilyn Wesley (2002), the Vietnam War is the first postmodern war that broke down any shared language as a means of rendering experience (p. 15).

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“The Man I Killed” begins with a list of physical attributes and possible characteristics of the man whom O’Brien killed with a grenade in My Khe. O’Brien describes the wounds that he inflicted. The man’s jaw was in his throat, he says, and his upper lip and teeth were missing. One eye was shut, and the other looked like a star-shaped hole. He imagines that the boy began studying at the university in Saigon in 1964, that he avoided politics and favored calculus. He notices that the butterfly has disappeared. Kiowa bends down to search the body, taking the young man’s personal affects, including a picture of a young woman standing in front of a motorcycle. He rationalizes that if O’Brien had not killed him, one of the other men surely would have. O’Brien speculates that the man was a scholar who disagreed with the war, but only fought to make his family and town proud—which is a fairly good description of O’Brien. The Man O’Brien Killed Quotes in The Things They Carried. The The Things They Carried quotes below all refer to the symbol of The Man O’Brien Killed. For each quote, you can also see the other characters and themes related to it (each theme is indicated by its own dot and icon, like this one:). Note: all page numbers and citation info for the quotes below refer to the Houghton Mifflin edition of The Things They Carried publi The Things They Carried study guide contains a biography of Tim O’Brien, literature essays, quiz questions, major themes, characters, and a full summary and analysis. When the story begins, O’Brien is standing in front of a man he just killed in My Khe. He repeats the same details about the man he killed, over and over again: one eye is a star-shaped hole; he lies face-up on the road; there are strips missing from his cheek; he has thin, arched eyebrows, like a woman; he is thin, with a concave chest, like a scholar. O’Brien is fixated on the details. Azar tries to congratulate O’Brien on killing a member of the Viet Cong. Kiowa is a good friend to O’Brien, sees that his friend is shocked and tells Azar to leave them alone. Kiowa reasons to O’Brien it was a O’Brien’s the things they carried and the man I killed. 229. After coming back from Vietnam, O’Brien dedicated much of his time to writing about his experiences there. Although fiction, his books were very strong and convincing. In the short story, The Man I Killed, the protagonist Tim remembers and repeats certain parts of the story that he made up for the Vietnamese man twice and in The Things they Carried, Lieutenant Henry Cross remembers and repeats his thoughts on the day he and Martha were out together. What O’Brien saw in the war is something he will always remember. Free Chapter 2, Love summary of The Things They Carried by Tim O’Brien. Get a detailed summary and analysis of every chapter in the book from BookRags.com. Chapter 2, Love Notes from The Things They Carried. Tim O’Brien. This section contains 210 words (approx. 1 page at 300 words per page). Years later Jimmy visits Tim (the narrator) and they talk about the war. They look at photographs, and Jimmy says he never forgave himself for Lavender’s death. Tim feels the same way about some things. After they are both drunk, Tim asks about Martha. Jimmy is surprised that Tim remembers her, but he goes to his room and gets a framed picture. It is the volleyball photograph. More summaries and resources for teaching or studying The Things They Carried.